

# German SPD conference strikes a new note in foreign policy

By Ulrich Rippert  
8 December 1999

The party conference of the German Social Democratic Party opened in Berlin on December 7. The three-day meeting is the first nation-wide party conference since the resignation of Oskar Lafontaine as party chairman and minister of finance, and follows the devastating SPD state and local election defeats of last summer.

In the run-up to the conference there was much speculation about its significance. Following the publication of Lafontaine's book *My Heart Beats on the Left*, in which he freely criticises chancellor Gerhard Schröder and other members of the government, the rumour spread that he would take the floor during the party conference. There was complete bedlam in the SPD headquarters, the Willy Brandt House, as party leaders recalled the Mannheim party conference in 1995, during which Lafontaine pushed aside then chairman Rudolf Scharping and seized the political leadership of the party. Some commentators even spoke of the SPD being threatened by a split.

But the closer it came to the party conference things cooled down. Lafontaine announced that he would not appear at the party conference and would not meddle with daily politics in the foreseeable future. The newly installed secretary general of the party, Franz Müntefering, who is practised in dealing with party crises and a master of bureaucratic manoeuvres, organised a number of party conferences on a regional and local level to give party members the opportunity to let off steam.

Schröder himself appeared at many of these local party conferences, listened to "the harsh criticism of the rank and file", tolerated being called "the comrade of the bosses" and replied paternally that he takes the opinion of the rank and file seriously, but that there is no alternative to the existing politics of the government. Now the air has been let out of the opposition, and following the chancellor's intervention to support the bailout scheme of the banks for the bankrupt Philipp Holzmann construction company, many trade union functionaries now applaud him as "the saviour of jobs".

At the opening of the party conference two things strike one immediately. The first is the political bankruptcy of the self-proclaimed left in the SPD, who have no alternatives to pose against the right-wing policies of the party leadership, let alone a political perspective. Second are the new views of the party regarding foreign policy. The European question is being deliberately used to blunt the growing social tensions and the increasing division of society between rich and poor, by creating a new "we are in it together" identity. Confronted with its own disastrous history, German chauvinism now wraps itself in the colours of the European Union. Reworking a well-worn German chauvinist adage, it is no longer the "German way of life" that should predominate in the world, but the European one.

The SPD is promoting "a defence of the European social system and system of values" under the slogan "We don't want American relations here!" With regard to foreign policy this perspective serves the new orientation, which consists of breaking the hitherto close relationship with the US step by step. With regard to domestic policy it aims to unite all social layers and classes behind the interests of the ruling circles.

Of all people, it was the notorious right-winger in the SPD party leadership, the president of North-Rhine Westphalia, Wolfgang Clement, who stressed that the European question should be at the heart of the party conference and should precipitate a political shift in the entire party. According to Clement the SPD should take a leaf from the book of US President John F. Kennedy, who managed to inspire an entire generation with his perspective of landing a man on the moon. In similar fashion the SPD should make the European perspective the basis for a broad mobilisation of the population.

The draft resolution introduced by the party leadership for "international politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century" bears the title "Responsibility for Europe". In the first paragraph Europe is praised as a "model of peace and civilisation", while stressing the necessity of mutual foreign and security politics. On the first page of the motion it reads: "Competitiveness on the world market and the shaping of world politics require mutual definition and improved coordination of European interests, especially in respect to international security and financial institutions."

If one calls to mind that, as Germany's ruling party, the SPD is required to use the appropriate diplomatic language, it is unmistakable that—although there are formulations such as "collaboration with the USA in the spirit of friendship"—the emphasis on European interests indicates growing conflict with the American government.

"Concerning the prevention and overcoming of crises", the European Union must be able to act "on its own initiative" and such actions must be based on "its own military capacities". The "European identity" is to be strengthened within NATO.

The distancing from American security policies becomes clear in the approach towards Russia. While the US government is determined to pursue its aims in southeastern Europe and by so doing accepts the danger of a serious conflict with Russia, the SPD motion stresses the necessity of close collaboration with Russia.

The resolution includes a whole chapter on this question, which emphasises the strong interest of Germany in a "democratic Russia that is strong both economically and politically.... Germany and its European partners must be prepared to invest together with Russia in order to build up Russian democracy and ensure the economic recuperation of the country."

"The partnership with Russia" must be strengthened on all levels "in the interests of European security". Concerning the regulation of conflicts, Russia must be "included in the mutual institutions at an early stage when decisions are made".

It is remarkable that German-Russian collaboration is not only mentioned in the context of "the fight against corruption and organised crime", but is also and particularly noted in relation to "the struggle against terrorism". This is precisely the slogan under which Yeltsin's regime is waging its brutal war against Chechnya.

In the whole nine pages of this resolution the war in Chechnya is neither criticised nor even mentioned. While the German government was interested in the dissolution of Yugoslavia and for this reason willingly took part in the bombardment of Serbia, it wants, if possible, to prevent Russia's break-up. This once more shows how cynically the question of human rights is used to justify each country's own imperialist policies.

In the years of the Cold War, relationships were clear and the leading role of the US within the Western alliance was never seriously questioned. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, international relationships began to change rapidly. The conflicts of the major powers over resources, markets and spheres of influence have intensified rapidly since then.

The debate over the new definition of German foreign policies is taking place within all parties and is closely combined with a reshaping of the political landscape in Germany. And it is the left inside the SPD who are the forerunners of a new political orientation.

One example is SPD deputy Konrad Gilges from Cologne, who during the Kosovo war demanded "a turn away from the military alliance with NATO and the strategic aims of the US". He proposed a "European system of mutual security from Wales to Vladivostok" and accused the party leadership of only regarding such a system as acceptable and workable if NATO played the leading role within it. By making such a mistake, the SPD leadership was strengthening "the great political influence that the US has on European politics". He acknowledged that within such a European security system, "Germany would play a deciding role because of its economic strength, population size and geographic location". He concluded regretfully: "This perspective frightens the other Western European states, and the leadership of the SPD and the Greens shy away from taking over this responsibility."

The arguments of Oskar Lafontaine in his recent book are very similar. In this context he repeatedly referred to the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor party of the East German Stalinist SED), and stressed that he would have no scruples about entering a coalition government with them. The new orientation on questions of foreign policy and security has also made the PDS of interest to other political circles. The PDS was, after all, the only political party in Germany which worked on the other side during the Cold War, and traditionally enjoyed a good relationship with Russia. The PDS fraction in parliament has already announced a position paper concerning the development of German policies towards Russia.

But also within out-and-out conservative layers the orientation towards the east is gaining in popularity. "Construction site Europe—from the Atlantic to the Urals" was the headline of an article printed in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concerning the 5th European Forum of the Quandt Foundation in Berlin. The question "How will Russia orientate itself?" was at the centre of the debate.

While Harvard professor Richard Pipes warned the congregation of

scientists, industrialists and politicians of placing too much hope on Russia and described the "centrifugal forces" of the former Soviet Union, German speakers stressed the "desperately needed eastward expansion" of the European Union. The article cites the views of the former advisor to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Horst Teltschik, an "authority" on questions of southeastern Europe and the CIS states. Teltschik believes that "the prospects for Europe are good and it would be best if the CIS states were also involved".

Russian nationalists also emphasise collaboration with the EC and especially Germany. During his visit to Berlin in November the chairman of the Russian Communist Party, Zyuganov, talked with high-ranking politicians, representatives of the government and economic experts and stressed that Germany "has an outstanding importance for the Russian politics and economy".

Facing elections in Russia, Zyuganov pledged that if he were to take part in the new government he would do everything to strengthen the German-Russian relationship. Germany must assume "a more important role in world politics and strive for greater European independence from the United States," he said.

While the debate over the shift of the parameters concerning foreign policy is the subject of vigorous debate, concrete steps are under way on a political and military level. In the half year since the end of the NATO bombardment of Serbia, the construction of an independent European army is proceeding apace.

Following the Anglo-French summit conference in London last week, it was announced during the regular German-French meeting a few days ago in Paris that Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy had all agreed on a mutual military structure for the European Union. The text of the resolution, entitled "Military forces, planning and operative leadership by the European Union", is being kept secret, but the plan is to pass the resolution at the coming EC summit in Helsinki.

Germany is not only the driving force behind the amalgamation of the European armaments industry—demonstrated for instance by the merger of Dasa with the French company Aerospatiale Matra S.A. to form the European Aeronautic, Defence and Space Company (EADS)—it is also pushing vigorously for the extension of the Paris-Berlin axis in the direction of Moscow. In so doing the SPD-Green government tries to avoid stirring up memories of the old imperialist strategy of seeking " *Lebensraum* " in the east.

Lafontaine was not to attend the party conference in Berlin. But he set the tone for debate on two scores: the delegates will make platitudinous and frequent reference to "social justice", while everything else basically stays the same. SPD Finance Minister Hans Eichel's cost-cutting policies, which aggravate existing social injustice even more, were backed without any resistance worth mentioning. Lafontaine has had more success with his demand for a distancing from the United States: this is a key question in carrying through a further shift to the right within the party.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>