

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### Elections force SPD to face reality

*The loss of votes for the opposition Social Democrats will help fuel a debate on economic policy.*

**T**he Social Democrats (SPD), the biggest opposition party in the national parliament, continued its trend of massive vote losses in the March 24 elections for three of the nation's 16 state parliaments. It lost 6.4% in Schleswig-Holstein, 5% in Rhineland-Palatinate, and 4.3% in Baden-Württemberg. This is important, because 15% of the national electorate went to the polls that Sunday.

The SPD should have benefitted from the bad economic policy record of the "Conservative Revolution" Bonn government coalition of Christian and (liberal) Free Democrats. The SPD has not made use of its chance. A scene in Bonn on March 18 exposed the bad shape which the Social Democrats are in: SPD national party chairman Oskar Lafontaine embarrassed himself with a "press conference" that lasted a bit more than six minutes and presented a catalogue of generalities that earned him the media's "capital punishment"—not one journalist asked a question. Some journalists expressed rage at being "insulted" by Lafontaine with this non-event.

Although the political quality of the Bonn press corps is not the best, they could at least have teased Lafontaine with nasty questions about his lack of policy. Their verdict against the shallowness of the SPD was to the point.

Reports about the absurd tactics of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in the United States, in refusing to launch vital voter-registration or campaign efforts, remind one of the non-campaign which the SPD is conducting against the government in

Bonn. There is not the slightest real challenge to the policy of incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl, no serious debate about the indebtedness of the public sector, or the danger of financial derivatives. The SPD usually presents a "social-minded" version of the same fiscal austerity which the government is pursuing. The SPD, under its present leadership, is rightly considered by many citizens to be "the other CDU," much like the DNC, which many Americans rightly view as "the other Republican Party."

And, the Social Democrats have combined the call for drastic budget cuts with radical environmentalism and post-industrialism: They call for an end to nuclear technology, and reject aerospace and modern transport technologies, such as magnetically levitated rail systems.

This is the tendency that Lafontaine, who exploited a temporary power vacuum and grabbed the national party chairmanship last autumn, has stood for, over the last 15 years. The fact that he captured this position with a broad majority of SPD convention delegates, did not come as a surprise. Because in spring 1995, the Social Democrats in the biggest state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), had decided, with explicit backing from the national party executive, to form a state government coalition with the radical-ecologist Green party.

The fact that this "red-green" coalition was opposed by a majority of traditional SPD voters and members, should have been seen as the writing on the wall by the party executive. But, it decided to ignore that. Informed ob-

servers recognized that the SPD would lose that section of its base that opposed cooperation with the Greens, for example, industrial workers, who smelled how the Greens' plans for an "ecology tax" would burden their plants with immense additional costs and block the creation of new, skilled jobs. A crisis that emerged in mid-February inside the NRW red-green coalition over a couple of public infrastructure projects, which the SPD wanted and the Greens didn't, demonstrated that coalitions with the radical ecologists mean a march into unmanageability. This is the last thing that a country hit with a real jobless rate of 16% (7 million unemployed) can afford. Many SPD voters decided to punish their party, and tens of thousands of them in each of the three states decided not to vote at all on March 24.

Another 20-30,000 SPD voters in each of the three states voted for the Greens, which gained 3.1% in Schleswig-Holstein, 0.4% in Rhineland-Palatinate, and 2.6% in Baden-Württemberg, as compared to the last elections.

This massive defection should push the real Social Democrats to call for an in-depth reform of party politics and campaign strategies. The odd thing is that even those "saner" Social Democrats have so far not taken much notice of the corresponding current inside the U.S. Democratic Party (LaRouche, Kennedy, Daschle, Gephardt, Bingaman, Dorgan), nor their efforts to outflank the DNC and begin the debate about alternatives to the collapsing world economy.

Mounting criticism of Lafontaine ostensibly contributed to his decision to visit the United States on April 3-5, including for meetings with President Clinton, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, and International Monetary Fund Managing Director Michel Camdessus.