

Germany's SPD Becoming A Failed Party?

by Rainer Apel

The June 13 elections for European Parliament left Germany's governing—for now—Social Democrats (SPD) in a state of shock and paralysis, with only 21.5% of the vote, the SPD's worst result in any kind of nationally-held election, since the founding of the German Federal Republic in 1949. The boycott of those elections by discontented constituencies, the low 45% voter turnout on June 13, meant that less than 10% of the electorate voted Social Democratic.

Long one of the two big parties in Germany, with the Christian Democrats, the SPD has dropped to a distant third place in the five eastern states of Germany (Saxonia, Saxe-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Thuringia, Mecklenburg-Prepomernia), behind the Christian Democrats and the Democratic Socialists (former communists). In Berlin, the German capital, the SPD dropped to the third position behind the Christian Democrats and the Greens.

Worse, looking forward to the Sept. 19 elections for state parliament in Saxonia, the SPD may not even receive 10% of the vote; it could drop to something close to the 5% mark!

Degeneration Dates from 1980s

The June 13 election disaster is the low point of a 30-year degeneration of the Social Democrats, which accelerated after it took over the national government in October 1998. After the oil crisis of 1973, the SPD was—although already infected with the virus of 1968 counter-culture—still opting for peaceful use of nuclear technology; it was supportive of rapid Third World economic development; it was still oriented towards the interests of its industrial labor voter base; and it was loyal to the social welfare state model and the principle of the common good. But, replaced in government by the Christian Democrats in October 1982, the SPD transformed itself, step by step, into a predominantly ecology-oriented party seeking political alliances with the radical-ecologist Green Party. When these two took back the government in October 1998, their "Red-Green" coalition moved rapidly to abandon nuclear technology, introduce drastic cuts in the labor market and in social welfare budgets, and adopt the "third way" brand of neo-liberalism which Tony Blair's "New Labor" had introduced in May 1997 in Britain.

From late 1998 on, the SPD increasingly alienated its voter base in the traditional high-technology sectors of the

industry, among labor unions in general, among retired citizens and other sections of the population that were most exposed to the budget-cutting policies, and among the productive *Mittelstand* of small and medium-sized firms. It sought new constituencies expected to be generated by the speculative bubble of the "New Economy"—which collapsed from late 2000 on.

Since then, the SPD has struggled with an unabated loss of voters, and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder won the national elections in September 2002 by only 6,000 votes over the opposition Christian Democrats, as he exploited the broad anti-war ferment among the German population, which was opposed to Bush's Iraq War buildup. The anti-war trick could not be repeated: going into the campaign for the European Parliament elections, the SPD tried to gain votes with the slogan "Power for Peace Europe," but voters are more interested in the economic-social situation, on which the SPD has no answers at present except additional budget cuts. A minor percentage of SPD voters switched to other parties on June 13, but the majority stayed home. The SPD has now arrived at a point only a few steps from being really turned into a minor political party.

The LaRouche movement and its BüSo party in Germany have begun an intervention, with an open letter written by chairwoman Helga Zepp-LaRouche, posing the question whether the SPD is still able to save itself from elimination. Reviewing the three decades-long degeneration of the Social Democrats, the letter urges SPD members to recall that during the peak of the first Great Depression more than 70 years ago, their party did have a programmatic alternative with the WTB-Plan (named after three leading labor officials, Woytinsky, Tarnow, and Baade), which outlined a crash remobilization of productive industry to re-employ 6 million unemployed Germans. The failure of the SPD leadership in 1931-32 to adopt this plan of a broad political campaign, played into the hands of the synarchist conspiracy to bring the National Socialists to power, leading to the crushing of the SPD as a party in 1933.

With the LaRouche Eurasian Land-Bridge development proposal, there is an alternative to economic depression and insane budget-balancing, the open letter says, which the SPD of today must study and discuss.

Can the SPD still save itself if it decides to, given its current bad condition? There is evidence that a potential remains, though much embattled, for a change. Among labor unions, there are still members and officials that insist on bigger public infrastructure development programs at the expense of budget-balancing. Dierk Hirschel, for example, chief economist of the national labor federation DGB, in a June 23 statement reminded the SPD and the Chancellor of the investment backlog of 700 billion euros, in municipal and regional public infrastructure like water and energy supply, transportation, and housing. But time is running out fast for the government to shift priorities, Hirschel warned.