

Which Way Out of Germany's Discontent?

by Rainer Apel

At the weekly cabinet session Jan. 28, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder surprised Health Minister Ulla Schmidt with his decree to stop all work on the planned citizens' burden-sharing of special care insurance; and also to put a halt on all other such projects for budget cuts for the time being. After the cabinet session, Schröder told the press: "We have reached the limit of tolerance. . . . The population cannot take any more."

The Chancellor's surprise move is, unfortunately, less dictated by reason than by acute panic over the drastic, recent loss of popular support—which offers devastating perspectives for Schröder's Social Democrats in the 14 elections to be held in Germany this year—five state parliament, eight municipal, and the European Parliament elections. Overwhelming majorities in strike votes in the metal and newspaper sectors and the mood in other labor unions indicate, furthermore, that this Spring a big strike wave is possible. Metal workers timed their first warnings of strikes in Berlin and several other big cities, just as the Chancellor spoke to the press on Jan. 28.

A widely-noticed FORSA opinion poll published on Jan. 29 gave Schröder a personal popularity rating of only 14%. This is less than what Schröder's predecessor in office, Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Christian Democrats, had in March 1998, a half year before he was voted out in the national elections that year. The FORSA pollsters found that were there national elections right now, Schröder's governing Social Democrats would receive no more than 24% of the vote, whereas the opposition Christian Democrats would receive 50%. Even together with their present Green Party coalition partner, the SPD and Schröder wouldn't get more than a third of the national vote.

Schröder's record-low rating will definitely not improve if he doesn't change policy course completely, by radically reorienting towards productive employment while abandoning budget-cutting projects especially in the areas of social welfare, job creation and public health sectors. And indeed, there are some in the SPD whose thinking seems to go in this direction: On Feb. 3, former party chairman—as well as former finance minister—Oskar Lafontaine published a commentary in the *Bildzeitung*, Germany's leading mass-tabloid, urging Schröder and the party to free themselves from

the discontent trap they have walked into, with a "contrasting social democratic program against neo-liberalism."

"(This means) Internationally: stabilization of currencies, control of capital flows. On the European level: . . . reformulation of the [Maastricht] Stability Pact [which ties the government's hands on investment policies]. Inside the Federal Republic: a public sector investment program to mobilize against the economic crisis," Lafontaine wrote. The FORSA opinion poll shows the extent of discontent and frustration among Germans with all established political parties: only 12% of the Germans still consider the "parties," including the opposition Christian Democrats, as trustworthy. Among political institutions, only current (and outgoing) President Johannes Rau is receiving support worth mentioning, namely 57%.

Another widely-read opinion poll which had been carried out by the Allensbach Institute in late January, even found only 8% those polled voicing respect for the political establishment as a whole. As for the Social Democrats, the panic that has broken out over the loss of popular confidence became clearly evident at the Berlin session of the SPD Party Council on Feb. 2. Lasting twice as long as usual, it turned into a stage of widely-expressed anger of council members and the party sections they represented, directed at the Chancellor's "reform" policies. The party has to "get back and listen to the forgotten man in the street," as one participant of the session was quoted by news wires.

Franz Müntefering, head of the SPD's group in the national parliament, got a similar dose of deep discontent at a meeting with party members of the district of Braunschweig, also on Feb. 2. The SPD of Müntefering's home-state North Rhine-Westphalia, meanwhile reports that it is faced with severe difficulties finding candidates among frustrated party members for the September municipal elections in that state. Members that have been working in the SPD for several decades, are quitting party membership in protest of the government's austerity policy, and even among members that stay in the party, commitment to get engaged in active election campaigning is down to almost zero. The situation in North Rhine-Westphalia is very important for Germany as a whole, being the biggest-single German state, with about 20% of the national electorate.

For the SPD, even the recommendations that former party chairman Lafontaine made in the *Bildzeitung*, are much too vague to mobilize the disillusioned, unmotivated party base for anything substantial. The questions that Lafontaine has left unanswered—namely, how to have investments into sectors of high productivity like nuclear power, maglev transportation, space technology; and how to generate loans in a non-monetarist way—have been answered by the LaRouche movement, in its program for the development of the Eurasian Land-Bridge. That is what the SPD needs. The German Chancellor hasn't much time to turn things around.