

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

A 'virtual' Social Democracy

The release of the party's new platform, plus the Hamburg election defeat, show that the SPD is out of touch with reality.

Two spectacular developments of the last two weeks of September show the dilemma in which the opposition Social Democrats (SPD) are caught.

First, on Sept. 16, the national party executive passed a new policy platform to serve as the "programmatic" basis of the 1998 national election campaign. Under the title "Innovations for Germany," the new platform, which was worked out under the auspices of the SPD's economic policy spokesman, Gerhard Schroeder, promises an alternative to the unemployment and collapse of industrial output, which has been caused by the fiscal austerity of the governing coalition of Christian and Free Democrats (CDU, FDP).

The promise made by the SPD is an empty one, however, and that is important in respect to Schroeder, who, after all, wants to become the SPD's top candidate and challenger to incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU).

The Schroeder platform is no alternative at all; it is only a variant of the government's balanced budget policy, and many analysts evaluate it as, at best, something that could serve as a basis for a Grand Coalition between the SPD and the CDU. The platform suggests that the SPD, which has received a great deal of support from among the leading industrial managers of Germany (who are giving up on the present German government), wants to pose as the "better CDU," the "major partner" in a potential Grand Coalition.

The central section of the platform has received applause from the three leading industrial and entrepreneurial

associations of Germany, the BDI, BDA, and DIHT. It calls for a massive expansion of the service sector and low-income jobs. This is to proceed on the condition, however, that the state subsidize tax breaks for firms that create such lower-qualified, lower-paid jobs. The state is also supposed to enforce measures to make social welfare recipients accept such jobs. This is clearly copied from British Prime Minister Tony Blair's "welfare to work" project. The money for the project is to be raised through taxes related to the environment and consumption.

Immediately after the SPD executive voted for the platform, warnings emerged from inside the party organization, that this policy, a continuation of the party's years-long alienation from the interests of labor and the productive middle class, would cost the party many voters.

The second development that exposed the SPD's increasing problems with the voters, was the disaster of the Sept. 21 elections for state parliament in the city-state of Hamburg. There, the SPD, which has governed the city-state for some time, fell 4.24% below the result of the last vote in 1993; the opposition CDU improved by 5.6%.

Hardly had the votes been counted in Hamburg, than the same SPD that had previously proclaimed this vote a test-run for the national elections of September 1998, now tried to play down the results as merely reflecting "local factors." The fact is that many voters could not find their own interests reflected in the SPD during the election campaign.

Another such "local factor," was the ridiculous attempt of the SPD to present itself as the little brother of Tony Blair's "new Labour" party of Britain. This started in July, when the SPD presented one of its main campaign posters with the slogan, written in English, "Law and order is a Labour issue—Tony Blair, new Labour, London." This had been borrowed straight from Blair's own election campaign in Britain, which led him to victory over a decomposed Tory government, on May 1.

As Anglophile as many Hamburg citizens have been, traditionally, such blatant "Blairism" did not convince them to give the majority to the SPD, on Sept. 21.

Now, the decision-making bodies of the SPD are going from one emergency crisis meeting to the next, trying to work out a new strategy to win votes. The best thing for the party and for Germany, would be for the SPD to drop the Blairism and begin a discussion about a real alternative to the present government. This should include a clear position in favor of industrial production, and against financial speculation; a clear preference for public sector infrastructure development and the respective creation of several hundred thousand jobs. In view of the nearly 5 million jobless in Germany, the SPD should adopt the slogan, "Production and jobs are a labor issue," and it should call for an in-depth reform of the financial system. The SPD should do what it did for a very short period earlier this year, before Blair took power in London, namely, to discuss the idea of a new Bretton Woods agreement.

Granted, the degeneration of the SPD into a "virtual" Social Democracy has gone quite far; but, after the shock of the Hamburg vote, some SPD members may be angry enough to change something.