

From Franz Müntefering to Mathias Platzeck

The German Social Democrats: on the way to “New Labour”

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Last week the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Franz Müntefering, resigned from his post. Just as sudden as the announcement of his resignation was the naming of his replacement. The change from Müntefering to Matthias Platzeck occurred within the space of little more than 24 hours.

Neither Müntefering’s resignation nor the nomination of Platzeck occurred democratically. Müntefering abruptly left his post after the party leadership opposed his nomination for the position of general secretary. Platzeck was then chosen within a tiny group of party heads and named as Müntefering’s successor. The party membership had absolutely no say in either decision. The coming SPD national party congress in mid-November will not alter these developments, even though the delegates could theoretically reject the decisions that have already been publicly made.

Only one and a half years have passed since Franz Müntefering took over the party chairmanship from German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Schröder himself occupied the position for barely five years. The speed with which the SPD uses up its chairpersons is a barometer of its political crisis and decline.

In the first four decades since the end of World War II the SPD had only three chairmen: Kurt Schumacher (1946-1952), Erich Ollenhauer (1952-1963) and Willy Brandt (1964-1987). The following 18 years saw August Bebel’s famous timepiece—which since the death of the legendary party leader has been passed on to each successive party chairman—change hands eight times: to Hans-Jochen Vogel, Björn Engholm, Johannes Rau, Rudolf Scharping, Oskar Lafontaine, Gerhard Schröder, Franz Müntefering and now Matthias Platzeck.

The constant wear and tear on those holding the party’s leading position is bound up with a fundamental change of the party itself. Of course, the SPD had already broken with a socialist perspective nearly 100 years ago, when in 1914 it voted for war credits for the First World War. In 1959, at its national conference in Godesberg, the party cut all programmatic ties to the workers’ movement and characterised itself as a “people’s party.” Despite this, until the 1980s and 1990s, the party continued to put forward a social-reformist programme which was based on retaining a certain degree of social equality.

Since then, under the pressure of globalisation, employer organisations have been clambering for a rigorous dismantling of social services and welfare on the one side and more tax privileges for companies and the wealthy on the other. During the SPD’s time in office it caved in to this pressure and transformed itself into a party for big business. Its policies since then have provoked growing resistance in the population and among party members. In the past 15 years around 300,000 members—almost one third of the membership—have resigned.

The suppression of inner-party discussion and democracy, the autocratic

leadership style of Schröder and Müntefering—who have repeatedly confronted party bodies with ultimatums and whose decisions were discussed only within the smallest circles at the top of the party—along with their refusal to tolerate any dissension, cannot be separated from the implementation of the anti-social policies of Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV.

As the president of the German state of Brandenburg, which surrounds Berlin, Matthias Platzeck had up until now received little attention in political circles and in the media, even though he had played an increasing role in the SPD leadership for some years.

Platzeck grew up in the old East Germany (GDR) and studied biochemistry in Ilmenau and Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz). When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 he was a founding member of the Green League in the GDR and a year later became minister without a specific responsibility in the cabinet of president Hans Modrow, the leader of the Stalinist state party, the SED (Socialist Unity Party). Running on the state list of the Bündnis 90 group, he entered the Brandenburg parliament. Platzeck rejected the merger of Bündnis 90 with the West German Green Party and in 1995 became a member of the SPD and environment minister in the state cabinet of Manfred Stolpe (SPD). When Stolpe resigned in the summer of 2002, Platzeck became Brandenburg president.

During the Brandenburg state elections last year, Platzeck vehemently defended Schröder’s Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV policies. He held his ground even as a rotten egg was thrown at him during a campaign speech. He described the massive cuts in social programs as the “only way to clean up the social system.” At the same time he demanded more discussion within the SPD and argued that these policies could be implemented not administratively, but only through debate.

Although the SPD lost votes in the Brandenburg elections, it remained the strongest party and joined forces with the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) to form a coalition government. Platzeck has for many years now worked “closely and reliably” (as he constantly puts it) with the CDU interior minister, Jörg Schönbohm. Schönbohm, a former army general, belongs to the right wing of the Union parties. He presents himself as a robust law-and-order man. Last spring, Schönbohm used the tragic case of a multiple child murder as the pretext for an anticommunist tirade. Platzeck defended his coalition partner and rejected calls for Schönbohm’s resignation.

Platzeck, however, is not just the man of the hour because he can work with the right-wingers in the CDU and has experience in a “grand coalition.” He is also someone who proposes a fundamental change in the SPD. One week after the German federal election in September, he wrote a commentary in the German business newspaper *Handelsblatt* under the title “The new Social Democracy.” Platzeck wrote that the election result was an “historic break.” He argued that the result contradicted those who said that the government had “no mandate for its reform policies of

Agenda 2010.”

Platzcek wrote: “Each and every vote for the SPD in this election means a clear vote for a social democratic policy of courageous reform. This much is clear: those who cast a free vote for Gerhard Schröder and German Social Democracy on 18 September 2005 did not do so in spite of, but because it paved the way forward for a decisive renewal of our country.”

One feels like replying: Lie Mister, but do so in moderation! Such a falsification of the facts is really an audacious act. In the previous 11 German state elections over the last several years, and in the European elections in 2004, the SPD has suffered a dramatic loss of votes. Hundreds of thousands of people have demonstrated on the streets against Agenda 2010 and its program of social cuts; tens of thousands of SPD members have resigned in disgust. It was only under the impact of the newly formed Left Party that Schröder demanded “more justice” and employed election talk against his own policies. The CDU on the other hand demanded an increase in the Value Added Tax (VAT), reductions in wages and pensions and the introduction of an across-the-board flat-tax rate. These two developments combined changed the election scales. Every serious analysis of the election made clear that voters voted “against Merkel,” the CDU leader, and not “for Schröder”—and absolutely not for Agenda 2010.

Although Franz Müntefering wants to become employment minister and vice-chancellor in a coalition government, the leadership axis of German politics has now become Merkel-Platzcek. For many it seems either coincidence or grotesque that 15 years after the collapse of the GDR two of its former citizens lead the country’s two biggest parties. Media commentaries refer to the similarities of their personalities and their political biographies and in general exaggerate superficialities.

The reasons lie much deeper, and are bound up with the character of German reunification in 1989-90. Before this event, both Matthias Platzcek and Angela Merkel had little to do with politics. They were taken in by the movement at the time and politicised—a movement that was more or less united on destroying all social and cultural institutions of GDR society and subjecting them to the profit interests of the large West German and international business groups.

In the first weeks of reunification, millions of people participated in demonstrations against the hated Stalinist regime, striving for a democratic and social renewal in the East and West. However, the decades-long suppression of any independent initiative of the working class in the GDR created a political vacuum that right-wing anticommunist demagogues were able to exploit. The demand for freedom and democracy was used as an ideological cover for the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of all social and progressive achievements.

It was under these conditions that Merkel and Platzcek began their political careers and quickly climbed the ranks of their respective parties. None of them had the slightest scruples when it came to implementing policies in the interests of businesses against those of society.

While many West German politicians, above all the older ones, are thoroughly conscious of the fact that social achievements and services were partly gained through social conflicts and class struggle and therefore have deep roots in the population, Merkel and Platzcek are not familiar with these experiences. Social resistance, strikes, class struggles and even local protests were violently suppressed by the GDR regime. Merkel and Platzcek have no inhibitions about implementing business-friendly policies. Under their leadership a grand coalition could rapidly develop into an authoritarian regime.

The quick change at the top of the SPD from Müntefering to Platzcek is closely bound up with a grouping inside the SPD known as the “Network.” Along with the “Seeheimer Circle,” in which the right wing of the SPD is organised, and the “Parliamentary Left” group, there exists this third internal SPD grouping. It was formed in 1992 by young

parliamentarians with the aim of promoting their political careers. The media characterises them as “power-hungry and lacking any programmatic content.”

Since its formation it has quickly expanded. It calls itself the “Post-68ers” or the “young generation for a new SPD.” It emphasises its “pragmatic” and “undogmatic” approach to economic developments and political tasks. According to this group, the ideology of the nineteenth century cannot resolve the problems in the twenty-first.

What this means concretely is seen by a declaration of the council of this Network on May 23 this year, one day after the SPD’s dramatic state election loss in North Rhine-Westphalia and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s announcement of new federal elections. The declaration demands: “Not to give up but to complete the reform course!” The new federal elections were supported as the “right consequence.” It went on: “There cannot be a discussion about the party’s orientation. Those who wish to question the SPD’s reform policies of the last years, or to instigate an internal party squabble over posts, damage the party and the country!”

Nevertheless, the group is systematically playing its own game of party-position chess and already occupies key state and federal positions at the leadership level. In order to get one of its followers appointed minister in the planned grand coalition, the Networkers struck a deal with the Parliamentary Left. The agreement meant that the Parliamentary Left would withdraw its candidate for environment minister and support that of the Networkers, Siegmund Gabriel. In return, the Networkers would support Andrea Nahles, the Parliamentary Left’s candidate for the position of general secretary.

The first half of this agreement went ahead as planned. With the help of the left, Gabriel became a candidate minister. However, after Nahles was elected general secretary by a surprising majority with the support of the Networkers, Müntefering resigned. Nahles came under attack as the “king murderer.”

Just one day later—again with heavy support from the Post-68ers—Matthias Platzcek was named as the future SPD chairman; he then demanded the right to put forward his own nomination as general secretary. Hours later the party’s executive committee unanimously voted in Platzcek’s nominee, Hubertus Heil. The 33-year-old Heil is a leading figure in the Network group. The coup was perfect. The Networker obtained the party’s key position.

Oskar Lafontaine, the former SPD chairman and now parliamentary fraction chief of the new Left Party, said the election of Andrea Nahles was a sign that the SPD leadership was making a turn to the left. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper he said: “The SPD is looking for a new orientation. It looks as though the majority of the leadership wanted to return to policies that are based on social democratic principles.”

Far from it. The opposite is the case. Nahles was used in a calculated manoeuvre and placed in the position for a limited time. At the same time, another member of the party’s left, Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, who held a position in the party’s executive, was forced to resign. There are many signals that point to the real character of the party’s “renewal,” and that is the one the Networkers are proclaiming, one similar in character to “New Labour” under Tony Blair in Britain.



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