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German Social Democrats embrace policies of right-wing nationalist AfD

By Peter Schwarz

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Anyone believing there is a limit to the Social Democratic Party's rightward shift in the federal election campaign was disabused of this notion on Sunday.

Following the presentation of the SPD's so-called "Germany Plan," which calls for a continuation of the anti-worker policies of former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and a major military build-up at home and abroad, the party's candidate for chancellor, Martin Schulz, jumped the last hurdle separating the SPD from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and other right-wing extremist parties by explicitly agitating against refugees.

Schulz chose the right-wing tabloid *Bild* to appeal for refugee policy to be placed at the centre of the election campaign. In 2015, more than a million refugees came to Germany in a "largely uncontrolled" way, Schulz declared, using the jargon of the AfD. That could not be allowed to be repeated, he said. He attacked Chancellor Angela Merkel from the right by accusing her of opening the borders to refugees without consulting other European states.

The situation in the Mediterranean is now "highly explosive," warned Schulz, adding, "If we don't act now, the situation is threatening to repeat itself." To prevent this, he demanded stepped-up measures to deter refugees. These would include a "European immigration law," which would ensure that only selected applicants were allowed to come to Europe. Anyone rejected after applying for asylum would lose the right to immigrate forever.

“Someone who applies for asylum cannot rely afterwards on the right to immigrate,” Schulz told the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*.

At the same time, Schulz would force other European Union states under threat of financial sanctions to accept more refugees from Italy, where many people continue to arrive from across the Mediterranean. He explicitly excluded Germany from this. “Now it’s the turn of the other EU member states,” he declared.

Schulz, who has been active in politics for over 40 years, is well aware of the provocative impact of his statements. They encourage the growth of the AfD and similar right-wing extremist parties throughout Europe. Hysterical tirades against refugees coming from the established political parties and mainstream media led to a strengthening of the far-right two years ago.

Some commentators link the fact that the SPD chairman is playing “the anti-immigrant card” (*Rheinische Post*) with his increased “desperation.” With the artificially inflated hype around Schulz having fallen flat, the SPD is now far behind the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union in the polls and has little chance of choosing the chancellor after September’s federal election.

But this is only a partial explanation. The SPD is reaching out to AfD voters not merely for electoral reasons. Its sharp shift to the right has deep social roots. The SPD is responding to the deepening social polarisation and emerging radicalisation of workers and youth.

Ever since the SPD betrayed its socialist program in 1914 and supported the First World War, in which millions of workers were senselessly slaughtered, it has seen its chief task as defending capitalism and suppressing all opposition to it. In periods of expansion, the SPD sought to ameliorate class tensions by means of social concessions, but in periods of crisis it always resorts to the most ruthless methods of repression.

At the end of the First World War, the SPD aligned itself with the right-wing Reichswehr (military) to drown the uprising of workers and soldiers in blood and murder its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. When the Weimar Republic once again entered into crisis in 1929, the SPD backed the semi-dictatorial regime of Heinrich Brüning, which destroyed the social gains of the working class by means of emergency decrees and supported the election of Field Marshall Hindenburg as president. In January of 1933, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor.

The economic upswing after the Second World War made possible a new phase of social reforms, which were already at an end by the mid-1970s. Helmut Schmidt, the Social Democratic chancellor at the time, introduced a fundamental shift in social policy that was continued by his Christian Democratic Union (CDU) successor Helmut Kohl and has been sustained to this day. In the early 2000s, it was once again an SPD chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, who created a massive low-wage sector with the Hartz reforms.

With the 2008 financial crisis, the extent of the global crisis of capitalism reached a point where even the appearance of social reforms was impossible. The social gains of the working class have

been destroyed everywhere, while a tiny elite at the top of society has vastly enriched itself. The great powers are rearming, devastating entire regions, as in the Middle East, and are preparing for a new imperialist world war.

These policies are supported by all of the established parties. The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, the Free Democratic Party, the Greens and the SPD are competing as to who can build up the army most effectively, pursue the most aggressive foreign policy, hire the most police and impose the deepest social cuts. None of them flinch when it comes to brutally deterring refugees from the wars in the Middle East and Africa.

CDU General Secretary Andreas Scheuer rejected Schulz's criticism of Merkel by stating that the SPD had persistently blocked the CDU's push for "more deportations, secure countries of origin, border controls and transit zones."

The Left Party also backs this agenda. It has subordinated all of its policies to the goal of forming the next federal government with the SPD. Its lead candidate, Sahra Wagenknecht, has long agitated against refugees in terms that are virtually indistinguishable from the AfD.

All of these parties are united by their fear of a rebellion of the working class and youth. They are more fearful of this than the rise of the AfD, which they are encouraging with their agenda based on policies they have adopted from it.

The SPD's embrace of the AfD's right-wing policies is not merely an expression of the bankruptcy of this party, which began its life as a Marxist workers' party in the 19th century. It shows that not a single problem—the defence of refugees and democratic rights, resistance against social cuts and layoffs, the fight against war—can be resolved without combating its source, the capitalist system, which is defended by the SPD and the Left Party.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) is the only party standing in the federal election on a socialist program. It connects the struggle against war and the strengthening of the state apparatus with the defence of democratic and social rights, and fights for the construction of an international working class movement to overthrow capitalism. We call on all WSWS readers to support the SGP's election campaign and join the party.