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Young Socialists Criticize the SPD's Lack of a Strategy vis-à-vis the Ecology Movement (1979)

In a position paper, the chairman of the Young Socialists (and later chancellor) Gerhard Schröder comments on the initial electoral success of the “Greens” in Bremen. According to Schröder, unless the Social Democrats began to take environmental questions more seriously, the rise of a competing party was to be predicted.

“The SPD has no Strategy”

The election results for the Greens/Alternative List in Bremen have startled the SPD. The cause of the shock was the fear they might lose their “power” in Bonn, or at least whatever was regarded as such. If the Greens/Alternatives run in the Bundestag election in 1980, then this fear is justified in any case, since with great probability that would lead to the grotesque situation in which forces that, in the broadest sense, feel committed to social progress would objectively pave the way for reactionary politics. No other interpretation is possible if voter behavior in Bremen is projected for the Federal Republic.

In view of this, the SPD has no strategy for how to react to this development. It is uncertain. This uncertainty has been expressed in a helpless-sounding “double strategy.” Part of the party is trying to force the Greens/Alternatives into an antidemocratic corner to make it seem impossible to vote for them. The other part is running around in overalls, overdoing their superficial attempts to curry favor and adapt to a “mass movement.” Neither one of these constitutes a strategy.

So what should we do? Or better, to avoid any misunderstanding: What now?

Before any answer can be ventured, there must be clarity regarding the potential of the Greens/Alternatives and the existing political power relations.

Two issues, in particular, served to mobilize roughly equal segments of voters in Bremen: environmental problems with a focus on nuclear power, and the threat posed to the political democracy by measures of state repression.

The voters who were mobilized by these issues are generally highly politicized. Two-thirds of them are young voters. They identify themselves as democratic socialists. The policies of the government have alienated them from the SPD. This alienation is by no means irreversible. It can be overcome.

Of course these voters are not only in Bremen, but throughout all of the Federal Republic. They probably make up about 2 percent of the vote. Based on the Bundestag election in 1980 they definitely want to keep [Franz-Josef] Strauß¹ out. But they will only decide to vote for the SPD if they are clearly shown the real difference between the social-liberal coalition and having Strauß take over, especially in the subject areas they are most concerned about.

With respect to the Bundestag election, the actual potential of the Greens/Alternatives under the same conditions that prevailed in 1980 (Strauß candidacy) is a maximum of 3.5 percent. The chance that the Greens/Alternatives could get seats in the Bundestag is extraordinarily low. This is the case regardless of whether they run on one or more lists.

[. . .]

The segment of the more conservative Greens that will definitely run is negligible. They can no longer be reached through arguments anyway. The same applies for the communist-oriented cadre. Both groups are so caught up in their own ideologies that they will definitely run in the next Bundestag election, without any consideration for the social repercussions. They need to be confronted with an argument that makes it clear that their candidacies objectively support Strauß's cause.

An open dialogue needs to be started with the left-socialist forces. This dialogue cannot deal exclusively with the issues of nuclear energy and the political democracy, but needs to cover the entire spectrum of domestic and foreign policy issues. They need to be asked specifically about the issue of asserting their demands and their relationship to the organized workers' movement (trade unions).

It goes without saying that the SPD must carry on this discussion openly. It cannot be a matter simply of justifying government policy. When the SPD represents controversial positions relative to those of the alternative movement, then they must be explained. Denouncing the movement is senseless. It is substantively wrong and creates solidarity where differentiation is the dictate of the hour.

The dialogue with left-socialist forces among the Greens/Alternatives can only be credible if led by the Young Socialists [SPD youth organization]. The demonstration by 150,000 opponents of nuclear power in Bonn has shown that the Young Socialists are not just a minor part of this movement. There is a great degree of common ground between the Young Socialists and the left-socialist forces in this movement. This opens up opportunities for discussion.

The proposed solidarity dialogue with the left-socialist forces within the movement of Greens/Alternatives carries with it the risk of fraying the Young Socialist organization. The "party founders" in the movement will try to win over as many as possible of the Young Socialists who are disappointed with government policies.

The means of doing this is obvious. The opponents of nuclear energy in the SPD will not be able to assert themselves at the party congress in Berlin. A credible alternative petition to the proposal by the party's executive committee – one that the Young Socialists could support – would be voted down by about 60-65 percent of the delegates at the Berlin party congress; [they would do so] not because they necessarily support the resolution of the executive committee,

¹ Conservative Bavarian populist with authoritarian leanings – ed.

but mostly because they do not want to oppose the social-democratic federal chancellor on a central issue, in order not to weaken his position in light of the upcoming elections.

This would be an opportunity for the “party founders” in the alternative movement to put the Young Socialists under pressure. This is where the risk of politically fraying the organization lies. The Young Socialists must counter this moralizing argumentation by self-assuredly presenting their rational strategy of changing the SPD by working in this organization.

On the other hand, no one can clearly say how the introduction and continued use of this technology [nuclear energy – *Spiegel* editor’s note] is supposed to be prevented if, on the one hand, the representatives of capital interests in the CDU/CSU and, on the other hand, almost all relevant parts of the labor movement will vote to support these technologies.

Anyone who really wants to prevent nuclear technology must attempt to spread convictions about the necessity of avoiding it by cooperating with the organizations of the working class in the Federal Republic, that is, within the unions and the SPD . This is the approach of the Young Socialists.

In view of this, it must be clearly shown that it is totally out of touch with reality if the “party founders” hope that after the Berlin party congress, masses of Young Socialists will be moved to leave the SPD. This will certainly not strengthen the movement of those who want to run in the Bundestag elections in 1980.

Source: Gerhard Schröder, “Die SPD hat kein Konzept” [“The SPD has no Strategy”], *Der Spiegel*, 1979, no. 44, pp. 68-71.

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