SPD Conference Report

A cowardly compromise stabilizes Helmut Schmidt... for the time being

by Rainer Apel, Bonn Bureau Chief

Political adversaries of West Germany's Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who had hoped that the Munich National Convention of the Social Democratic Party would dissent strongly from the Chancellor's politics and would thus contribute to Schmidt's fall, were disappointed. The vast majority of the 400 delegates to the Munich convention stated their interest in keeping Schmidt in power in Bonn, and—even more important—gave general support to Schmidt's policy in NATO. Schmidt's 1979 designing of the "Double-track" approach, through which the Federal Republic made support of 1983 plans to station Euromissiles in Germany contingent on continuing negotiations between the United States and the U.S.S.R., has become an unassailable platform of his administration, which none of his opponents—left or right—have been able to justifiably oppose.

While many of the 400 delegates were far from being in full agreement with NATO's plans for stationing of the Pershing II and cruise missiles by 1983, they left no doubt that they would not allow this issue to become a lever for toppling the Chancellor's government. In spite of all disagreements, especially by the left-wing side of the SPD, with Schmidt's general policy, there was a basic commitment to avoid political maneuvers which would weaken the stability of the Schmidt government and thus enable the opposition Christian Democrats to take power in Bonn.

This least common denominator among left-wing, environmentalist, and pro-labor social democrats, which stabilized Schmidt for the time being, was made possible by a deal within the SPD leadership to not allow the Munich convention to become the occasion of major controversy. The deal, which was made before the convention started on April 19, was, however, a dirty one, since it meant that the issue of incompatibility of the SPD as a basically labor-related party with the radical environmentalist movement, which has won many sympathizers in the party, would not be debated at all. A great chance to force a clear political distance from the "greens," which would have helped the SPD in the three upcoming state-level elections of this year, was thus spoiled for the sake of "party unity."

While it is still an open question which of the different wings in the SPD will profit more from that compromise, Schmidt will undoubtedly try to utilize the "all-party-support" gained at Munich by exactly that volatile compromise. Schmidt's first move to increase his control after the Congress was to announce a reshuffle of his cabinet. Three ministerial posts and three advisory posts were shifted around in a way that increases control wielded in the government by the right-wing SPD faction (also known as the "Kanalarbeiter").

On the party level itself, however, new trouble is already on the horizon: the SPD left-wing left no doubt that they will support the mass "peace" demonstrations planned for June 10 when U.S. President Reagan comes to Bonn to address Parliament. These demonstrations could easily become violent, U.S. and German security officials have warned, and will definitively have an "anti-American" character. New trouble can also be expected around the controversial issue of necessary investments in nuclear energy-generating projects which are being opposed by strong pro-environmentalist wings of the SPD in two of the states which will have elections this year, Hamburg and Hesse (both still governed by SPD governments).

Labor, unemployment, and energy

To a certain extent, the debates in Munich on labor politics, unemployment, and energy policy reflected the positive impact of labor-base organizing inside the SPD which from the beginning of 1981 had addressed the necessity of the SPD giving more emphasis to workers' concerns in everyday party work. A major problem of the inner-party life of the SPD since 1972 has been that the traditional profile of the party as a predominantly labor-oriented party was being shifted toward "new layers of society": the sociologists, psychologists, and other "ologists."

Since the new layers' were able to dominate the intra-party debate on politics to the extent that the necessity of formulating positions on investments in the productive industry was treated as a side-aspect, worker members became increasingly demoralized. The effects of this became clear in two state elections this year, where the SPD sustained heavy defeats, the main cause

of which had been that worker voters often saw no reason to vote for SPD candidates who showed no interest in issues of concern to labor, such as the rising rate of unemployment. Most of these dubious SPD candidates were also radical environmentalists.

The inner-party battle on the control over the party's general politics emerged during the first months of 1981, when the future of West Germany's central steel-producing region, the Dortmund region in the Ruhr, was becoming uncertain due to the EC's Davignon plan to severely limit production. A year-long fight has been conducted by Dortmund steel workers, local and regional administration officials, and some of that region's industrialists to insure that a new steel plant will be built to replace obsolete capacity being shut down. A series of labor-industry meetings pressured the state government and parliament to fund the future of tens of thousands of skilled jobs in the steel industry. As a leading official of the West German metal workers told *EIR* during the SPD Munich convention, "this fight has been very decisive for the economic situation in this country: it helped to guarantee employment in the key productive industries of this country—otherwise, unemployment would be much higher now than it is."

This statement gains significance in light of a West German unemployment rate of around two million in April, many of the unemployed being skilled workers laid off from productive industries such as auto, construction, and steel.

The same official, however, also indicated how much the dirty deal struck at the SPD executive level for the Munich SPD convention had suffocated the urgent debate on two crucial issues: currency and investment policy, and the environmentalist blockade of investments in the construction and energy-producing sectors. As the official told *EIR* in Munich, "these issues should have been on the agenda, but the party executive decided to not bring them up. They thought that if we started to debate the environmentalist problem, then the energy policy debate here would not have proceeded smoothly, and this would have caused problems during the crucial debate on NATO and the missiles problem. . . ."

As it turned out, the debate on NATO did not proceed without problems, and environmentalist members of the SPD told *EIR* they would not stop organizing against nuclear energy and big industrial projects even after the Munich SPD convention. The problem of having to confront the "green" wing of the SPD in an open debate on policies has therefore not been solved, but only postponed in Munich. It must even be feared, that the Munich "ceasefire" between the hostile lines of the SPD will break just during the curcial elections in the state of Hesse, whose SPD governor, Holger Börner, is the last reliable ally of Chancellor Schmidt on the state level. Even marginal losses of votes due to factional warfare between the hostile wings of the Hesse SPD—the environmentalist wing is extremely strong there—could ruin Börner's chances for re-election.

The debate at the Munich convention did feature some solid arguments in favor of investment in the productive industrial sector, such as steel and construction, and during the debate on energy policies, labor-based delegates stressed the urgent need for building new conventional and nuclear power plants in order to provide reliable sources of energy for West Germany's industry. The secret deal on the party executive level not to attack the environmentalists, however, contributed to treating nuclear energy as only a secondary option after coal power. The chairman of the West German mining workers, Adolf Schmidt, however, stressed in his presentation that the high temperature reactor technology was key to developing ways of processing coal into more valuable products than just fuel for power-generating facilities, as it is still the case today.

Among the positive aspects of the Munich convention debate on energy was that a call for a two-year construction ban on all nuclear power projects, written by the "green wing" of the SPD, was voted down by a 60 to 40 percent margin.

NATO disarmament and the peace movement

As had been predicted before the Munich convention started, the debate on NATO, the Euromissiles, and the peace movement became the most controversial. Political lobbying from the side of the SPD's labor-base had, however, succeeded in making the unemployment and investment issue the number-one topic on the agenda, and in pushing the NATO issue down to second place. This helped to channel at least some of the broader left-wing sentiment against NATO into general support for Schmidt, because only very few of the SPD's left-wing would risk being blamed for not showing interest in the unemployment problem.

Although, therefore, the NATO debate "only" occupied one of the four days of the Munich convention, it made clear what the political adversaries of Helmut Schmidt, especially on the U.S. side and in the international press, had meant when addressing the "erosion of SPD party support for Schmidt on the NATO issue." For most of the SPD membership, and not only for the left-wing which is very close to the so-called mass peace movement, NATO is still a negative factor, and arms policy is always considered a subject to be avoided. Most of the SPD membership had, after the last war, opposed West Germany's re-armament and joining of NATO in 1955, and the basic sentiment against the military is still alive, although SPD defense ministers have commanded West Germany's armed forces since 1969. This emotional resistance against military affairs,

Party Chairman Brandt and Chancellor Schmidt.

mixed with prevailing socialist objections against any kind of "military-industrial complex," has always allowed demagogues to rally parts of the SPD against those in the party, who, like Helmut Schmidt or Hans Apel, decided to become ministers of defense in SPD-led governments.

The Munich convention indeed featured a high degree of this demagoguery, the main spokesmen for which were Oskar Lafontaine and Erhapd Eppler, both also spokesmen for the environmentalist wing of the SPD. Both of them—in this respect certainly comparable to U.S. peace movement figures such as Roger Molander, or Edward Kennedy and Jane Fonda—show actual interest in matters of defense and armaments only to the extent that they suffice to stir emotions against the military in general. Lafontaine has developed the dubious art of posing a simplistic, false choice between defense and "life," using the slogan "We want to live, and not die" at the Munich conference. Lafontaine is tied into genocidalist networks like the Club of Rome off-spring IIASA (in Austria); Eppler was one of the 50 Germans selected in the late 1950s to attend Henry Kissinger's "strategic seminars" at Harvard, which created the notion that Dr. Strangelove politics were viable strategic policy.

The involvement of both Lafontaine and Eppler with these networks make it clearer why they are involved in mobilizing Schmidt in a kind of anti-Vietnam-protest-style of mass upsurge against NATO. While the Munich SPD convention rejected the resolutions from the Lafontaine-Eppler side with a two-thirds majority, there is, however, no reason to believe that the left has in any way reneged on its decision to support the potentially violent demonstrations which will greet the summit meeting. Erhard Eppler himself gave the marching orders at the Munich convention: either the SPD votes for the "Real America" of Edward Kennedy against Reagan, or it votes for Reagan and against Kennedy, he said, and if the SPD voted thus against Kennedy and the U.S. peace movement, the peace movement in West Germany would turn away from the SPD and run amok.

It should be mentioned that some of the contributions to the SPD debate on NATO in Munich did, indeed, produce useful arguments. Hans Apel, Minister of Defense in Bonn, said, for example, that "our government does, unlike many other governments in the West . . . lay emphasis on social and economic stability as a major factor of defense. We insist on economic development and stability of the Third World. We do, unlike many other Western nations these days . . . [possibly referring to Britain in the present Malvinas conflict—R.A.] respect the sovereignty of Third World nations, and we have a justified interest in détente with the Soviet bloc."

Bonn Minister of Development Policy Hans Offergeld, said that economic development in the Third World is perhaps as important as military defense for the world's security, and the former SPD parliamentary faction's spokesman for defense matters (now senator for internal security in Hamburg), Alfons Pawelczyk said that what should raise much more immediate concern for peace was the fact that the "general foreign policy consensus on détente is not only eroding between East and West, but even within the NATO alliance. And once that consensus breaks, we can forget about efficient disarmament politics, because then we will lack partners for détente in the West. . . ."

Hans Apel added that his impression was that the 1967 NATO platform for détente politics, the "Harmel Report," which had also been the basis for the 1979 NATO double-track decision, seems to no longer be respected by the present U.S. administration, and he added as an admonishment to his colleagues Weinberger and Haig that "what should not be forgotten is that the NATO 1979 decision does not only bind us in Bonn, but also the Americans as well as any other NATO partner." He said, as kind of a warning to the Anglo-American approach, that whoever tried to decouple from one of the two equal parts of the 1979 double-track decision, would make the decision invalid.

These statements from the government bench, made at the Munich SPD convention, seem to indicate that the Schmidt government has not given up its efforts to convince the rest of NATO that there is no alternative to détente and disarmament, and that the peace movement will not succeed in compromising the government in Bonn.