

A Left-Wing Godesberg – the SPD’s new Hamburg Party Programme



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(German Version)

THE EVENT DESERVES Europe’s attention: the German Social Democrats adopted a new party programme at their party conference at the end of October 2007. After Berlin (1989) and Godesberg (1959), this is the third post-war party programme. If one wants to cover even the whole party history, the Weimar Republic party programmes Heidelberg (1925) and Görlitz (1921) as well as the German Empire party programmes Erfurt (1891) and Gotha (1875) also preceded the Hamburg Programme too. Hence for the seventh time, a new party programme was adopted. So, which parts of this event deserve attention?

Let us begin with the normal things within this remarkable event. The Hamburg Programme is the first party programme of one of Europe’s big left-wing parties in the new 21st century and has been written for the coming two or three decades. Unlike all its predecessors, the programme was compiled whilst the SPD has been in government and not in opposition. And the SPD needed 8 long years, from

1999 to 2007, three successive programme commissions and not less than four party chairmen to finish the programme.

With the Hamburg Programme, the SPD has returned as a ‘programme party’. The party has always felt committed to such claim. This commitment is reflected in the two parallel parts of the Erfurt Programme. Whereas the allegedly natural way towards a classless socialist society is outlined in its first part, the second part comprises a concrete catalogue of measures ranging from transition claims to the creation of a democratic republic. The knowledge of the merit of such tension arc between the vision of a social democratic party, its historical duty and its day-to-day political goals has evaporated in the last years and decades. Examples for this were inter alia the 1999 Schröder-Blair paper, extensive privatisation of public goods, not just a few aspects of the ‘Agenda 2010’ and attempts to dismiss central programmatic objectives such as ‘democratic socialism’ and ‘economic democracy’ as in principle outdated and therefore obsolete.

Layout, methodology and basic messages of the Hamburg Programme contradict this tendency. One could argue now that the SPD has actually never abandoned its commitment of being a ‘programme party’. This is however only seemingly true but not factually. Despite important and still valid aspects, the last party programme, the so-called Berlin Programme, adopted in

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December 1989 remained in the thinking of system contradiction, national partition as well as the Cold War. It was therefore easy to brush the programme's valid statements, for example on the principle of sustainability, with reference to the radically changed world order aside. Indeed, the Berlin Programme had long ago lost its guiding impact on the social democrats' governmental policies. Only a small step was missing to rid themselves forever of the burden of uncomfortable visionary objectives.

It is thus all the more important that the Hamburg Programme has set an end to this tendency. It is not a backtracking bow to the past that already the introduction follows 'democratic socialism's proud tradition. The paragraph on *Our Values and Beliefs* explicitly states that democratic socialism means nothing less than the programmatic horizon of social democratic objectives for the 21st century – the 'first real global century' according to the introductory time analysis. Consequently less than two decades later, the most resolute commitment to the validity of these socialist objectives is expressed by a country in which once the Berlin Wall stood.

Who wants to disagree that this commitment demonstrates a crucial landmark for the whole present European left? At the end of the 19th century, the Erfurt Programme inspired all other continental social democratic and socialist parties, which were at that time only in their creation stage. The Godesberg Programme of the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, which served as an important role model for the European social democracy, symbolises another watershed due to its recognition of 'core value socialism' (*Grundwertesozialismus*) and social market economy. As a sort of 'left-wing Godesberg', the Hamburg Programme has a good chance to become as significant as the SPD's two most influential party programmes.

The Programme's core messages

To stop climate change: In the introductory paragraph *The time we live in*, this question is given a prominent position placing it over and ahead of all other contradictions. This shows which importance the Hamburg Programme assigns to the fight against global warming caused by human activities. In all paragraphs that follow, the 'sustainability principle' including a radical turn of energy policy as well as the entering of a solar era is picked up again. This sustainability principle must determine the activities of an 'UN economic, social and environmental council' – a core demand for the creation of a desired 'global domestic policy'. The responsibilities of such a council are obvious – it has to coordinate 'economic interests, social needs and ecological necessities'. Yet, the key question of how this council could assert its authority worldwide unfortunately remains unclear.

Sustainability is after all not less insistently called for in the treaties of the European Union and for the reshaping of the economy of one's own country. Nevertheless, it could also happen that all these objectives are fading in the light of dramatic culmination of the real climate conditions and therefore much more direct interference in industrial living is required – especially there where a responsibility for climate change can be detected.

To fight against global capitalism: The less likely it is to reverse the globalisation of capital and goods, services and labour – in fact globalisation holds unquestioned advantages – the less acceptable global capitalism created by globalisation is. Global capitalism characterises a 'lack of democracy and fairness'. 'It worsens old injustices and creates new ones.' Global capitalism thus evokes an opposing stance behind which Social Democrats must rally. The struggle against poverty throughout the world, Europe and Germany

offers the most common rationale for the advocacy of a just global economic order. The claim for democratic control of financial market, which has to be implemented at national, European and global level, belongs to this very old, but increasingly charged debate about global economic order. Although the programme describes how important it is to provide frameworks, it on the other hand stays vague and non-binding once effective measures are concerned. Neither stock exchange tax nor Tobin tax nor restrictions of hedge funds' activities, which must include more than just transparency, are mentioned in the programme.

Social Europe must become our answer to globalisation. Like in no other party programme before, the SPD focuses in Hamburg on the EU as strategic arena for the realisation of its policies. Against all contradictions and half measures of the current European affairs, it is said right at the beginning of the relevant paragraph: 'Democratic Europe needs a government accountable to parliament on the basis of a European constitution.' Yet, the Programme also explicitly dismisses Brussels' steady tendency to extend the lead of the internal market compared to social integration into a permanent predominance of the market principle at the European level. 'Besides the EU's Economic and Monetary Union a European social union of equal rank needs to be created.' Therewith and only therewith the EU can gain such degree of internal cohesion and interna-

tional attractiveness in order to fundamentally reform global capitalism. It is therefore only consistent when the Hamburg Programme expressly supports the further development of the Party of European Socialists 'towards a capable members and programme party'.

Decent work: 'Every work well done deserves respect, but not every work is decent work. Work is part of a life in dignity, but the work has to be decent.' This is the core piece of our programme; if anywhere then it is worthwhile here to have a short comparing digression about the history of the SPD's programmes. Each previous programme approached differently societal reality continuously endeavouring to find answers 'on the basis of its current time'. Apart from employees' jobs, 'decent work' in the Hamburg Programme also deliberately includes 'self-employed jobs' and 'decent work without profit' (volunteer work). As part of a plausible full employment strategy, 'job and occupational change' and even more importantly 'constant learning' are supported. By embracing the requirements derived from this strategy, the Hamburg Programme can even more convincingly explain the resultant expectations of 'decent work'. 'Fair distribution of profits', protection against social and wage dumping, collective bargaining autonomy and co-determination are part of these expectations.

Fair services of public interest: The struggle for the best possible realisation of 'decent work' provides the basis for the welfare state as 'major civilising innovation of the 20th century'. In the run-up to the party conference in Hamburg it was heavily debated whether the 'post-caring' elements of the welfare state carried out as transfer payment, for example unemployment benefit or pension, should recede in favour of its 'precautionary' elements such as different aspects of education system, integration of immigrants or

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the field of health protection. Eventually, the understanding of the indispensability of both systems prevailed. This led to statements like: 'The earlier, more individual and more effective the precautionary principle is applied, the better the welfare state is capable of justly protecting against major life risks.' At the same time, it becomes obvious that question of justice in each subarea of the welfare state ranging from education and health system to old-age provision demands for independent answers to often dramatically growing problems. These problems vary from available resources to participation of the people involved to democratic form of responsibility of the whole of society.

A modern programme party

Party programmes need life: this is particularly true for a programme such as the Hamburg Programme which redefines the basic values of a party. They gain life from the belief systems of their members for whom they speak and whose different opinions they bring together. Party programmes however also need to be realistic and effective. Therefore, their examination never stops; their capability will constantly be tested – inside by members and supporters, outside by the public, media and rival parties and last but not least in democracies by elections.

These are the tests, which the SPD's Hamburg Programme has yet to pass. It starts with the process of implementation of the adopted text by the members at every level – in local branches and local government, at state and federal level. Everywhere it has to be seen as to whether the programme can convince the party members: If the programme has accepted numerous grassroots proposals, convincingly fitted in with the programmatic heritage of Social Democracy, provided enough space for answers to the new challenges of our time, it is really viable for the future. Is it possible to combine the

core messages, how do they go along with the programme's individual messages and can we extract orientation and instructions of action from these? Yet, on the other hand member's reality must also match the programme: How do the basic messages of the programme relate to one's own political acting and to the political practice of Social Democrats regardless of which policy field and level?

In doing so, one thing becomes apparent: If a party adopts a new party programme, pragmatism within the party will be limited and everyday necessary political compromises will increasingly need justifications. If a party ignores these, its credibility would be in fact more damaged than this would be the case during times of programmatic emptiness.

The fact that the German Social Democrats, whilst being in government, dare to try to meet the updated credibility criteria of the Hamburg Programme shows their confidence. No one needs to fear now that the SPD will become a dogmatic party of programmatic 'exegetes'. However thanks to the Hamburg Programme, an invaluable gain in internal solidarity and willingness to self-confidently enter political disputes with the rival parties on the right or on the left can already be noted.