

Germany: the SPD is returning to its traditional electorate

The SPD held an extraordinary party convention on 26 September, at the time of which the outline of a new party programme was presented. The convention marked a symbolic end to accounting for the defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2009, when the party received its worst result in history. The main conclusion made during the convention was the decision to address the SPD's political offer again to the party's core electorate, for example families with many children and blue-collar workers.

A major part of the SPD's electorate and its politicians have believed for many years that the welfare state reform conducted by Gerhard Schröder's government in 2003 (Agenda 2010) was a betrayal of the SPD's ideals. The package, as part of which the duration of unemployment allowances was shortened and legal regulations protecting workers' rights were reduced, was perceived to have adversely affected the traditional electorate of the SPD. This led to dissension in the party and the emergence in 2007 of the Left Party, which is now the SPD's most serious competitor on the left wing of the political scene. The continuation of Schröder's policy, aimed at winning the broadest possible support among the German middle class, additionally deepened the conflict inside the party. Last year parliamentary elections showed that the Christian Democrat parties finally won the struggle for support from the centrist electorate. Immediately after the elections, the party leader Sigmar Gabriel appealed for a return to traditional social democratic ideals: a pro-family policy and the welfare state. This move has given tangible effects; the SPD has 30% support, which is 7 percentage points higher than its result in the parliamentary elections. As they decide to turn to the left of the political scene, the Social Democrats must not disregard the Left Party as their competitor. However, this new line adopted by the SPD may simply be an attempt to prepare the ground for possible coalitions with the Left Party's participation or support, similar to those already functioning in two federal states. <zawil>