Will German Social Democrats expel youth leader for socialist ideas?

written by Ron Lare | May 17, 2019



Young Socialists in the SPD with Chairperson Kevin Kuehnert vote against the start of coalition talks during the SPD's party congress in Bonn, Germany, January 21, 2018. REUTERS/Thilo Schmuelgen – RC19E9F900E0

The SPD — the Social Democratic Party of Germany — is Germany's oldest political party. Its history includes both revolutionary struggle against capitalism and the betrayal of revolution. Many still consider it a socialist party, and its youth organization identifies as Young Socialists.

Now, in a May Day 2019 interview, the leader of the party's youth organization, the "Jusos," 29-year-old Kevin Kühnert, has shocked the German political establishment, including an SPD leadership committed to capitalism. Kühnert said that capitalism must be "overcome." He said important social decisions should be made "collectively."

Kühnert added specifics that further concerned SPD leaders about their chances among middle-class voters in the current European Parliamentary elections. He said collecting rent from tenants is not a legitimate way to earn a living and housing should be owned only by whoever lives in it, not by landlords.

As for the real owners of Germany, Kühnert suggested that companies such as BMW should be nationalized and run by their employees. He was supported by commentators from one of the SPD's rivals, the Left Party (Die Linke), and denounced by all the other major parties.

Meanwhile, German and US capitalist expropriations get a pass. Kühnert mocks horror at "collectivizing" BMW even as Germany "collectivizes" land for Autobahn construction. In Detroit, GM is closing its Poletown plant decades after Detroit repressed protesters and leveled a community to make way for GM. Socialists demand the plant now be expropriated for green production.

The top SPD "parent party" leader, Andrea Nahles, wouldn't comment on Kühnert's statements. Some party leaders joked about positions they themselves held as youth. But former SPD chief Sigmar Gabriel accused Kühnert of using Donald Trump's demagogic methods. An SPD council on the economy proposed Kühnert's expulsion from the SPD.

Jusos, led by Kühnert, is more independent than most political parties' youth groups, but is the

traditional incubator for party leaders who shed the sins of their youth.

Some mainstream media took Kühnert seriously. They suggested SPD spark a national discussion of rising inequality to restore party's profile among voters. Academics defended his criticisms of the housing market.

The SPD is truly in crisis. Jusos opposed forming the party's current national coalition with Merkel's Christian Democrats and their Bavarian ally, the CSU. Since then this youth opposition has strengthened.

SPD youth see that the Green Party, starting from conservative-humanistic values, has in some ways passed the SPD to the left as the latter moved rightward. Many progressives favor the Greens over the SPD on climate change and immigration, and as an alternative to the rising far-right party, the Alternative for Germany. Many voters value Greens' record in governing at local and regional levels (while, unlike the SPD, so far avoiding national coalitions).

Yet here were the Greens criticizing Kühnert as too left-wing. A leading Green said Germany needs ecological rather than socialist reform of the economy — the latter a subject "for seminars."

Die Linke, the Left Party, supported Kühnert on workers running BMW and added a more Marxist statement that those doing the work should own the production process and product.

Die Linke has a small but significant and stable voting base as well as a wing promoting a mass progressive, cross-party movement. The SPD leaders lose youth to the left, but their response seems to be, "Shut the baby up so we can go back to sleep."

In the 1960s and 70s, Kühnert's comments would have been unremarkable in a youth leader. In the neoliberal world, they draw a line between social-democratic electoralism and socialist solutions.

Time will tell whether this controversy in the SPD is merely a tempest in a May Day teapot. However, SPD youth will continue to threaten a split over the coalition government with the conservatives of Angela Merkel's CDU. These youth may increasingly look toward Die Linke. Even a slight socialist breeze from Jusos is a relief from international social democracy's suffocating capitulation to neoliberalism.

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