Apocalypse cancelled!

How social democrats can promote a social and ecological transformation

Read this article in German.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has embraced its mission of shaping the digital revolution. Rightly so, as digitalisation will fundamentally change the economy and society. It affects classical social democratic policy areas such as work, justice, participation and the protection of civil liberties. Nobody would even think of writing off this issue as merely postmodern gimmickry which won't impact anyone beyond the digital avant-garde.

It's therefore all the more surprising how half-heartedly the SPD is handling the second major transformation issue of our time, the global climate and environmental changes. Again and again, the party erects conflict lines between work and the environment, prosperity and climate protection. It often sees climate and environmental policy issues as green 'feel-good' topics which won't help the fight for the 'hard-working middle-class'.

Some social democrats are making this misjudgement precisely at a time when environmental awareness is changing among both its own membership and those groups of voters which the SPD must win over. Global warming, extreme weather incidents, heat waves, droughts, species extinction and other knock-on effects of climate change have caused environmental issues to lose any semblance of being 'avant-garde postmodern'. They have long been firmly embedded within the values system of core social democratic constituencies. The polls are clear: a large majority of the population expects answers from their policy-makers as to how the economy, work and society can be reshaped to preserve natural resources, fight climate change and hold society together.

Ecology as a question of social justice

Social democracy used to be further ahead. In the Berlin programme of

1989, the SPD did what it's missing today: the party intertwined social and ecological concerns into a social democratic narrative of progress for industrial Germany. '*The ecological reorganisation of our industrial society has become a question of survival*', one can read in extensive remarks on 'ecologically and socially responsible economies.' And again: '*Nothing is sensible for the overall economy that is not sensible in terms of ecology. Ecology is not an add-on to the economy*.'

It's high time for the SPD to take up this programmatic tradition once again. This cannot be limited to the recent odd row over emission standards for cars. For as with digitalisation, climate change confronts us with the fundamental question of how we want to work, live and do business. This presents social democracy with the chance to bring together core issues such as digitalisation, good work, social cohesion, economic development and innovation policy into a new, progressive, socio-ecological project.

We need a political debate about how ecological justice can be implemented in practice.

And in order to be able to uphold the claim of being a party of justice, the SPD will have no choice but to develop a thorough understanding of ecological justice. The global environmental changes are already causing a noticeable increase in conflicts over the distribution of resources. The emissions-intensive behaviour of one person increasingly undermines the right to exist of others. With consequences such as soil degradation, air and noise pollution and the spreading of diseases, climate change has already become the 'invisible hand' behind many social upheavals today.

All of this raises numerous fundamental questions of justice: how can we give particular support to those who are most severely affected by environmental damage? On the other hand, how can we prevent eco-political decisions from deepening social divisions? What should continue to grow because it contributes to the common good? What must be dismantled because it is socially and ecologically detrimental? How can this kind of change be implemented in a socially just manner? How many resources is an individual entitled to use in exercising his right to an individual way of life, without curtailing the rights of others in so doing? How do we prevent the ecological costs of private sector decisions from being shifted onto the general public?

Trade unions need to be at the forefront

At present, the SPD cannot have complete answers to many of these questions. But it ought to begin to look for answers. This is because the emissions riggings, the disputes over lignite mining and the ban on diesel cars are only the start of diverse socio-ecological conflicts and areas of tension that the party will have to deal with in future.

We need a political debate about how ecological justice can be implemented in practice. This requires attractive and concrete visions of the future – beyond crisis rhetoric and moral appeals – which can show that a socio-ecological transformation can, instead of sacrifice, offer prospects for a better life.

New concepts of mobility, liveable cities and communities, a clean and decentralised energy supply, good nutrition and landscape conservation, as well as communal participation and codetermination in the workplace – all of these things occur tangibly in people's daily lives and are directly linked to socio-ecological transformation.

Today 'Good Work' can, given global supply chains, only mean 'Good Work' globally.

In the coming years, it will be particularly important to develop a socio-ecological understanding of work. A modern concept of work discusses the conditions for the regeneration of human *and* natural resources. Just as Marx spoke of not *one*, but *two* '*sources of wealth*', namely the 'earth and labour', both are subject to the dangers of over-use and exploitation and must both be organised according to sustainability criteria.

For the SPD this presents the opportunity to work hand in hand with trade unions on a socio-ecological progress model. Not only are the trade unions among the key players in many fields of transformation (energy, industry, construction, transport, public services). Like the SPD, trade unions have put forward socio-ecological alternatives for leading sectors in German industry in the 1990s, but did not pursue the debate up until the end.

For both the SPD and trade unions, the ecological reorganisation of emissions-intensive industry sectors should become one of their most central tasks. The common goal of social democracy, to reshape the German economy to be almost greenhouse gas neutral by 2050, offers opportunities for new industrial jobs in forward-looking lines of business as well as technological innovations which could help to gradually

decouple value creation and the use of resources.

The party of progress, the party of justice

From a socio-ecological perspective, the concept of 'Good Work' means contributing to sustainable value creation processes in the economy and society – in a meaningful and secure occupation. It includes growth in sustainable sectors that translates into jobs, as well as education, learning and qualification campaigns to accompany this transformation. It emphasises working time models and mobility concepts that enable a sustainable way of life. And: today 'Good Work' can, given global supply chains, only mean 'Good Work' globally. It's absolutely necessary to take into account the social and ecological working conditions of foreign suppliers as well.

Many employees have, however, experienced and suffered from the fact that different structural changes of the last four decades have mostly been implemented without their say and against their economic and often existential interests. Therefore, a socio-ecological concept of work always also means taking seriously the idea of 'just transitions' as established by the trade unions in the Paris Agreement on climate change.

The socio-ecological transformation certainly makes for one of the most complex issues in politics today.

This means evaluating the social and employment-related consequences of transformation processes at an early stage, pursuing an active labour market policy and taking social protection measures for those directly affected. We need massive long-term public and private investment for innovation and structural change, as well as a proactive state that directs the transition to sustainable value creation processes by means of regulatory policy.

And finally: every substantial socio-ecological alternative will take on established systems with powerful interests. Changing these systems will produce winners and losers. Questions of a just transition will largely be decided upon in political discussions. It's a prerequisite for implementing socio-ecological work to democratise the economy, that is to say increase participation and codetermination in the workplace, and to use the state's ability to implement social decisions regarding economic players.

For the SPD in particular, it will be important not to make these changes in a top-down way. In order to regain competence and allies as well as

credibility and trust, they must make the socio-ecological transformation a theme in people's local area: in the neighbourhood, the community, the region and in the workplace. The SPD can strengthen their social networks again by coming into close contact with people impacted by these changes and also with those who are already working on local socio-ecological solutions and pioneering the establishment of new cultures of cooperation and participation.

The socio-ecological transformation certainly makes for one of the most complex issues in politics today. But the SPD must not be afraid of this: social democrats have always been successful precisely when they, as the party of progress, have articulated 'realistic visionary' answers to the big questions of our time. These include both political strategies for the here and now as well as long-term ideas and plans that express the will to change and the possibility of a different, better, just society. And when they, as the party of justice, have known how to configure this progress in such a way that it led to greater social cohesion. These kinds of progress parties are needed today, ones that combine justice, prosperity and sustainability in keeping with the times – and that make this their primary policy objective.



Jochen Steinhilber
Berlin

Jochen Steinhilber has been Head of the Global and European Policy department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) since 2010 and is the contact person with regard to fundamental international policy issues.