

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Green party is heading for a split

The fight between the “pragmatists” and the ideologues is making the Greens the sick man of the red-green coalition.

Young voters want jobs and a sound economic and social future; they do not want feminism or to engage in fringe group activities, and they care little about anti-nuclear and anti-military issues. That is why they do not vote for the Greens. Youth priorities have changed.

These observations are in a report compiled by Gunda Roestel, one of the two women at the top of the Green party. She says that these trends were already evident last year. But, the fact that a majority of voters wanted the national government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl out at all costs last September, clouded the fact that 93% of German voters did not cast their ballot for the Greens. Since last autumn, the Greens have lost considerable support and are now hovering around the 5% minimum which, under German election law, must be met to gain entry to the parliaments. If the trend is not reversed, the party will fall below 5%. Roestel reports all of this.

But strong radical currents in the Green party do not want to read the writing on the wall. And they also dislike Gunda Roestel: First, because she belongs to the “pragmatist” faction, and second, because she comes from Germany’s east. The rift between the Greens east and west of the former division of Germany is very deep; the radical faction controls the western party sections, while the Greens in the east have always been more pragmatic.

After the September elections, the western radicals staged a coup, pushing “easterners” out of leading posts in government and parliamentary groupings. Roestel got her post as one of

two women at the top of the party only because the radical faction had to make a concession to the feminist current. The “male-female” issue is a dogmatic ideological issue among the Greens, and the 50% “female quota” for party posts brought Roestel in, along with her male party colleague Jürgen Trittin, two years ago. Trittin became a cabinet minister in Bonn in October 1998, leaving his party post vacant. Because only one of the three federal cabinet posts held by the Greens, that of the public health minister, was held by a Green woman, his party post was given to a woman to keep the balance.

Since Roestel is a “moderate,” according to the Green quota, her co-leader had to be a “radical”: Antje Radcke. However, the two have not had a cooperative relationship, and so, sentiment had been building to replace both of them, at the Greens’ Erfurt European Policy convention on March 5-7.

Recognizing the alienation of the party from the young voters, the pragmatists around German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a Green, fear the party will lose its ability to keep posts on the state and national level. Therefore, Fischer proposed streamlining party structures, putting heavier emphasis on technocratic efficiency at the expense of the ideologues. Fischer also proposed replacing the two women with a party chairman or chairwoman.

With that, Fischer poked a stick into a nest of vipers: The radicals mobilized on the feminism issue, and although Fischer had declared that he would not run for chairman, he was accused of anti-feminist views, ending

any debate at the Erfurt convention on his proposals or the Roestel report. On the surface, things remain as they are until the next national party convention, but below the surface, the knives are out for fierce factional warfare.

Fischer himself announced the end of the 10-year internal cease-fire. At a separate gathering in Erfurt of the “realists,” Fischer said that the gloves must come off against the radicals, or “fundamentalists.” The cease-fire can no longer be honored, because the party can only be run efficiently, i.e., win votes and stay in the government, if it is run by one, united policy, he said.

Thus, the Green party is heading for a split, with one or the other faction either walking out or being expelled. These faction fights will pit the radicalized currents at the party base against the red-green national government and the parliamentary group of the Greens. A deep gulf will emerge, from the national party organization down through the state and local branches. And until this war is decided, none of the ruling bodies that are based on Social Democratic Party (SPD) coalitions with the Greens, from the national level to the local, will be able to function. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) will have no choice but to rule by decree, which will increase the frictions. Against that background, the red-green government, which is losing its capacity to govern by the day, is unlikely to survive the next big blow coming from the world financial markets.

Anticipating that, the Social Democrats have recently met secretly with leaders of the post-communist PDS party, to prepare the ground either for a new government majority, should the Green party split, or for PDS support for a minority government between the SPD and rump Greens. But with that kind of arrangement, things would turn even worse in Germany.