

Rearmament? Social democracy and the question of peace in the 1980s

Jan Hansen

The question of war and peace preoccupied social democrats in Europe throughout the 20th century. Under the shadow of the bipolar confrontation and the division of Europe in particular, the call for a reduction of military tensions and nuclear armament was a key distinguishing feature of social democratic foreign and defence policy. Nevertheless, the debate on war and peace in the 1980s was heavily fraught with conflict. The re-intensification of the East-West conflict testified to by the NATO double-track decision, by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and by the 'liberation movements' in Central America led to acrimonious transnational conflicts among European social democrats.

The paper examines the debate on peace within the European member parties of the Socialist International in the 1980s. Specifically, it analyses the shift in basic attitudes to war and peace (1), the challenge to traditional social democratic defence concepts by the extra-parliamentary peace movement which was increasing in strength during this decade, and by the alternative theories the new movement discussed (2), and the redefining of a 'consensus on security policy' which referred back to existing traditions in social democratic peace policy (3).