

Germany: two more ministers resign from Schröder cabinet

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Just 24 hours after the resignations of the German Ministers for Health—Andrea Fischer (Green Party) and Agriculture, Karl-Heinz Funke (Social Democratic Party—SPD)—replacements were found and the German coalition government returned to business. The rapid change of personnel was designed to cover up deeper problems.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) has already lost seven members of government, although his party has only just reached the halfway point of its term in office.

The Red-Green coalition (of the SPD and the Greens) took power claiming it would profoundly reform German politics and bring the country into line with the new demands posed by globalisation. Above all, this meant breaking up the traditional structures of the German social state and opening the country up to unlimited access of the international finance markets. Initial claims that the process could take place in a manner which respected the social equilibrium were quickly dispelled.

Following an unprecedented mobbing campaign on the part of the main German business organisations, SPD Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine resigned in the spring of 1999, accusing Schröder of “bad teamwork”. In order to pacify party ranks, Schröder then got rid of Bodo Hombach, the right-wing head of the chancellery.

In the same year Franz Münterfering switched jobs from his post as transport minister to general secretary of the SPD, in order to discipline the party as it completed its transition into a undiluted agent of big business. The tiny grouping of SPD lefts was drawn into government responsibility when Lafontaine's friend, Reinhard Klimmt, took over responsibility for the transport ministry. However, after just one year and following accusations of previous financial irregularities, Klimmt resigned without any resistance.

Although the government has not met serious resistance either from the parliamentary opposition or from inside its own ranks, the permanent reorganisation of the cabinet demonstrates that the destruction of the German social state system requires more than merely reading the lips of the corporate elite and its lobbies.

Since taking office as health minister two years ago, Andrea Fischer has attempted to implement a so-called major reform of the health system. The existing state-run scheme was to be

broken up by privatising parts of the system and opening it up for major capital investors. The result would have been a two-class system of health care in which only the rich would be able to afford suitable health care insurance and treatment.

However, although Fischer never demonstrated the least hesitancy to implement such a major attack on social rights, she was unable to impose her plans in the face of broad opposition from influential organisations representing doctors, health insurance companies and, above all, the all-powerful lobby of pharmaceutical companies who all saw their interests threatened. The coalition's Minister for Labour and Social Affairs Walter Riester (SPD) has run into similar problems in his attempts to “reform” the German pensions scheme. For some time there has also been speculation about his resignation.

Traditionally, lobby groups active in the Ministry of Agriculture have been amongst the most powerful and influential in German politics. This is now the arena which has been chosen by Schröder to implement changes in agricultural policy in the face of resistance from farming organisations and the agriculture industry. To this end he is using the current BSE (Mad Cow Disease) crisis in Germany, which has only erupted so late in Germany because no large-scale investigation of German cow herds has taken place, despite warnings from European Union headquarters in Brussels.

For external public consumption there is now a great deal of talk about “strengthening protection for the consumer”. Along these lines the Agriculture Ministry is to be renamed “The Ministry for Protection of Consumers and Agriculture”. However the changes in agricultural policy are in fact bound up with very different considerations. They are aimed at the eastward expansion of the European Union.

It has been clear for some time that the inclusion into the EU of Poland, the Czech Republic and other East European countries will only be possible after drastically curbing European financial aid for agriculture. Under prevailing conditions an expansion of the EU would entitle East European states to huge sums of money, which would bankrupt the treasury in Brussels.

Up until now, however, the influential German Farmers Union (DBV) has been able to successfully prevent any restrictions on the extensive financial aid. Additionally, the

right-wing opposition parties and, in particular, the CSU—with its base in the agricultural state of Bavaria—has paid heed to an important part of its electoral base, and has traditionally held a protective hand over the farmers.

In fact, German farmers receive just a fraction of the annual total of 15 billion marks allocated to agriculture by the national treasury. The main beneficiary of the state funds is the industrial wing of the so-called “green front”. Some sections of the media have already referred to the interests represented by the “agricultural-industrial complex”, which together with major distributors also includes seed and animal feed producers as well as the chemical industry, which provides fertiliser and pesticides.

In addition, market-leading dairies and meat collectives, as well as a large part of the food industry, have been able to profit from state subsidies. In total the net product of this agribusiness totals 215 billion marks per year and therefore represents one of the biggest and most influential branches of industry in the country.

The magic formula developed to implement the long planned cuts in subventions goes under the name “ecological farming”. Based on EU guidelines on the fair treatment of herd animals and ecological cultivation, this kind of farming is currently practised by just 2 percent of German farmers. With a special programme of sponsorship amounting to 500 billion marks per year, ecological farming is now planned to expand to 10 percent of total farming.

In view of widespread and justified worries about the spread of BSE, the demand for ecological farming has wide public support. The latest edition of *Die Zeit* newspaper comments: “Although nobody is aware of the transmission chain for the disease, although Mad Cow Disease exists in family farms as well as in agricultural factories, although fowl and other animals are held in far worse conditions than cows, it is clear where policy is heading: a major change in agriculture. That would be a sensation. And all thanks to BSE!”

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In order to sustain this propaganda the SPD and Greens have switched ministries. The new head of the Agricultural Ministry is the current chairman of the Green Party, Renate Künast, while the current vice-chairperson of the SPD parliamentary fraction, Ulla Schmidt, is taking over the Health Ministry. Up until now Schmidt has worked advising Labour Minister Riester in his reform of the pensions scheme.

To begin with, the appointment of Künast to the Agricultural Ministry caused widespread shaking of heads. As a trained social worker and then jurist she has absolutely no experience with agricultural questions. However up until now her main political task and credentials have consisted in cloaking the permanent shift to the right by the Greens—whether on the issue of support for the Kosovo War, nuclear policy or agreement to broad cuts in social gains and tax reforms—in left-wing and

politically progressive garb.

As new minister her job will be to advocate ecological farming. The changes bound up with such a move, however, will have very negative consequences, in three areas in particular.

First of all, in future other forms of subvention will be drastically cut with reference to ecological farming. Many farmers will undoubtedly be forced to give up their farms. The destruction of farms will intensify, leading to an increase of poverty in country areas (something which is already quite pronounced) and the attendant danger of extreme right-wing political movements.

On the other hand, the “agricultural-industrial complex” will find the means to protect its profits. The term ecological farming also serves to justify increases in prices for consumers. It is already being regularly emphasised that healthy meat, vegetables and fruits have their price, and that by always searching for cheap alternatives the consumer is in fact encouraging mass animal farming and the over-fertilisation of the soil.

Thirdly, in future proof that products are of ecological origin will serve to encourage protectionism. The detailed description of food products according to origin and type of production will be used to keep out products from other countries and limit imports.

A number of media commentaries on the latest change of ministers emphasise that the government cannot continue to switch back and forth between the various lobbies and interest groups, but must instead establish its priorities and impose them with the necessary force. The demand for a tightening up of authority on the part of the government is a forewarning of pending social struggles.

In the first half of its term in office the Red-Green coalition made many decisions entailing devastating consequences for the masses of the population which will make themselves felt over the next months. In this respect the latest switching about of chairs in the Berlin cabinet is the overture to a further turn to the right by the Schröder government.



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