

The coming grand coalition in Germany: illegitimate and undemocratic

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party)
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The grand coalition being prepared by Germany's Union parties (Christian Democratic Union—CDU, Christian Social Union—CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is undemocratic and illegitimate. Such a government will pursue policies in the interests of German big business and the rich—the same policies that were decisively rejected by the overwhelming majority of the German electorate on September 18.

The CDU politician Norbert Röttgen made this unmistakably clear in a comment to the *Berliner Zeitung*: “A grand coalition can take on the uncomfortable questions for which the courage was lacking over the past 15 years.” By virtue of the time period he cited, Röttgen's charge of political cowardice extended not only to the current SPD-Green Party government, but also to its CDU predecessor and former Chancellor Helmut Kohl. A grand coalition will clearly be more right-wing than either of these governments.

Nobody should be fooled into thinking that “it will be much more difficult for a grand coalition to continue the existing policy of welfare cuts,” or that it represents a “far lesser evil than a black-yellow (CDU-Free Democratic Party) government,” as Oskar Lafontaine of the Left Party claimed before the election.

While there is still a great deal of wrangling over the leadership and composition of a grand coalition, the fundamental guidelines of its policy have already been determined. It will be characterized by violent attacks on the working population. On this, the media and SPD and Union politicians are united.

Its first task will be to draw up a new federal budget, i.e., a new round of social cuts.

Next on the agenda is a fundamental transformation of Germany's pension, health and nursing care schemes. Here the SPD and Union parties propose differing concepts. They agree, however, that big business must be relieved of social costs (so-called ancillary wage costs), payments to the insured must be slashed, and insurance funds must be largely denationalized and opened up to the stock market. Many commentators regard the dismantling of Germany's more than century-old social security system to be the “historic opportunity” before a grand coalition.

Finally, taxes for the rich and big business are to be lowered even further, and the so-called federalism reform is to be completed. Even if Professor Paul Kirchhof (the flat tax advocate brought onto the CDU election team) is not part of a future grand coalition, he embodies the type of policies that will be introduced.

A grand coalition will press ahead with the strengthening of the state apparatus and the dismantling of democratic rights. Little is said about such plans because there is a longstanding agreement between the SPD and the Union parties on this question. Since the policy of a grand coalition will inevitably provoke considerable popular opposition, the coalition will use such repressive measures to suppress resistance to its attacks.

According to the German journalists' federation, between 1987 and 2000 over 150 newspaper editorial offices, radio stations and private

dwelling of journalists in Germany were searched by police and had material confiscated. The aim was to intimidate. None of these raids ended in the prosecution of journalists. This drive to intimidate critical opinion will intensify under a grand coalition.

The purpose of integrating the SPD and, above all, the trade unions into a grand coalition is to help neutralize resistance to the wiping out of past social gains and the German welfare state.

The *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* has just announced that the chairman of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Michael Sommer, and the Hessian prime minister, Roland Koch, met last Friday for a confidential discussion in Berlin. CDU executive member Koch is a key figure in the maneuvering for a new government. In their recent discussions, Koch is alleged to have told Sommer that the Union parties are ready to shift somewhat from their hard-line demand for a loosening of German tariff and industrial laws if the DGB supports a grand coalition.

Such a move on the part of the unions will do little to improve the situation of workers who for years have confronted declining incomes and worsening conditions of work, and would do absolutely nothing to change the situation for the unemployed. What would emerge, however, is a strengthening of the trade union bureaucracy and its functionaries.

The *taz* newspaper, which supports the formation of a grand coalition, made this quite clear. Under the headline “Marrakesch and the Grand Coalition,” it praised the recent decision of Volkswagen to construct its new “Marrakesch” model in the German city of Wolfsburg instead of, as originally threatened, low-wage Portugal.

The newspaper drew a direct parallel to a grand coalition: “Lacking an election victory, the Thatcher revolution will not take place... Rhineland capitalism, i.e., social conciliatory warmth instead of profit-maximizing coldness, is attempting once again to rear its head and acquire momentum.”

In fact, the agreement made in Wolfsburg means that the “Thatcher revolution” is well under way. The truth is that the factory works councils and the IG-Metall union have signed a contract which accepts drastic wage cuts for new employees and new rates based on quality control—in complete disregard of existing tariff and industrial laws.

This gives a foretaste of how a grand coalition will function. The Union parties lay down an aggressive right-wing political line which is then sold by the SPD and DGB. For the grand coalition, “social conciliatory warmth” will exist only for the functionaries of the SDP and the trade unions. For the mass of working and unemployed people, the rule will be “profit-maximizing coldness.”

From the very beginning, the early Bundestag (federal parliament) election was aimed at bringing a government to power which could implement unpopular measures against the majority of the population. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder decided on this unusual step after his own program of welfare cuts, the Agenda 2010, encountered increasing resistance which reached into the ranks of his own party.

After the collapse last May of the last remaining SPD-Green

government at the state level, in North Rhine-Westphalia, the most influential circles in German business and politics were no longer prepared to wait another 18 months for a change of government. Schröder's decision to prematurely dissolve the Bundestag amounted to voluntarily handing over power to CDU leader Angela Merkel and the Union parties.

In any case, Schröder made it absolutely clear that under no circumstances would he retreat from his resolve to implement his Agenda 2010. He gave voters an ultimatum: Either you elect me and swallow Agenda 2010, or right-wing leaders such as Merkel (CDU), Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party—FDP) and Edmund Stoiber (CSU) will carry out their even more drastic version of the same policy. This blackmail maneuver was then given a seal of approval by the German president and the country's Constitutional Court.

However, two developments created considerable problems for Schröder and the ruling elite.

The first was the rapid growth in support for the recently founded Left Party. This party, led by former SPD Chairman Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi from the Party of Democratic Socialism, propagates a thoroughly bourgeois reform program and defends the existing order. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of the party, which at one point, according to opinion polls, registered electoral support of up to 15 percent, was taken by the ruling class as a warning: it expressed a radicalization of the electorate.

The success of the Left Party forced the SPD to alter its election propaganda. While formerly it had campaigned as a party intent on carrying out the reforms embodied in the Agenda 2010, it switched to presenting itself as a defender of the welfare state. Schröder lashed out at Merkel's financial policy expert, Paul Kirchhof, who openly expressed the neo-liberal content of the Union parties' program. The Greens made a similar shift to the left in their election propaganda.

This propaganda shift was carried out not so much to oppose Merkel and Kirchhof, with whom there is broad agreement in SPD circles, as to blunt support for the Left Party. As the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noted, after the election the Left Party would disappear only if the SPD could "once again give left-wing workers and low-ranking trade union functionaries some prospect of social security."

The second shock for the ruling elite took place on the evening of the election. The Union parties and the Free Democrats, which had been considered for some time to be sure-fire winners, received just 45 percent of the vote. A clear majority of the electorate had decided against the program of Merkel and Westerwelle.

The result did not signal support for the SPD, which obtained one of its worst-ever results, but rather a clear rejection of the neo-liberal program of the Union parties and the FDP—and thus indirectly Schröder's own Agenda 2010. This had become increasingly clear as the SPD sought to distance itself from the Agenda in its election campaign.

In its first-ever election, the Left Party obtained 9 percent of the vote, more than the Greens have won in their entire history. It became the fourth-strongest party in the Bundestag—in front of the Greens and the CSU. Some 25 percent of East German voters and 25 percent of all unemployed cast their votes in favor of the Left Party.

Rarely has there been such a clear decision on the part of voters. The SPD, the Greens and the Left Party together have over 40 more seats than the union parties and the FDP in the newly elected Bundestag.

Official circles in Berlin reacted in a confused manner in the first week after the election. On the evening of the election, Schröder announced his intention to remain chancellor. With a certain degree of justification, he referred to the devastating defeat suffered by the Union parties. At the same time, he categorically refused to work with the Left Party. The Greens rejected Schröder's claim to the chancellorship and took part in the speculations over a black-yellow-green (Union parties-Green Party-

FDP) coalition.

The media commenced a nonstop campaign on the theme that what was absolutely necessary was a "stable government" in order to implement "necessary reforms" in the face of voters "unable to make up their minds." Now, just one week later, all the main political parties have reverted to the original purpose of the early election.

Since last Sunday, Schröder has repeatedly stressed that he will do everything possible to ensure that a grand coalition comes into being. "I am completely sure that such a government in the form of a grand coalition will come about," he said on Tuesday in a speech he made in Strasbourg.

By bringing about a grand coalition, the SPD is realizing Schröder's original aim in calling for early elections—which was so decisively rejected by voters on September 18. He is helping to propel Merkel into the post of chancellor in defiance of the voters' wishes. And if not Merkel, then Stoiber, Koch, Wulff or some other Union party politician who will pursue the same course. It is now regarded as certain that Schröder will renounce his claim to the chancellorship by next week at the latest.

The government which is now being assembled is thoroughly undemocratic and illegitimate. The ruling elite are imposing their own will—irrespective of the wishes and votes of the electorate. There is a clear majority in the Bundestag to the left of center. Without the support of the SPD or the Greens, Merkel and the Union parties would have no possibility of forming a government and carrying out their policies.

Now the Union parties will dominate practically all of Germany's constitutional bodies—in addition to the Upper House of parliament and the presidency, the Union parties will hold the chancellorship and indirectly control the Bundestag. Parliamentary opposition will be largely nullified by a grand coalition. Despite the second worst election result in their history, the Union parties will command unprecedented authority—thanks to the SPD.

The Left Party has done nothing to oppose this development. It is behaving in a completely passive manner. It does not even warn of the implications of a grand coalition for the population. It merely speculates on further election successes, on some additional seats in state parliaments, and a possible split within the SPD after the SPD joins forces with the Union parties. Just like the other parties, the Left Party regards the population as nothing more than gullible voters who can leverage them into winning offices and political influence.

Lafontaine's self-satisfied statement welcoming a grand coalition from standpoint of the Left Party's interests recalls the notorious statement made by the German Communist Party in the 1930s: "After Hitler, us." While the Left Party is gloating over its unexpected election success, a grand coalition will go into action. It will dismantle democratic and social rights and undermine the fabric of society. A glimpse at the US, Great Britain or Eastern Europe shows the pernicious and dangerous social and political consequences of eradicating welfare policies.

The cowardly and passive behavior of the Left Party is consistent with the role it already plays in government in the east of the country, where it implements policies that are virtually indistinguishable from those of the Union parties and SPD. It is unable to warn and mobilize the population because to do so would jeopardize its position in those regions where it shares power.

Whoever seeks to oppose a grand coalition must comprehend that this can be done only through the construction of an independent, socialist party of the working class. This was precisely the basis for the participation of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (German Socialist Equality Party) in the Bundestag elections. We warned from the outset that the early Bundestag election would be the prelude to further and sharper attacks against the working population.

Resistance to the offensive planned by the illegitimate government now

being formed in Berlin must be linked to the construction of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and the struggle for an international socialist perspective.



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