

What can be expected from Germany's grand coalition?

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"A cabinet of top political civil servants" was the way journalist Heribert Prantl (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 14) described the governing team of Germany's newly formed grand coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Union parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU).

Prantl was referring to the fact that many prominent ministerial positions are occupied by individuals who up until now have worked as part of the executive apparatus, far removed from the public political arena.

According to Prantl, the model for these "supreme civil servants of the modern variety" is the newly designated foreign affairs minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), who in recent years, removed from the public eye, occupied the key post in the cabinet of outgoing Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD). "He was the quietly efficient eminence in the Schröder chancellorship. He was the one who kept things going, without vanity, without any fuss," wrote Prantl.

Other politicians basically from the same mold of top civil servants are the new justice minister, Brigitte Zypries (SPD), who held the same post under the Schröder government, the finance minister, Peer Steinbrück (SPD), and the SPD chairman, Franz Müntefering, who is to take over as both vice chancellor and labor minister.

According to Prantl, Müntefering epitomizes both party leader and the "species of top civil servant." The same applies to the CSU chairman and future economics minister, Edmund Stoiber, who is "more of a top manager and supreme bureaucrat" than "political old hand." The same basically applies to the new chancellor, "the aloof [CDU leader] Angela Merkel, who lacks any charisma."

Wolfgang Schäuble, who has been appointed interior minister, can also be ranked as a top civil servant. For many years Schäuble played an important role in the background for Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) as Steinmeier played for Schröder. Later, he was removed from leading political posts—first by Kohl and then by Merkel. Nevertheless, he is now regarded as a faithful supporter of Merkel in the new cabinet.

There is an element of truth in Prantl's comment regarding a "cabinet of top political civil servants."

In Italy, governments of so-called technocrats have been repeatedly appointed during periods of political crisis to work alongside cabinets of politically unaffiliated specialists. The governments of the former central bank heads Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and Lamberto Dini at the beginning of the 1990s were typical examples.

The new government in Berlin has not gone so far as to seek personnel outside of the established parties. The grand coalition is much more based on a laboriously worked out equilibrium between the CDU, CSU and SPD. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how many of the new ministers are regarded as figures whose sense of duty, in keeping with the outlook of typical civil servants, lies with the state and its aims, rather than party programs or the opinion of voters.

Prantl is quite positive about the result. "That is not a bad thing," he writes, and quotes the playwright Bertolt Brecht: "There is no special

need for justice in well administered countries."

"With good management," he concludes, "it should be possible to achieve the tax and federalism reforms which are needed if the social security system is to be rescued."

Prantl, who heads the domestic affairs department of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, reveals here his former background as a public prosecutor and model of the typical German democrat. For the latter, democracy is embodied in the institution of the state itself, rather than the public will.

The technocratic elements with which Prantl connects hopes for a well managed government are, in reality, an expression of the illegitimate character of a change of government which was from the very beginning completely undemocratic and which Prantl initially subjected to heavy criticism—when then-Chancellor Schröder called for an early dissolution of parliament by means of a phony no-confidence vote. The grand coalition, which is to take over by the end of November at the latest, bears clear characteristics of an authoritarian, Bonapartist regime.

The term Bonapartism signifies a regime which, in a period of immense social tension, appears to rise above social classes and defend public "order," but in fact represents the interests of the strongest and most powerful factions within the ruling class. Napoleon III Bonaparte, who gave rise to the term, became emperor of France in 1852 following a state coup. His regime relied directly on the police, army and state bureaucracy, and was thus a military police dictatorship which draped itself in parliamentary colors.

The new grand coalition in Germany has not gone so far. It adheres—at least formally—to existing parliamentary majorities. One could better describe it as a pre-Bonapartist regime, similar to the last grand coalition of the Weimar Republic under the Social Democrat Hermann Müller.

Müller surrendered power in 1930 to the center-right politician Heinrich Brüning. Brüning liberated himself from parliamentary restrictions and governed by emergency decrees, which were signed by Reich President Hindenburg and later supported by the SPD. In this manner, the path was opened for Hitler to come to power.

The authoritarian, Bonapartist characteristics of the current grand coalition emerge with particular force when one recalls the way in which it came into being.

Schröder decided upon new elections in May of this year because his supporters in big business and the ruling elite were not prepared to wait 18 months for the next scheduled parliamentary (Bundestag) election and a new government better able to press ahead with the "reforms," i.e., attacks on wages, conditions of work and social security benefits, initiated by Schröder's SPD-Green Party coalition government. After the SPD's devastating defeat at the polls in North Rhine-Westphalia, increasing discontent within the SPD membership, as well as the danger of a drift towards the newly emerging Left Party, threatened to paralyze the SPD.

At the same time, the CDU-CSU majority in the Upper House of parliament blocked the functioning of the government. The entire national

and international business press uniformly proclaimed that what Germany urgently needed was a drastic, neo-liberal reform program.

Under these circumstances, Schröder decided to go on the offensive and precipitate a premature dissolution of the Bundestag. Under the circumstances prevailing at the time, his action amounted to handing over power to CDU leader Merkel and the “free market” Free Democratic Party (FDP).

Although the dissolution of the parliament on the basis of a phony no-confidence vote was a clear violation of the German constitution, Schröder’s initiative was supported by all of the established political parties, the federal president, and finally the Federal Constitutional Court. Replacing the government was more important to Germany’s ruling circles than adhering to its own legal norms.

In the event, the ensuing election campaign took an unexpected turn. First, the Left Party was formed more quickly than anticipated and quickly won substantial support, according to the opinion polls. In order to undermine support for the Left Party, the SPD was forced to pose as the defender of the welfare state and increasingly conduct an election campaign that sounded like a critique of its own government program. Opinion poll estimates of support for Merkel plummeted as the neo-liberal content of her program became more and more clear to the voters.

On Election Day, voters delivered a resounding rebuff to Merkel and FPD leader Guido Westerwelle. The parties which had in one way or another expressed opposition in the election campaign to Merkel’s neo-liberal course—the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens—won a clear majority in the new Bundestag—over 40 more seats than the union parties and the FDP. It also became clear that many inside the CDU, and above all in the CSU, likewise rejected the course proposed by Merkel and Westerwelle.

German ruling circles were forced to rethink their strategy. A frontal confrontation with broad social layers, as planned by Merkel and Westerwelle, seemed risky and inadvisable in view of the substantial opposition revealed by the election result. After days and weeks of maneuvering, agreement was finally reached by a handful of leading politicians on the formation of a grand coalition.

Before coming to any conclusions of a programmatic nature, Merkel, CSU leader Stoiber, SPD boss Müntefering and outgoing chancellor Schröder met in secret session to decide which party would get which ministries, and which politicians would fill particular posts. The discussions were subject to strict secrecy and had the character of a conspiracy. Along with the general public, party committees and elected delegates were kept in the dark.

The government ultimately agreed upon differs from that planned by Merkel and Westerwelle only with regard to the methods it will seek to employ, not with regard to policy. Instead of declaring open war on Germany’s working masses, it wants to achieve its ends insidiously.

The SPD and its allies in the trade union leadership are to play the key role in this respect. Due to its overwhelming majority in parliament—448 out of a total of 614 mandates—the grand coalition is freed from the threat of an oppositional majority emerging in parliament and thereby insulated from public pressure.

The SPD has an extraordinary degree of influence in the grand coalition, with a total of eight ministerial posts. Besides the post of chancellor, the CDU has just four ministers, and the CSU two—one of whom, Horst Seehofer, ranks among Merkel’s sharpest adversaries in the Union parties and is regarded by many leading figures in these parties as a crypto-Social Democrat. More important than the numerical superiority of the SPD is, however, the fact that it controls those departments which are responsible for the sharpest attacks on working people—finance, labor and health.

It is already clear that the incoming coalition will implement policies at least as drastic as those proposed by Merkel and Westerwelle. This is evident from the appointment of Peer Steinbrück (SPD) as finance

minister. Prior to the start of coalition negotiations on Monday this week, it was revealed by circles close to Steinbrück that the SPD was planning annual budgetary cuts amounting to 14.5 billion euros.

The basis for the cuts package is a document drawn up in 2003 by Steinbrück and the Hessian prime minister, Roland Koch (CDU). Proposed measures include slashing tax allowances for those on average incomes and cuts in the basic social fabric (schools, education, welfare, etc.). On the other hand, tax exemptions which have allowed German companies to make record profits in recent years will go untouched.

Steinbrück has also raised plans to sell the network of German motorways to private investors. The new motorway fees bound up with such a privatization would hit ordinary commuters and the self-employed hardest. Such proposals are too much even for the Union parties to stomach.

It is clear that with regard to policy, there is no basis for regarding the SPD as standing to the left of the Union parties. Its primary task in the grand coalition is to control and suppress public opposition for as long as possible. In this respect, SPD boss Müntefering, as labor minister, will play a particularly important role. Seehofer, who is very popular with ordinary CSU members, is to serve a similar function.

The Left Party is indirectly involved in this conspiracy. In the states of Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania it already shares power with the SPD and plays a key role in putting into practice the austerity policies decided upon by the federal government. Just prior to the commencement of coalition negotiations between the SPD and the Union parties, a leader of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, announced that his organization was striving to establish a coalition with the SPD on a federal level by 2009. This is a clear indication that the Left Party will present no serious opposition to the SPD.

Another key department allocated to the SPD is the foreign ministry. Schröder’s trusted ally Steinmeier is to provide continuity for a policy based on once again making Germany an influential player on the world stage. In particular, he will maintain a close relationship with Russia, much favored by German business circles, which had reservations on this question about Merkel.

In a foreign policy speech at the end of September, Steinmeier praised the potential arising from bilateral relations with Russia. “This can be clearly seen with the recent project, the Baltic Sea pipeline,” he stressed. “Domestic, energy and ecological, European political, geo-strategic and security criteria are all interlocked.”

The most important department to be occupied by the CDU is the interior ministry. For many years, Wolfgang Schäuble worked alongside former chancellor Kohl and played a key role 15 years ago in drafting the unification agreement with East Germany (the German Democratic Republic—GDR). Since then, millions of workers in the former GDR have paid a bitter price in the form of unemployment and declining living standards.

Schäuble, a right-wing, thoroughly conservative politician, who is, in addition, embittered by his handicap (Schäuble has been confined to a wheelchair as a result of an assassination attempt) will be assigned the job of suppressing the opposition which will inevitably develop to the policies of the grand coalition. The reality is that, while it commands an impressive majority in the Bundestag, the grand coalition lacks any genuine popular support and will inevitably turn to authoritarian forms of rule as extra-parliamentary opposition develops.

The last and only grand coalition in the history of the post-war Federal Republic was the government of Georg Kiesinger and Willy Brandt between 1966 and 1969, which was notorious for legislating emergency laws. The current grand coalition could be the government that puts them into effect.



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