

Germany: SPD chairman resigns in midst of grand coalition talks

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Less than six months after German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder decided to call early federal elections, despite the fact that his governing Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition retained a parliamentary majority, the head of the SPD, Franz Müntefering, has resigned from his post as chairman and thrown the party into a deep crisis.

The same motive underlies both the early election and Müntefering's abrupt resignation: Schröder and Müntefering want to make clear that they will not tolerate the least trace of opposition to their pro-business policies, and prefer to hand over power to the right-wing parties rather than accept criticism from within the ranks of their own party.

Müntefering announced his resignation following a vote in the party executive Monday, in which 23 executive members nominated the former Young Socialist leader Andrea Nahles as the party's new general secretary. Müntefering's own preferred candidate, Kajo Wasserhövel, received just 14 votes. Müntefering then broke off the meeting, met with the party presidium and told baffled executive members that he would not serve as chairman at the party conference due to be held in two weeks.

One would think that the election for a leading post of a candidate who does not have the official approval of the party chairman is a normal democratic procedure. But this is not the case in the SPD.

Müntefering reacted by resigning his post, and the press angrily attacked those who had dared to vote against his candidate. Their behaviour was described as "Harakiri," an "impulse for self-destruction," and "the victory of the irrational over the rational," and the proceedings were depicted as a "putsch" and a "rebellion against the head of the SPD"—merely because a majority of the executive in a secret vote came to a decision not corresponding to the wishes of the party chairman.

This despite the fact that Nahles is anything but a political opponent of Müntefering. The 35-year-old graduate in literary studies has been "supported all these years" by Müntefering and is "very grateful," as she readily acknowledged in a recent interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper.

Nahles is regarded as belonging to the party's left wing. But this left wing has supported every decision of the party leadership for years—military interventions in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 programme, and now the grand coalition of conservative parties and the SPD.

"We all want to see the grand coalition succeed. A party cannot conduct agitation against a government it supports," Nahles told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* shortly before the executive meeting. In fact, her "leftness" is limited to occasional and very softly spoken verbal

criticism.

The "lefts" have established an alliance with the so-called "Networkers" within the SPD—a collection of careerist young functionaries assembled around the figure of the former prime minister of Lower Saxony, Sigmar Gabriel. According to media reports, the "lefts" made a deal with the Networkers to support Gabriel's claim to the post of environment minister if his supporters agreed to vote for Nahles.

In *Spiegel online*, political scientist Franz Walter describes the Networkers as follows: "This group in the SPD parliamentary faction came together in 1998 in order to establish a cosy informal atmosphere and structure of patronage for an internal party faction. It has never had a common political platform, a binding programme or even a stringent conceptual strategy for a changed SPD after Schröder.... The common basis was being young and the aspiration in future to climb the ranks of the political establishment—to be more precise: to be favourably accepted by the latter. For this reason, the 'Networkers' have been regarded through the years pretty much as opportunists lacking any principles."

Most executive members voted for Nahles because they feared the organisational decline of the party would continue if it were perceived as nothing more than the tail of the grand coalition led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU). Müntefering's candidate for the post of general secretary, Kajo Wasserhövel, is regarded as his right-hand man and a relatively apolitical functionary. His job was to keep a tight rein on the party for a chairman who already has his hands full as designated vice chancellor and labour minister in the future government.

In a letter announcing his resignation to party members, Müntefering declared, "I wanted to be chairman of this party and the vice chancellor of this government.... To serve the party and govern at the same time is never easy, not least in a grand coalition.... Therefore, I proposed a particular form of work for the top ranks of the party leadership, and, in addition, proposed Kajo Wasserhövel for general secretary."

For her part, Nahles insisted on the necessity for a "political general secretary," who not only assured that the party closed ranks behind the government, but also "worked to build up a reserve of ideals in the coming years" and "made the organisational preparations for a majority in 2009"—the date for the next scheduled federal elections. She remarked that there "should not merely be Berlin-centred perspectives," the party also had to "open itself up to the arena of civil society."

In other words: Nahles insists that the party maintain a certain distance from the day-to-day work of the government—even if only to

prevent the further loss of members and voters and more defections to the Left Party of Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine. She found support for this line in the party executive, where for some time frustration has accumulated with the authoritarian leadership style employed by Schröder and Müntefering. In particular, Schröder's decision in favour of early elections—a decision made without warning or consultation, and then justified with the argument that the chancellor could no longer rely on support from his own ranks—was a source of disquiet.

According to a report in *Spiegel online*, it was the contribution made by Schröder at the executive meeting that tipped the balance and led to a majority in favour of Nahles. Schröder spoke out in favour of Wasserhövel: “‘That was not helpful,’ one of those in attendance declared later. It only served to remind the executive of how the party had been ‘bled dry’ by Schröder’s leadership style. The vote was also a ‘signal of self-assertion against the seven years under Schröder.’ ”

The revolt against Müntefering's candidate was not aimed at his right-wing policies or the grand coalition, but rather at his authoritarian style of leadership. This conclusion was also drawn by *FAZ.net*, which wrote: “The support which Ms. Nahles received was not merely due to her person or her political leanings. It had much more to do with Müntefering's leadership style, which is increasingly perceived as authoritarian within the party leadership, where there have been accusations that Müntefering does not consult and carries out his decisions in a single-handed manner.”

Even such a limited form of protest was too much for Müntefering. He will not, and cannot, tolerate any criticism from within the ranks of the party, even with regard to organisational questions. The reason is the package of cuts and savings that is currently being prepared by the grand coalition.

It was no coincidence that on the very day Müntefering announced his resignation, a meeting took place between leading figures of the grand coalition that discussed forthcoming budget cuts totalling 35 billion euros. There has since been a curtain of silence over the results of the talks.

The cuts will inevitably provoke anger and opposition from SPD voters and ordinary party members, and under such conditions any differences within the party could quickly escalate into explosive conflicts. In this respect, the authoritarian style of leadership by which Müntefering disciplines the party is an anticipation of the authoritarian methods that will be employed by the grand coalition to suppress public opposition to its policies.

Müntefering's announcement of his resignation was entirely effective in silencing his critics inside the party. Barely was the news out when the right wing in the party began to angrily attack those members of the executive who had dared to support Nahles. Some of the more modest accusations included “gigantic stupidity,” “incomprehensible” and “immature.”

Those who backed Nahles took turns before the television cameras to reassure: “This is not what we wanted.” If they had known that Müntefering would resign, they would have cast their votes differently, they declared.

Nahles herself stated that she might withdraw her candidacy for the general secretary post at the upcoming party conference, and the environment minister, Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul, who is regarded as a leading player in the campaign to back Nahles, announced she would give up her post as deputy party chair to make it available as an alternative for Nahles.

It is already quite clear that the party conference due to take place on

the weekend of November 12-13 will pay homage to Müntefering, and no one will dare utter a word of criticism. There is already an Internet campaign underway to persuade Müntefering to stay in office.

He has since declared that he will continue to lead coalition negotiations with “all his energy” and will take over the posts of vice chancellor and labour minister as planned. It seems unlikely that Müntefering will back down on his resignation, and a replacement for the party chairmanship has already been found in the person of the prime minister of the state of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck.

In his letter to party members, Müntefering wrote, “The rejuvenation of the leadership of the SPD is now taking place somewhat earlier than I thought. I will assist in making this succeed.”

There is no shortage of ambitious candidates among the Networkers who will prove willing and able to serve under Müntefering and the grand coalition. The “rejuvenation of the leadership of the SPD” could rapidly prove to be a form of modernisation along the lines of Tony Blair's British New Labour.

Even if the SPD is able to resolve the current crisis, Müntefering's resignation shows the fragility of the grand coalition. It shows signs of breaking apart even before it has formally come into being. While speculation was rife following Müntefering's resignation, another key figure in the grand coalition, the chairman of the Christian Social Union (CSU), Edmund Stoiber, announced he was throwing in the towel and would return to his party stronghold in Bavaria.

Stoiber, who had hesitated for weeks before deciding to take over a ministerial post in Berlin, announced on Tuesday that he was “definite” in his decision to remain prime minister of Bavaria. A CSU party colleague, Michael Glos, has been announced as his replacement for the post of federal economics minister.

Stoiber justified his own resignation by citing Müntefering's resignation as SPD party chairman. This, Stoiber declared, had changed the situation in the SPD. Müntefering was an “authority and central figure in the grand coalition,” and this meant the basis for his own “entry into government no longer existed.”

The real reason for Stoiber's resignation is that he confronts crucial problems in Bavaria very similar to those now confronting the SPD. His party regularly notched up election victories of 50 or 60 percent, which means he has enjoyed support from broad layers of working people who will be hit hard by the policies of the future grand coalition.

Within days of Stoiber making the decision to join the government in Berlin, a struggle had begun in the CSU for his succession as prime minister of Bavaria between Stoiber's head of chancellery, Erwin Huber, regarded as a protagonist of neo-liberal policies, and the state's interior minister, Günter Beckstein, who advocates an authoritarian state that retains certain social responsibilities. This struggle has now been set aside by Stoiber's return to Bavaria.

Stoiber is also alleged to be unhappy with the chancellor designate, Angela Merkel, who backed down on her promise that he could take over an enlarged “super ministry” comprising economics and technology.



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