

German trade unions rally to the grand coalition

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Even before negotiations over the program of Germany's new grand coalition government had been completed, the country's trade unions were avidly offering their cooperation and support.

Just two weeks after the recent German parliamentary elections, the head of the trade union federation (DGB), Michael Sommer, held confidential discussions with the Hessian state prime minister Roland Koch, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) spokesman on economic affairs, Ronald Pofalla, and the party council of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Together with the three parties constituting Germany's grand coalition—the SPD, the CDU and its right-wing partner, the Christian Social Union, (CSU)—the trade union federation regards its primary state obligation as keeping secret the results and content of all such discussions. Since the first exploratory discussions between the unions and the coalition parties no statement has been issued from trade union headquarters in Düsseldorf.

The reason for the secrecy is quite simple. The union leaders, along with all the participants striving to conclude negotiations over the new government's program, are conscious of the fact that such a grand coalition does not correspond to the voters' will. The Bundestag election this September clearly represented a thumbs-down by the majority of voters to unabashed free-market policies.

According to Sommer, such "work in the background" is of the greatest importance and very effective. "We are not working out in the open," he told the press after the conservative parties had revealed some details of the discussions.

Sommer neglects to mention that he lacks any mandate from union members for such secret talks. In fact, his members can only learn about the DGB

leaders' deep involvement in the formation and programmatic work of the grand coalition from the media. Dieter Metz, speaking on behalf of Roland Koch, stressed that his CDU boss was very interested in making sure that a reasonable climate existed in relations between his party and the trade unions, and that he personally meets regularly with Sommer and other trade union leaders.

Germany's business lobbies, which have been exerting enormous pressure on the coalition negotiations and demanding even more drastic cuts in the country's social fabric, have also met on regular occasions with the DGB leadership. First of all, union officials were the guests of Jürgen Thumann, president of the German Industrial Federation; then they met with the heads of the German chambers of trade. A discussion then followed with the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Described by one newspaper, the *Frankfurt Rundschau*, as "quiet diplomacy," this collaboration in fact represents a conspiracy against workers and the unemployed. The trade unions are directly involved in helping prepare an all-out attack on wages, jobs and workers' basic rights. After all, it did not take much for Germany's government parties to involve the DGB in their plans. It was sufficient for the former to announce that the designated chancellor, Angela Merkel (CDU), was ready to revive the so-called "alliance for jobs" which had ceased to function two years previously. This was all it took to ensure that the trade unions were "willing to negotiate."

Between 1998 and 2003 regular discussions by government representatives and the trade unions took place within the framework of the corporatist "alliance for jobs." The top representatives of the most important business associations and trade unions, as well as the

SPD chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and other cabinet members, were involved in the talks. During this period the “alliance” attempted to agree on welfare cuts behind the backs of the population and generally worked on ways to police the working class.

The “alliance” discussions officially stopped at the end of 2003, but, in fact, continued in the form of talks with a similar composition over major policies such as the SPD-Green Party government’s anti-welfare measures, the Agenda 2010 and Hartz I to IV laws. Prominent union representatives, such as engineering union IG-Metall boss Jürgen Peters or the head of the public sector union Verdi, Frank Bsirske, always sat in on the talks.

The future grand coalition is keen to continue this tradition and likewise rely on the services of the trade union bureaucracy.

As in the case of the “alliance for jobs,” the official remit for the current talks are measures to combat Germany’s high rate of unemployment. At a recent trade union congress DGB boss Sommer stressed that “a new social dialogue could offer chances to put our country out front economically and socially.” He thought it advisable to change the name of the previously discredited “alliance” discussions between the government, employers and trade unions.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Sommer stressed that the DGB was quite prepared to accept Merkel as chancellor. “Trade unions cannot pick the government, that’s the job of the voters,” he said. In fact, in the election Merkel suffered a decisive rejection. Those parties which during the election campaign officially claimed to oppose her neo-liberal program—the SPD, the Greens and the newly formed Left Party—obtained a clear majority.

The prominent architects of the grand coalition—Merkel, Michael Glos and Koch for the CDU/CSU union, as well as Franz Müntefering, Peer Steinbrück and Schröder for the SPD—quickly joined forces to win the trade unions to the task of implementing further free-market measures.

Significantly, the chairman of the chemical workers’ union, Hubertus Schmoldt, was under serious consideration as candidate for the post of labor minister in the grand coalition. Schmoldt is a staunch right-wing social democrat who maintained close relations for many years with former chancellor Schröder and was

favored by the latter for the post. Schmoldt turned the offer down, claiming he could better support the policies of the coalition as head of a major trade union. Perhaps an additional consideration is the fact that as trade union boss with seats on the boards of directors of major companies his current job pays better than a ministerial post does.

Irrespective of Schmoldt’s intentions, the fact remains that the integration of the trade unions into the state has a long and disastrous tradition in Germany. The union leaders have always leaned towards the state whenever the capitalist profit system has been threatened economically or politically. In the history of the German workers’ movement in particular such positions have resulted in tragic defeats.

It should not be forgotten that the predecessors of the modern DGB, the ADGB, offered their loyal co-operation to the Nazi regime over 70 years ago and, in a desperate attempt to save their skins, called upon workers to participate in Nazi demonstrations on May 1, 1933. On May 2, 1933 Nazi storm troopers stormed the offices of the trade unions. Today political conditions are different, but the national-opportunist outlook and cowardice of the trade union leaders remains the same.



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