

The new leadership of the German Social Democratic Party

Opportunists, lobbyists, careerists

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The decline of a party is often expressed in the manner it changes its leadership. This is certainly the case with the breakneck-pace replacement of the leading figures in the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Just hours after the dramatic election defeat for the social democrats on Sunday one week ago, four members of the party executive committee met in a small circle and organised the changes at the top of the party. In its latest edition, *Der Spiegel* reports that taking part in this meeting were two former ministers in the outgoing grand coalition, Labour Minister Olaf Scholz and Environment Secretary Sigmar Gabriel, as well as Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit and the deputy chairman of the party, Andrea Nahles.

The four agreed amongst themselves that Gabriel take over as party chairman with Nahles as secretary-general. Scholz and Wowereit were selected as deputy chairmen of the party. This proposal was then unanimously supported by the SPD presidium with only one member, Andrea Ypsilanti from Hesse, abstaining in the vote.

There was more opposition to the changes in the party executive. From the 36 executive members present, Gabriel received only 28 votes while designate Secretary-General Nahles received just 24. Despite the evident lack of enthusiasm for the new leadership team, it is expected to be agreed on as a matter of course at a special party congress to be held in November.

The change of leadership amounts to an internal party coup. A handful of top officials used the political shock unleashed by the party's worst election result in postwar history to replace the leadership at a rapid tempo. Under no circumstances was there to be any serious discussion of the political reasons for the election debacle. Nothing could have shown more clearly the disinterest and contempt on the part of the party leadership for its members.

The party, which in the last 11 years in government has lost the support of more than half its voters (in 1998, at the start of the SPD-Green Party coalition, the SPD had the

support of 20 million voters; in last Sunday's election, this figure had fallen to less than 10 million), has reacted to its latest defeat by appointing as chairman a man who as a minister completely supported the right-wing policies of the grand coalition. The SPD's leading candidate in the federal election, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who has just been severely punished by voters, is to take over the leadership of the SPD parliamentary (Bundestag) faction. The whole shabby business is then called "renewal in opposition."

The form of the change of leadership says much about the political content and standpoint of the new leadership group headed by future party chief Gabriel and Secretary-General Nahles. They represent a layer in the party that regards every political event, including the worst of defeats at the polls, from a single viewpoint: their own personal careers. Any adherence to political opinions or principles is utterly alien to them. They can hold one opinion today and the opposite political point of view tomorrow if it furthers their careers. Against this background, the designation "left" or "right" loses any real political significance.

Sigmar Gabriel is a typical representative of such social-democratic apparatchiks. Now 50 years old, at the age of 18 he joined the SPD in 1977. This year is significant for understanding his party career. Although veteran SPD leader Willy Brandt was still party chief at that time and remained so for the next 10 years, the real driving force in the party was Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Together with Herbert Wehner, Schmidt had forced Brandt to resign as chancellor in the spring of 1974 following pressure from business lobbies for a tougher course against the working class. A strike by public service workers lasting for weeks had won broad support and resulted in considerable wage increases.

It was the unmasking of Günter Guillaume as a spy for Stalinist East Germany (GDR) that proved to be the mechanism forcing Brandt's resignation. Guillaume had worked as a personal adviser to Brandt in the chancellery. Schmidt then set up a government in close cooperation with

the trade union bureaucracy, which undertook an offensive against workers in a broad sphere of social life. Socialist-leaning groups and tendencies in the party and trade unions were hounded and suppressed.

The second half of the 1970s was the height of Schmidt's persecution of leftists. Tens of thousands of members and sympathisers deserted the SPD in disappointment. It was at this time that the Green Party emerged. Irrespective of the party's later turn to the right, at the end of the 1970s the Greens were able to attract as founding members many disenchanted social democrats intent on a more humane and liberal society. At a time when precisely such forces were flooding out of the SPD, the young Sigmar Gabriel felt attracted towards the party under Schmidt's leadership.

Gabriel used his involvement in the SPD youth organisation, the Falcons, as a springboard for his rapid rise within the party. Via the district assembly for the region of Goslar he ascended into state political circles and in 1990 became a member of the parliament for the state of Lower Saxony. He then advanced to become head of the parliamentary group and supporter of the state's prime minister at the time and later chancellor, Gerhard Schröder.

When Schröder took over as chancellor in October 1998, Gabriel took over as prime minister of Lower Saxony some time later in December 1999 without standing for election. As a "Schröder man," he continued the right-wing policies of his mentor.

As a member of the Volkswagen supervisory board, he also functioned as a lobbyist for Germany's biggest car company. In 2002, his partner at the time, Ines Krüger, received a well-endowed post in the personnel department at VW. Gabriel denied exerting any influence and repeatedly declared that the appointment of Krüger had nothing to do with his own role as a VW board member or head of the state government. Following his failure to be re-elected in Lower Saxony, it then emerged that Gabriel held 75 percent of the shares in a Volkswagen consulting company.

Despite his close links to Gerhard Schröder, Gabriel carried out a tactical shift in the state election campaign in 2003 and dissociated himself publicly from Schröder's anti-welfare "Agenda" policies. The voters in Lower Saxony, however, were unimpressed and rated his about-turn for what it was: an electoral tactic. With Gabriel as its leading candidate, the SPD lost 14.4 percent of the vote in 2003 and the state administration switched into the hands of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Two and a half years later, Schröder called Gabriel to Berlin and proposed he take over as environment secretary in the grand coalition (CDU-SPD-Christian Social Union). In this post, Gabriel continued his political lobbying for a number of major concerns, supported anti-social measures in

the cabinet—such as raising the pension age to 67—and intensified his cooperation with the SPD right wing organised in the so-called Seeheim Circle. This did not deter him, however, from striking a leftist pose in the election campaign and meeting with Klaus Wowereit one day before the election to discuss a further course of action. The defeat at the polls then served as a further springboard for Gabriel and his consorts.

Both Wowereit and Nahles are frequently and misleadingly described as "lefts" inside the SPD, although as mayor of Berlin for the last eight years, Wowereit has presided over the most drastic cuts to jobs and welfare gains in the history of the city.

Designate Secretary-General Andrea Nahles is 10 years younger than Gabriel and also puts herself forward as a representative of the "party left." The utter inappropriateness of this designation is clear when one glimpses at the political development of this committed and practicing Catholic.

She joined the SPD at the age of 18 and began her whirlwind rise to the top of the party in the year of capitalist restoration—1989. Her political integration into the party was directly bound up with the social decline that followed the re-establishment of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the GDR.

Up until the end of the 1990s, Nahles was head of the party's youth movement and quickly learned how to cover up the right-wing policies of the SPD with leftist phrases. She criticised the Agenda politics of Schröder, but voted in favour when it came to any important decisions. Her job was to keep critical elements inside the party. In return for her services, she was elected in 2003—during the Schröder government—from the party executive committee onto the party's highest body, the SPD presidium.

At the same time, she maintains close relations with the trade union bureaucracy and was active for some time in the IG Metall office in Berlin. As secretary-general, Nahles will work closely with the trade unions to ensure the necessary political cover for the policies of the current CDU-Free Democratic Party federal coalition.

While media commentators are speculating over the role to be played by the SPD in opposition and whether the party will be able to successfully regenerate itself, the change of leadership in the SPD has already made clear that the party is reacting to its defeat at the polls by maintaining its right-wing course.



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