

German Chancellor Merkel's nuclear about-face—an invitation to the Greens

Dietmar Henning, Peter Schwarz
6 June 2011

Just seven months after Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) extended the life of Germany's nuclear power plants until 2036, the German government has made an abrupt about-face. Now, the last atomic power plant will be shut down by 2022, just a year later than was originally decided in 2001 by the Social Democratic Party-Green Party government of Gerhard Schröder.

Last Monday, the leaders of the CDU, Christian Social Union (CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) agreed that in about ten years all Germany's nuclear power plants would be taken off the grid. The seven oldest reactors that were shut down shortly after the nuclear accident in Japan's Fukushima, and the Krümmel power plant near Hamburg, which has been off line for two years due to accidents, will not be brought back into operation. The remaining nine nuclear power plants will continue to operate for ten years.

On Friday, the Merkel government discussed its new energy plan with state premiers. This week, the cabinet wants to approve a new bill.

The about-face on nuclear policy is officially justified with reference to the disaster in Japan. Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen told CDU members in Münster, Fukushima had revealed the “unpredictability of nature” and the “unlimited damage” that could be caused by a nuclear accident. The government's energy concept was “ethically sound”, and based on Christian responsibility for creation, he said.

However, coming from a minister in a government that first extended the lifetime of the nuclear power plants against strong public opposition—thus holding out the prospect of profits running into billions for the energy companies—such reasoning has little credibility.

In fact, Merkel's nuclear reversal arises not from ethical motives but tactical calculations. In view of devastating poll numbers—the CDU/CSU is currently polling just over 30 percent, and the FDP has fallen below the five-percent minimum vote required for parliamentary representation—the CDU leader is seeking to open up new coalition possibilities.

She has in mind particularly the Greens, whose poll numbers have risen sharply, and who in some areas are running ahead of the SPD. By 2013, when the next federal election is due, the political cards could be reshuffled anew.

Last year, Merkel put an end to speculation about an alliance between the CDU and the Greens by extending the lifetime of the nuclear plants, which the SPD-Green government had fixed in 2001 in consultation with the energy companies. The Greens had always celebrated the nuclear phase-out as the biggest success of their years in power; they would not have found it easy to form an alliance with a party that sought to reverse the decision to end reliance on nuclear power.

On Merkel's part, the extension was a concession to the FDP and the big-business wing of her own party, whose leading representatives had turned their backs on the Chancellor and subtly threatened to establish a new right-wing party.

However, the decline of the CDU and FDP further accelerated after the decision to extend the lifetime of the plants. This year, they suffered heavy losses in all the state elections. In Baden-Württemberg, the CDU even lost the office of the state premier to the Greens. The nuclear accident in Fukushima provided Merkel with an opportunity to change course.

Scarcely had the scale of the disaster become clear when Merkel pulled the rudder hard about and announced a three-month moratorium, during which all Germany's nuclear plants would be subjected to a stress test and the older ones shut down. At the same time, she established an Ethics Commission, chaired by the former director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), Klaus Töpfer (CDU), tasked with making recommendations for a new energy plan.

The Greens responded to Merkel's plans positively. Their only criticism was in questions of detail: they are demanding more money for renewable energy, to achieve the objective set out in the government plan. This foresees a doubling in the share of renewable energy as a percentage of the total supply by 2020, from the current 17 percent to 35 percent.

The leader of the Greens in the Bundestag (parliament), Jürgen Trittin, praised a “historic opportunity” to “resolve the nuclear issue that had been simmering for decades, through a real consensus”. This presupposed that the government had a “serious and above all a responsible exit strategy” from nuclear energy.

Tübingen’s Green Mayor Boris Palmer said “a consensus on the nuclear phase-out” was desirable. On the *ARD* daily news show he said: “What we need is an energy policy aimed at a consensus with the whole population, also including the environmental groups.” The Greens, he added, were willing to negotiate with the Chancellor.

For his part, federal Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen (CDU) signalled to the Greens the government’s willingness to negotiate: “Now everyone is invited to make a proposal, but also with the desire to contribute to the results and to a consensus.”

The SPD has also welcomed the new energy plan. Party leader Sigmar Gabriel said he was willing to build a consensus. The SPD could live with the end date of 2022, since it was only two years after the SPD’s own target, he said.

Whether the SPD and the Greens will vote for the new energy plan in the Bundestag remains open. Such an agreement would send a clear signal for closer cooperation with Merkel and the CDU.

For the Chancellor, however, the nuclear phase-out is a balancing act, since the decision has attracted considerable criticism in sections of big business and abroad.

The big energy companies—RWE, E.ON, Vattenfall and EnBW—have strongly protested the decision and are threatening lawsuits, demands for damages, and massive price increases. RWE CEO Jürgen Grossman said the idea of a German energy supply without nuclear power was completely unrealistic. Even after the nuclear phase-out, Germany would continue to consume energy generated in foreign nuclear plants, which would have to be imported at high prices. Also, the industrialists association, BDI, predicted electricity price increases of 30 percent. Daimler CEO Dieter Zetsche warned that the nuclear phase-out meant the country would lose an affordable energy supply.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy described the fears about the safety of nuclear power plants after the accident in Fukushima as “medieval” and “irrational”, without mentioning Germany directly by name. The head of the International Energy Agency, Nobuo Tanaka, said Germany’s unilateral action could destabilize European electricity networks. “It is not a German, but a European problem,” he said.

The *Financial Times* criticized Germany for going it alone. “The fact that Germany could have made such a decision

unilaterally, when it has potentially such harmful implications for its European partners, once again reveals the limits of the European project,” wrote the British business daily. “Indeed, over the past year, time and time again, Germany has appeared to put its own interests over those of Europe as a whole.”

Despite this criticism, Merkel has chosen to phase out nuclear energy because she badly needs new political and social props for her unpopular right-wing policies. The Greens are offering to help, because they agree with Merkel on two important issues: budgetary and defence policy.

They are strict advocates of the “debt brake”, the balanced-budget amendment to the German constitution passed in 2009, even if it means massive cuts in social spending. On this issue, there are conflicts with the Social Democrats, with whom the Greens currently govern in several states. Under pressure from their voters, the SPD tends towards loosening the strict savings targets, unlike the Greens, who receive many votes from the relatively affluent urban middle classes.

The Greens also support the government’s reform of the military, which seeks to turn the armed forces into the tool of an aggressive German foreign policy. A week ago, the Green Party parliamentary chair Jürgen Trittin enthusiastically supported the plans of Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière.

In view of the continuing financial crisis and intense global upheavals, the Greens are needed to bring on board the better-off layers of the middle class against the working class and to support German imperialism.

As for the nuclear phase-out itself, Merkel has left a back door open. While the old reactors are shut down, she has guaranteed the energy companies that for the next ten years they can operate the newer ones at full capacity, which goes far beyond the existing regulations. By then, the parliamentary arithmetic could change and the law could still be rewritten. All that would be required is a vote in parliament to extend the lifetime of the remaining plants.

The energy companies certainly do not need to worry financially. The government’s position paper already lays down the level of compensation payments for the industry. The energy and climate fund includes possible compensation amounting to € 500 million.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact