

Germany: Greens agree to Merkel's nuclear phase-out

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The Greens have voted to support the nuclear phase-out proposed by Chancellor Angela Merkel, sending a clear signal for future cooperation with the Christian Democrats.

With just a few dissenting votes from among approximately 800 delegates, the Green Party special congress last Saturday mandated the 68 Green members of parliament to support the government proposal. The rank and file backed the motion tabled by the party leadership mandating the Green parliamentarians to vote in favour of the so-called Atomic Energy Act amendment.

This further shift to the right by the Greens did not pass without the usual spectacle of a heated debate between the party leadership and some of the delegates, something that has become almost a familiar ritual at Green Party conventions. In six hours of debate and 60 speeches, delegates accused the party leadership of abandoning their own principles, history and allies from the anti-nuclear movement.

Green Party policy had previously been to advocate the phasing out of nuclear power by 2017. The government's nuclear phase-out is expected to take place by 2022. Merkel's about-face—nine months ago, she had extended the lifetime of Germany's nuclear power plants by 8 to 14 years—stems from the need to seek new coalition options, since both government parties are polling record lows, the CDU at 30 percent and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) below the 5 percent hurdle needed to gain parliamentary representation. The change in nuclear policy was an approach to the Greens, whose party leadership immediately accepted.

The debate is only superficially about the nuclear power issue. In 2001, when the Greens were in government with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), they negotiated a “nuclear phase-out” with the big energy companies that guaranteed their atomic power plants a 32-year lifetime. By 2021 at the earliest, and by 2025 at the latest, the last plant would be taken off the grid, three years later than is now laid down in Merkel's proposal.

Opponents of Merkel's proposed amendment to the

Atomic Energy Act now argue that the possibility of an “exit from the exit strategy” cannot be legally excluded, which could still extend the lifetime of the plants further.

Moreover, Merkel's proposal would leave nuclear reactors running in Brokdorf (until 2019) and Grundremmingen (2021) that are similar to those in Fukushima, Japan.

The party leadership—co-chairs Claudia Roth and Cem Özdemir, as well as the parliamentary group co-chairs Jürgen Trittin and Renate Künast—also made no secret of the fact that they support these arguments. But they made it clear that, for them, it was about sending a signal that the Greens were “ready to govern”, even in alliance with the CDU. Later, when in government in 2013, one could have another look; Roth asserted, “We will do everything to see that the nuclear phase-out is accelerated”.

“All those who are for 2017 must vote for 2022 and not for 2040”, said Trittin. Özdemir said that a withdrawal by 2017 was not realistic, in other words, party policy is merely a bargaining chip. Green parliamentary deputy Bärbel Höhn, a former environment minister in North Rhine Westphalia, called those who would not see this “naive”.

Baden Württemberg Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann, the first Green state premier, who now plays a leading role in the party, vehemently advocates rapprochement with the CDU. Kretschmann, a devout Catholic who has supported collaboration between the Greens and Christian Democrats for years, claimed that even before the party congress, at a meeting of the heads of state governments where he was the only Green present, he had already negotiated the gradual shut-down of nuclear power plants. Kretschmann said that agreeing to Merkel's Atomic Energy Act amendment was a choice of direction.

The “opponents” of the party leadership were not opposed to this course. But while the party leaders openly stated the political significance of their agreement—new options to exercise power through reaching out to the Christian Democrats—their opponents stubbornly argued over the question of nuclear power. The chair of the Green Party youth organisation, Gesine Agena, said she firmly believed

that only convinced opponents of nuclear power were participating in the conference. She did not understand why the Greens would give their approval to Merkel without them ever being asked. And, one might add, without Merkel needing the approval of the Greens to pass her nuclear phase-out legislation. The ruling coalition still has a majority; moreover, the SPD has also long before made clear its approval.

Green parliamentarian Christian Ströbele was also on the same “false” line. As always, he took on the role of a safety valve for the rank and file. In a speech that received much applause, he lamented that the five additional years between the Greens’ target of exiting from nuclear power by 2017 and the target proposed by the government were too much. “We simply cannot say yes, we have to say no,” he cried, to thunderous applause. But he too was not expecting that the party would take a stand against its own leadership. He therefore implored once again, “The struggle continues!”

Green Party parliamentary faction leader Renate Künast took up this refrain, and then said, “Say yes, and keep on fighting!” Finally, she even sought to employ the words of Karl Marx, whose contempt for the politicians of the upper middle class, like the Greens today, was expressed in his sharp and pointed polemics. The hall erupted as she said, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it”, quoting from Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* in order to justify this rightward shift by the Greens.

A little later, almost all of the 800 delegates voted to support Merkel’s nuclear phase-out. “The agreement to the CDU-FDP exit date is a bridge to the Christian Democrats,” said *Spiegel Online*. Since this Saturday, a Christian Democrat-Green coalition was “no longer a pipe dream”.

The following day, the SPD and CDU were full of praise. “I am delighted,” said CDU Secretary General Hermann Gröhe. But “the stress test for the Greens” would come when they had to enforce “unpopular but necessary measures”. The SPD parliamentary group leader Thomas Oppermann welcomed the outcome of the special party congress, and called it the Greens’ “baptism of fire to show their readiness to govern”.

Jürgen Trittin underscored this assessment. In future, the Greens also wanted to occupy the post of interior minister, he told the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. “In several states, we have already held the finance portfolio and now in Rhineland Palatinate we have taken on economic affairs. Surely it is time that a Green [politician] also takes ministerial responsibility for interior affairs.” Trittin wanted to show that the Green Party no longer had “any difficulties with the police.” Green parliamentarian Wolfgang Wieland expressed the same sentiments. The fact the Greens had

never held the interior ministry portfolio at federal or state level was “the last taboo,” “The taboo must fall,” demanded Wieland.

A week ago, Boris Palmer, the well-known Green mayor of Tübingen—like Kretschmann an advocate of collaboration with the Christian Democrats—told *Zeit Online*: “Responsible domestic policy” means that “sometimes repression is called for”.

This further shift to the right by the Green Party is part of an international phenomenon. The mounting international financial and debt crisis of the last three years has seen ruling elites worldwide off-loading the burden of the crisis onto working people. In the inevitable struggles, this is provoking, as in North Africa, the Middle East, Greece, Spain and many other countries, sections of the upper middle class to cling all the more closely to their own bourgeoisie. The fear of losing their privileged position in society means they offer to divert the outrage over the social attacks and the arrogance of the ruling strata, and ultimately help to enforce the cuts, even using the state apparatus.

The Greens represent these sections of the upper middle class. Their voters have the highest average incomes and educational attainment levels. A survey by financial daily *Handelsblatt* of 800 leading business figures showed the Greens coming out best of all the parties. They polled very well among managers of large companies with more than 5,000 employees. *Spiegel Online* commented on the special party congress last Saturday: “The Greens have long ago abandoned their origins on the left fringe of society.”

If the crisis of the federal government becomes more acute, the Greens are ready to continue Merkel’s policies in an alliance with the Christian Democrats, or with the SPD.



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