

Berlin social democrats seek coalition with the conservatives

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Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (Social Democratic Party—SPD) is now seeking a coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) after he abruptly ended coalition negotiations with the Green Party.

In March this year, with the support of SPD votes, Winfried Kretschmann was elected to become the first Green president in Baden Württemberg. Since then, SPD-Green administrations have been favoured as a viable alternative to the conflict-ridden federal conservative coalition. In Rhineland Palatinate, for example, an exclusively SPD government was replaced by an SPD-Green coalition, and two months later a similar alliance came to power in Bremen.

But this time the aspirations of the Green Party, which had on occasion overtaken the SPD in the polls, were suddenly dashed. In the Mecklenburg Vorpommern state election, the SPD and the Green Party failed to achieve a joint majority, and in Berlin they managed the latter only with a thin one seat majority. This is the situation that has led Wowereit to press the ejection button and jettison the Green party.

The official reason for the breakdown of talks was the failure of the parties to agree on a 3.2 kilometer extension of the A100 motorway in Berlin. Because the route leads directly through a Green-voting district, the Green Party was reluctant to agree unconditionally on its construction as the SPD was demanding.

But a disputed three kilometers of motorway can hardly be the real explanation for the abrupt way in which negotiations were ended by the SPD. The latter had undoubtedly already decided that an alliance with the CDU would be preferable, as shown by their absolute unwillingness to offer any compromises to the Green Party.

The CDU in Berlin is not only considered to be one

of the most right-wing factions within the national party, it was thoroughly discredited in a 2001 banking scandal. After it was revealed that leading CDU politicians had received large kickbacks from the sale of public housing stock to the Berlin banks, votes for the party fell from 40.8 percent in 1999 to 23.8 percent in 2001. In the most recent election, they were even lower—just 23.4 percent.

The CDU's leading candidate, Frank Henkel, while not directly involved with the corrupt cohort surrounding the long-serving CDU Mayor Eberhard Diepgen, has nevertheless close connections with the latter's cronies. For instance, Henkel was the previous supervisor of Diepgen's private office.

If it should come to a coalition between the SPD and the CDU, Henkel would very probably take over the post of home affairs. He is already the domestic spokesman for his fraction, and has a record of constantly calling for increases in police numbers as well as demanding the arming of local "citizen's watch" patrols with police batons and the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility to 12. He is also an adherent of "zero tolerance" regarding crimes committed by immigrants. With these policies he continues a long tradition of extreme-right Berlin CDU home affairs ministers.

From 1981 to 1986, the CDU home affairs minister was Heinrich Lummer. After a history of financially supporting extreme right-wing parties in the 1970s, Lummer used his office to pursue aggressive policies against young squatters and engage in racist and nationalist polemics. In his book, titled *Germany Should Stay German*, he warns against "Überfremdung" (the overrunning of Germany by foreigners) and calls for the preservation of the "German Folk" and "German culture." The book is

published by the extreme right-wing publishing house Hohenrain-Verlag.

From 1996 to 1998, Jörg Schönbohm (CDU) served as home affairs minister for Berlin. He was primarily responsible for promoting the concept of a German “leading culture” to which foreign residents had to adapt. He sought to explain the death of a child at the hands of its mother in 2005 by linking the incident to “proletarianisation forced on people by the SPD regime.” He attributed the rise in right-wing extremist crimes to the campaigns of militant opponents of right-wing extremism.

It may well be that Wowereit imagines a coalition with the CDU would be more stable than one based on the narrow majority offered by the Green Party, but his decision to reject the SPD-Green “new wave” in favor of an alliance with the right-wing Berlin CDU is of significance for the entire country. It is an expression of the reorientation of large sections of the SPD towards cooperation with the CDU.

It is no accident that Wowereit is receiving backing for this from SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel. The latter has been accusing the Green Party of not being capable of shouldering responsibility for tough measures. At the same time, the mayor of Hamburg, former Employment Minister Olaf Scholz (SPD), has declared that the Berlin Green Party is not displaying “the reliability that is an essential pre-condition.”

The Green Party itself is connecting the breakdown of coalition talks with wider national politics. The parliamentary leader of the national Green Party fraction, Volker Beck, announced that it “...was not a wise decision in view of the dissolution of the national CDU/SPD alliance.” Renate Kunast, Green Party top candidate in Berlin, was even more combative in her press comment: “I am certain that no Green Party member will ever forget what the SPD just did.”

This reorientation within sections of the SPD represents a reaction to the intensifying economic and financial crisis. In an atmosphere dominated by unceasing reports of growing international tensions and the spread of popular resistance to the dictatorship of the banks, the social democrats are making clear they will not tolerate any deviations from the party line on the part of their coalition partner.

At a time when the current national coalition government (CDU and Free Democratic Party—FDP) is

in deep crisis and scarcely able to get anything through parliament, the SPD is offering the CDU a “grand coalition” option. Such a coalition would have an extremely undemocratic character. Its sole purpose would be to force through the measures demanded by the banks in response to the worst financial crisis since the 1930s.

The first time the SPD entered into such a coalition was in 1966, in response to rising class conflict. During this coalition, one of its most significant acts was to introduce emergency powers legislation allowing parliament by a two-thirds majority to disregard all “normal” democratic rights in the case of civil uprisings or war.

The second grand coalition was formed in 2005, not long before the current economic crisis erupted. This coalition passed laws to enable the 750 billion euro bank rescue package and introduce the so-called “debt brake”—a spending cap that obliges future governments to recoup the money spent on the bank bailouts at the expense of the people.



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