

What lies behind the drawn-out coalition talks in Germany?

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Almost eight weeks have passed since the federal elections of September 22, yet the process of forming a new government is still dragging on.

Exploratory talks were held first. Although the Greens proclaimed their broad agreement with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), these two parties eventually decided to enter coalition talks with the Social Democrats (SPD). These talks have been on-going now for three weeks.

Thirteen working groups have met on dozens of occasions under the leadership of politicians specialized in each field. At these meetings, there were long discussions over a wide variety of issues, many of lesser significance, such as a tax on lorry drivers, same-sex marriage and a legal quota for women on the boards of companies. On Wednesday, the main roundtable, made up of 75 participants, met for the fifth time to receive progress reports from the working groups, but nothing significant emerged from this meeting.

What underlies the long, drawn-out process of forming a government is the worsening economic and social crisis in Germany and Europe. The new government's task will be to step up the social counter-revolution throughout Europe against the growing resistance of the population.

The two previous governments under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, the coalition with the SPD from 2005-2009, and the coalition with the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) from 2009-2013, were partially able to offload the economic crisis onto the countries in eastern and southern Europe. The drastic austerity measures dictated by the Chancellor's office, in collaboration with the European Union (EU), have cut a path of economic and social devastation in countries like Greece and worsened the Euro crisis.

The so-called bailouts from the European stability fund did not go to the highly-indebted countries, but flowed directly to the creditors in the banks, including several German institutions. These banks were able to offload their toxic assets onto state budgets and the European Central Bank, while the total debt of the bailed-out countries exploded.

Greece's indebtedness rose despite, or rather because of the bailout, from 110 to 175 percent of GDP.

In the EU, 26 million people are currently without work. In Spain and Greece, almost a third of all adults and two thirds of young people are out of work.

In Germany, only the financial elite and a tiny section of the upper middle class have profited from these developments. The Hartz laws and the Agenda 2010 social reforms have created a massive low-wage sector and deep social polarization. More than 6 million people are on Hartz IV welfare benefits of less than €400 per month, while the number of millionaires continues to rise, passing the one million mark earlier this year.

Business associations are now demanding an intensification of the social attacks. The so-called wise economists (Council of experts for the review of macroeconomic developments) presented a report this week. They called upon the future governing parties to continue with the Agenda policies and to intensify the reforms.

In addition, there are mounting conflicts between the major powers. Edward Snowden's revelations have uncovered the extra-legal machinations of US intelligence agencies, straining German-American relations. At the same time, the criminal character of the policies of the American government has become clear to millions. The weakening of the United States has in turn had consequences for Europe, deepening the conflicts between the European governments.

Under these conditions, there are a growing number of comments in the media and from research institutions close to the government, pushing for the revival of German great power politics. The SWP research institute published last month a study on the topic "new power, new responsibility." In view of the decline of the United States, the new government in Berlin, the SWP report argued, had to assume more responsibility in global politics.

In this context, the formation of the government is increasingly taking the form of a conspiracy against the population. Behind the endless debates in specialist committees and coalition round tables, important political

changes are taking place. All of the important decisions are being taken in secret, far removed from any democratic oversight.

Fundamental issues of domestic and foreign policy are being discussed between a small group made up of the so-called “big three” party chairmen: Angela Merkel (CDU), Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) and Horst Seehofer (CSU). Decisions are then taken in close consultation with the heads of the business associations and financial institutions.

The character of the coming government is already foreshadowed in the process of its formation. In striking feature in this is the minimising of the role of parliament and of the electorate. The division of powers, parliamentary oversight and other basic components of the bourgeois constitution now exist only on paper.

The last normal sitting of the federal parliament (Bundestag) took place in June, before the summer break and long before the election. Although the Bundestag has been formally constituted since then, it is yet to take up its work.

To date, no parliamentary committees have been formed to oversee the work of the government. The delay in electing such committees has been justified with the claim that the composition of the committees and their leadership would preempt decisions about the distribution of responsibilities within the coalition and the appointment of ministers.

This says a lot about the future relationship between the government and parliament. While parliament should control the government according to the constitution, parliament is subordinating itself to the government and making the election of its committees dependent upon the future composition of the coalition. Thus parliament is acting as a pseudo-democratic institution, rubberstamping government decisions.

In the committees that are still meeting, deputies are working who were long ago voted out of parliament. In the parliamentary control committee (PKG), which is responsible for the oversight of the intelligence services, there are two members of the FDP, which is not represented in the new parliament, and an SPD member who lost his mandate at the election and now sits as a private individual on the committee for the intelligence services.

It is similar in the foreign ministry. Last weekend, Guido Westerwelle (FDP) travelled as foreign minister to Geneva for the discussions on Iran’s nuclear programme, although he has no democratic legitimacy as a member of the FDP. The decision on how to proceed in this vital issue of international politics was discussed in a small group in the Chancellor’s office, including the SPD’s leader Gabriel, and in close consultation with Washington. Although this involved fundamental questions of war and peace,

parliament remained entirely excluded.

The hollowing out of bourgeois democratic norms is a typical characteristic of authoritarian regimes. In the Weimar Republic, the government led by the Centre Party politician Heinrich Brüning governed for two years with the help of emergency powers, before he was replaced by the semi-dictatorial regimes of Franz von Papen and Kurt von Schleicher, following which Hitler took power.

The turn away from the norms of bourgeois democracy is neither temporary nor accidental. It is above all a sign of the character of the coming government, which is preparing massive attacks on the population in all areas.

In this, the CDU/CSU can count on the full support of the nominal opposition. Neither the Greens nor the Left Party have protested against the undermining of the rights of parliament. Both are prepared to step in and take up the responsibilities of government should the current coalition talks ultimately fail,

The Left Party has repeatedly offered its services as a partner to the SPD and Greens to realize their right-wing programme. The SPD is keen to make use of this offer. At their party congress this weekend, the SPD intends to declare itself open to coalitions with the Left Party, however not now but in the distant future.

This step is being used by Gabriel to impose the right-wing course on the party membership, as they must vote on the coalition agreement. In this way he can signal to the membership that although the SPD is entering government with the CDU, “it remains in spite of this a party anchored on the left,” as the French daily *Le Monde* wrote—a newspaper which is familiar with such manoeuvres.

At the same time, this step will further draw the Left Party into preparations for a grand coalition.



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