

The role of Germany's Left Party in the coalition negotiations

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The shift of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) in its attitude toward the Left Party has been enthusiastically greeted at the latter's Berlin headquarters—the Karl Liebknecht House. Just hours after delegates at a SPD party congress adopted a motion opening the way for coalitions at a federal level with the Left Party, the latter's co-chairpersons, Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, appeared before the media to offer the SPD “high-level talks”.

The subsequent cool reaction of SPD General Secretary Andrea Nahles to the Left Party's overtures was largely intended for public consumption. In reality, contact between the SPD and Left Party headquarters has been intensified at all levels.

The question of forming a coalition with the Social Democrats was the main topic of discussion at Left Party state congresses in Saxony and Thuringia, held simultaneously with the SPD congress. Elections are due in Thuringia in September 2014 and the state chairman of the Left Party could become premier with the votes of the SPD.

The deputy premier of Thuringia and SPD regional chairman, Christoph Matschie, immediately and publicly adjusted himself to the new situation. He said he could now imagine the possible election of a Left Party politician as state premier. According to the most recent opinion polls, the Left Party in Thuringia leads the SPD by 13 points.

Up until now Matschie had always ruled out supporting a Left Party candidate for such a post. After the last state election in Thuringia in 2009, the SPD rejected the option of a coalition with the Left Party and formed a coalition instead with the right-wing Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Many media commentators have superficially presented the new level of collaboration between the

SPD and the Left Party as a tactical initiative aimed at putting pressure on the CDU and its allies in the current coalition negotiations.

Jakob Augstein, in his *Der Spiegel* column, responded rapturously, and asked: “When has a party so cleverly turned defeat into victory, as the SPD is currently doing?” The plan of the SPD under party chief Sigmar Gabriel, he suggested, was brilliant: just two years of “grand coalition”, then a “red-red-green” [left-wing] government led by the Social Democrats. “Turn to the right and then to the left—this is not a paradox, it's smart”.

Such praise for the new alliance between the SPD and the Left Party cannot be attributed merely to naïveté and stupidity—although Augstein is guilty of both. Rather, there is a body of opinion convinced that the SPD in alliance with the Left Party and the Greens would much more effectively represent the interests of German business at home and abroad than the previous coalition of the CDU and the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP).

In fact, the enthusiasm of the Left Party for the advances of the SPD is the form in which the former is being integrated into the grand coalition. Although massive attacks on social and democratic rights are being prepared in the current coalition negotiations, the Left Party is not opposing them. Rather it is participating in the planning and utilizing its close links with the trade unions in the process.

The leadership of the DGB [Confederation of German Trade Unions] and the major unions are closely involved in the coalition negotiations. Together with the employers' associations, the unions are exerting pressure to curtail the activities of so-called “craft unions” and restrict the right to strike.

On Monday the coalition working group, “Labour

and Social Affairs”, presented an interim report that announced agreement on an “Initiative for the legal regulation of the bargaining process”. The declared aim of the working group was to “rationalize the pluralism prevailing in contract negotiations”. This innocuous sounding formulation conceals a fundamental attack on the rights to strike and freedom of association guaranteed by the German constitution.

“Pluralism prevailing in contract negotiations” is a euphemistic reference to the existence of certain small, craft unions, which have been formed in recent years in areas of industry and the services sector in an effort to throw off the dominance of the DGB unions.

The de facto sovereignty in contract bargaining enjoyed by the DGB has for many years resulted in contracts detrimental to workers, which the latter are not legally able to oppose. Verdi, the services union, for example, has signed a series of contract agreements imposing wage cuts, compulsory overtime and job losses in the public sector. The same applies to the country’s largest industrial union, IG Metall. All of the contracts dictating wage concessions, job losses and the closure of the Opel auto plant in Bochum bear the union’s signature.

Over the last several years there has been resistance to this process by smaller, specialized unions representing individual professions, e.g., pilots, train drivers, flight attendants, airport apron controllers, hospital doctors, etc. In 2008, a train drivers’ strike temporarily paralyzed rail operations. The strike was aimed directly against the policy of the DGB train drivers’ union, Transnet, which had enforced pay cuts, job cuts and worsening working conditions in preparation for floating the German railway system on the stock exchange.

A strike by airport apron controllers at Frankfurt Airport also had a major impact last year and placed Verdi under pressure.

For a number of years, the DGB has sought jointly with the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations (BDA) to suppress the right to strike for such craft unions and enforce the monopoly position of the DGB.

Now the latest initiative to regulate contract bargaining aims to cement the DGB’s position. In future, craft unions will not be able to call their members out on strike when they represent a minority

of the workforce compared to the major unions. The contract agreed by the union with the most members in the factory will be legally binding on every worker. Under the terms of this agreement, all employees’ organizations would be bound to the so-called peace obligation anchored in German labour law, i.e., a complete ban on any industrial action, applying even to those workers who refuse to sign the contract.

The unions are being integrated into the government in an unprecedented manner to suppress any opposition to layoffs and cuts to pay and benefits. The initiative for this offensive comes directly from the SPD and the trade unions themselves.

The enthusiastic response of the Left Party to closer cooperation with the SPD is directly linked to support for this policy. The Left Party is using its close ties to the trade unions to expand the bureaucratic control and oppression of workers.



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