

Social Democrats, Left Party and Greens preparing coalition in Germany

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For weeks, there have been extensive discussions in the German press about the prospect of a coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD), Left Party and Greens after Germany's federal election in 2017. The impulse was the dramatic losses suffered by the SPD and Left Party in regional elections in March. The SPD finished behind the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in two states, and the Left Party trailed the AfD in three. Further fuel for the debate about an SPD/Left Party/Green coalition was provided by President Joachim Gauck's decision not to run for a second term in office and the vote in Britain to leave the European Union (EU).

SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel and the entire Left Party leadership are the main advocates of a coalition in Berlin. In mid-May, Gabriel met for the first time in Saarland with Oscar Lafontaine, who is considered persona non grata in the SPD after he turned his back on the party 17 years ago and subsequently became a joint founder of the Left Party. Following the meeting, Lafontaine and his wife, Left Party parliamentary chair Sahra Wagenknecht, have been pushing for an alliance with the SPD and Greens.

As Wagenknecht declared in the wake of Gauck's announcement that he would not seek a second term, "We wish the SPD had the courage to free itself from the confines of the grand coalition and not only propose a joint candidate with us and the Greens, but also impose one." The two joint chairpersons of the Left Party, Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger, also proclaimed their willingness to reach "an agreement on a joint candidature with the SPD and Greens."

In a column in *Der Spiegel* 10 days later, Gabriel called for an "alliance of progressive forces" to combat the rise of a "radical bourgeois right." This was widely interpreted as an invitation to the Left Party and Greens for cooperation.

The Greens are split over the issue. A significant section of the party, which is now governing two states in western Germany in coalition with the right-wing Christian Democratic Union (CDU), would prefer a coalition at the federal level with the conservatives.

But even discounting the Greens' stance, the prospect of an SPD/Left Party/Green federal coalition seems highly speculative. Although the three parties hold a majority of the seats in the current parliament, this is hardly likely to be the

case after the 2017 election. According to polls, all three parties combined are likely to win support from a little over 40 percent of the electorate.

However, as has often been the case in the Federal Republic, the haggling over new majorities is not simply a question of electoral tactics, but of a political change of course.

In 1969, the right-leaning free-market Free Democrats (FDP) united with the SPD to support the implementation of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik (Eastern Policy), which created new markets for German industry. And in 1998, the formerly pacifist Greens were brought into the federal government in order to make possible the return of German soldiers to war zones around the world. The Hartz reforms, which created a huge low-wage sector in Germany, were also the work of the SPD/Green coalition.

The proposal for an SPD/Left Party/Green coalition draws on this legacy. Along with domestic political goals, it aims to bring about a new orientation for German foreign policy that is being pressed for by sections of the ruling elite. Two issues are at the heart of this project: the reorganisation of the EU under German hegemony and a reorientation of German foreign and military policy on lines relatively more independent of the United States.

Among the governing coalition of the CDU, CSU and SPD, there are considerable differences on both of these questions, which in part cut across party lines. On both issues, the Left Party is considered an important prop for a new orientation.

As always, the change of course being strived for is accompanied by sanctimonious phrases about peace, democracy and social justice. But those seeking to orient themselves politically must learn to distinguish between such phrases and real goals. An SPD/Left Party/Green coalition would stand for more militarism, a strengthening of the state apparatus and further attacks on social rights. In numerous interviews, articles and strategy papers, the leading spokespeople for the SPD and Left Party have exchanged ideas on this over recent weeks.

On the day after the Brexit vote, Gabriel and European Parliament president Martin Schulz (SPD) presented a joint foreign policy paper. Under the title "Founding Europe anew," they demanded a closer centralisation of the EU under German

pre-eminence. Given the increased inability of the European Council of heads of government to act, the European Commission had to be “restructured into a genuine European government.”

Further demands in the 10-point paper included: a “shift in economic policy and a new growth pact for the EU,” although the authors explicitly acknowledge the validity of the European Stability Pact, which compels indebted states to implement strict austerity measures; an “economic Schengen” (i.e., a further expansion of the European common market); the emergence of the EU as a “unified regional power for order”; effective cooperation on internal security; the establishment of a “European FBI”; and an “effective securing of Europe’s external borders.”

The paper was met with protests from the CDU. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble insist upon the leading role of the European Council of heads of government and do not want to give encouragement to nationalist tendencies within the EU with further centralisation.

In a newspaper interview, Schäuble attacked the EU Commission and its president, Jean-Claude Juncker, who, in spite of his membership in a conservative party, represents a position in line with the SPD on this issue. “If the Commission doesn’t act together, then we will take the matter into our own hands and solve the problems between the governments,” he threatened last Sunday.

In addition, Schäuble expressed the fear that the “growth pact” proposed by the SPD would undermine his austerity course. The revival of “the false idea” that “one can pump out growth by taking on new debt” could not be accepted, he said.

Shortly after Gabriel and Schulz’s publication, the German and French foreign ministers, both social democrats, released their own paper. Under the title “A strong Europe in an insecure world,” Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Jean-Marc Ayrault described the British decision to leave the EU as an opportunity to establish a European military and defence policy independent of the United States.

Both papers were greeted with enthusiasm in the Left Party. In the Bundestag debate on the Brexit vote, parliamentary chair Dietmar Bartsch praised the Gabriel-Schulz paper. It was a diametrical shift from the current policy, he claimed. “I think it is reasonable that we take the first step towards another Europe.” Against China, Japan and North America, Europe had “only a chance together.” “If one wants a united Europe, then one cannot talk so much; one must immediately act.”

Two days later, Wagenknecht promised Gabriel, who was travelling to Greece, her full support. Greece was “a good place to present a programme for another Europe,” she stated in parliament. “If Sigmar Gabriel is seriously concerned about a new start in Europe, to reduce inequality and create new European regulations to prioritise the welfare and social security of the people over the freedom of deregulated markets,

he has our support.” “A fundamental change of course” was involved.

Wagenknecht, of course, knows full well that the SPD is not retreating from its austerity dictates to Greece, which are being implemented by her ally Alexis Tsipras. To leave no doubt about this, she demanded, “In Greece, and throughout Europe, public debt must be reduced.” Her rhetoric about “social security” and “deregulated markets” merely serves to cover the right-wing essence of the cooperation with the SPD.

The anti-American orientation of the proposed SPD/Left Party/Green alliance was formulated most explicitly by Oscar Lafontaine. In early June, he participated in a rally in front of the US Ramstein air base and told the Internet publication KenFM, “The United States is an oligarchic system, which is out to secure raw materials and markets around the world by military means.” The US wanted to “encircle Russia,” which was “obvious to anyone who looks at the map.” He called for a “security system including Russia and not confrontation, which the United States has been looking for for years.”

On his Facebook page, Lafontaine called for “drawing on the best traditions of an independent European foreign policy, as was developed by Charles de Gaulle for France and Willy Brandt for Germany.” He accused Chancellor Merkel of not understanding the “imperial goals” of the United States and of being “incapable of an independent German foreign policy.” By contrast, he praised Foreign Minister Steinmeier.

This anti-Americanism, which in the struggle against American imperialism strengthens German imperialism rather than the unity with the American working class, is reactionary in every sense.

The campaign for an SPD/Left Party/Green coalition is likely to intensify as the federal election draws nearer over the coming year. It will be concealed behind all possible promises of social security and peace so as to win over dissatisfied sections of the population. But it will lead to a dead end. An SPD/Left Party/Green coalition would be not in the slightest more progressive than the current right-wing government.



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