

Leading SPD politician to become German president

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On Monday, after weeks of behind-the-scenes wrangling, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) decided to support the candidacy of Social Democrat Frank-Walter Steinmeier for the office of federal president.

Nothing should now stand in the way of the current foreign minister being elected to Germany's highest public office. The Social Democratic Party (SPD), CDU and CSU control nearly three quarters of the votes in the Federal Assembly, which will elect the president on February 12, 2017. The Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) will probably also support Steinmeier. Only the Left Party has announced that it would stand its own candidate.

The agreement on Steinmeier took place a few days following the US presidential election, and was obviously influenced by the result. The victory of Donald Trump has triggered a shock in Germany.

Big business is preparing for turbulent times ahead, when a protectionist course prevails in Washington and this sets a global precedent. German industry is dependent on exports, second only to the Chinese. Germany's current account surplus will reach a historic record of 8.8 percent of GDP this year. In foreign policy, the German government is reckoning with sharp international tensions and an increased in military conflicts if Trump implements just a fraction of his campaign announcements.

Both the crisis in the export industries and the increase in military operations will exacerbate social and political tensions within Germany and accelerate the alienation of broad sections of the population from the political elites. Against this background, the agreement on Steinmeier, justified by the CDU chairman and Chancellor Angela Merkel as a “rational decision,” sends out a dual signal.

Firstly, Steinmeier, like no other German politician, embodies the policy of welfare cuts and militarism with which the German ruling class is reacting to the global crisis of capitalism.

As head of the chancellery of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), he drafted the “Agenda 2010” welfare and

labour “reforms,” and thus bears primary responsibility for the exponential growth in precarious forms of work and the related decline of wages and benefits. In the meantime, just half of all those working in Germany are in full-time jobs with social insurance.

As foreign minister of the present grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD, Steinmeier tirelessly argues for German great power politics and the return of German militarism. A milestone in this respect was the speech he delivered on February 1, 2014 at the Munich Security Conference.

A culture of German military restraint, Steinmeier said, should “not become a culture of standing aside. Germany is too large to comment on world politics only from the sideline.” Steinmeier did not stop at words. The same month, he played a leading role in the coup in Ukraine, which, resting on fascist militias, replaced a pro-Russian regime with a pro-Western one headed by a billionaire oligarch.

Second, with the selection of Steinmeier, the grand coalition is closing ranks. The agreement on a common candidate is a clear signal for a continuation of the governing coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD after the federal elections in autumn 2017.

The election of the president, who has largely ceremonial duties, has always served to set the course for future government coalitions in Germany. For example, the election of the SPD politician Gustav Heinemann with the votes of the FDP prepared the election of Willy Brandt as the first Social Democratic chancellor in the Federal Republic of Germany. Based on his supposed “independence,” the president also fulfils the task of providing support for official politics beyond the immediate government camp.

The so-called “people's parties”—CDU, CSU and SPD—have dramatically lost voters in recent years. In some state elections, even their combined votes are insufficient to form a majority. For this reason, there have been numerous scenarios outlined for a new coalition government at the

federal level.

Sections of the CDU and the Greens, who already govern jointly in some states, are looking to form a so-called “black-green” coalition. According to media reports, Chancellor Angela Merkel had even proposed Winfried Kretschmann, the Green state premier of Baden-Württemberg, as a candidate for president. Kretschmann responded to the offer by praising Merkel to the skies, declaring that she was irreplaceable as chancellor.

But Merkel’s initiative failed due to opposition from the CDU’s Bavarian sister party, the CSU. At last weekend’s Green Party conference, delegates rebuked Kretschmann and other prominent advocates of a black-green coalition by voting down their resolutions.

Under these circumstances, the CDU/CSU intend to renew their proven alliance with the SPD in preparation for the coming period of social upheaval, following Trump’s election as US president. The Greens, who have no fundamental differences with the government’s policies, remain in reserve to step into a future coalition in a period of crisis.

The same is true for the Left Party. In recent months, leading representatives of the Left Party, the Greens and the SPD, supported by SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel, had brought an alliance of these three parties at federal level into discussion. This met with enthusiasm in the Left Party, above all, which is ready to do anything as long as it is rewarded with ministerial posts at the Berlin cabinet table.

But such a project appears too uncertain for the ruling elites at the moment. To counter the expected social and political convulsions—at least momentarily—they are relying on proven mechanisms. As early as 1968, a grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD had adopted emergency laws when confronted with massive protests. And in 2003, when Chancellor Schröder prematurely ended the “red-green” coalition in face of massive discontent with Agenda 2010, the grand coalition took over the implementation of these anti-working-class policies. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the CDU and SPD worked closely together to save the banks and shift the burden onto the population.

The nomination of Steinmeier has been met with enthusiasm by sections of the liberal, formerly democratic, petty bourgeoisie, who, given Trump’s election victory and the rise of right-wing parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), yearn for order and a strong state. For example, Heribert Prantl, domestic policy editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, has been gushing in his praise of the SPD politician.

Prantl described the president as a “defender of the social and constitutional republic” and emphasized, “This was rarely as necessary in West German history as it is today.”

Steinmeier’s nomination for this office, Prantl continues, is “a demonstration of the community of democrats” and “a victory for reasons of state.” The SPD politician was “prepared in domestic policy terms and well versed in foreign policy.” He had the talent of “an honest broker,” which “cannot be valued highly enough today.” He was “anti-Trump” and an “anchor of experience.” Prantl concludes, “The hopes that are linked to a Federal President Steinmeier are not small.”

However, many other media outlets have expressed skepticism.

The pro-union *Frankfurter Rundschau* fears that a president “who feels so committed to the poorly regarded consensus of the so-called middle,” would widen the gap between the establishment parties and the general public.

“What Germany needed, was a sort of a democratic anti-Trump,” writes Stephan Hebel. “Not in the sense that he simply defends the establishment against the right-wing populists. Rather, it would be better to have [some]one who, given the anger at the failure of the establishment parties, which is not entirely without reason, can give a voice and even better, a democratic direction.”

The pro-Green Party *taz* makes a similar argument. “While large sections of society no longer feel represented by the political class, someone would become president who, like no other, is a typical professional politician,” writes Martin Kaul.

The conservative press attacks the CDU/CSU for not standing its own candidate with a clear right-wing profile. “This ‘lack of an alternative’ does no good to Germany’s political system, which like never before is being challenged by populists of all kinds,” Berthold Kohler wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. “In this respect too, it would have been better if the Union [CDU/CSU] had sent its own candidate into the race.”

And Ulf Poschardt rages in *Die Welt*, “The elite achievers have no political representation in the federal government, the chattering elites—the warning sign of Trump or not—are continuing as usual. They have understood nothing. In the end, this includes the charming President-to-be ... It is becoming dark in Germany.”

One thing is clear from all the commentaries: The establishment parties are joining forces behind Steinmeier because they are preparing for fierce social and political conflicts.



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