

# German Social Democrats prepare for conflict with the US

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The shuffling of posts in the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) last week was a carefully prepared operation.

On January 24, the SPD made the surprise announcement that the former president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, would run as its candidate for chancellor in this autumn's federal election. Schulz also becomes chairman of the SPD, replacing Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who, in turn, takes over the post of foreign minister from Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is due to assume the post of federal president.

Journalists close to government circles have gone to great lengths to present this change of posts as a personal, spontaneous decision made by Gabriel. *Der Spiegel* claimed that Gabriel decided only last Saturday to renounce the chancellor candidacy, taking by surprise all of the others involved, including Schulz. Such reports are aimed at obscuring what really took place.

When one examines the political positions of Gabriel and Schulz, a very different picture emerges. The ruling circles in Germany are repositioning themselves. They consider the nationalist policy of the new US president, Donald Trump, to be not only a danger, but also an opportunity for them to realize their own great power ambitions. They regard the SPD as the most suitable instrument to achieve this end.

That is why Schulz has been built up by the media as the "bearer of hope" for the SPD, bringing with him the chance for an election victory. In fact, Schulz personifies the despised politics of the SPD like no other. As a long-standing member of the conservative Seeheim circle in the SPD and the de facto leader of a grand coalition in the European Parliament, he belongs to the right wing of the party.

In a long *Handelsblat* with the on January 24, Gabriel made clear the SPD's agenda. Trump, he said, "means business," but this was no cause for timidity. He continued, "If Trump starts a trade war with Asia and South America, this opens up opportunities for us... Europe should now work quickly on a new Asia strategy. The spaces that America leaves free must now be used."

He added that if "US protectionism leads to new opportunities for Europe throughout Asia, we should take advantage."

In order to facilitate such a turn to Asia, Gabriel is striving for a core Europe under German leadership. He listed as top priorities "strengthening Europe, developing a common foreign and security policy... and, above all, building our own Asia, India and China strategy."

Brexit could provide the decisive impulse. "The exit of Great Britain is being discussed much too defensively," he said. "It is also an opportunity to increase the cooperation of a group in the EU" and "strengthen core Europe enormously."

A few hours after the interview was published, Gabriel announced the change of posts in the SPD leadership. Three days later he was foreign minister.

Gabriel's course was supported by the Swedish EU commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, who is responsible for trade policy. She announced that the EU had a long list of countries wishing to conclude trade agreements, including Japan, Mexico and members of Mercosur, the South American trade bloc. Many of these countries have been negotiating much more intensively with the EU since the election of Trump.

On Thursday, *SpiegelOnline* published a commentary by its Brussels correspondent titled "Trump can be Europe's chance." He presented

Trump's isolationism as providing new possibilities for European trade, but went further, writing that "an even more long-term opportunity for Europe" was the "imminent loss of *moral leadership* by the US." [Emphasis in the original.]

This explains why Schulz is seen as a suitable candidate for the implementation of this policy. He has spoken out relatively clearly against Trump and now plans to exploit the widespread indignation over Trump's racist and authoritarian policies to advance the interests of German imperialism, presenting Germany as the embodiment of "Western values."

Chancellor Angela Merkel, who worked very closely with former European Parliament President Schulz, has also distanced herself from Trump, but her own party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is deeply divided on the issue of refugee policy and nationalism. Its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), is cooperating with ultranationalist parties such as Hungary's Fidesz and has expressed some sympathy for Trump.

In order to regain lost SPD voters, Schulz wants to promote "social justice" in the upcoming election campaign and turn to people who "work hard." But apart from a few rhetorical thrusts against tax evaders and highly paid executives such as former VW boss Martin Winterkorn, he has nothing to offer. Such hollow denunciations do not cost him anything, and Winterkorn is no longer in office. At the same time, Schulz defends the anti-working class Hartz laws as "necessary reforms," and is not even prepared to commit himself to an increase in the meagre minimum wage, on which it is impossible to live.

He has little chance of winning back the millions of former SPD voters who, as a consequence of SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010, now spend their lives trapped in precarious, low-paid jobs. His appeal is to well-paid union and party officials and sections of the middle class, who are quite prepared to fall in behind Germany's great power ambitions in exchange for a few moralistic phrases. Schulz would be prepared to govern in a coalition with the Greens and the Left Party.

Last Saturday, the printed version of *Der Spiegel* published a long article, which, underpinned by economic data, bluntly formulated the foreign policy objectives of German imperialism. The article projected

a "radical break" in transatlantic relations between Germany and the US and "perhaps even the transformation from friend to foe." It went on to advise "preparing countermeasures" and "seeking out allies, in Asia, for example."

According to the article, the federal government is planning a "chain of trade agreements" that "give German companies access to the boom region in the Pacific." The article specifically touts the prospect of "better relations with China," adding that, "A new Berlin-Beijing axis could at least partially replace the old transatlantic order."

This perspective is a mixture of megalomania and delusion. Contrary to the line taken by much of the German media, the US under Trump does not plan to withdraw into isolationism, but rather to replace economic methods of imperialist dominance with naked military force.

Barely noted by the German media is the fact that when visiting the Pentagon, Trump signed not only an executive order banning migrants, but also an executive order for a "great rebuilding of the Armed Forces." Following the Obama administration's decision to upgrade the US nuclear weapons program at a total cost of \$1 trillion, Trump's "rebuilding" will increase annual military spending from \$600 to \$700 billion.

Leading representatives of the Trump administration have threatened China with a blockade of the islands in the South China Sea—an action that would amount to a declaration of war. Trump's government will not remain idle if Germany and Europe seek to move more aggressively into Asia at the expense of the US.

The foreign policy outlined by Gabriel and Schulz and the transformation of the US "from friend to foe" set the course for a military confrontation with the world's biggest nuclear power, which Germany fought in two world wars in the last century.



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