

Social Democrat Steinmeier is elected president of Germany

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14 February 2017

Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) was elected as the new president of Germany by the Federal Assembly on Sunday. After stepping down as foreign minister in the coalition government headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Steinmeier will succeed the retiring head of state, Joachim Gauck, in Bellevue Castle.

The election result shows that, despite the large majority achieved by Steinmeier and the many statements congratulating him, the German party system is breaking down under conditions of growing international political and economic instability.

In the first ballot, Steinmeier was elected with 75 percent of the vote, but he received only 931 of the 1,239 valid votes, many fewer than expected. If all the electors of the five parties that officially support Steinmeier—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Green Party—had voted for him, he would have received 1,106 votes.

Christoph Butterwegge, a poverty researcher who stood in the election as the Left Party candidate, received more votes than expected. He received a total of 128 votes even though the Left Party only has 95 electors. The candidate of the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD), Albrecht Glaser, received 42 votes, at least seven of which came from representatives of other parties. In addition, 103 members of the Federal Assembly abstained.

The election of Steinmeier marks a political turning point. At no time since the end of the Second World War has a president held such a prominent and key position in the state apparatus prior to taking office. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote: “Steinmeier stands for the political class of this

country. One of his predecessors, Horst Köhler, who was an outsider, failed because he didn’t know anyone in Berlin politics. Steinmeier knows everyone.”

More than any other politician of the past 20 years, the SPD politician personifies the rightward shift in German politics. As head of the chancellor’s office under Merkel’s predecessor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), Steinmeier played a significant role in working out the infamous Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws, which drove millions into bitter poverty. Between 2005 and 2009, and then again between 2013 and 2017, he served as foreign minister of the grand coalition under Merkel. In this role, he prepared the way for the shift in German politics to a more aggressive foreign policy.

Exactly three years ago, at the Munich Security Conference, Steinmeier, Gauck and Defence Minister von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) announced the return of German militarism. Germany must “be prepared to intervene earlier, more decisively and substantially in foreign and security policy,” said Steinmeier. He pursued this program by supporting the right-wing putsch in Ukraine, the build-up of NATO against Russia, and the military deployments in Mali, Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, the foreign ministry led a so-called review process of German foreign policy under his direction, in order to combat the continual resistance to war and militarism. It published a strategy paper, which advocated the militarization of Europe under German dominance. In countless speeches and articles, Steinmeier himself has repeatedly referred to “Germany’s new global role.”

In his short address after the election, Steinmeier made it clear that he would pursue this project further as president. He said that in stormy times, when the world appears to have gone “off the rails,” everything

depends on the “cement that holds society together.” Germany is starting to be seen “by many people all over the world as an anchor of hope,” he claimed. “If the foundation topples somewhere else, then we must stand even more firmly on this foundation ... Let’s be bold. Then I will not be anxious about the future,” he told the members of the Federal Assembly.

Steinmeier left no room for doubt that by being “bold” he meant the continued pursuit of war, which will inevitably go along with massive attacks on the working class within the country.

“When Johannes Rau stood here, unified Germany saw itself confronted with difficult foreign policy decisions in the Balkans, with new responsibilities in the world, which have grown even greater today and which we have accepted,” he said. Today is once again “a difficult time—but ladies and gentlemen, this time is ours! We bear responsibility. And if we want to make others bold, then we need to be bold ourselves!”

The presidency, which has had a primarily representative function after the experiences of the Weimar Republic, will have to be transformed once again into a political planning and power centre in order to implement these new great power fantasies.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that Steinmeier will bring “a complete team of his own into Bellevue Castle, with whom he has worked for a long time and to whom he is bound by friendship.” This team includes Secretary of State Stephan Steinlein, and previous head of planning in the SPD faction, Oliver Schmolke, as well as “the 30-year-old speech writer Wolfgang Silberman, a graduate of Oxford and Harvard, and Thomas Bagger, the previous head of planning in the foreign office.”



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