

Germany's Social Democrats prepare to suppress popular opposition

Marianne Arens and Peter Schwarz
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After its worst election defeat in the post-World War II period, Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) has wasted no time in repositioning itself. On election night, the SPD announced that it was not interested in the continuation of the grand coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union and would go into opposition. Three days later, the SPD parliamentary group elected former labour minister Andrea Nahles as its leader.

Nahles will thereby become the new guiding figure within the SPD. The parliamentary group leadership offers her more opportunities for political influence than the party leader, although there is much to suggest that she will also be the successor to Martin Schulz in the latter position. Schulz's influence is rapidly diminishing after he headed up the SPD's worst election result, with 20.5 percent of the vote, since 1945. The only reason he has not been immediately removed is that the party elected him unanimously as leader in March.

The SPD's decisions to go into opposition and choose Nahles have a clear political content. The issue at stake is not a "process of renewal," a "combative role in the opposition" or challenging the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), as Nahles and the SPD have publicly claimed. As the largest opposition party, the SPD will assume the task of suppressing popular opposition to militarism, the strengthening of the state apparatus and social cutbacks. In the process, the SPD is ever more openly adopting the AfD's slogans.

Faced with mounting social and political opposition, the SPD is exiting government to cover for right-wing policies that the party has played a major role in developing since 1998, with a break of just four years, and which the incoming Christian Democratic/Free Democratic/Green Party "Jamaica" coalition will continue. The Social Democrats are basing themselves on tens of thousands of bureaucrats in the trade unions, the SPD and the state apparatus, where the SPD continues to enjoy substantial influence at the state level.

The 47-year-old Nahles is better equipped to play this role

than almost anyone else. Unlike Martin Schulz, who spent the last 23 years of his political career in European politics, Nahles has at her disposal a close network of contacts both within and outside the SPD.

She is a member not only of the SPD, but also the IG Metall trade union, Attac and the central committee of the German Catholics. She was also for many years a member of the Denkfabrik (Think Tank), a group within the SPD that evaluates the prospects for closer collaboration between the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens. Angela Marquardt, Denkfabrik's head of operations, is Nahles' secretary in Berlin. Until 2002, Marquardt was a leading member of the Left Party's predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS).

As leader of the opposition, Nahles is striving to establish cooperation with the Left Party. "We now have before us four years in opposition and we have to reach an understanding in one way or another about our joint responsibility for our democracy. I am ready for that," she said in an interview with *Der Spiegel* after her election as parliamentary group leader.

In her various posts in the party and in government, Nahles has perfected the technique of combining demagogic phrases with right-wing policies. After joining the SPD at the age of 18, she led the Jusos, the SPD's youth organisation, from 1995 to 1999. She was a protégé of then-SPD leader Oskar Lafontaine, who described her as a "gift from God." Nahles was elected to the parliament (Bundestag) for the first time in 1998. In 2009, she became general secretary of the SPD, and in 2013 she became labour minister in Angela Merkel's grand coalition government.

She collaborated closely with the trade unions in this role. She bears responsibility for the Contract Unity Law, which effectively created a monopoly for unions aligned with the German Trade Union Alliance (DGB) and prevented strikes by smaller, profession-based unions such as the pilots' Cockpit, the doctors' Marburger Bund and the Train Drivers Union.

In 2003, Nahles publicly criticised then-SPD Chancellor

Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010, which earned her a reputation as a "left." But she drew no practical political conclusions from this, other than the promotion of her own career. During her term as labour minister, Agenda 2010 took full effect: Germany became a low-wage country in which 40 percent of wage workers labour under precarious conditions.

Nahles' own projects, the minimum wage, company pensions and the Contract Unity Law, were aimed at bolstering Agenda 2010. They were intended to dampen criticism without placing even the most minimal restrictions on the predatory profiteering of German corporations and banks. In addition, they sought to consolidate the unions' influence in the economy.

The centerpiece of Nahles' social policy is the minimum wage, which came into force on January 1, 2015. It currently stands at €8.84, so low that it is impossible to live on in any major city. And there are more holes in the minimum wage regulation than a Swiss cheese. The many exceptions target young people, seasonal workers and harvest helpers, the long-term unemployed, and others. Additional conditions have been added that further undermine the minimum wage.

It is a similar story with the company pension law, which mainly benefits the pension funds and insurance providers. Company pensions are financed through "deferred compensation," i.e., contributions taken from the wages of employees. Companies are compensated with tax subsidies, and the state pension has been further reduced. In practice, this kind of company pension contributes to an increase in old age poverty. Since 2006, the number of people who have to work after reaching retirement age has doubled.

Nahles' interview in the latest edition of *Der Spiegel* leaves no doubt that the SPD will continue these right-wing policies in opposition.

"We now have to take responsibility for our democracy in opposition," Nahles told the magazine. The SPD does not interpret "responsibility for democracy" to mean defending democratic rights, which it has played a part in systematically undermining over recent years. Rather, it means strengthening the bourgeois state's apparatus of repression. "It was right for us to demand 15,000 more police officers in our campaign," Nahles stated in the interview.

She adopted the tone of the AfD on refugee policy and advocated the creation of a strong state. "We are not naive," she said. "When a million people come here they are not all going to be nice. And anyone who doesn't play by the rules must face tough consequences."

Asked whether the state must be capable of closing its borders, Nahles answered, "Yes, because a state must be able to be strong. It is a force for regulation, organisation,

opportunity-creation, but also punishment and restriction. If that is called into question, it won't be good in the long term."

Nahles insisted on the continuation of Schröder's Agenda policies. In reply to *Der Spiegel's* remark, "The Agenda 2010 was a mistake," she said, "No, the Agenda was a necessary impulse for reform." She rejected the policies of British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn with the remark, "Things work differently here. In Germany, we have a good tradition of a culture of consultation, for example between employers and trade unions."

Above all, Nahles insisted that Germany has to stick to the foreign policy goals set by the grand coalition four years ago. Based on its dominant position in Europe, Germany should once again become a military power. To do this, she appealed for close cooperation with France.

Nahles said she is very grateful to French President Emmanuel Macron for "having presented this week his vision of Europe with a strong, constructive state, with a defence union, unified minimum wage, and a harmonised social state." Macron's "strong state" is seen in the permanent state of emergency he is maintaining in France. And Nahles' talk of a "harmonised social state" can be seen in Macron's right-wing labour market reforms, which have triggered stormy protests by French workers.

Nahles and the SPD are well aware of the widespread opposition among workers and young people to militarism, the strengthening of the state apparatus and social cuts—policies that all of the established parties in one form or another support. The AfD was able to direct this pent-up anger into right-wing channels with its demagogic slogans.

But there are millions who oppose the current political set-up just as much as they do the AfD and are searching for a progressive way out of the capitalist blind alley. The SPD considers its most important task to be maintaining control of and suppressing this opposition.



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