

# Political crisis in Berlin as coalition talks for German government fail

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The failure of talks on a so-called Jamaica coalition between the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), Green Party and Free Democratic Party (FDP), eight weeks after Germany's federal election, has not only triggered a deep crisis in Berlin, it also marks a turning point in German and European politics.

It remains entirely unclear how things will proceed—whether the Social Democratic Party (SPD) will declare itself ready to continue the Grand Coalition with the CDU, whether a minority government will be formed, or whether fresh elections will be called, which will drag out the crisis even longer. However, one thing is clear. The time when differences within the ruling class could be resolved around the negotiating table is over. Chancellor Angela Merkel's era is coming to an end. The political climate is becoming rawer, social conflicts are hardening, and official politics is moving further to the right.

Germany has long been a stabilizing force within a European Union dominated by economic crises, domestic political conflicts, and the growth of nationalist tendencies. It is now experiencing, as *Spiegel Online* put it, its own “Brexit moment” and “Trump moment.”

The cause of this crisis is not the squabbling over emissions rates, refugee levels and tax rates, which have dominated the Jamaica talks over the past four weeks, but rather the growing gulf between the parties' right-wing program and the needs of broad sections of the population.

Over the past four years, the Grand Coalition has launched a massive military buildup, imposed horrendous austerity programs on weaker EU states, and increased levels of poverty and precarious working conditions within Germany. This was the government's

response to the global financial crisis and the growth in tensions between the major powers following the election of Donald Trump.

These policies are deeply unpopular. The CDU, CSU and SPD lost a large number of votes in the recent election, which resulted in their worst result in 70 years. Nonetheless, all parties are committed to continue these policies. This is determining their behavior in the current crisis.

It is no accident that the FDP broke off coalition talks, and, as many believe, planned to do so long in advance. The party, which never enjoyed mass influence and relied on rich donors in big business, has always played a trailblazing role during major transformations in German history.

After the Second World War, the FDP stood on the far right of the political spectrum, attracted many former national liberals and Nazis to its ranks, and formed a coalition with the CDU's Konrad Adenauer. In 1969, the party switched sides and assisted Social Democrat Willy Brandt to become chancellor. In 1982, the FDP changed course again, bringing down the SPD-led government of Helmut Schmidt and governing for the next 16 years with Helmut Kohl (CDU).

The FDP is now returning to its roots and orienting towards the neo-fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD), which gained in the elections by profiting from the collapse in the vote for the major parties. Thirty-eight-year-old Christian Lindner, who has led the FDP for four years, is taking the party far to the right. The daily *Tagesspiegel* wrote that in the event of fresh election, he would “seek out the right-wing fringe so as to become a new kind of people's party through the national liberals.” The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* accused Lindner of abusing the exploratory coalition talks to “Haiderise” himself in the image of the former leader

of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Jörg Haider.

Lindner also calculates that he will win strong support for his right-wing program within the CDU/CSU. In the CSU, Markus Söder and Alexander Dobrindt are preparing to oust leader Horst Seehofer. Both represent a hardline conservative agenda. Angela Merkel is also under pressure from the right-wing section of her party, and it remains unclear whether she will survive the crisis politically.

Leading AfD politician André Poggenburg has already offered to tolerate a CDU-FDP minority government in parliament, provided that someone other than Merkel holds the position of chancellor and that the new government expands domestic repression and prevents refugees from reuniting with their families in Germany.

The SPD's politics are also shifting rapidly to the right. The party played a substantial role in reviving German militarism and, especially since the Hamburg G20 summit, has advocated the strengthening of the police and intelligence services. It did this in the name of a campaign against "left-wing extremism." The SPD considers its traditional aim to be the establishment of a bulwark against opposition from the left.

This is why the parties do not wish to continue the Grand Coalition. Although Chancellor Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) applied significant pressure to the SPD, the SPD executive agreed unanimously Monday to remain in opposition rather than enter the government. The SPD fears that a socialist perspective will find an audience if it continues to work closely with the CDU/CSU, leaving the AfD as the largest opposition in parliament.

The Left Party supports this course. It is responding to the breakdown of coalition talks by demanding new elections and offering to form a government with the SPD and the Greens, who were desperate to form a coalition with the CDU/CSU and the FDP.

No matter how the crisis develops over the next few days and weeks, workers and youth must prepare for massive attacks and an intensification of the class struggle. The *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), stated during the election campaign that the elections were a political turning point, and that all parties were working to push through "an unprecedented increase in militarism, the

strengthening of the repressive state apparatus, and social cuts."

The SGP, the statement declared, is the only party "that opposes the 'left' and right-wing defenders of capitalism and fights for the building of an international socialist movement." The fight to build the SGP and a socialist movement, in the US and internationally, is the urgent political task.



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