

Campaign builds for grand coalition in Germany

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Pressure is building in Berlin to form a stable government as quickly as possible. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier hosted a meeting on Thursday of the leaders of the Christian Democrats (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) to convince them to continue the grand coalition.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) is also advocating a new installment of the grand coalition. Several leading CDU/CSU politicians have put the SPD under pressure to initiate coalition talks as quickly as possible.

The German Employers' Conference, where leading figures from big business meet with top politicians, demanded on Wednesday that the parties come to a swift agreement: "Whoever stands in elections must be prepared to assume responsibility for establishing government," said Employers' Conference President Ingo Kramer.

The trade unions are also promoting a grand coalition. The head of the German Trade Union Association, Reiner Hoffmann, called for a stable government. The crying need for modernisation in Germany and Europe is a major factor in favour of a grand coalition, he said. Verdi trade union leader Frank Bsirske said he expects the parties to finally seriously begin exploratory talks with the goal of forming a stable government.

A new installment of the grand coalition would not merely be a continuation of the two previous coalitions which governed Germany from 2005 to 2009 and 2013 to 2017. It would pursue a much more aggressive right-wing agenda. The future government's policies will be determined by the global capitalist crisis—the instability of the financial markets, raging trade war, the crisis of the European Union, Germany's conflicts with the

United States, Russia and China, and the growing war danger.

The advocates of a grand coalition argue that Germany requires stability above all else. By this they mean a strong government capable of enforcing the ruling elite's interests at home and abroad with a firm hand.

As the weekly news magazine *Die Zeit* commented, "In these turbulent times in which the United States under Donald Trump is acting like a bull in the china shop of world politics and one European country after another is falling under the influence of populists, Germany cannot afford to be absent as an anchor of stability."

Stable relations are of the utmost importance, *Die Zeit*'s article continued, "whether the issue is the EU's future relationship with Britain or the further integration of the eurozone, the unification of European defence policy, the combatting of the causes of refugee flight" or "mediating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine or Saudi Arabia and Iran."

International advocates of a strong EU are also calling for a grand coalition. French President Emmanuel Macron called Chancellor Merkel immediately after the collapse of coalition talks between the CDU/CSU, Free Democrats (FDP) and Greens and told her, "We have to carry on." A crisis in Berlin is not in France's interests, he said.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras sent a text message to SPD leader Martin Schulz as he addressed the federal congress of the SPD youth movement, Jusos. He called upon Schulz to advocate for a grand coalition, which is opposed by Jusos.

The *Financial Times* went so far as to describe Germany as the "indispensable nation." The entire European project would be in trouble if Germany was

not “solid and predictable,” wrote Gideon Rachman.

Within the SPD, apart from Steinmeier, whose party membership has lapsed due to his public office, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and the right-wing mayor of Hamburg, Olaf Scholz, are the main advocates of a grand coalition.

Steinmeier and Gabriel paved the way for the return of German militarism. In 2014, then-Foreign Minister Steinmeier declared “the end of military restraint” and played a major part in the coup in Ukraine, which brought an anti-Russian, oligarchic regime to power in Kiev. Gabriel has campaigned tirelessly for an independent European army and a foreign policy liberated from reliance on the United States.

At a security conference held this week in Berlin, German army generals announced what they expect from a new installment of the grand coalition: a programme of rearmament that recalls the rearmament of the Wehrmacht in the 1930s.

In domestic policy, the SPD has also led the way in suppressing social and political opposition. With the assistance of the trade unions, with which the party enjoys close ties, the SPD has smothered all opposition in the working class to layoffs and social spending cuts. Justice Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) was responsible, among other things, for the Network Enforcement Law, which imposes strict censorship on social media. He works closely with CDU Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere, a hardliner on domestic policy.

This is the reason why the Employers’ Conference is calling for a grand coalition. The major corporations are ready for a new offensive against the working class. Siemens, Thyssen Krupp and Air Berlin are currently throwing thousands of workers onto the streets, without the usual social safety net.

However, the advocates of a grand coalition have a problem. Such a coalition is deeply unpopular. According to an INSA poll, only 22 percent of voters support one. In the recent the federal election, the CDU, CSU and SPD lost a combined 14 percentage points of the vote and received just 53 percent support. If non-voters are included, they obtained support from just 40 percent of the electorate. With 20.5 percent of the vote, the SPD secured only half the votes it got in 1998, when it returned to government after 16 years in opposition.

As a result, there is a great deal of fear within the

SPD that it will suffer the same fate as other social democratic parties and recede into insignificance if the SPD continues the grand coalition. The Social Democrats and other sections of the ruling class worry that left-wing and socialist ideas will gain influence if the SPD’s decline persists.

As a result, the SPD leadership is playing for time. The party executive will discuss further steps only on Monday. A federal SPD conference beginning Thursday will then decide whether the SPD should begin exploratory talks with the CDU/CSU. Only if these are successful would actual coalition talks take place. Finally, at least according to the SPD’s current rules, the membership would have to vote on the result.

It is now expected that the formation of a government could take until February or March of 2018. What all of the parties—including the Left Party, the Greens, the FDP and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)—want to avoid at all costs are new elections. They do not want any discussion to take place in the population about the future government’s programme, or allow critical voices to gain a hearing.

Representatives of all parties are exploiting the ongoing crisis to draw closer to the AfD. In the CSU, party leader Horst Seehofer is being besieged by Bavarian Finance Minister Markus Söder and his supporters, who are aligned with the AfD on many issues. The CDU right wing is also stepping up pressure on Merkel.

AfD parliamentary leader Alexander Gauland advised his party to adopt a wait and see approach. The day for assuming government responsibility will come, he said. “But we can do that only if we are on a level playing field with the other parties, like our Austrian partners in the FPÖ [Freedom Party],” he said.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP--Socialist Equality Party) is the only party in Germany opposing the right-wing conspiracy with a socialist programme. The SGP demands new elections in order to expose the bourgeois parties’ real aims and build a socialist alternative to capitalism, war and authoritarianism.



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