

German Social Democratic Party congress paves way for grand coalition

Peter Schwarz
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To understand the significance of the Social Democrats' (SPD) party congress, which began in Berlin yesterday, it is necessary to study the keynote foreign policy speech given by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel this week at the Körber Foundation's Berlin Foreign Policy Forum. The two-day congress has the task of aligning the 600 delegates and 440,000 party members with the aggressive imperialist policy outlined by Gabriel in this speech.

The Social Democratic Foreign Minister advocated a radical break from Germany's post-war foreign policy, which resorted mainly to diplomatic methods and relied on US military might in the pursuit of geopolitical interests.

Germany has "no comfortable place on the sidelines of international politics any more," said Gabriel. The European Union can survive only if it "defines its own interests and projects its power."

He explicitly warned against a "fixation on the law as the form for overcoming political challenges." He appealed for "political-strategic thinking" whose gaze is not directed "always to the horizon of moral norms and imperatives," and cynically added, "The era in which Germany allowed itself to have strategic ideas was quite unpleasant for everyone else." Gabriel was referring with his "unpleasant" remark to the extermination of 6 million Jews, the death of 25 million people in the Soviet Union and the destruction of large parts of Europe.

Gabriel's foreign policy, "without over-dimensional moral or normative blinkers" includes the use of overwhelming military force. But this was not discussed, or mentioned only on the sidelines at the SPD congress. There are two reasons for this: first, within the SPD, broad agreement exists on Gabriel's course, and second, the delegates do not want to discuss

these issues openly because militarism and great-power politics are deeply unpopular among the population.

Instead, those directing the congress agenda organised an "open debate" on whether the SPD should continue the grand coalition, support a minority government, or reject any form of government participation. It was a phony debate, whose outcome was predetermined.

In his opening speech, party leader Martin Schulz ruefully apologised for the SPD's worst election result in 70 years and—in one of the few honest passages of his speech—acknowledged that many people no longer view SPD politicians as representatives of their interests, but as part of the establishment.

He then advocated government participation. "We don't have to govern at any cost, but we also cannot not want to govern at any cost," he told his audience, and appealed to "the SPD's responsibility to the next generation."

Like Gabriel at the Körber Foundation, Schulz called for an aggressive foreign policy based on a German-dominated European Union and an alliance with France. "A strong SPD is necessary to make Germany strong and make Europe strong," said Schulz.

He threatened to throw EU states out if they do not submit to German dictates. The EU should be transformed by 2025 into the United States of Europe with a common constitution, he demanded. Member states who do not accept this federal constitution would have to leave the EU, he added. "Europe is our life insurance," according to Schulz. "It is our only chance to stay competitive with the other great regions on this Earth."

In the debate that followed, ministers, high-ranking party and trade union officials, and from time to time a less well-known delegate blustered about a "new style

of politics,” “content” (which was never specified in concrete terms), and “open and unbiased negotiations.”

German Trade Union Association leader Reiner Hoffmann appealed to the “comrades” to assume their responsibility and ensure a “government capable of acting.” In the name of all DGB trade unions, he advocated a strong European Union and praised French President Emmanuel Macron, who has launched a frontal assault on French workers, to the skies.

All of the delegates were agreed that new elections had to be avoided at all costs, because they could serve as an entry point for social and political opposition. This was declared most explicitly by SPD deputy leader Ralf Stegner, who is considered a representative of the SPD’s “left” wing. Nobody could wish for new elections, he said. “Then the voters will flay us alive.” He therefore appealed for talks on a grand coalition.

After almost four-and-a-half hours the “open debate” was halted, even though less than half of the registered speakers had been heard. The congress decided by a wide majority to initiate “open and unbiased” negotiations with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union on forming a government. The formulation “open and unbiased” was chosen by the party executive to keep the number of votes against as low as possible.

The congress subsequently declared its faith in Martin Schulz, re-electing him with 82 percent of the vote as leader. This was further proof that the party fully backs a third installment of the grand coalition. As Gabriel’s speech at the Körber Foundation made clear, its policies will not merely be the continuation of those pursued by previous governments. Instead, they will be much further to the right. This does not only apply to foreign policy, but also to the internal and external buildup of the state apparatus and the attacks on the working class.

After its election defeat in September, when it suffered its worst election result in 70 years, the SPD decided to go into opposition. But it has become clear in the meantime that the party is needed to enforce an agenda that is deeply unpopular among the working class and young people.

The SPD barely enjoys any support among these layers. But the party possesses a large apparatus of state and municipal politicians, and civil servants and trade union bureaucrats, all of whom are determined to

smother popular opposition. The SPD’s core consists of “80,000 office-oriented active members,” as a recent comment in the *Tageszeitung* aptly put it. “Municipal civil servants, health insurance directors, supervisory board members of regional banks, trade union officials, press spokesmen from state parliamentary groups, broadcast commissioners—in short: the backbone of the state, such as it is.”



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