

Germany: SPD leadership steps up pressure for coalition with Merkel

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The leadership of the Social Democratic Party is trying to close party ranks and pave the way for a renewal of its grand coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (both parties known as the Union) in the run-up to the SPD special congress on January 21 in Bonn. SPD Chairman Martin Schulz and the party's parliamentary faction leader, Andrea Nahles, both visited the state of North Rhine-Westphalia this week to secure the votes on Sunday of delegates from the most populous and industrialized state.

The ensuing discussion was intense, emotional and controversial, Schulz declared, following his debate with party delegates in Dusseldorf. It was "encouraging that in the exchange of arguments there was more unity than divergence." He had encountered similar thoughtfulness in Dortmund one day before and that left him "hoping we win a strong mandate at the party congress to enter coalition negotiations."

On Sunday, 600 delegates and the 45-strong SPD executive committee will vote in Bonn on a possible continuation of the grand coalition. The delegates are not bound by previous resolutions from state party congresses or executives. In the past few days, the SPD state associations in Berlin (23 delegates) and Saxony-Anhalt (six) spoke out against a renewal of the grand coalition. The SPD state groupings in Brandenburg (10 delegates) and Hamburg (15) voted in favour of coalition negotiations. The state with the most SPD delegates—NRW with 144 delegates—will not hold a formal vote in advance of Sunday's congress.

The SPD leadership has adopted an increasingly aggressive stance in order to achieve its goal—the formation of a new right-wing government with the Union—in the face of considerable criticism within its own ranks. In an interview with Deutschlandfunk,

Nahles complained that critics in the party were "deliberately talking down" the outcome of the talks so far. She then threatened, "I do not accept that. I will hold out against it and for good reasons. Very many successes have been achieved."

What Nahles and the SPD understand by "successes" is clear from the "results of the exploratory talks between CDU, CSU and SPD," published last Friday. Wrapped up with some hollow phrases about "peace" and more "social justice," the 28-page document calls for a continuation and intensification of the policies of militarism at home and abroad, and social cuts. In refugee policy, the Union and the SPD have adopted the far-right demand for a cap on refugees. The *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively covered the key issues raised in the right-wing document.

Above all, the swift implementation of a common European military and great power policy in cooperation with France is a priority for the SPD. On Wednesday, acting foreign minister and former SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel appealed to the SPD to live up to its political responsibility. "There are great hopes worldwide that the SPD ensures that Germany finally reaches out to France to renew and strengthen Europe". Everyone had "seen that the CDU/CSU, the Greens and FDP were not ready and able".

Sections of the SPD opposing the formation of a renewed grand coalition have no fundamental differences with this political course, which they have fully supported for the past four years.

In an interview with Deutschlandfunk, Frederick Cordes, the chairman of the SPD youth group, the Young Socialists (Jusos) in North Rhine-Westphalia, proposed implementing the results of the talks held so far in the form of a minority government. He was of the opinion that "this document could be a good basis if

you look at the section on Europe.” It was not all “bad” and the party was “ready to tolerate such a minority government.”

Behind the Jusos’ battle cry of “No to gro-ko” is the fear that the SPD could suffer the same fate as the Socialist Party in France, or PASOK in Greece, if they continue their war and austerity policies in a renewed coalition with the Union.

Referring to the SPD vote in last autumn’s federal election, a member of the Young Socialists declared in a video for Spiegel Online: “20 percent is not the bottom of the barrel, we saw that in France. Of course, we are afraid that social democracy will virtually disappear.” An official statement from the Jusos warns: “The last few years and a look at neighbouring European countries teach us that whoever paves the way for a grand coalition based on short-term stability risk their own political existence in the medium term.”

The same fear drives the Left Party. According to Left Party Chairman Dietmar Bartsch, if the Social Democrats renew their coalition with the Union, he “feared it would further damage the credibility of the SPD” and that was “not good for the country.” The Left Party did not wish to see “the SPD sink out of sight thereby strengthening people we do not want in parliament at all.”

The Left Party is also opposed to new elections, as demanded by the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), in order to fight for a socialist alternative to the grand coalition. Instead, Bartsch signaled to the ruling class that his party is ready to support a right-wing capitalist government at a federal level, saying, “Of course, a minority government is an option that can be seriously tested.” He also wished “that certain decisions be taken at a time when there is no government. There are enough motions and maybe it will also work.”

The Jusos and the Left Party fear that the SGP and a socialist program will win growing support if there are new elections or if the SPD continues its despised coalition with the CDU/CSU, with the far-right Alternative for Germany leading the opposition. In the federal election last September, the Union parties and the SPD notched up their worst result in the postwar period, with a combined loss of 14 percent of the vote. After concluding talks with the Union, support for the SPD has now declined to its lowest ever measured value, 18.5 percent, according to an Insa survey. This

means that only half the electorate would vote for the two so-called People’s Parties, the SPD and CDU.



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