

Germany: Why is the SPD youth wing campaigning against a grand coalition?

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The campaign by the Jusos, the youth wing of Germany's Social Democratic Party, against a new edition of the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats has provoked considerable nervousness in the SPD leadership, and in other political circles.

At the SPD party congress on January 21, the vote to begin coalition negotiations with the "Union" (Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, CDU and its Bavarian wing, the Christian Social Union, CSU) was surprisingly close, with 362 for and 279 against. Although the party leadership had unanimously solicited a yes vote, it could win only 56 percent of the delegates. Now it fears that the members could reject a coalition agreement, which has still to be negotiated.

At the party congress, Kevin Kühnert, SPD youth organization chair, was the main opponent of party leader Martin Schulz. Like Schulz, he too had previously visited the SPD state associations and campaigned for a rejection of coalition negotiations. Since then, the media has provided the 28-year-old with much publicity: he is extensively interviewed in the main news programmes, widely cited by newspapers and invited onto prominent talk shows.

The Jusos have continued their campaign after the congress. Under the hashtag #NoGroKo (No Grand Coalition), they advocate a rejection of the coalition agreement in the membership vote to which the party has committed itself. At the same time, under the slogan "join up, say no," they are seeking to attract new SPD members who will vote against the GroKo.

According to a report by *Focus* magazine, 1,900 new members joined the SPD within just two days of the party congress. Now, the party leadership wants to set a deadline after which new members can no longer participate in the vote.

The main reason for the resonance that the Jusos' campaign is finding in the SPD is the rejection of a grand coalition by broad sections of the population. A survey conducted by Insa after the SPD party congress on behalf of *Bild* newspaper showed that only 31 percent of respondents believed that a grand coalition was good for Germany. Half thought it was bad, and only 42 percent expected it to last until the end of the legislative term.

Especially in the working class and youth, the grand coalition

is hated as a synonym for social inequality, precarious working conditions, militarism, state rearmament and attacks on democratic rights. Under the previous two grand coalitions, the gulf between rich and poor has dramatically widened, German troops are in Asia, Africa and on the Russian border, and surveillance by the intelligence services and police is ubiquitous.

For these reasons, SPD members who reject a grand coalition fear that the party will suffer the fate of the French Socialist Party and the Greek PASOK, disappearing completely into insignificance, if it continues the coalition with the Union. Over the past 25 years, the SPD has already lost more than half its members and one-third of its voters.

Kühnert is appealing to this fear of ruin and the associated loss of offices and sinecures. In December, at an SPD party congress, he said that the young ones in the SPD had "an interest that there still be something left of this enterprise, damn it."

He always returns to this topic. On January 10, he told Spiegel Online that the Jusos were "sceptical in principle of an alliance of the Union and the SPD." This had "little to do with the results of the negotiations," but with "the fact we seriously lost votes." This could not "be swept from the table by the results of any negotiations."

In some of the media, Kühnert is now being compared with British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and US Democrat Bernie Sanders. That is not entirely wrong. Corbyn and Sanders gained considerable support by criticizing party leaderships. For both, the issue was saving the party, not breaking with its reactionary policies. Sanders, who had won 13 million votes in the primary campaign with his attacks on Wall Street, then supported the icon of Wall Street, Hillary Clinton, in the presidential campaign. And Corbyn, now leader of the Labour Party, is preparing for a possible takeover of the prime ministership.

Kühnert, however, does not employ the left-wing and socialist rhetoric that Corbyn and Sanders use to lure their followers. The slick political science student, who made his career in Berlin's local politics and in the Jusos, was elected as the Jusos national chair only two months ago. While he speaks in torrents, he says almost nothing of substance.

With him, one finds just as little criticism of militarism and

the imperialist great power policy being driven forward by SPD Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and his predecessor Frank-Walter Steinmeier, now federal president, as opposition to stepping up the powers of the state, surveillance and censorship.

Even in social policy, Kühnert limits himself to a few minimum demands that the SPD could not achieve in the negotiations with the Union—abolition of the groundless limitation of employment contracts, harmonization of medical fees for private and statutory insured and the like. This is nothing when measured against the social devastation for which the SPD has been responsible since the introduction of the Hartz labour “reforms.”

Kühnert's mantra is “renewal.” By this he does not mean a departure from the reactionary politics of the SPD, which in any case would not be possible with a party that has been a reliable support of the capitalist order for over a hundred years. Rather, he favours a kind of general overhaul while in opposition, to prepare the party to pursue its right-wing policies all the more aggressively in the future. Not least, he is driven by the fear that a further decline of the SPD will result in workers and young people turning to a socialist perspective.

That Kühnert is opposed to mobilizing a social movement against the right-wing programme of the grand coalition is most clearly demonstrated by his refusal to call for new elections. Asked about this by Spiegel Online, he claimed, “Whether it comes to new elections is absolutely not in the hands of the SPD. Here, the president has a say in the matter.” He added, for safety's sake, that the SPD would “neither shy away from, nor seek new elections.”

This is simply untrue, even if one disregards the fact that the federal president himself has been a member of the SPD for decades and has currently only let his membership lapse on account of his office. Steinmeier would find it difficult to resist a powerful campaign that appealed to the working class, and combined the rejection of the anti-working class and militarist policy of the grand coalition with the demand for new elections.

But this is what the Jusos, as well as the SPD as a whole and all other parties in the Bundestag (parliament), want to avoid at all costs. New elections would force them to publicly discuss the reactionary plans they are forging behind the backs of the population. In the political atmosphere of an election campaign, workers and young people could find their voice, and a socialist programme find support. In face of stark social inequality and escalating labour disputes in the metalworking and other industries, this is a nightmare scenario for the SPD.

Kühnert is even ready to support a CDU/CSU minority government to avoid new elections. Asked by Spiegel Online what kind of government model he wanted instead of a grand coalition, he replied, “A minority government is the most honest option.” But unfortunately, “this variant is vehemently rejected by the Union.”

He could not say more clearly that he is not concerned with

mobilizing resistance to the grand coalition policy, but rather with saving the offices and sinecures of the SPD. The fact that this also raises his own market value and increases his prospects of a future ministerial office is not merely a side effect.

Kühnert is also making sure he does not blot his copy book with the SPD grandees, emphasizing again and again that he is not demanding resignations. He could also live with the result of the negotiations between the SPD and the Union, he said at the congress.

It is therefore not surprising that Kühnert is also praised by right-wing and business media, in particular those who consider Chancellor Merkel to be weak and exhausted after 12 years in office and who are demanding a “generational change.”

Leading business daily *Handelsblatt* appeared on the day of the SPD party congress with a ten-page special section accusing Merkel and Schulz of forming a “pact of the fainthearted,” which would mean “four lost years” for Germany. Regarding Kühnert, it said, “You do not need to support a single substantive demand of the Juso chairman to feel sympathy for his mission.” He was, “the left-hand defender” keeping the Union and SPD from immediately going on to award the prizes “after their petty midfield moves” in the negotiations.

The right-wing magazine *Cicero* celebrated Kühnert as a “young savage” who goes “unusual ways.” He placed himself “as a dedicated left-winger,” but was by no means radical. “Rather, his style of politics is radically unconventional ... We need more with punch like that.”

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party calling for new elections to prevent a grand coalition. In the election campaign it will mobilize all means to build a socialist alternative to capitalism, war and a police state, and to expose the real aims of the bourgeois parties.



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