

Germany: Youth leader Kühnert seeks to save the SPD—and the state

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Last week, the leaders of the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) agreed to renew their grand coalition government. Since then, Juso (Young Socialists) Chairman Kevin Kühnert has been touring Germany under the slogan #NoGroKo (No Grand Coalition), calling for the coalition agreement to be rejected by the SPD membership in balloting that starts today.

His appearance on Tuesday evening in Berlin-Kreuzberg made clear which social and political interests, fears and calculations lie behind the campaign of the Jusos, and to which far-reaching social developments they are reacting.

Kühnert and the Jusos are not concerned with organising a political struggle against the grand coalition, let alone mobilising workers and young people for new elections based on a socialist programme. Their goal is to forestall the collapse of the SPD in a new edition of the grand coalition and to prevent growing popular opposition from breaking out of the official party spectrum.

“Maybe I’m even carrying more state-political responsibility, which other people talk about the whole time,” said Kühnert. “More worrying than 14, 15 or 16 percent for the SPD,” for him, was “that we now have a situation where the SPD and the CDU/CSU together have less than 50 percent in the polls.” People were “looking for actual or perceived alternatives in our political landscape,” and that applied “not only to the [far-right] Alternative for Germany (AfD).” This made “politics not only confusing, but dangerous.”

Right at the beginning of his speech at the event, which with over 200 was well-attended for a Juso meeting, Kühnert made clear that he has no fundamental differences with the coalition agreement, although this provides the basis for the most right-wing

German government since the demise of the Nazi dictatorship. “I think our negotiators obtained the best that was possible under the circumstances,” he said. One could also “clearly see that our party was the one that went into these negotiations with political goals in the first place.”

Kühnert also did not rule out further cooperation with the CDU/CSU. “The Jusos were never against talks with the CDU/CSU,” he assured his audience. “From the outset—since the coalition talks with the Free Democrats and Greens failed in November—we said we’d like to talk to them, we can talk about a toleration model” (that is, a minority CDU-only government “tolerated” by the SPD). And this train had “still not left the station.” One could say, “on the basis of this paper [the coalition agreement], okay these were subjects that could be implemented in the form of a minority government.” He believed that “the CDU and SPD in the Bundestag [parliament] could quickly agree in many places on questions of European policy. Also out of a shared sense of responsibility.”

In the following discussion, a representative of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) spoke out against the right-wing coalition agreement and called on the SPD members present to reject it. He addressed the question to Kühnert: As a member of the SPD executive, could he provide an insight into the secret rearmament plans discussed and did he know how the agreed NATO spending target of two percent of GDP, requiring an increase of the military budget by about €35 billion by 2024, was specifically to be achieved?

Kühnert’s evasive answer showed that he does not really object to the policy of militarism, increased state powers at home and social cuts. “Unfortunately,” one could “not present the discussion on the SPD party

executive committee...like in a left-wing plenum,” he stated cynically. What is in the coalition agreement was “not a clear commitment to NATO’s two-percent target,” but did mean “more money for armaments.”

However, the envisaged billions were “not for rearmament” but “for defence.” This differentiation was important to him. “If you maintain a Bundeswehr [Armed Forces], whether you like it or not,” you are “also something of an employer” and must take care of this, “that people have decent working conditions, which they objectively often do not have at the moment.” Rearmament was “something else.”

Kühnert may call the plans for the massive increase in military spending what he likes, but he himself makes clear that the Social Democrats are the driving force behind them. In this area of negotiations, the SPD had managed to ensure a “one-to-one link” in defence spending and development aid over the next few years, he boasted. This meant, “For every euro that goes into defence spending the same amount goes on development aid.” This was “a success for the SPD” and a “good point.”

Kühnert’s plea for the military followed his defence of the cuts and increased police-state powers agreed in the coalition contract as genuine social-democratic policies. “In essence” there was “still no turning away, especially from the austerity and sanctions regime of recent years,” he admitted. This applied, “to other demands as well,” such as the “15,000 new police officers and the like.” But one must “remain honest” and say, “Our election programme was not really a departure from this European policy and the 15,000 police were promised.” In this respect, it was wrong to criticise the coalition agreement “in the places where our demands are in it.”

It speaks volumes about the right-wing character of the Jusos that none of the members present criticised “our Kevin” from the left. The discussion revolved around the question of whether the SPD was doomed more quickly within or outside a grand coalition. Early on, an older SPD member spoke up and stated, “The SPD is f**ked. What does the alternative look like? If it came to new elections, could we end up with 12 or 15 percent?” Of course, “a grand coalition is always laden with compromises,” but “if you’re not part of it, you can’t change anything.”

The majority of those present seemed opposed to the

continuation of the grand coalition, but at the same time vehemently opposed to new elections. Kerstin from Kreuzberg, an SPD member for 17 years, declared to great applause, “Why are we constantly being persuaded that if we say no [to the grand coalition] there are new elections? I still cannot believe that.” Merkel had said on Sunday on TV that she was “ready for a minority government.” After all, she is exactly “as afraid of new elections as we are.” And President Steinmeier would “do everything possible to prevent these elections. Because nobody wants to see us at 15 percent at the moment.”

The new members present had apparently joined the SPD for similar reasons. Two out of the four who spoke up turned out to be officials from the Berlin Association of the Italian Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), which is also deeply hated among workers and youth in Italy for its austerity policies. Another said he was “still undecided” how he would vote in the membership poll. But he believed that “Europe and Germany deserve better politics.”

In the end, Kühnert promised the SPD members present he would fight for the “renewal” of the party regardless of the outcome of the membership poll.

The Juso chairman may already be dreaming of holding high party office; he would just as little change the right-wing and anti-working-class policy of the SPD as his predecessors at the head of the Jusos—including the former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and the designated SPD Chair Andrea Nahles. “I do not want to die in beauty and make no compromises,” he called out. The SPD had “proven” it could “make difficult, painful compromises.” After all, “no one has governed as often in the past 20 years as we have.”



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