

German defence minister confirms grand coalition's rearmament plans

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German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen made clear in a recent interview with the *Passauer Neue Presse* what the central tasks of Germany's incoming government would be. A new instalment of the grand coalition will launch a major rearmament programme and press ahead with the return of German militarism to the world stage.

The conservative parties and Social Democrats have already "initiated important reforms for the soldiers over recent years," stated von der Leyen. After the army had "consistently shrunk over the past quarter century," it can now "grow once again." However, it is not possible to "repair everything in a few years that has been dismantled and cut over 25 years." The "modernisation course" therefore has to be "continued tenaciously" and this is precisely what she will "do everything in my power to achieve."

Von der Leyen boasted of the "successes" already achieved during the previous legislative period. Since the beginning of 2015, "the average operational readiness of the main weapons systems [has...] increased by more than 25 percent." And in 2016, she "presented parliament with a €130 billion investment plan through 2030." She boasted that "steady progress" is also being made on "material for the soldiers."

The grand coalition's plans are comparable in scale only with Nazi Germany's rearmament offensive prior to World War II. Von der Leyen confirmed that the "NATO targets" are to "be achieved" by 2024. The parties have "written a fiscal target range into the coalition agreement that will put us on a path to get there."

Although there is "hard work ahead of us," von der Leyen is "confident that we will manage it."

In financial terms, the "hard work" amounts to close to a doubling of military spending. The 2018 budget

officially allocated around €39.5 billion for defence, equating to around 1.2 percent of GDP. To reach the NATO target of spending 2 percent, at least an additional €35 billion would have to be spent on the military annually if economic growth is taken into account.

As in her warmongering speech at the Munich Security Conference, von der Leyen left no doubt about the fact that the rearmament plans are aimed at waging war and enforcing German imperialist interests around the world. The German army is "the second largest troop contributor in NATO" and has assumed "major new tasks over recent years." These include, among others, "protection in the Baltic, interventions in Syria and Iraq, and missions in the Mediterranean." The soldiers carried this out "one and all with courage... A consistently better financing of the armed forces" is therefore "all the more important."

The SPD, whose members have until Saturday to vote on the coalition agreement, will be the driving force in the grand coalition behind the rearmament programme. On Wednesday, SPD parliamentary armed forces commissioner Hans-Peter Bartels, whose annual report triggered the current wave of rearmament hysteria within the ruling class, declared, "The army needs to be fully equipped for the expanded tasks it now has to fulfil."

Bartels understands this to mean a large and heavily armed military force capable of waging major wars if necessary. "Every unit needs its own material. Empty structures are useless in an emergency. During the Cold War, 1.3 million soldiers in the German army—that would have been the size of the defence force when mobilised—had material for moving, communicating and shooting." Today, there is sufficient "equipment only for the German contingents in foreign

interventions and the obligations similar to interventions.” But this is “nowhere near enough” for “the masses of soldiers back home.”

According to Bartels, in addition “to the ‘out of area’ missions beyond the Federal Republic’s territory” there has been “a return to a focus on collective defence in Europe since 2014... This practically had no value...prior to the Ukraine crisis,” he said, but now, for example, “NATO’s intervention force NRF is seriously called upon.” No “European NATO partner in Eastern Europe should have to fear being militarily threatened or put under pressure by their large neighbour.”

Bartels and the SPD know full well that in Eastern Europe, it is not Russia, but NATO that is the aggressor. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than 25 years ago, the Western military alliance has systematically encircled Russia. In February 2014, the German government, and SPD Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, joined with the US to back a right-wing coup in Ukraine to bring a pro-Western regime to power. In early 2017, Germany sent troops to Eastern Europe for the first time since the Wehrmacht’s war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

Bartels’ tirades expose the SPD’s real character as an essentially right-wing, militarist party of the state. In the interview, he complained that “in a quarter century of reduction,” numerous “weapons have been scrapped... With the austerity reform of 2011,” the army “gave away large amounts of material. 70 percent of the equipment was to be sufficient for the army. This means, for example, that six tank battalions on paper have to make do with tanks for four.”

From the outset, the Greens and Left Party have backed the revival of German militarism. If they are now criticising the government’s rearmament plans, they do so from the right. In a recent press release, Green parliamentary group leader Anton Hofreiter complained that the Defence Minister is not capable of “equipping the soldiers with basic military equipment. There is a lack of winter clothing, a lack of tents, and a lack of bulletproof vests.”

Germany is “involved in important UN peacekeeping missions such as in Mali,” and “in order to carry out these missions with the necessary high standard...our soldiers need to be properly equipped,” blustered Hofreiter. Mrs von der Leyen “has been Defence

Minister for four years,” and she should “stop going around talking and finally make sure that the soldiers get the equipment they are due.”

The Left Party’s Sahra Wagenknecht described the “doubling of the defence budget from €37 billion to €70 billion agreed in the coalition pact” as “pure madness” in an interview with the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*. But this was only to cover up her full backing to the rearmament drive. Since the army is now to concentrate on its obligation to defend the country, Wagenknecht demanded that it has to be “appropriately equipped.”

The securing of the “defence of the country” is a euphemism for the rearmament of the army and the development of an independent and militarist German great power policy. Harald Kujat, the former inspector general of the army, demanded a few days ago that the army has to be “directed once again towards the defence of the state and the Federal Republic.” It is inadequate “to turn the screw in certain areas, purchase more underwear, boots or tanks.” “A fundamental course correction” is needed, he added. The Left Party collaborates closely with Kujat, having invited him to their parliamentary group conference in Hannover in September 2016.

While the entire German ruling class, in spite of two horrific world wars during the 20th century, are turning once again to militarism and war, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei is intensifying its struggle in opposition to the drive to war. The SGP rejects the war conspiracy and demands new elections. We base ourselves on the enormous opposition to war in the population and fight for the construction of an international movement against capitalism and war. In the final analysis, the plans for rearmament and war being implemented by the ruling elites in every country behind the backs of the population can only be stopped by the mobilisation of the working class on a socialist programme.



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