Germany: The membership vote and the war policy of the SPD

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The Social Democratic Party (SPD) membership vote on a new edition of the grand coalition ended yesterday. Since February 20, 464,000 SPD party members have had the opportunity to vote by mail. On Sunday, the SPD executive will then announce the result.

The aim of the vote was not to ascertain the opinion of the SPD rank and file and then orient the policy of the executive to the outcome of the membership vote. The broad rejection of the grand coalition in the population and among the SPD ranks has long been known. In the general election in September last year, all the parties of the outgoing grand coalition—the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD)—were massively punished. As a pay-off for its right-wing, anti-social policies, the SPD vote slumped to 20.5 percent, its worst election result in 70 years. Since then, it has slipped by another 5 percent in voter surveys.

The real aim of the membership vote has been to provide a kind of pseudo-democratic cover for the continuation of the grand coalition, in order to realize a political programme that is even more right-wing than that of the last government, against the declared resistance of the population. To achieve this, the SPD executive has used the vote to conduct an intense propaganda campaign in support of the proposed coalition and has sought to intimidate all its opponents.

When the ballot papers were sent out 10 days ago, the SPD executive approved a three-page letter praising the coalition agreement to the heavens. It said, “The coalition agreement bears clear social democratic handwriting!” And further, “The bottom line is that our negotiation results [with the CDU/CSU] provide the basis for a government that puts people at the centre of its work—with all their hopes, desires, but also worries and fears. Only with the SPD is such a policy possible.” The arguments of the coalition’s opponents were completely hidden from sight.

At seven regional conferences, countless district assemblies and local organisation meetings, as well as in talk shows and media interviews, active and former executive members appeared and warned the membership of the consequences of a rejection. Former party leader Rudolf Scharping spoke for them all when he told the *Rhein-Zeitung* that new elections would be “a life-threatening risk for the SPD” and “bad for Germany.”

It is hard to better formulate the SPD leadership’s fears of the people and their determination to use brutal methods against any resistance.

This dictatorial demeanour emerges directly from the programme of the grand coalition, whose true core was covered up at all SPD events. Nowhere in the various conferences and meetings, and in the media reports, has there been any talk of what stands at the heart of the coalition agreement: the pursuit of great power politics, a doubling of military spending and preparations for war.

The word “Bundeswehr” (armed forces) appears more than three dozen times in the coalition agreement, and the decision on rearming the military permeates all policy areas. The entire thrust of the next government’s work is to be geared towards the return of Germany to aggressive foreign and great power policies.

The central chapter, “Germany’s Responsibility for Peace, Freedom and Security in the World,” comprises 20 pages and reads like a strategy document for a third grab for world power. The list of German areas of interests includes the Western Balkans, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Armaments production is to be massively expanded and specifically promoted. The coalition agreement states, “The Bundeswehr will procure what it needs, not what it is offered.” What is needed is “a transparent, effective and optimized armaments process.” How the doubling of defence spending is to be financed along with

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simultaneous tax cuts for corporations and the rich, as well as a ban on new debt, is not explained. Clearly, a renewed policy of comprehensive social cuts was secretly agreed.

Following the monstrous crimes committed by the German army in two world wars, and in view of the massive popular resistance against rearmament, the Bundeswehr had to call itself a “parliamentary army” in the post-war years. This was supposed to ensure the strict subordination of the military to parliament and the elected government.

Now the coalition agreement turns this control into a “duty of care” towards the military. It states that the Bundestag (parliament) assumes a “special responsibility for our soldiers,” and, “So that the Bundeswehr can properly fulfil the orders given to it in all dimensions, we will provide the soldiers with the best possible equipment, training and support.”

To this end, the “trend reversals in personnel, material and finances” initiated are to be systematically continued, and “in addition to ensuring the sustainable financing of the Bundeswehr, the necessary conditions are to be guaranteed for planning and financing security investments over the years.” In the future, a “parliamentary army” means that parliament must ensure the implementation of the requirements of the army brass.

The massive pressure the SPD leadership has exerted on its own members over the past 10 days during the vote is part of a political conspiracy to implement this militaristic program.

The SPD leadership even wants to keep the counting of votes strictly under its control. Unlike the first SPD membership vote on the 2013 coalition agreement, which took place under notarial control, no premises have been hired for the count this time. The ballots are being transported by Post Office trucks to SPD headquarters at Willy Brandt Haus. There, 120 SPD volunteers will carry out the count under the eyes of the party executive.

Another element of this undemocratic process is the opposition campaign by Juso (Young Socialists) boss Kevin Kühnert, who parades in the media as a spokesman for the coalition opponents within the SPD. Kühnert himself is a member of the SPD executive committee and largely agrees with the content of the coalition agreement.

The 28-year-old son of a Berlin civil servant joined the SPD in 2005, the last year of the SPD-Green Party coalition under Gerhard Schröder and Joshka Fischer, as thousands of SPD members protested against Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws—introducing massive attacks on welfare and labour rights—and the war policy, with thousands resigning from the party. For Kühnert, the Schröder SPD did not look repugnant, but appealing. He has worked systematically on his rise through the party ever since.

Even now, he constantly emphasizes that “regardless of the current differences,” the party must be united and strengthened after the vote. His nationwide “ no-groko” tour (No Grand Coalition) is not designed to organize a political fight against the grand coalition, but serves above all to raise his own profile. Like the advocates of a grand coalition, his primary concern is rescuing the SPD, which has played the leading role in implementing social cuts and the return to militarism over the past two decades and has repressed all working class resistance in close collaboration with the unions.

The WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) advocate the opposite view. We welcome the growing opposition of many workers and young people against the SPD, which is also manifested in its loss of votes and the decline of the party in the polls. The claim that it is possible to renew or reform the SPD “in opposition” is wrong and a deliberate fraud. If the SPD were in opposition, it would protect the CDU/CSU government from the rear, suppress resistance against it, and prevent all socialist developments in the working class.

Ever since the SPD agreed to the Kaiser’s war credits in 1914 on the eve of the First World War and bloodily suppressed the November Revolution of 1918 a century ago, it has been one of the most important political pillars of German imperialism. Today it is trying to take the lead in advancing Germany’s great power politics, military rearmament and police state measures.

It is not the renewal of the SPD but the construction of the SGP that is the task of the hour. We call on workers to break with the SPD-controlled unions and to build workers’ committees that carefully study the coalition agreement and develop the growing opposition to redundancies and welfare cuts into a broad political movement for new elections and against the coming grand coalition.

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