

German grand coalition takes office as most right-wing government since 1945

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Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Angela Merkel was elected German chancellor for the fourth time Wednesday, almost six months after the federal election. The formation of a new government has never before taken so long. Generally, a government takes office one to two months after the election.

Merkel was elected narrowly as chancellor. With just 364 votes out of a total of 709 deputies, she secured just 9 more than the minimum necessary. At least 35 members from the governing parties, the CDU, Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), refused to back Merkel in the secret ballot.

The poor election result and the long period required to form the government demonstrate that the new government is unstable. The main reason for this instability is the deep social chasm that has opened up between the broad masses of the population and all the political parties.

Fifteen years to the day before Merkel's election, then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder delivered his notorious Agenda speech to parliament. It introduced a social counter-revolution that has been pursued by all successive governments and has transformed Germany into one of the world's most unequal countries, with high poverty rates and a huge low-wage sector. The new government will continue this course, combining it with a massive strengthening of the repressive state apparatus at home and abroad.

The situation increasingly resembles the infamous conditions during the Weimar Republic, when parliaments were fractured and governments were unstable, while all of the bourgeois parties moved ever further to the right in the face of deepening social opposition.

For the first time, seven parties are represented in parliament. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the main opposition party, ahead of the Free Democrats (FDP), Greens and Left Party. The new government is

referred to as a grand coalition, but this is a relic of the past that no longer corresponds to reality. The CDU/CSU and SPD, which between them regularly won between 75 and 90 percent of the vote until the turn of the century and could easily form a stable government with one small coalition partner, secured just 53 percent of the vote in the last election. Their support now stands at less than 50 percent in the polls. The SPD in particular has lost support among workers.

The months of haggling over a new government, which took place behind the backs of the population, resulted in a further shift to the right. Merkel integrated her internal party rival Jens Spahn, who will now be health minister, into the cabinet. CSU leader Horst Seehofer handed the post of minister president of Bavaria to Markus Söder, who like Spahn is on the far-right wing of the CDU/CSU. Seehofer then assumed the post of interior minister in the new federal government and announced mass deportations and the construction of a police state.

Along with the chancellor, only 5 of the 15 ministers were part of the previous government. The SPD has distanced itself from its two previous leaders. Martin Schulz, who ran as the SPD's lead candidate in the election, and former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who led the party prior to Schulz, are not included in the new cabinet. The SPD ministers, like Finance Minister Olaf Scholz and Family Minister Franziska Giffey, are known above all for their right-wing outlook.

Although the governing and opposition parties are divided both among and within themselves, none of them opposes the coalition agreement, which contains plans to double military spending, massively expand the police and intelligence agencies, and continue austerity policies to ensure a balanced budget. The only criticism they make of the agreement is that it does not go far enough.

The AfD can take comfort in the knowledge that the new government has largely adopted its refugee policy.

The FDP has embraced the AfD's line and criticises the government exclusively from the right. And the Greens accepted policies during the exploratory talks on forming a "Jamaica coalition" with the conservative parties and FDP that the CDU/CSU and SPD subsequently agreed upon.

The Left Party also supports the new government's course. Asked by a reporter from NTV on the sidelines of Merkel's re-election if there were positive points in the coalition agreement, Left Party parliamentary leader Dietmar Bartsch could hardly contain himself. There are "reasonable things, no doubt about it," he said. "It would be really poor if such a long coalition agreement was all bad." Then, to the reporter's surprise, he detailed a long list of praiseworthy items.

Asked about the cabinet members, Bartsch answered, "I want to judge the ministers by their deeds, and I don't want to express an opinion yet about Mrs. Giffey. She is totally new. Let's see what she gets done in cabinet." As mayor of the Berlin district of Neuköln, Franziska Giffey made a name for herself chiefly through her hardline treatment of refugees and immigrants.

Many media outlets also view the coalition agreement merely "as the starting point of the new government, and not its end point," as the daily *Handelsblatt* put it. They are of the opinion that, in the face of mounting tensions with the United States, Russia and China, the government's rearmament plans are far too modest, and it is being much too timid on the issue of austerity.

Spiegel Online went so far as to accuse the new government of being "not a project for the future, but backward looking to a time when there were no refugees, no digitalisation, no terrorism, no globalisation, no Trump and no Putin."

In fact, the coalition agreement, with its doubling of military spending and strengthening of the domestic apparatus of state repression, is merely the starting point for a much more comprehensive militarist policy. The Agenda 2010 attacks on social welfare, the multibillion-euro bailout of the banks and most of the German army's foreign interventions were never included in advance in a coalition agreement.

Germany's ruling circles are fully committed to exploiting the "opportunity" of deepening global tensions to pursue a "dirty" foreign policy and make "Europe a global political actor," as *Der Spiegel*'s editor-in-chief wrote in the magazine's latest edition.

In the few weeks since the coalition agreement was made public, international tensions have significantly

intensified. US President Donald Trump has imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, threatened trade war, and fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and replaced him with former CIA Director Mike Pompeo, which was seen in Germany as a declaration of political warfare. The war in Syria is intensifying, and the British government is exploiting the mysterious attack on a former Russian spy to ramp up tensions with Russia.

At the same time, the major corporations are preparing a new round of attacks on the working class. Deutsche Bank and Postbank, RWE and EON, Opel, Siemens, Airbus and Deutsche Post have announced the laying off of thousands of workers and wage cuts, even as profits and managers' salaries rise.

These developments will determine the grand coalition's future policies. The government will respond to the intensification of international and social conflicts by resorting to militarist great-power policies and constructing a police state. The vast majority of the population opposes this, but this opposition finds no expression in official politics. The so-called opposition parties, no less than the trade unions, support the new government's policies.

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) was the only political tendency to reject the grand coalition and call for new elections. We warned that in the face of the deep-going global capitalist crisis, German imperialism was resorting to "the criminal methods of the past." We wrote that this "right-wing conspiracy, which is backed in its essentials by all parliamentary parties and large sections of the European bourgeoisie" can only be stopped "by the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme."

This applies with even greater force now that the new government has taken office. The deep crisis of global capitalism is placing bitter class battles on the order of the day. Their outcome depends on the building of the SGP and its international sister parties into mass socialist parties of the working class.



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