Germany: SPD elects Andrea Nahles as new party leader

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On April 22, a special congress of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) elected Andrea Nahles as the party's new leader. She succeeds Martin Schulz, who had been elected 15 months earlier and resigned two months ago.

Although Nahles was supported by the entire party executive and had only a pro forma candidate standing against her—the largely unknown mayor of Flensburg, Simone Lange—she received just under two-thirds of delegates' votes. It was the second worst result for such a vote in the history of the party. Only Oskar Lafontaine received fewer votes, when in 1995 he challenged and defeated the previous party leader Rudolf Scharping, who had the support of the party executive.

Nahles takes over the leadership of a party moving sharply to the right and in a process of profound decline. The SPD has been part of the federal government for 16 out of the last 20 years. It is responsible for massive tax cuts for the wealthy, cuts in social and public spending, the emergence of a huge low pay sector, and the return of the German army to international battlefields.

As a result, the number of its voters and members has halved. In 1998, 41 percent of the electorate voted for the SPD, compared to just 20.5 percent last autumn. According to current surveys the party is polling at 17 percent. The number of party members has dropped from 775,000, 20 years ago, to 440,000 today.

Consequently, there was much talk of "renewal" at the SPD congress, but Nahles' biography and political history guarantee that the party will continue on its right-wing course. She is proof in person that the SPD cannot be "renewed." The right-wing development of the SPD does not simply spring from the will of this or that individual, but rather from its unconditional defence of capitalism at a time of sharp geopolitical, economic and social conflicts.

Although at the age of 47 Nahles is relatively young, she is already part of the party's old guard. She has been an SPD member for 30 years and filled nearly all of the party's leading posts: chair of the Young Socialists (Jusos), member of the Bundestag, secretary general, federal labour minister and leader of the SPD parliamentary faction since 2017.

In the course of the membership vote on the party's coalition deal with the conservative Union parties, Nahles vehemently campaigned for a continuation of the grand coalition. At membership meetings across the country she backed the most right-wing government program since the founding of the federal republic, focusing on military rearmament and the continuation of austerity policies.

As head of the parliamentary faction and leader of the party, Nahles now has the task of defending the government and ensuring the smooth implementation of this program. According to media reports, she is on excellent terms with Chancellor Angela Merkel and the head of the Union parliamentary group, Volker Kauder.

Nahles candidature speech at the congress was as banal as it was embarrassing. She introduced herself by saying, "Catholic. Child of a worker. Girl. From the countryside." There then followed one empty phrase after the other. "We are tackling it, that is my promise," she declared, pledging that the "renewal of the party" would also be possible while participating in the grand coalition: "I will provide you with the proof tomorrow."

Nahles only hinted at what this "renewal" would consist of. She praised the coalition agreement with the conservative parties as a "giant breakthrough" that should not be "played down." She strictly rejected

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demands for the abolishment of the Hartz IV welfare scheme, a demand raised by her rival candidate, Simone Lange: “If we just say we are replacing Hartz IV or the Agenda, not a single issue will be answered.” Instead of debating Agenda 2010, one should debate perspectives for 2020, she stressed.

Nahles placed special emphasis on “domestic security,” which urgently needed strengthening. As threats to such security she cited people who “do not adhere to our rules,” as well as “the events at Cologne Central Station.” This refers to the events of New Year’s Eve 2015/16, which were blown out of all proportion at the time and used as pretext for a racist campaign. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented: “For Nahles security seems to be a problem that has to do with foreigners.”

Nahles owes her rise to the top of the SPD to the close network she has built inside and outside the party. This network serves to suppress and control any expressions of social protest. As labour minister, Nahles, in close cooperation with the major German unions, passed the Collective Bargaining Act, which imposes a strike ban on smaller unions.

Many of her old pals from her days in the Young Socialists now sit on SPD leadership committees and Berlin ministries. Nahles is simultaneously a member of Attac, the central committee of German Catholics and the trade union IG Metall.

From 1997 to 2007 she was living with Horst Neumann, a typical representative of Germany’s corrupt form of social partnership. After studying economics and social sciences, Neumann worked for the economic department of the executive of IG Metall. Then, on the basis of the German system of co-determination, he went on to advance his highly paid career by taking up seats on the supervisory boards and executives of various large companies. At the end, he took over from Peter Hartz as the personnel manager at Volkswagen, earning more than a million euros a year.

Nahles also maintains good relations with the Left Party. One of her assistants in the Bundestag is Angela Marquardt, a former leading member of the Left Party predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Marquardt is also the director of “Denkfabrik,” a coalition of MPs from the SPD, the Left Party and Greens.

The Left Party has welcomed Nahles’ election. “Nahles’ origins in the left wing of the Social Democratic Party and her commitment to the centre-left lead to a small spark of hope for a not inconsiderable number of people inside and outside the SPD that the party can return to its social democratic roots,” declared Left Party faction leader Dietmar Bartsch. Left Party leader Katja Kipping expressed her hope that Nahles “can halt the final collapse of German social democracy.”

The leader of the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party, Christian Lindner, also welcomed the election of Nahles. He would personally have wished her a better result, he said, and wished her every success in her proposed renewal process. “A strong SPD is a contribution to the stability of our political landscape as a whole,” he commented.

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