

German government rent by deepening crisis

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Just three months after taking office, the fourth government of Angela Merkel is facing possible dissolution. A fierce conflict over refugee policy between the conservative sister parties, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), threatens to blow apart the Grand Coalition, which also includes the Social Democratic SPD. This could also mean the end of the chancellorship of Merkel, who has been German head of government since November 2005.

CSU chairman Horst Seehofer, the interior minister in Merkel's cabinet, wants to refuse entry at the German border to refugees who have already been registered in another European Union country and whose fingerprints are stored in the Eurodac system. In the last year alone, this would have affected 60,000 people.

Merkel rejects this and instead is seeking a "European solution" to the refugee issue, which amounts to the hermetic sealing off of Europe's external borders, standardized asylum procedures being carried out in special camps and the distribution of refugees by country quotas. Merkel fears that unilateral German action will trigger a Europe-wide chain reaction, leading to the collapse of the open borders of the Schengen system, which would have devastating economic consequences and blow apart the European Union.

The CDU and CSU are independent parties, but they do not compete against each other in elections. The CSU exists only in Bavaria, while the CDU is represented in all other federal states. At the federal level, the two parties traditionally work together and form a common faction in the Bundestag (parliament). But in the past week, the conflict between them has escalated rapidly. "The Chancellor's fall, the end of the Grand Coalition, the end of the community of the CDU and CSU—everything is possible in the capital," wrote *Spiegel Online* on Friday.

On Monday, Interior Minister Seehofer intended to present a master plan on asylum policy, on which he had not previously agreed with the Chancellor. Its 63 points also contained the controversial rejection of refugees directly at the German border. Pressured by Merkel, Seehofer finally canceled the planned press conference. Instead, he met with the Bundestag members of his party, who closed ranks behind him. The next day, several CDU deputies supported Seehofer's position at a joint parliamentary group meeting between the CDU and CSU.

Then on Wednesday, Seehofer failed to appear at the regular integration summit with migrant associations and instead met with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, a hardliner on refugee issues. Kurz was campaigning for an "axis of the willing" between Berlin, Vienna and Rome to ward off migrants. Seehofer provocatively invited Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, a right-wing extremist from the Lega, for a visit to Berlin. Salvini had recently refused to allow the *Aquarius*, with more than six hundred refugees on board, to land in Italy.

In the evening, the CDU and CSU party leaders tried in vain to reach a compromise in the Chancellery. Merkel's proposal to take two weeks until the upcoming EU summit to strike bilateral agreements with countries directly affected by the deportations was rejected by Seehofer.

On Thursday, CSU and CDU Bundestag members debated for hours in separate sessions. While the CDU largely supported Merkel, the CSU delegates, as one participant noted, put themselves "three hundred percent" behind Seehofer. Panic also broke out among the parliamentary deputies. One compared the situation with the end of the Weimar Republic in the 1930s. From the CSU, the call sounded for a change of leadership in the CDU, in other words, for Merkel's resignation.

A decision could come on Monday, when the CSU executive will meet. Seehofer wants to have his master plan for asylum policy approved by them. He has threatened to order the rejection of refugees at the border against Merkel's will by ministerial decree. In this event, Merkel would have little choice but to sack Seehofer.

Efforts are still being undertaken to defuse the crisis. The CDU has asked the Bundestag President and former Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who himself is close to the positions of the CSU on many issues, to mediate between the two parties.

The conflict between the CDU and the CSU has revealed contradictions that have been developing over a protracted period. There is agreement in ruling circles that Germany must respond to growing global conflicts by returning to a great power policy and militarism. "Germany is too big to comment on world politics only from the side lines," the then Foreign Minister and today's Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier declared four years ago.

But there are sharp differences regarding the way such a policy is to be carried out. Sections of the CDU, the SPD, the Greens and the majority of the Left Party believe that Germany can only muster the necessary economic and military weight to "stand eye to eye" with the US, China and Russia in the concert of world powers with the help of the European Union. They therefore advocate enhancing the EU's military capacity, subordinating it to German interests, and subjecting the European working class to strict austerity measures. They support close collaboration with France, whose President Emmanuel Macron advocates similar ideas.

The CSU, a part of the CDU, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a wing of the Left Party, however, believe that the EU is too cumbersome, too dependent on majority decisions and, above all, too expensive to serve the interests of German imperialism. They look to unilateral national actions that confront others with a *fait accompli* and force them to decide, for or against Germany. The CSU and Seehofer maintain close ties with nationalist forces in other European countries. For example, the ultra-nationalist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is a regular guest at CSU party events.

When Austria's Chancellor Kurz spoke with

Seehofer of an "axis of the willing," he was not merely referring to the rejection of refugees. The term "coalition of the willing" was originally coined by US President George W. Bush for the Iraq war, when he flouted international organizations such as the UN and even military alliances such as NATO and attacked Iraq in an ad hoc coalition.

Similar disputes not only divide the German, but also the European bourgeoisie. In the UK, the question of whether the country's future lies inside or outside the EU has hopelessly divided both the Tories and Labour. In Eastern Europe, in Austria and now also in Italy, nationalist governments have come to power who are skeptical of or even hostile to the EU.

The escalation of conflicts with the US after the G7 summit—especially Trump's trade-war measures, which hit Germany and Europe hard, and his threat of a war against Iran—have further exacerbated the conflict over these issues. The dispute in Germany revolves around how to best step up the country's military capability, while placing the burden of rearmament on the working class.

On Wednesday, German foreign Minister Heiko Maas gave a keynote speech on foreign policy, demanding an independent German-European foreign and defense policy in response to "Donald Trump's egotistic 'America first' policy, Russia's attack on international law and the sovereignty of states and the expansion of the Chinese giant." The German aspiration to fuse Europe together as a military bloc against the three major nuclear powers of the world strengthens extremely nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies.

The working class must counterpose its own independent policy to the sharp turn to the right of the ruling class. The only response to anti-refugee politics, welfare cuts, militarism and the stepping up of state powers is the international unity of the working class in the struggle for a socialist program.



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