

German Social Democrats demand right-wing replacement for Merkel

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The German Social Democrats (SPD) hope that a right-wing candidate will become the new leader of their coalition partner, the Christian Democrats (CDU), after Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she will not stand for re-election as party leader at the CDU congress in December. The SPD argues that a shift to the right by the CDU would give the SPD the necessary leeway to regenerate and regain support.

Kevin Kühnert, chair of the SPD youth organisation, has called Angela Merkel's withdrawal from the CDU presidency an opportunity for the SPD. In recent years, many people have had the feeling that the CDU/CSU and the SPD were two wings of a party moderated by Merkel, he told the ARD morning show. That is why he favours a conservative candidate as successor. In this way, the contrast between the two parties would become clearer, he said.

Kühnert would prefer if the CDU/CSU gave a clear signal that it was "returning to conservatism in a broad way." He said he was convinced that many rank-and-file members of the CDU/CSU want this.

It is hard to say whether the cynicism or the arrogance of this reasoning is more repulsive. A further shift to the right by the CDU/CSU would be accompanied by stepped-up attacks on democratic rights and social programs and would lead to the inclusion of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the government, sooner or later.

The three candidates most likely to succeed Merkel are Friedrich Merz, Jens Spahn and Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer.

Merz embodies the amalgamation of finance capital and social reaction in its purest form. This Catholic from the Sauerland region takes an ultra-conservative stance on socio-political issues and is head of BlackRock Germany, the world's largest asset

manager.

Spahn, together with Alexander Dobrindt, the CSU's regional group chairman, is striving for a "conservative revolution" modelled on the extreme right in the Weimar Republic. He is friends with Trump confidante Richard Grenell, the US ambassador in Berlin, and with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who governs in alliance with the extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Kramp-Karrenbauer is Merkel's favourite. If she is elected, Merkel might possibly remain Chancellor for some time and continue the much-hated policies that have been repeatedly rejected by the electorate.

The election of either Merz or Spahn, which would lead to a rapid end to Merkel's chancellorship, and the continuation of the grand coalition in its present form, would have devastating social and political consequences for the vast majority of the population. But that does not concern the SPD.

It is not interested in "renewal," but rather in preventing a broader mobilisation against the political shift to the right at all costs. Both Kühnert and other SPD politicians emphasize that the SPD will remain loyal to the grand coalition to the last and that it does not want new elections under any circumstances.

On the ARD morning show, Kühnert, who had led the #NoGroKo campaign against the continuation of the grand coalition in the spring, said, although he did not assume the grand coalition would last its full term until 2021, the question was "who will find a shrewd exit option at some point."

Sigmar Gabriel, who led the SPD from 2009 to 2017, expressed himself more clearly in a guest article for the weekly *Die Zeit*. He assumes that Merkel will vacate the chancellery after the European elections in May 2019 at the latest and "clear the way for a 'Jamaica

coalition’ of the CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens.” Nevertheless, Gabriel insists the SPD should not leave the grand coalition of its own volition and should support it until the CDU/CSU has put together a new, more right-wing government.

“Simply running away panic-stricken from the government out of fear of the voters would not make the SPD stronger,” writes Gabriel. He openly admits that this puts the SPD in a “tricky” position: “While the CDU is on its way to personnel and programmatic renewal with the change at the top after 18 years, for the time being, everything must remain the same with the SPD. Keeping the government stable in order to give the political competitor time to renew itself, and then probably be replaced as a coalition partner: That is pretty much the most ungrateful and uncomfortable situation you can get into in politics.”

Nevertheless, Gabriel recommends his party follow this path. The reason is his fear of new elections, which he calls “an existential danger for the SPD.” In other words, the SPD is willing to pave the way for Merz or Spahn to become Chancellor and for the AfD to join the government to prevent new elections.

New elections would allow broad sections of the population to intervene in political events. The SPD, the CDU and all other parties would have to justify themselves for the policies of social austerity, state armament and militarism that they are currently pursuing in a conspiracy behind the scenes. The socialist perspective of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) would be heard. The SPD wants to avoid this at all costs. Not because, as Gabriel writes, it is “afraid of the strengthening of the right-wing populist AfD,” but because it fears a mobilization against right-wing politics, which the SPD not only supported, but decisively advanced.

All the social measures of the past two decades bear the signature of the SPD—Agenda 2010, the Hartz IV labour and welfare “reforms,” the raising of the pension age to 67, etc. The SPD has also played a leading role in the return of German militarism. Gabriel himself pioneered the view that Germany must see the supposed retreat of the USA as an “opportunity” to once again become a world power itself. And in refugee policy, the grand coalition has already adopted the AfD’s line, not least at the instigation of the SPD.

The coming weeks will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the November Revolution in Germany. After the slaughter of the First World War, millions of sailors, soldiers and workers rose up against the Kaiser’s regime. At the time, the SPD under Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Noske allied itself with the most reactionary forces in the military to defeat the revolutionary workers who aspired to a socialist society. Under the pseudo-democratic guise of the Weimar Republic, the SPD preserved the basis of existence of the finance and big business barons, the landowners and military caste who, 15 years later, then helped Hitler to power.

One hundred years later, the SPD stands just as far to the right. The time when it could combine the defence of capitalism with social concessions has long since passed. But unlike 1918, the SPD no longer has a mass base and is in free-fall. The growing popular repudiation of the SPD can only be mobilized into a struggle against the resurgence of fascism, militarism and war if it is armed with a socialist perspective. This means building a genuine socialist mass party of the working class—the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei.



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