

German Defence Minister to become EU Commission president

Peter Schwarz
17 July 2019

For the first time since 1958, a German politician will occupy the most powerful office in the European Union (EU). Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Ursula von der Leyen will succeed Jean-Claude Juncker as president of the EU Commission. The former German Defence Minister was elected with a slim majority by the European Parliament on Tuesday evening. Requiring 374 votes, half of the 750 deputies, von der Leyen secured 383 votes.

The election was preceded by weeks of conflicts, deals and backroom manoeuvres. The EU Council, the body which represents all EU heads of government, took three summits and several all-night meetings before reaching an agreement. But the deal by no means guaranteed a majority in the European Parliament.

Von der Leyen engaged in two weeks of intensive lobbying to cobble together a majority. She was supported by an entire team and promised everyone what they wanted to hear. Her candidacy speech, delivered in German, French and English to the deputies on Tuesday morning, sounded as though it had been scripted by an advertising agency.

She emphasised the fact that she is a woman and pledged to occupy half of all Commission posts with women. She declared her support for environmental protection as if she were addressing one of the mass demonstrations organised by Fridays for Future. She also promised an improved minimum wage and better prospects for young people. She expressed her sorrow at the 17,000 deaths in the Mediterranean and vowed to strengthen the European border protection agency Frontex more rapidly than previously planned. She portrayed herself as a fervent European who was born in Brussels and only realised that she was German at the age of 13.

The speech was directed above all at Green and Social Democratic deputies so that they could vote for her without being completely discredited in the eyes of their supporters.

It worked. In the end, the conservative and liberal party groups, along with two thirds of the social democrats, voted for von der Leyen. Although the Greens rejected her candidacy, many Green politicians spoke positively of her. Only the European Left grouping and the right-wing populists spoke out against von der Leyen. The national conservatives refused to take a united position. The outcome of the election could not be predetermined because voting was secret.

The election of von der Leyen marks a further shift to the right by the European ruling class. It stands for further austerity and an expansion of militarism and the police-state build-up throughout the continent and abroad. Von der Leyen has been a member of the German cabinet ever since Angela Merkel became chancellor, serving four years as family minister, four years as labour minister, and six years as defence minister. In these positions, she has enforced deep social spending cuts, a redistribution of income and wealth from the bottom to the top of society, and the largest increase in military spending since German reunification. Since she became defence minister, military spending has increased from €30 billion to €45 billion, with more increases to come.

In her speech in Strasbourg von der Leyen stressed that “Europe should have a stronger and more united voice in the world—and it needs to act fast. That is why we must have the courage to take foreign policy decisions by qualified majority. And to stand united behind them... This is why we created the European Defence Union.” She added: “Our servicemen and servicewomen work side by side with police officers,

diplomats and development aid workers. These men and women deserve our utmost respect and recognition for their tireless service for Europe.”

Five months ago, von der Leyen delivered a bellicose speech to 600 representatives of the political elite, the intelligence agencies and the military at the 2019 Munich Security Conference. She declared, “The most prominent characteristic of the new security landscape” is “the return of competition between the major powers.”

“Whether we like it or not, Germany and Europe are part of this competitive struggle. We are not neutral,” she proclaimed, and appealed for a more independent German-European defence policy to enable Berlin and Brussels to play an independent role in the coming struggle. “We Germans shouldn’t claim to be more moral than France, or more far-sighted on human rights policy than Britain,” she said in concluding her speech.

The true signal being sent by von der Leyen’s election to head the EU Commission is that the European Union will be expanded into a military great power under German-French hegemony. Her candidacy for the EU Commission, which came as a surprise, was agreed in one-on-one negotiations between Chancellor Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

For Macron, von der Leyen is acceptable for a number of reasons. She energetically pressed ahead with German military interventions in central Africa, where the German army has cooperated closely with France. Despite her push for a European army, she enjoys good relations with NATO, and can therefore keep the Eastern European states like Poland in line. Above all, nothing now stands in the way of the takeover of the top job at the European Central Bank by a Frenchwoman, former IMF director Christine Lagarde.

The German-French hegemony within the European Union, which will be strengthened by Britain’s departure, will not lessen the conflicts within the EU and the tensions between Berlin and Paris. Their attempt to dominate the EU will strengthen the right-wing nationalist forces in Eastern Europe that already enjoy a dominant political role.

Since Italy and Spain have been compensated with the posts of European Parliament President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the Eastern European and smaller EU states have been left empty-

handed following the allocation of EU top jobs. Only Belgium will occupy the post of EU Council President.

Bitter international conflicts with the United States, China, Russia and other major powers will further intensify the differences within Europe. Just this week, tensions between the EU and NATO member Turkey heightened dramatically over the discovery of natural gas reserves off the coast of Cyprus.

The burden of these conflicts will be borne by the working class through low wages, precarious working conditions, and pay cuts. Although von der Leyen was careful not to focus too much on this during her speech because of its unpopularity, the arming of the European surveillance and police-state apparatus, together with military rearmament, will be the main focus of her term as Commission president.



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