

Germany: The election of the SPD leader and the decline of social democracy

Ulrich Rippert
14 October 2019

Since Andrea Nahles resigned as chair of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) at the beginning of June, the party has been desperately seeking a new party leader.

Since Willy Brandt, who headed the party from 1964 to 1987, there have been a total of 17 leaders of the SPD, including four in an acting capacity. Following Nahles' resignation, no one from the front row has wanted to take over the office. The party executive committee therefore appointed three acting chairs, two of whom have already stepped down.

The final decision on the party leadership will be made at a party convention in early December. Until then, public candidate hustings will be held, along with a membership vote. If no pair of candidates or single candidate achieves an absolute majority, there will be a runoff election between the top two. A total of seven pairs of candidates are applying for a co-chair post (male/female) plus one single candidate are presenting themselves to the membership at 23 regional conferences until 12 October.

The SPD leadership election is being shaped by the deep crisis of the capitalist system. It is not only the US government that is exacerbating its trade war efforts almost daily. Brexit is accelerating the break-up of the EU, and all the major powers are preparing for coming economic and military confrontations.

In the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the SPD plays a key role in pushing through the rapid build-up of Germany's military capacity and the ever-harsher attacks on the working class. It was former Social Democratic Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, now Federal President, who declared five years ago that Germany was too big and too powerful to limit itself to a role on the sidelines in the crises of world politics. Since then, the SPD leadership has used every occasion to emphasise that German big-business interests require a strong military force.

SPD federal Finance Minister Olaf Scholz has pushed through a massive increase in defence spending, while at the same introducing one cuts programme after another in all social areas. This anti-working-class policy meets with fierce opposition in the population, resulting in record losses for the SPD in one election after another.

A look at the list of candidates makes clear that all those participating in the SPD leadership carousel support this right-wing policy. Behind the empty phrases about more "climate responsibility," "securing the future," and "shaping innovation" is always the same reactionary capitalist programme of trade war, social cuts, and military rearmament.

Olaf Scholz and Klara Geywitz

The favourite among SPD members is said to be the Vice-Chancellor and federal Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, of all people; 35 percent of members believe he will win the race. Scholz is running on a joint slate with the rising East German politician Klara Geywitz. He could fail, however, if he does not make it to the runoff. According to the latest polls, Scholz/Geywitz are only running fourth in the first round with 19 percent, behind three other pairs, which each poll 20 to 23 percent.

Scholz had already led the party last year as acting chairman and, together with Nahles, pushed through the continuation of the grand coalition with the CDU/CSU. He is a guarantor of the right-wing, anti-working-class policy of the federal government and makes that clear on every occasion.

One of his first actions as finance minister was to make the head in Germany of the US bank Goldman Sachs, Jörg Kukies, his secretary of state. He wanted to emphasize that the SPD is and remains the representative of the interests of the banking and financial aristocracy.

Scholz is a typical SPD apparatchik. He began his political career as a high school student with the Jusos (Young Socialists), where he made it up to deputy federal chairman. At that time, he supported the so-called Stamokap wing, which spoke about "overcoming capitalism." But like many Juso careerists, Scholz also very quickly changed his politics. Today he is one of the leading representatives of the right-wing party apparatus. At the time of the so-called welfare and labour "reforms" of the Hartz laws and Agenda 2010, he protected the flank of Chancellor Schröder as SPD secretary general. As labour minister in the first grand coalition under Merkel, he contributed significantly to raising the retirement age to 67.

As mayor of Hamburg, Scholz became known primarily for his law-and-order policies. As early as 2001, as a Hamburg Interior senator (state minister), he had introduced the forced administration of emetics to secure evidence from drug dealers, which was later condemned by the European Court of Human Rights as a violation of human rights. As mayor, two years ago, he was responsible for the massive police operation and persecution of those protesting against the G20 summit.

His electoral partner Klara Geywitz was secretary-general of the state party in Brandenburg, before she moved up into the federal party executive committee in 2017. After fifteen years as a member of the state parliament, she lost her seat in the regional election at the beginning of September. The SPD, which had ruled the state uninterruptedly since German reunification in 1990, lost another 5.7 percent compared to its poor election result of 2014; her coalition partner the Left Party lost 8 percent.

Above all, Geywitz has become known as a vehement feminist. She was one of the main initiators of the so-called "Brandenburg Parity Act," which requires all parties to run equal numbers of men and women on their electoral lists. After the last federal election, Geywitz advocated the continuation of the grand coalition and was a member of the commission which negotiated the coalition agreement with the Christian Democrats.

She defends the anti-social Agenda 2010 and Hartz laws on the grounds that the Schröder government had initiated an important growth phase in Germany. She stressed that it became clear then how important it was not to give in to pressure from below. At the regional conferences she has advocated a stronger state and a better equipped police force.

Other applicants

Another pair in the lead group is Boris Pistorius and Petra Köpping.

Pistorius has been state interior minister in Lower Saxony for six years and is known for his tough right-wing line against refugees and for the stepping up of the powers of the state. Two years ago, he presented an SPD position paper on domestic politics, the focus of which is the strengthening of the federal police financially and in terms of personnel. In autumn last year, more than 10,000 people demonstrated in Hannover against the new Lower Saxony Police Law (POG), which massively extends the powers of the security authorities and, at the same time, restricts fundamental civil rights.

Pistorius not only comes from the same SPD state association as ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, he has been living for three years with his fourth wife, Doris Schroeder-Kopf, from whom Schröder separated in 2015.

Petra Köpping is state minister for gender equality and integration in Saxony and is largely unknown nationally. She began her political career in the former East Germany (GDR) and in 1986, three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, joined its party of state, the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party.

After 1989, Köpping climbed up in the SPD, was deputy SPD chair in Saxony for ten years and was appointed as a minister in 2014 by the CDU state premier Stanislaw Tillich. The vote for the SPD—which has its historical roots in Saxony and which achieved just under 20 percent of the vote after the collapse of the GDR—is now falling towards the five percent hurdle required for parliamentary representation. At the last state election in September, it received just 7.7 percent. Köpping talks a lot about more integration and social justice, trying to provide a fig leaf for the extreme right-wing politics of Pistorius.

Also with a chance to reach the run-off are the pairs Christina Kampmann and Michael Roth as well as Saskia Esken and Norbert-Walter Borjans.

Michael Roth has been minister of state at the federal Foreign Ministry since 2013, where he worked closely with today's Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his successors Sigmar Gabriel and Heiko Maas, thereby assuming full responsibility for the aggressive great power politics upon which Germany has embarked during this period. He has followed a typical functionary's career. Joining the SPD as a student in 1987, he studied political science with a scholarship from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and then held leading party offices in the Hesse state association and in the SPD federal parliamentary group.

Borjans was state finance minister in North Rhine-Westphalia from 2010 to 2017 and as such, responsible for austerity policies in a state containing some of the poorest regions in Germany.

Another candidate pair consists of Karl Lauterbach and Nina Scheer.

Lauterbach is a deputy chair of the SPD federal parliamentary group and the party's health spokesperson. He played an important role during the SPD-Green Party federal coalition government, and thereafter in the dismantling of welfare provisions and the privatization of important parts of the health system.

Because of his previous CDU membership, Lauterbach maintains close relations with Christian Democratic politicians and is friends with the CDU right-winger Wolfgang Bosbach.

His claim to be a fighter against a two-class medicine is revealed as pure hypocrisy by his activity on the supervisory board of Rhön-Klinikum AG. The company runs 54 hospitals and 35 medical care centres, generating sales of €2.32 billion in 2009. When the media revealed that staff at the company are paid miserably and subject to extreme exploitation, Lauterbach wrapped himself in silence.

Nina Scheer, the woman at his side, is the daughter of long-time SPD parliamentary deputy Hermann Scheer, who achieved nationwide prominence when he opposed the SPD-Green Party federal government's military deployment in Kosovo, but at the same time defended the SPD. Nina Scheer has been sitting in the Bundestag (federal parliament) since

2013 and is a member of the Grundwertekommission (Foundation Values Commission).

Kevin Kühnert

A particularly cynical role in the SPD leadership carousel is being played by the Juso leader Kevin Kühnert. He rejects standing himself because he wants to continue his role as a left-wing chatterbox and fig leaf for the SPD right-wing. Instead, he is supporting Norbert-Walter Borjans.

Two years ago, Kühnert functioned as spokesman of the opponents of the grand coalition in the SPD and described himself falsely as a "socialist." In an interview with news weekly *Der Spiegel*, he justified his renunciation of a candidature with the fact that in the SPD the apparatus determined the politics and his candidacy would have "further divided the party emotionally."

"Even a party leader supported by the members must work within the frameworks that are there," he said. "Being against the executive, the parliamentary group and the apparatus won't work in a party. Nothing would have been more negligent than to produce massive hopes, which then after a few weeks lead to disappointment."

In other words, Kühnert's talk about a socialist development of the SPD is a deliberate fraud. He knows very well that the right-wing politics of this party cannot be changed, and he does not want to do this. He says himself, "In its DNA, the SPD is not a party where you can make a revolution." Asked by *Der Spiegel* whether he would nevertheless remain in the SPD, he answers angrily, "What a question!"

Kühnert knows what his role is in the fraudulent game: to provide a left-wing cover for the SPD. But the true character of this party is becoming ever more obvious. It is a right-wing party of state that fully represents the interests of the banks, large corporations, the secret services and the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). SPD Chancellor Schröder's Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws, implementing welfare and labour "reforms", have plunged millions of working-class families into bitter misery. If the SPD today speaks of "reforms," it does not mean social improvements, but social cuts, increasing state powers and militarism.

It is necessary to understand the reason for the continuing shift to the right and the decline of Social Democracy. It is a political process that is not limited to Germany. The Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) lost almost six percent of the vote in recent parliamentary election, in France, there is hardly anything left of the Social Democrats, in Italy they have dissolved into the Democratic Party (PD) and are constantly moving to the right.

The decline of social democracy is a result of the fact that the globalization of production has undermined any policy of social reform, however limited. It is impossible to defend capitalism and at the same time fulfil the elementary interests of the workers, the poor and the oppressed. As it was one hundred years ago, the alternative today is once again: "socialism or barbarism."

The party that the working class had once built, collapsed in 1914 at the beginning of the First World War. At that time, the SPD betrayed its socialist programme and, in the hitherto greatest slaughter of world history, sided with the Kaiser, Reichswehr (Imperial Army) and German capitalism. At the end of the war, when revolutionary workers and soldiers tried to dis-empower the generals, landlords and steel barons, in addition to the emperor, the SPD allied itself with the generals and bloodily suppressed the revolution. Fifteen years later, it persistently refused to mobilize workers against the Nazis, but relied on the state and Reich President Hindenburg, who eventually appointed Hitler as chancellor.

Two factors helped this discredited party regain its footing after World War II: the crimes of Stalinism, which drove workers back and into the arms of the SPD, and the economic boom that temporarily allowed capital to grant limited social concessions to the working class.

But all that is long gone. Since the early 1980s, working-class incomes have been stagnating or declining, while a small minority at the top of society has accumulated massive wealth and things are also going well for

affluent sections of the middle class.

The SPD bases itself on these layers. It is a party of the trade union and party functionaries, well-off civil servants and wealthy petty bourgeois who completely defend the interests of German capital, against their international rivals as well as against the working class. They fear nothing so much as a rebellion of the working class and youth. The more resistance to the consequences of the economic downturn and the developing recession grows, the more openly does the SPD call for police interventions, increased state power and dictatorship.

It is perfectly just that workers refuse to vote for this right-wing party. But that is only the first step. The working class needs a new party based on the international socialist traditions betrayed by the SPD more than a hundred years ago. This party is the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), the German section of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact