Germany’s budget for 2020: Billions for rearmament and war

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Last Friday, the German parliament (Bundestag) passed its budget for 2020, relying on the votes of all of the parties constituting the government—a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD).

At the heart of the budget presented by finance minister Olaf Scholz (SPD), is a massive increase in military spending. Five years ago, at the Munich Security Conference in 2014, the grand coalition announced Germany’s return to an aggressive foreign and great power policy. The far-reaching consequences of such a policy are increasingly reflected in the current budget.

The military budget alone will total 45.05 billion euros next year—an increase of more than 12 billion euros since 2014 (32.4 billion). In reality, the increase is even higher. According to a report by the German Press Agency, the German government has notified NATO of its intention to spend 50.25 billion euros in 2020. “We are complying with our international obligations. The NATO defence ratio is 1.42 percent,” Scholz stressed in his speech in the Bundestag.

Further massive increases are planned over the coming years. In her speech summing up the work of the government, chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) announced: “We will continue this step by step: 1.5 percent by 2024. The defence minister has drawn up a plan enabling us to improve our capability in the alliance by increasing our capacities to reach 2 percent (of GDP) by the early 2030s. You can count on that, ladies and gentlemen.”

What Merkel and the entire ruling class plans is a massive rearmaments program to prepare for war. In absolute terms, the target of two-percent of GDP, agreed by the grand coalition at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, would mean increasing the military budget to more than 90 billion euros per annum. This is a gigantic sum. The planned over-spend alone is about three times the country’s total health budget, which will amount to 15.35 billion euros next year.

In their speeches in the Bundestag, politicians from all of the various parliamentary groups spelt out the consequences for the German population in the next few years should they fail to prevent such madness by building an independent socialist mass movement against capitalism and war. Workers and young people will pay the price for rearmament in several ways—in the form of deeper social cuts to finance new weapons and as cannon fodder in new imperialist wars.

In her speech defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) was blunt about what was at stake: “If we assume responsibility in the world and are one of the countries that relies more than any other on free shipping because we transport most of our goods on oceanic containers, then it necessary to address the issue of free shipping and the freedom of sea routes. I do not believe that other nations will always take up the slack and send their soldiers to ensure this freedom. We have to be prepared. That’s the debate that needs to be carried out.”

Kramp-Karrenbauer had already announced last Monday at a German army base in Saarland that the government was preparing new military missions. “We would be able to undertake additional missions today,” with increased funding, she explained. On Friday, she introduced a proposal for compulsory service for all school leavers. What she is proposing, in fact, is the reintroduction of military service, which was suspended in 2011, thereby obtaining new recruits for the Bundeswehr and advancing the government’s plans to wage new wars.

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The parliamentary state secretary at the Defense Ministry, Peter Tauber, did not beat around the bush: “I am in favour of such a duty,” he said at the CDU party headquarters. He spoke as a “former conscript” and hoped that compulsory service would not only lead to improved social cohesion. He was also convinced that “the defence of our freedom could not be left to a few.”

It is primarily the SPD in the grand coalition which is pushing ahead with plans for Germany to play the role of military superpower. In his own speech on Friday, foreign minister Heiko Maas (SPD) bragged about Germany’s engagements in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen and other countries. He explained: “Anyone seeing this and who refers to Germany’s responsibility in the world must take note that in all of the crises we are currently dealing with, it is Germany which has now assumed the leading role in conflict resolution. I think that’s a good way to take responsibility in the world.”

The grand coalition’s rearmament policy is now so similar to that of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) that AfD politicians praised the new war budget. “The defence budget for 2020 will increase to around 45 billion euros. This is very welcome,” rejoiced AfD deputy Martin Hohmann. “Equally positive” was “the inclusion of the heavy transport helicopter” and the “announcement by the minister, that the equipping of the army at HIL plants will remain in the hands of the state.”

Hohmann was expelled from the CDU in 2004 after making a speech judged to be anti-Semitic. In the Bundestag debate Friday he went on to praise the grand coalition for supporting “the two-percent promise to NATO” and for promoting militarism at home. “The major public pledge made on November 12 before the Reichstag was in line with your intention, minister, to increase the public presence of the Bundeswehr. On a similar level is your determined action to allow free rail travel for soldiers in uniform, like policemen—of course in uniform; this question came up here earlier.”

The so-called left-wing opposition parties have not only failed to oppose the sharp turn to the right by the ruling class, they are taking the same road. When representatives of the Left Party and the Greens criticise the grand coalition in their speeches, they do it from the standpoint that the government is not doing enough to advance the interests of German and European imperialism against their international rivals.

“We definitely do not want to be or become a mere plaything between the major powers Russia, China and the US,” declared Left Party foreign policy spokesman Stefan Liebich. Due to the “current state of NATO…we should seriously debate here what it means for Europe and what it means for the European budget if we take this challenge seriously.” The government’s budget is “not enough if we really want to shape European sovereignty within the framework of NATO, as we have done so far.”

Green Party leader Anton Hofreiter demanded: “We need to invest more in Europe so that at the end we are not sitting outside when others are setting international rules. Then we would only be the recipients of these rules. Europe must take more responsibility and we must take more responsibility for Europe.” Germany must “help Europe to set itself decisive goals.” He said that “the euro should become a global reserve currency that makes us less dependent on the dollar” and “enforce Europe’s self-assertion,” in particular “in dealing with China.”

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