

New leadership in German SPD: Fresh faces—same right-wing policies

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3 December 2019

Norbert Walter-Borjans and Saskia Esken have been elected as the new co-leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) by a membership vote. They succeed Andrea Nahles, who resigned on June 3 after a devastating European election result. The leadership election must be confirmed next weekend by a Bundestag (parliamentary) party conference, but this is considered a formality.

Walter-Borjans and Esken, who had been in second place after the first ballot on October 25, unexpectedly defeated the current finance minister and vice-chancellor, Olaf Scholz, who ran together with Klara Geywitz, a member of the Brandenburg state legislature. The Walter-Borjans/Esken duo received 53 percent of the votes cast, the Scholz/Geywitz duo 45 percent. Voter turnout was a low 54 percent.

The election result is an expression of the deep unease within the SPD membership over the grand coalition with the Christian Democrats—not out of opposition to its right-wing policies, but because the SPD vote is falling ever more sharply in elections and polls and the functionaries and careerists who make up the bulk of the party membership fear for their future. The election results indicate that there is virtually no constituency within the SPD for changing the right-wing course of the party or the continued existence of the grand coalition.

Olaf Scholz, who has held leading positions in the party and in government since 2001—general secretary, deputy chairman and provisional chairman of the SPD; interior minister and first mayor of Hamburg; minister of labour and finance in the federal government—was the candidate of the party establishment. He had campaigned vehemently for a continuation of the grand coalition. His defeat against two relatively unknown candidates is therefore considered a severe blow to the party establishment and has been widely assessed as such in the media.

The claims that Walter-Borjans and Esken will pursue a different policy, embody a left wing of the party and reject the grand coalition are myths that do not stand up to serious scrutiny. The only thing that distinguishes them from Scholz

is the fact that, despite their advanced age—Walter-Borjans is 67 and Esken is 58—they have had hardly any impact on the public. Neither has won an election outside the SPD and neither has held high party office.

During the election campaign, the new leadership duo occasionally threatened to withdraw from the grand coalition. Esken, in particular, stated that she would support an end to the coalition unless the coalition agreement was renegotiated. But as soon as the election result was known, she rowed back. “We will discuss how to deal with it at the party conference,” she told the *ARD Tagesthemen* programme. She and Walter-Borjans did not plan “to go it alone,” but rather pursue a joint course with the Bundestag (parliament) faction and the SPD ministers.

Esken, of course, knows full well that both the ministers and the Bundestag faction, which is threatened with losing half of its parliamentary mandates in the event of new elections, are by a large majority in favour of continuing the grand coalition.

Juso (Young Socialist) leader Kevin Kühnert, who is acting as spokesman for the opponents of the grand coalition in the SPD and who early on pledged the SPD’s youth members to support Walter-Borjans and Esken, also spoke in favour of close cooperation with Scholz and his supporters. “Our opponents want us to tear ourselves apart. We won’t do them that favour,” he said.

Trade union and industry representatives are also pushing for a continuation of the grand coalition. The leader of the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB), Reiner Hoffmann, told the *Bild am Sonntag*, “Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans should do their utmost to support the government in the second half, to successfully implement open projects under the coalition agreement.”

The president of the Federation of German Industries, Dieter Kempf, warned in the same newspaper, “We can’t afford any protracted adjournments in Berlin.”

A review of the political biographies of Walter-Borjans and Esken makes perfectly clear that nothing will change under their leadership in relation to the right-wing course of

the SPD.

Walter-Borjans, who holds a doctorate in economics, joined the SPD only in 1983, at the age of 31, in order to pursue a career. Without ever standing in a public election, he worked in various capacities for the SPD-led state governments of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and Saarland. Among other things, he was a state secretary, government spokesman and finally, from 2010 to 2017, finance minister in NRW.

As finance minister, he was responsible for massive attacks on the working class. “They have cut the state budget to the bone,” the WSWS commented shortly before the 2017 state election, which the SPD lost, as the balance sheet of the government of Hannelore Kraft, in which Walter-Borjans was finance minister.

The state government demanded an extremely high price to relieve the debt of the 138 cities in the state that were under an emergency budget in 2010. The WSWS reported: “The cities have been subjected to rigorous austerity measures that have reduced all the services provided by the municipalities to the legally prescribed minimum. The result is social impoverishment and the collapse of infrastructure. In addition, huge sums of money have been cut in the cities and municipalities at the expense of the workers and residents, who are paying for the cuts in the form of reduced public services.”

The Kraft government, wrote the WSWS, “is responsible for an unprecedented degree of impoverishment, especially in the Ruhr area. In this still industrialized region, with its more than 5 million inhabitants, the unemployment rate is above 15 or 20 percent, especially in the northern districts. One in three children in the Ruhr area—one in two in some districts—lives in a household dependent on the minimal Hartz IV welfare payments.”

As NRW finance minister, Walter-Borjans was responsible for winding up the former state bank, Westdeutsche Landesbank (WestLB). He outsourced high-risk stock and business deals to a “bad bank,” thus imposing the losses on the state treasury, privatising the profitable parts and reducing the workforce from 4,200 to 1,300 employees.

In order to implement the debt ceiling, decided with the support of the SPD, Walter-Borjans initiated further austerity measures, including a reduction in public sector salaries.

Walter-Borjans owes his reputation as a “left-winger” above all to the fact that, as finance minister, he was committed to the purchase of credit default swaps, which contributed to the conviction of tax fugitives who had hidden their assets in Swiss banks. However, the conviction of a few black sheep did not change the fact that the SPD had already initiated the biggest ever redistribution of wealth in

favour of the rich by massively lowering top tax rates and introducing the so-called labour and welfare “reforms” of the Hartz laws.

Saskia Esken, who joined the SPD in 1990, was active as a local politician in Baden-Württemberg only until 2013. Then she was elected to the Bundestag, where she was particularly active as an internet politician. She is a member of the Verdi trade union.

At the beginning of October, the WSWS wrote of the SPD leadership candidates: “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... 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.”

This was confirmed by the election of the new party leadership. The SPD has long ceased to be a party that defends the interests of workers and the socially disadvantaged. All the reactionary measures of the last two decades bear its signature—the international war missions of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), the Hartz laws, the tax reforms in favour of the rich, the massive stepping up of police powers.

As a result, the SPD continuously loses support—from 41 percent in the 1998 Bundestag elections to 13 percent in the last surveys. It helps promote the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The replacement of faces at the top will change nothing, but only accelerate the party’s well-deserved decline.



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