

Germany's Christian Democrats close ranks with the far-right Alternative for Germany

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Nine months before the next federal election, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is cozying up to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). This is the issue at the heart of the government crisis in the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt.

The crisis is not limited to a few right-wing troublemakers in a relatively insignificant CDU state association, which represents only three percent of delegates at CDU federal conferences. Rather, the leadership of the federal party has indicated its readiness as well to openly cooperate with the AfD.

Neither the current CDU party chairperson Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, nor Secretary General Paul Ziemiak have criticised the CDU parliamentary faction in Saxony-Anhalt, which insists on its right to ally itself with the AfD against the state coalition government of which the CDU is a part. Friedrich Merz, one of the three candidates for the post of CDU party chairman and chancellor candidate, has gone so far as to publicly back the state CDU.

The SPD and the Greens also share direct responsibility for the rehabilitation of the AfD, which is hated by broad sections of the population and has been weakened by internal conflicts in recent months. After the 2016 state elections, the SPD and Greens formed a so-called Kenya coalition with the CDU (based on the party colours of all 3 parties) and presented it as a "bulwark against the right," i.e. against the AfD, which emerged from the state election in second place with 24.3 percent of the vote.

Now it is clear that far from being a "bulwark against the right" the Kenya coalition is just the opposite; it is in fact a bulwark for the right. The coalition has shielded the AfD from criticism from the left and de facto implemented its political program: arming the police, deporting refugees and decimating social gains in a state that is top of the list in Germany in terms of poverty and unemployment. Now those in the CDU who sympathise with the AfD, and who never made a secret of their standpoint, feel strong enough to take the offensive.

The crisis in Saxony-Anhalt was ignited by a minor issue, the increase of the monthly broadcasting fee by 86 cents to 18.36 euros. The increase is part of the federal media treaty, which requires that all German states agree to the increase in order for it to come into force at the beginning of January.

The CDU faction in the Magdeburg state parliament insisted on rejecting the increase, which other federal states—including those governed by the CDU—had already agreed to. The Saxony-Anhalt CDU justified its rejection of the increase by citing a clause in the

coalition agreement that advocated the "stability of contributions." But this was an obvious pretext, since similar formulations can be found in the coalition agreements of other states, which approved the media treaty on the grounds that this was the first fee increase since 2009 and therefore merely an adjustment for inflation.

The Magdeburg CDU faction was well aware it could only prevent the increase with the support of the AfD, which also rejects the increase, while the SPD and the Greens support it. The increase in the broadcasting fee was therefore clearly a pretext to justify cooperation with the AfD.

The premier of Saxony-Anhalt Reiner Haseloff (CDU) tried to maintain the coalition with various manoeuvres and delaying tactics. Finally, last Friday, Holger Stahlknecht, the state Interior Minister and CDU chairman, made a stand against Haseloff. In an interview with the *Magdeburger Volksstimme*, Stahlknecht declared that the party's rejection of the fee was "not negotiable": "The CDU will not give up its position. The CDU state executive agreed this unanimously on Monday evening. The party stands by the faction without any ifs and buts. We are lining up together."

In the interview, Stahlknecht also made clear that he was not concerned about the financial burden of the broadcasting fee, which is levied on every household and is especially hard for low-income earners. Instead, he attacked the orientation of the public media, which he accused of "moralising on behalf of an intellectual minority" and of too much political correctness. As Interior Minister during the refugee crisis, he had seen citizens expressing concern "whether integration would succeed," and "who were then brandmarked as right-wing." In fact, this is the type of language associated with the AfD.

Asked by the *Magdeburger Volksstimme* what would happen if the coalition collapsed next week, Stahlknecht insisted: "Once again, we are sticking to our position. The ball is now in the court of the SPD and Greens." Should they leave the government, Stahlknecht said, "this would result in a CDU minority government." Such a minority government would rely on the AfD not only regarding the broadcasting fee, but also on other issues. The AfD immediately declared its willingness to cooperate.

Prime Minister Haseloff reacted to the interview by dismissing Stahlknecht, who has been head of the Interior Ministry since 2011. Stahlknecht then announced his resignation as state party chairman on Tuesday.

For some considerable time, there was no reaction from the CDU headquarters in Berlin. Eventually both CDU party chairwoman

Kramp-Karrenbauer and secretary general Ziemiak reacted by placing responsibility on the SPD and the Greens, which now had to “be aware of their political responsibility in the state.” The candidate for party chair, Merz openly expressed his solidarity with Stahlknecht, declaring that the planned increase in contributions could be viewed critically, and that it was “completely unimportant what the AfD thought about the matter.”

Stahlknecht’s resignation did not resolve the crisis. Both the parliamentary group and the state party continue to reject the fee increase and Stahlknecht enjoys considerable sympathy within the party. His interview remains on the social media channel of the state CDU, and on Facebook he was hailed by hundreds of supporters as a “straightforward” and “steadfast” “politician with backbone.”

Unable to change the position of his own party, Prime Minister Haseloff finally decided to cancel the vote on the fee increase in the state parliament, meaning that the federal media treaty, which requires unanimity of all the states, will not come into force in January. While the CDU and the AfD have not formally joined forces to vote it down, the AfD got what it wanted.

The orientation of the Saxony-Anhalt CDU towards the AfD is not new. Members of the party’s parliamentary faction have repeatedly spoken out publicly in favour of cooperation with the right-wing extremist party, which in Saxony-Anhalt is led by representatives of the neo-Nazi “Wing.”

In the summer of 2019, deputy CDU faction leaders Ulrich Thomas and Lars-Jörn Zimmer wrote a “memorandum” calling for a coalition with the AfD. Voters for the CDU and AfD pursued similar goals, the memo argued and then lamented in the typical manner of the AfD “uncontrolled migration” and an “increase in brutal criminality.” It then continued: “It must be possible again to reconcile the social with the national”—an unmistakable allusion to National Socialism, as Hitler’s party was officially called.

At the beginning of this year, the CDU nominated Robert Möritz, a well-known neo-Nazi, who has never concealed his views and who was also on the board of the CDU district association of Anhalt-Bitterfeld, as candidate in a local election. When his far-right past came to light, he was defended not only by Sven Schulze, secretary general of the state CDU, but also by Interior Minister Stahlknecht.

Stahlknecht has repeatedly attracted attention with his right-wing inclinations. One year ago, he wanted to appoint the chairman of the police union Rainer Wendt as state secretary. Wendt is a key figure for the extreme right. As Minister of the Interior, Stahlknecht was also responsible for the fact that the synagogue in Halle was completely unprotected when the neo-fascist terrorist Stephan Balliet attempted to storm the building on the holiday of Yom Kippur 2019. Only a strong wooden door prevented a massacre. Stahlknecht later complained to police officers that they could not be deployed elsewhere because of the need to protect Jewish facilities—a comment which Jewish organisations protested vehemently.

This has not prevented the SPD from working closely with the CDU and Stahlknecht for nine and a half years—and the Greens for four and a half—while claiming in public that their coalition represented a “bulwark against the right.” The Left Party would no

doubt also have joined the coalition if asked.

The events in Magdeburg show that the election of FDP politician Thomas Kemmerich as Thuringian premier with the votes of the AfD, CDU and the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party in February this year was no accident. When Kemmerich was finally forced to resign following a storm of public outrage and Bodo Ramelow from the Left Party returned to the post of premier, he too reached out his hand to the AfD by using his vote to enable the party to fill the position of vice-president of the state parliament.

The rise of the AfD, which has met with massive popular opposition, is largely due to the support it has received from other parties. The continuation of the federal grand coalition after the 2017 election served above all to elevate the AfD to the country’s main opposition party. Since then, although its fascist character is becoming increasingly obvious, the AfD has been feted by the other established parties and entrusted with the leadership of important committees. At the same time, the ultra-right terrorist networks which operate in and around the AfD and reach deep inside the country’s security forces, can rely on support from the judiciary and secret services.

The right-wing extremists are needed to enforce policies of social reaction, rearmament and militarism to suppress growing working class resistance. When it comes to refugee policy and rearmament at home and abroad, the German government has long since adopted the AfD’s program. Thousands have died from COVID-19 due to the federal and state governments’ refusal to impose a lockdown. The profits of the big corporations are regarded by them to be more important than the lives and health of the population. This policy can ultimately only be implemented by force.

Governments around the world are therefore turning to far-right forces to suppress the growing resistance of the working class, which is moving to the left. The danger of fascism can only be countered by an independent movement of the working class that breaks with all of the capitalist parties and is based on an international socialist program. This requires the building of a new socialist party in the international working class – the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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