

Germany's Christian Democrats choose new leader

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Armin Laschet, the minister president of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), is the new leader of Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU). An online party congress voted for the 59 year old in the second round of the governing party's leadership contest on Saturday.

Laschet was seen as the favoured candidate of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is stepping down after the federal election in September. He ended up with 521 delegate votes, compared to 466 for his chief competitor, Friedrich Merz. In the first round, Laschet secured five votes fewer than Merz. But because 224 votes went to the third-placed Norbert Röttgen, a runoff election was necessary which Laschet won.

In several interviews following the party congress, Laschet made clear that under his leadership the CDU would continue and intensify the right-wing course in government it has pursued over recent years. In the ZDF programme "What Next?" he spoke against a "strict shutdown of the economy" and thus in favour of the policy of placing profits before human lives that has cost over 46,000 lives in Germany alone to date.

In the same breath, Laschet praised his notoriously right-wing challenger Merz, who as CEO of the German division of Black Rock embodies the interests of the financial oligarchy more than any other. Responding to Merz's offer to serve as finance minister in the federal government, Laschet said that while he did not see a basis for this at present, he "values him very much as a business figure" and plans to cooperate closely with him.

With regard to foreign and military policy, Laschet made clear that he would do everything possible to reach the "2 percent goal," i.e., spending more than €90 billion on the military budget every year, as soon as possible. "Germany already promised this to US President Barack Obama. And not just to the president, but to NATO as a whole, and we are bound by that promise," he said.

Laschet's narrow victory over Merz, who enjoyed the support of the openly right-wing section of the party, which has close ties to the right-wing extremist Alternative for

Germany (AfD), has nothing to do with a rejection of his standpoints. On the contrary, the majority of the party hopes to be able to enforce its anti-worker, militarist agenda more effectively under the leadership of the minister president from NRW in the face of mounting opposition among the population. Like Merkel, he understands how to package the most right-wing policies with a few hollow phrases and a cynical smile.

In his speech to the party congress, Laschet explained his approach, saying, "One needs to expertly use the toolbox of the political centre. The capacity to unite. What does that mean? When everyone talks abstractly about bringing the economy and ecology together, I recall the exit from coal energy. The long nights of negotiations in the Chancellor's Office, but also the day after, where I had to explain to a workplace meeting of miners, your plant will soon be closed and you will go into early retirement."

Laschet also promised to implement the policy of strengthening the police state apparatus more effectively than his competitors. "While everyone is talking about internal security, we are enforcing a zero-tolerance policy towards lawbreakers and criminals. Day after day, night after night, when words and deeds go together, trust emerges," he declared.

He said virtually nothing about the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic. The reason for this is obvious. More than any other minister president, he advocates the ruthless reopening of the economy and schools, a policy that has made Germany an epicentre of the pandemic and mass deaths over recent months. In the process, the CDU/Free Democrat (FDP) coalition government he leads in NRW has from the outset shown callous indifference to the growing number of deaths.

As Laschet's widely hated Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (FDP) declared at the height of the first wave of the pandemic last April, "There will be school communities who will have to mourn the deaths of teachers, school directors and relatives, which will in addition permanently influence school life and the typical school day."

In a comment published in *Focus* magazine same time headlined, “We still have to live with the virus for a long time,” Laschet came out strongly in favour of “consistently fewer regulations” and a rapid end to coronavirus containment measures. He explicitly backed the fascistic concept advanced by his party colleague, Federal Parliament President Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), who asserted that the dignity of the person does not include the right to life and is therefore not protected absolutely by Germany’s Basic Law.

In his candidacy speech, Laschet attempted to distance himself and his party from the development of right-wing extremist forces in Germany and internationally. He referred to the “shattered windows” in the US Capitol, the German Empire’s military flag on the steps of the Reichstag Building, and the murder of Kassel district President Walter Lübcke (CDU). He told the delegates, “To be clear, we will not allow right-wing terrorists and ideological agitators to break our country.”

This is nothing but empty rhetoric. In reality, the grand coalition bears full responsibility for the dangerous strengthening of the far right in Germany, which will continue still further under his direction as CDU leader.

By continuing the grand coalition after the federal election in 2017, the CDU and Social Democrats made the AfD the official opposition and consciously integrated the party into parliamentary business. Ever since, all of the established parties have adopted the agitation and policies of the AfD, creating the ideological and political climate for the right-wing terrorists.

Among the leading ideological agitators in the country are former CDU politicians, who are now AfD members, like Alexander Gauland, as well as current leading politicians in the CDU and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). For example, Horst Seehofer (CSU) stated following the far-right rampage in Chemnitz in 2018 that he would have marched himself if he were not a government minister. He subsequently described the immigration issue as “the mother of all political problems” and asserted, “Islam does not belong to Germany.”

Laschet was also a purveyor of anti-immigrant chauvinism during the pandemic. When mass infections broke out at a Tönnies meatpacking plant, he did not criticise the working conditions, which were akin to slave labour, but claimed that Romanians and Bulgarians had smuggled in the virus from their own countries.

The policies advocated by Laschet, including the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus, the rearming of the military, social inequality and “herd immunity,” will not only further strengthen the most right-wing forces in the CDU, but also the AfD and the far-right terrorist networks in

the ~~around~~ police and the ~~the~~ intelligence agencies. Although they maintain death lists with the names of tens of thousands of people and are preparing for “Day X,” the government allows them to operate virtually unhindered, even after the neo-Nazi murder of Kassel district President Walter Lübcke and the terrorist attacks in Halle and Hanau. Leading right-wing terrorists, like Franco A. and Andre S., remain free men.

No opposition to these dangerous developments should be expected from the nominally left-wing parties in parliament. They are themselves an integral part of the state apparatus and government and are offering their services to impose the ruling class agenda against mounting resistance from the population.

Green Party co-leader Analena Baerbock, who has declared she is striving to establish a CDU/Green coalition after the federal election, congratulated Laschet on Twitter “on the successful election as party leader.” There will be “an exciting political competition to see which force will lead our country bravely, decisively and with new purpose out of the crisis.”

The leader of the Left Party’s parliamentary group in the federal parliament, Dietmar Bartsch, who dreams of a Social Democrat/Left Party/Green coalition, wrote, “I congratulate the new CDU leader Armin Laschet.” At the same time, he sought to downplay the sharp lurch to the right within the CDU and the ruling elite as a whole. “Good that a correction to the right did not succeed in the Union,” he said.

Workers and young people cannot allow themselves to be lulled to sleep with such statements but must look reality straight in the face and draw the necessary political conclusions. The attempted fascist coup in the United States, just like the sharp shift to the right in Germany and Europe, and the mass deaths around the world are serious warnings. As in the 1930s, the ruling elites are relying increasingly on fascism, militarism and dictatorship to enforce their interests at home and abroad. The struggle against this requires the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.



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