

The trade unions become the fourth partner in Germany's new coalition government

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Immediately before the publication of the coalition agreement between the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP) last week, a version circulated online in which the document metadata was visible. At one point it shows, “Last modified by: Hoffmann, Reiner (DGB-GBV).”

The DGB (German Trade Union Confederation) immediately announced that its chairman Reiner Hoffmann had not made any changes to the text. But even without this lapse, it was clear that the DGB was deeply involved in the coalition negotiations. It is no exaggeration to call it the fourth partner in the “traffic light” coalition.

From the first to the last line, the coalition agreement is imbued with the spirit of corporatism which the DGB and its individual unions also worship. Faced with a global pandemic in which the lives and health of millions of workers are being sacrificed to profit, the deepest gulf between rich and poor in decades, and the growing resistance of the working class, the unions are closing ranks with government and big business.

At the beginning of the November Revolution in 1918, Germany's first ever Social Democratic president, Friedrich Ebert, whom the SPD and the unions revere to this day, had declared: “I do not want the social revolution. I hate it like sin.” Today's social democrats and union leaders hate not only social revolution but even the slightest protest or strike. They react with fear and panic to the growing pressure from below and have transformed themselves into a tool for oppressing the workers.

The close collaboration between the DGB unions and the federal government is not new. In 2010, for example, the then head of Germany's largest union, IG Metall, Berthold Huber, celebrated his 60th birthday in the chancellery together with the chancellor, the heads of Siemens and VW, and the president of the employers' association. In 2015, the Bundestag (federal parliament) passed the Collective Bargaining Unity Act, which gives the DGB a monopoly position and undermines the constitutionally protected right to strike and freedom of association. And this spring, the so-called Works Council Modernization Act made it easier to set up union-dominated works councils, which are needed to suppress resistance in the factories.

But the current integration of the unions into government

goes far beyond past cooperation. A look at the coalition agreement makes this clear.

Under the buzzwords modernization, transformation and climate protection, the traffic light coalition is planning “a new departure,” after which nothing will remain of the rights and achievements that the working class fought for in the post-World War II decades. To accomplish this, it needs the state, business and unions to close ranks.

“In dialogue with business, the trade unions and employers' associations, we want to forge an ‘Alliance for Transformation’ and discuss stable and reliable framework conditions for transformation in the first six months of 2022,” the coalition agreement states. As “Europe's largest industrial and export economy,” Germany faces “far-reaching processes of transformation in global competition” in the 2020s. “We therefore see the task of giving our country's economic strength a new dynamic.”

So it goes on for pages. The traffic light coalition wants to create “space for innovation, competitiveness and more efficiency.” For this, “we need a decade of investment in the future and more speed.”

All of this could have come from the computers of DGB head Hoffmann and his advisers—and possibly did. The well-paid union bureaucrats see the future of the German economy from the same vantage point as the corporate bosses and shareholders. They want it to generate high profits and become more efficient and competitive in order to survive against the international competition—even if this means mass layoffs, wage cuts and unbearable work pressures.

The unions are using their army of works council representatives and shop stewards to suppress any resistance. According to its own figures, IG Metall alone has 50,000 works council representatives and 80,000 shop stewards. A joint counteroffensive by the international working class, which faces the same globally operating corporations and banks all over the world, on the other hand, is the union bureaucrats' worst nightmare.

Even during the exploratory coalition talks, which were held in great secrecy, DGB head Hoffmann had welcomed the participation of the FDP in the new government, even though it is universally known and hated as the lobbyist of the financial

aristocracy.

In response to the *Tagesspiegel's* accusation that the FDP had wanted to “burn collective bargaining agreements” in the past, and that in the coalition negotiations it had pushed through the abandonment of higher taxes for the rich, the retention of the debt ceiling and the continuation of low-paid “mini-jobs,” Hoffmann said, “The FDP with Christian Lindner is different from the FDP with Guido Westerwelle and Philipp Rösler,” its previous leaders.

Hoffmann added that in order to “secure Germany as an industrial location,” a “massive expansion of renewable energies” was necessary and that a “Federal Minister Christian Lindner could ensure that fast administrative, planning and approval procedures are realized.”

How brutally the traffic light coalition will attack the working class is already shown by its coronavirus policy. On the day the coalition agreement was announced, the official number of COVID-19 deaths in Germany rose above 100,000, and it has been known at least since the president of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) Lothar Wieler’s angry speech that this figure was not true, but at least twice as high.

Nevertheless, with their majority in the Bundestag, the traffic light parties passed a new version of the Infection Protection Act, which massively restricts the means of combating the pandemic. The new government is determined to further tighten the murderous “profits before lives” policy of the outgoing grand coalition. It would rather accept tens of thousands of deaths and the mass infection of young people than endanger the profits of big business.

The DGB and its individual unions also play an important role in this. With their close-meshed network of company functionaries, they ensure that workplaces remain open and that information about the spread of the virus is concealed.

Although there are health and safety officers and company doctors in the large corporations and in many medium-sized enterprises, all information about what is happening regarding workplace infections and those acquired on the way to work is kept secret. The unions are a central part of the coronavirus conspiracy in the factories.

The DGB also supports the incoming government’s policies of rearmament and war. Back in 2014, the DGB reacted enthusiastically when the then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), and now German president, called for Germany to pursue a great power policy and assume more military responsibility internationally.

To promote his great power policy, Steinmeier set up the website “Review 2014” at the time. Its authors included the newly elected DGB head, Hoffmann, who unreservedly backed military rearmament.

His predecessor, Michael Sommer, had already maintained close contacts with the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). In a joint declaration with the Bundeswehr, the DGB had claimed in all seriousness that the trade unions and Bundeswehr were both

part of the peace movement. A short time later, the DGB participated in celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Bundeswehr.

The integration of the DGB into the government makes it clear how important the call of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is for the working class to organize itself independently of the unions in rank-and-file committees. The coalition agreement leaves no doubt that conflict with the incoming government is inevitable. But it is not possible to fight against the government and its policies of social attacks, military build-up and herd immunity without breaking with the corrupt unions and overcoming their control in workplaces.

The claim that under the growing pressure of the workers the existing unions can be renewed or reformed is false. The opposite is true. The more resistance develops in factories, offices and hospitals, the more the unions integrate themselves into the state apparatus and support the government against the working class.

The US saw the most powerful strike wave in decades this year. Workers around the world were enthusiastic and supportive. In many other countries—including Germany—the willingness to strike is also growing. The DGB feels threatened by this development, fears for its privileges and is merging with the government.

Therefore, it is absolutely urgent that workers become active and organize themselves in independent rank-and-file committees to take the defence of their health, their lives and their jobs into their own hands.

These rank-and-file committees must gather all the information about the developments in the workplace, including in particular about coronavirus infections, evaluate it, draw conclusions and, if necessary, arrange for the closure of workplaces. We call on workers to contact us and participate in our Global Workers’ Inquest into the Coronavirus Pandemic.



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