Kevin Kühnert: From “party rebel” to SPD secretary-general

Peter Schwarz
19 December 2021

The ascent from Young Socialist (Juso) leader, spouting left-wing phrases, to right-wing party functionary, minister and chancellor is a well-greased ladder in Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD). Gerhard Schröder, Andrea Nahles and others have all taken this route. Even Germany’s new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, in his younger days as deputy Juso chairman, once campaigned for “overcoming the capitalist economy,” criticised “aggressive-imperialist NATO” and condemned the German Federal Republic as the “European stronghold of big business.”

So the election of Kevin Kühnert as general secretary of the SPD last Saturday is nothing new in this respect. What is unusual, at most, is the speed with which Kühnert has made the transformation from “party rebel” to whip of Germany’s governing party. In his new role he will “watch the backs of government members and the parliamentary group to ensure they fulfil the concluded coalition agreement,” he told the *taz* newspaper in an interview.

The coalition agreement Kühnert wants to push through as SPD leader is a declaration of war on the working population and a firm commitment to militarism. It intensifies the murderous pandemic policy of the former grand coalition of the SPD and conservative parties, which has already claimed 105,000 lives and pledges to massively increase Germany’s military spending at home and abroad. In addition, the coalition pact adheres to the country’s debt brake and rules out tax increases for the rich.

Kühnert has already made clear he will not tolerate any opposition to the right-wing course of the new government. He said the SPD should not “jeopardise or belittle its electoral success by falling back into unnecessary infighting,” he said. “We don’t need any ritualised heckling between the grassroots SPD and the government SPD to remind us our party is still alive.”

The parliamentary group and government are for the SPD, he continued, the “hands that can shape and change reality with skill and ability,” while the party is the “head and heart of the social-democratic movement,” describing the division of labour between the government and the party—with the “head” clearly committed to follow what the government regards as necessary.

“Crawl to the big-wigs, bully the underlings” is the motto of Diederich Heßling in Heinrich Mann’s famous novel *Der Untertan*. There is a piece of Heßling in every politician who subordinates political principles to his career—as is the case with Kühnert. The 32-year-old has carefully prepared and planned his ascent.

Four years ago, Kühnert stepped into the media spotlight when he became spokesman for opponents of the grand coalition within the SPD. At the SPD special party conference in January 2018, which decided by a narrow majority in favour of a continuation of the grand coalition, and during the subsequent vote on the coalition agreement, the newly elected Juso leader featured prominently in the media as its main opponent.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out at the time, Kühnert was never concerned with rejecting the policies of the grand coalition, i.e., soaring social inequality, precarious forms of work, militarism, state rearmament and attacks on the democratic rights for the working class and youth. Kühnert also rejected a fresh election. Instead, he argued for a Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) minority government, which the SPD would then have supported.

His main concern was to prevent the complete collapse of the SPD, which after four years of grand coalition received its worst Bundestag election result in

© World Socialist Web Site

post-war history. Young people in the SPD have “an interest in the survival of the shop, damn it,” he told a party conference at the time. He confessed to *Der Spiegel* that the Jusos’ scepticism about an alliance between the CDU/CSU and the SPD had “little to do with the exploratory talks,” but rather with the fact that “we have seriously lost votes.”

Above all, Kühnert feared that the growing opposition of the working class would erupt outside the bounds of the official party spectrum. At a public meeting covered by the WSWS, he explicitly acknowledged his “political responsibility to the state.” He was much more worried about the fact “that we now have a situation where the SPD and the CDU/CSU together have less than 50 percent in the polls” than the “14, 15 or 16 percent for the SPD.”

The former grand coalition finally took up its work with a right-wing programme six months after the Bundestag elections—and Kühnert fully supported it, while still seeking, on occasion, to pose as a “leftist.” In a *Zeit* interview in 2019, for example, he described himself as a “socialist” who advocated the “overcoming of capitalism” and the “collectivisation” of companies. But this was just smoke and mirrors.

When SPD leader Andrea Nahles resigned in the summer of 2019 after the party’s disastrous European election result, Kühnert refrained from running for office due to a lack of prospects of success. Instead, he helped the duo of Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans win the election, presenting them as a left-wing alternative to then-Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, who was also running for the party chairmanship.

That, again, was a deceptive manoeuvre. Esken and Walter-Borjans agreed in secret talks that Scholz should be the SPD’s candidate for chancellor in this autumn’s election. Now, Scholz has taken over as chancellor and his then-co-candidate for the party chair, Klara Geywitz, assumes the post of federal minister of construction.

Kühnert, in the meantime, continued his climb up the ladder. At the end of 2019, he was deputy SPD leader and began working closely with General Secretary Lars Klingbeil, a member of the right-wing Seeheim Circle. Now he has replaced Klingbeil, who has been elected as the new party leader together with Saskia Esken. As the new general secretary, Kühnert is responsible for the organisation of the SPD and has the task of bringing the party into line behind the government and disciplining the party parliamentary faction when necessary.

His career is typical for a party that has long cut all its ties with the working class and represents the interests of the banks, big corporations and the state apparatus. The SPD is a rallying point for careerists, trade union and party officials, civil servants and wealthy petty bourgeois who fear nothing so much as a rebellion by the working class and youth.

They enjoy a standard of living that the vast majority of the population can only dream of. Every year, millions of euros of state money flow to the parties and their foundations. In 2019, this sum totalled €193 million for the parties and €542 million for party-affiliated foundations. In addition come the MPs’ salaries, expense allowances and income for numerous other offices based on party membership.

One of Kühnert’s biggest concerns will be that the SPD will receive “only” €54.37 million in federal funding for the year 2020. The sum is measured in terms of votes in federal, state or European elections, the number of which has halved for the SPD since 1998. As a result, numerous jobs are to be cut at Willy Brandt House, the headquarters of the SPD in Berlin.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site