The return of the “Grand Coalition” in Berlin

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Following two elections held over a short period of time, the despised political constellation of the Social Democratic Party and Christian Democratic Union (known as a “Grand Coalition”) is returning to Berlin. The state executive of the SPD decided on Wednesday by 25 votes to 12 to end its current alliance with the Greens and the Left Party in the Berlin state government, the Senate, and commence coalition negotiations with the CDU.

Franziska Giffey, the SPD state chairwoman, had threatened to resign if the committee did not agree to the proposal. She will hand over the office of Governing Mayor to Kai Wegner, the leader of the CDU in Berlin, and assume another office in the Senate if the coalition negotiations are successful.

The return of the Grand Coalition in Berlin reaffirms that it has become impossible to influence political events by means of the ballot box.

The term “Grand Coalition” is itself misleading. The expression dates from a period in the past when the SPD and CDU together received over 80 percent of the vote and voter turnout was between 80 and 90 percent. In the parliamentary elections on February 12, however, the CDU and SPD together only managed to win 46.6 percent of the votes cast, with a voter turnout of 63 percent. Taking into account nonvoters and residents of the city who do not hold a German passport, less than a quarter of adult Berliners voted for the CDU or SPD. Among young people, the result was even more pronounced. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, only 23 per cent of the votes cast went to the SPD or CDU.

The SPD and CDU have alternated in power, or shared power, for decades in Berlin. In the frontline city of the Cold War, which was subsidized for political reasons, a culture of graft and corruption developed that far exceeded what was common in other major cities and that continued after reunification in 1990. Changes of government were not infrequently triggered by corruption scandals.

The last CDU governing mayor, Eberhard Diepgen, lost his post in 2001 in the wake of the Berlin banking scandal. After a short period of an SPD-Green government, the “red-red” Senate (SPD and the PDS, the latter the forerunner of the Left Party), led by Klaus Wowereit, took over from where Diepgen had left off.

As one of its first official acts, the alliance of the SPD and the PDS decided to guarantee €21.6 billion debt incurred by the criminal real estate businesses of the Bankgesellschaft Berlin. The state budget was thus ruined for good. The red-red Senate spent the rest of its 10-year term in office recouping its funding of the bank at the expense of the city’s population. It cut wages and wiped out tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector, privatised hospitals and clinics, cut funding to schools and sold off hundreds of thousands of publicly owned apartments to real estate sharks.

In 2011, the “red-red” coalition lost its majority and Wowereit returned to the tried and tested Grand Coalition, this time under Social Democratic leadership. The Grand Coalition lost its majority in 2016 and Michael Müller, who had replaced Wowereit, then formed a Senate comprised of an alliance of the SPD, Left Party and Greens.

During this time, the massive enrichment of those at the top of society, at the expense of the majority, continued unabated. Those with good connections to the Senate landed top jobs with annual salaries of several hundred thousand euros in state-owned companies—such as the transport company BVG and the broadcaster RBB—while Berlin developed into the country’s main centre of poverty as rents and living costs exploded. Every fifth inhabitant of Berlin is now considered poor.

The return of the Grand Coalition is a guarantee that this process of social decay will continue. After 16

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years of CDU rule in the federal government under Angela Merkel—12 of them in a Grand Coalition with the SPD—this form of government is hated by the working class.

In Berlin, the issue of “security”—i.e., arming the police and the state’s repressive apparatus—is to be top of the agenda in the coalition negotiations between the CDU and the SPD. The Berlin CDU, which has always stood for “law and order,” and Franziska Giffey, the political protege of the notorious Neukölln District Mayor Heinz Buschkowsky, share the same outlook in this respect. They are preparing for the violent suppression of social opposition.

The return of the Grand Coalition underlines the importance of the recent Berlin election campaign of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party). The SGP placed the struggle against rearmament and the Ukraine war, which is supported by all the parties represented in the parliament, at the heart of its election campaign.

It made clear that there is only one way to stop war, wages and social cuts: the mobilisation of the international working class on the basis of a socialist programme. Together with its sister parties in the Fourth International it is building a socialist movement worldwide against war and its root cause, capitalism. War and the associated social attacks can only be stopped by breaking the power of the banks and corporations and bringing them under democratic control.

This perspective is now crucial. Around the world and across Europe—from France to Britain to Spain to Germany—the biggest wave of class struggles since the 1970s is developing, bringing millions of workers into conflict with the capitalist system. It is time to join the SGP and build it as the new party of the working class.

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