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German conservatives and Social Democrats agree to coalition talks



After five days of exploratory talks and an all-night marathon, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) agreed early Friday to initiate formal talks on the continuation of Germany's grand coalition.

The agreement has to be accepted by an SPD party congress on January 21. Coalition talks, which must be approved by the three parties' committees and, in the case of the SPD, the full membership, can then begin. If everything runs smoothly, a new government could be formed by the end of March, a full six months after the federal election.

The three party leaders, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), Horst Seehofer (CSU) and Martin Schulz (SPD) indicated that they were extremely pleased with the agreement. They presented a 28-page document on the results of the exploratory talks, which conceals a deeply reactionary right-wing programme behind unctuous rhetoric about an "awakening," "democracy," "peace" and "justice."

The first point concerns Europe. It includes much talk of “solidarity,” “values,” “opportunities” and “peace.” But this does not amount to a shift from the government’s previous Europe policy, which aimed to establish German preeminence over Europe.

On the contrary, the paper explicitly calls for a continuation of austerity policies, which have devastated social systems in Greece, Spain and other countries, driven youth unemployment to record levels and led to the growth of right-wing, nationalist tendencies. “We want to [strengthen] the EU’s competitiveness in the context of globalisation,” the paper states, adding, “We want to push ahead with fiscal controls in the EU.”

While Berlin has to date promoted the EU primarily for economic reasons—German big business profits more than any other country from the common market and single currency—the document concentrates on the bloc’s geostrategic importance.

“Global power relations have fundamentally changed over recent years—politically, economically and militarily,” states one of the document’s key passages. “The US’ focus on key areas, the strengthening of China, and Russian policy make clear: Europe, more than ever before, must take its fate into its own hands. Only together does the EU have a chance to assert itself and enforce its joint interests in the world.”

To “assert itself in the world,” the coalition partners are seeking close cooperation with France and President Emmanuel Macron. “The renewal of the EU will be achieved only if Germany and France cooperate to this end with all their might. We therefore want to further strengthen and renew German-French cooperation,” states the paper. The coalition partners are even prepared to pay higher contributions to the EU, and agree to the creation of a European investment budget and European monetary fund—key demands from Macron rejected thus far by the CSU.

The enforcement of “joint interests in the world” means above all the deployment of military force. “We want to strengthen cooperation in security and defence policy (Pesco) and fill it with life,” states the paper, explicitly calling for the continuation and expansion of the German Army’s interventions in Afghanistan and Mali.

It is noteworthy that the paper underscores the significance of EU defence policy, but does not refer to NATO once. This cannot be an oversight. No programmatic German government document has ever been released to date without a reference to NATO. It demonstrates that Germany is increasingly pursuing its great power ambitions independently of and in opposition to the United States.

The huge costs of militarism are concealed by the document. The SPD, in particular, wants to avoid a public discussion erupting over this. The goal of increasing military spending to

2 percent of gross domestic product, almost a doubling of the budget to €60 billion annually, is not even mentioned, even though the previous government committed to it.

However, the paper notes that the German Army remains an “indispensable part of German security policy.” It continues: “In order that it can fulfill the tasks assigned to it with the utmost expertise in all their dimensions, we will make available the best possible equipment, training and care to the soldiers.”

The second issue that makes clear the reactionary direction of the future government is refugee policy. On this, the CDU, CSU and SPD have largely adopted the demands of the far-right Alternative for Germany.

As the paper states, “We want to comprehensively combat causes of flight, jointly protect the EU’s external borders more effectively and create a division of responsibility within the EU.” The coalition parties are “in agreement that our society’s capacity for integration cannot be overwhelmed” and seek to restrict “migration movements to Germany and Europe.”

To this end, Frontex will be “further developed into a real European border protection police.” Family reunification for refugees with subsidiary protection will be capped at 1,000 people per month. Refugees who claim asylum will be kept in “central reception, processing and repatriation centres,” and Morocco, Algeria and other countries will be declared safe countries of origin.

The demand for an upper limit for refugees, which Merkel and the SPD consistently opposed in public, found its way into the agreement following the exploratory talks. It confirmed “that the migration numbers will not exceed the range of 180,000 to 220,000 annually.”

A lot of space is taken up in the document by a few minimal social reforms, above all in the area of families, which are to be paid for by a tiny fraction of the €45 billion available from the budget surplus. Given the rapid rise in poverty, social inequality and low-wage work over recent years, these proposals are nothing more than a drop in the bucket. They serve chiefly as a fig leaf for the programme’s reactionary character. In exchange, the SPD has abandoned its demand for an increase in the top tax bracket.

This issue was the subject of bitter wrangling during the exploratory talks, and the employers’ associations, which are demanding massive tax cuts, responded furiously. “A new edition of the grand coalition will come at a price for Germany,” protested the president of the mid-sized business association, Mario Ohoven.

The major strengthening of the repressive state apparatus shows that the coalition partners expect strong social opposition to their right-wing programme. To “ensure the state’s ability to function,” they agreed to expand the federal and state security forces “by 15,000 positions (7,500 at the federal level and 7,500 at the state level).” In addition, “at least 2,000 positions in the judiciary (courts, state prosecutors, law enforcement), as well as better IT and building facilities, and more efficient procedures” will be created.

Four days ago, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei warned: “Over recent days, leading representatives from all three parties have repeatedly made clear that a new installment of the grand coalition will not simply continue the policies of the previous government. The course it pursues will be much more reactionary.”

We justified our call for new elections by stating, “A clique of right-wing conspirators cannot be permitted to impose their will on the population without any mandate. In the election campaign, the SGP would expose the true aims of the bourgeois parties—including SPD, Left Party and Greens—and build a socialist alternative to capitalism, war and authoritarianism.”

This warning has now been confirmed. The demand for new elections is more urgent than ever.