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German grand coalition backs secret service head who defended neo-Nazis

In the face of overwhelming popular opposition, the German grand coalition government announced Sunday that it would keep Hans-Georg Maassen, the former head of the secret service, in the interior ministry.

After thousands of neo-Nazis rioted in the East German city of Chemnitz last month, Maassen publicly defended the fascists, disputing well-documented claims that the demonstrators attacked foreigners.

In response to a wave of popular revulsion, Maassen was removed from his post as the head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), and was to be appointed as a state secretary in the interior ministry. After widespread public protest over Maassen's promotion, the government announced on Sunday that Maassen would be retained in a lower-level position, as special adviser on European and international affairs in the Interior Ministry, and will continue to receive his current salary.

The leaders of the parties of the grand coalition rushed to defend their backing for Maassen. Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) stated that she regretted the fact that she had "not paid enough attention to...how the people would justifiably feel when they hear about a promotion." The issue therefore had to be re-evaluated, she added. The new result was "very fair and explicable."

Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Andrea Nahles declared, "We have found a solution. It is a good sign that the coalition is able to take public criticism seriously and correct itself." SPD general secretary Lars Klingbeil said it was good that the original

decision had been altered. If Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU) wants to keep Maassen in his circle of advisors, that is his decision, he added.

In fact, the decision to keep Maassen in the interior ministry sends a clear message to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and all of its supporters in the state apparatus that they enjoy the full backing of the grand coalition.

Normally, a top official who so openly challenged their own government and explicitly aligned with far-right forces would be immediately sent into early retirement. This has happened to dozens of leading officials, including several BfV presidents.

But the grand coalition does not want to part with Maassen under any circumstances. The more support the grand coalition loses in the polls, the more it relies on those elements in the police and security apparatus who admire Maassen for his support for the authoritarian and xenophobic policies of the AfD, and hatred for everything that they describe as “left-wing.”

A typical example of these forces is the leader of the German Police Union, Rainer Wendt, who defended Maassen two weeks ago against what he labelled “left-wing forces.” “One has to appreciate that we really need all of our forces to combat political or religious motivated extremism of all kinds and we have nothing better to do than weaken the BfV president in these debates, the absurdity could hardly be greater,” wrote Wendt.

Wendt then attacked the parties of the grand coalition, using the jargon of an authoritarian regime. Instead of strengthening the intelligence services, he wrote, “the parties are obsessing over their own political affairs and neglecting this task, engaging in symbolic replacement talks and loud shouting matches.”

Maassen is only the tip of the iceberg and his far-right positions have long been known. In 2002 under Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD), Maassen ensured that Murat Kurnaz, who grew up in Bremen and was detained in the US prison camp at Guantanamo Bay without charge, could not return to Germany. He was held for a further four years without being charged of any crime.

As an official in the Interior Ministry and president of the BfV since 2012, Maassen was heavily involved in covering up the role of intelligence agents in the far-right NSU terrorist cell, and for organising the illegal data exchange with the American NSA.

Shortly before the events in Chemnitz, the secret service report 2017, for which Maassen bore responsibility, was released. The AfD and the far-right figures and organisations aligned with it (Björn Höcke, Götz Kubitschek, Jürgen Elsässer, Pegida) were not named as extremists in the report. By contrast, critics of capitalism, nationalism, and the AfD

were denounced as “left-wing extremists.” The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in particular was identified as an “object of surveillance” and a “left-wing extremist party,” even though the BfV presented no evidence of violations of the law or acts of violence.

Although this report shows where the BfV and Maassen truly stand politically, not a single deputy from any of the parties represented in parliament protested against it. For the same reason, they now celebrate the continued employment of this AfD sympathiser in the Interior Ministry as a success.

However, the issue at stake is not merely a personal decision by Seehofer, as SPD general secretary Klingbeil would have it, or an attempt by Seehofer to get back at Merkel at the end of his political career, as many media outlets claim. Fundamentally, the grand coalition is increasingly based on the authoritarian forces in the state apparatus embodied by Maassen. This is why SPD leader Andrea Nahles initially had no problem agreeing to Maassen’s promotion.

Under conditions of growing international tensions, particularly with the US, an escalation of trade war, and the breaking apart of the European Union, the ruling elite is planning an escalation of militarism and social austerity that they cannot enforce through democratic forms of rule. As at the end of the Weimar Republic, they are increasingly relying on the authoritarian forces in the state apparatus and on far-right elements such as the AfD.

SPD leader Nahles made this clear in a letter to the party membership. She justified her continued support of the grand coalition and Maassen by stating, “Europe faces a crucial test, trade war is looming with the US, the situation in Syria requires all of our diplomatic efforts. Therefore, it is important for the SPD to maintain a functioning federal government.”

Nahles’ “functioning federal government,” which according to the latest polls is supported by just 43 percent of voters, 10 percentage points less than the last election, is—as the Maassen affair demonstrates—a breeding ground for the most right-wing, reactionary forces.

This right-wing conspiracy is plain for all to see. The issue now is to politically arm widespread opposition among workers and young people. The SGP therefore reissues its demands for an end to the grand coalition and the calling of new elections. These elections must be made the starting point for a broad mobilisation of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist programme. This is the only way to stop the right-wing conspiracy, which is supported by all parties in parliament and large sections of the European bourgeoisie. Our demands are:

- Stop the conspiracy by the grand coalition, the state apparatus, and right-wing extremists!
- No more war! Stop Germany's return to a militarist great power policy!
- The dissolution of the secret service, and an immediate halt to the surveillance of the SGP and other left-wing organizations!
- Defend the right to asylum! No to the militarisation of the state and surveillance!
- End poverty and exploitation—for social equality! The super-wealthy, banks, and corporations must be expropriated and placed under democratic control.