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The German Christian democrats elect a new leader

On Friday, a congress of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Hamburg will elect Angela Merkel's successor as party leader. Merkel, who has led the CDU for 18 years, announced her resignation as party leader in October after massive losses in Hesse's state elections. She wants to remain Chancellor, however, until the end of the regular legislative period in the autumn of 2021.

Three candidates are up for election in Hamburg: CDU Secretary General Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (56), Health Minister Jens Spahn (38) and Investment Manager Friedrich Merz (63), who retired from active politics 16 years ago. Over the past few days, the three candidates have presented themselves to the public at eight CDU regional conferences and in countless interviews and media appearances.

The media celebrate this as a rebirth of democracy in a party which held its last open election of its chairman in 1971, when Rainer Barzel prevailed against Helmut Kohl, who later became chancellor. The open culture of discussion will revive the party and increase its attractiveness, many comments claim.

In fact, nothing of the sort is the case. What distinguishes all three candidates is their detachment from the problems and concerns of the vast majority of the population. They compete, over who can shift Merkel's policy furthest to the right—be it on refugees (Kramp-Karrenbauer), the harassment of welfare recipients (Spahn) or support for the financial markets and the super-rich (Merz). The public reaction remains understandably negative.

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“The big hype about Angela Merkel’s successor does not benefit the CDU”, commented Forsa boss Manfred Güllner on his institute’s latest poll. “The CDU does not win any major sympathies among the electorate, there can be no question of a mood of optimism.” The CDU remains at 27 percent in the Forsa poll, its coalition partner SPD at 14 percent. If elections were held now, the Grand Coalition would no longer have a majority and would only reach 41 percent. Only a coalition of the CDU and the Greens, which are in second place with 22 percent, could hope for a narrow majority of deputies. Otherwise only alliances of three or more parties would yield a government majority.

The mantra used by the candidates and numerous media to justify the CDU’s further shift to the right is that Merkel has placed the party too much in the “centre of society” and thus created space for the growth of the far-right AfD, which must now be reconquered.

In the editorial published in its latest edition, *Der Spiegel* calls for an “honest debate about the mistakes of the Merkel era”; otherwise the CDU would be threatened with ruin. “It was a mistake to move the CDU so far to the left that the AfD could easily take the place of the CDU,” it declares. “And it was wrong to allow months of loss of control at the German borders. The CDU must admit this to itself, even if it is tantamount to matricide.” At the regional conferences, Merz promised that he would not accept “the AfD sitting in 16 state parliaments and with 12.6 percent in the Bundestag”. He was confident that he could change that—by adopting the policy of the AfD.

Kramp-Karrenbauer promised a tough line in migration policy, which she would make her top priority. “We need an intelligent border regime: Transit centres, dragnet controls, bilateral agreements for rapid repatriation,” she told the *Merkur* newspaper.

Spahn, who has long advocated an anti-refugee line, accused Hartz IV recipients of having their livelihood financed by ordinary workers and their taxes, and demanded tougher sanctions if they miss deadlines or turn down poorly paid work.

The claim that Merkel has moved the CDU to the left turns reality upside down. An objective assessment of her 13-year chancellorship proves the opposite.

Under Merkel’s responsibility, Germany has developed into the most unequal country in Europe, where one in six lives in poverty and around 40 percent of all employees work in precarious conditions. In Greece, Portugal and other European countries, Merkel’s name is synonymous with brutal austerity programs that have ruined the lives of millions. During her chancellorship, after five decades of military abstinence, Germany again developed into an interventionist power, with troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali and numerous other countries.

The short-term opening of the borders to refugees in the summer of 2015 was not motivated by humanitarian reasons, but by fears of an uncontrollable crisis in the Balkans. It has long since been replaced by the ruthless closing off of European borders, mass deportations and the construction of camps in which refugees are imprisoned.

Merkel's government and the state have ideologically and politically supported the rise of the AfD. This was obvious when the head of the secret service, Hans-Georg Maaßen, publicly supported the far-right party.

What distinguishes Merkel's era, which is approaching its end, from her replacement as CDU leader, is not a left-wing policy, but her close cooperation with the SPD and the trade unions in implementing an extremely right-wing policy. There is no social regression and no dismissal that has not been worked out and supported by the Social Democrats and the unions.

When Merkel took over the chairmanship of the CDU in April of 2000, the CDU was politically on the floor, and the German economy was in crisis. Helmut Kohl had lost the Bundestag elections in the autumn of 1998 after 16 years as Chancellor, and the CDU was involved in corruption scandals. Merkel used this to outmanoeuvre Helmut Kohl and his team, including Wolfgang Schäuble and Friedrich Merz. At that time, she promoted a neo-liberal economic programme that provided for the abolition of solidarity-based health insurance and progressive income taxation.

But the SPD and the Greens took the burden off her shoulders. With the Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws, they created a mechanism that effectively destroyed the social achievements of the post-war period. When Merkel won the Bundestag election in 2005 and formed her first coalition with the SPD, she was able to rely on these measures. With the exception of the years 2009 to 2013, in which she formed a coalition with the Free Democrats, she has always ruled in a grand coalition with the SPD.

Characteristic of her close cooperation with the SPD and the trade unions is an evening in March 2010: The then head of the IG Metall union, Berthold Huber, celebrated his 60th birthday in the Chancellor's Office. Invited as guests were the president of the employers' association Martin Kannegiesser, the bosses of Siemens and Volkswagen and the leaders of various works councils.

Today the unions are hated and the SPD is collapsing. The mood in the working class is boiling. In France, with the "Yellow Vests", a powerful social movement has developed outside of the control of the trade unions and the traditional parties.

This is the real reason for the CDU's shift to the right, and not the alleged competition with the AfD. It is preparing to violently suppress social protests and political resistance against social attacks, militarism and state repression. It will not only closely work with the AfD, but also with the SPD and the unions.

Friedrich Merz's return to politics symbolizes this shift to the right. More than nearly any other German politician, he embodies the naked interests of capital. The former parliamentary party leader of the CDU has been active as a business lobbyist for 16 years and is currently chairman of the supervisory board of the German branch of the world's largest investment company Blackrock. He was brought back into politics by Wolfgang Schäuble, the architect of the austerity diktat for Greece. Schäuble, who still has a lot of influence in the CDU, has openly called for his election.

Merz obviously has not only the CDU presidency in mind, but also the Chancellor's Office. It remains to be seen whether he will cooperate with Merkel or whether he will seek a change of government in the near future. The FDP has already signaled its willingness to cooperate with Merz, should the Grand Coalition come to an early end.

But even Merkel's temporary stay in office or the election of Kramp-Karrenbauer, who is given the best chances for party chairmanship alongside Merz, will not change this course of development. Merkel has proven her adaptability time and again throughout her long career. Kramp-Karrenbauer is an arch-conservative Catholic. She could possibly have an easier path to forming a coalition with the Greens than Merz. The Greens have moved closer to the CDU in recent years and have formed a joint government with it in two of its former strongholds, Baden-Württemberg and Hesse.

Workers and youth must prepare for violent attacks, which they can only counter by organizing independently and fighting for a socialist program.