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Germany's Social Democrats prepare for grand coalition with Merkel

Four days after the failure of the exploratory talks on the formation of a Jamaica coalition between the conservative, liberal and Green parties, Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) is preparing the way for a continuation of the grand coalition.

On Monday the party executive had voted unanimously against participating in government and in favour of new elections. But after negotiations between SPD leader Martin Schulz and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and an eight-hour meeting involving the SPD leadership, General Secretary Hubertus Heil announced the change of course early Friday morning. The SPD is "firmly convinced that it is necessary to talk," he said. The SPD will not exclude itself from government talks, he added.

However, the SPD did not want to explicitly commit to a grand coalition at this stage. "Within the SPD, the grand coalition is not automatic," stated executive member Manuela Schwesig. But this is merely aimed at buying time so as to implement the new course.

It is now up to party leader Schulz to prepare the party for a change in course and explain it to the membership. That was the message from Willy Brandt House, the SPD's headquarters. Schulz declared over Twitter that he would have the membership vote on the SPD's participation in government. The SPD has planned a party congress for early December.

Along with a continuation of the grand coalition, another possibility currently being discussed is the SPD's support for a minority government of the Christian Democratic

Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). But this is less likely. The offer is merely “the first step back into the grand coalition,” wrote Spiegel Online.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* stated that the minority government option would be “wrong” because it would weaken Germany in foreign policy: “In the situation in which Germany finds itself, and also the role that Germany possesses in Europe, it is inconceivable that the government would have to fear the securing of an agreement in its own parliament for every difficult decision.”

President Steinmeier, whose SPD membership has officially lapsed, has applied major pressure on his party over recent days to enter the government. He now no longer wants to let any time slip, and has invited the leaders of the SPD, CDU and CSU to Bellevue Palace next week to discuss how things are to proceed. He also intends to hold separate talks with the parliamentary leaders of the Free Democrats (FDP), Greens and the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The SPD decided to go into opposition after it received its worst result in 70 years in the September 24 election, in which the CDU and CSU also suffered substantial losses. The governing parties lost a total of 14 percentage points. The SPD fears that it will decline into insignificance, and that the working class will turn to the left if it remains in government in spite of the devastating verdict of the electorate.

After the talks on a potential CDU-FDP-Green coalition dragged out for weeks and ultimately collapsed, their priorities changed. President Steinmeier, President of the Bundestag (parliament) Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), and other leading state representatives insisted that new elections had to be avoided at all costs. The reason for this was their concern that the widespread social dissatisfaction would find political expression in a new election campaign and that a protracted government crisis would undermine Germany’s international standing.

They rapidly gained supporters within the SPD. Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who continues to serve temporarily in that position, Hamburg Mayor Olaf Scholz and other representatives of the party’s right-wing criticised Schulz, who continued to insist that the SPD should remain in opposition. On Thursday, Schulz relented.

A third installment of the grand coalition would differ significantly from its predecessors from 2005 to 2009 and 2013 to 2017. Emerging out of a major electoral defeat, the government will lack any democratic legitimacy. As a result, it will respond in a much more authoritarian and ruthless manner than its predecessor to pressure from below.

Reading the newspaper commentaries on the SPD's change of course leaves no room for doubt about this.

On Monday, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) was still paying "respect" to the FDP, because they torpedoed the Jamaica talks and "spared" Germany "a government full of contradictions." The FAZ is now praising the SPD in the warmest tones because the party has bowed to the "state's interests."

"When the midwife bearing the name President intervenes in the labour ward of parliamentary democracy, all party desires must retreat in the face of the state's interests," wrote the conservative mouthpiece of the Frankfurt stock exchange.

The Weimar Republic, with which it compares the current situation, did not fail because the state elites—Reich President, the general staff, judiciary, and bourgeois parties—aligned themselves with the most reactionary forces and even appointed Hitler as chancellor, but rather because the "party landscape in an increasingly fractured spectrum" gained "the upper hand over the well-being of the state," the FAZ wrote.

This is the classic justification for every dictatorship: as the social and political conflicts intensify, the parties—the political expression of social interests—and thus democracy, bow before the "well-being of the state." On August 4, 1914, when the SPD voted for war credits for the First World War and opponents of the war were thrown in prison, Kaiser Wilhelm uttered the infamous statement, "I no longer recognise any parties, I recognise only Germans."

Die Zeit is also enthusiastic about the SPD's return to government. "The most important thing now is that Germany gets a new government soon that is not only capable of administering day-to-day business, but also of tackling the country's problems, providing an answer to French President Emmanuel Macron's proposals for renewing the EU, and responding to crises," wrote the SPD-aligned weekly newspaper.

The SPD has long been the most aggressive party when it comes to "tackling the country's problems" in the interests of the ruling elite and responding to international crises. The abolition of social and democratic rights has largely been implemented by the SPD—from the Hartz laws to the raising of the age of retirement to 67, the contract unity law, which suppresses smaller trade unions, and the Facebook law, which censors the Internet.

President Steinmeier, the driving force behind the grand coalition, was in 2003, as head of Gerhard Schröder's chancellor's office, the actual author of the right-wing Agenda 2010. As foreign minister, he played a leading role in 2014 in the revival of German militarism, and his successor Sigmar Gabriel is pressing ahead with strengthening the German army

and the construction of an independent European army. It was Gabriel who made the statement that the rise of Trump should not only be seen as a threat, but as an opportunity for German big business to intervene more decisively in new regions of the world.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) warned in its statement on the federal election, “All of the established parties—from the CDU/CSU, to the FDP, Greens, the SPD and the Left Party—support the policies of militarism, the strengthening of the domestic repressive state apparatus, and social cutbacks. They organise the social attacks at the federal and state level. They are all conspiring against the population.”

This is now being confirmed. The grand coalition is deeply unpopular, as shown by its losses in the federal election. If it is continued, it will be the result of a conspiracy behind the scenes. The SGP rejects this and demands new elections.

The policies of social cutbacks, strengthening of the state apparatus and militarism are being met with widespread opposition among workers and youth. But this opposition requires a political perspective; otherwise the right-wing will profit from the mounting frustration. The SGP is fighting for the building of a socialist alternative, which connects the struggle against war with the fight against social inequality and capitalism.