

German government crisis intensifies

By Ulrich Rippert
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There are few precedents for the barrage of criticism currently being levelled against the German government. At the same time, conflicts inside the coalition of conservative parties—Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP)—are also intensifying.

This week's *Der Spiegel* magazine featured a headline addressed to chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and her deputy Guido Westerwelle (FDP) declaring, "Call it quits!" The main story in the magazine describes Merkel as a "Trümmerfrau" (referring to the women who cleared away rubble after World War II). The magazine stated that Merkel's chancellorship was in ruins and that nobody, including "Merkel's most faithful supporters", was betting on her government surviving for long. *Der Spiegel* concludes, "In truth this coalition has already failed...the prevailing mood in the chancellery is that the end is nigh."

Also this week, the business magazine *Wirtschaftswoche* appeared with a question prominently featured: "Angela Merkel—is this the end?" and then concluded after several pages with the editorial comment: "Merkel—that is the end." Never in the history of the Federal Republic were the currency and economy in such danger as today, *Wirtschaftswoche* writes. "Never was the level of debt so dramatically high." At the same time, the disorientation of the government was more apparent than ever. The coalition is "reeling without a goal or compass" and showing neither resolution, orientation nor leadership.

The only positive aspect of the crisis, the business magazine concludes, is that a short time ago, the present coalition of parties was regarded as a "dream coalition". But "now Germans know once and for all that they can expect nothing more from this government...the coalition is finished irrespective of

what follows."

Last Saturday, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ran a number of articles speculating on the end of the Merkel government. One editorial accuses the chancellor of having lost control over the coalition. A full-page article headed "Last words" describes the work of the government during the previous week as a "chronicle of failure". And in a commentary, *SZ* leading journalist Heribert Prantl writes: "Never in the history of the German Federal Republic has there been a government as bad as this one."

Joining the chorus of critics, Social Democratic Party faction leader Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for new elections. His call was echoed on Sunday evening by the chair of the Greens' parliamentary group, Renate Künast.

Many commentaries analyse the cabinet crisis predominantly from the standpoint of the personal inadequacies and political weaknesses of the chancellor and her deputy. But such a viewpoint is limited; the causes of the crisis lie more deeply.

The international financial and economic crisis has stripped away the basis upon which previously policy and politics had been conducted. Political coordinates have been disrupted in every sphere of domestic and foreign policy. The former methods of political rule no longer function, while new forms of rule cannot develop without violent conflicts and clashes.

In reaction to the economic collapse of the 1930s and the political disaster that ensued, bourgeois politicians sought to establish a minimum of social reconciliation in the name of the "social free-market economy" and "social partnership". This was the course adopted by all political institutions and parties. It is no coincidence that both the SPD and the conservative CDU/CSU have both referred to themselves as "people's parties". When the governing SPD implemented drastic social cuts between 1998 and 2005 as part of its Agenda

2010, the pro-employees wing of the conservative parties warned of adverse political consequences.

In view of the economic crisis, finance capital requires even deeper social cuts. The recent austerity measures announced by the Merkel government are just the first step. Big business lobbies are demanding even more extensive cuts, such as the abolition of legal protection against dismissal, restrictions on sickness pay and a general dismantling of all social standards.

These measures, however, have led to popular resistance, for which the ruling elite is not yet prepared. Not only are the conflicts between the CDU/CSU and FDP escalating, there are also profound divisions in the conservative camp that threaten to blow these parties apart.

Conflicts are also intensifying in the sphere of foreign policy. In the post-war period, virtually all sides acknowledged Germany's orientation towards the West, in particular towards the US. Since taking power in 2005, Angela Merkel has tried to maintain this tradition and steer a course aimed at intensified transatlantic cooperation. Nevertheless, tensions are increasing at all levels. In the wake of the economic crisis, which has undermined the leading role of America, the US government has sought to shift the burden for the crisis onto Europe. This strain in relations has in turn increased conflicts between the European great powers.

In the run-up to the French-German summit on economic policy that took place on Monday, having been postponed at short notice, commentators spoke of a low point in French-German relations. French president Nicolas Sarkozy had sharply criticised the German austerity measures and demanded more cooperation in light of the increasing crisis in the eurozone.

Against this background of domestic and foreign policy crisis, influential layers of the ruling class have concluded that the Merkel-Westerwelle government is too weak and unstable to effectively solve the problems. In this situation, the Social Democrats and the Greens offer their services as organisations better able to more consistently defend and advance Germany's interests in Europe and internationally.

Many commentators have combined their criticism of the Merkel government with songs of praise for the SPD and Greens, while seeking to claim that the

integration of the Social Democrats into government would limit and moderate the worst effects of the social cuts.

However, the opposite is the case. The SPD praises itself—correctly—as a party with a wealth of experience when it comes to imposing social cuts. It points to its record in power with the Greens when, in close cooperation with the trade unions, the SPD implemented the most far-ranging attacks on the German welfare state in post-war history. The current cabinet crisis is the form in which the ruling elite is seeking to arrive at a government constellation that can best implement the social attacks demanded by big business and the banks. As a result, major class struggles are inevitable.

In this connection, a further comment in the weekend edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* stands out. In the article, journalist Stefan Ulrich compares the political situation in Germany and Europe with the beginning of the French Revolution. “1789 is alive at this moment”, he writes. Even if the mood is not yet so revolutionary in Europe as it was 220 years ago, the discontent that is gathering apace in Greece “under the cuts diktat” is very worrying. “Spain and Portugal could follow if their governments transfer the pressure of the markets completely onto their respective populations,” he writes.

Merkel has dictated to the country a savings package that “impacts the weak, spares the strong and ignores the values of equality and fraternity”, Ulrich adds. This is very dangerous. Marie Antoinette did not act out of malice, “however completely misjudged what was brewing in France”.

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