

SPD leader Gabriel succeeds Steinmeier as German foreign minister

By Johannes Stern
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Last Friday, President Joachim Gauck officially dismissed the Social Democrat Frank-Walter Steinmeier from the post of foreign minister. His successor is the former economics minister and Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman, Sigmar Gabriel. The new economics minister is Gabriel's former state secretary, Brigitte Zypries, who was federal justice minister from 2002 to 2009. On February 12, Steinmeier will be elected to succeed Gauck as president by the Federal Assembly.

As the WSWs wrote in a previous article, the changes, including the chancellor candidacy of former president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz (SPD), are directly linked to the coming to power of Donald Trump. German imperialism is responding by aggressively pursuing its own economic and geopolitical claims, if necessary against its main post-war ally, the United States.

Immediately after Trump's inaugural speech on January 20, Gabriel had already argued that Germany now had to define and pursue its own interests "rigorously." Earlier last week, in an interview with business daily *Handelsblatt*, he stressed it was now a matter of asserting German leadership in Europe and the world.

"Germany should act confidently and not be anxious, let alone submissive," he said. "We are a technologically highly successful exporting nation, with many industrious workers and shrewd entrepreneurs." Germany was "not only stable itself, but an anchor of stability for many other countries in Europe." Trump's first speech as US president showed "He is bitterly serious in what he means. We will have to dress warmly. But there is no reason for timidity."

Gabriel's answer echoes Germany's former great power pretensions that had already found a place in the

foreign ministry under Steinmeier. At the 2014 Munich Security Conference, Steinmeier, together with German President Gauck and Foreign Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), announced that Germany must be "ready to engage in foreign and security policy issues earlier, more decisively, and more substantially." Ever since, the SPD-led foreign ministry has published numerous policy papers, directed at the militarization of Europe under German hegemony. In several articles, Steinmeier himself has spoken of "Germany's new global role."

With Trump's election and Britain's impending exit from the European Union, the German ruling class feels the time is ripe to turn this ambition into action. "Now is the time to strengthen Europe," Gabriel declared in *Handelsblatt*. "Strengthen Europe, develop a common foreign and security policy. ... We do not need 'more Europe,' but a different Europe. One which positions itself collectively in the world. If Trump starts a trade war with Asia and South America, this will open up opportunities for us." Europe must "now quickly work on a new Asia strategy" and "use the space that America frees up."

In this context, Brexit was "being discussed far too defensively," Gabriel blustered. It could "provide a decisive impulse" and "tremendously strengthen a core Europe" led by Germany. The Europe of 28 member states, in "which the European Commission micromanages things and leaves unanswered the major issues of a common foreign and security policy or a common economic and fiscal policy" has "no future."

To put Gabriel's perspective in a nutshell: Germany must now finally rise to become Europe's "disciplinarian" and enforce its geopolitical and economic interests internationally. This is precisely what Humboldt Professor Herfried Münkler, who

maintains close links with the foreign ministry, called for as early as 2015 in his book *Power in the Middle*. Ever since the inauguration of Trump, this is the stated aim of the ruling class.

In the article “German officials demand aggressive response to Trump’s inaugural address”, we reported on the ferocious reactions to Trump’s inauguration. Since then, numerous other newspapers, foreign policy think tanks, business leaders and politicians have joined in the call for German “leadership” in Europe and the world.

“Berlin confronts the difficult task vis-à-vis the USA and within the EU of showing leadership,” warned the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). And Manfred Weber (Christian Social Union, CSU), head of the conservative EPP Group in the European Parliament, threatened in the *Rheinische Post* that if Trump’s message was “America first,” then our answer must be “Europe first.”

The Left Party, which from the beginning has been part of the return of German militarism, is sounding similarly aggressive tones. On the day Gabriel took office, Gregor Gysi, leader of the European Left, said on Deutschlandfunk, “We must find our own role and act sovereignly and, incidentally, boldly against Trump. Otherwise we have no chance. ... If you want Trump to have respect for you, you have act downright impudently and confidently. He likes that. Then he will also learn to deal with you. But if you act obsequiously and then say nothing ... you’re finished with him. He likes tough guys, so you have to act correspondingly tough.”

In 2014, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) published a resolution analysing the historical and political reasons for the return of an aggressive German imperialism. The reason for this was “the deep crisis of global capitalism and the nation-state system on which it is based. When Trotsky analysed the objective driving forces in 1932 that led to the rise of Hitler, he wrote: ‘As the productive forces of Germany become more and more highly geared, the more dynamic power they gather, the more they are strangled within the state system of Europe—a system that is akin to the “system” of cages within an impoverished provincial zoo.’”

The resolution continues: “Hitler’s attempt to break out of this system of cages by violently conquering

Europe left the continent in ruins, costing the lives of 70 million and ending in total military defeat. But the post-war order resolved none of the problems that had led to war. The economic power of the US made possible a temporary stabilisation and the post-war boom. The Cold War not only kept the Soviet Union at bay, but also kept Germany under control. But with the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the period in which German business could conduct its affairs in the wake of the US and the German army could restrict itself to national defence was irrevocably over.”

At the end of the resolution, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit outlines the only viable perspective in the struggle against war, which is now of crucial significance: “The PSG links the struggle against militarism and war with the mobilization of the working class to defend their social and political rights. The fight against imperialism is a struggle against capitalism. All demands arising from opposition to war—the abolition of the Bundeswehr (German military), the immediate withdrawal of German troops abroad, the dissolution of the secret services—require the independent political and revolutionary mobilization of the working class, with the goal of assuming political power and transforming the world economy on a socialist basis.”

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