

Germany: The new Social Democratic ministers

By Peter Schwarz
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On Friday, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) announced the names of its ministers in the incoming coalition government with the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). This completes the list of ministers in the new cabinet. The CDU and the CSU had already named their government members at the end of February. Next Wednesday, Angela Merkel will stand for the fourth time for election as chancellor by the Bundestag, which will be followed by the federal president swearing in her ministers. Nearly six months following the general election, Germany finally has a regular government again.

This will be the most right-wing German government since the overthrow of the Nazi regime. This is clear from the coalition agreement concluded by the CDU/CSU and the SPD. Its focus is on a doubling of military spending, a new round of social cuts, the adoption of the right-wing refugee policies of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the establishment of a police state to suppress social and political resistance.

The ministers have been specifically chosen to implement this reactionary programme. This is clearly demonstrated by the assumption of the Interior Ministry, now extended to include “homeland,” by the CSU chair and former Bavarian state premier Horst Seehofer. In matters of law and order, the CSU stands even further to right than the CDU.

A further expression of this right-wing turn is the inclusion of Jens Spahn, the spokesman for the right-wing conservatives in the CDU, and the former CSU secretary-general Andi Scheuer, a right-wing demagogue, in the new government. Spahn becomes health minister and Scheuer takes the transport portfolio.

The SPD will play a key role in the new cabinet, after rank-and-file members approved the right-wing coalition agreement by a clear two-thirds majority. Although the party returned its worst election result in 70 years, it is disproportionately represented in the new government, with six ministers.

In addition to the foreign and labour ministries, the third key department is now the finance ministry, which, following the Chancellor’s Office, is considered the most influential centre of power. For this reason, Merkel had to hand over the economic affairs ministry to the CDU. The justice, family and environment ministries will continue to be led by the SPD.

The new finance minister will be Hamburg Mayor Olaf Scholz, who as vice chancellor is also responsible for the coordination of the six SPD ministers, and thus has a prominent role.

Scholz is one of the leading representatives of the SPD right-wing. He will strictly adhere to the rigid austerity policies of his predecessor Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU). He has already promised that the goal of a balanced budget is also inviolable for the SPD. This could cause disillusionment, particularly in Paris, where the government of President Macron had hoped for a relaxation of fiscal policy.

As SPD secretary general, Scholz had supported the introduction of massive attacks on welfare and labour rights under the Agenda 2010 and Hartz laws of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder; as labour minister in the first grand coalition under Merkel, he raised the retirement age to 67. As mayor of Hamburg, Scholz recently made a name for himself with the brutal police operation against the G20 protests.

In government, the SPD fulfils a dual function. It has long played a leading role in Germany’s return to militarism and great power politics; Social Democratic Foreign Ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel have long set the tone. But it is also responsible for keeping the growing opposition to social devastation and militarism in the working class under control and suppressing it.

The SPD has largely lost its electoral base among workers. However, it still maintains a dense network of elected officials, civil servants, union officials and full-time works council representatives that stifle any social protest.

With a budget of €140 billion, two fifths of the total budget, the labour ministry plays an important role. In the last government, Andrea Nahles had led this department. Nahles, herself a member of the IG Metall union, maintains close links with the trade unions and has repeatedly spoken at their rallies. Now, as chair of the SPD parliamentary faction and party leader, Nahles takes on the task of bringing the party into line behind the government.

The new labour minister will be Hubertus Heil, who until now has mainly worked behind the scenes. He was twice SPD secretary-general and lost office both times after devastating election defeats, in 2009 and 2017. Like Nahles, Heil is also a

member of IG Metall and has extensive contacts. He is one of the founders of the so-called “network,” an influential association of SPD members primarily concerned with promoting their own careers.

The surprising appointment of Franziska Giffey as Minister of Family Affairs must also be seen in relation to the suppression of social opposition. The mayoress of the Berlin district of Neukölln, who has never held political office at state or federal level, was selected because she ticked several boxes—from the East, a woman, and under 40. Giffey is a specialist in diverting social opposition into right-wing channels. Her political mentor and predecessor in Neukölln was Heinz Buschkowsky, who poisoned the climate against refugees in his books and public appearances. Like Buschkowsky, Giffey also stands for taking a tough course against migrants.

The most controversial decision by Scholz and Nahles, who largely determined the new ministers without wider consultation, concerns the occupation of the foreign ministry. This office will be taken over by the former Justice Minister Heiko Maas, who is a blank sheet in foreign policy terms. Despite intensive research in their archives, the media failed to find a single meaningful statement by Maas on foreign policy issues.

The Saarland-born politician owes his rise above all to his flexibility, his lack of backbone and his contempt for democratic principles. As justice minister, he was responsible for several laws that undermine basic democratic rights. These include the Data Retention Act passed in 2015, which Maas had vehemently rejected half a year earlier, and the Network Enforcement Act, which obliges large companies such as Twitter and Facebook to censor content or face severe penalties. Maas, who with his girlfriend, the actress Natalia Wörner, likes to mix among the Berlin in-crowd and appear on the red carpet of the Berlinale, is also a proponent of the undemocratic #MeToo campaign.

The former foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, was shown the door by Scholz and Nahles, even though the polls currently rate him as the most popular SPD politician, who would have favoured remaining in office. He was supported in this by business representatives, union representatives, finance daily *Handelsblatt*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the 88-year-old philosopher Jürgen Habermas and many others.

The reason for the rift between Gabriel and the SPD leadership cited in virtually all commentary is his personal unpredictability: He has “immense talent,” but also great “destructive power,” he was “flashy,” but also acts “destructively,” has “character defects,” could not “fit in,” was not a “team player” and did not always have his “political temperament” under control.

All that may play a role. Following the membership vote on the coalition agreement, Nahles and Scholz are insisting on “unity.” They do not want to allow open conflicts within the

party leadership to prevent the SPD from implementing the right-wing government program against all opposition. For this reason, when announcing the names of the new ministers, they stressed they were all “team players.”

There are not only personal, but also political reasons for the quarrel with Gabriel. Nobody wants to talk about this because an open dispute about foreign policy would bring to light the plans of all sides and could unleash horror, rejection and resistance.

Gabriel is one of the advocates of close military cooperation with France in order to build the European Union into a political superpower. For this reason, he is also prepared to make concessions in fiscal policy, which other representatives of the SPD and the grand coalition reject.

He has also repeatedly called publicly for Germany to distance itself more clearly from the US. He does not share the hope that “after an exceptional period of the Trump presidency, we will return to our old partnership,” he said three months ago. He has repeatedly called for a relaxation of sanctions against Russia and has made intensive efforts to move closer to Turkey, which is at odds with the United States. There are differences over this both within the SPD and the grand coalition.

On the other hand, there is agreement with Gabriel about the fact that Germany must massively upgrade its military capacity in order to pursue an aggressive great power policy. Germany must formulate its “own interests,” “profess a strategic view of the world” and “should not be content with the cheap claim of pursuing a values-based foreign policy,” he demands. He also coined the phrase that Europe should not renounce the military, “because as the only vegetarian, we will find it damn hard in a world of carnivores.”

The grand coalition is holding firm to this even without Foreign Minister Gabriel, especially Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), who will retain her current post in the new government.

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