

German Christian Democrats select Merkel's favoured candidate as party leader

By Peter Schwarz and Ulrich Rippert
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The former secretary-general of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, is the new leader of the party. At the CDU party congress in Hamburg on Friday, 517 of the 999 delegates voted in her favour. She received only 35 votes more than her main rival, Friedrich Merz. A third candidate, the country's current health minister, Jens Spahn, was eliminated in a first round of voting, having received 157 votes.

Kramp-Karrenbauer was the favoured candidate of the party's outgoing chairperson, Angela Merkel, who announced her resignation after more than 18 years as party leader. Merkel has declared that she intends to remain chancellor until the next scheduled federal election in 2021. Kramp-Karrenbauer gave up her post as premier of the state of Saarland last spring to take over as head of the party apparatus in Berlin following a request from Merkel.

Merkel has been under pressure in the CDU following a succession of electoral defeats. At the start of the congress, she defended her term in office in a half-hour speech and was given a long standing ovation by the delegates. Her "system," Merkel explained, consisted of "concentrating on the subject matter... often in a rather dry manner and without using big words."

In fact, what characterised Merkel's term in office was her ability to implement a reactionary, anti-working class and militarist policy without provoking major class battles or protests. Unlike many veteran CDU members, who grew up in the philistine fog of the Adenauer era or fought in the student revolt of the late 1960s, Merkel, the daughter of a protestant pastor who grew up in the former East Germany, had no ideological blinkers. She was able to straddle very diverse positions with equal conviction and cooperate with the neoliberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, the trade unions and even the Left Party. She had an innate sense that the wealthy middle classes on which these parties are based were moving to the right.

Under Merkel's chancellorship, Germany has developed into the most unequal country in Europe—one where a sixth

of the population lives in poverty and some 40 percent of all workers are employed in precarious forms of work. In Greece, Portugal and other European countries, Merkel's name is synonymous with the brutal austerity programs that have ruined the lives of millions. Under her chancellorship, the German elite has returned to an aggressive great power foreign policy following five decades of military abstinence.

In the agreement on which the current grand coalition government is based, the conservative Union parties, the CDU and the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the SPD agreed to raise defence spending to two percent of gross domestic product by 2024, an increase to more than €75 billion per annum.

This policy of rapid military rearmament, coupled with massive social cuts, restrictions on democratic rights and the build-up of the police and intelligence services is now being intensified. All three candidates for the CDU leadership represent extreme right-wing political positions.

Health Minister Jens Spahn defends the bureaucratic harassment of the unemployed and Hartz IV recipients. Calling himself a representative of the younger generation—he is 38 years old—he has pledged to ensure that "the burden of social costs" is minimised.

Kramp-Karrenbauer promised to implement an uncompromisingly hard line in immigration policy, and Friedrich Merz stood in the race for party leadership as an open advocate of the financial oligarchy and the super-rich.

Merz was supported by the party's business wing, the financial press and conservative media outlets. He retired from active politics 16 years ago and has since earned millions through his business and financial interests. In addition to several supervisory board positions and advisory mandates, he was supervisory board chairman and lobbyist for the German section of BlackRock, the investment management firm known as the world's largest "shadow bank."

As chairman of the CDU, his task would have been to bring the policies of the CDU and federal policies as a whole more in line with the demands of the financial

markets. Two days before the election, Wolfgang Schäuble, the conservative patriarch of the CDU, publicly called for Merz's election and campaigned on his behalf.

In the event, CDU delegates decided against Merz and in favour of Kramp-Karrenbauer, but this does constitute a rejection of Merz's neoliberal views. Rather, delegates hope that, with the support of the party apparatus she represents, Kramp-Karrenbauer will be able to carry through anti-working class and militarist policies more effectively.

In her speech to the party congress, Kramp-Karrenbauer spouted hackneyed phrases about a "new start" and a "new future" to dress up her credentials as a defender of Fortress Europe, austerity policies and European militarism. Europe had to be "made secure against external threats" and "the euro finally made crisis-proof," she said. What was needed was a "Europe that not only formulates, but implements its common security interests with a European security council and a European army." One needed to have "the courage to write this in our election program," she added.

Time and again, Kramp-Karrenbauer emphasized that the task was not only to formulate a right-wing government program, but to implement it with the appropriate harshness. It was necessary to "leave the comfort zone...and translate into deeds that which one could, should and must do..." In the course of her political career she had "learned to lead," and was ready to take "the next step." It was necessary to "embrace change with courage, even if it means breaking with cherished habits."

Domestically, this means the establishment of a veritable police state. "If we have the courage, then we will make a strong state...one that is consistent," she told the delegates. "A state that does not let itself be fooled, not by petty criminals, not by tax fraudsters, not by big criminal clans and not by the anarchistic, chaotic people who ran riot here in Hamburg at the G20 meeting. Here, too, we have to show a clear profile."

The decision in favour of Kramp-Karrenbauer must be seen within the context of the growing economic and social crisis. More and more workers and young people are opposed and hostile to the government's policies.

The change of leadership in Germany's main governing party takes place in the midst of a new eruption of class struggle in Europe. Merkel's closest ally in the European Union, French President Emmanuel Macron, faces a rebellion against horrendous levels of social inequality—a rebellion that is rapidly expanding and finding broad resonance among workers and youth across Europe.

In the face of this growing social storm, the political establishment is closing ranks. At the centre of all the speeches at the CDU congress were appeals for unity, cooperation and determination.

Following her selection, Kramp-Karrenbauer went on to offer both Merz and Spahn leading posts in the party, while calling upon all of the party's factions to work together.

The CDU's main coalition partner, the SPD, reacted enthusiastically. SPD leader Andrea Nahles effusively congratulated the new CDU chairman and offered "intensive and good cooperation."

Congratulations also came from the leadership of the Green Party. "We look forward to exciting political competition and the upcoming debates about the best ideas for our country and Europe," declared the joint chairs of the Greens, Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck.

The Left Party also celebrated the CDU delegates' decision. "Congratulations to AKK [Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer]," wrote Left Party leader Dietmar Bartsch on Twitter. The CDU had "opted for continuity with its choice." Bartsch hailed Merkel's term in office with the words: "Eighteen years as chairman of the CDU. Our respect and appreciation."

The trade unions also responded enthusiastically. Both the head of the German trade union federation (DGB), Reiner Hoffmann, and Frank Bsirske, the leader of Germany's main public service union (Verdi), were present at the party congress. "I have got to know Annette Kramp-Karrenbauer as a person who remains down to earth, even though she has great responsibility," Bsirske said, adding that he looked forward to good cooperation in the future.

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