

Following European elections: EU summit haggles over top jobs

By Peter Schwarz
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The last polling stations in the European elections had barely closed when haggling broke out among the heads of government over the top jobs in the European Union. They gathered for a summit in Brussels on Tuesday to discuss the future leading personnel in the EU.

The meeting concluded without a decision being taken. The conflicting interests could not be reconciled in the short term. To avoid a conflict erupting in public, current EU Council President Donald Tusk was tasked with drafting a list of proposed names ahead of the next EU summit at the end of June.

A total of five top jobs are at stake: the European Commission President, the President of the European Central Bank, the EU Council President, The EU Foreign Policy Representative, and the President of the European Parliament. The first three in particular wield considerable power.

The EU Commission President controls a staff of 32,000 officials and employees, which is closely tied to the 25,000 lobbyists in Brussels who seek to influence the EU. Largely outside of any democratic control, this apparatus exercises substantial influence over all areas of European political and economic life.

The European Central Bank determines EU monetary policy. Unlike the EU Commission, the Central Bank is independent, meaning it is free from any controls or orders from elected committees. Monetary policy is determined within the closed circle of the financial aristocracy, from which the ECB President usually comes.

The EU Council President is responsible for organizing the meetings of the heads of government and the meetings of other departmental ministers, and therefore chiefly responsible for the EU's main executive and legislative periods, although the latter

responsibility is shared with the European Parliament.

To date, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, who always had a majority in parliament, divided the posts up among themselves. Of the current occupants, three are members of the conservative European People's Party, (Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, Council President Tusk and EU Parliament President Antonio Tajani). Although ECB President Mario Dragghi is a non-party figure, he was helped into power in 2011 by the EPP members Silvio Berlusconi, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. The EU Foreign Policy Representative, Federica Mogherini, is a social democrat.

The EPP's dominance of the top officials ensured the significant influence over the EU of Germany, where Angela Merkel of the EPP has held power for 14 years, for most of that time in a coalition with the SPD.

However, social democrats have been forced from power in France and Italy. In the newly-elected European Parliament, the conservatives and social democrats control just 332 of the 751 seats, or 44 percent. In the old parliament, they held 401 seats. To secure a majority, they are now dependent on support from the Liberals or Greens.

The political differences between all of these parties are minimal. They have all shifted sharply to the right over recent years, supporting the EU's austerity policies, its military rearmament, the construction of a police state apparatus and the enforcement of inhumane refugee policies, and they will continue to do so.

This shift to the right has intensified the national divisions within the EU and given them an increasingly aggressive character. This finds expression in the splintering of the European parliament into several competing factions.

French President Emmanuel Macron has made clear

that he will not accept a German Commission President. By contrast, German Chancellor Merkel has insisted on supporting the EPP's Manfred Weber, who ran as the party's lead candidate in the election. The Commission President is proposed by the heads of government, but must receive the parliament's majority support.

In France, the EPP has virtually no representation. Its representative, Les Républicains, won a mere 8 percent of the vote. The Socialist Party did even worse, obtaining just 6.2 percent. Macron's own party, La République En Marche, came second with 22.4 percent, behind Marine Le Pen's right-wing extremist Rassemblement National with 23.3 percent. Macron's party joined the liberal group in the European Parliament, which increased its representation to 105 seats as a result.

The disputes over influence and positions are being driven by more deep-going conflicts that have been developing over a longer period. Macron has repeatedly been met with opposition from Berlin in his attempt to further integrate the EU's finance policy. Frictions also exist over plans to establish a European army and a European arms industry independent of the United States, which both Berlin and Paris support. Paris was outraged when Germany temporarily halted weapons exports to Saudi Arabia following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. And while Macron advocated a hardline stance on Brexit, Merkel indicated her readiness to offer Britain concessions.

With the request for Tusk to propose a list of candidates, these conflicts will now continue to rage behind the scenes, and may be reconciled with a filthy compromise.

The public is being systematically lied to about the real issues that are at stake. For example, the German government justified its support for Weber by referring to the principle of lead candidates, which was introduced at the last European elections but has no legal basis. According to this, only a candidate who stood as the lead candidate for one of the European parties can be elected as Commission President. As a result, so the argument goes, they receive democratic legitimacy.

This argument is evidently absurd. Weber was chosen as the lead candidate by the inner circle of his party, which then won less than a quarter of the vote across

Europe. Even in Germany, a survey found that only 32 percent of voters support Weber becoming Commission President, while 59 percent are opposed.

It remains unclear whether Merkel will insist on appointing Weber. There are suggestions that she may concede in order to secure the position of ECB President for current Bundesbank President Jens Weidmann, who is seen as an austerity hardliner.

Another possible candidate for Commission President is Margarete Vestager, who is currently commissioner for EU competition affairs. The Danish member of the liberal group would receive Macron's support and could be backed by the Greens as the first woman to lead the Commission.

Some observers believe that the haggling over the top jobs could drag on for months. However, one thing is clear: Whatever the makeup of the new Commission being worked out behind the scenes, it will continue the right-wing, anti-working class policies enforced by its predecessor.

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