

German Social Democratic Party leader Nahles resigns

By Peter Schwarz
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On Sunday, Andrea Nahles announced her resignation from the posts of party leader and parliamentary group leader of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD). She was responding to the disastrous results for the SPD in the May 26 European elections and the state election in Bremen.

"The discussion in the parliamentary group and the numerous responses from the party have demonstrated to me that the support necessary for me to carry out the responsibilities of my posts no longer exists," Nahles said in explaining her decision in a written statement. Over recent days she faced sharp criticism within the SPD. The 48-year-old plans to leave politics altogether and will soon resign her seat in the federal parliament.

Politicians from across the political spectrum expressed their high opinion of Nahles and their sympathy for her. "Great respect for Andrea Nahles. Politics should not be so brutal," stated Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch. Kevin Kühnert, the leader of the SPD youth (Jusos), who was an internal critic of Nahles, wrote on Twitter, "We should never, ever, ever treat each other like we've done over the last few weeks. I'm ashamed."

Free Democratic Party leader Christian Lindner praised Nahles as an "honest and competent" politician and warned that the way she was treated should prompt some reflection among politicians.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Nahles had "good character."

Green Party co-leaders Analena Baerbock and Robert Habeck declared their respect for Nahles' "clear decision," and added, "We hope that the SPD quickly resolves its personnel issues so that it can focus with renewed vigour on the tasks at hand."

The crisis in the SPD leadership is the latest stage in the decline of a party that has gone through 15 party

leaders since 1987. In the 41 years prior to that, the SPD had just three leaders.

As with previous leadership changes in the SPD, the media is full of speculation as to its cause. Two of the most common explanations offered in newspaper commentaries are that the SPD failed to communicate its successes in the grand coalition or it has been too focused on itself rather than the future of the country.

All of this is, to put it mildly, nonsense. The reasons for the crisis and decline of the SPD are plain for all to see, and they will not be resolved by reshuffling the leading personnel or rebranding the party. Since the SPD returned to government in 1998 after 16 years in opposition, it has played a leading role in the redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus, and the return of German militarism.

The SPD's Agenda 2010 imposed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who led the government from 1998 to 2005, condemned millions to low wages and meagre pensions, while taxes for the corporations and super-rich were drastically cut. The poorest 10 percent of the population earns 10 percent less today than it did in 1990, the year of German reunification, while the richest 10 percent earns 35 percent more. The widening of this gulf took place mainly during the seven years of Schröder's government.

Since then, the SPD has pushed through similar policies as the junior partner in grand coalitions with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). As labour minister from 2013 to 2017, Andrea Nahles played a leading part in this. The minimum wage she introduced and presented as a great advance is so low that it has had the effect of applying downward pressure on all wages.

In April 2018, she replaced Martin Schulz as party

leader. When elected party leader just one year before, Schulz had been hailed as the saviour of the party.

In the face of bitter opposition in her own ranks, Nahles successfully fought for the SPD's participation in a new grand coalition on the basis of a right-wing programme, including Germany's military rearmament, strict austerity measures, and the embrace of the far-right Alternative for Germany's refugee policy.

As a result of these policies, large sections of the working class, which had long comprised the SPD's main base of support, turned away from the party. Layers of the urban middle class that had previously supported the SPD turned to the Greens. As for the youth, few young people even pay attention to the SPD.

The election results provide resounding confirmation of this development. While the SPD secured 40.9 percent of the vote when it entered government in 1998, it won just 34.2 percent of the vote in 2005. Only 20.5 percent of voters backed the SPD in the 2017 federal elections, and the party had its worst ever result in a national election in last week's European elections, securing just 15.8 percent of the vote. In the city state of Bremen, where the SPD has governed without interruption since the end of World War II, it lost its position as the largest party to the CDU.

The SPD's anti-worker policies are not the outcome of personal mistakes or tactical miscalculations. They arise inevitably out of the social and political character of the party, which is based on privileged sections of the middle class, state officials and trade union bureaucrats. It is a party that unconditionally defends the interests of German big business, against both its international rivals and the working class. The SPD's rightward evolution and decline will continue, regardless of who replaces Nahles.

It remains unclear how Nahles' resignation will affect the grand coalition. Her predecessor as SPD parliamentary group leader, Thomas Oppermann, indicated that the SPD would withdraw from the government. "We are faced with the question, will there be a Groko (grand coalition) at Christmas," stated Oppermann.

Chancellor Merkel, CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and CSU parliamentary group leader Alexander Dobrindt appealed to the SPD to remain in the government. "I assume that the SPD will

resolve its personnel issues quickly and not impact the grand coalition's ability to function," said Kramp-Karrenbauer. As for the CDU, "We continue to support the grand coalition."

Thuringia's minister president, Bodo Ramelow of the Left Party, also indirectly appealed to the SPD to stay in the grand coalition. "Gloating is not really appropriate, but rather concern," he wrote on Twitter. "One can see in Italy what happens when the party system completely falls apart. A comedian with the Five Star Movement helps the neo-fascists into the saddle and holds the stirrups for them. No thank you."

The Greens, which are currently well ahead of the SPD in opinion polls, indicated that they would not be prepared to enter government if the SPD withdrew, and that they would instead support new elections. However, neither the CDU nor the SPD has an interest in this, since they would both lose massively.

Representatives of big business also warned against new elections or an early end of the grand coalition. Mario Ohoven, president of the mid-sized business association, said, "Given the beginnings of a downturn in Germany and global crises, the business community needs security for the future and stability. New elections and complicated negotiations to form a government would destabilise business at home and abroad. Germany cannot afford a months-long standstill in government."

There is therefore much to suggest that the grand coalition will remain in power despite Nahles' resignation and will continue its right-wing, anti-worker policies, even though its support in the population continues to collapse.

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