



# Germany: The "traffic light" coalition

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Almost three months after the general election, Germany has a new government. The coalition, led by the Social Democrats, SPD, and including the Liberals of the FDP and the Greens, is nicknamed the "traffic light coalition" after the Red, Yellow and Green of the parties' colours.

## Framework conditions

One thing is already obvious: The fact that at the federal level, for only the second time, a three-party coalition is now needed to form a government is in itself a sign of the dwindling stability of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. The government is facing the increasingly rough seas of competition for world market shares.

These will be all the more stormy if a recession is added to the costs of the climate, the pandemic and the EU crises, and the struggle to redivide the world. So, we can expect that the ship of government will have to sail anything but calm seas and will even be threatened with capsizing. Survival for the whole of the legislative period is by no means certain.

The crew that Olaf Scholz, the new SPD Chancellor, has put together seems to be no nearer a clear course than the caretaker federal government. Although the deadline for emergency measures has been extended beyond 15 December and more thought is being given to compulsory vaccination, the expectation of an early end to the pandemic is basically being maintained. The strategy lurches back and forth between vaccination campaigns and deliberately allowing infection of the young. The overriding priorities are, first, to avert a lockdown for big business and then to avoid overloading intensive care units and hospitals.

## Queer political awakening?

The agreed coalition programme announces comprehensive reforms in gender and family policy, this is indeed the most progressive chapter. Equality between women and men is to be achieved by 2030. Women are to be better protected against violence and the gender pay gap is to be overcome. To this end, the Pay Transparency Act is to be further developed and legal action is to be simplified. Why this should be enough to overcome this expression of the systematic social oppression of women is anyone's guess. In any case, the gender-specific division of labour will not be scratched. Rather, the opposite is to be expected.

The new, and old, Minister of Labour, Hubertus Heil, wants to grant a 40 percent subsidy to families who make use of "everyday helpers". This is likely to benefit mainly high earners, who will be helped shunt the housework onto poorly paid migrant women by the increase of the mini-job ceiling (see below).

The ban on advertising abortions (§ 219a) is to be abolished and abortion is to be included in medical training. The statutory health insurance funds are to pay. However, the extremely tight conditions for legal abortions, only after compulsory "counselling" and within the first 12 weeks, mean it is questionable whether the reforms will mean more doctors actually perform the procedure.

The reactionary transsexual law will be replaced by a law on self-determination, according to which self-disclosure is sufficient to change the entry in the personal register. The costs of gender reassignment treatments are paid by the GKV. Trans and intersex persons who were affected by forced operations due to previous law are to be compensated, gaps in protection in the prohibition of surgery for intersex children are to be closed.

These improvements are undoubtedly to be welcomed. With the exception of the shortcomings mentioned, the other gender and family policy reforms also represent progress. However, their funding is another matter (like the cuts in funding for women's shelters) and this will be a necessary battlefield to ensure the implementation of progressive rules for the working class and gender oppressed.

### Civil rights

This section sounds better than it is. What it is dealing with, after all, is the surveillance powers of the state - actually, the restriction of civil rights.

Security laws are to be reviewed by the end of 2023 ("surveillance bill"). A "freedom commission" will advise responsible bodies on proposed legislation. Video surveillance is to take place only at "crime hotspots", but the state will define where they are. The state will still be allowed to retain data and secretly install spyware on the devices of those it suspects of being criminals or terrorists. The Democracy Promotion Act is supposed to strengthen "civil society" by 2023, but, on closer inspection, the compulsory commitment to the "free democratic basic order" points to a possible "extremism clause" (that could be used for accusations of antisemitism against BDS, for example). The coalition paper does not address the recommendations of the parliamentary inquiry into the involvement of informers and state agents in the activities of the fascist terror group the National Socialist Underground, NSU.

The last 30 years have been marked by an unchecked sharpening of policy law and order. The announced "increase in efficiency" in criminal proceedings suggests a continuation of this. Meanwhile, the coalition wants to cautiously legalise the personal use of cannabis and check the security laws for compatibility with civil rights. All in all, however, such small improvements should not obscure the fact that the course towards an expansion of the state's repressive rights will be continued, albeit cleared of some conservative ballast.

### Minimum wage and citizen's income

It is to rise to 12 euros/hour. This represents a step forward that should not be underestimated and will be a material improvement for millions. According to the Hans Böckler Foundation, 8.6 million workers currently earn less than 12 euros/hour. What remains uncertain is whether the increase will be introduced quickly. An earlier discussion paper proposed its introduction in the first year, but the coalition agreement is silent about deadlines. From the time it comes into force, however, the mini-job ceiling will also rise from 450 to 520 euros.

According to labour market researchers, this is where most violations of the minimum wage occur. For example, most mini-jobbers do not receive holiday pay or sick pay. Recently, 77 percent were on less than 11.50 euros per hour. According to an IAB study from October 2021, they displace up to 500,000 jobs in small companies that are subject to social security contributions. For the unemployed, these form more of a ghetto than a bridge to compulsory social insurance.

Payments under the Hartz IV reform of benefits are now called "citizen's income". In the election campaign, the Greens demanded a 50-euro increase in the standard rate and an end to sanctions, but from 2022 the increase will remain at the 3 euros planned by the previous government. Those receiving the citizen's income will also be obliged to cooperate and be subjected to bureaucratic harassment.

Apart from tariff compliance for public contracts, the traffic light troika has little else planned. There are no plans to make it easier for collective agreements to be declared generally binding. The downward trend in collective bargaining coverage will continue. Thus, even the increase in the minimum wage, the only tangible promise for wage earners, threatens to be eaten up by further deregulation, restructuring and inflation. The citizen's income is already turning out to be a sham.

### Housing

The federal government only wants to review the right of municipalities to buy homes that private housing corporations choose to sell, thereby bringing them into the public sector. This right was overturned by the Federal Administrative Court and both the SPD and the Greens had promised to reframe the law to overcome the objections of the Court.

There is no provision for a clause that would allow the federal states to introduce a rent cap. We recall: the Federal Constitutional Court had recently rejected this rent regulation by the Land of Berlin. The largely ineffective rent cap will not be followed up. Increases in rent for existing tenancies will be slightly curtailed from 15 percent to 11 percent for a period of 3 years. The planned introduction of a new non-profit housing association remains the only consolation. The SPD and the Greens had campaigned for a "rent freeze". A neo-liberal course in the housing sector is, at best, only temporarily camouflaged by the invocation of, above all private! new construction. The traffic light agreement contains almost exclusively deteriorations.

### Health and care

This post is the most unloved in the government. A few improvements are promised. For example, binding staffing levels are to apply in hospitals in the short term, initially in the form of the Nursing Staff Regulation 2.0 drawn up by the public sector union, ver.di, the German Nursing Council and the Hospital Association. Furthermore, the distinction between the outpatient and inpatient sectors is to become more flexible. However, the federal government will not support the Länder in their investments within the framework of dual financing.

Attention must be paid to two points in particular: The exclusion of nursing from the flat rates per case since January 2020 did not lead to an automatic increase in staff. In 2021, there will even be 4,000 fewer intensive care beds in Germany than in 2020. Since then, nursing staff have been increasingly burdened with tasks that were previously carried out by so-called auxiliary staff. As much as an integrated and flexible health system is desirable in itself, it must be assumed that the new coalition does not intend to strengthen the public sector at the expense of the private sector.

Above all: everything is ultimately subject to funding. There is a shortage of 130,000 employees in the health sector. The necessary funds to end the nursing crisis and the overloading of hospitals are at best only vaguely promised. The continuation of the misery is thus pre-programmed.

### Migration

Here, too, there are some welcome declarations of intent. People with residence permits that are only extended for a short period of time are to be given more chances to obtain a permanent right to stay. Refugees with protection status will be allowed to bring their relatives with them.

These are just some of the promises. The introduction of a points system ("opportunity card") is supposed to establish a second pillar in immigration law. It is nicely packaged, but in the end its purpose is to make it easier to recruit those migrant workers who are needed by capital and, conversely, to reject those who cannot be utilised. In effect this only means the segregation among migrants is reorganised in the interest of the economy.

At the same time, the new federal government is planning a "repatriation offensive", that is, accelerated deportations of rejected asylum seekers, alongside a reduction of "irregular migration". The external fortress of the EU will thus be further strengthened.

### Financial, fiscal and defence policy

It is no coincidence that FDP leader, Christian Lindner, holds the post of finance minister. The debt cap is to be reintroduced from the year after next. There are to be no tax increases. All talk of a tax on the rich by the Greens and especially the SPD, be it an increase in the top tax rate, wealth tax, etc., turns out to be so much hot air. Where the necessary investments in, for example, energy transition and digitalisation are to come from, the mass of the population will soon see in their own wallets.

In view of the Corona and restructuring costs, the traffic lights are in a quandary, so the logical choice is yellow, the FDP: overall, capital needs to be renewed but, at the same time, there is a need to save. While the coalition will promote big capital and its restructuring in the name of modernisation, digitalisation and ecological change, the debt limit will tighten the thumbscrews in the public sector. How is the expansion of education, schools and universities to be achieved? Through private investors. The neoliberal side of the traffic lights sends its regards.

In the coalition agreement, there is no written commitment to the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. But the procurement of armed drones, only permitted for guaranteed democratic killings, is agreed to, just as the maintenance of a credible deterrent potential, including Germany's nuclear participation, of course, worldwide military operations and participation in the confrontation policy of the USA are granted the written word. Under Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, of the Green party, the transatlantic arms race and threats of aggression are reaffirmed. Even if the Federal Ministry of Defence falls into the hands of the SPD these core government departments reveal what is threatening, deterioration across the board.

### Environmental policy

Speaking of warming, wasn't there meant to be something about the earth? Will the valiant knight Robert Habeck, with his new super-ministry for the economy and the environment, take up his sword for nature? Answer: more likely a toothpick! When it comes to the coal phase-out, the woolly formula of the exploratory paper has been adopted: "ideally by 2030" instead of 2038. The CO2 certificate price, a "socially unjust", indirect, non-progressive mass tax, is not to fall below 60 euros/tonne.

Meanwhile, the coal-fired power plants continue to run. Their electricity will be called up first, because natural gas, which is cheaper in the greenhouse gas balance, is more expensive. By 2030, the coalition agreement envisages an 80 percent share of renewable energies in the electricity market. In 9 years, however, the generation of green electricity would then have to be doubled. The most ambitious targets are for offshore wind energy. This is where the big companies are most involved.

The situation is even worse in the transport sector, which accounts for more than 1/5 of greenhouse gas emissions in Germany. There is no end in sight to the tax exemption for paraffin and the subsidies for diesel. The new car minister will be the FDP's Volker Wissing.

### Conclusion

"Dare more progress", "Alliance for freedom, justice and sustainability": these smug formulas from the arsenal of the public dumbing down industry called advertising cannot hide the fact that the masses of wage earners will have to defend themselves in the long run, especially in view of the international conditions described at the beginning. The gift package that Uncle Olaf has conjured up for the children of his subjects is proving to be poisoned bait.

Facing all progressives is always Finance Minister Lindner, who must approve the necessary cash for the flowery dreams of our colourful trinity. He has his hand on the decisive lever of power. This justifies the verdict that ultimately the most right-wing party, the FDP, was able to put on the best show in the coalition negotiations. Steps to finance pensions, more private investment, loosening of working time rules underpin this assessment. Finally, it should be noted: East Germany, with its special problems, is mentioned only once in 178 pages.

As foreign minister, almost-chancellor Annalena Baerbock will follow in the well-trodden footsteps of her Green predecessor, "Yugoslavia bomber" Joschka Fischer. Bound by transatlantic loyalty, she will follow an increasingly confrontational course against China and Russia (Ukraine, Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline).

In many respects, the coming years could be decisive for a longer period. In the climate crisis, it will be very clear in four years' time how things stand with the 1.5 °C. The struggle to redivide the world is pushing for decisive battles sooner or later. The restructuring and renewal of industry is taking place now, not because it is crucial for climate protection, but crucial for the position of German capital in the world. Layoffs, cutbacks, poverty will increase.

### Why we need an action conference

The shift to the right has left deep traces. The crumbling of the bourgeois camp can be seen not least in the 3-party government. Depending on how it sells itself to the masses, it can delay or intensify the dying of the "bourgeois centre" and the shift to the right. In the face of new refugee movements, pandemics and multiple social decline, right-wing populist to fascist forces from AfD to Dritte Weg are already lying in wait.

The strengthening of bourgeois and right-wing forces is only one possible development, however. A progressive alternative to this can become a real possibility but only if the reorganisation of the working class is tackled, if it rises to become the central, independent fighting force against crisis, capital and climate catastrophe. The victory of the Berlin referendum to expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co. or the huge demonstrations of the environmental movement and anti-racist mobilisations in recent years show that new centres of potential resistance have also emerged.

These mobilisations must be strengthened and at the same time the political consciousness of activists must be raised. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a debate on the goals and means of our struggle and how we can really connect these struggles. There needs to be a concrete starting point for organising this discussion and a common plan of struggle to counter it: an action conference. It should focus on defining concrete demands and the means of struggle to jointly counter the attacks of Red-Green-Yellow and capital.

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