

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Ecologism in, technology and jobs out

The new red-green coalition government is willfully putting its head in a noose of its own making.

On Oct. 20, the “red-green” coalition program was signed by the two partners, the Social Democrats and the Greens. The new government, which will take office immediately after the formal vote in the newly convened parliament on Oct. 27, has a majority of 21 seats. It would be a solid basis for governing the nation in normal times, but times are not normal. And, the new government has the same flaw as the old one: It believes it can handle things with a strong dose of populism, particularly the brand of ecologism which the new red-green team is obsessed with. The new team wants to “transform” Germany from an industrial nation into one that “puts ecology first.”

The developments around the nomination of the new Economics Minister tell a lot about this government: Just before the election campaign started, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) candidate for Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, picked a computer dealer, Jost Stollmann, as his choice for Economics Minister. Stollmann was thought to be a representative of “modern” industry, i.e., the service sector, and he was not even a member of the SPD. He was intended as a symbol of the populist, “nonideological,” and “unprejudiced” image that Schroeder wanted to put across to voters.

But, when the election campaign began, Stollmann was not available for the media—the SPD first sent him on summer vacation, and then allowed him to make a few public remarks with no relevance to the SPD party platform. Many observers suspected that Stollmann would not survive election day as a nominee for the Economics

Ministry, but would quickly be out of the picture, even before the new cabinet was formed.

And indeed, after Sept. 27, it became clear that the Economics Ministry would be cut back, to serve the personal ambitions of Finance Minister-designate Oskar Lafontaine, by making his Finance Ministry even more influential. In the current economic crisis, a powerful Economics Ministry would make a lot of sense, but the Social Democrats do not share this view.

Ecology-minded as the SPD leadership around party chairman Lafontaine is, they think that jobs can be created through ecology projects; the traditional role of the Economics Ministry in supporting heavy industry, such as coal, steel, and ship-building, does not interest the SPD and its Green coalition partner. They want to move into the post-industrial age, which implies that they want to phase out state support for industry, and for the nuclear technology sector. They believe that globalization and downsizing, even as the global financial system disintegrates, are just the “natural transition” from the industrial era to a service-based economy and ecologism. There is therefore no room in a red-green cabinet for an Economics Ministry.

“All that is left for this guy Stollmann,” as a leading Social Democrat commented in Bonn in mid-October, “is, maybe, to compose the web page for the ministry. All the rest he can simply forget.” When the coalition talks between the SPD and the Greens came to a close on Oct. 19, it became clear that the Economics Ministry would be a rump ministry in the red-

green design. Stollmann promptly announced his resignation, and the man who got the nomination for the post instead was Werner Mueller.

Mueller is an outright populist and opportunist. While working at VEBA, one of Germany’s leading energy producers, he developed the idea in the late 1980s, when there was a tide of anti-nuclear protests in Germany, that “nuclear energy is meaningful but not feasible, because it is not accepted by the population.” He played a role in VEBA’s abrupt pull-out from the planned national project for nuclear fuel reprocessing in Wackersdorf, in April 1989. And from 1990 on, he served Gerhard Schroeder, who had just been elected governor of the state of Lower Saxony, as adviser on energy questions.

During the eight years since, Mueller has promoted the idea of an “energy policy consensus between the power sector and the ecologists,” which would be an “ordered withdrawal from nuclear technology.” This is exactly the policy that he will implement now, as Economics Minister in the first national red-green coalition government. The first thing Mueller announced upon his nomination on Oct. 19, was that among his prime tasks would be to “organize a soft withdrawal from nuclear technology.”

Thus, 40,000 highly skilled jobs in the German nuclear sector, plus twice as many in the supply sectors, are going to be eliminated. Unemployment will rise in Germany, on top of the 8 million that already are jobless. Moreover, the new government is committed to pursuing a balanced budget as a top priority. But, fewer Germans with a job means less tax revenue. With its “ecology first, production second, jobs last” policy, the red-green government will soon run into even bigger troubles than the government it is replacing.