

Austrian Social Democrats name former rail executive to head party and government

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Just days after the resignation of Werner Feymann as Austrian chancellor and leader of the Social Democrats (SPÖ), the party agreed on railways boss Christian Kern as his successor. The self-declared “non-political” candidate was the favourite of the party’s right wing. He stands for a further intensification of austerity policies and closer collaboration with the right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Feymann announced he was immediately stepping down as chancellor and party leader on Monday. His resignation was the result of a long-term rightward development of the SPÖ, which led to a massive loss of support among voters. The low point thus far was the presidential election at the end of April, when SPÖ candidate Rudolf Hundstorfer, a long-standing trade union bureaucrat, achieved little more than 10 percent of the vote and failed to make the second round.

Feymann assumed the post of SPÖ leader in 2008 and was elected to the position of chancellor shortly afterwards. In alliance with the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), he pursued a strict austerity course at the expense of the working class. Under his government, the pension age was increased, large numbers of public sector jobs were cut and wages reduced.

Almost all regional state party organisations spoke out in support of Kern as Feymann’s successor, including the Burgenland party under Hans Niessl, which is currently in a coalition with the FPÖ. The chairman of the Austrian trade union confederation (ÖGB), Erich Foglar, also spoke out Wednesday in favour of Kern. Foglar is pushing for closer cooperation and more future alliances with the FPÖ. Coalitions with the FPÖ, in his opinion, are “not to be condemned in a democracy.”

The head of the construction workers’ union, Josef

Muchitsch, appealed for Kern to be appointed party leader and chancellor. In Kern, someone with the expertise but free from influence was entering politics, according to the Burgenland deputy, who is also an advocate of closer collaboration with the right-wing extremists. Helmut Leitenberger, the SPÖ leader in the city of Leibnitz, remarked that now “an opening to the FPÖ [is] in sight.”

The party’s leader in the state of Vienna, Michael Häupl, who will lead the SPÖ until Kern’s appointment, said on Friday that with regard to cooperation with the FPÖ, a “catalogue of criteria” would be drafted. “If this could be the way out, I will not curtail this discussion,” Häupl said. Häupl was the last prominent SPÖ politician to speak out against coalitions with the FPÖ.

According to initial announcements, there will be changes in cabinet. However, it is certain that defence minister Peter Doscozil will remain in office. He is a representative of the far-right of the party that called for a strict policy of sealing the borders to refugees. Doscozil is also backed by Niessl. Niessl hailed Kern as a “consummate professional.”

The replacement of Feymann by a representative of big business was evidently the subject of discussion within the SPÖ for some time. Media manager Gerhard Zeiler, who was considered for party leader along with Kern, openly admitted on Thursday’s edition of the ZiB 2 news programme that he and Kern had been working to remove Feymann for a year. “We both had a role to play and agreed that a change in personnel within the SPÖ was necessary,” said Zeiler. The party congress decision not to enter coalitions with the FPÖ, which is still in force, was described by Zeiler as wrong.

The 50-year-old Kern was born in the Vienna

working class district of Simmering. After studying publishing, the son of a secretary and electrical fitter began his career as a press spokesman in the state office of the SPÖ. Thanks to his political restraint, he rose rapidly within the party and used this to advance his professional career. The SPÖ assisted him to join the state-owned electricity provider. In 2010, he was appointed manager of the state-owned train operator ÖBB.

In 2014, Kern's annual wages were increased to €700,000. Prior to this, he put an end to the company's losses by slashing costs. His predecessor in the leadership of the ÖBB, Martin Huber, lost over €300 million through high-risk speculative activities. Kern subsequently restructured the loss-making freight transportation operation RCA. In the process, 4,000 jobs have been cut since 2009. The latest report on the position of the ÖBB presented by Kern several weeks ago indicated a profit for the 2015 financial year of €193 million.

Kern will now push through cuts to pensions, health care and education already initiated by the Feymann government. The ÖVP is already demanding the de-bureaucratisation of the economy and a discussion about capping social welfare.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* formulated the basic hopes as follows: "The literal corruption of SPÖ and ÖVP at the federal, state and municipal levels led Austria's politics and economy into torpor. Christian Kern, the successful rail manager, could be the right man as chancellor to put an end to the reform log-jam in Austria."

Christian Neumeyer, head of the Austrian association of industrialists, also demanded rapid reforms to "break through the rigidity." He warned that Austria would lose "additional ground in international competitiveness otherwise." Whether or not the FPÖ participates in a future government was for him a secondary issue, because he was not concerned with parties, but about the business location.

The ÖVP formulated its demands on Tuesday for a continuation of the grand coalition with the SPÖ. This included strict adherence to the upper limit for asylum seekers. In the event that Kern softens his stance on border security and asylum policy, ÖVP leader Mitterlehner threatened "discussions" which would lead to the end of the coalition and fresh elections.

Political expert Peter Filzmeyer stated on Deutschlandfunk that he considered a "further change in course by the SPÖ on refugee policy" to be impossible.

This became clear with the government's latest plans for internal security. Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP) presented the "secure Austria" action plan. It proposes an increase of "the intensity of deportations" for those with no right to remain in the country. Justice minister Wolfgang Brandstätter called at the same time for "strict border control management."



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