

"Modern" German Social Democrats

Wolfgang Clement--Prime Minister of North-Rhine Westphalia

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No sooner had Gerhard Schröder been appointed candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for the chancellorship of Germany than Johannes Rau, the prime minister of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), was replaced.

Rau was the last incumbent SPD politician of the generation who came to prominence amidst the reform policies of the 60s and 70s. Although during his long years of office, thousands upon thousands of jobs in the steel and mining industry were destroyed, Rau still embodied a past era of social democratic policies: an era of social balances and compromise.

On May 27, with the votes of the SPD and the Greens, Wolfgang Clement was elected new prime minister of the parliament of North-Rhine Westphalia, the most populated of the German states with 18 million inhabitants. His election symbolizes a change of the policy carried over the past years by the SPD. In his own words, Clement sees himself as a representative of the 'modern', the (hinting at Tony Blair's New Labour Party) 'New SPD'.

In his government statement and with the first measures he initiated as prime minister, Clement made clear which way the wind was now blowing. In light of state debts of over 130,000 million marks he announced drastic and painful cuts and austerity measures. He reduced the size of his cabinet on the grounds that: 'only then do we have the credibility to demand cuts from the citizens as well.'

His decision to unite, in particular, the ministries of justice and of the interior earned Clement a great deal of criticism. The objection was that the subordination of justice and police to one and the same authority would undermine the constitutional division of powers.

In a two-page letter of protest the presidents of the higher regional courts of NRW warned: 'the shameful

dependence of the judiciary on political convenience ... [occurred] in our country only a few decades ago,' (i.e., during the time of the fascists). Even the more conservative minded president of the Federal High Court, Karlmann Geiß, severely condemned social democracy's indifference towards constitutional traditions: only during Nazi rule was there no separation of the portfolios for justice and interior ministries in Germany.

The fusion of the ministry for employment and social affairs with that of urban development, culture, education and sport is also revealing. Clement views art, culture and education exclusively from an economic angle. In his government statement he says in this regard: 'Culture creates jobs. That is why we conduct a discussion about how cultural and educational policy, employment market and economic policy can be more tightly linked up.'

Education as well is to be subordinated to purely economic views and interests. Already in March of this year Clement declared in an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine: 'I think, for example, that it is correct to merge the economy with education, science and research. They belong together.'

In his government statement Clement then specified more precisely what he meant by this: 'strengthened awareness for quality and performance' and 'more autonomy and independence for schools and universities and colleges'. 'The quality of teaching and research' should be increased 'through evaluation, performance incentives and arranged targets', 'shorter courses of studies qualifying for a profession and more differentiated qualifications' and 'competition and co-operation between universities and colleges' should be introduced.

Clement wants to massively reduce the state's personnel costs. The reduction of over 22,000 jobs, already agreed to in 1995, should be accelerated and 'the structure for

wages and gratuities for the civil service should be adapted to the public financial situation.' A budget law agreed to at the beginning of July cuts benefits which had been previously guaranteed, or axes them completely. Those hit by this are the civil servants and employees of the state administration. Subsidies in case of sickness and ministerial salary benefits will be cut. In addition to this, advanced maintenance payment for families and transport costs for school children will be cut--something which severely hits a large section of the population.

Clement acclaims the starting up of new businesses and increased desire to become 'economically independent' as a way out of million-strong unemployment.

During his time as NRW minister of the economy he demonstrated what this looks like in practice. The Center for Cartoon Film, HDO, in Oberhausen was considered to be the favorite project of the new media sector and was subsidized with 100 million marks of taxpayers' money. A total of just 25 jobs were created there and these are now already under threat by impending bankruptcy of the business. With yearly incomes of up to 240,000 marks plus company car and expense allowances of 70,000 marks a year since 1990, at least the managers of the company enjoyed excellent earnings and an exquisite life style.

This generosity towards the rich and the better off transforms itself into its complete opposite when the issue is supporting the unemployed and those on social benefits, as well as the unemployed youth.

The newspaper from the Ruhr area, WAZ, asked the newly elected Prime Minister Clement at the end of May: 'Are there areas which are taboo with regard to cutbacks?' Clement's answer: 'Basically no.' To the question: 'What does that mean for the individual?' Clement replied: 'For example, those who can get a job, have to take it, otherwise they will be ineligible for unemployment benefits. We have guideline regulations which allow us to do this. They are not used enough.'

Clement praised a lot of measures the state of NRW had already started up to make the unemployed, with due pressure, accept whatever jobs come up. All these measures are based on placing relief payments for unemployment benefits or social security benefits at the disposal of companies instead of the people who have run into difficulties. This is how businesses are provided with cheap labor.

To *Der Spiegel's* question as to whether he would consider withdrawing the cuts made to pensions and wage payments in case of sickness, if the SPD should win the

elections, Clement replied: 'I won't change my mind: there should be no withdrawal of measures if this leads to an increase of national insurance contributions. We need a reduction of national insurance contributions.'

On the issue of Europe Clement advocates a regionalised Europe. In *Der Spiegel* he declared that he considered his position as prime minister of NRW as more important than the office of national minister of the economy in a future federal government of Germany in Berlin. Clement said: 'NRW is one of the greatest export nations of the world. Sixty percent of our exports go to our European neighbors. We are more intricately bound to the Netherlands than to the German state of Saxony. NRW, Lower Saxony, the Netherlands, Belgium and the North of France--that is our economic region. We are in a breath-taking process of denationalization and Europeanisation.'

Clement speaks out here in favor of a regional location policy which promotes the stronger areas at the expense of the weaker ones, just as his social and budget policies are leading to an increasingly clear social division between rich and poor. Like the Bavarian prime minister Stoiber of the CSU, he thinks that the financial contributions made by German states such as NRW and Bavaria to the poorer states should be reduced. Clement thereby casts to the winds the dangers of increasing regional antagonism such as that which has led to civil war in the Balkans.

See the election web site of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)

[In German]

See Also:

Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) Election Programme 1998:

For an independent political movement of the working class

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