

Germany: SPD leadership rallies behind former minister threatened with expulsion

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8 August 2008

Leading members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany have recently rallied to make clear their opposition to the expulsion from the party of former SPD “Superminister” Wolfgang Clement.

On July 3, an arbitration committee in Clement’s political home state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) recommended the expulsion from the SPD of the former federal economics and labour minister and NRW prime minister following his intervention in the Hesse state election held last February.

In the run-up to the Hesse election, Clement published an article in the daily *Die Welt* in which he criticised the energy policies of the SPD’s leading candidate in Hesse, Andrea Ypsilanti. Clement, who has been a member of the supervisory board of energy company RWE Power AG since 2006, expressed his particular opposition to Ypsilanti’s call to replace nuclear and coal-generated power with renewable energy. RWE AG is Germany’s second-largest energy company and also runs nuclear plants. Clement then followed up his public criticism of Ypsilanti by bluntly declaring on television that he wouldn’t vote for her.

Coming from one of the leading figures in the SPD this amounted to a recommendation not to vote for the party in Hesse, thereby allowing the Christian Democrat candidate, right-winger Roland Koch, to maintain his grip on the state.

The NRW arbitration committee has made clear that it only arrived at its expulsion decision following a protracted process. The committee of experienced jurists initially imposed a reprimand and was prepared to let the matter lie as long as Clement agreed in future not to counsel against voting for a SPD candidate.

Clement refused, telling the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper: “I won’t pin myself down in terms of when, how and where I express my opinion in the future.” After deliberating, the arbitration committee decided to recommend Clement’s expulsion from the party.

Clement has already lodged an appeal against the decision through his lawyer, former SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily. His appeal will be heard by the SPD national panel which will then make a binding decision.

In the meantime, the SPD leadership has rushed to defend Clement’s services to the party and initiate a “damage control” operation, aimed at both ensuring his continued membership of the party and quelling any real discussion over the political significance of the affair.

German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück who worked closely with Clement for many years in NRW and succeeded him as state premier rushed to the defence of his mentor. Steinbrück expressed his support for Clement’s legal challenge to the expulsion ruling and argued that Clement’s behaviour fell within the bounds of what was tolerable in a “broad church.” “The SPD can only remain a party that represents all Germans if it tolerates a broad spectrum of opinion and personalities,” Steinbrück said.

Steinbrück’s reference to “a broad spectrum of opinion and personalities” should be taken with many grains of salt. The SPD has a long and inglorious history of expelling left-wing critics from the party,

beginning with Hugo Haase in 1915. In the exceptional case when a right-winger like Clement is threatened with expulsion, the party leadership closes ranks immediately.

The next figure to step up to the plate to defend Clement was Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a possible SPD candidate for chancellor in federal elections to be held next year. Steinmeier is a close confidante of former chancellor Gerhard Schröder and was appointed foreign minister at Schröder’s instigation. According to Steinmeier, Clement’s possible expulsion was “not exactly encouraging” and in an interview with the weekly *Der Spiegel*, he defended the work done by Clement as part of the Schröder government. “The reforms that we pushed through together with Wolfgang Clement opened many wounds” in the party, “But they won’t heal any faster if Clement has to leave.”

Other leading SPD figures, such as former chairman Franz Müntefering and the federal Finance Minister Hans Eichel have also issued statements in support of Clement. Schily, Clement’s lawyer, has made clear where he stands in the matter, describing any decision to expel Clement from the SPD as “suicidal” for the party.

The current party chairman, Kurt Beck, has also sought to smooth over the affair and has stressed on a number of occasions the necessity of taking into account Clement’s record of services to the party. According to SPD General Secretary Hubertus Heil, a national arbitration panel is to be set up to assess Clement’s case and consider his “lifetime contribution” to the party.

Any balanced account of this contribution must come to the conclusion that throughout his political career Wolfgang Clement has been a devoted advocate of the interests of German big business and an avid opponent of the social and democratic rights of the working class.

After training as a journalist, Clement made rapid strides inside the SPD, which he joined in 1970. Between 1981 and 1986 he was spokesman for the SPD federal executive and a deputy federal party whip from 1985 to 1986. Throughout this period he continued to work as a journalist—as deputy editor of the *Westfälische Rundschau* and then editor-in-chief of the *Hamburger Morgenpost* from 1986 to 1989.

Although he is currently complaining about his treatment at the hands of the NRW arbitration committee, Clement was active in supporting the expulsion of left-wingers in the SPD as far back as 1973. In that year he wrote an article for the *Westfälische Rundschau* headlined “No room for Zealots,” in which he argued in support of the decision to expel two leftist critics of the SPD—one of whom was the well-known social researcher, Christoph Butterwegge.

Clement’s full-time political career commenced in the early 1990s, when he assumed a number of leading positions for the SPD in North Rhine-Westphalia, including that of economics minister, before becoming premier of the state in 1998. Clement took over the premiership of the state from longstanding SPD grandee Johannes Rau.

Rau was the last incumbent SPD politician of the generation that came to prominence during the period of the social reformist policies of the

1960s and 1970s. Although thousands upon thousands of jobs in the steel and mining industry were destroyed during his long years in office, Rau still embodied a past era of SPD policies—an era of social balances and compromise.

From the outset of his premiership in NRW, Clement made clear he stood for a decisive break with such policies. Unlike other leading figures in the SPD and Greens, such as Schröder and Joschka Fischer, Clement did not carry the “ballast” of a radical past. In his own words, Clement saw himself as a representative of the “modern new SPD,” with figures like former British Prime Minister Tony Blair as role model.

In NRW Clement quickly gained a reputation for his ruthless budgetary policies, involving drastic cuts to basic services and austerity measures. To implement his policies, he surrounded himself with non-descript bookkeepers, such as Germany’s current finance minister, Peer Steinbrück.

Clement’s authoritarian style of leadership and austerity policies in NRW caught the eye of the SPD leadership and in 2002 Clement was appointed “Superminister” for Economics and Labour in the new SPD-Green coalition government led by Schröder and Fischer. Clement was given special responsibility by Schröder for drawing up the draconian package of welfare cuts embodied in the Agenda 2010 program and Hartz IV legislation.

The measures introduced by Clement represented the most far-reaching assault on the German welfare state since the Second World War. The measures have been enthusiastically welcomed by German businesses associations for transforming the country within the space of a few years into a haven for employers seeking cheap labour. Clement’s contempt for the unemployed was summed up in a pamphlet issued by his ministry in the middle of the 2005 federal election campaign: “Priority for decent citizens—against abuses, ‘spongers’ and selfishness within the welfare state.”

With the possible exception of Schröder himself there is no-one more associated in the public mind with welfare and social cuts than Wolfgang Clement.

Since leaving government, Clement has used his connections built up during his time in power as former Economics Minister and premier of NRW to take up seats on the boards of a number of prominent German companies, including RWE AG, and as chairman of the research department for the low-wage Adecco work agency. Clement is also a leading member of the right-wing think tank, Convention for Germany, which brings together leading business leaders, bankers and political lobbyists, with politicians from across the political spectrum.

This is the lifetime contribution of the man the SPD leadership is now so anxious to defend.

A number of media commentaries have claimed that the decision made by the NRW arbitration committee is “suicidal for the SPD,” under conditions where the party’s support is plummeting (recent polls put the SPD at just 20 percent) and anger is growing in the rank and file. Other reports refer to the arrogance and “narcissism” of Clement, but in fact it is necessary to examine the underlying political issues.

It was Clement himself who made clear that the question was not just one of “free expression in the SPD” or his own wounded pride. In an interview with *Die Welt*, he spelt out the basic issue: “This is also about the political course. The attempt to turn back the ‘Agenda 2010’ is basically wrong,” he told the paper and continued: “At the moment, the wing [of the party] that tends toward ideology has the majority ... the position I have long represented is not the strongest in the party now.”

Clement’s assessment of the dispute was confirmed by an editorial in the conservative *FAZ* newspaper: “Clement’s offence is to be a prime mover behind the Agenda 2010 reforms and one of the loudest voices against efforts to water them down. Schröder is out of the picture and Müntefering is likewise quiet.”

Clement is intent on using his conflict with sections of the party to ensure that there is no weakening or watering down of the Agenda 2010 program. At the end of April he appeared at a press conference given by the right-wing Convention for Germany to praise its latest publication and complain that Germany’s reform process has been struck “numb” (“Reformstarre”). What Germany needed, according to Clement, was a “wake-up call” to liberate the country from excessive legal hindrances on business activity and a paralysing bureaucracy.

Behind Clement’s stubborn insistence that he is determined to say what he likes and support who he wants lies his resolve to ensure that his program of social and welfare cuts is not only continued but intensified.

Confronted with plummeting membership and faltering electoral support—according to statistics published last month, the SPD has recently lost its place as Germany’s biggest political party to the CDU—a layer of the SPD around chairman Kurt Beck have concluded that it is necessary to make a few superficial adjustments to the Agenda 2010 program, accompanied by talk of social justice, to regain some degree of electoral credibility before the federal elections planned for September 2009.

At the same time, the SPD has come under increasing pressure from the Left Party, which under the leadership of former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine, is trying to revive illusions in a social reformist programme.

There are those in the SPD who argue that it is advisable to leave the door open to a possible coalition with the Left Party, which has risen to prominence precisely on the basis of its demagogic and hypocritical opposition to the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV legislation. Quite aware of the opportunism of the Left Party—the latter has been in coalition with the SPD for many years in Berlin—these SPD layers regard a future coalition at a federal level as a useful option to oppose a left-wing development within the working class.

Attempts to find common ground between the SPD and the Left Party are continuing apace. Only recently Left Party leader Gregor Gysi met with the proposed chancellor candidate of the SPD, Gesine Schwan, for friendly discussions, and in Hesse Andrea Ypsilanti has indicated she will seek direct talks with the Left Party over the possibility of future collaboration at state level.

Clement is alarmed at such overtures and has not the slightest concern regarding the SPD’s sinking membership and electoral support. Instead, on behalf of a prominent layer of the SPD, including Müntefering, Steinmeier, Schily and Steinbrück—who all adamantly oppose any collaboration with the Left Party and any concessions on social or welfare issues—Clement argues for a course of direct confrontation with the working class, irrespective of the consequences for the SPD.



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