

Germany: The role of the Free Democratic Party in the next government

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On Monday October 5, just one week after Germany's federal elections, the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) begin talks in Berlin with the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) aimed at forming a coalition government. The CDU/CSU (the union) explained that it wanted to put forward a government programme within five to six weeks.

In the past few days, prominent FDP politicians, in particular party chairman Guido Westerwelle, have outlined their version of such a government programme. It envisages unparalleled cuts in the country's social welfare system, the further promotion of the interests of big business and the wealthy together with an aggressive nationalist foreign policy.

The election result means the FDP will be far more strongly represented in the new government than it was under the administration of Helmut Kohl (CDU), who was voted out of office in 1998. The *Handelsblatt* business newspaper wrote on October 1, "It was particularly Angela Merkel's weakness in implementing reforms that led entrepreneurs and independent businessmen to flood over to the FDP. Many hoped that a dynamic FDP could restore reason to a social-democratized union."

This is precisely the role played by the FDP. The party leadership immediately moved to repudiate statements by CDU politicians that the new government would not contemplate changes to laws restricting the firing of workers. In *Bild-Zeitung*, deputy FDP chair Andrea Pinkwart warned the CDU/CSU that they "cannot declare entire fields of policy non-negotiable from the start. Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU should tone down their war of words."

Westerwelle explained, "Our compass in the negotiations will be our programme." The FDP wants to implement as much of it as possible.

The programme of the FDP, "The Germany Program," is an appeal for the abolition of everything fought for by the workers' movement in the last 150 years.

A "simple" wage and income tax model should decrease taxes in particular for top earners. There are to be rates of just 10 and 25 percent taxation, as well as a top tax rate of 35 percent. At present, the top tax rate is around 42 percent. Prior to the government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) taking office in 1998, the top level of tax was around 53 percent.

Business is also to be awarded substantial concessions. Trade tax, an important source of income for the municipalities, is to be abolished, while the losses of venture capitalists are to be "reimbursed in full."

Employees' legal protections against dismissal are to be abolished as far as possible. The protection will only apply to companies with more than 20 employees and after two years employment. When signing their employment contract, workers would be offered compensation and/or financing for further training instead of any legal protection against dismissal in cases of compulsory redundancy. It is clear that workers looking for a job will be left with no choice but to agree to these terms.

The FDP also rejects the minimum wage: "Free collective bargaining must be protected against state wage dictates." The FDP is even floating

the idea of establishing special economic zones (so-called "model regions"), where the state governments can flout existing labour laws and regulations. In 1990, the FDP had already demanded that the former East Germany be declared a special economic zone.

In addition, the privatisation of the social insurance scheme and lower taxes for the rich and big business will be at the expense of the general population. "A concept for a fair tax must be linked to consolidating state finances," the FDP election programme reads. The FDP demands a prohibition on new debts at the federal, state and municipal level, which would mean drastic cuts in education as well as social services and such facilities as swimming pools, sports fields, libraries, etc.

The social insurance scheme will be privatised if the FDP has its way. State-backed insurance schemes covering pensions, sickness and long-term care will be transferred to a "funded" private model, in which individuals can "decide for themselves" what level of insurance and how they finance it according to their own resources. "Unbureaucratic contribution models are essential for cost-conscious and healthy behaviour."

The long-term unemployed are to receive so-called "bürgergeld" ("citizens' money") which will combine unemployment benefits, payments for accommodation and heating, child allowance and rent subsidies. "By means of bürgergeld, benefits will be fundamentally averaged out and be administered by a single authority," the programme states. An unemployed person without children would receive just €662 per month and be expected to pay for everything. "In the case where a reasonable job offer is refused, the bürgergeld would be cut."

If the unemployed cannot afford to pay their rent, they will be at the mercy of their landlords because, "Asymmetrical terms of notice, excessive backlogs on rent payments as well as grace periods for defaulting tenants are to be abolished."

The FDP's traditional appeal to defend "citizens' rights," which it reaffirmed in the current federal election campaign, is merely a diversion. The so-called "liberal wing" was always a minority in the party, and civil rights have inevitably fallen victim to "pressure" from its coalition partners. This will also undoubtedly be the case in the coming coalition. The CDU/CSU has made it clear that it will refuse to reverse any of the measures introduced by the last two governments restricting democratic rights and massively increasing the forms of state spying.

A compromise between the coalition partners could then take the form of the FDP accepting the CDU/CSU stance on the dismantling of democratic rights and the development of "security measures"; in return for allowing the FDP to press ahead with its programme of welfare cuts and pro-business tax breaks.

Some media outlets and business organisations have recently proposed that FDP leader Westerwelle take over as so-called super-minister for finance and economy. The president of the Taxpayers Federation, Karl Heinz Däke, stressed that Westerwelle could then "use his expert knowledge in tax and financial policy much better." Usually, the junior

coalition partner is given control of the foreign ministry, which is also linked with the office of vice-chancellor.

As in domestic policy, so too in foreign policy, the FDP advocates a programme that aggressively pursues the interests of German big business. It believes German imperialism should become the supreme power in Europe, able to look Washington in the eye.

The FDP programme calls for “genuine competition” in the internal European market. The majority of EU subsidies that presently flow into agricultural and structural funds, and thus into the pockets of Europe’s “allies,” should be redirected into the “strategic areas of European policy,” such as the protection of the EU’s external borders and on foreign and security policy. A “long-term goal remains for the FDP the construction of a European Armed Forces under a joint supreme command.”

In NATO, the FDP wants to increase “Europe’s weight.” “The FDP seeks an equitable security partnership within the Atlantic alliance. This means developing European security and defence policy and strengthening the German Armed Forces.”

Other organizations should also be re-cast in Germany’s interests. “Germany, which contributes substantially to the financing of international and European organizations, must also be appropriately represented in these bodies in terms of personnel.”

To this end, the FDP advocates a European seat on the UN Security Council. As long as there is no seat for the EU, “a German seat would be the second-best solution.”

With a strengthened Germany, the FDP then wants to work “together with the new American administration on re-establishing the West as a capable community of the enlightened constitutional democracies of this world.” With Russia, it wants “critical dialogue and pragmatic co-operation.”

In the Middle East, it wants policy to follow the purse strings: economic support for all countries in the region should be dependent upon their support for the “peace process.”

In Afghanistan, however, the FDP indirectly seeks the strengthening of the military. There had been a failure in “the building of efficient government, administrative and security apparatuses,” its programme declares. This calls for more personnel from Germany, for example to assist in setting up the Afghan police.

In Iran, where Germany is defending important interests as one of the country’s largest business partners, the FDP supports the “diplomatic path.”

What the FDP means by the “diplomatic path” can be seen around the world in the activities of the closely associated “Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty,” which enjoys millions in state subsidies, receiving more than €36 million in 2007.

With its worldwide network of contacts, the foundation intervenes actively in other countries’ domestic affairs, stirring up ethnic and religious conflict. For example, in June it organised a conference in Frankfurt entitled “The question of nationality and democracy in Iran.” The conference sought to bring “more strongly into the focus of international public opinion” the interests of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran—“Azeri, Kurds, Arabs, Beluchis, Turkmens, Bahai, as well as other smaller peoples and religious communities.”

At the beginning of the 1990s, the then FDP foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher played an important role in stoking the civil war in Yugoslavia. The hasty recognition of the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, whose separatist efforts had been encouraged by Germany’s BND (foreign secret service) for a long time, set a course for civil war. Today, Genscher is honorary party chairman and has more recently been seen in public alongside FDP leader Guido Westerwelle, underscoring the party’s aspirations to the foreign ministry.

In Latin America, the Naumann Foundation maintains links to the

opposition in Venezuela and Bolivia. In Honduras, it intervened on the side of those leading the coup against the democratically-elected government. In Tibet, it supported last summer’s anti-Chinese protests.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation is led by Wolfgang Gerhardt, for many years a chairman of the FDP (1995 to 2001) and its bundestag (federal parliament) faction (1998 to 2006). Before the 2005 bundestag elections, he was regarded as the prospective foreign minister, had the conservatives won the poll. When the FDP remained in opposition, he took over the presidency of the party foundation, which plays an extremely active role in foreign policy. Guido Westerwelle, who will presumably now take over the foreign ministry, is not only closely connected to the party foundation through Gerhardt, he is also a former scholarship student of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

In the sixty years since the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, the FDP has been in government for 42 years—from 1949 to 1957, from 1961 to 1966 and from 1969 to 1998—longer than any other party. Since the party was founded, it has stood on the right wing of the political spectrum—in economic and social policy, as in foreign policy.

After the Second World War, many former Nazis found a home inside the FDP, which integrated members of the old National Liberal Party and even extreme German nationalist tendencies from the Weimar Republic into its ranks. At its federal party congress in 1951, it called for the release of all “so-called war criminals.” The FDP welcomed the establishment of the “Federation of German Soldiers,” including former members of the Wehrmacht and SS, in order to integrate these nationalist forces.

In 1969, when the FDP formed a coalition government with the SPD, these right-wing forces receded into the background, however they remained active inside the party. The FDP’s self-promoted image as a liberal bourgeois party, standing for the rights and freedom of the citizen, rests entirely on its role during the SPD-FDP coalition from 1969 to 1982. Under Chancellor Willy Brandt (SPD), Walter Scheel took over the foreign ministry from 1969 for the FDP. This office then remained in the hands of the FDP for 29 years until 1998.

In the mid 1990s, the national-conservative forces around former Chief Federal Prosecutor Alexander von Stahl and Berlin publicist Rainer Zittelmann stepped onto the stage. In 1998, von Stahl then lost the election to become chairman of the Berlin FDP. Since then, these tendencies have been in the background.

However, in light of the international economic crisis and the increasing conflicts between the imperialist states, these forces will receive a boost inside the FDP. Westerwelle’s persistent refusal to speak in English at the first press conference following the bundestag elections was not due to his lack of fluency in that language or being worn out. The British newspaper the *Independent* put it succinctly, when it spoke about a “new Teutonic self-confidence.”



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