

German government minister prepares new attacks on the unemployed

Peter Schwarz
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The chairman of the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), Guido Westerwelle, has hit the headlines in the past few days with vitriolic attacks on the unemployed.

Westerwelle is the German foreign minister and vice-chancellor of the German coalition government consisting of the FDP and two conservative parties. His latest comments come on the heels of a decision by the Federal Constitutional Court (BVG), which declared that the manner of calculation of so-called Hartz IV welfare payments was unconstitutional.

In a newspaper interview Westerwelle maintained that the discussion over Hartz IV bears “socialist traits,” recalled “late Roman decadence” and called for an “intellectual-political about-turn.” Instead of improving the manner of distribution, the issue of “performance justice” must be at the centre of political debate, he insisted.

Following some criticism of his comments, Westerwelle went on a media offensive. Those who work are increasingly becoming “the idiots of the nation,” he declared, and demanded a completely new start for the German welfare state. It is “a cynical debate when those who work in Germany, who get up and are industrious, must in the meantime apologize for the fact that they can hang on to some returns from their work.”

Most commentators have declared that Westerwelle’s tirades against the welfare state are an attempt to combat his party’s declining popularity. Three months before the crucial state election in North Rhine-Westphalia, the FDP has slumped in the polls from its 14.6 percent support level at the time of the federal election last autumn to its current level of 8 percent. If repeated in the NRW state election, such a poll for the FDP would threaten the existing coalition in the most densely populated state in Germany between the FDP and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

There have been a series of signals from inside the CDU pointing towards a possible coalition with the Greens, who are currently riding high in the polls. Should the CDU form a coalition with the Greens in North-Rhine Westphalia—in

like manner to Hamburg, where such a coalition already governs—then the conservatives together with the FDP would lose their majority in the Upper House of Parliament, in turn severely weakening the influence of the FDP at a federal level. Many commentators have concluded, therefore, that Westerwelle’s demagogic move to dominate the headlines is his attempt to rectify the FDP’s plunging support.

However, there is more than electoral manoeuvring behind Westerwelle’s frontal attack on the welfare state. Even if his comments have met with some opposition by layers inside the government coalition, all of the governing parties are agreed that a new round of social cuts far exceeding the cuts involved in the Agenda 2010 introduced by the former Social Democratic-Green Party coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder is inevitable.

The “brake on debt” introduced by the previous grand coalition (SPD and conservative parties) into the German constitution requires the government to implement annual cuts in the region of tens of billion euros. Both the defence budget and the government’s massive debt relief for the banks have been excluded from any cuts, meaning that the savings must be made in the field of pensions, health care, jobs and welfare payments. In any event, most municipalities that are also affected by the debt brake are already confronting bankruptcy.

It is notably the German government and economic representatives who are demanding that the Greek government recover its debts by painful cuts in public expenditure and wages. In this respect Greece is a test case for all of Europe, including Germany.

Westerwelle’s comments have met with criticism because many representatives of the ruling elite are concerned that one should not unnecessarily provoke the victims of the next round of cuts. The economic crisis has already forced many families to the brink of bankruptcy while the government pumps hundreds of billions to the banks. Deutsche Bank is once again making record profits and a series of revelations have emerged over the activities of millionaire tax evaders in Switzerland. Against this background it is not surprising that

Westerwelle's fiery speeches have met with some opposition from those social layers he traditionally looks upon as his own constituency.

That is why a number of CDU-CSU and some FDP politicians have condemned Westerwelle's remarks. Their criticisms, however, are merely directed against the polemical way in which he raised his complaints—in essence they are in agreement with him. For example, the general secretary of the CDU, Hermann Gröhe, criticised Westerwelle's "questionable generalisation and aggressive tone," arguing that his remarks only served to complicate the necessary debate over the level of Hartz IV payments.

Federal finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), who has the last word in budgetary policy, gave Westerwelle indirect support by categorically excluding any increase in Hartz-IV payments. "The constitutional court quite clearly refrained from saying that Hartz IV payments are insufficient," Schäuble said. There was no money available for additional social spending, he declared.

Echoing Westerwelle, Schäuble rejected any increase in unemployment payments by referring to the low wage rates for poorly paid workers. "We should not lose sight of the basic idea behind Hartz IV," he said. "The necessary level of welfare payments should not serve to make it unattractive to work."

This argument—put forward in endless variations in the current debate—is especially cynical. It is precisely the Hartz legislation that has played a huge role in the creation of a massive cheap wage sector in Germany. After one year of unemployment, workers are forced to accept any sort of work—even notorious one-euro per hour jobs. This process has led to a general depression of wages and the ballooning of precarious types of labour.

Now the pittance paid to hairdressers, security guards, call centre workers, etc. are being used to lower the level of unemployment payments, with the argument that those in work would lack any incentive to work if payments remained at the existing level.

Other CDU politicians, in particular representatives of its business wing, have given their unreserved support to Westerwelle.

Michael Fuchs (CDU), deputy chairman of the CDU-CSU faction in parliament, criticised the "thoroughly aggressive attacks on Westerwelle," who he declared was "in essence perfectly correct and had initiated an important debate." Kurt Lauk, the president of the CDU economic council, also supported Westerwelle and demanded "an open discussion without taboos about how we are to get to grips with the explosion in social expenditure."

CSU state committee leader Hans Peter Friedrich declared that the basic tenor of Westerwelle's comments was that

"those who work must have more than those who do not work." And the leader of the Christian Social Union, Horst Seehofer, supported stricter rules to force Hartz IV recipients to accept jobs. Whoever rejects such "assistance," he threatened "must be stopped in his tracks".

Westerwelle has been subject to verbal criticism from some members of the SPD, the Greens and the Left party. SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel called him a "socio-political arsonist," while the leader of the Greens, Claudia Roth, called him a "brawler" and the Green parliamentary fraction chair Renate Künast termed him a "political hooligan."

In fact, such criticism lacks any credibility. After all, it was the SPD and the Greens who established the Hartz laws, which were recently declared to violate human dignity by the Federal Constitutional Court. At the same time, both parties have made absolutely clear that their top political priority is consolidation of the national budget through appropriate social cuts.

As for the Left party, its role as coalition partner of the SPD in the Berlin Senate for the past eight years testifies to the party's readiness to implement social cuts just as ruthlessly as all other parties.

The German trade union federation (DGB) has expressed its own support for Westerwelle's proposal for a "broad debate" about social justice, well aware that such a debate portends a new round of welfare cuts far exceeding those introduced by the previous SPD-Green Party government's Agenda 2010. There can be no doubt that the SPD, the Greens, the Left party and the trade unions will all side with the government.



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