

NRW State election: Former SPD premier supports free market FDP

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Wolfgang Clement, the former Social Democratic Party (SPD) premier of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and former SPD minister for economy and labour, has thrown his support behind the campaign of the radical free market party, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Sunday's state election.

NRW is Germany's biggest state and its former industrial heartland. The result of the NRW state election is traditionally regarded as an important pointer to the future of the federal government.

On May Day, Clement appeared alongside the leading FDP candidate, Christian Lindner, in the RWE pavilion, in the Essen Philharmonic Hall. The two men presented a four-page thesis calling for a "rational industrial policy." Work on large projects such as power plants is to be accelerated and not be delayed or blocked by political interests or the concerns of residents living near industrial plants.

The document also demands that subsidies for renewable energy be reduced and that energy pricing policy be left to the whims of the market—i.e., the major energy companies. Clement is a leading representative of the energy industry. Since 2006, he has been a member of the Supervisory Board of RWE Power AG, which has its main office in Essen.

Clement's commitment to a party primarily known as a lobbying group for top earners and financial and economic interests does not come as a surprise. Clement made a name for himself in the SPD by his arrogance, his contempt for workers and his close relations with big business. Despite—or rather precisely due to—these characteristics, he was able to assume some of the country's most senior government posts.

Clement began his career as a journalist at the *Westfälische Rundschau* (WAZ) newspaper and

advanced to deputy editor. From 1981 to 1986, he was spokesperson for the National Executive of the SPD. He then moved seamlessly to the post of editor of the *Hamburger Morgenpost*, which he held from 1986 to 1989.

In 1990, the premier of NRW, Johannes Rau, brought Clement into the state government. In 1998, Clement, now also a member of the SPD's national executive, took over the state premiership from Rau. As soon as he was in office, he announced sharp and painful cuts in order to reduce the state debt of 130 billion deutschmarks.

His decision to amalgamate the state justice and interior ministries was also controversial. The presidents of the Courts of Appeal wrote a letter protesting against this attack on the independence of the judiciary. The president of the Federal Court pointed out that the only time when the judiciary and police fell under the remit of one minister was during Nazi rule. Clement was eventually forced to reverse his decision.

While the state government under Clement proceeded ruthlessly against the unemployed and young people, forcing them into a variety of work programmes, it was far more generous to business associations, major companies and banks. During Clement's tenure in office, there were no fewer than four parliamentary committees of inquiry into irregularities in the funding of companies. It was also at this time that Clement became acquainted with Christian Lindner.

Clement took over his most significant job in 2002 (until 2005) as "super minister" for Economics and

Labour in the federal government led by Gerhard Schröder. During his time in office, he introduced huge tax breaks for companies, and the anti-social Hartz laws, which resulted in the explosive growth of a low-wage sector and attendant poverty.

Clement publicly ridiculed those who opposed his policies. In talk shows and news conferences, he claimed without any proof that Hartz IV welfare recipients abused their entitlement to benefits. His ministry published a booklet titled “Priority for the decent — against abuse, rip-offs and self-serving in the welfare state.” The unemployed and needy were defamed as “parasites,” “free riders” and “parasites.”

Following the premature end of the Schröder government, Clement and many other leading members of the cabinet moved seamlessly into highly paid posts in business and the banks. He was a member of the supervisory board of Dussmann Group, a leading service company primarily active in commercial cleaning, as well as of the supervisory board of the German temporary jobs company DIS. Both companies benefited hugely from the liberalisation of laws on temporary employment introduced by Clement.

Of the many other well-paid posts occupied by Clement, we shall cite only two: He sits on the board of the fourth-largest German newspaper publisher, DuMont, and he is a member of the “Convention for Germany”, a right-wing think tank, bringing together prominent representatives of government, business and high finance, such as former federal president Roman Herzog, the former president of the German Business Association Olaf Henkel and management consultant Roland Berger. The Convention demands the implementation and intensification of Schröder’s Agenda 2010 programme and calls for fewer elections to be held.

At the end of his ministerial career, Clement turned his back on the SPD. In 2008, he publicly opposed the SPD candidate in the state of Hessen after the candidate Andrea Ypsilanti refused to rule out cooperation with the Left Party. He was subsequently reprimanded by the SPD and quit after 38 years of membership. Just one year later, Clement threw his support behind FDP

chairman Guido Westerwelle in the general election campaign in 2009.

Clement’s career and present conduct are a damning indictment of the SPD. Although he never made a secret about his right-wing orientation, Clement was able to occupy some of the country’s highest political posts. Things will not change in this respect in the future. SPD leader Peer Steinbrück, also a former finance minister in NRW and former federal finance minister, and a man with very similar links to the banks and big business, is already in discussion as the SPD’s candidate for the post of federal chancellor.



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