

Germany: FDP Congress tacks to the right

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The main focus of the 70th National Congress of Germany's neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), which took place last weekend in Berlin, was the adoption of a European election program and the election of a new secretary general.

The party went to great lengths to shed its image as a ruthless lobby for the rich and win back voters who have increasingly switched to the Green Party. The term "empathy" was one of the leitmotifs of the Congress. The party's new secretary-general Linda Teuteberg went so far as to express empathy for the socially deprived and actually mentioned Germany's miserly social welfare system (Hartz IV) and the growing problem of poverty amongst seniors. The Congress called for more gender equality and more climate protection—based, of course, on free market solutions such as emissions trading.

This was all facade, however. The central message of the Congress was unmistakable: the Free Democrats advocate aggressive international expansion, more corporate deregulation and austerity for the working class. With regard to foreign policy the party calls for a powerful European Union dominated by Germany and an acceleration of Germany's current program of military rearmament. Domestically, the FDP calls for a strong state.

In his speech to the Congress, party leader Christian Lindner portrayed China as a role model in this respect. He started his speech with a sentence in Chinese saying that one has to move with the times when society and the economy change. Behind him, in huge Chinese characters, were the words "economic policy."

Lindner described China as both a role model, and as a rival and threat. He said he was impressed by the way in which China resolutely pursues its global interests and suppresses the class struggle in its own country. "As things stand, our children will not only have to learn English, but also Chinese," he said. The aim however, he continued, was that the Chinese continue to learn English and German.

The party's program for the forthcoming European election, adopted by the Congress, focuses on a powerful EU with a "genuine common foreign, security and development policy" and a "European Army under a joint supreme

command."

"The EU can only remain a genuine global player when it speaks with one voice in the competition between world powers," the program states.

Secondly, the program calls for a more aggressive policy against refugees: "We call for a common European asylum, refugee and immigration policy to effectively organise and control migration." The border protection agency Frontex should be expanded, refugees and migrants from civil war countries be turned back and at the same time "migration based on labor market requirements" should be promoted to attract the "best minds."

The program favours tightening up the Maastricht framework, which imposes a debt ceiling and ruthless austerity measures on EU member states. "We do not want a transfer union, joint liability for deposits or joint unemployment insurance," the program reads. "We demand automatic sanctions against member states which run up excessive debts."

The FDP also intends to accelerate the rate of military rearmament. The FDP's leading candidate in the European elections, Nicola Beer, sharply criticised the federal government because it was not moving fast enough to fulfil NATO's demand for two-percent of GDP to be spent on defence. She also opposed the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline connecting Russia with Germany via the Baltic Sea.

Alarmed by the huge support for a referendum in Berlin demanding the expropriation of large housing concerns, the party congress adopted an urgent petition calling for the deletion of Article 15 in the German Constitution (Basic Law).

This article, introduced after WWII as a concession to widespread support for socialism following the atrocities of Nazi rule, permits the socialisation of "land, natural resources and means of production" in exchange for compensation. It has only been used once—and not as a socialist measure, but rather to rescue banks gone bankrupt. At the height of the financial crisis in 2009, the German Parliament passed a law that makes it possible to nationalise vulnerable banks when necessary. Now, however, at a time

when opponents of real estate speculators and property sharks want to put the article to their own use the FDP wants to abolish it.

The lip service previously paid by the FDP to certain individual basic rights, which the party never intended to put into practice, has now disappeared from the program and party speeches.

The new secretary general Teuteberg stressed the party's commitment to a strong state. Lindner had already justified the surprising nomination of the 38-year-old to the post of secretary general by stating that he was "impressed" by the stance she had taken on immigration and refugee policies.

In her speech to the party Teuteberg said that liberals could "not tolerate" a state of affairs where alleged right-wing arsonists were released, tax fraudsters remained free from prosecution and deportations not enforced because of a lack of staff and overly long legal processes. She pleaded for more deportations to improve the credibility of the state and demonstrate its ability to act. "We have to enforce the removal of foreign nationals," she demanded to vigorous applause.

Since its foundation in 1948, the FDP has been the party that has most consistently represented the interests of big business and finance capital. It was regarded as a party that could be bought and was kept afloat on a number of occasions by large donations from major industrialists—such as in the 1980s, when it was deeply involved in the Flick party donation scandal, and in 2008–2009, when the owner of the Mövenpick chain of hotels, August von Finck, donated 1.1 million euros to the party. In exchange the FDP, as part of the government, ensured a reduction in VAT for hotel accommodation. Finck, whose fortune was in part based on the Aryanisation of Jewish property under the Nazis, later switched his support to the far right AfD.

After WWII the FDP stood on the extreme right of the German political party spectrum and campaigned for the votes of former Nazis and Nazi officials using national slogans. It only developed a more socially liberal stance after striking an alliance with the SPD in 1969 and helping Willy Brandt become chancellor. Brandt was required at that time to bring student unrest and militant labor disputes under control and open up new markets in the east for the German economy through his Ostpolitik. In 1982, the FDP changed sides again and helped Helmut Kohl (CDU) take power via a vote of no confidence.

Although the party polled well under ten percent in most elections, the FDP exerted disproportionate influence in its role as favoured coalition partner of both the conservative Union (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union) and the SPD. Between 1949 to 1998 the FDP was involved in all coalition governments, apart from two

breaks, and controlled key ministries such as foreign affairs, and the interior and economics ministries. Between 2009 to 2013 it formed another coalition with the Union led by Angela Merkel. During this period the FDP was voted out of most state parliaments and finally out of the Bundestag due to its arrogant, right-wing politics.

Following the federal election in autumn 2017, the FDP held talks on a possible coalition with both the Union and the Greens, but the talks broke down after several weeks. The CDU/CSU concluded that the highly unpopular policies of social cuts, militarism and rearmament, which all of the parties agreed to in principle, could best be implemented in the short term by a continuation of the grand coalition with the SPD.

Since then the grand coalition has moved official policy far to the right. The extreme right-wing AfD is the official opposition party, heads important parliamentary committees and sets the line for government policy. The government has fully adopted the refugee policy of the AfD. Hardly a week goes by without the adoption of new police and surveillance laws. Military rearmament is progressing in leaps and bounds. Large sections of the population work in low-paid jobs and receive wages below the poverty line.

Meanwhile, the grand coalition is in deep crisis and is despised for its right-wing policies. For the past weeks the CDU, CSU and SPD combined have failed to win sufficient support for a majority. The SPD is polling below 20 percent and millions have participated in strikes for better wages and working conditions. There have also been large-scale protests against high rents, pollution and internet censorship. At the same time, international tensions are growing and there is a threat of recession.

Under these circumstances, the FDP is offering its service as a party of government in order to forge ahead with the reactionary offensive of the ruling class and suppress all opposition should the grand coalition collapse.



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