

Wolfgang Clement: The unvarnished face of Germany's SPD

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Wolfgang Clement, who died of cancer last Sunday at the age of 80, represented the unvarnished face of the SPD. Unlike other Social Democrats, he never felt the need to hide his contempt for the people whose interests the SPD claims to represent. He was a ruthless defender of capitalist interests and regarded as his party's most important task disciplining the working class and ensuring they kept working.

This is what made him especially valuable to the SPD. He was unsuited to play the role of the election campaigner making fulsome promises to voters. Instead, he excelled as the pragmatist who operated behind closed doors over many years. When he finally entered government, he ruthlessly dismantled social and democratic rights.

Unlike other right-wing SPD politicians such as Gerhard Schröder and Olaf Scholz, who began their careers with anti-capitalist phrases in the party's Young Socialists, Clement never made a secret of his right-wing views. Born in Bochum in 1940 the son of a master builder, he worked as a journalist and studied law before joining the SPD in 1970 at the age of 30.

Inside the SPD Clement won the support of figures such as its former federal chairman Willy Brandt and later Johannes Rau, premier of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and subsequent president of Germany, with whose family he maintained a close friendship. Both Brandt and Rau, it should be noted, were SPD grandees who today are idealised as alleged representatives of socially progressive policies. In 1981, Brandt made Clement SPD spokesman and in 1985 federal manager of the SPD. From 1989, Clement headed Rau's state chancellery in NRW.

Clement's rise to prominence is not unique within the SPD. Frank-Walter Steinmeier first headed the state chancellery of the state of Lower Saxony and the federal chancellery for Gerhard Schröder for 12 years, before stepping on to the public stage as foreign minister and finally as federal president—his current post, which he uses to promote the return of German militarism.

Another long-time SPD member, Thilo Sarrazin, was a prominent figure in the Treuhand organisation, which closed down industries and wiped out millions of jobs in East Germany following the capitalist reunification of Germany, and

an executive member of Deutsche Bahn, before being brought to Berlin by the city's SPD-Left Party Senate to fill the post of finance senator. In charge of the city's finance department, he introduced a programme of massive cuts to public services and jobs before outing himself as a racist and ideological pioneer of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Clement reveals the SPD for what it really is—a party that defends the capitalist system by all means, which will stop at nothing to suppress all opposition. His biography vividly demonstrates the absurdity of, and dangers bound up with, the idea that a government consisting of the SPD, Greens and the Left Party would represent a lesser evil to the current SPD-conservative “grand coalition” in Berlin. This notion is promoted in particular by the Left Party.

During his 38 years of SPD membership, during which he held numerous top positions in the party and government, Clement contested only one election—in 2000, when he defended his post as NRW's premier—a position he had inherited two years earlier from his long-time friend and mentor Johannes Rau.

Barely in office, Clement embarked on a drastic austerity course to reduce the state's €130 billion in debts. Among his key projects was the merger of the state Interior Ministry and Justice Ministry, which would have placed control of the courts, the public prosecutor's office and the police under one jurisdiction. Following a storm of protest, he was forced to back down. Even the president of the federal Court of Justice felt obliged to point out that the only time previously when the police and judiciary were subordinate to the same minister was under the Nazis.

Clement won the election in 2000, despite a 3.2 percent drop in votes for the SPD from the previous election. Two years later, he resigned his post to join Schröder's red-green (SPD-Green Party) federal government as a “super minister” with responsibility for both finance and economics. Schröder brought Clement to Berlin to implement Agenda 2010, the most comprehensive programme of social cutbacks since the founding of the Federal Republic—an austerity programme that fundamentally changed class relations. Massive tax cuts for the rich and for businesses went hand in hand with the creation of a huge low-wage sector. Hartz IV served as a lever to force

formerly better-paid workers to take up low-paid work.

While Schröder, as chancellor, took over responsibility for his government's Agenda policies, supported by the Greens, Clement and the then head of the chancellery, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, carried out the dirty work.

Clement threw himself into the job with enthusiasm and dogged determination. He publicly mocked anyone who opposed Agenda policies. His ministry published a brochure titled "Priority for upright citizens—Against abuse, rip-offs and self-service in the welfare state." In the brochure, the unemployed and poor were denigrated as "freeloaders," "rip-off artists" and "parasites." Clement himself claimed at press conferences and on talk shows (without providing any evidence) that 10 to 20 percent of Hartz IV welfare recipients abused the system.

In 2005, the SPD suffered a devastating defeat in state elections in its former stronghold of North Rhine-Westphalia, and Schröder pulled the plug on the red-green coalition. Clement lost his ministerial post and turned his back on the SPD in outrage. In 2008, in a guest article for the conservative *Welt am Sonntag*, he spoke out against a vote for the SPD in upcoming Hesse state elections. He cited the SPD's election statement that it would not build any new nuclear or coal-fired power plants. Such a move would have hit the interests of the energy company RWE Power, on whose supervisory board Clement sat.

Clement was threatened with disciplinary proceedings for his anti-party stance. Although numerous leading representatives of the SPD backed him, Clement forestalled formal proceedings by quitting the party on his own initiative. In the years that followed, he supported the neoliberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) in election campaigns, became involved in right-wing think tanks, and earned millions as a business lobbyist and member of numerous supervisory boards. In doing so, he personally benefited from the low-wage policies he had introduced as economics minister.

From 2006 to 2016, Clement sat on the supervisory board of the fifth largest German temporary employment agency, DIS. After a Swiss competitor, Adecco, swallowed up DIS, Clement took over the chairmanship of the newly founded "Adecco Institute for the Study of Work," which is fully financed by the Adecco Group and carries out public propaganda work.

Clement was also a member of the supervisory board of the Dussmann Foundation from 2005. The Dussmann group of companies with sales of €2.2 billion (2017) is almost exclusively active in the low-wage sector. It employs 64,500 people in 17 countries in nursing homes, the cleaning and security sector and catering. Dussmann also operates a prominent cultural department store in Berlin to enhance its image.

In addition, Clement has been a member or chairman of the supervisory boards of media and telecommunications companies (Landau Media, DuMont Schauberg, Media

Broadcast, 1&1 Versatel), of companies in the energy sector (RWE), the Russian consulting company Energy Consulting, the drilling technology company Daldrop & Söhne, investment companies (Berger Lahnstein Middelhoff & Partners, Citigroup Global Markets Deutschland, Deekeling Arndt Advisors) and the notorious real estate company Deutsche Wohnen.

As chairman of the board of trustees of the Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (Initiative New Social Market Economy), which is backed by various business associations, and member of other right-wing think tanks, Clement defended Agenda 2010 and called for its provisions to be tightened up. For example, he argued in 2012 that due to longer average life expectancy people could work to the age of 75 or 80.

Clement's appalling record has not prevented the SPD from speaking of the deceased in the highest tones. Germany's President Steinmeier praised his "high level of political commitment and open and engaging way of approaching people"—a man who had rendered outstanding services to his country.

Former SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel wrote on Twitter: "Whether in the SPD or outside: with #WolfgangClement a great social democrat has died who did a great deal for the people of NRW and the republic. Engaging, humorous, stubborn and sensitive at the same time. And a fighter to the end. Take care, my friend."

SPD health politician Karl Lauterbach commented that Clement was "tolerant" and "a socially liberal spirit," "We did not always agree, but it's evident that Wolfgang Clement was a great politician, restlessly working for Germany's future," he wrote.

The FDP and CDU also praised Clement. FDP Chairman Christian Lindner tweeted that the FDP was in mourning, writing, "As a social liberal, he committed himself all his life to social advancement, work and growth. I have also come to appreciate him personally as a man of honour and advisor."

NRW Minister President Armin Laschet (CDU) described Clement as a "doer who stood for social market economy like no other, a premier who has dynamically advanced our state." CDU right-winger Friedrich Merz paid him "thanks and high recognition for his political life's work." And Federal Minister of Economics Peter Altmaier (CDU) praised him as a "great patriot who was not concerned with ideology, but rather with jobs and people."



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