

Ex-Stalinists in crisis

Tensions mount in the German PDS

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Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the SED regime, conflicts inside the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, successor to the ruling Stalinist party [SED] in the former German Democratic Republic [GDR]) are taking sharper and sharper forms. The breach between the PDS's role as an opposition in words and a government party in deeds is becoming increasingly difficult to span.

Just a week before the national party conference, which took place in Berlin in mid-January, the vice chairman of the party and election campaign manager, André Brie, resigned from all leading positions. Enraged, he declared that the PDS--if it kept on its present course--would no longer exist in 10 years' time.

Above all he was outraged over the decision by the party's parliamentary fraction to employ former GDR top spy Topas alias Rainer Rupp as a counselor. Rupp had spied for the GDR in the NATO headquarters in Brussels and is currently serving a prison sentence for his activities. Brie was also angry about the increasingly louder campaign inside the party for a general amnesty for former officials of the SED--"A completely false signal to the party!"

The dispute in the PDS is by no means new. Since the party's founding conference nine years ago, when the old SED was reconstituted as the PDS, conflicts have repeatedly broken out with changing intensity and in different forms--and for the following reason:

In the main, the social basis of the PDS consists of those former SED members who came off worst following German reunification in 1990. Up until the present day more than 80 percent of the PDS membership are former members of the SED and the average age of the party exceeds the official retirement age of 65. Many thousands of GDR functionaries lost not only their jobs but also their privileged situations in

society. Their pension payments were considerably reduced because of their "closeness to the regime", and their initial hopes in the market economy quickly turned into disappointment and frustration.

The growing bitterness among these layers began to be directed against the government in Bonn, and western German parties in general. The policies of the PDS leadership, which were decisively influenced and planned in the past years by André Brie, are, however, directed towards "Western integration", market reforms and collaboration with the SPD--and in many regions, collaboration with the CDU.

This is the source of the bizarre, strained relations whereby the PDS appears on the surface as a loud and verbose party of opposition, but everywhere it exercises influence--on a local or national level--acts as a factor for law and order, supports austerity measures as well as cuts in the social sector and, in this respect, cannot be distinguished from the SPD or the CDU.

The intensified bickering in the past weeks has several reasons. The political constellation changed enormously for the PDS following last autumn's national elections.

On a national level, it could pose as an opposition party as long as Kohl was in power while at the same time supporting the SPD, whose policies hardly differ from those of the PDS. Now opposition on the part of the PDS means conflict with the SPD, a party with which it shares power at a state level. Under these conditions the talk of opposition becomes more and more flimsy. The PDS votes "no" in parliament only when its vote is immaterial. Otherwise it agrees to the government's policies.

On a state level, at the end of last year and for the first time, the PDS became a governing party in a coalition with the SPD in Mecklenburg Vorpommern.

Since the beginning of November the party has taken over the ministerial posts for employment, building and regional planning, social welfare and environment. The coalition agreements it has signed with the SPD in the most northern of the east German states makes a mockery of the PDS party programme.

The axing of several thousands of jobs in the public sector is laid down in the coalition contracts as well as a "strong link between science and economy", which has the aim of pushing through "higher flexibility" and "accountable performances" in the sector of higher education. In the past the PDS had conducted demonstrations together with environmental organizations against the planned motorway to the northeast coast. Now the building of the motorway is to go ahead with the agreement of the PDS minister of environment.

In another east German state, Saxony-Anhalt, the PDS has been supporting ("tolerating") an SPD minority government for several years and has time and again pushed through austerity measures and cuts in the face of local popular resistance. While one section of the party protests in front of the regional parliament, officials from the same party are inside signing and helping to carry out the cuts.

Under these conditions the PDS leadership fears a split of the party and is doing its very best to prevent this from taking place. This was a main feature of the recent party conference. Although the conference was supposedly devoted to the discussion on party programme, political debate was limited to a minimum. Brie, who would have knocked on the SPD's door a long time ago if it hadn't been for his own past as a collaborator with the Stasi (secret police of the GDR), was not allowed to speak at the conference due to "lack of time".

For two hours party Chairman Bisky intoned a speech which had the motto: "The party is the alpha and omega of the political work of each and everyone." He made clear that the counseling agreement with ex-spy Topas was a signal to those in the party who suffer today because of their earlier commitment to the GDR, and that the members of the parliamentary party faction should understand that their influence depends on the strength of the party as a whole.

The change in comparison to earlier party conferences was glaring. Three years ago the party

leadership strongly opposed the Stalinist faction known as the "Communist Platform" (KPF) and, in order to push through an openly social democratic course, threatened the group with expulsion from the party. On the last day of this year's conference a member of the KPF was elected to the party executive and Sarah Wagenknecht, as speaker of the KPF, received as much applause for her speech as party leader Bisky.

In light of the growing social crisis which has led to unemployment levels of over 30 percent in many towns in eastern Germany, the PDS sees its chief task in keeping the growing opposition under control. "We must draw the social protest to the left," said Gregor Gysi in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* during the party conference and stressed: "The PDS is more necessary than ever!" But by posing as a party of opposition, while at the same time using its increase in votes to function as a party of government and a proponent of law and order, the PDS also loses its last vestiges of credibility and influence. An aggravation of inner-party conflicts is inevitable.

Against this background the election at the party conference of a public relations manager and millionaire as new vice-chairman fits into place. Diether Dehm is a pretentious showman from Frankfurt (western Germany) who switched from the SPD to the PDS just a few months ago. He pompously announced to the party delegates that his public relations agency (marketing pop groups and sports figures such as ice-skating star Katarina Witt) was the ideal instrument to strengthen the influence of the PDS in the west.

A party which, in light of its internal divisions, dares not discuss programmatic issues has set its hopes on an ostentatious show-off. The political bankruptcy of a party is inevitably expressed in its choice of leadership.



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