

# Where is the German Party of Democratic Socialism going?

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*The following article reproduces a lecture given by Ulrich Rippert on the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS—Party of Democratic Socialism), successor to the ruling Stalinist party in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany).*

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A week ago, Peter Schwarz spoke here about the current crisis of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). He posed the following question: are we dealing with a passing phenomenon, or does the end of this century also mark the end of social democracy? Or, to put it differently: is the issue, as former SPD Chairman Oscar Lafontaine maintains, to defend the program of social reformism against its neo-liberal adversaries, or is this reformist program itself at an end?

Schwarz's answer was clear. In pursuing a reformist path for the past 85 years, the uppermost goal of the SPD had always been to defend the bourgeois order. Even in the few years in which it strove to implement social reforms, these were subordinated to the aim of maintaining capitalist rule. Today the concentrated power of global capital renders reformist conceptions untenable. The working class needs a completely new, revolutionary perspective.

The question that interests us today is the following: in light of the decline of the SPD, does the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) offer an alternative?

Over the past year, many have praised the entry of the SPD, in coalition with the Greens, into government as a great step forward and described the red-green coalition as a “left-wing government”. We reject such a position.

Our appraisal of the PDS is similar. Many disappointed SPD lefts are knocking at the door of the PDS and lauding it as an alternative. We reject such a position. Today's illusions in the PDS are no more valid than yesterday's in the SPD or the Greens.

While these people were happy with the election results recorded recently by the PDS, and applauded enthusiastically on hearing them, we see things differently. We regard the fact that the growing opposition to the social and political crisis in Germany results in increased votes for the PDS as the outcome of deep political confusion and disorientation among broad layers of the population.

Everybody now knows what to expect from the SPD—namely, nothing other than the dismantling of the welfare state in the interests of the rich, on a more draconian scale than under the preceding Kohl government. But what will the PDS do, if it assumes the reins of power?

More and more frequently, and with increasing emphasis, the PDS describes itself as the party of “social justice”. Some months ago, PDS parliamentary fraction leader Gregor Gysi entitled a 12-point policy paper “Justice is Modern”. In this statement the PDS demanded the improvement of the welfare system, rather than its dismantling, the withdrawal of proposed cuts in pensions, and the allocation of more

money for education as an investment in the future, etc. But a year ago the SPD was also issuing these demands, on the basis of which it went on to win the federal parliamentary elections.

Anybody today who takes a party at face value, accepting uncritically its election propaganda and general promises of doing away with unemployment and supporting social equilibrium, is, if you pardon my harsh judgement, a political idiot. There are such people, who cling to illusions and then subsequently lament over the fact that they have been cheated yet again.

Whoever is politically serious must ask himself the question: what is the source of the dreadful opportunism which marks the first year in government of the red-green coalition? How is it to be explained that both parties, since taking over government, have carried out policies that are the exact opposite of what they had promised prior to the election?

Without doubt personal and political characteristics of the leading figures play a role, but it would be according far too much credit to SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Green party leader and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer if they were made solely, or even primarily, responsible for the dramatic shift to the right of their parties.

Furthermore, the question arises as to why the most corrupt and opportunistic functionaries are to be found in the leadership of these parties. Evidently in these parties there are no better people, or such people are not able to prevail. The issue is not so much a personal matter, but rather a social phenomenon, and this is bound up with fundamental changes in the structure of society.

A decisive element in the development of these parties is that both the SPD and the Greens fully acknowledge as legitimate the existing relations of power and ownership. This allows business organisations to pressurise the government into continually imposing new and more extensive attacks on the population.

But what about the PDS? How does this party regard the existing relations of power and ownership?

The PDS describes itself as a socialist party: formerly as the *Sozialistische Einheits Partei Deutschland* (SED—Socialist Unity Party), now as a democratic socialist party. But what sort of party was it then, and what is it today?

I want to explore this question in three respects:

Regarding its history: how did this party react to the decisive turning points in social development?

Regarding its social orientation: on which social layers does the PDS rest? For whom does it speak?

Regarding its practice: what does the PDS do when it exercises political power and is a direct factor in political developments?

Let us begin with history.

For 40 years the SED was the sole official party in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). One could say that this party truly had the years and the power to prove what it was capable of.

I do not intend, however, to hold the PDS responsible for all of the

disgraceful deeds of the SED. Without doubt there have been changes over the past 10 years—both in the internal structure of the party, as well as its politics. Nevertheless, it was no accident that the SED was not dissolved 10 years ago, but simply renamed itself. Control over the extensive party property was merely one aspect—as significant as it is for this or that individual. With respect to a historical evaluation it plays a subordinate role.

One reason the SED survived in the form of the PDS was the attempt of the party leadership to rescue elements of the old GDR tradition and carry them forward into the Federal Republic of Germany. Their aim was a political synthesis of the GDR and West Germany. The best of both states should be united, Gysi emphasised at the time, and described this project as a “Third Way”. What has become of it? Nothing!

Already at that time the SED/PDS was confronted with the question of how to react to the concentrated power of West German and international companies and banks. Resistance to the devastating social consequences of German unification would have required the mobilisation of the workers and broad layers of the population. Precisely this, however, was what the party wanted to prevent at all costs.

Hans Modrow, the last prime minister of the GDR and present honorary chairman of the PDS, has emphasised again and again that his most important task during the critical weeks leading up to and following the fall of the Berlin Wall consisted in preserving law and order. He hoped that the West German government would respect this service and acknowledge the PDS as a force for stability, recognising it as a political equal when it came to negotiations. When this did not happen, he complained about the ingratitude and arrogance of the Western power-holders.

His minister of trade and commerce at the time, Christa Luft, today a member of the PDS federal parliamentary faction, founded the *Treuhänderstalt* (Trust Agency) with the purpose of conducting fair consultations with the Western companies and banks on the denationalisation of the GDR's economy. Later, she became terribly angry when Western entrepreneurs used the *Treuhänderstalt* to wipe out East German industry without the least regard for the social consequences.

That the PDS stood unequivocally for the introduction of private industry and capitalist ownership is incontrovertible. Christa Luft wrote an entire book on the matter with the title *The Joy of Property*, and in the first programmatic declarations of the PDS, Gysi demanded the “creation of a market economy” which rewards performance.

The same party, which today demands social reforms and speaks of limiting the power of business organisations, not only failed to oppose reunification under capitalist conditions, but played a key role in enforcing it. The fact that the results of reunification were very different from what they anticipated is no excuse, but merely demonstrates their political naïveté and short-sightedness.

So it came about—with barely a ripple the GDR went under.

Today, 10 years later, literally nothing remains. Was there ever before a case of an entire state departing in such a dramatic manner from the stage of history without leaving even a trace of progressive development—a state, moreover, which maintained that it was the embodiment of the future?

If one looks closely, there are only two aspects of the GDR that have survived. One is an enormous political confusion about socialism and other questions. The other is an increasingly loud lament about how bad everything is and how the “wessis” (West Germans) were able to exploit the situation. Together these constitute an explosive mixture of social anger and aggression, which can easily be exploited by right-wing demagogues.

In order to understand the PDS, one must deal with the history and political development of the GDR and also the Soviet Union. I must limit myself here to some fundamental questions. There is, however, abundant

literature by Leon Trotsky, or the Russian historian Vadim Rogovin, among others, which should be studied seriously.

The establishment of the GDR and coming to power of the SED were directly bound up with the greatest factional struggle in the history of the labour movement: the dispute between Stalinism and the Marxist opposition. The widespread assertion that the source and roots of Stalinism can be found in Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution is fundamentally false.

Stalin's ascent to become dictator of the Soviet Union was directly bound up with the brutal suppression of the Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky. After its victory over the Trotskyist opposition, the Stalinist regime aimed its terror at every progressive tendency in the country. Hundreds of thousands were condemned on the basis of false accusations, then executed or left to die in the labour camps. Reaction in Russia took dreadful revenge on the revolution.

Stalinism was the result of the pressure exercised by imperialism on the first workers state. It found its social support from layers which had rejected the 1917 revolution or had acquired privileges after the revolution, and had come to detest the aspirations of the masses for equality and freedom from the bottom of their souls. The establishment of the Stalinist dictatorship was the first stage of the bourgeois counterrevolution, which only concluded 70 years later with the policy of capitalist restoration under Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

Stalinism was more than a dictatorial party and form of government. It was based on a definite program: the nationalist concept of “constructing socialism in one country”. This nationalist orientation stood in absolute contrast to Marxism. By “socialism” Marxism understands a higher historic stage of development of society, which must be based on more progressive productive forces than capitalism. Capitalist society already made possible the rapid development and progress of industry and technology on the basis of an international division of labour. The attempt to set up a socialist society within a narrow national framework is both absurd and reactionary.

This narrow-minded perspective also determined the orientation of the Soviet government, when, at the end of the Second World War, the Stalinist regime was expanded to a number of countries in Eastern Europe and to the eastern part of Germany.

The GDR emerged through the intervention of the Soviet occupying power and was not the result of a revolutionary movement of the workers.

The Soviet regime pursued two goals in Germany:

(a) A buffer state was to be created in order to guarantee the security of the Soviet Union.

(b) A revolutionary movement of the working class in Germany, such as took place at the end of the First World War, was to be prevented. A revolt by the working class would have had immediate consequences for the Soviet Union and threatened the Stalinist regime.

Such inherently progressive measures as the nationalisation of the land, as well as the most important industries, or the introduction of some social reforms, were combined with an intensification of control over the working class and the suppression of every independent movement of the workers. Any independent political action by workers was thwarted, and when they came into conflict with the GDR government, as was the case in June 1953, they were put down by force of arms.

The key characteristic of the GDR was the gagging of every form of independent thinking and action, the repression of free thought and exchange of opinions. Today that heritage reaps a bitter revenge. This is the reason for the present crisis and lack of orientation and also the growing susceptibility to right-wing extremist demagogues.

If one asks why the workers have not been able to repulse any of the attacks mounted by the employers over the past decade, the explanation is to be found in the sweeping political suppression they suffered during the years of the GDR. An entire generation was stripped of the ability to think

and act independently.

In order to exert its political power, more than anything else the labour movement requires the free and fair struggle of political ideas; the open debate on political programs and theoretical conceptions; the right to form groups or parties to discuss political or cultural ideas. In short, it needs workers' democracy!

Whoever questions this proposition has failed to understand the first thing about socialism.

Political oppression in the GDR served to enforce the interests of a privileged layer in the state and party, which reacted to each problem with the most narrow bureaucratic means, such as the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and prohibitions on travel.

The GDR's dependence on the world economy constantly grew over the years. The globalisation of production, which in the 80s led to a rapid increase in productivity, threw the GDR hopelessly back in terms of international competition. To mention just one figure: East Germany's share of machine exports fell from 3.9 percent in 1973 to 0.9 percent in 1986.

I will not dwell on Erik Honecker's hopeless attempt to develop a megabyte chip for the GDR. Even before the prototype was ready, other more powerful and cheaper computer chips were already on the international market.

In the end, the GDR failed because its nationalist and bureaucratic perspective was incompatible with the internationalisation of production.

The SED reacted to the breakdown of the Stalinist state and the establishment of a bourgeois state by transforming itself into the PDS, the transformation of the state party of the East into a constitutional party of the West.

Nationalism of the Stalinist variety was replaced by a form of social reformism of the capitalist variety, which rests on a strengthening of the national state.

As evidence of the humane and social face of capitalism, the PDS cites the policies of former SPD leader Willy Brandt. However the attempt to revive the reformist policies of the 1970s is not just a retrograde perspective, it leaves out the most important question. The objective changes in the production process, which brought about the end of the Soviet Union and the GDR, have simultaneously undermined the politics of social reforms on a capitalist basis.

The more the social and political crisis intensifies, the clearer becomes the national orientation of the PDS's perspective. Paradoxically, this development is demonstrated in the issue that led many to applaud the PDS—the party's position regarding the latest war.

The PDS was the only party in the *Bundestag* (German parliament) to vote against the NATO war in Yugoslavia and against German participation in it. That strengthened their reputation as a "consistent anti-war party". When one more closely considers the arguments of the PDS, however, the party's main objection to the war was that it had not been legitimised by the United Nations. Instead, NATO, under the leadership of the US government, acted independently of the UN, contravening both international law and the NATO treaty.

The PDS was by no means alone in this criticism. A whole series of leading politicians made similar comments against the war and above all against American dominance of NATO—from such Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians as Willy Wimmer, deputy chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to ex-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) and other leading SPD members such as Egon Bahr and Hermann Scheer.

Since the end of the war this criticism has become louder still. Europe must develop its own independent foreign and security policy and can no longer continue to be spoon-fed by the United States. Fifty years ago—before the foundation of NATO—a similar conflict between the "Atlanticists" and "Europeans" had already taken place in German

politics.

The policy of Konrad Adenauer (CDU), German chancellor at that time, for an unrestricted commitment to the West met with considerable resistance, in the ranks of both the CDU and the SPD. Adenauer's main opponent, SPD chairman Kurt Schumacher, vehemently agitated for a stronger independent role for Germany in international politics. Against Bonn, he supported Berlin's claim as German capital; he refused to recognise the Oder-Neisse boundary with Poland, and supported the restoration of Germany within its 1937 borders.

The demand for more German independence in foreign policy has met with broad support in the PDS. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, initiatives in favour of a united Germany and a German foreign policy independent of the Great Powers have a long tradition in the SED; indeed, up until 1952 it formed part of the party's official policy. On the other hand, the GDR established the closest economic and political links with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The PDS, whose politics are not marked by any close links to the US, has more in common with the changed interests of German foreign policy than either the SPD or CDU. This is one reason for the favourable media coverage of the PDS recently, and why even the CDU found itself forced to withdraw its "red socks" campaign against the PDS, and to recognise the party as a "serious political force".

The PDS reacts to this changed situation by reinforcing its role as an establishment party. In the first place, it is clearing away its previous pacifist conceptions. Gysi's strategy paper for the recognition of the UN's monopoly of force is presently being discussed in the party, but the vigorous debate is the first step toward agreeing to foreign combat missions by the German army.

Secondly, the party is seeking to bring its propaganda into line with its actual political orientation. To this end, Gysi explained two weeks ago in an interview with the *Südwestfunk* radio station that it was urgently necessary for the party take its leave from the "old models of socialism". The task now is to arrive at "realisable political alternatives". The party must comprehend that it is no longer an issue of the "change from capitalism to another completely different system".

Let us now examine more closely the social orientation of the PDS.

Over the past 13 months of the red-green government it has become clear that adherence to even the most minimal social standards meets with aggressive resistance on the part of big business and its associations. It is not merely a matter of different economic conceptions, the efficacy of which have to be demonstrated to the entrepreneurs. It is an issue of the clash of real social forces, i.e., a class struggle.

In order to repulse the attacks of the employers' organisations, it is necessary to mobilise broad layers of the working population.

Can and does the PDS want to do this?

In the GDR the SED represented the interests of a privileged layer and vigorously rebuffed any autonomous action on the part of the workers.

Following reunification, the PDS was the mouthpiece of an army of disillusioned small property holders, who set their hopes on the market economy but were quickly disappointed. For many, "more rights for the East" became the central demand of the PDS.

Christine Ostrovski, PDS state executive member in Saxony, demanded the transformation of the PDS into an "East German peoples party", comparable to the right-wing Christian Social Union in Bavaria. Gysi raised the demand for the establishment of a separate parliamentary chamber: alongside the two existing parliamentary chambers, *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat*, special representation for the East German states should be set up.

At the heart of the economic and social programme of the PDS is the demand for "support for the *Mittelstand*".

A three-letter word that continually crops up in all German economic and socio-political theses is: "ÖBS"—standing for public employment

sector. Normally there follows a quite complicated explanation of a secondary labour market. What is meant, however, is quite simple. The plan is for a host of different forms of services—neighbourhood aid, care for the elderly and children, housework or even looking after dogs, doing the shopping, etc.—to be carried out by small private enterprises, which, following some initial financial support, are then expected to operate profitably.

If a comparison is sought, look at the transformation that has taken place in nursing care insurance. This has led to a situation where hundreds of nurses and care assistants comb the cities in their cars in order to hastily change the dressing of a patient here, to wash another there, and then speed to some other part of town in order to administer an injection. This has not only led to a deterioration in care, but also involves drastic wage cuts and a loss of social benefits for the employees.

In order to transform these services, which were previously carried out by charitable or state organisations, into profitable small businesses, it is necessary for the latter to procure mainly family members or friends to perform unpaid work. The PDS has already developed a designation for such work. In its "Twelve Theses" the party speaks of "more meaningful, voluntary communal and individual work, which is not commercially oriented".

The PDS uses every opportunity to make clear its concentration on the creation and advancement of small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Here is a recent example:

PDS press release, October 16, 1999: "New farsighted economy with ÖBS and strong small- and medium-sized companies."

"At a conference of representatives from medium-sized businesses, together with trade unions and PDS workers' representatives, organised by the party executive committee on October 16, 1999, PDS Deputy Chairman Diether Dehm called upon those present to recognise the power of the banks as a danger for jobs and the *Mittelstand*."

"The PDS will develop a plan for the *Mittelstand* against the wave of bankruptcies in East and West whereby, for example, investment no longer flows to Siemens and Co., but rather to small traders and the *Mittelstand* ..."

The deputy chairman of the PDS in the *Bundestag*, Christa Luft, also called upon PDS members, both entrepreneurs and union members, to overcome their long-standing differences, to learn from one another and to recognise their common adversary in the executive suites of the corporations and major banks. Luft said: "Germany needs a PDS that is united—for a new farsighted economy with a publicly supported occupational sector, strong small- and medium-sized businesses and the qualitative development of industry."

Support for the *Mittelstand* means the strengthening of a social layer that is completely enamoured of the capitalist system. Under conditions of growing pressure on the part of international capital markets, such businesses will be rapidly confronted with ruin. The PDS is resting on the most unstable of social layers, which, under conditions of economic crisis, can develop very far to the right.

What does the practice of the PDS look like?

One could describe the party with the words: "Opposition in words—law and order in deeds".

Everywhere that the PDS actually exercises political responsibility, it works closely with the SPD and CDU with the common goal of imposing social cuts and austerity measures against the population.

Here are just two brief examples that reveal far more than a dozen party programmes.

Last summer the PDS fraction in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt voted for the so-called "law governing children's care", which introduced decisive cuts to kindergartens, nurseries and children's day homes, and involves the destruction of several thousand jobs.

It is by no means a novelty for the PDS to support the SPD in imposing

cuts within the framework of the "Magdeburg model," whereby the PDS "tolerates" (i.e., does not vote against) the measures carried out by the SPD, in an informal alliance. For the fifth time in a row the PDS has put its signature on cuts implemented by the SPD state government, involving the dismantling of local social benefits.

What is new is, firstly, the extent of the cuts and, secondly, the fact that this time the measures have met with massive opposition on the part of those directly affected, as well as broad layers of the general population.

Saxony-Anhalt's state constitution embodies the right to carry out different sorts of plebiscites, making a "people's initiative" possible that can have a powerful influence on the decisions of the state parliament. It is first necessary to collect 250,000 signatures from eligible voters. Within a short space of time, a referendum initiative collected nearly 300,000 signatures against the planned law, although the PDS had explicitly and repeatedly argued against such a mobilisation.

How did the party that often calls itself a "left opposition" react to this?

Bearing in mind the growing resistance in the general populace, the PDS first sought to win time and agreed jointly with the CDU to postpone the vote on the new law. It then tried to split the leadership of the referendum initiative and convince a part of the campaign of the necessity to make expenditure cuts. Four days after local elections it jointly voted for the law with the SPD and enforced the cuts in face of popular resistance.

A few days later the SPD government of Rheinhard Höppner disclosed that it intends to wipe out 13,000 of the existing 74,000 jobs in the public sector over the next five years.

For a further look at the PDS's *realpolitik* it is necessary to turn to Schwerin, the state capital of Mecklenburg-Pomerania. Since the beginning of the year, the state has been governed by an SPD-PDS coalition. For the first time, the PDS is participating in a state government with its own ministers. What have been the consequences for the population?

Just two points:

In the face of continually growing resistance, almost all of the local hospitals are to be privatised as quickly as possible. A few weeks ago the newspaper *Junge Welt* interviewed the northern region press officer of the public service union ÖTV. Although we are not supporters of the trade union bureaucracy, which frequently agrees to cuts, the statements of Gabriele Gröschl-Bahr are very informative.

She says: "At the moment seven hospitals stand on the list. Almost all local hospitals are down for privatisation. That affects district hospitals and even the university hospital in Greifswald. Privatisation inevitably means job losses, because cuts in staff are the only way to save money. At the moment, Mecklenburg-Pomerania is trying to give away the hospitals to private investors, without regard for the consequences on research and teaching."

Question: What is the PDS minister of social affairs, Martina Bunge, doing?

"Naturally we had hoped that an SPD-PDS state government would not have decided so simply on privatisation, and that instead would work on the issue with us in the trade unions. We have experienced, however, these measures being enforced in a more radical fashion than in other states. And the minister of social affairs did nothing to intervene.... Before the local elections the PDS had announced that it would defend public employment, now under a PDS government hospitals are to be privatised."

Question: How have the staff reacted in the affected hospitals?

"Recently a protest statement with 7,000 signatures was submitted by staff to state Prime Minister Harald Ringstorff. Some 1,000 people took to the streets in protest in the town of Greifswald. It has turned out to be completely wrong to expect that life would be easier after German reunification in a democratic society, and especially with this state government. The staff affected are rather angry."

The second development concerns the situation on the jobs market, the political responsibility of PDS state chairman and Employment Minister Helmut Holter. Of all East German states, Mecklenburg Pomerania has the lowest wages. Some 41 percent of employees work without a proper contract, the highest percentage in the East. According to one investigation into working conditions in the state, wage differences amounting to 600 German marks (US\$310) per month for workers carrying out the same tasks is not uncommon.

PDS Minister Holter is using these low incomes to push through cheap labour in the ÖBS sector. Let me cite once again an exchange from the pages of *Junge Welt*, this time with the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) state chairman. He is quoted as follows: "Pointing to the lack of contracts in many industries, Minister Holter told many enterprises in Mecklenburg-Pomerania that it was sufficient to pay 80 percent of the standard union wage for publicly sponsored employment. It is especially explosive when a PDS employment minister sanctions such contract breeches."

In the face of union protests, Holter, together with the employers' associations, enforced the 80 percent regulation.

Any commentary is superfluous!

Point by point, the PDS takes over the positions that have been abandoned by the SPD and thus follows the SPD, step by step, in its rightward path.

The prognosis for the party's coming development presents itself in the form of a contradiction. The more the PDS is able to win opposition votes with its propaganda as the "party of social justice", and thereby increase its political weight, the more it emphasises its willingness to act "responsibly" as an establishment party in furthering Germany's "national interest".

From a completely limited viewpoint, many consider the PDS as a parliamentary ally or a partner in actions against the right wing. But future social development depends, above all, on the independent political thinking and activity of broad layers of the population. That requires the clarification of fundamental questions of political orientation. The PDS, however, was in the past and remains today the principal source of political confusion. Previously, in the name of socialism, the party justified the greatest crimes against the working class. Today it still continues to declare its politics, which function entirely within the framework of bourgeois society, to be socialist.

Under conditions where the entire party system is in a state of great flux, and the old *Volksparteien* (peoples parties) are openly breaking apart, the development of the PDS can assume very different forms. I will not speculate at this point.

But one thing is certain and should be expressed clearly: under no circumstances is it possible for the PDS to become a party of the working class, representing the historic interests of the working population in the construction of a new, genuinely socialist society. For that to happen it would have to break with everything it represents and everything which constitutes its real nature.

Like the SPD, the PDS is part of the huge bureaucratic apparatus that dominated the working class this century, an apparatus which is now breaking apart.

The fundamental social changes that are forcing parties to completely transform their appearance in the shortest possible time are accompanied by major political experiences. Whoever is willing can learn quickly under these conditions.

For example, we only have to consider the crash course in opportunism presented by the German Green party. But that is the subject of another lecture.

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