

Germany: Party of Democratic Socialism proclaims its love for the Fatherland

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Following its party convention in the eastern German city of Cottbus, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) has resolutely declared its loyalty to the German nation. In a manner more characteristic of the right wing, the party's leading representatives have officially voiced their allegiance to the German Fatherland.

During the party convention—held under the slogan, “... so that a healthy Germany blossoms”—it was noticeable that, together with its relations to the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD), the PDS sought to clarify its attitude to the nation. In her inaugural speech as party chairperson, Gabriele Zimmer acknowledged her “love for Germany” and said she was impressed with the uninhibited attitude of the French and Italian left towards the concept of nationhood. “Germany is beautiful,” she announced to the delegates. “I am not opposed to Germany but, rather because I love it... I oppose what prevents a healthy Germany from blossoming.”

In an interview with the daily *taz* newspaper at the end of October, she continued in the same vein. Sentimentally enthusing over her homeland (“Do you know how wonderful it is to soar in a glider over the river Rhön in Hesse ... where my uncle lives — wonderful”), she repeated arguments sounded by former party chairman Gregor Gysi in an earlier interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*: “Up until today most left-wingers have seen themselves as being distanced from or even against Germany, against the concept of the nation. It's exactly this attitude that I want to change!” And on another occasion: “The German left's troubled relationship with nationhood stems from historical causes rooted back in the nineteenth century. By combating and insulting the left as people without a Fatherland, their opponents made it often difficult for left-wingers to acknowledge the German nation.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has already dealt with the way this statement distorts history (See: Former East German Stalinist leader and PDS head Gregor Gysi discovers the nation <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/oct2000/germ-o18.shtml>). Our argument need not be repeated here. Instead we now want to pursue the question of why the PDS leadership tried so hard and, after initial hesitations, eventually managed to engage the media in a public relations campaign concerning its attitude to the German nation.

Timidly expressed objections from party members to Zimmer's excessive nationalism provoked an even more decisive avowal of national pride and were arrogantly dismissed by the party leadership.

Among the leadership's critics was federal parliamentarian, Winfried Wolf, speaking against— among other things—Zimmer's admiration for the French Communist Party, which had supported the colonial war against Algeria, as well as defended the French government's nuclear arms program.

Wolf, however, is in an extremely weak position in the PDS. As a one-time member of the pseudo-Trotskyist GIM (International Marxist Group) and the VSP (United Socialist Party)—middle class radical groups that function as political apologists for the Stalinist and social democratic parties and trade union bureaucracies—he is among those former West German left-wingers who joined the PDS after reunification and thereby enjoyed the prospects of an unexpected career leap. In 1995 the PDS placed him at the top of their slate in the state of Baden-Württemberg and helped secure him a parliamentary seat, although he had no significant backing either in the electorate or in the PDS. In response to his current remarks, Roland , the new chairman of the PDS parliamentary faction, threatened to expel him if he did not withdraw his criticism. “Then I'll just say goodbye,” was Claus's much quoted reply during the faction meeting.

Further objections came from the ranks of the younger PDS members.

Angela Marquardt, former member of the party executive, spoke of a “slap in the face for all left-wingers” and answered Zimmer with: “In adopting this (nationalistic) stance, she is not my chairperson.”

In an interview with *Junge Welt* newspaper (former paper of the youth movement of the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party—SED), federal PDS deputy Carsten Hüber questioned the political spectrum the party was addressing with this type of campaign. Against a background of increasing right-wing violence and the current debate about a “defining culture” in Germany, he could not understand what a discussion about nationhood could achieve—apart from confusion. “Because in my view”, he explained, “regardless of the particular political issue—whether social policy, the environment, immigration or

economic policy— nationhood cannot be a point of reference for any form of left-wing politics with a future”.

Sarah Wagenknecht, a member of the party executive, thought that the debate about the German nation was the “surest way to reduce the PDS in western Germany from 2 to 0.2 percent of the vote”. Therefore she saw it as “ill-considered and unnecessary”. Nevertheless, Wagenknecht's Communist Platform fraction in the PDS has little reason to attack the nationalist utterances of the PDS. As keeper of the Holy Grail of the lost East German identity, she herself is certainly used to promoting her own version of nationalism.

The stance taken by these critics is so weak that it would be an exaggeration to speak of a debate or even a quarrel within the PDS. While the objections of such critics sound like shy reservations motivated by considerations of electoral strategy, the party leadership is consolidating its position with every reply it makes to criticism. At the same time it sees itself assured of support for its position from the majority of the party membership.

Consequently, Dietmar Bartsch, the party's Federal Secretary, stated that the critics shouldn't “get carried away”. According to him, many of the comrades had greeted Zimmer's utterances as a liberating. Gregor Gysi has also recently sprung to the defence of the new party chairperson, expressing his deep respect for her readiness to tackle a “mega-issue” and call for “a normal relationship between left-wingers and their nation.” He emphasised that, “If it wants to be successful, the left too will have to fight for and not against the nation.”

The question remains as to why the PDS is provoking a debate that appears to be so one-sided. One would think it should have been fully satisfied with the clear mandate delivered to the new executive and its political course through the votes at the party convention. After all, Chairperson Zimmer did receive over 90 percent of the delegates' votes—a result reminiscent of the old days of the SED.

Essentially there are two reasons for this sense of urgency.

Firstly, the acceptance of the PDS into the circle of establishment parties is conditional upon its professed loyalty to the German nation being beyond the slightest doubt. In deference to ruling political circles, it is most eager to shake off the stigma of unpredictability. It wants to prove that certain “incidents”—like the one in Münster at the beginning of this year, when the executive received a stab in the back from party members over the question of the deployment of UN military troops—now belong to the past.

Secondly, the declaration of German patriotism is meant to serve as an alternative to the call for “social justice”, which is increasingly losing credibility in view of the PDS's actual political record.

Since reunification the PDS has served as a mustering post and mouthpiece for those layers which formerly occupied leading positions within the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), but then got left behind following German

reunification in 1989/90. Among these people were a considerable number of functionaries from the SED, the FDJ youth organisation and the FDGB trade union alliance (whose careers suddenly came to an end with the collapse of the GDR) as well as members of the scientific, educational and cultural elite and officers of the GDR military and police forces.

The party's demand for “social justice” was aimed at acquiring equal terms with corresponding social layers in the West, but also found a resonance in that part of the East German population which, after reunification, was suddenly confronted with long-term unemployment, painful cuts in child care provision, exorbitant rents, constant stress, etc.

Due to the support of such layers, the PDS was able to win votes and positions of political responsibility. Ten years since reunification the party now sits firmly in the saddle with three ministers in the state parliament of Mecklenburg-Pommern, nearly two hundred local mayors and thousands of seats in national, state and local parliaments. The source for its role as opposition has dried up. The party has got down to business.

As a result, however, the party will increasingly lose its traditional following. It is already the case that the party's policies on a day-to-day basis have made clear that its socialist rhetoric is just empty phraseology. Wherever the party has influence it has supported social cuts, referring to “budget restrictions”. At the same time, to the extent that PDS ministers in Mecklenburg-Pommern have supported the tax plans of the Schröder government, the party ensures that such restrictions continue to dominate.

Under conditions where the gulf between rich and poor in German society is growing, and it proves impossible to quell social tensions with reforms, a large part of those who up until now have sympathised with the party will desert its ranks. In addition, the party threatens to antagonise its clientele amongst small business layers when it assumes growing responsibility for national policies aimed at appeasing German big business interests.

In anticipation of the impending decline of its customary social base, the PDS is on the lookout for a unifying bond—something “which binds instead of dividing” as Gysi put it in his interview in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. This bond is “love for Germany”, the recognition of the nation. The similarity to the current debate over a “guiding culture” inside the conservative Christian Democratic Union, which has similar aims in this respect to the PDS, is unmistakable.



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