

PDS leader Gysi announces candidacy in Berlin mayoral election

Ute Reissner, Hendrick Paul
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At a recent press conference Gregor Gysi, a leading figure in the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), announced his intention of standing as a candidate for the post of mayor of Berlin. He said he had decided to run because “the present situation in Berlin demands such an alternative candidacy”.

The PDS is the successor organisation to the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the Stalinist party that ruled in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), more widely known as East Germany, from the formation of East Germany in the late 1940s until the collapse of the Stalinist state and the reunification of Germany on a capitalist basis a decade ago.

Like many other state parties of the former Soviet bloc, the SED transformed itself into a new party in order to adapt itself to the conditions of capitalist restoration. But the PDS has never made a historical accounting with the counterrevolutionary record and dictatorial practices of the party from which it emerged.

Although it seeks to distance itself from the crimes of Stalinism against the working class both internationally and in Germany, the PDS remains wedded to the anti-Marxist and nationalist perspective that animated the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy and its East European counterparts. Its pedigree is not the program of the 1917 October Revolution, but rather the betrayal of that revolution by the Stalinist regime, including the liquidation of the socialist elements in the Soviet working class and intelligentsia in the infamous purges and show trials of the 1930s. (For a detailed analysis of the role of Stalinism and the SED in East Germany, see Stalinism in Eastern Europe: the Rise and Fall of the GDR).

With Gysi’s candidacy in Berlin, the PDS is announcing its bid to become a full-fledged party of the German bourgeois state, and offering its services in carrying through major cuts in the city’s budget.

The mayoral election will take place in the wake of the disclosure of massive debts arising from a banking scandal involving leading city officials.

A resolution of the PDS state conference [Berlin is both a municipality and a state] on June 15 stipulated: “After the election several different constellations are possible. For the first time the PDS has the possibility of taking over governmental responsibility and thereby demonstrating that it can achieve what many increasingly regard it capable of.”

The purpose of his candidacy, Gysi explained, was to ensure that “the necessary reform of the city’s finances takes place in a fair way”. He wanted “to clean up the corrupt network of politics, money and real estate in Berlin and thereby create an even playing field for all employers.” Only by ending this corruption, he said, “will it be possible to make Berlin a more interesting prospect for serious investors.” The city’s administration had to be “streamlined, de-bureaucratized and made more transparent.”

The candidate-in-waiting was obliged to employ all of his rhetorical talents to combine such a drastic programme of cuts with some pretence of tackling social problems. Greater economic power, he explained, would eventually benefit schools, kindergartens and cultural institutions. But for the moment, the PDS should no longer oppose public spending cuts that it

would inevitably vote for in parliament.

In an interview with the on-line magazine of the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, he said, “Instead of constructing castles in the air, we have to support harsh cuts. In a coalition with the SPD (Social Democratic Party) the PDS will have the job of ensuring that people—even if they suffer because of the cuts—have the feeling that at least they are being treated fairly.”

Over a year ago Gysi announced his resignation from his leading position in the PDS. This followed a dispute at the PDS party conference in Münster in April 2000. The delegates had voted against a motion proposed by the party’s executive calling for a change in the party’s traditional opposition to military interventions by the German army. In a letter to delegates Gysi called upon the party to draw “a dividing line from the dogmatic left” and emphasised that the party’s parliamentary fraction would, under no circumstances, yield its right to “concretely assess every UN action”.

Following the defeat of their motion, Gysi and PDS Chairman Lothar Bisky resigned their posts. In October 2000 Gysi also resigned from his position as chairman of the PDS fraction in the German parliament. This development made clear that the party was hardly in a position to maintain much longer its balancing act of verbal opposition and de facto support for the status quo.

Following the reintroduction in the former East Germany of capitalist market relations in 1989-90—measures supported and implemented by the PDS—the party posed as the advocate of the deprived and disadvantaged in the hard-hit east. In practice, however, in the numerous localities where the party held power, the PDS carried out policies largely identical to those of the other main German parties.

In the German states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where the PDS has governed in a coalition with the SPD since 1998, and Saxony-Anhalt, where the PDS has “tolerated” an SPD government since 1994, the party has done nothing to alleviate the disastrous social conditions and staggering levels of unemployment. Both regions have some of the highest unemployment rates in Germany. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the PDS labour ministry spoke of a “super weapon” against unemployment—a publicly supported scheme to create 5,000 new jobs. In the event, only a few hundred new posts were created. Over the same period of time another 5,000 state-subsidised jobs were lost.

The Social Democratic minister president in Saxony-Anhalt, Reinhardt Höppner, has boasted that since taking power seven years ago, with the support of the PDS, he has been able to shed 2,000 jobs a year in the public services. Year after year the PDS has given its seal of approval to new budget cuts, including cuts in childcare.

Gysi’s candidacy in Berlin makes clear that the PDS is now ready to carry out similar policies on a much larger scale, and, if possible at the federal level.

At an extraordinary state conference last month PDS Chairperson Gabi Zimmer stated: “In Berlin there is a budget crisis brought about by

Diepgen [the former Christian Democratic Union (CDU) mayor] and co. which does not leave even the limited room for manoeuvre that we have elsewhere. It is not even possible at this stage to assess the full extent of the crisis... This poses a further question: What is our position regarding a crisis of public finances? Are budget cuts a theme for socialists? Is it possible for such cuts to stand at the centre of the policies of a state government in which the PDS is a coalition partner?"

The situation in Berlin reflects relations in Germany as a whole. Many of the conflicts and contradictions that currently afflict the country are expressed in Berlin in their sharpest form. Ten years after German reunification, social divisions have intensified to an unprecedented degree, while regional divisions and those between eastern and western Germany have also increased dramatically.

In past years the SPD and the Green Party explicitly rejected any possibility of working together in a government in Berlin with the PDS. Today they see no alternative, especially when the Berlin banking crisis has provoked huge levels of discontent in the population. The PDS, which was not involved in the morass of corruption that engulfed the ruling CDU-SPD coalition in Berlin, is being called upon to exert its remaining credibility so as to implement plans, worked out long in advance, for devastating social cuts in the city.

The decision to bring the PDS on board was made at the highest level. Only after German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had given his approval did the Berlin SPD proceed to dissolve its coalition with the conservative CDU at the beginning of June and, with the votes of the PDS, oust Eberhard Diepgen from the mayor's office.

For years the PDS leadership, and Gysi in particular, have worked on a national level to prepare their party for participation in government. They have sought to prove their acceptability by continually adapting themselves to officially sponsored anti-communism.

On the occasion of his resignation as chairman of the PDS parliamentary fraction, Gysi made a speech in October 2000 on the tenth anniversary of German unification. The theme of the speech was his loyalty to the nation. "Many lefts in Germany have never fought for their nation and were therefore doomed to failure," he said. "A left which does not regard itself as part of the nation cannot fight for it. Even less can it take over the main responsibility for a nation".

The new chairman of the PDS, Gabi Zimmer, voted into office at the time with 90 percent of the votes of PDS delegates, also announced her intention of changing "the rigid relation of German lefts to their nation."

In December 2000, the PDS came to the conclusion that a law was necessary to regulate and limit immigration. This was followed recently by an apology for the forced unification of the German Communist Party (KPD) and SPD in Soviet-occupied eastern Germany in 1946, as well as the construction of the Berlin wall in 1961.

Earlier this month Gysi declared that he would take personal responsibility for working over the history of the PDS and its forerunner, the SED. However, the PDS version of "working over the history" is just another of its submissive adaptations to the German establishment. Thus, the apology for the forced unification of the KPD and SPD facilitates making further advances towards the Social Democracy.

The reluctance of the PDS to undertake a real historical debate is demonstrated by the crude manner with which the PDS leadership deals with its own critics inside the party. New assessments of historical questions are regularly voiced in the media by leading party figures such as Zimmer, André Brie and Gysi, without any prior inner-party consultation, not to speak of votes.

Dietmar Bartsch, managing secretary of the PDS, provocatively stated in the *Spiegel* magazine that he would not even read discussion papers produced by inner-party critics, whom he denounced—falsely—as "Trotskyists". Gysi publicly attacked Sarah Wagenknecht, the leader of a hard-line Stalinist faction within the PDS named "Communist Platform",

as "a strange figure indeed". In late June, Peter Porsch resigned from his position as assistant national secretary shortly after he had come under harsh criticism for his public opposition to the PDS leadership's apology for the building of the Berlin wall.

While no precise figures are being published, articles in newspapers close to the PDS (such as *Junge Welt*) speak of hundreds of members leaving the party in disgust. The membership of the PDS consists largely of former citizens of East Germany in their 60s or older.

Gysi's candidacy is based not so much on his party as on his personal renown. Originally, he had demanded a change in the Berlin constitution to introduce direct, personal election of the mayor instead of the present party vote. This would have enabled him to stand independently of the PDS. When this did not prove feasible, he decided to run all the same.

According to opinion polls, Gysi's candidacy is supported by about 30 percent of the population, putting him on equal footing with Social Democratic candidate Klaus Wowereit.

If the PDS does assume governmental power, it will not take long for such a "red-red" (SPD-PDS) coalition to frustrate the hopes held by some sections of the population in such a formation. A glimpse at Italy shows the dangers that can emerge from such a situation. Disappointment over the performance of the centre left "Olive-Tree Alliance" eventually made it possible for Berlusconi to take power in a coalition with the neo-fascist National Alliance.

The recent intervention in the Berlin controversies by ex-German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in a media-inspired performance should be taken as a serious warning. Kohl described the PDS as communist and then employed the well-known phrase of the post-war chairman of the SPD, Kurt Schumacher: "Communists are merely red-varnished fascists".

This was not just a descent into Cold War rhetoric by a politician out of touch with reality. It is part of the campaign by a section of the CDU that is seeking to build a new movement on the extreme right of German politics.



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