

Ex-Stalinists join Social Democrats in Berlin city coalition

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The following article was written just before the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the successor to the SED, the ruling Stalinist party in former East Germany) finally agreed to form a coalition government in the city-state of Berlin, following October's poll. These elections had been forced when the SPD withdrew from the previous coalition with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), following a protracted crisis over city finances and corruption.

Negotiations between the SPD and PDS about forming a coalition government for Berlin city-state are running at full speed. Time is pressing; despite the approaching Christmas holidays, the new Berlin Senate (as the city-state government is called) must be confirmed by a vote in the state legislature on January 17. Both chief negotiators, the ruling mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD) and Gregor Gysi (PDS), are optimistic.

Up to now, PDS participation in governing Germany's capital city was intensely controversial. The PDS significantly improved its percentage share in October's state elections—winning 22.6 percent, nearly a five percent increase—and taking almost half the number of votes cast in the east part of the city. However, Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and the SPD nationally had previously spoken out against forming a coalition with the PDS in the Berlin Senate.

In the summer, Schröder had utilised the crisis that followed the exposure of massive corruption and nepotism at the Bankgesellschaft Berlin (the city's largest banking house) for a campaign against the Berlin "swamp". The grand coalition between the CDU and SPD in the Senate was abruptly ended and fresh elections called. Schröder's aim was to ensure Berlin had a government that could push through an extensive rationalisation programme and significant cuts in the capital. He certainly planned on the cooperation of the PDS, which controls the mayor's office in several districts in East Berlin.

But the September 11 terror attacks changed the political framework. With the PDS voting in the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) against the war in Afghanistan, a coalition with the ex-Stalinists in the German capital was no longer desirable. It was also uncertain whether the SPD's federal coalition partners, the Green Party, would politically survive after agreeing to the participation of German troops in the war. Under these conditions, the chancellor looked to the Free Democratic Party (FDP). Several times, he demonstratively invited the Liberals' chairperson Guido Westerwelle to confidential talks and signalled his clear interest in cooperation in his speeches to the *Bundestag*.

Under these conditions, coalition negotiations began at the end of October between the SPD, the Greens and the FDP, about forming a so-called "traffic light" coalition of red-green-orange in Berlin. But the FDP took an increasingly belligerent attitude. Not only did the notoriously rightwing FDP area branch in Berlin display its hostility to a coalition with the SPD in the Senate, but also the FDP's federal headquarters embarked upon a collision course with the Schröder government. US militarism in Afghanistan had given an impetus to the most reactionary

political tendencies. While the "red-green" federal government was only able to confirm its support for the war with difficulty (and the chancellor's threatened vote of confidence), conservative and rightwing forces saw their own chances improving. Thus the FDP abruptly let the "traffic light" coalition talks collapse, as they calculated that together with the Conservatives they might stand a real chance of success in the *Bundestag* elections next year in replacing the red-green government.

The PDS lead candidate in the Berlin elections, Gregor Gysi, had resigned himself to the success of the "traffic light" coalition—reopening his law offices and concluding deals with several newspapers about writing a regular column—when news reached him that the three-way talks had collapsed, and the SPD beat a path to his door. For the last two weeks he has been sitting in the Berlin city hall in order to prepare his participation in the Senate.

Government participation by the PDS in the capital introduces a new period of German politics.

Not only will the PDS rule over West Berliners for the first time, i.e. over citizens of the former West Germany, but their participation in the Berlin Senate serves as a springboard for taking on government responsibility at a national level. Through the coalition negotiations, the SPD aims to cement this party, whose members call themselves "democratic socialists," into a budget consolidation program that includes drastic cuts in all areas of social spending and a massive dismantling of public sector jobs.

The PDS has not hesitated in taking charge of arrangements for these austerity measures. Cloaking itself in the timeworn phrases about democracy being the "art of compromise", the PDS sees its role very much like that of the trade union bureaucracy: to shape the cuts in the welfare system in such a way that any resistance can be kept under control.

The following examples are illustrative. The Senate had previously announced the closure of 20 swimming pools in the city on cost grounds. Last weekend, the SPD and PDS agreed on closing 10 pools. The Friedrichshain sports and recreation centre—considered a prestige facility in former East Germany—is to be privatised as quickly as possible and will receive no more public funds after 2003. Evidently, Gysi wants to make it clear to his supporters in the east that some of their "sacred cows" are to be killed, and he has no scruples about doing so.

Although the education system in the city has already witnessed drastic cuts, and a recent study exposed big shortfalls in the German education system, other cuts are to follow in this area. The PDS had always protested loudly against the previous Senate plans to privatise the city's day nurseries, or to place them under private operators. Now the party is demanding that the Senate administration first examine whether the measure would actually save 290 million German Marks (\$133.5 million), and then suggests a so-called "third way". The city should establish its own business—for example, a "non-profit making" company—which functions according to free market criteria and then could take over the

administration of the day nurseries.

The aim remains the same: to push through the austerity measures. An SPD-PDS coalition would not even shrink from making cuts that affected educational standards, reports the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*. According to the paper, up to now, there is one senior staff member for every 100 children. By changing this ratio to one for every 130 children, 360 jobs could be cut. The size of the crèche groups would also be raised from 16 to 21 children.

Some 50,000 jobs have already been slashed in the city administration since 1990. There is still no agreement about a further reduction in staff. The ruling mayor, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), wants to cut personnel expenditure by about 2 billion Marks (\$1 billion). The SPD is demanding that city employees forgo their Christmas bonus and accept a reduction in working hours with a corresponding cut in wages. The PDS is calling for every decision affecting staffing to be agreed in discussions with the unions. However, according to Harald Wolf, leader of the PDS parliamentary group in city hall, it should be possible to conclude a "solidarity pact" with the unions, which achieves personnel savings worth approximately 1.6 billion Marks (\$800 million).

In the past, PDS officials stressed that cuts did not always have to be in areas affecting the weakest social layers. Now, as they take hold of the levers of power in the German capital, they are showing how seriously this was meant. On December 12, the PDS-SPD negotiating team discussing employment, social spending and health, agreed to cut some payments for those receiving social security by 20 percent; thus the one-off payment for winter clothes would be reduced for from 370 to 260 Marks (\$170-120).

The PDS leadership has also introduced a change in security policy. They continue to reject the introduction of closed-circuit TV into Berlin's public spaces begun by the CDU, but instead want to put more police officers on the streets, equipping all police stations with computers and network capabilities.

As far as military operations abroad by the German army go, PDS federal party manager Dietmar Bartsch is calling for a "realistic foreign policy". Policing operations and other foreign actions by German forces given United Nations blessing are "no longer a taboo". Bartsch pointed to the fact that the last PDS party congress supported the establishment of an international criminal court, and stressed that this would naturally have certain consequences. According to Bartsch, you cannot haul war criminals and other offenders before such a court by sending out a "police patrol", but must be prepared "if necessary, to fall back on elite army forces".

That the PDS is seeking to form a coalition with the party that has pushed through German participation in a war whose duration, extent and consequences are completely unknown, speaks volumes about its anti-war principles. If Gregor Gysi still tries to speak on anti-war demonstrations or protests, this only shows how much he fears that the PDS could lose its ability to divert such social protests into safer channels. But facts are stubborn things. Those who yesterday protested against social cuts are today sitting in city hall and planning their implementation.

The readiness with which the PDS unscrupulously wields the knife, today berating all resistance as an unrealistic flight of fancy, and then tomorrow using the police to suppress it, shows the party's historic experience in exercising power. In contrast to the Greens, who at every rightward turn have vocally displayed their own inner conflicts, the PDS acts as a party that has held state power in the German Democratic Republic for 40 years, where it suppressed all resistance.

There are definite reasons why the ruling party of the GDR was not dissolved when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989/90, but was renamed as the PDS. The party's extensive property holdings played a role, but not the crucial one. Much more important was maintaining the machinery of power that it had accrued over decades of experience in working class

oppression. During the last years, Gysi has praised and offered the services of this machinery time and again. Although he tried to free the PDS from the stench of the old Stalinist apparatus, the West German elite shunned his efforts. That the PDS is now called to the Berlin Senate, where it will be tested, is the result of a fundamental economic and political crisis.

All hopes for a period of stable economic growth, which the Schröder government entertained when it took office three years ago, have long faded. For several months, the number of unemployed has risen, and the bad news from the company boardrooms has become much more threatening. The polarisation of society is clearly increasing. Whereas Schröder and his British colleague Prime Minister Tony Blair talked of a *Neue Mitte* /Third Way, to which their politics were aimed, instead an enormous gulf has opened up between rich and poor.

It is the middle classes that are being ground down. Only a very small section has succeeded in its social ascent, while the large majority have slid down into the nameless army of wage labourers and face ever-greater difficulties in ensuring their families can make ends meet. In many questions government policy has failed and Schröder is clinging to every straw he can.

Particularly in eastern Germany, the government fears the rise of social conflicts that cannot be held under control. The official number of unemployed is twice as high in the east as in the west, despite the drift of many east German families to the large metropolitan areas in the west. In the former industrial centres of east Germany, where the SPD achieved its biggest votes three years ago, disappointment and bitterness are particularly great.

It is here that the PDS, which is the only party to possess an extensive organisational structure, must now enforce law and order. However, it remains to be seen whether the party is really able to do this, since up to now it has played a distinct double game. As an opposition party, it has been able to win protest votes, but in those municipalities or states where it exercises power, it competes with the CDU and SPD in implementing social cuts and lay-offs. With its entry into the Berlin Senate, the PDS is showing that when it comes to the crunch, it defends the existing order. Like the Greens, the political descent of the PDS also begins with its rise into federal politics.

The advanced economic and political crisis means that the degeneration and political putrefaction of the PDS will take on an even more rapid form. A glance at the party's leading figures shows this. While 90 percent of the membership consists of ageing SED cadres, the party's leading bodies are filled with young, dynamic careerists, whose opportunism is exceeded only by their ignorance.

A fine specimen of this species is Stefan Liebich. Only a few weeks ago, this 28-year-old was elected as the party's Berlin chairman, and he now sits next to Gregor Gysi at the negotiating table, obviously enjoying his place in the limelight. He calls himself a "policy manager" and likes to speak about "rock-hard budget shake-ups" and taking "economic responsibility". He makes no secret of his past in East Berlin and does not deny that even as a pupil he was passing on information about classmates to the *Stasi* (state security police). His motive even then was pursuing a career.

Above all, what he derived from the decline of the GDR was contempt for the broad mass of the population. It is clear from his arrogance and boundless conceit that he has never faced a serious opposition from the working class.

The danger is that the rightwing politics of the PDS will open the way for even more rightwing demagogues. In Saxony-Anhalt, the state in which the PDS has supported the SPD minority government of Reinhard Höppner for the last nine years, this danger is very tangible. Years of strong PDS political influence in the state capital Magdeburg has not changed the fact that this state suffers from the highest level of

unemployment in Germany and has cut back its social spending continually.

Next April's state elections will also be contested by the rightwing *Partei Reichstaatlicher Offensive* (PRO, Constitutional Offensive Party) headed by Hamburg Judge Ronald Barnabas Schill. In state elections held in neighbouring Hamburg this summer, Schill's law-and-order party won almost 20 percent of the vote. The PRO could find strong support in the decimated industrial districts of Magdeburg, Halle and Leuna, instigating a strong polarisation of the party landscape in the run-up to the *Bundestag* elections next year: on the one hand, an alliance between the SPD and PDS, and on the other, a conservative offensive by the Christian Democrats in alliance with rightwing racist groupings. In this way, the social divisions of society are reflected in a distorted fashion at a political level.

History does not repeat itself, but it would be wrong to neglect historic lessons. In 1938, in the founding programme of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky pointed out the fact that the popular front, on one side and the fascist dictatorship on the other are the last supports of bourgeois rule. Trotsky's assessment that the Stalinist parties played a key role in paralysing the working class in face of the danger from the rightwing was confirmed by historic developments.

Despite holding many anti-Stalinism-debates, the PDS clearly stands in the Stalinist tradition, precisely in this question.



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