

Germany: Ex-Stalinist leader Gysi resigns Berlin post

Ulrich Rippert
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The decision by Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) leader Gregor Gysi to resign his posts as economics minister and mayor of Berlin, as well as step down as parliamentary deputy, drew surprised reactions in the German capital last Wednesday. Gysi first took up the post of economics minister for the city-state of Berlin at the beginning of the year and he was widely regarded as a key figure in the city's so-called "red-red coalition"—the PDS alliance with the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Gysi gave as the reason for his resignation the fact that as deputy he had abused his parliamentary privilege in the years 2000 and 2001. He admitted using "bonus miles" accrued as a result of flights made in the course of his work for "occasional private purposes". He had made a mistake "for which I cannot forgive myself".

At the start of the week a number of conservative newspapers—in particular the *Bild*—published prominent articles accusing Gysi and other leading German politicians, including Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin and Foreign Office state minister Ludger Volmer, both from the Green Party, of using bonus miles for private purposes.

It is unclear how the newspapers obtained the confidential information. In fact the affair has all the hallmarks of a deliberate campaign by sections of the media to discredit Social Democratic, Green Party and PDS politicians in order to improve the chances of the conservative opposition Union parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—in the run up to national elections planned for September.

What is absolutely clear is that compared to corruption cases that have emerged in Germany over the past year, the current allegations over bonus miles are petty. Even the opposition parties in the Berlin senate did not call for Gysi's resignation. His behaviour contravenes directions made by the German parliament, but it is by no means criminal and many other deputies have done the same. According to press reports, it is a matter of course for employees of large companies to use bonus miles for private journeys.

While Trittin and Volmer have denied the accusations, Gysi immediately and without hesitation resigned. He conceded that his mistake regarding the bonus miles was "not a dramatic event, nothing punishable, for many justified, not a reason for resignation when one does not divorce political morality from social reality."

Nevertheless, he went on, the mistake showed "that I have distanced myself from my voters, that I have begun to regard privileges as a matter of course, that I can no longer rely 100 percent on my instinct when it comes to deciding between what is justified and unjustified. I was in danger of becoming someone I did not want to be, bound up with a loss of image and credibility." I feared, said Gysi, "the change taking place in my own character".

Gysi's outpourings of self-criticism had the required affect. His decision has been applauded as noble and highly moral. Berlin's Mayor, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), who was forced to abruptly break off his holiday, regretted the resignation and commented, "I must accord him my respect and thank him for the fruitful collaboration." The main editorial writer of the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, Heribert Prantl, praised Gysi for applying the same criteria to himself that he had used in polemics with his opponents. "That deserves respect," he wrote.

In fact Gysi's real motivation had very little to do with his prattling over morality. When it was an issue of implementing economic policies at the expense of broad social layers, Gysi demonstrated no moral scruples. As economics minister in Berlin, he repeatedly defied protest demonstrations and petitions in order to proceed with mass redundancies and attacks on social services.

A year ago Gysi stood as a candidate in the Berlin state election with the aim of "shouldering severe cuts", as he explained at the time to the *Tagespiegel* newspaper. He wanted to make the city "more interesting for serious investors" and make the administration more "streamlined, de-bureaucratised and transparent".

The previous city senate coalition, composed of the CDU and SPD, was so despised that it was unable to press ahead with planned cuts without unleashing mass protests. According to Gysi, the role of the PDS in the new senate was to ensure that "the people—even when they suffer because of the cuts—have the feeling: at least the cuts are being implemented in a fair fashion".

Barely in office, the SPD-PDS senate drew up a double budget for 2002/03, which went far further in the realm of savings measures than anything imposed by the CDU-SPD senate in the last decade.

In the current budget year, the senate administration and city districts must save a total of 121 million euros and impose the following measures: the destruction of 15,000 positions in the public service, extension of working hours by half an hour per week for city officials in west Berlin and accompanying wage cuts of an average of 10 percent.

Some 1,100 jobs were cut in nurseries and day centres in the capital and pressure on the city's district suburbs resulted in substantial price increases in youth activities, leisure, sport and educational facilities. The senate proceeded with particular severity against those who are dependent on social assistance, with total cuts in payments of 40 million euros (23 percent).

At the same time, the senate agreed to use its budget to guarantee all the financial losses arising from the shady business dealings of the Bankgesellschaft Berlin AG—totalling 21.6 billion euros. This means in practice that the profit of investors, comprising mainly of the wealthy clients of the previous corrupt state government, has been

secured at the expense of the population and its poorest layers.

A few weeks ago, drastic increases in the price of admission to Berlin swimming pools led to widespread protests. Such protests were frequently directed against Gysi personally as economics minister and he has been the butt of hostility and catcalls in the course of recent public appearances. He has even been forced to protect himself from the impact of rotten tomatoes and eggs.

While Gysi, as economics minister, remained adamant in the face of popular opposition, he immediately and tamely gave way when put under pressure by a right-wing media campaign. A few arbitrary and inflated accusations raised by conservative and right-wing journalists employing dubious methods were enough to precipitate his resignation.

In many respects Gysi's resignation brings to mind the resignation of Oskar Lafontaine three years ago. As former SPD chairman and Finance Minister of the new SPD-Green Party government, Lafontaine also suddenly announced his resignation from all posts after coming under pressure from the political rightwing. As we wrote at the time, his resignation must be understood as a "recognition of the failure of his policies".

As one of Europe's last leading Social Democrats, Lafontaine spoke of the necessity of implementing balanced social policies. He claimed that the negative social consequences of globalisation and the unrestrained conduct of the market could be ameliorated by political measures, without throwing into question the capitalist system itself. He promised an alternative to the anti-social budgetary plans of the Kohl government and was instrumental in securing an election victory for the SPD four years ago.

In his post as Finance Minister, Lafontaine proceeded to implement the budget cuts of his conservative predecessor, only to come under pressure from sections of big business and the rightwing inside his own party. Following a dispute with Chancellor Schröder, he resigned from all posts without a fight and left the way open for the rightwing in the party to dictate government economic policy.

There are marked similarities between the politics of Gysi and Lafontaine. As the son of a GDR Minister of Culture, Gregor Gysi took over the leadership of the party following the collapse of the East German Stalinist SED government and turned it into the PDS. Gysi's aim was to ensure the smooth integration of the former GDR political elite into the political and business establishment of the reunited Germany.

Although the party continues to describe itself as a socialist organisation, the PDS has never seriously questioned capitalist property relations. The party's socialist rhetoric was directed at capturing and controlling the growing anger over worsening social conditions in the east of the country. In those areas where the PDS entered government—in many east German localities and in the states of Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern—the party has carried out policies virtually identical to those of the SPD and CDU. Both states head the list of areas with the largest percentage of unemployed in Germany.

In recent years the PDS has played a key role in maintaining bourgeois rule in the East German states. At the same time the party sought to develop its profile as a party of opposition in national politics and to attract protest votes. It has become increasingly difficult, however, for the party to bridge the yawning gap between its demagogic slogans and its practice.

In 1993, Gysi handed over the party chairmanship to his friend Lothar Bisky in order to concentrate on the party's public presentation

and to lead its parliamentary fraction. At a party conference in April 2000, both Bisky and Gysi announced their resignation from politics after delegates voted down their proposal calling upon the PDS to support foreign interventions by the German army under certain circumstances.

Following a corruption scandal in the Berlin senate, the PDS had the opportunity of entering state government in the German capital. Gysi took advantage of the situation to return to politics and stood as the leading PDS candidate in the Berlin state elections. He now describes this move as a mistake and stated in his letter of resignation: "My decision of a year ago to leave politics, was correct, the short-term revision—as I now know—a mistake".

Although Gysi now speaks about morality and responsibility, he has not evinced the least sense of responsibility to the workers and youth who erroneously gave him their vote in the belief that he would oppose the right-wing policies and criminal activities of the previous CDU-led Berlin administration. When it proved necessary to counter an aggressive right-wing campaign, Gysi pulled back and retreated into his private life.

It is worth comparing Gysi's reaction to that of right-winger Roland Koch, prime minister of the German state of Hessen. With uncompromising intransigence, Koch has justified the illegal financing practices indulged in by his party (CDU), underwritten false reports, lied to parliament and at the same time rebuffed all calls for his resignation with provocative arrogance.

The election campaign headquarters of the conservative Union parties and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) reacted to the news of Gysi's resignation with unrestrained glee. Following the departure of its most prominent member, it is questionable whether the PDS will be able to win the 5 percent of the vote necessary for admittance to the German parliament on September 22. With the PDS out of parliament, an outright majority for the Union and the FDP is virtually guaranteed.

In the event Gysi's resignation has more profound roots than personal vanity and cowardice. In common with Lafontaine or the former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin—who recently, and without a word, withdrew from politics after his defeat—Gysi is politically at the end of the road.

His flight is part of a general demoralisation which has spread through the German SPD-Green government and its sphere of supporters. Gysi's much lauded political perspicacity was, together with the perspectives of the German government, based mainly on the continuation of the stock market boom of the 1990s. He promoted the idea that the growing profits of a flourishing economy should not be restricted to enriching a tiny elite but should also be used, in limited fashion, to suppress class conflicts. The dramatic losses on share markets together with increasing indications of a worldwide recession have thoroughly undermined such social reformist illusions.



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