

The PDS and the German floods

The case of Dresden

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The east German City of Dresden, which is the capital of the state of Saxony, was especially hard hit by the recent catastrophic floods in Europe. The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor organisation to the former ruling party in the GDR (German Democratic Republic—the former East Germany), has formed the second largest faction in the city council of Dresden since the reunification of Germany in 1990. In recent polls held in the city prior to upcoming national elections, the PDS has the support of 28 percent of voters, almost on par with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with 29 percent.

Following the flood, the PDS in Dresden struck an agreement with other parties to halt the election campaign for the month of August and to continue it only in very subdued fashion in September. The PDS in Saxony was agreed that—considering the flooding—party strife was misplaced; everybody should get together and repair the damage.

The two PDS candidates for the national elections from Dresden, Christine Ostrovski and Ingrid Mattern, even published a statement calling for the postponement of the national election date, set for September 22. Given the “national catastrophe,” Ostrovski wrote in the latest issue of the PDS news sheet in Dresden, “petty squabbling over how to finance and what to finance is just as inappropriate as hollow election slogans or calls to vote for this or that chancellor.”

Seizing on the common fate of the nation in light of the flooding, the PDS is trying to divert attention from precisely those social conditions which were brought to light by recent events: the deep social divide and the hopelessness of the policies followed by all established parties, including the PDS, since the reunification of Germany on a capitalist basis. In this respect, Dresden is a microcosm of the situation throughout the former East Germany.

The city council of Dresden is dominated by a CDU majority. However the mayor, Ingolf Roßberg, is a member of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and was elected last year with the support of the PDS, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens.

The immediate reaction of the city authorities to the flood was marked by indifference towards the fate of the population. The affected inhabitants of Dresden are especially enraged because there was no warning given before the water reached their homes, making it impossible for them to prepare for the disaster or salvage anything. The authorities justify their silence by saying that they were attempting to prevent a panic.

They did, however, create precisely such a panic when on Wednesday, August 14, the town hall spread a false report over the radio that a dam had broken in the mountains of the Erzgebirge just above Dresden, which would have meant huge masses of water were heading towards the city. This warning was retracted after half an hour.

Dr. Gerhard Ehninger, an international authority on leukaemia who heads a number of clinics in the university hospital of Dresden, has raised very serious accusations against the crisis committee headed by the city mayor. He describes the events during the night of August 14-15 as a

virtual guerrilla warfare between hospital doctors and the crisis committee. According to him, the town hall insisted on the evacuation of gravely ill patients, without taking into consideration the advice of specialised firefighters and the medical staff.

In a contribution to the August 26 edition of the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dr. Ehninger details the “chaotic, overanxious manner of reaction” on the part of the crisis committee. The chaos created by orders of the city authorities, Ehninger writes, was worse in terms of effects on the hospital than the flood as such. Only through “massive personal interventions” were the doctors able to prevent severely ill patients needing specialised care from being taken to random clinics lacking adequate equipment. Even kitchen staff were evacuated by force, while specialised firefighters who had come from far away to help were instructed to stop pumping out the basement in the middle of the night, because “this hospital will not be needed anymore, anyhow”.

Ehninger described how, on his own initiative, he had gone up to the second floor to 10 cancer patients who had just undergone bone marrow transplantation. “We were even prepared to deal with an interruption of water and electricity supplies,” he wrote. “If these patients, whose immune systems do not function at all, had been taken out of their sterile environment, they would have been exposed to the risk of deadly infections.... Regrettably, there were people whose deaths were directly bound up with the evacuation.”

Ehninger’s report demonstrates in tragic manner that the bureaucratic arrogance of the authorities today is at least equal to the times of the GDR. The crisis committee did not send a single representative to the most important hospital in the city to gain a picture of the situation, but ordered measures placing human lives at risk.

Meanwhile, hospital management and the town hall have agreed to discuss the issue only internally. The press is trying to play down the scandal by treating it as a squabble over competencies.

All parties and the media stress that the water level of the Elbe, which has been measured since the year 1500, was the highest ever recorded at the height of the catastrophe on August 17. Even during the last big flood of 1845 the level only rose to 8.77 meters, compared to the latest high point of 9.40. Nobody, it is said, could possibly have foreseen such a catastrophe, and therefore it is wrong to assign guilt or hold anyone responsible. All parties gratefully take up the claims of the city government, that following the warnings by state authorities they had prepared for a water level of 9 meters, and if only it had stayed at 9 meters everything would have remained under control. But, according to all the parties, at 9.40 metres a catastrophe was unavoidable.

Apart from its dubious credibility, this theory of the fatal 40 centimetres does not explain why all provisions for floods and catastrophes were criminally neglected at all levels of government over the last decade. As Steffen Flath (CDU), the environment minister of Saxony, admits, there is no comprehensive, functioning warning system against such catastrophes. In addition, a large part of the equipment available to the firefighters

stems from the days of the GDR. Many pumps proved to be out of order. The Technical Aid Service (Technisches Hilfswerk—THW) has also long been complaining about a lack of adequate equipment and funding. Since 1990, under the conservative government of Helmut Kohl (CDU), funding for the THW had been cut by one quarter, i.e., about 30 million euros. Some THW vehicles lack even mobile telephones.

This striking neglect of disaster control in general, and on the part of the city council of Dresden in particular, is no accident. It is entirely in line with the overall policies in the states of the former GDR, which have been geared to short-term improvisation during much of the past 12 years. The restoration of capitalism meant that any sense of responsibility for the needs of society as a whole was ditched. The outward appearance of the average city in eastern Germany—renovated apartment blocks built over prefabricated slabs from the GDR days, newly built glamorous shopping malls, luxurious government buildings—is a façade concealing beneath it great social decline and economic rot.

National development funds flowing into eastern Germany were used to attract possible investors. The city of Dresden, like many others, tried to attract business with a cheap and flexible workforce, subsidies and tax relief. Glossy brochures on display in the town hall promise a business location combining hi-tech with the newly renovated medieval city centre. The Dresdner Sparkasse (Dresden Savings and Loans Bank) in its brochure quotes Hans Christoph von Rohr, the president of the Industrial Investment Council (ICC) founded by the East German states in 1997: “Friendly, cosmopolitan clubs, international schools and a golf course nearby contribute a lot to the attraction of a business site and compensate for many an objective drawback”—the drawback being that wages are even lower just a few kilometres away—in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

The national subsidy program “Aufbau Ost” (Building the East) was to create favourable as possible conditions for big business. Meanwhile, the old industries of the GDR were dismantled and tens of thousands of workers thrown onto the streets. Infrastructure was developed to the degree determined by investors.

This policy has led to a pronounced division of society between rich and poor. Industry cashed in while unemployment remained high. In Dresden, unemployment has stagnated at around 16 percent for the past few years, while the number of inhabitants has dropped. The percentage of those out of work for more than a year is rising. Almost 40 percent of all unemployed now fall now into this category, which means that their unemployment benefits run out and they must depend on social security, bringing more social misery. The number of social security recipients in Dresden has risen from 8,000 to more than 15,000 over the past four years. At the same time, the number of part-time and insecure jobs is very high.

Those few who profited from these developments stroll through the beautifully renovated city centre, live in revitalised villas on the hills of the city and have their children educated in the brand-new International School, at a tuition cost of 5,000 to 9,500 euros a year. The broad mass of the population, however, struggles on in the tiny old apartments—dubbed “workers’ rabbit hutches” in the GDR—suffering from growing economic insecurity, sending their children to run-down state schools.

This servility towards big business and arrogance towards the common people also characterised the reaction of the city government to the flood. While businesses were immediately offered payments and generous aid, private households received a pittance of 500 euros per person, under the condition that they prove at least 5,000 euros in damages. Any money they might have received from private or church aid agencies was also deducted. Old age pensioners, who had been evacuated from their apartments and moved to hotels, received a note from the city council that the authorities would no longer pay for their accommodation once the state of emergency was lifted. Big companies, on the other hand, were

promised millions in damage repair.

The flood catastrophe has itself become the starting point for the further division of society. In the last week of August, with mud still piling up in many basements, the state government of Saxony authorised the city budget of Dresden for the year 2002. It ordered a freeze on public spending and stressed that, in face of the flood, budget consolidation must proceed as planned. This means cuts amounting to 214 million euros to the year 2005 and the destruction of a further 1,400 jobs in the public sector.

Following the flood catastrophe, the PDS—which describes itself on election posters as a “left-wing force”—has closed ranks in the Dresden city council. On their web site and in their publication *Gläsernes Rathaus* (Glass town hall) they reprint the speech by Dresden Mayor Ingolf Roßberg, which appeals for the “unity of the citizens of Dresden”. The speech emphasises that “it was possible for the city authorities, with the mayor at its head, for the fire brigade, the environmental authorities and medical facilities to maintain the capabilities of the city—despite some dramatic moments,” while one could recall that on “this or that occasion there were not enough sand sacks and at another time, the shovels” (*Gläsernes Rathaus*, “Dresdner Blätt’l”, 30 August 2002).

This indifference is more easily explained when one considers that the mayor owes his post to the PDS. Ingolf Roßberg, a careerist and member of the liberal FDP, won the Dresden mayoral elections in June of 2001 due to the efforts of the “Mayor for Dresden” alliance, which was mainly run and organised by the PDS. The party justified its campaign at the time as the means necessary to replace the former CDU mayor.

Critics of the campaign from inside the PDS itself were countered by the PDS council deputy and current parliamentary deputy candidate Ostrovski, who had stood down as a PDS candidate in favour of Roßberg. As soon as there was the least indication of any popular revolt the PDS closed ranks with the established political parties in order to strangle or suppress it. In this respect the party stands in the tradition of Stalinism, even when it seeks to distance itself from the latter’s terror methods.

There has been a common thread to the political activities and behaviour of the PDS since the events of 1989/90, which led to the dissolution of the GDR and the capitalist reunification of Germany. The predecessor organisation to the PDS, the Stalinist SED, reacted by channelling any dissatisfaction within the East German population over the effects of reunification and handing over numerous social gains won by the working class to the capitalist state in the west. Party leaders thereby sought to anticipate and forestall any genuine resistance and rescue their own skins.

Since then the supporters and members of the PDS have been driven by the urge to take their place amongst those profiting from capitalism and play a role as part of the ruling class—even at the cost of their self-denigration. Striving to establish its own role within the ruling class, the successor party to the SED has sacrificed the last remnants of social responsibility retained by this or that individual party member.

The PDS craves to be acknowledged and accepted by the ruling class, which, for its part, continues to treat the party as a pariah. This is the source of the party’s laments over discrimination of the “east”. What motivates the party above all is its own standing, rather than any concern for the population as a whole. While the PDS has undertaken attacks on the conditions of the working class in countless east German communities, at the same time the party seeks to direct anger and discontent towards the “west” and thereby split the working class.



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