

The German PDS: an establishment party which calls itself socialist

Ulrich Rippert
13 September 2002

At a meeting called by the *Sächsische Zeitung*, an influential regional newspaper with close links to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) based in Dresden, the capital city of the eastern German state of Saxony, the main speaker was Roland Claus. Claus is chairman of the parliamentary fraction of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formerly the East German Stalinist SED) and had travelled from Berlin in order to submit himself to the so-called “crossfire” of questions by the SZ reporters. The city of Dresden was at the epicentre of devastating floods which particularly affected large areas of East Germany.

There was an air of unreality, something ominous about the meeting. Held in the great hall of the “Old Slaughterhouse”, a decrepit building in the middle of a landscape dominated by industrial ruins, the light in the meeting room was subdued. Two thirds of the 500 seats in the hall were empty. The rest were occupied by members of the PDS who all appeared to know one another from the old days of the SED, before the fall of the Berlin wall. They greeted one another in a friendly fashion, and it was apparent the average age of the audience was 60 and upwards.

The PDS candidate made a very different impression. PDS fraction leader Roland Claus is 48 years old, suntanned from his recent holiday, and sported a smart dark suit with black T-shirt. He leapt onto the illuminated stage. The first questions by the two reporters resembled a format popular in television shows where contestants are called upon to complete unfinished sentences: “What I like most about election candidate Stoiber [candidate of the right-wing Union parties in the upcoming national elections] is...?” Claus’s reply: “that he will never be chancellor.” Next sentence ... to “the notion that the PDS fails to enter the German parliament?” Claus’s reply: “I cannot imagine it. I am absolutely incompetent to answer that question.”

The meeting continued for one-and-a-half-hours, with the two journalists giving cues which Roland Claus used to reiterate the election programme of the PDS. Interest in what he said was minimal. Most of those present seemed to be familiar with such election speeches and did not take them very seriously. Anyone with any knowledge of the PDS knows that it is a party which, when in power, takes decisions completely contrary to its

programme and election promises.

In his short period in power as Economics Senator for Berlin, for example, former PDS leader Gregor Gysi agreed with other PDS senators to the destruction of 15,000 jobs in public service, the lengthening of the working week for state officials and drastic cuts in the payments to those dependent on social assistance. At the same time he undertook to support the bankrupt Bankgesellschaft Berlin AG to the sum of 21.6 billion euros.

The situation is not very different in the East German state of Magdeburg, where the PDS has supported the cuts in the social fabric carried out by the SPD-led government of Reinhard Höppner (SPD), or in Schwerin, where the PDS minister for Labour and Construction and vice president of the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Helmut Holter, has pushed through a ruthless privatisation of public services.

Two things stood out at the meeting in Dresden: firstly, that the speakers had nothing to say about the variety of problems confronting the majority of inhabitants of the region. Secondly, it was also apparent that no one really expected any answers from the PDS. Apart from 120 pensioners who had responded to an invitation for a free night out, nobody else came aside from a handful of school children who sat in the first row and clapped in the manner of the FDJ (youth organisation of the SED). Notable by their absence were the leading candidate of the party in Dresden and the local PDS leadership.

Instead, the executive of the local party organisation published a statement a few days prior to the meeting calling for a cancellation of the election campaign and a delay in the holding of national elections set for September 22. The reason given in the statement: the flood catastrophe had created such enormous problems and called for such huge social efforts that any “petty party conflict” should be put on the back burner.

Shortly afterwards the best known PDS politician in Saxony and member of the state leadership, Christine Ostrovski, made known that she was withdrawing immediately from the election campaign. At a press conference she declared: “Two personal blows have forced me to make this move.” First, she noted, her house in the Dresden district of Altrachau had been badly damaged by flood waters and had to be dried out. Second, her partner lay in hospital with a serious illness. As a result,

Ostrovski cancelled all her election engagements but insisted on remaining a candidate.

This decision says more over the real role of the PDS as a thoroughly loyal, establishment party than a hundred election speeches.

In common with many other east German cities and communities, social conflict is patently evident in the capital city of Saxony. Upon leaving the centre of town with its many buildings steeped in historical tradition, expensive hotels, shopping centres, boutiques and the thoroughly modern so-called “Glass Factory”—recently built by Volkswagen for the production of luxury cars—one does not have to go far before encountering extremes of poverty. The recent flood and the subsequent distribution of compensation funds has only served to deepen the gulf between rich and poor.

Under these circumstances the call for an end to the election campaign only serves to silence any critical voices. In knee-jerk fashion the PDS reacts to any and every social disruption and political conflict by drawing closer together with the political establishment. The party seeks to stifle and suppress any popular criticism or resistance.

It is in this respect that the PDS, in particular, demonstrates its continuity with its Stalinist predecessor, the SED. Many of the elderly members of the audience in Dresden would have much preferred to have greeted the figure of Hans Modrow instead of Roland Claus. In the period before the collapse of the GDR, Modrow was the all-powerful SED head of the region and still functions today as an honorary chairman of the PDS. Modrow never beat about the bush when it came to describing the role of the SED/PDS in the critical period surrounding the collapse of the Berlin wall. Functioning at that time as transitional head of the crumbling GDR state, he saw his task in keeping the police-state apparatus in good shape until the bourgeoisie in the west of the country could take power. In his memoirs of 1991 he wrote in typical fashion: “For me the issue was to maintain the rule of law in the country and prevent chaos.”

Although the PDS continues to include the designation “socialism” in its official party name, as a party it never seriously questioned the introduction of capitalist property relations and the capitalist state. Its retention of socialist rhetoric is mainly aimed at heading off growing dissatisfaction in the East of Germany resulting from widespread social devastation.

When questions from the public were finally allowed after a period of two hours, this author directly addressed the issue of the role played by the PDS as a defender of the existing bourgeois order.

To the question why the PDS called for a halt to the election campaign precisely at a point when social conflicts were intensifying, Claus answered with an unconditional defence of the position of the PDS state organisation. “In light of the great problems” created by the floods, he said, together with the

“huge social tasks” which confront the region, it was necessary to put an end to “petty party conflicts.”

In a second question to Claus, I pointed out that the central answer of the PDS to the problem of mass unemployment was the sponsoring of the middle class and small businesses in the manner of Germany’s neo-liberal Free Democratic Party. I asked how such policies could have any thing to do with socialism or a party which called itself a “left-wing force.”

The next day the *Sächsische Zeitung* reported the exchange at the Dresden meeting and cited the answer given by Claus. “I regard the sponsoring of small business as expressly not anti-socialist. It can be very well compatible with social justice when one attempts to improve the chances of small and middle-sized companies and support them in their struggle against the megalomania and excessive power of the major banks and concerns.”

Claus neglected to make clear that the PDS seeks to strengthen the middle class at the cost of the working population and not the big banks and companies. A number of years ago, under the title ÖBS (Public Employment Sector), the party demanded that public services be carried out by small private companies, which after an initial cash injection, should operate on the profit principle. Such services included neighbourhood assistance schemes, care of the elderly, care of children and even dogs, as well as shopping services. In Saxony, Christine Ostrovski even went so far as to found an PDS employers organisation and proposed transforming the PDS into an “East German Peoples Party” based on the Bavarian Christian Social Union.

In fact, the most important task of socialist politics has always been to strengthen the social influence of the working class—a task which by no means excludes necessary help for small farmers, self-employed and small businesses. “The liberation of the working class must be the task of the working class itself” was the way Karl Marx posed the issue 150 years ago. The PDS defends a diametrically opposed position. It undertakes to suppress any independent movement of the working class. In the manner of a seismograph of political development, the party reacts to the slightest social disturbance with measures aimed at stabilising the bourgeois status quo.



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