Germany: Defeat for “reformers” at PDS conference in Gera

Hendrick Paul, Peter Schwarz
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Three weeks after its poor showing in the German national elections, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, formerly the Stalinist ruling party, SED, of East Germany) is being torn apart by internal divisions.

The party’s eighth national conference, held October 12-13 in the East German city of Gera, was dominated by heated struggles between opposing wings of the party—with the so-called “traditionalist” wing led by party chairman, Gabi Zimmer, emerging as clear winner. The “reform” wing, which until now had played the leading role inside the party, is no longer represented on the party’s executive committee and its two most prominent representatives, Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky, who led the party two years ago, did not even bother turning up for the conference.

The conflicts at the conference revolved around the causes and conclusions to be drawn from the party’s devastating results in the elections of September 22. For the first time since the reunification of Germany in 1990, the PDS failed to win the five percent of the vote (or three candidates directly voted from their constituencies), which is necessary for representation in the German parliament (Bundestag). The party has been reduced to a rump of just two deputies who were directly voted in their East Berlin constituencies. Parallel to national elections the PDS also lost a third of its vote to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in state elections in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (East Germany). The PDS has jointly governed the state for the past four years in a coalition with the SPD.

The losses incurred by the PDS are the result of the party’s record in government in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Berlin (where it has governed in the city’s senate since January) and Saxony-Anhalt (where the PDS has supported a minority SPD government). In power the PDS has supported numerous attacks on Germany’s social welfare system, as well as cuts and privatisations. Such measures stood in stark contrast to the pose adopted by the PDS in opposition. Growing social divisions together with the turn to the right of the SPD has made it impossible for the PDS to support the SPD and at the same time maintain its public persona of opposition to the dismantlement of social gains.

The reaction to the election debacle by the fraction led by Zimmer was to distance itself from the SPD and mildly criticise the practice of those members of the PDS who had shared state government responsibility.

The honorary chairman of the PDS, Hans Modrow, who was a long time member of the central committee of the SED and East German prime minister at the time of reunification, set the tone for the conference with his opening speech. He attacked those who have “decisively made their mark on the image of the party—ever closer to the SPD, and less and less self-governed”. In her own speech to the conference Zimmer declared: “In my opinion the PDS has to clearly develop its profile as a socialist party. Germany does not need a second social democratic party.”

She criticised her party’s record in government by insisting, “The PDS in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Berlin is not responsible for our election defeat,” but “nevertheless we should take stock of the consequences of our participation in government.” One can “rightly expect that the PDS does not just enter into a competition about the best way to save, but instead acts in a socially just fashion in difficult situations.”

A motion proposed by Zimmer demanded that the PDS regard itself as a “force for social opposition” and not “a partner or even pocket version project of the SPD and Greens.” She went onto openly attack the SPD-PDS senate in Berlin, stating, “Many people cannot understand that in Berlin billions of tax-payers’ money is pouring into the pockets of wealthy stockholders, while public service workers must do without well deserved demands and at the same time very painful cuts are made in the sphere of social services, cultural institutions and the infrastructure.”

Zimmer’s speech was greeted with anger by the “reformers,” who believe that the future of the PDS is bound up with close collaboration with the SPD. Just three days before the conference the party’s national executive voted down Zimmer’s motion, which was carried at the party conference, and supported a rival motion from the Berlin body of the organisation, which stated: “Like the SPD, the PDS is a democratic and social party of reform.” The motion spoke out against “ideological declarations” and in favour of a pragmatic course of work inside government. The PDS can only win back the confidence of voters “through practical politics”, the Berlin motion insisted.

National co-coordinator Dietmar Bartsch called on Zimmer to refrain from standing for re-election as party chair and announced his own candidacy for the post.

At the conference the “reformers”, who were backed by much of the German media, suffered a clear defeat—much to their own surprise. With 69 percent of the vote, Zimmer was confirmed as party chair. Her rival in the vote, Roland Claus, former leader of

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the party's parliamentary faction, received just 24 percent of the vote. At the last moment Bartsch stood down in the election to make way for Claus. Zimmer's motion was accepted and the Berlin proposal rejected.

The "reformers" then refused to put up candidates for any other seats on the executive, allowing supporters of Zimmer to take up the rest of the places. Even Sahra Wagenknecht, a leading representative of the Communist Platform fraction of the PDS, which glorifies the Stalinist system of East Germany, was able to win a seat on the 14-strong executive. She received the fifth largest vote of all the candidates. None of the former prominent figures in the party—Bartsch, Claus and the chair of the Berlin group of the PDS, Petra Pau—are now represented on the executive.

According to some reports the entire group of "reformers" considered leaving the party en masse on the evening of the elections. Instead PDS groups from the states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin and Brandenburg agreed to coordinate their future activity in a bloc against the supporters of Zimmer, who are mainly based in the East German states of Saxony and Thuringia. This move could very well be the first step towards a split in the party, or a move by a section of the party into the ranks of the SPD. It is an open secret that the SPD, which lacks members and experienced politicians in the east of Germany, is actively at work to recruit prominent members of the PDS.

Despite the heated conflicts and intrigues on display at the party conference, the division of the two wings into "reformers" and "traditionalists" is exaggerated. It would be more accurate to speak of two tendencies inside a "reform wing." The party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* conceded this point on the eve of the party conference, when it noted cynically that the struggle was in fact between "realists and ultra-realists."

Zimmer emphasised the values of socialism against social democracy, but never made clear what she considered to be the difference between the two.

Since the emergence of the PDS from the SED, the party has made clear that it favoured the reunification of Germany on the basis of the introduction of capitalist property relations in the east. The government lead by Hans Modrow saw its task as opening up the way for reunification and, as he later wrote, "preventing any political destabilisation of the country."

Since having taken up the post of party chair two years ago following the resignation of Lothar Bisky, Zimmer has neither said nor done anything which could be interpreted as marking a course opposed to that pursued by her current rivals inside the party.

At the PDS conference in Münster in 2000, she was a defender of the party executive when it attempted to change the party's position on the issue of war, and suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of delegates. Upon taking over as party chair she also adopted a pronounced nationalist tone, and proclaimed her love for Germany. She supported Petra Pau who, in an indirect manner, made proposals to restrict the migration of foreign workers to Germany.

Just a year ago, Zimmer was the leading figure on the party executive calling for the expulsion of PDS members in the city of Hamburg after the local organisation had put up a poster pointing to the responsibility of American government policies for the terror attacks of September 11 in New York and Washington.

Zimmer belongs to the pioneers inside the party who favoured collaboration in government with the SPD. In 1999, when the PDS was second to the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) in the state of Thuringia, as chairman of the PDS fraction in the state parliament Zimmer argued for forming a coalition with the SPD. The plan only failed due to the massive loss of votes by the SPD, enabling the CDU to secure an overall majority.

After the latest Gera conference, Zimmer immediately made overtures to her opponents inside the party, who were predicting the imminent end of the PDS. Zimmer sought to placate them, emphasising that "government participation is important for us" and that she was in no way arguing for an end to the PDS presence in the coalitions in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

The socialist phraseology employed by the PDS is there only to attract those who have lost out in the process of reunification and has no real practical consequences for the party. With its invocation of "social justice" and nostalgia for the East German state, the PDS appeals to those former members of the old nomenclature who have failed in their career moves in a united Germany—academics without posts, small businessmen whose hopes have been dashed. At the same time, the PDS seeks to appeal to the unemployed and socially disadvantaged. All the while, the party strives to win the recognition of the political elite in Germany and maintain its position as a constitutional force to be reckoned with.

The balancing act maintained by the party had already led to numerous fraction struggles in the past. To the extent that the party was regarded as a source of oppositional politics, it was able to pick up new voters as the social crisis in Germany deepened. But since assuming power in a number of East German states, the party has no longer been able to disguise the real content of its politics. As a consequence, droves of voters have turned their back on the party.

This is the reason for the current conflicts. The faction lead by Gysi, Bartsch, Claus and Pau is moving closer and closer to the SPD and open defence of the state against growing political and social opposition, while for its part, the group around Zimmer, Modrow, et al, is determined to once again don the fig-leaf of verbal opposition.

Much of the media in Germany has welcomed the decline of the PDS, but there are also those who warn of the dangers arising from the disappearance of the party. The left-liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau*, for example, openly called upon social democrats to integrate PDS members and supporters into their ranks "should they seek to prevent the frustration absorbed by the successor party to the SED from erupting somewhere else and in a far more radical form."

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