Germany: Party of Democratic Socialism gripped by crisis

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The crisis inside the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—formerly the SED, the Stalinist party of government in former East Germany) has reached a new high point with the resignation of party chairwoman Gabi Zimmer and the announcement that the entire executive intends to resign at a special congress in June.

The half-life of PDS governing bodies is becoming ever shorter. The present executive was elected in Gera just six months ago, a few weeks after the party's drastic loss of votes in the Bundestag (parliament) elections. At that time, there was much talk of new departures, socialist renewal and future prospects.

The search for another executive is now very clearly backward looking. All hopes are set on former chairman, Lothar Bisky, returning to head the party. Such a move is supported in particular by the party's East German regional organisations. Former party leader Gregor Gysi has also said he will become active again in the PDS under certain conditions.

The planned change in leadership is part of a fierce controversy about the direction of the PDS, and the return of Bisky and Gysi signifies a new rightward shift by the party. The resignation of Gabi Zimmer was preceded by two weeks of sharp public polemics against the party executive, which, from the outset, were aimed at forcing the elected leadership to quit.

It began at the end of April, when the executive committee was due to discuss a paper tabled by Zimmer presenting an alternative to the "Agenda 2010" of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). A majority on the executive voted to postpone discussion to a later date, whereupon Brandenburg PDS regional chair, Ralf Christoffers, publicly demanded the dismissal of the party's organisation manager Uwe Hiksch and vice-chair Dieter Dehm, said to be responsible for the postponement.

Hiksch and Dehm both come from West Germany. They joined the PDS after resigning from the SPD in 1999 because of its support for the war in Kosovo. Following the April PDS executive committee meeting, a witch-hunt against them began. Within a few days the demand for their resignation was taken up by all the PDS East German regional organisations and state parliamentary factions, PDS state ministers and senators, the two PDS Bundestag deputies and finally by Zimmer herself. This campaign was supported by Gregor Gysi, Lothar Bisky and Andre Brie, who had together largely determined the policy of the PDS in the 1990s.

The attack on Hiksch and Dehm was used by the so-called "reformers" to launch an offensive and to take revenge for their defeat at the Gera party congress. In Gera, the reformers had been punished for the party's drastic losses in the Bundestag election and for their close cooperation with the SPD. The reason given for the defeat at the polls was PDS participation in government at a local and state level in East Germany and Berlin where the party had helped push through drastic social cuts.

The most devastating effects of this kind of *real politik* can be seen in Berlin, where the SPD-PDS coalition city-state legislature has instigated radical cuts hitting the poorest sections of society, while not touching the privileges of the corrupt investors in the Bankgesellschaft Berlin. Anger at the policies pursued by the PDS in Berlin led to a substantial loss of votes in state elections last year.

Zimmer's restrained criticism of the PDS government participation corresponded with the mood of the delegates in Gera and a clear majority elected her as chair. This mood also led to Hiksch and Dehm being elected onto the executive, while the reformers were voted out.

The underdogs have used the last six months to make life difficult for the incoming executive, helped by the new party leadership refusing to do anything to defend itself. At the Gera congress, they refused to enter the new executive. The so-called "security guard affair" resulted in three months of negative headlines for the executive. Dehm had instructed a security guard to check outgoing PDS business manager, Dietmar Bartsch, when leaving party headquarters so that he did not remove important documents—which was certainly not entirely unjustified.

Recently during the Iraq war, and while Gerhard Schroeder was presenting his Agenda 2010, there was nothing to be seen or heard from those who had previously been magically drawn to every TV talk show. Four years ago, Gysi had attracted the odium of all the Bundestag parties during the Kosovo war when he travelled to Belgrade to meet Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. During the Iraq war, he hosted his own talk show on *Mitteldeutschen Rundfunk*, and preferred to talk shop about East German economics with the Christian Democratic politician and entrepreneur Lothar Spaeth.

It should not be forgotten that in the last six months, cooperation between the PDS and the SPD in East Germany has become ever closer with increasingly catastrophic consequences for the general population. The criticism raised in Gera of PDS participation in the state legislatures of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin

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has not even been mentioned.

A characteristic response came from the party's regional organisation in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where the PDS has had ministers in the state government alongside the SPD since 1998. Still under the influence of the Gera congress, a meeting of the PDS state convention decided last November that with the beginning of the war in Iraq the PDS ministers should resign their office and a special party congress should discuss withdrawal from the coalition with the SPD. During the Iraq war, a meeting of the state convention did indeed take place, not to carry out this decision, but rather to annul it without providing any reasons.

The party executive either silently tolerated all this or directly supported it. In particular, the incoming chair Gabi Zimmer worked from the outset as the extended arm of the reformers inside the executive. Even in Gera she defended the policy of participating in government while making a few criticisms. After the beginning of the Iraq war, she also left the decision as to whether to continue coalitions with the SPD in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania exclusively to the respective regional organisations. The PDS state convention in Berlin, at which 80 percent of the delegates supported the policies being carried out by the SPD-PDS coalition in Berlin city hall, did not elicit a comment from the executive.

The fact that the reformers, who had wanted to leave the party in Gera, are now going on the offensive is not only a result of the malleable attitudes of the executive. It is also connected with political changes that have begun since the Iraq war. The fact that the American administration could act with impunity outside international law and establish a colonial regime in Baghdad has strengthened and encouraged the most right-wing political forces in all political parties. In the SPD, Schroeder is pushing through Agenda 2010 and with it the sharpest social cuts since the end of fascism and World War II. The reformers in the PDS now detect an opportunity to go on the offensive.

Their choice of words shows that they are not aiming at discussion but at confrontation. "A lack of political culture" has gripped the party executive, according to executive member Wolfgang Gehrke. The "orthodox left"—meaning Hiksch and Dehm—are accused of blocking all attempts at reform and have declared war on the political credibility of the PDS. Gysi speaks of charlatans who make themselves and the party look ridiculous. Zimmer and former federal business manager Dietmar Bartsch talk about the party's "last chance" to return to politics.

The hostility of the present conflict testifies to the determination with which the reformers want to turn events in their favour. The alternative paper to Agenda 2010, discussion of which the executive supposedly rejected, is as toothless as all such PDS papers and would probably not have been noticed or read by anybody if they had simply approved it. Following this executive resolution there was no critical discussion inside the party, but immediately the demand was raised for the removal of two executive members. What is taking place is nothing other than a putsch from the right, which the current PDS leadership has allowed to take place without a fight.

It is no coincidence that the deepest crisis to wrack the PDS since German reunification developed only a few weeks after the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war, and that it is not the lefts inside the PDS, but the so-called reformers who have emerged strengthened from this development.

Millions of people around the globe and particularly in Europe protested against the war. In Germany, not a week went by without tens of thousands taking to the streets demanding an end to the war and denouncing the direct and indirect support of the German government for the clique around Bush.

Rather than seeing the mass demonstrations as an opportunity for strengthening opposition to the policies of the Social Democratic-Green Party federal government, the PDS regarded them as a danger to be contained. Wherever they put in an appearance against the war, they organised vigils and torchlight ceremonies away from the central body of demonstrators. Their goal was to transform the mass protests against the war from a demonstration into a quasi-religious ceremony. But their impact on the movement remained zero. The PDS ratings in the opinion polls continued to fall to approximately three percent. Support for the PDS in Berlin has sunk inside two years from 22.6 to 9 percent.

The party which for 40 years was the backbone of state power in the German Democratic Republi,c and which suppressed every independent movement of the working class, has not changed its spots. Those in the party who express opposition to the course taken by Gysi and Bisky do not base themselves upon the mass demonstrations in order to oppose the policies of the rightwing. Instead, they are completely intimidated.

In answer to Gysi's comment in the *Berliner Zeitung*, "What we do not need, however, are ideas as out of touch with reality as the nationalisation of the banks," Hiksch wrote in a column in *Junge Welt* that, due to the existing balance of power, the left could not question "the existence of capitalism." In another article in the same newspaper, he made clear that the lefts in the PDS have nothing with which to oppose the closed ranks of the reformers, except perhaps "rage and mourning."

Hiksch and Dehm have always kept their distance from the so-called Communist Platform and Marxist Forum in the PDS, and for their part these groupings have shown little confidence in the two defectors from the SPD Bundestag faction. But whatever the links between the self-declared left-wing tendencies inside the PDS, their objective role over 10 years has been as a left figleaf for the right-wing policies of the reformers. Their job is to create the illusion in the general population that as long as a leftwing exists in the PDS, oppositional politics must proceed through its organisations. They claim the need for an independent working class party is not only redundant but also dangerous, because it allegedly "splits" the left. In this way, they provide the authority for the reformers that is now directed against them.

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