

German intelligence service spies on the Berlin Social Forum

Emma Bode
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For the past three years, the German intelligence service (*Verfassungsschutz*—Office for the Protection of the Constitution) has systematically spied on members of the Berlin Social Forum. The spying affair was made public by *Der Spiegel* magazine last month and has been confirmed by an official hearing held in the Berlin Senate.

The Berlin Social Forum was founded in 2003 in the German capital as a loose alliance of various small left-wing parties and initiatives for unemployed persons and other political organisations to oppose policies aimed at breaking up the country's welfare and social state. It has sought to pressure the government to change its course via political meetings, discussions and other activities.

The city administration—which in Berlin consists of a coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism—reacted to this pressure, as is now clear, by sending intelligence service agents into the organisation to spy on its members.

Special attention was paid to spying on the activities of the sociologist Peter Grottian, who holds a professorship for political science at the Otto-Suhr-Institute at Berlin's Free University and works in an honorary capacity for a number of different social initiatives.

Grottian is well known in particular for his work in connection with the Berlin Bank Scandal Initiative. The Initiative collected 34,500 signatures from Berlin citizens to force a popular referendum aimed at cancelling the Berlin Senate's endorsement of more than €21.6 billion to bail out the debts of the scandal-ridden Berlin Bankgesellschaft (Berlin Banking Corp.). The referendum was also aimed at securing some sort of penalties for the managers and politicians involved

in the banking scandal. Most of those responsible received sumptuous pension payments from the Senate and continue to live a life of luxury—at the expense of the Berlin taxpayer.

Despite the Initiative having collected considerably more signatures than were necessary, the Senate abruptly rejected the call for a referendum, claiming that it could have consequences for the city's budget. Senate representatives claimed that on this basis the referendum contravened city statutes and deemed it inadmissible. The Initiative then lodged an appeal with the constitutional court in Berlin. Grottian reacted by declaring that direct democracy evidently stops when money is involved.

The public prosecutor's office in Berlin is also conducting proceedings against Professor Grottian because he informed the public in general terms of investigations made by the public prosecutor in connection with the bank scandal. In addition, a district court in Berlin imposed a €3,000 fine on Grottian after he advised unemployed persons to refuse to pay for transport tickets following the withdrawal by the Senate of subsidised travel for the unemployed. The fine was imposed although Grottian had offered to pay the fine of €40 of every unemployed person apprehended for non-payment of their ticket. The non-payment protest was aimed at putting pressure on the Senate to restore its subsidies for the unemployed—just one of many subsidies for the poor and underprivileged that had been sacrificed by the SPD and Left Party-PDS in order to bail out Berlin Banking investors.

Following publication of the intelligence services' spying operations, the appropriate Senate minister sought to justify the activities of the agency by claiming that the spying was in fact directed against “autonomous groups” that followed unconstitutional

goals and had infiltrated the Social Forum.

When it was revealed that the intelligence agents were in the possession of several files of detailed minutes of discussions, including names of those involved, the intelligence service conceded to a certain degree of overzealousness and the senator for internal affairs offered to immediately destroy the relevant documents—i.e., prior to an investigation of the affair by the Berlin Senate. So far, it has been possible to prevent the authorities from destroying the documents.

The systematic spying on members of the Berlin Social Forum cannot simply be dismissed as a fluke, but rather expresses profound social forces. The enormous social polarisation taking place so rapidly over the past four years in the German capital city at the hands of the SPD-Left Party-PDS Senate is increasingly incompatible with the maintenance of even the most elementary democratic rights.

Within official political circles, it is known that only repression and intimidation can answer increasing levels of social protest. At a relatively small demonstration against welfare cuts taking place at the beginning of June in Berlin, police intervened with excessive force against demonstrators and tried to disrupt the closing rally.

Peter Grottian has also made enemies in the Berlin Senate because of his research. One CDU (Christian Democratic Union) politician, Nicolas Zimmer, has sought to initiate proceedings aimed at possibly expelling him from his post as professor.

Particular attention should be drawn to the role of the Left Party-PDS in the spying affair. In its programme, it goes so far as to call for the abolition of the secret services, and groupings within the organisation have also been subject to state surveillance on suspicion of “left-wing extremism.” Nevertheless, the Left Party-PDS tolerates the activities of the intelligence service in Berlin. Their only criticism is that the prescribed criteria for monitoring by the intelligence service—i.e., secret activities or the preparation of anarchist acts—were not fulfilled in the case of the Berlin Social Forum.

So far, it is not clear to what extent the Left Party-PDS, which is part of the ruling coalition, had direct access to the files of the intelligence service. While it officially claims ignorance regarding the issue, its own representative, Steffan Zillich, sits on the committee for

the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in the Berlin lower house.

The Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism did not emerge out of the blue. It has its origins in the Stalinist state party of the former East Germany and shares a long tradition of suppressing political opposition. After repeated renaming and open confessions of its allegiance to the free-market economy, this party has remained faithful to a central point: it fears nothing more than an independent political movement of the working class, and it sees its most important task in preventing such a development.

There are therefore absolutely no grounds for believing that the Left Party-PDS would shrink from supporting spying and suppression, which it already carried out against the working class in the GDR in the form of the Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party). Any aggravation of social tensions will inevitably provoke this party to undertake an increasingly aggressive right-wing course.



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