

German Left Party slanders Günter Grass

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Over the past week, German newspapers, politicians and intellectuals have leveled outrageous and baseless accusations against the renowned writer Günter Grass in response to his political poem “What Must Be Said,” in which he warns of an Israeli attack on Iran. (See “Stop the warmongers! Defend Günter Grass!”)

Grass is one of the leading literary figures of the 20th century, having achieved international recognition for a series of novels that explore the origins and implications of the crimes committed during the period of Nazi dictatorship. Now he is being charged variously with anti-Semitism, self-promotion and even dementia.

The attacks on Grass have come from all of the political parties of the German establishment, including the Social Democratic Party and the Greens. In the course of this campaign, the German Left Party has joined in the attacks on Grass and signaled its full support for both German imperialist foreign policy and the Israeli regime.

On April 6, two days after the publication of Grass’s poem, Beate Klarsfeld, who had been nominated by the Left Party as its candidate for the German presidency, joined in the attack on Grass. In comments published widely in the German press, she drew a direct parallel between Grass and Adolf Hitler.

Klarsfeld compared Grass’s poem with a speech made by Hitler in 1939 against “international Jewish finance”. Alluding to Grass’s most famous novel, she declared that the “tin drummer was playing the same anti-Semitic music”.

The Left Party last February nominated Klarsfeld to stand as its candidate for president, a choice that was endorsed by the chairman of the Left Party’s parliamentary group, Gregor Gysi. Twice previously the Left Party nominated Klarsfeld for one of Germany’s highest awards, the Federal Cross of Merit.

In nominating Klarsfeld, the Left Party was obviously seeking to capitalize on her reputation for exposing the

crimes of the Nazis. In so doing, they turned a blind eye to her right-wing politics, which include support for the crimes of the Israeli regime and enthusiastic backing for French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

A week after the publication of Klarsfeld’s comments, not a single leading figure in the Left Party has repudiated her slanders. Instead, a number of Left Party leaders, including parliamentary deputies Halina Wawzyniak (deputy chairperson of the Left Party), Wulf Gallert (chair of the Left Party in Saxony-Anhalt) and Michael Leutert from Chemnitz have gone on record criticising Grass’s poem and distancing themselves from the writer.

A short press statement by the official foreign policy spokesman of the Left Party, Jan van Aken, issued on April 9, takes issue with Israel’s ban on Grass’s entry into the country but then goes on to criticise the writer and his poem.

Echoing comments made by German government officials, van Aken attacks Grass for not criticising the Iranian government and its “lack of cooperation” with UN inspectors. Van Aken notes Grass’s assertion that a preemptive war by Israel could “erase the Iranian people” and declares it to be “simply false”.

He concludes by appealing to the German government to persuade the Israeli regime to withdraw its ban on Grass. His statement makes no mention of the slanders by Klarsfeld.

In fact, it is van Aken’s arguments that are “simply false”. The Iranian regime has consistently maintained that it has no plans to build a nuclear weapon and that its enrichment of uranium is for peaceful purposes, and no evidence has been presented proving the contrary. Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has repeatedly opened up its facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. Meanwhile, van Aken is silent on the secret stockpile of nuclear weapons hoarded by Israel, its

refusal to sign the NPT, and its persecution of Israeli scientists seeking to reveal the truth about the country's nuclear capacity.

Van Aken's criticism of the claim by Grass that an Israeli preemptive war "could erase the Iranian people" has been repeated by a number of German newspapers. The scenario, however, of a first strike by Israel, using conventional weapons, leading to a catastrophic escalation of conflict throughout the Middle East, possibly involving nuclear weapons, is shared by many military experts. The US Congress has already pledged to authorize the use of "overwhelming military force" to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Van Aken's apologetics give a green light to the regime in Tel Aviv to continue its preparations for military aggression in the region.

The campaign against Grass received a further boost this week when Left Party leader Gysi proclaimed his support for plans by German President Joachim Gauck to visit Israel at the end of May. Gauck is the right-wing anti-communist who defeated Left Party candidate Klarsfeld in last month's parliamentary vote for German president.

Gauck's proposal was welcomed by Germany's establishment parties as an opportunity to "restore relations" with Israel in the wake of the Grass affair. Gysi was one of the first to declare his backing for such a visit.

For anyone who has followed the development of the Left Party, its closing of ranks with the German establishment on the issue of Israel comes as no surprise. This is not the first time that the party has intervened to back Israel and silence criticisms of its policies.

At the beginning of 2009, the chairman of the Left Party in Berlin, Klaus Lederer, publicly spoke out in support of the aggression launched by Israel against Gaza. Lederer spoke at a pro-Israel demonstration that had been called by Jewish organizations in Berlin. The rally was planned in response to a number of German demonstrations opposing the Israeli assault on Gaza.

Linking criticism of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza to anti-Semitism, Lederer proclaimed: "The brutal and bitter conflict in the Gaza Strip and in the south of Israel should not be used by anybody in our country to foment anti-Semitism."

Just one month later, in February 2009, the party's educational institute, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), cancelled a meeting that was to feature the American academic and expert on Israeli politics and history, Norman Finkelstein.

A representative of the RLS subsequently explained that the meeting was canceled after the organizers learned that pro-Israel supporters within the Left Party were planning to disrupt it.

The Left Party's adoption of an uncritical attitude towards Israel and its censure of critics of the Israeli government are aimed at assuring the German bourgeoisie of its support for German imperialism and its foreign policy. Gysi himself cemented the party's course in the spring of 2008, when he gave a speech calling for a reorientation of the party's political line with regard to Israel. He rejected the term "imperialist" in characterizing Israeli policy and called upon the "left" to acknowledge the right of the state of Israel to exist.

The endorsement of Klarsfeld's slanders against Grass by the Left Party leadership makes clear that the Left Party is lurching further to the right. The Left Party is signaling that it is prepared to back German military involvement in a new war in the Middle East.



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