

# Günter Grass and the German Social Democrats

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It is noteworthy that the attacks on Gunter Grass's poem "What must be said" have not only come from conservative and right-wing circles. Immediately after the Nobel Prize-winning author of *The Tin Drum* published his criticism of the Israeli policy of war against Iran, a barrage of abuse was launched from the Willy-Brandt-Haus, headquarters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Leading Social Democrats are heading the offensive against their former party member, who was once one of the SPD's most prominent election campaigners.

On the very day after the poem's publication, SPD general secretary Andrea Nahles commented that, given the situation in the Middle East, the poem was "irritating and inappropriate". Reinhold Robbe, former SPD spokesman on military affairs and current president of the German-Israeli Society, accused Grass of gross ignorance regarding the complex political situation in the Middle East. Grass's views were "so general and shallow that it is almost pointless trying to counter them in any detail". The text was "meagre, self-centred, superfluous and vain", said Robbe, adding: "I don't want to see Grass in any more election campaigns for the SPD".

Rolf Mützenich, foreign policy spokesman for the SPD parliamentary faction, also accused Grass of falsely assessing the conflict. According to Mützenich, he was trivialising the danger of war on the part of Iran. Gernot Erler, deputy chairman of the SPD parliamentary group, described the Nobel laureate as someone who had "lost touch with reality and the facts". Erler said the SPD will be avoiding Günter Grass's help in future election campaigns. The notoriously opportunist party leader Sigmar Gabriel left a door open and replied that, despite all the criticism, one should not immediately rule out future electoral support from Günter Grass.

Apart from Klaus Staack, president of the Berlin Academy of Arts and longtime friend of Grass, no one of any rank or prominence in the SPD has rejected the attacks on Grass and defended the former party companion. Only the federal parliament's vice president, Wolfgang Thierse, whose moralising claptrap about ethics and humility in politics has long been used to obfuscate the SPD's shift towards the right, warned about the need for "more fairness" in the debate.

The SPD's refusal to defend Grass has important political

consequences. The extent of the rabble-rousing, orchestrated against the world-famous writer, is virtually unprecedented. He has been reviled in major media outlets as the "prototype of the anti-Semitic intellectual" (e.g., by Henryk M. Broder and Josef Joffe) or as a "neo-Nazi" who versifies "in 'national newspaper' jargon" (Tilman Krause and Malte Lehming). If the SPD were to oppose this agitation, the impact would be immediate and dramatic, under conditions where the American and Israeli governments' systematic preparation for war against Iran is widely opposed by the general population.

Instead, the SPD is emboldening the most reactionary political forces. It is playing directly into the hands of the right wing, which intends to use the smear campaign to silence anyone prepared to challenge the return to militarism and war. The Social Democrats hope that no one will dare to protest against another war in the Middle East, if they succeed in silencing a man of such great moral authority as Grass.

The relationship between Grass and the SPD had always been fraught with tension. On the one hand, Grass was attracted to the party, from which he expected more democracy and social progress. On the other hand, he repeatedly collided with it whenever it made a move to the right. Unlike other artists and intellectuals of the postwar period, Grass never had any particular sympathy for the GDR (former German Democratic Republic). For Grass, the repulsive side of the Stalinist regime always predominated over the positive consequences of nationalised property relations. This stance also drove him into the arms of the SPD.

In 1961, Grass met Willy Brandt (later to become Germany's fourth chancellor) in person and joined other writers to form the "political election forum of German authors". He was strongly committed to the SPD in subsequent election campaigns, making a substantial contribution to the electoral successes that brought Willy Brandt into the federal chancellery in 1969 and gave the SPD its best election result ever (46 percent of the poll) three years later.

Grass supported Brandt's social and political reforms. He cherished the hope—or rather the illusion—that such a reform policy would humanise capitalism and socialise the profit system. He failed to realise that the temporary high wage settlements of the time were primarily used to pacify workers,

after the general strike in France in the spring of 1968 had unleashed bitter wage disputes in Germany.

The Brandt government's major educational reform—which Grass also supported and which led to an increase in secondary school graduates from 5 to 30 percent—served to keep rebellious young people off the streets. It had a particularly vicious downside: the Brandt government passed into law the “Radicals Decree”, banning anyone who continued to rebel from working in the public service.

Grass also underestimated the contradictions inherent in Brandt's policies regarding foreign affairs. Born in the formerly German and now Polish city of Danzig, Grass was extremely enthusiastic about the “new Ostpolitik” (eastern policy). He was particularly inspired by Willy Brandt's genuflection before the monument commemorating the murdered Jews of Warsaw and the reconciliation between Germany and Poland. But Brandt's Ostpolitik, which initially roused strong opposition in conservative circles, gave the German economy access to urgently needed new markets in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In the long term, Ostpolitik undermined the stability of the Eastern European countries and prepared the way for the restoration of capitalism—a development that Grass in turn viewed extremely critically.

Grass distanced himself from the SPD when Brandt was overthrown in early 1974 and replaced by Helmut Schmidt, who gained the cooperation of the trade unions in order to thwart the political and social influence of the working class. It was not until 1981, when the SPD was coming under strong pressure, that Grass finally joined the party.

But nearly 10 years later, he again came into conflict with the SPD. He opposed the euphoria surrounding the reunification process and advocated a confederation of the two German states. He hoped for a gradual merging of the two and called for a referendum on the German constitution, which had never been put to the vote of the population in either the western or the eastern part of the country.

Grass warned against the growth of nationalism. He was outraged when the SPD—in the midst of right-wing attacks on foreigners and together with the conservative government of Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union)—amended the constitution to significantly undermine the right to asylum. He protested by resigning from the party in 1992.

But he still hoped to cooperate with the SPD to foster a more humane society. Grass failed to comprehend that the right-wing development of the SPD, as well as the trade unions, had deep objective roots. He hoped for social-democratic reforms at a time when the globalisation of production had already ruled out any serious reform policy within the framework of the bourgeois order.

In the late 1990s, Grass again supported the SPD election campaign that was to lead to the first red-green (Social Democratic-Green Party) federal government under Gerhard

Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens). In 2003, he enthusiastically endorsed their criticism of the Iraq war, although the Schröder-Fischer government was imposing the greatest cuts in social spending since the end of the Second World War. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on Grass's attitude, writing, “One cannot bisect this government: foreign policy, good; social policy, bad”.

We warned that the issue of war could not be separated from social issues, and that the Schröder-Fischer government was waging a real war against its own people. By enforcing the punitive Hartz unemployment benefits laws, it was driving large sections of an entire generation towards financial ruin. “Such an impoverishment of the lower layers of society is both extremely anti-social and politically criminal. It accelerates social decay and undermines precisely that social force, upon which the struggle against militarism and war needs to base itself—the vast majority of the working people”.

In 2005, Günter Grass again took part in an SPD election campaign, this time one led by Heide Simonis in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. However, his call for the reintroduction of a wealth tax for high earners was bluntly rejected by the party leadership.

With the Willy-Brandt-Haus's recent savage attacks on the successful election campaigner, the conflict between the SPD and Grass has reached a new dimension. They reveal the SPD for what it is: a right-wing bourgeois party that long ago severed its links to the working class, and is currently cooperating to impose drastic cuts in social spending and prepare for future military operations against Syria and Iran, in the face of broad popular opposition.



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