

Germany: The SPD's new press spokesman

Peter Schwarz
14 June 2013

One hundred days before the general election, nervousness and panic are growing at Willy-Brandt-Haus, the headquarters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Despite widespread social discontent and the growing scandals surrounding Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) government, the SPD is failing to get anywhere near the 30 percent mark in opinion polls. Only together with its favoured coalition partner, the Green Party, can the SPD poll at about 40 percent—the same level of support recorded by the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

The more desperately the SPD attempts to improve its electoral chances the more obvious it becomes that the party is no different from the current government, and supports its pro-business, militaristic and anti-democratic policies.

On Monday, this was again highlighted when surprisingly the SPD's candidate for chancellor in the upcoming elections, Peer Steinbrück, sacked his former press spokesman Michael Donnermeyer and replaced him with Rolf Kleine. The SPD top candidate's new front man embodies all that is backward, right-wing and reactionary in German politics.

The 52-year-old Kleine has spent much of his career as a journalist in the editorial office of the tabloid newspaper *Bild*. From 2000 to 2012, he headed the paper's Berlin office of the right-wing Springer group. In this capacity, he was responsible for and authored numerous editorials that are difficult to reconcile with the official election propaganda of the SPD.

For example, Kleine ranted uncontrollably against the “bankrupt Greeks”, whom he sweepingly accused of “corruption, inefficiency and the incredible waste of billions”. He refused to support the emergency loans to the country threatened by bankruptcy, as advocated by the SPD. According to Klein in a *Bild* editorial of April 13, 2010, “EVERY EURO [given to the Greeks] should

be too dear for us” (emphasis in original).

Klein also defended former SPD state minister Thilo Sarrazin and his racist diatribe *Germany Abolishes Itself*. When SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel sought to draw a connection between the anti-Islamism of Sarrazin and the fatal rampage of right-wing radical Anders Breivik on the Norwegian island of Utöya, Kleine replied indignantly, “Sarrazin (66), SPD member and former Berlin state finance minister, has repeatedly pointed to abuses in Germany in past years, including criticizing the unwillingness of many foreigners to integrate with us.... The pugnacious ex-minister received wide acclaim across party lines for many of his theses—even from prominent contemporaries such as former [SPD] Chancellor Helmut Schmidt! And Sarrazin's book *Germany Abolishes Itself* (with over 1.3 million copies sold so far) catapulted its author overnight onto all the best-seller lists. Nevertheless, the SPD leadership—and especially Gabriel—has tried to get rid of the unpopular party colleague.”

Steinbrück justified hiring Kleine as press spokesman by arguing he was a “media professional”. If Steinbrück means that he is able to poison public opinion and intrigue behind the scenes, then he is undoubtedly right.

For example, in his capacity as head of the Berlin office of *Bild*, Kleine was directly involved in bringing down President Christian Wulff (CDU), who owed both his political rise and his abrupt fall from grace to his close relations with the paper's editorial team.

According to a report that appeared in *Bild* on December 12, 2012, Kleine attended the crucial meeting in December 2011 that gave the thumbs down to Wulff. A small circle under the leadership of Editor-in-chief Kai Dieckmann decided to publish the report about Wulff's private home loan, initiating his destruction by the media.

The social interests Kleine serves can be seen by his

last professional engagement. Prior to his appointment as Steinbrück's press spokesman he worked for 16 months as chief lobbyist for the real estate giant Deutsche Annington (DAIG). The company, founded by London private equity firm Terra Forma Capital Partners in 2001, follows a typical "locust" business model.

DAIG buys up housing stocks from public owners or large corporations at a low flat fee of around €50,000 (US\$66,730) per housing unit. In this way, the company has acquired 11 of 18 state-owned railway housing associations (65,000 dwellings), Heimbau AG in Kiel (10,000 apartments), former company housing belonging to energy company RWE (4,500 homes), and Viterra AG, which previously belonged to energy company E.ON (152,000 dwellings).

Some of the apartments were then sold on at much higher prices to the previous tenants. In addition, rents were increased, maintenance reduced, repair costs and staffing cut back. Despite an increase in the housing stock it owned, the number of DAIG employees fell from 1,900 in late 2005 to currently around 1,100.

Since a large part of the property purchases were leveraged, and the debts dumped on the housing associations, investors saw fantastic returns on equity for which the tenants will have to pay in the final analysis. In this way, in 12 years DAIG became the largest landlord in Germany, with a net asset value (assets minus liabilities) of €4.25 billion (US\$5.67 billion). It is currently preparing its IPO.

Tenants associations have repeatedly accused DAIG of neglecting tenants' interests and neglecting maintenance. That the former chief lobbyist of this property speculator has now becomes the press spokesman of the SPD candidate for chancellor exposes the party's election promise to provide "affordable housing" as a bad joke.

However, Kleine's appointment has brought Steinbrück little good fortune. The day after his appointment, he had to publicly apologize, because Steinbrück posted a photo of the Vietnamese General Nguyen Giap under the headline "The FDP is back!" on his Facebook page—the photo was a blatantly racist allusion to the Vietnamese origins of Free Democratic Party chairman Philipp Rösler.

The appointment of Kleine says much about the character of the SPD and its contempt for the electorate.

The party that once posed as the representative of the ordinary worker has become fully integrated into the milieu of speculators and the rich and powerful. Since it adopted the welfare and labour "reforms" of Agenda 2010 and the Hartz IV laws under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, the SPD has been unreservedly accepted by big business as fully representing their interests.

The SPD is so far removed from the conditions of existence of broad social layers that it has lost any sense of the impact of its own actions. For the electorate, it has nothing but contempt. It believes that they can be endlessly manipulated and taken for a ride. Otherwise, how could the SPD come up with the notion of entrusting its media work to a journalist from *Bild*, to which no self-respecting SPD politician would have given an interview in the past?

In these circumstances, the SPD's low poll numbers are a positive signal. They show that many, especially younger voters, have seen through the SPD and are not prepared to trust it.

Under these circumstances, the Left Party has taken over the task of reviving the SPD's fortunes. Its whole election campaign is geared towards presenting itself to the SPD as a reliable coalition partner or the party that could help it to a majority—as it already does or has done in several of Germany's states. In preparation for the general election the Left Party has junked almost everything that could stand in the way of it collaborating with the SPD—from rejecting international deployments by the German Armed Forces to its former opposition to Hartz IV.

Those who want to fight poverty, unemployment, welfare cuts and militarism should support the election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG) and help build it as an international socialist party of the working class.



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