

BT Visits SED/PDS Branch

A Glimpse Inside the ‘Monolith’

FEBRUARY 7—We received an invitation to go and talk to members of the PDS [Party of Democratic Socialism, formerly known as the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the ruling party of the German Democratic Republic (DDR)] in Finsterwalde, halfway between Berlin and Dresden. Of course we decided to go; a chance like this is too good to pass up. It opened our eyes to the real situation in the PDS/SED, at least in that area....

When we got there we noticed that most of the houses were quite well kept. This must be difficult given the level of air pollution. I have never been an eco-freak, but the Trabbi [DDR auto] is a nasty stinker. You can see black fumes coming out of the back of most of them. But that’s nothing compared to the foul smoke pouring out of the chimneys of the factories—all of which seemed to be located right in the middle of the living quarters! The brown coal they burn produces poisonous sulphur dioxide fumes. It is literally unbearable.

We arrived just after Modrow’s spectacular speech capitulating on reunification. This was earth-shaking for the SED members.

On Saturday we visited what was left of the local PDS/SED leadership. They had never spoken to anyone from the West. Even CP members from the BRD [Federal Republic of Germany], some of whom have been permitted to visit relatives in the DDR (usually SED members), were never allowed to visit the SED offices or attend meetings or forums! Until November, even *unofficial meetings* between members of the SED and the West German CP were forbidden.

A couple of months ago there were over 5,000 SED members in the area. At this stage they still claim 1,900, but the real figure is probably considerably lower. When I was told that they had not been able to contact many of the branch leaders in the locality by letter or phone, I suggested that perhaps this indicated that the nominal membership of 1,900 included quite a few who had just not bothered to return their party books. This was met with silence.

This year they built the annual January Luxemburg/Liebknicht demonstration by scribbling a notice on the blackboard in the party office. Three hundred people turned up. But there were no letters, no phone calls, no posters and no leaflets. They say they have trouble getting notices into the paper these days. It seems that *Neues Deutschland* [ND, the PDS/SED party daily] is so busy concentrating on the large issues that it only runs announcements of demonstrations in Berlin. The machine is broken.

The PDS leaders (and members) seem totally unprepared for the upcoming elections. They do not seem to be able to produce a leaflet, brochure or even a press release. Before November, they said you could just call the party advertising department and they would send you what you wanted. Often they would send stuff that

nobody wanted; often it was not even necessary to call. But in those days the SED couldn’t lose elections anyway, so why worry?

When we got a chance to make a presentation to a section of the local branch, it seemed at first like we had hit some pretty left-wing elements. But I soon began to wonder why there were no disagreements coming up. After all, Stalinists are supposed to have *some* differences with Trotskyists, aren’t they? It was all a bit strange. They agreed on the necessity of workers councils (although it became clear that they only had in mind the class-collaborationist shop stewards’ councils on the BRD model). They agreed that a reunified Germany could only be a dangerous imperialist power (but unfortunately they did not have much of a grasp of what “imperialist” means, apart from something you call people who disagree with you). They agreed with everything in our [German] 1917 statement. But none of this agreement meant much—they hardly seemed equipped to disagree. No one had even heard of Gramsci, nor had anyone heard of workers councils before. It had never been part of the required reading! Eventually I asked for a show of hands among those present who had read the *Communist Manifesto*. They all sat there and looked ashamed.

In the DDR it seems that the attitude toward Marx and Lenin was the same as the attitude of my classmates at school who had to read German classical poets like Schiller, and hated it. Most of them never found out what a good writer he was. When I asked about buying a set of Marx’s writings and a few volumes of Luxemburg, people seemed genuinely astonished that anyone would be interested in such things.

If you want to talk politics with people, with very few exceptions, it all has to be pitched at a fairly elementary level. You cannot assume that people have read a thing by the founders of our movement. Most SED members read ND and get their politics from that. Those with decent memories could recite, more or less intelligently, the latest speech or directive—but that was it. Only one of all the PDS/SED members I met owned copies of the six-volume Marx/Engels and six-volume Lenin sets. He was also the only one who had read all of *State and Revolution* (my god, it’s only 120 pages long!) or *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. What a superb job the Stalinists have done in eradicating any kind of Marxist tradition in the DDR, especially considering the numbers of old communists living there. I am still somewhat shocked at the appalling political level.

After a while it became clear that the immediate concerns of the PDS/SED members were not really political, but rather organizational. They seemed to have absolutely no experience whatsoever with party organization in our sense of the word; they could not summon all their members to appear at a certain time and place;

they seem to have no idea about how to create functioning units. (They don't appear to have units any more since the work-place and living area units collapsed.) The members who still meet do so almost casually, at work or in their residential units. Many of the PDS members we met seemed anxious to get things organized, but it was apparent that they shared no clear set of

ideas (program) around which to reorganize. They did not know whether they would be able to agree on a program, and generally seemed to think that under the circumstances it was best to avoid possibly controversial points, because this could lead to a split. Talk about chickens with their heads cut off! ■