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EAST GERMAN POLITBURO AND CENTRAL COMMITTEE RESIGN

by Barbara Donovan

Summary: Pressure from reformers within the East German communist party has forced the resignation of the entire Politburo and Central Committee. A working group consisting of leading supporters of reform was formed to carry through a full-scale investigation of charges of corruption and abuse of power in the party and to prepare for the party congress in two weeks. A new SED leadership will be elected at the congress.

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As the East German population continues to vent its impatience at the slow pace of reform in the GDR--most recently by forming a human chain from one end of the country to the other--the rank-and-file of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) has moved to push through a more far-reaching reform of the party itself. Mounting criticism of the SED leadership's policies from grassroots party organizations forced the resignation of the SED Politburo, including Secretary-General Egon Krenz, as well as the entire Central Committee during a special CC session on December 3. Further, in what amounted to a coup d'etat within the East German communist party, leading reformers took over control of the party, forming a working group to carry through an extensive review of the SED's policies. The members of the group include Dresden's Mayor Wolfgang Berghofer, the lawyer Gregor Gysi, and the former head of intelligence Markus Wolf.¹ The aim of the group is "to save our party, which is currently in the midst of a deep crisis." It hopes to transform the SED into "a modern socialist party governed from below."² The working group will manage the party's affairs until the congress scheduled for December 15 to 17, at which a new Politburo and CC will be elected.

The changes in the SED come against the background of a wave of corruption scandals involving many former senior SED

officials, who have been shown to have been living in luxury at a time when they preached austerity to others. It was disclosed at the end of the special CC session that a number of members of the old SED leadership under Erich Honecker had been expelled from the party, including Honecker, Willi Stoph, Horst Sindermann, and Erich Mielke. In two related developments, the East German government dismissed Trade Ministry State Secretary Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski from all his posts after it had been revealed that he was linked to the operations of an illegal arms export firm in the GDR. The State Prosecutor's Office yesterday issued an arrest warrant for Schalck-Golodkowski, who was believed to have gone into hiding in the West. ADM also announced yesterday that two former Politburo members, former CC Secretary for economic affairs Guenter Mittag and former chairman of the trade union federation Harry Tisch had been taken into custody on charges of abusing their power and knowingly mismanaging the economy."

Lacking Credibility. The resignation of the SED leadership was not unexpected. Just the evening before Krenz had been treated to a hostile reception when he attempted to address a communist rally in East Berlin. The crowd jeered, hissed, and called out "Resign, Resign." Pressure on Krenz from within the party to relinquish his post as SED leader had been in evidence ever since the 10th CC plenum in early November, when the party rank-and-file forced Krenz to agree to hold a party congress in December instead of the planned conference. Only a congress could elect a new Central Committee. Since then Krenz has repeatedly come under attack from party officials who argued that the SED's Action Program for reform would have little public impact as long as it was carried out by the current party leadership. Krenz was, indeed, unable to make a dent in the wall of public distrust that has always confronted him. His past, above all his open support for the suppression of the prodemocracy movement in China and his part in manipulating the results of the communal elections in May, remained an expensive liability.

The disclosures of corruption dealt the final blow to the Krenz leadership, which was not able to absolve itself of some form of responsibility for the growing scandal. Initially, it seemed that Krenz even encouraged the investigation of cases of corruption as part of an attempt to shift the blame for the country's problems even more squarely onto the shoulders of the former leaders. That calculation could not but backfire. It was a clearly pained Krenz who attempted to maintain in a brief West German television interview on December 7 that although he had lived in the same exclusive compound as the former Politburo members now accused of harboring privileges, he had been unaware of their life-styles and did "not know what was inside their houses."

At yesterday's plenary session, the Politburo faced charges that it had only "half-heartedly" pursued the "task of

uncovering the entire range of corruption and accumulation of privileges."⁸ It was agreed that in order not to miss any remaining chance of restoring the unity of the party and its authority, the entire SED leadership would have to go.

The Party in Disarray. The resignations were the result of a move by the party's main reformers, with the help of a grassroots contingent, to seize power from the old guard in order to defuse a growing crisis within the party. Pressure for the resignation of the Politburo and the CC had built up to a critical level. Moreover, although no demands for a split in the party had yet been made in public, this could apparently not be ruled out as a possible outcome of the party congress.⁹

The tales of corruption and accumulated privileges had provoked anger and disillusionment among many party members. One local communist party official told a rally in East Berlin that 40% of the party members in her factory had quit in disgust over the scandals.⁷ On Saturday, the recently appointed candidate Politburo member Hans-Joachim Willerding resigned, saying that he had no confidence in the current leadership's ability to acquire the authority needed to lead the drive for reform.⁸ Growing disillusionment has also been expressed at numerous regional conferences of delegates chosen for the party congress. Delegates have called for a complete break with the past, while charging the SED leadership with not preparing properly for the congress. They criticized the leadership's lack of a clear direction and of a political program to counter the increased decentralization at the grassroots level in the party.⁹

The reformist working group's plans envisage, in addition to investigating the party's past, the preparation within the next two weeks of a program to serve as the basis for, in the words of member Markus Wolf, the "new formation of a socialist party."¹⁰ The congress would then be the launching pad for this new party, which would strive to present to the public the image of a strong, cohesive, and credible political force.

What are the working group's chances of succeeding in this endeavor? How the party will emerge from this cleansing will depend on the ability of the working group to restore a sense of worth and a sense of purpose to the party. This may involve the compilation of new party statutes, a new self-definition, and perhaps even the dissolution of the SED followed by the formation of a new socialist party. Ultimately, however, the success of all this will rest on the ability of the new SED leadership to restore the party's authority in society at large. This, in turn, promises to be an uphill battle. Prime Minister Hans Modrow admitted in an interview with the West German weekly *Der Spiegel* that the SED would at the most win 30% of the vote if free elections were held now.¹¹ Moreover, one asks how a party consumed by problems of its own can hope to manage society's problems. It remains to be seen whether the East German Communists will be able to break this vicious circle.

Yesterday's overthrow of the old party elite is a sign that the drive to reform the party is strong. That is hardly surprising, considering that it is not just the existence of the Communists' hold on power that is at stake but also the very existence of a separate German state. It is still uncertain, however, whether the Communists will be capable of refilling the vacuum of power they have left behind in their search for renewal.

In the meantime, political power has at least temporarily been transferred to Prime Minister Hans Modrow. On December 4 he traveled to Moscow to attend the Warsaw Pact summit in his capacity as Prime Minister. He said, though, that he carried "a mandate" to discuss the affairs of the communist party.¹ Indeed, there are indications that he was involved in engineering the overthrow of the old SED leadership. Many of his close political associates are in the working group.² He, too, was invited to take part but declined, saying that he should devote himself to his government responsibilities. It is, however, likely that he will be one of the few members of the old Politburo who will be elected to the new one.

One of the working group's first moves was to change the subtitle of the party daily *Neues Deutschland* from "Organ of the Central Committee of the SED" to "Organ of the SED." Justifying the move, Editor in Chief Wolfgang Spirkmann wrote that in the future *Neues Deutschland* should be a paper of the party's rank and file.³

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1 The other members of the working group are Heinz Albrecht, Hans-Joergen Aulwin, Lothar Bisky, Ellen Brodbeck, Roland Claus, Hans-Joachim Wahn, Klaus Woywille, Dagmar Wozniak, Horbert Ketscher, Dieter Klein, Herbert Kröner, Eva Malack-Levy, Bernd Meier, Peter Pechauf, Ulrich Pech, Wolfgang Pohl, Erich Postler, Gerd Schulz, Wolfgang Thiel, Heinz Vietze, Roland Wenzel, and Brigitte Zimmermann. The working group does not include anyone from the former Politburo.

2 For the working group's first statement see *ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 See the text of the December 1 Volkstammer session in *ibid.*, 3-5 November 1989.

5 See the texts of the CC and Politburo resolutions in *ibid.*, 4 December 1989.

6 See, for example, the interview with Hannes Bahrmann, a delegate to the party conference from East Berlin, in *Die Tageszeitung*, 3 December 1989.

7 AP, 2 December 1989.

8 *Neues Deutschland*, 4 December 1989.

- 9 See the reports from the delegate conferences in *Ibid.*, 4 December 1989.
- 10 ZDF (West German television, second channel), 9:30 P.M.
- 11 *Der Spiegel*, 4 December 1989.
- 12 *Neues Deutschland*, 5 December 1989.
- 13 Markus Wolf is an acknowledged "close friend" of Medrow, and it is to be assumed that Berghofer and Medrow have close ties stemming from the days when the latter was district party chief in Dresden, where Berghofer is mayor.
- 14 *Neues Deutschland*, 4 December 1989.

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