

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Dirty tricks won't save communism

The SED party is desperately trying to split the East German political opposition movement.

East Germany is entering a severe economic and political crisis, which is not only the heritage of the old regime that was toppled in October, but also a result of the foul tactics of the new SED-led government of Hans Modrow. He refused to let the opposition parties enter the government, preferring to rely on the same discredited combination of the SED Communists and four licensed "bloc parties" that have ruined the country in the past 40 years.

Warning strikes in some of the bigger industrial combines, like the prestigious car-producing IFA complex in Zwickau, and the mass exodus of workers from the SED party are clear signs that the regime has lost confidence among the labor base. The FDGB, the discredited SED-run labor front, lost 10% of its members in the past two months. Things are working against the SED—especially in view of the May 6 elections for seats in the parliament, the Volkskammer.

But for the time being, the SED hopes to defend and consolidate its power positions, primarily in the security sector and the media, counting on splits in the opposition. The SED is playing for time, as is shown by the safety-valve function of the "roundtable talks" it held with seven opposition groups since early December. The weekly sessions have so far produced a lot of talk, no progress on the economic reform, no passage of an election law, and no legalization of the opposition.

Besides, the roundtable's decisions are not binding. Roundtable members are not even informed by the government on key aspects of policy

like state security matters. The roundtable operates in a gray zone, and various opposition figures intend to walk out, especially over the hot issue of "what is happening with the Stasi?" The infamous Stasi, the political police-state apparatus with 20,000 members and more than 100,000 agents and informants on its payroll, was not dissolved, but renamed and regrouped, and not even disarmed. The Stasi's extensive file system on dissidents, data on the network of tens of thousands of covert informants in all layers of the society (including opposition groups, naturally), and data on Stasi cooperation with the Russian KGB, were hustled to secret locations to be safe from opposition insistence on their release to the public.

The media are under firm SED majority control, and have launched a dirty tricks campaign to split the opposition movement and discredit its leaders. First, the SED media concentrated on propagating a "new socialism," or, as they called it, a "return to the pure, original principles of the concept of socialism." They declared this to be the platform of the new Modrow government, insinuating that rather than reuniting with West Germany, East Germany should remain an "independent, sovereign state."

The crimes of the past 44 years of Communist rule were blamed on a few toppled SED party leaders, like Erich Honecker, and socialism was declared a "desirable concept of a new and better society which must not be given up because of a few grave flaws." Next, the desire of the majority, which doesn't buy socialism (old or "new") anymore, for non-socialist solutions to

the crisis, was put under attack by the black propaganda apparatus.

When banners against new socialist experiments and for German unity began to dominate the big public protest rallies, the SED-controlled media churned out a propaganda equation reading like this: Opposition to the socialist system is a return to anti-Sovietism, to the belief-structure of the Nazis, and this means the rise of a new fascism and the threat of a new war.

When this didn't help to contain the mass sentiment for reunification, the third black propaganda campaign was launched over New Year's on the phony issue of "threats of right-wing extremism and of neo-fascism." Hardly had this "threat" been discovered, than a series of anonymous swastikas were painted on Soviet army stations and anti-Semitic slogans on shop windows appeared. Capitalizing on the pause in public mass opposition rallies between Christmas and Jan. 8, the SED-controlled media stepped up the propaganda drive. The scare campaign culminated on Jan. 3 with an SED-staged mass rally of 200,000 party members and followers at the Red Army monument in Berlin-Treptow, ranting loudly against "the rise of a new fascism."

The outcome of this dirty tricks operation may prove short-lived and counterproductive, however. Most East Germans feel reminded of the methods employed by the hated Honecker regime that fell in October. After the SED's staged mass rally in Berlin, spokesmen of various opposition groups denounced the "smear campaign, the sole aim of which is to put false blame on the opposition and establish the SED as the party of law and order." Opposition leaders stated that from Jan. 8 on, the huge Monday mass rallies would be resumed, in order to increase the pressure on the regime.