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boss told: on your bike

MEMBERSHIP IS up, the tills are ringing merrily, and the cause has never enjoyed so much influence as now. Still, ugly rumors have been sweeping the German branch of Greenpeace, the largest on the planet. The word on the grapevine was that the eco-warriors had lost faith in their leader, it was hotly denied all week, but on Friday night came the bombshell. At a closed meeting at headquarters in Hamburg, Walter Homolka, the chubby rabbi who had been in charge only since last April, had been told to get on his bike.

A brief communiqué- announced that Mr. Homolka had been sacked "because of unbridgeable differences over presentation and leadership". There were no further details, but criticism over the 34-year-old leader's stewardship has been growing. Insiders said that he was simply not cut out for the job.

One of Mr. Homolka's many faults, as Greenpeace fundamentalists saw it, was that he never rode a bicycle. At mornings, he would affront them by arriving at work by taxi. He tried to defend himself by arguing that he had to go by taxi, to carry his heavy files, but to no avail. He often flew, too, contrary to rules dictating that far long-distance journeys - to other words, those out of biking range - the train should take the strain.

No one doubted his commitment or versatility. Mr Homolka had started adult life as a banker, developing the concept of "ethical investment" while working for the gnomes of Munich. Disenchanted with Mammon, he then turned to religion. He went to study Judaism and theology in Britain, obtaining a doctorate at King's College, London. When he returned to Germany, he joined the publishing giant Bertelsmann. In all this time, Mr. Homolka was writing books on a variety of other subjects. This is not exactly the background that one expects of a leader of Greenpeace, but activists' respected him for his passion and intelligence. Long before he took over the organisation, Mr Homolka was appearing regularly on talk shows, lambasting officials and companies for damaging the Environment.

After his appointment, he became even more visible. Thanks to him, Greenpeace was winning the intellectual debate. To the activists, though, something was missing. They criticised him for devoting too much time to his other flock, and complained of not getting enough fun. After all, they had joined up for a bit of direct action – attacking waste dumps and nuclear submarines, that sort of thing. And Mr Homolka was not giving it to them.

Abseiling from ropes and diving into seas was just not his style. He had promised to learn to ride a bike, but there he drew the line. Happenings were getting rarer, and the leader would not even attend the few that remained.

Greenpeace is certain the new leader, Brigitte Behrens, will bring back the glory days, She is much more mainstream than Mr. Homolka, For one thing, she rides a bike.