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# **Working Class Revolutionary Politics in Germany 1914 - 1923**

**The German Revolution,  
KAPD, Otto Ruhle, AAUD  
and more**

**Subversion Reprint**

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On the Origins and Early Years of Working Class Revolutionary Politics :

# An Introduction to 'Left Communism' in Germany from 1914 to 1923

## Introduction and Overview

What follows has been freely adapted from an *Introduction* to a Pamphlet called '*From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution*' produced in 1974 by a small group of partisans of 'Left Communism' who called themselves '*Socialist Reproduction*' and '*Revolutionary Perspectives*'. The main text of this work which they translated, was written in 1921 by Otto Ruhle to explain the basis of the a new politics that had been developed inside the German working class of the period.

We reproduce the introduction now because it gives a history of this movement, showing how it arose within an existing movement in a period of struggle during and after the First World war. It also discusses and critically examines the issues this movement raised and the solutions they worked out to the problem of the emancipation of the working class from capitalism. It is universally acknowledged that this was a period when many of the existing institutions of the workers movement came into question, when new perspectives, ideas and institutions were being developed.

Although this essay is intended to introduce and discuss some of these new perspectives, tactics and ideas, we would stress that anyone interested should consult if at all possible the original documents referred to. It is most important first of all to understand this movement, called here 'Left Communism' *in its own terms*. Whatever conclusions we may arrive at today, this previous movement stands, is a part of our history and must be understood if ever we are to move forward.

Of course today it is impossible to recreate this movement, it was defeated by a combination of counter revolution, demoralisation, isolation and the assaults of the 'old workers movement' - social democracy, Stalinism etc. and of course the rise of the Nazi movement. If we are ever going to gain our emancipation and create a new form of society, some reconsideration of the questions raised by this movement will be necessary . . . . .

## Outbreak of World War

The outbreak of the international war in August 1914 between the various capitalist states, marked a historical watershed for the capitalist mode of production. Politically it also had the effect of shattering the old workers movement.

In particular it marked the end of what was recognised as the 'old struggle', a struggle that was part of a socially progressive phase of the capitalist period of human history. Instead a new period opened up, one in which we are still living, a period of the politics of mass murder, stagnating society, destruction and waste of vast quantities of social wealth, of the temporary stabilisation of one 'national' economy at the expense of another or through the massive production of means of destruction [the arms based economy]. All this and more has come to be referred to in a short hand way as the period of capitalism's *decadence*.

[It is important to remember that this idea of decadence is just that - an idea or concept, an invention of our minds to describe social reality. 'Decadence' by itself is no more an active part of the world than the metaphysical and theological concepts of 'evil' or 'original sin'. Anyone who begins an argument by saying 'decadence is responsible for . . . . .' or the like is employing the concept in an idealistic way and should be pulled up sharply.]

For the 'old struggle', the struggle of mass Social Democratic parties and the Second International this meant a profound change. This old movement was based on a struggle to improve the situation of the working class within a progressive capitalist society. This movement was founded on the '*principle of distinction*', which led to the separation of the movement into different organisations. A separation of the 'workers movement' from the 'socialist movement', the trade unions from the parliamentary party.

This distinction is at the base of the separation of economics and politics, the difference between civil society and private ownership of the means of production, which is at the heart of the bourgeois view of the world. The outbreak of the war showed that the material basis for this old struggle was now dissolved into a dance of death. Crucially however if the basis for the old reformist struggle was finished, if a politics that could win real gains for the working class within the capitalist mode of production was *not* possible, what was not clear was how this new reality was going to be understood by the international working class - nor how long this process was likely to be.

The working class has thrust upon it the task of creating a society for the future of all humanity, a communist society of socialised humanity, out of the decay of the society which gave birth to it. It cannot do this however in any school other than the one of historical necessity. Moreover the working class cannot find the tools and perspectives for such a struggle within



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capitalist society's own political practice - in the world of bourgeois democracy, interest groups, tactical alliances, voting strengths, programmatic compromises, social consensus and the 'national interest'.

The working class cannot learn to stand alone as an international revolutionary class, as a '*class for itself*', unless it confronts this bourgeois democracy. And having confronted it, learnt its bankruptcy and utter emptiness, learnt that 'it cannot deliver the goods'. Even then illusions persist that this is merely a temporary failing, that things will return to how they were before. When they don't return, when 'the goose has no more golden eggs to lay', even then dreams remain from the childhood of capitalism, until such time as the inevitability of the class struggle and the reality of the revolutionary project emerges out of the ruins of stagnation and war.

All this is the dominant experience of the international working class, in the developed capitalist countries in the period since 1914. Small wonder then that when we ourselves begin to study the experience of our class in the period during and immediately after the First World War, we cannot do so with any expectation of being able to discover any ready made solutions or insights that do not arise from the fact that we are of that class and living in this same historical epoch. Nor do we have any illusions that because we have come along later, this will give us any greater understanding of the fundamental nature of this experience for our revolutionary class any more than that of those who lived and fought through it as revolutionary Marxists, *from the stand-point of communism as they understood it*.

But for our part, our commitment to the communist project is grounded in the necessity to make no concessions to capital or its representatives in whatever guise. We now live in a period objectively favourable at least to the maturation of the revolutionary potential of the working class - a '*class for itself*'.

So if seventy odd years of capitalist counter revolution against this potential, should cause us once again to return to the German 'Left Communists' merely to indulge in ancestor worship or to prostrate ourselves uncritically or to mouth long-standing and unreconsidered judgements; judgements now turned to stone by this counter revolution, then this would indeed be a waste. But for us the critical insights made by this early movement are an encouragement to go beyond the partial views and insights of a new movement that has come about as a result of the fragility of the capitalist system since the early 1970s.

Nevertheless we recognise that our understanding is that of a class whose old movement is still in the process of dissolution and not yet that of a revolutionary class in the making.

### **War and the Second International**

Thus the so called 'betrayal' of the mass Social Democratic Party in Germany at the outbreak of the 1914 - 18 war and the role played by the trade union bureaucracy, were nothing if not an object lesson in the relationship of 'politics' to 'economics' in this new period.

The political party, the SPD, voted funds to finance the economic expansion of German capital on the world market in the form of imperialist warfare, while the economic activity of the trade unions took the form of signing an agreement [the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*] with the Army so that this Army ran wartime industrial production in Germany. Under this agreement the political 'rights' of the mobility of labour and the 'right' to strike were signed away by the economic organisations of the working class in favour of the militarisation of labour. The socialist scruples of any individual members of the political organisation, the 'jewel in the crown' of the Second International, were overcome by the threat of the trade union leaders to withdraw financial support from the SPD if it did not collaborate in the war effort.

The gap revealed in 1914 between the words and deeds of Social Democracy in Germany, reflected in turn the gap which these events opened up between the 'official' socialist movement, revealed in its political and economic organisations alike to be the 'left flank' of German capitalist interests, and the interests of the German working class.

### **End of the 'Old Movement' - Beginning of the New ?**

This split gave rise to two important socialist opposition currents to the war. One within the official movement itself and the other from within layers of the working class who no longer accepted the 'official' movement as the authentic expression of their political interests and aspirations. These two currents were to converge and briefly join forces in the German Communist Party [KPD] immediately after the war.

But in origin, development and self-conception they were to prove very different. One, the *Spartakusbund*, was a proletarian current trying to express itself through the outdated means of pre war Social Democratic politics. As such it was destined either to join the counter-revolution or to negate and frustrate its own socialist intentions because it never developed an understanding



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of the new thinking necessary to realise its intentions. This tendency fully illustrates the truth of the saying 'if you're not part of the solution, then you must be part of the problem'.

The other current, with which we are more concerned in this essay and which chose to call itself '*Left Communist*', was to achieve its most effective organisational expression in the formation of the German Communist Workers Party, the KAPD, in 1920.

### **Spartakism**

The first of these currents was that which formed within the SPD around the figures of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring - the Spartakus group [*Spartakusbund*].

This group also included among others Paul Levi, Leo Jogisches and Wilhelm Pieck. In so far as the two currents we have identified here delineated themselves as on the one hand social democratic and on the other revolutionary, particularly after the war, the Spartakus group does not so much belong to the first current as straddle the gap between the two. Its surviving leadership after the German revolution, rejoined the social democratic tendency in the VKPD, while many of its working class membership joined the Left Communists in the KAPD. The likely direction of Luxemburg and Liebknecht had they lived is speculation, but their closest associates rejoined the right-wing of the KPD, and in the case of Levi after his expulsion from the latter, the SPD. So also did some of the KAPD leaders join the SPD after 1923.

The Spartakus group were the core of the 'revolutionary tendency' within the SPD, which in the decade before the war, had prepared the ground for their opposition to the war through ceaseless internal party polemics with both the right wing faction of Ebert and Scheidemann and the '*proletarian kernel*' centre faction of Bebel and Kautsky. In Rosa Luxemburg they had the outstanding revolutionary theorist of the pre war international socialist movement. It was above all in her theoretical writings, born in sharp conflict with Bernstein's 'evolutionary socialism' inside Social Democracy, that laid the theoretical basis for the political perspectives not only of her own tendency during and after the war, but for the entire German socialist movement from Left Social Democrats to Left Communists.

### **Contribution of Rosa Luxemburg**

Vilified and patronised after her death and the decline of the German movement, any attempt to recognise and value the enormity of her contribution to the world communist movement, must at the same time make necessary and relevant criticisms of her political weaknesses. Luxemburg above all was responsible for working out the implications *for capital* of the new period opened up by the decadence of the capitalist system. Whilst it is not our purpose here to enter into the debate between Lenin and Luxemburg within the Second International before the war, it is important to note why Luxemburg should be re-assessed.

Situated at the heart of the German imperialist machine, she had in her polemics against the centre and right of the SPD a clear understanding of the deep seated changes in the economy pushing the advanced capitalist nations into a global war. She also clearly understood that the 'evolutionary Marxism' of these tendencies would only disarm the German workers in this event. Lenin, however, up until the outbreak of the war, still supported the Bebel-Kautsky *centre* faction of the SPD, and when he received newspaper reports of their vote in the Reichstag for war credits, he refused for some days to believe the truth of them.

At this point Lenin radically altered his political position on a number of questions raised by the war, whilst still remaining under the illusion that Kautsky was a 'renegade' rather than a conscious spokesman for the left wing of capitalism throughout the period.

### **Attitude to the War**

Although the Spartakus group early on constituted themselves as a political pole of socialist opposition to the war, as shown by Liebknecht's vote against war credits in the Reichstag, in defiance of the SPD *Zentrale*, they failed to work out the full implications for their political practice of their recognition of the new role the SPD was playing in the capitalist economy. Even though they took up an heroic opposition to the war, they proved like most of their contemporaries, such as for example John Maclean in Britain, unable to go beyond their role *as radical social democrats*. The clearest expression of this failure in Germany was the fact that the Spartakus group formed an alliance with the non revolutionary, 'class in itself', anti war position of the Independent Socialists, the USPD. This faction was based on the prewar centre faction, so the Spartakus group actually *diluted* their own opposition to the war, in effect making them an opposition within social democracy rather than making a clean break with the principles and practices of this movement. Such a clean break was absolutely necessary for any revolutionary activity as the events of the 'November Revolution' were quickly to show. [In this regard the split inside the Italian Socialist Party was much clearer - but the Italian socialists/communists had at least a year to decide this question while the Italian ruling class made up its mind whether to come into the war or not.]



## November 1918 - A 'Peoples Revolution' ?

In addition to the Spartakists refusal to break with the political form of Social Democracy, there was also a contradictory refusal to accept the political content of working within these institutions. For example, Liebknecht spent the best part of the war in jail for his principled opposition to it, and then refused the seat offered to him by the SPD and USPD members of the six man 'Council of People's Commissioners' which had been set up to ensure Social Democratic control over the November Revolution of 1918.

It was leading members of this body which had proclaimed the Republic at the uprising in Berlin. The basis for Liebknecht's refusal, as was the same for all Spartakist leaders, was loyalty to the principle of 'workers democracy', as expressed by the now obsolete Social Democratic Party. It was this same 'workers democracy' which allowed these self appointed 'peoples commissioners' to dictate the course of the 'revolution'. [In many areas the 'majority' Social Democrats simply assumed leadership of the Workers Councils 'as of right' and without the formality of a vote]

Liebknecht had not been 'democratically elected' but selected by a group of political schemers in order to give the Spartakists 'representation'. Quite obviously this was a way of drawing in their supporters and keeping them off the streets. At the same time, the Spartakists programme drawn up by Luxemburg also expressed this confusion of bourgeois means and proletarian ends by saying the Spartakists would not form a Government in Germany unless and until they had the majority support of the working class behind them. In effect they had a 'democratic substitutionist' position, a principled bourgeois democratism.

So by refusing to take part in the historically impossible 'completion of the bourgeois revolution' [of 1848 !] in Germany at the end of the war, the Spartakists leaders became some of the first victims of the *inevitable* counter-revolution against the German working class. The 'completion' of the bourgeois revolution in the twentieth century always means the suppression of the proletarian revolution.

The working class is no longer allied with a radical middle class - instead it stands *independently* for its own interests and those of humanity as a whole, while the formerly radical middle class runs for cover and protection within the state. Thus the 'right of people to self determination' is now *utterly reactionary* from a working class point of view.

The murders of Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Jogisches by a counter revolutionary political alliance between the Army and the SPD, coupled with the murder of many hundreds of working class activists in the same period, should have served as a warning to the Spartakists and their supporters of the insufficiency of their political conceptions and practice. There is some reason to believe that at least some of their number drew the lessons of the events before the final outturn. At the founding conference of the KPD held in Berlin on 30 December 1918, a few days before her murder, Luxemburg had faced considerable opposition when speaking for the Spartakus leadership, in favour of participation in the parliamentary process.

This was at a moment when no parliament of any sort existed in Germany and when the country was effectively being run by the Workers Councils that had sprung up everywhere in the weeks following the final defeat of the German war effort and the overthrow of the Kaiser.

## Formation of the KPD

In this debate, at which were present many members of the second working class political current to which we already referred and who form the main subject of this essay, the Spartakist leadership was defeated on this question, by a large majority.

The spokesman opposing the leadership was Otto Ruhle, a leading member of this second current. In support of his anti parliamentary position during this debate, Ruhle observed that:

'Participation will be interpreted as approbation of the National Assembly. We will only help in this way to take the struggle from the streets in parliament. For us the only task is to reinforce the power of the workers and soldiers councils.'

[Quoted in '*Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin*' - Editions Prudhommeaux p 47]

Ever the exponent of parliamentary 'tactics', the Spartakus leadership avoided a parallel defeat on the question of whether to work within the trade unions or to abandon them as organs of proletarian class struggle, by referring this question to a commission [sound familiar to anyone ?] set up at the conference, rather than engage in open debate and following vote, *and certain defeat*.

## An Alternative Voice

The second current of the working class opposition to the war began to form in the second year around small groups of political workers in some of the main manufacturing centres such as Bremen, Brunswick, Berlin and Hamburg. The roots of the political outlook of these small groups lay both in their experience and criticism of the role played by the trade union apparatus in the mass strikes that erupted in Germany, as in all other industrialised countries before the war and in the parallel political debate which took place first within the Second International and then outside it. It was first shown by the Left tendency within the Dutch Socialist Workers Party, the SDAP, which split from the majority in 1909.



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This left tendency included, Pannekoek, Gorter and Roland-Holst and was known as the 'Tribunists' after the political journal in which their contributions to this debate appeared, *De Tribune*.

The main spokesman of this tendency in the debate was Anton Pannekoek [1873 - 1960], and the leading issue was his rejection of Social Democratic politics and parliamentarism as the means appropriate to the revolutionary struggle of the working class.

### **Pre war opposition**

In 1909 a clear cleavage of opinion appeared between Pannekoek and Luxemburg on this split in Social Democracy.

Luxemburg declared that the Left's response in leaving their party had been 'sectarian' and that in her opinion 'the worst working class party is better than none.' Her fundamental blind spot, her fatal loyalty to the official movement, is revealed in her equation of the workers' movement with Social Democracy.

She said, 'We cannot stand outside the organisation, outside contact with the masses.'

[Letter to Roland-Holst of 11 August 1908. Quoted in '*Rosa Luxemburg*' Nettl. p. 405 Abridged Edition]

These pre war alignments must be borne in mind if we are to comprehend the *international* point of origin of the coherence adopted by this second current in Germany during the war, the close alignment of the Dutch and German Left Communists, and in particular the short lived confidence that was brought about among them in Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the early period of the Third International.

After 1914 Lenin extended the terms of the already ten year old Bolshevik critique of the Mensheviks within Russian Social Democracy to include the criticisms of the Dutch Left from before the war. In '*State and Revolution*' of 1917 he observed,

'In this controversy [on the question of state power] it is not Kautsky, but Pannekoek who represents Marxism, for it was Marx who taught that the proletariat cannot simply win state power in the sense that the old state apparatus passes into new hands, but must smash this apparatus, must break it and replace it by a new one.'

[*State and Revolution* - p 358 Essential Works of Lenin - Bantam Books October 1966]

The main difference in practical interpretation of this position between Bolsheviks and Left Communists was only to become apparent in the period immediately following the war.

### **Influence of Lenin and Bolshevism**

No account however of the significance of the Left Communists within an international movement in this period can be adequate without considering the role of Lenin and the Bolshevik party within the international workers movement. If we simply project our view of say the Kronstadt uprising of 1921, back onto the events of 1917, we will fail to acknowledge the fact that the Russian revolution was lost every bit as much in Turin, Berlin or Glasgow as it was in Petrograd or Moscow.

The international alignments amongst the 'opposition' can be most clearly seen at the Zimmerwald conference in Switzerland in 1915 to rally the anti war fragments of the shattered Second International.

The Zimmerwald 'Left' included the Bolsheviks, Tribunists and the German Left Communists, while the 'Centre' would not commit itself to the 'Left' policy of 'turn the imperialist war between states into a revolutionary civil war.' This 'centre' unprepared *in practice* to break with Social Democracy, included Trotsky and other Mensheviks, and the Spartakus group. After this first international war time conference, the German Left Communist groups from Bremen, Brunswick and Berlin who had attended formed themselves into the German International Socialists [ISD]. Later in the war they changed their name to the German International Communists [IKD]. In March 1915 Otto Ruhle was the second Reichstag deputy after Liebknecht to vote against war credits. After a brief membership of the Spartakus group, he joined the tendency of groups in and around the ISD, becoming spokesman for the Dresden area group.

Other leading figures in this tendency included Karl Radek in Brunswick, later secretary of the Third International, Paul Frolich in Bremen, later KPD leader, and Laufenberg and Wolffheim in Hamburg, theorists of 'National Bolshevism' in Germany after the war. These latter two were quite unrepresentatively selected by Lenin in his '*Left wing Communism . . .*' as typifying the politics of the 'ultra-left' in Germany, representing as they did possibly the most unstable tendency within the IKD. Their 'National Bolshevik' policy was to be adopted by the KPD for a period during the French invasion and occupation of the Ruhr after the war.

Perhaps the most striking and significant difference between the two main currents - Spartakus and the 'Left' - [which were reflected internationally] was the difference in the self conscious basis upon which each of them developed. This was also revealed in their respective practices. The Spartakists sought to give *immediate* expression to the forms of class struggle that



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emerged during the war. They had an effective political presence, despite their small numbers, around both the food riots and strike movements that developed from 1915 onwards. However, during the war the strike movements were dominated by the shop stewards, skilled engineering workers whose wage militancy in opposition to their union leaders had formed the basis for the parallel split of the USPD [Independent Social Democrats] from the SPD in the early part of the war. Just like their British class brothers they were labour aristocrats threatened with eventual extinction by the new mass production techniques which were to invade Europe as part of the invasion of American capital in the 1920s and 1930s. Because of the demand for war production however they were placed at a moment of great sectional power. They had to adopt a policy towards the flood of 'dilutees' into the factories.

And just like their British contemporaries they fought a militant defensive battle, initially around their own sectional; and short term economic interests. However because this movement was broken up as a consequence among other things of a German military defeat, there had to develop an 'unofficial' class movement that went way beyond the conceptions of the skilled men after the war.

A comparable, but less developed extension of struggle took place in Britain after 1917, but crucially *nowhere* in this country did it break the bounds of trade unionism [official or otherwise]. The attitude of the militants in Britain is best summed up by a resolution of the National Conference of Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement in January 1920.

'... the attitude towards the existing unions is not one of antagonism, rather does the SS & WCM desire to revolutionise the aim of trade unionism and to remould its structure. The realisation of this revolutionary aim can only be brought about by active propaganda inside the trade unions and by fuller participation in the internal work of those organisations'

[Published in 'Solidarity' Journal of the SS & WCM - June 1920]

The Spartakists by contrast had more influence on women and young people who, often dominated by the more cautious USPD male skilled workers in the factories, were often obliged to organise riots and demonstrations over food shortages and other 'social' issues *outside* the factories. By the end of the war the term 'Spartakist' in the eyes of the 'respectable' middle and working classes, was virtually synonymous with the word 'hooligan'. The Spartakists were undoubtedly credited with a presence at many scenes of social unrest where almost certainly none of their membership was present.

Only in the last two years of the war did pressure from the working class on the shopfloor begin to erode the 'from the top down' principle. This was the basis of much of the German shop stewards influence and it in turn reflected the intensely patriarchal relationship between labour and capital in most of German industry before the war.

Before we turn to the events of the last year of the war, it is essential to discuss the character and nature of this relationship, for this contains much of the key to understanding this whole movement and also gives insights into how a new and better movement might begin to express and form itself today.

### 'Character' of the German Working Class

The traditional habits of industrial relations were transformed throughout the pre war and war time period in Germany, as was the case in most 'advanced' capitalist countries.

There was a huge growth of massive new industrial centres with modern technology and machinery located in the Berlin region, the Leipzig - Dresden - Chemnitz triangle and in Wurtemberg, as well as around the ports of Hamburg, Kiel and Bremen.

One consequence of this transformation was that the traditional industrial leadership of the German working class of the Ruhr coal miners in the strike waves before the war had been displaced to a great extent by the new initiating role of the working class in the newer manufacturing centres. Now in the post war strike wave, the lead passed to Berlin, followed by the ports, then Saxony and finally the Ruhr

Whilst for the German working class the dominant *political* influence on its revolutionary hopes [as was true in this period for the working class as a whole] was the Russian revolution, with the appearance of Soviets and to a lesser degree the Bolshevik party, the dominant influence on its *organisation* as a class within capitalism, was that of the IWW. Daniel DeLeon and the 'Wobblies' have been much misunderstood in the intervening period. With their slogan of 'One Big Union', they have been written off as syndicalists. This is unfair and masks a revolutionary understanding of their role and outlook. The influence of the IWW increased throughout this period as with the rise of the new manufacturing centres, often accompanied by the introduction of advanced American technology and working methods, the conditions of labour of German workers increasingly resembled those of American workers. [The same influences were at work in Britain, see for instance the *Singer* complex in Clydeside]

However in so far as the German working class did not get beyond its view of itself as a 'producer' class for German capitalism and develop a political outlook as a revolutionary 'class for itself', it is hard to make a direct comparison of a model of revolutionary organisation they were evolving, with the *form* of industrial unionism. In this essay we point out that as far as international influences were concerned, the German working class found itself 'sandwiched' between a political revolution in a backward sector, what became the USSR, and an aggressive but anti-political syndicalist type movement in the USA.



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It is important to bear in mind this international location of the German working class as it struggled to create a revolutionary expression for itself. In the post war period this was to come out on several occasions in the conflict between the KAPD and Comintern in 1920 and 1921; KAPD delegates often referring to the industrial experience of the IWW and the Shop Stewards movement in Britain, in defence of their own positions on industrial struggle and the trade union question. After their expulsion from the Third International, they were to align themselves much more firmly with the other West European and American influences. This is typified by a comment of Herman Gorter in 1923,

'Lenin and his colleagues have played a strange role. On the one hand they have shown the world proletariat the way to communism, on the other they have helped to establish world capitalism in Russia and Asia . . . for our part we shall always regard as more important the real communism towards which the English, German and North American workers are striving.'

[*'World Communism'* - reprinted as a series of articles in *Workers Dreadnought* February 1924]

The downside of the IWW influence on the Left Communists, and especially the AAUD-E, was that the adaptation of the Wobbly form of politics and organisation to German conditions [we will touch on this again] could only bring out its inherent limitations. The American Wobbly was a member of the most mobile class in the world, a class of international origins, a class hardly dominated by sectional, craft or skilled interests. One day he would be a factory worker, a farm hand the next, and after that a rail road worker. He saw himself as part of a social class organised through the IWW against capital as an international market. The Wobbly organiser moved within the stream of the class [the KAPD expression was as a 'yeast within the masses'] from job to job and coast to coast. As such he never conceived himself as having a specific relation to a particular factory or means of production. The whole of industrial America was the 'factory' in which he worked, and the whole of American society was his terrain of struggle. As a consequence of this positive feature, which has been widely misunderstood, we would argue that the practice of the IWW was far more 'unconsciously communist' in its form of organisation and content than that of the European working class.

[The reader will have to forgive us this contradictory notion, but we are trying to understand how a communist movement arises out of the working class's own struggle. This whole area of the relationship of the European working class to the IWW in this period needs further study. Here as a start we would refer the reader to an article by Sergio Bologna in *Telos* No. 13 of 1972 entitled '*Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origins of the Workers Councils Movement*', where this is discussed, and some of the above points are gone into.]

This is not to say that the IWW outlook was more overtly political in a conscious revolutionary sense. But to transfer an aggressive industrial unionism to a relatively immobile proletariat such as in Germany, only served to bring out the limitations of IWW 'syndicalism' and to feed the tendency towards 'factoryism'.

### Outbreak of Struggle 1918

In January 1918 the highest point of the wartime industrial struggles was reached in the strike of almost half a million workers that broke out in and around Berlin. During this strike the pressure of the shop floor workers upon the shop steward structure was greater than in any previous strike in wartime Germany. However the demands drawn up by the strikers stopped short of any revolutionary socialist content.

They included a call for peace without annexations [one of Wilsons Nine Points], release of political prisoners, suffrage reform, right to public political meetings and improved food supplies. This strike which was defeated, proved to be a dress rehearsal for the November revolution. The SPD broke its long-standing practice of remaining outside direct involvement in industrial disputes, to involve itself in the resolution [that is defeat] of the strike.

As in the later November Revolution the more militant and revolutionary shop stewards were outflanked by the acceptance by their more moderate colleagues of the role of the SPD politicians in co-opting the struggle.

The main difference between the practice of the 'Left Communists' and that of the Spartakists, lay in the fact that, although the Left were in close contact with the larger working class movement in the areas where they were mainly situated - that is the newer manufacturing areas, the groups around the ISD were beginning a far more profound process of theoretical elaboration. They wanted time to work out all the implications for the working class of the new period of capitalist society brought about by the war.

### New Perspectives

What was required they argued, was not some new tactic or alliance, but new principles, new perspectives. There was a new basis for struggle which imposed new tasks. This process of fundamental re-orientation, matured throughout the war period. It had hardly begun to develop its practical revolutionary expression within the working class, when it was caught up and all but destroyed by the capitalist counter revolution against the very current within the working class which it was trying to express.



### **'Unitary Organisation'**

The earliest uncertain attempts to draw up the consequences of the new role of Social Democracy and its policies for the revolutionary working class, included some development of the idea of 'unitary organisation'. This was to unite the functions of a political party and industrial organisation within the same structure. This idea can be found in the main wartime organ of the ISD Bremen based journal *'Workers Politics'*. However in this early version the unitary organisation was still viewed as taking part in parliamentary and reformist trade union struggles. Only later was this organisationally based model of a revolutionary synthesis considered and thought of in less literal terms.

At this time Ruhle as the main spokesman for this group was still a deputy in the Reichstag for the industrial region of East Saxony. In a speech to the Reichstag in October 1918 and speaking for the newly renamed IKD, he expressed opposition to the war and criticised the Berlin strikers demand for a negotiated peace in the January of that year,

'In the epoch of imperialism, a compromise peace which can be in the interests of the people, of the working class, is something purely and simply impossible. This proposed peace is only designed to save the system of exploitation and enslavement from the catastrophe which is threatening it.'

[This speech is reproduced, in French, in *'Le Spartakisme'* G Badea, L'Arche pp 335 - 337]

It was this entire tendency which along with other politically independent groups of industrial workers, thrown up by the more political tone of the strikes in the last year of the war, who formed the majority of delegates to the founding conference of the KPD on 30 December 1919. This was where the parliamentary line of the leading Spartakists at the conference was defeated. [This defeat was accomplished with the support of an opposition current within the Spartakist's own movement] A number of members of both currents crossed from one side of the debate to the other during this whole period. Undoubtedly this suggests a continuing process of political re-alignment within the German socialist movement and was why it was believed there was a genuine basis for a merger of both currents into the KPD in 1918.

[The process in Britain of political re-alignment that led to the formation of the CPGB in 1921, was totally different - this should form the subject of a similar study.]

### **The Movement for Workers Councils**

The November [1918] Revolution shifted the centre of activity temporarily from the Reichstag to the Workers Councils which had sprung up all over Germany. This experience of creating widespread class based unitary organisations illustrates precisely the difference between bourgeois democracy and working class democracy. Bourgeois democracy is a democracy of *form* which hides the reality of class society. Working class democracy is a democracy of *content*, the workers create institutions capable of responding to their needs as a class. However these newly created 'Workers Councils' never had the chance to develop this content.

They functioned essentially as local decentralised caretaker organs of German bourgeois social democratic society, keeping production and social relations turning smoothly and normally in the social vacuum following the overthrow of the Kaiser and the defeat of the German armed forces. They were to function until a Constituent Assembly could be elected to resume control of the business of the state.

Everyone, from workers and soldiers, to army officers, factory managers, white collar workers and members of the professional classes, joined the councils.

In most parts of Germany they were dominated by SPD members [this party was the biggest of the pre war opposition parties, having polled four and a half million votes pre war] In only a handful of centres, usually in the most industrialised areas did the councils have anything resembling a revolutionary political content. [See for example the pamphlet *'The Wilhelmshaven Revolt'* by 'Ikarus' who took part in the events he describes - available from Archive Publishing] In a few other places the revolutionary elements left the Social Democratic dominated councils to set up their own revolutionary alternatives. The old hierarchical traditions of Church, Army, the 'fear of Bolshevism' as the Devil's own medicine, held undisputed sway over the vast masses of the working class in a still recently industrialised country. Post-feudal patriarchal relations were still socially dominant, especially in the large scale family-owned heavy industrial companies such as Krupp and Thyssen, and the SPD reaped the harvest of custom and superstition for the old ruling class.

### **Working Class votes 'Not to Take Power'**

When the Left Communists and Spartakists urged 'All Power to the Councils', the National Congress of Workers Councils met in Berlin in December 1918 and refused entry to the Congress to Luxemburg and other 'political elements'. They further voted by a large majority to give up all claims to political power and to support the efforts of the 'Peoples Commissioners' [among whom were Ebert, Scheidemann and Noske ] to arrange elections to a new Constituent Assembly.

The powerful hold of Social Democratic ideology over large sections of the German working class and their consequent refusal to make a proletarian revolution have to be seen as the most important obstacle to the German Revolution in the post war



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period. It was this obstacle, this view of itself as a '*class for capital*' that determined the tactics, attempts and failures of the Left Communists between 1918 and 1923. This same obstacle eventually overwhelmed and split this movement and then rendered it impotent.

The return of the leading Spartakist currents of the KPD to Social Democratic politics, the *putschism* of both the KPD and KAPD, the split between the AAUD and the AAUD-E, the emergence of 'factoryist' and council fetishist tendencies from the fragments of a demoralised German Left, the split between the KAPD and the Third International, the rapid political degeneration within the International itself - ALL these features are accounted for in the first instance by the dominance of Social Democratic sensibilities - for ideas is too truncated a word - over the large majority of the German working class and over the movement internationally.

Its cultural influence is to be seen even amongst the revolutionary elements themselves, the declared enemies of Social Democracy, even amongst the most outstanding of them. No wonder the German ruling class referred to 'our good Sozi . . . .'

All this of course is not denying or minimising the concrete ways in which the counter-revolution crushed the movement. The alliance between the SPD and Army in the Arbeitsgemeinschaft, the social freedom of movement allowed to the Freikorps, the private counter revolutionary armies formed by members of the officer caste after the break up of the Kaiser's Army and the myth of the '*Dolchstoß*', the heavily repressive use of the State legal apparatus against revolutionaries - all these activities took place with the silent connivance of the majority of the working class in Germany. The political lessons learned by the most advanced proletarian groupings in the war time period had yet to be generalised and accepted within the class as a whole, and in so doing take on the dimension of a powerful material revolutionary force in society.

So that we are not misunderstood, when we talk about the revolutionary current within the German working class after the war, we are no longer talking of tiny handfuls of workers of the early war period, the revolutionary embryos. But by now tens of thousands of class conscious workers. At the time of their formation the [1918] KPD numbered 14,000 members and the KAPD in 1920, 40,000 [about four fifths of the current KPD]. When the AAUD and the AAUD-E split they had about 100,000 members each. You will see that we are not talking about obscure revolutionary sects, as the legacy of the Third International would have us believe, but of a significant current within the working class.

### **Defeat, Demoralisation and Isolation**

But while the post war period brought further material hardship for German workers by way of vicious reparations clauses in the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919 [so much for the Berlin strikers hopes of a 'just peace', based on Wilson's Fourteen Points], the illusion still persisted that a return to the pre war status quo was still possible. Moreover the 'school of hunger and enslavement' that many referred to [see here for instance John Maclean's '*War After the War*'] was not for the majority the 'school of inspiration and political awakening'.

This historically explicable failure of the German working class to acquire a generalised revolutionary consciousness within this period, and the subsequent defeat of the German Revolution were at the origins of a debate on the relationship between Marxism and psychoanalysis which took place in this period. [see for example Wilhelm Reich's '*Mass Psychology of Fascism*']

### **A Balance Sheet**

So, we can locate the factors that throw light on the relationship between the German Left Communists and the rest of the German working class in the overall situation and in the consciousness of the workers. We can examine both the positive and negative aspects of this relationship.

On the positive side we see the root and branch opposition to parliamentarism and the trade unions - an opposition based equally on the necessarily counter-revolutionary role of these institutions in the period and on the related need for a revolutionary working class to develop its own self consciousness, self reliance and above all its independence from the old workers movement. An independence that was above all a rejection of the class collaboration and 'representation of different interests' of this old movement and an affirmation of a class politics - a class with a revolutionary task to perform and a revolutionary identity to proclaim.

The negative side of this relationship can be seen in the tendency towards 'substitutionism', in attempts to incite a passive 'mass' of the class to insurrection, as in the abortive March Action of 1921, when the KPD and KAPD members in some parts of Germany fought with clubs, those large numbers of workers, who refused to join them on the streets and instead were attempting to enter the factories to work. The KAPD was also likewise in support of the putschism of the KPD, during the disastrous insurrection in the Hamburg area, which was begun by the KPD in October 1923.



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There are other more detailed accounts for readers who want a better grasp of events from the 1918 November Revolution to the inflation crisis of 1923. By this time the Left Communists current was already rapidly shrinking in numbers and about to disappear once more into small political grouplets. [see bibliography]

Following the inflation crisis of 1923, the German economy was 'refloated' on the basis of short term American loans under the Dawes plan. The short term economic stability and economic growth that this injection of credit brought about further reduced the already waning revolutionary tendencies within the German workers.

### Lessons for Today

Our intention here is to stress those features relevant for a study of this movement and its lessons for us today. Foremost amongst these features was the attempt by the German Left Communists to construct a communist political practice based on the new period that they recognised and diagnosed and *in direct opposition to this*, the role of the Third International and the leadership of the KPD.

And just to show how this has a bearing on politics today this counter-revolutionary role has been justified and asserted by tendencies associated with both the Third and Fourth International throughout the world up to the present day.

The early period of the war shifted the focus of the class struggle from the pre war industrial area to the area of bourgeois politics. The workers struggle had to break out of the stranglehold of the 'Sacred Union' - the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, the name given to the wartime class collaboration in the 'National Interest' which sought to tie the working class to the goals of the imperialist conflict. This was done by a combination of mystification and coercion. By the end of the war the industrial struggle was beginning to re-emerge as the focus and the war time leadership of the skilled craft sections was giving way to a more class political and less sectional upsurge from below in the factories. Effectively this was a return to a more politicised wave of mass strikes like the ones that occurred before the war. This previous wave especially in Belgium and Germany sparked off a fierce debate within the Second International to which Rosa Luxemburg contributed in her famous pamphlet on the 'Mass Strike' in 1906.

### The Workers 'Union'

The most significant feature of this renewed industrial activity, expressing lessons drawn from the pre war and early war time industrial struggles, was its outright rejection of the role of the trade unions in mediating and policing the struggle between the working class and capital on the shop floor. The slogan '*Get out of the Unions*' was first heard in the middle of the war and was then taken up as a central part of the platform of the Left Communist current.

After the war, in the period of the Councils, when demobilisation took place and unemployment soared, the popularity of this slogan spread and in the main industrial centres hundreds of thousands of workers left the unions. Often they dissolved their local branches, seized branch funds and redistributed them as unemployment relief. Many of these workers, skilled and unskilled alike, regrouped themselves during the course of 1919 into single factory organisations within their own plant, often as a result of the strikes of the time. These factory organisations were to be the basic organs of the Worker Unions into which they were grouped at regional and national level.

[In this context the German word '*Union*' has nothing whatsoever to do with trade union which is called '*Gewerkschaft*' in German. The '*Union*' therefore fought the trade unions. - Publishers Note]

At first many of these workers joined the recently formed Anarcho-Syndicalist FAUD, following the first period of the Councils and the downturn of the German Revolution in May 1919. The FAUD, whose forerunner the FVDG had wielded considerable influence in the pre war industrial struggles, had been banned for the duration of the war. It proved however not to have gone beyond a militant anti-political democratic syndicalism of the pre war period. This was not enough for a generation that had just gone through the political experience of the war, and the small Marxist opposition within the FAUD soon left along with many others and helped to found the General Workers Union of Germany, the AAUD at the start of the following year. The formation of the AAUD from factory organisations [*Betriebsorganisationen*] and workers unions organised at plant and regional level was paralleled by the 'democratic' expulsion of the Left Communist tendency from the KPD in December 1919.

### Political Organisation

This tendency formed itself into the Communist Workers Party of Germany, the KAPD, in April 1920. Their expulsion from the KPD was part of the strategy supported from Moscow by the newly formed Third International and was engineered by the KPD *Zentrale* [Central Committee] under the leadership of old Spartakists led by Paul Levi.

Moscow and the old leadership were determined to return the German movement to both a parliamentary practice and activity within the old trade unions. The Left Communists were not willing to respond in kind to this Social-Democratic style of political manoeuvring to which they were victim, although some of their number briefly advocated healing this rift. This was no minor



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split, the expelled Left Communist current [who remember 'won' the vote on parliamentary activity] represented about half the current membership of the KPD, and certainly the bulk of its membership in the main industrial areas.

The KPD then completed its transformation into a mass membership social democratic type organisation in the following year - a party of 'supporters' rather than active members with a developed political outlook - by merging itself with the 'left-wing' of the USPD and renaming itself the United Communist Party of Germany, the VKPD. The VKPD thus represents the continuity of the first current we have identified. This was the end product of the failure of the Spartakusbund to break decisively with Social Democracy. It now commenced an electoral strategy, combined with a policy of 'revolutionising the unions' from within - a strategy which proved singularly ineffective.

So the KAPD and the AAUD distinguished themselves both from the parliamentarism and the trade unionism of the KPD and from the rejection of political struggle and the need for proletarian dictatorship of the FAUD.

### **KAPD - A Different Kind of Party**

In its programme drawn up in May 1920, the KAPD clearly based its perspectives upon the overall nature of the period as that of the entry of capitalism into its decline.

'It becomes ever clearer that the opposition between exploiters and exploited, which is daily increasing; that the contradiction between capital and labour, of which even the most indifferent layers of the working class are now becoming increasingly conscious, cannot be resolved. Capitalism has experienced its ultimate fiasco. It has found itself historically reduced to wiping itself out in a war of imperialist robbery. It has created the chaos, whose intolerable continuation puts the working class in front of a historical alternative, descent into barbarism or the construction of a socialist world.'

[*Programme of the KAPD* - La Gauche Allemande p 4, La Vielle Taupe, Paris 1973. In French - Translated by the Publishers]

The idea behind the relationship of the KAPD to the AAUD was that the factory organisations, operating as workers councils for the social [re] organisation of production following the revolution, were to form the basis of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*.

However they could only fulfil this function in so far as those participating in them had a revolutionary and political conception of their tasks and functions - *a communist consciousness*.

In so far as this was not the case - the KAPD was conceived of as the separate organisation of conscious communists, whose role was to promote communist perspectives and goals, through its own independent activity and influence within the factory organisations. The precise interpretation of this perspective, and thus the need for a separate political organisation, was the basis of a disagreement within the KAPD between the tendency led by Otto Ruhle and the rest of the organisation.

The KAPD's conception of the relationship between Party and Workers' Councils was set out in the 1921 KAPD document, '*Theses on the Role of the Party in the Proletarian Revolution*', in the following terms,

'In as much as the masses, after the political victory of the revolution, are ready in their class organisations [*Unions*] to introduce the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the council system, they will increase in importance in relation to the party. . . . . in as much as the masses finally change their dictatorship into a communist economy, the party ceases to exist.'

Given that the KAPD and the AAUD had a large common membership, with the AAUD being by far the larger organisation, the practical role of communists within the factory organisations was defined as being to consistently raise communist positions and perspectives within any struggle. They were to play a leading role as communists within the struggle and through this to win the development of the industrial struggle to communist perspectives.

The AAUD membership were not to take the lead in any struggle for factory reforms or wage increases, any struggle in which a communist direction could not be taken. They were to express forms of practical solidarity with such struggles, whilst refusing to accept their terms of reference. So it can be seen that the viability of their perspective was inseparable from the implicitly revolutionary potential of struggles of this period. This was reflected in the active membership of these organisations.

At its founding the KAPD was for the most part made up of young workers and unemployed who shared with most of the party spokesmen a semi-insurrectionary perspective. Different interpretations of these perspectives, which we will outline, were to create a split within the KAPD and AAUD within a year of their formation.

### **Decline of the Movement**

So far in our exposition we have been overwhelmingly sympathetic to this Left Communist current - but it is not possible to keep this sympathy in the period of the movements' decline and collapse under the weight of the counter revolution. Some of the best elements of both organisations reformed themselves into a small communist propaganda group in the late 1920s, the German Communist Workers Group - KAUD. One of the few available accounts of the KAUD's conception of its political role shows that in the meantime it had drawn some of the lessons of its past, and especially the danger of *permanent* class [unitary] organisation, except in a period of permanent revolutionary class upsurge:



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'The KAUD united all workers who were declared communists, but it did not claim that it united all the workers any longer. The organisation was no longer a general organisation of the workers as the AAUD had been. No longer was the organised class struggle to depend on an organisation formed previous to the struggle [and] these organisations were no longer to be considered as organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . the task of the new KAUD would amount to communist propaganda, clarifying the objectives of the struggle and urging the working class to struggle principally by means of the unofficial strike.'

[Origins of the Movement for Workers Councils in Germany 1918 - 29 p \*\* Archive Publications]

The divisions created in a movement that is in the process of clarifying and sharpening a communist perspective and practice are different from those divisions forced upon groups desperately trying to push back the weight of a growing counter-revolution. So once again we must distinguish what for us are the positive and negative features of each side of this split.

### KAPD versus the 'Einheitlern'

The two main tendencies in this final split were represented respectively by the Berlin group within the KAPD, which included amongst others Gorter, Reichenbach and Schwab, and the group based upon East Saxony whose principal spokesman was Otto Ruhle.

The latter current left the KAPD and AAUD to form a single organisation, the General Workers Union of Germany - United Organisation, the AAUD-E or *Einheitlern*. The main basis of the split was over the principle of 'unitary' organisation to which we have already referred. The 'Einheitlern' held that the factory organisations were the *sole* basis for the revolutionary organisation of the working class. They were to combine within them all the political and economic functions and tasks of preparing and exercising the workers dictatorship.

What brought about the emergence of the *Einheitlern* as a distinct grouping was the political question raised by the relationship of the German Left Communists to the Third International, to which we must now turn.

### Basis for a 'Third International'

Before her assassination Rosa Luxemburg - in keeping with her 'principled substitutionism' - had voiced her opposition to the consequences of a new International being created prematurely by the Bolsheviks. In her opinion an effective International could only emerge with the widespread support of the working class movement in more than one country. She considered the German workers' movement insufficiently politically developed as a result of its war time experiences to play a part in founding a new International. The KPD delegate, Eberlein was instructed along these lines before he left early in 1919 for the Moscow conference, where the Bolsheviks proposed to form such an International. In our view Luxemburg's understanding was incorrect because her conception was of an International composed of an amalgam of socialist leaderships which obtained its viability from the *quantitative* working class support in each country, that each national leadership represented.

Luxemburg's idea was to make good the failures of the Second International - to 'weld closer together' the leadership and the masses. The 'masses' of course were 'betrayed' by the leadership in 1914. In this respect her position was closer to that of the Bolsheviks than either of them were to the German Left Communists, since the conditions of participation she felt to be lacking in Germany were present for the Bolsheviks, given that they did not have her 'democratic' scruples, through 'their seizure of power'. But the Bolsheviks idea of the nature of the International remained dominated by the *number* of votes represented in their respective countries by the other participating parties in relation to their acceptance of the Bolsheviks own political positions, which they put over within the International by the use of 'parliamentary' tactics and procedures.

In this respect the Bolsheviks conception of the International was that of a permanent organisation designed to replace the Second International.

In contrast the Left Communists took part on the basis of the revolutionary *content* of the policies debated and agreed upon. So it was therefore that they were to leave or be expelled once such debate was forbidden or curtailed by the procedural tactics of the Russian party. For the first year however the quality and content of the Bolshevik's internationalism was masked by the fact that the Russian's own need for international solidarity made it particularly difficult to distinguish between the 'national' and 'international' aspects.

To the working class internationalism of the German Left Communists, 'Russian Internationalism' was - until its counter-revolutionary nature became clear - more preferable to the backward political basis of Luxemburg's desire for the KPD not to participate in the Third International.

So the International initially at least was an organ to bring together and represent the most conscious revolutionary layers of each 'national' working class. As it turned out Eberlein's objections were overcome in Moscow, though not for the reasons outlined above, by the Bolsheviks who knew full well that without German support they would be unable to launch a new International. Thus the Third International was founded in March 1919.



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That the Russian working class was dependent on the international working class to save the October 1917 Revolution from defeat and isolation was admitted by both the Bolshevik and Western European revolutionaries. In Germany Rosa Luxemburg had repeatedly stressed this view and the special role of the German working class. She noted that the German workers were failing to play this role, existing as they did in an advanced industrialised sector of capitalism close to the industrially shattered and militarily besieged Russian subcontinent.

'Everything that happens in Russia is comprehensible and represents an inevitable chain of causes and effects, of which the starting and finishing point are: the failure of the German proletariat and the occupation of Russia by German imperialism.'

[*'The Russian Revolution'* New York 1940 edition p 54]

[The signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty on 3 March 1918 gave up whole areas of 'European Russia', including the Polish working class to the 'tender mercies' of German imperialism.]

In line with this internationalist perspective, the KPD and the KAPD both attempted to give practical support to the Russian working class in the period after the war.

The KAPD in particular played a leading role in the summer of 1920 in disrupting munitions production by sabotaging munitions trains crossing Germany [by now of course Germany was part of the 'Allied' intervention in Russia] en route for Poland where the Russo-Polish war was raging at the time. [So the Brest-Litovsk 'peace' actually lasted less than 12 months]

Nevertheless this same internationalist perspective of the KAPD pushed it into seeking affiliation to the Third International on its regroupment as a separate organisation from the KPD.

Since they arose out of the same international re-alignment and under the impact of the 1917 revolution, the German Left Communists undoubtedly saw themselves as being politically closer to the Bolsheviks than to the Social-Democratically inclined 'old' Spartakists of the KPD- Zentrale, right up until the infamous Second Congress of the Third International in July 1920. By contrast the Bolsheviks undoubtedly saw themselves as politically closer to the KPD-Zentrale than to the German Left. Obviously this triangle of cross purposes between the two German tendencies and the Russian Party within the International was shortly to be resolved at the expense of the German Left.

From the outset the Bolshevik conception of the role of the International was consistently determined at root by the premises of the old Second International - to the point where they convened the founding conference at the same time as the British Labour Party had called for the resurrection of the Second International. This was simply to prevent the Social-Democratic Left from being re-absorbed into the Second International. [That this was a waste of time and that the Social-Democratic 'left', for example the BSP in Britain was *umbilically connected* to the Labour Party and the Second International and could not be broken from it, was ignored by the Bolsheviks]

It took the best part of a year for this perspective to work its way through the Third International in political and organisational terms. During this time the possibility of genuine international debate on working class perspectives and tactics was potentially possible within it.

Even as late as January 1920 a West European Bureau of the International was set up in Amsterdam to co-ordinate information and activity amongst member organisations. However the autonomy of this body was quickly put to an end once it became apparent. The appearance of an article advocating anti-parliamentary positions in the only issue of the Amsterdam Bureau's own journal showed it might serve as a focus for non-Bolshevik communist perspectives within the International.

### **Nationalism or Internationalism ?**

From the outset therefore the Third International was dominated by the policies and finances of the Russian party. This party, isolated from the international working class movement by the counter-revolutionary 'allied' intervention, concluded that the revolutionary crisis was *over* by mid 1919. The leadership of Zinoviev and Radek [who had some influence within the German movement] and with the support of the entire Russian party leadership, turned the Third International into a vehicle to 'stabilise' and 'normalise' political relations between new Russian state and the leading capitalist states of Europe and North America.

The means to this end was to exercise political influence within the 'socialist' movements of the world, frequently by using Comintern agents recruited specifically for the purpose. The aim was to create 'communist' parties allied to the International who, while they rejected pre war Social Democratic and syndicalist positions, would nevertheless adhere to Bolshevik policies and specifically i] participate in parliamentary and ii] trade union activity. This meant 'mass' parties for electoral purposes to serve as powerful political pressure groups on their respective ruling classes especially in relation to 'soviet Russia'. In effect these new parties were to work within Social Democracy once more, but to justify this practice to the doubting revolutionaries among their own membership as merely a 'tactic' required to defend the Russian Revolution.

In other words, they were to return to the politics of the Second International in the name of the Third. At the same time and secretly, the Bolsheviks were attempting to negotiate with leading capitalist industrialists in Western Europe [and especially Germany] to renew foreign capital investment in Russia, a practice justified under the slogan of 'peaceful co-existence' and whose practical result was the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922.



## The Russian Policy

The two major obstacles to Bolshevik policy within the socialist movement at an international level, whose strength and influence varied greatly from country to country were the anti-Bolshevik Left Social Democrats of the Socialist parties such as the Serrati faction of the PSI in Italy and the Kautskyite section of the USPD in Germany on the one hand, and on the other the non Bolshevik communists for whom the revolutionary period was not over just because Moscow said so.

Foremost of these latter tendencies in political coherence and organisational strength were the Left Communists in Germany. Other smaller 'Left' groupings included that of Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain and the Bordigists in Italy as well as the Dutch Left Communists.

Where the Bolsheviks could identify the Social Democrats as the main enemy, the Comintern tactic was to split their party and then regroup a pro-Bolshevik side of the split into a new communist party.

Where the Left Communists, the 'Infantilely Disordered' had strength, the tactic was either to force them to unite with a parliamentary oriented party or to discredit their leaders and win over their members, for as Lenin noted of the KAPD in Germany - their members were,

'... better able than the latter [KPD] to carry on agitation among the masses.'

[*'Left Wing Communism - An Infantile Disorder'* - V I Lenin p.114 Peking Edition October 1965, where this comment appears in an Appendix called 'The Split amongst the German Communists']

It is vital to emphasise here a clear understanding of the role of the Third International at this time, *because of what it has suppressed*. This role has had a crippling influence on what 'proletarian internationalism' means and what we should understand by what was Left Communism in its own time and what it means today, since this role of the International [the famous 'first four congresses'] is the foundation upon which most of the 'Left' is built today.

The very term 'infantile' used by Lenin to describe the Left Communists at this time is a misconception between a young and necessarily immature working class politics and what he saw as childish impracticality. Lenin used all his personal authority and prestige to attack the Left and bolster the counter-revolutionary policy of the Third International. Rather we should call this tendency *'Left Wing Communism: The Future of the International Working Class in its Infancy'* and given the history of the intervening period there is obviously now no longer any need to add the prefix 'Left Wing'.

The essential political content of the time is clear from Pannekoek,

'It is easy to see that the needs of the Republic of Soviets are at the basis of these politics . . . . Moscow wants to be able to rely not upon a radical Communist Party, leading to a fundamental revolution in the future, but rather on a large organised proletarian force which will intervene in its favour precisely to the extent that it puts pressure upon the Government of its country . . . . The task of Communism is to unmask the forces and tendencies which seek to halt the revolution halfway, to point out the way forward to the masses, the way which leads, by way of the fiercest struggles, to the distant goal, to undivided power and to stimulate the energies of the proletariat and to deepen the revolutionary current . . . If one adopts the perspective of the immediate safeguarding of Soviet Russia, one will inevitably arrive through this at a conception of the World Revolution [the taking of power by workers leaders sympathetic to the Soviet Union]'

'... From there, Russia, surrounded by 'friendly' workers' republics, will in all tranquillity be able to pursue its economic construction in the direction of communism, that is why the same things we consider to be intermediary, transitory, inadequate forms, to be fought against with all our might, for Moscow constitute the realisation, the end point, the supreme goal of communist politics.'

[Postscript to *'World Revolution and Communist Tactics'* 1920 in *'Pannekoek et les Conseils Ouvriers'* Editions Briacancier EDI Paris pp 200 - 201]

From its formation in 1920, the KAPD criticised the policies of the Third International, but it took it another two years to break altogether with the International. Whereas the more outright opposition of the Ruhle tendency within the party to the policies of the Third International from early on, contributed to its break with the KAPD.

The first and most important critique by the KAPD of the Third International policies - produced by Gorter in his famous *'Reply to Lenin'* [in response to *'Left wing Communism . . . .'*] stressed the difference in economic development and thus in class structure, between social relations inside Russia and those within the countries of Western Europe.

The West European working class had to stand as a class *alone* to make the revolution, against the weight of bourgeois ideology and custom, against all other classes in capitalist society, the peasantry included. So all political practice and principles had to bring to the fore the means by which the working class could increase its revolutionary capacities and its self reliance. Rejecting Parliament and Trade Unions, what the KAPD called 'leader politics', the Social Democratic management of 'national consensus' and so on was based on these principles.



## **KAPD Criticism of the Third International**

Whilst arguing this perspective for the German working class, the KAPD also showed it to be a correct estimation of the problems facing the communists as a minority within the working class, in as much as they failed to carry through the implications of their analysis with regard to their membership of the Third International. As we have shown this body was showing itself to be increasingly dominated by the needs of the new Russian state. This weakness of the KAPD can be seen in Gorter's deference to Lenin [\*] in sections of his 'Reply', in the reluctance of the KAPD to criticise Bolshevik policy inside Russia, and by their taking part in the 'March Action' in Germany, an insurrection led by the KPD under the Comintern supervision of Bela Kun.

[\* For example accepting the 'united front' between workers and peasants in Russia which Gorter contrasted with its incorrectness in Western Europe. In effect admitting that Russia was somehow a 'special case' to which the principles of proletarian internationalism need not be strictly applied. Luxemburg had consistently criticised Bolshevik policy towards the peasantry. Bordiga also in Italy devoted much effort to working out this question]

This involvement in the 'March Action' was the cause of an especial antagonism between the AAUD and the KAPD, for it was widely suspected that this insurrection was deliberately timed by Comintern politicians, 'the palace mayors of Moscow', to take attention away from the anti-Bolshevik strikes by the working class of Petrograd in the spring of 1921 which led to the Kronstadt insurrection. This was bloodily suppressed by the Bolsheviks.

Effectively the KAPD was guilty by association in crushing this uprising, and when challenged by the Russian party at the Third World Congress of the International in Moscow shortly after, they failed to disassociate themselves from this suppression. The KAPD spokesman stating in explanation that in a newspaper article Gorter had referred to the Kronstadt insurrection as a proletarian uprising, that while he recognised the 'inner logic' of the actions of both the workers involved and of the Russian party's response,

'Comrade Gorter does not side with the Kronstadt rebels, and the same goes for the KAPD.'

[*'La Gauche Allemande'* op. cit. p. 52]

The KAPD subsequently criticised the suppression of the Kronstadt insurrection *after* their expulsion from the Third International. Gorter saying of this event,

'then - as by a breath - communism collapsed.' [*World Communism*]

Some of the basis for the KAPD's involvement in this and other putschist actions must be recognised in their own desire for revolution in Germany. The pressure towards 'voluntarist' actions was actually the pressure exerted by the counter revolution and the KAPD's reaction was a misplaced desire to ignite the German working class into action by their action. The KAPD's idea of its role within the Third International at the Second and Third Congresses after which it was expelled, was to try and constitute itself as a revolutionary opposition *within* the International. It drew in support from other national sections and acted as a counter weight to the dominance of the Russian party and its reactionary policies within the International. This role was a combination of a highly developed internationalism and political naivete as to the real intentions and strength of the Russian party. By 1923 and its short lived attempt to set up an alternative Fourth International [several years before Trotsky], Gorter and the KAPD had quite clearly drawn the overall lessons of this bitter experience.

'We would advise our Russian comrades to say to the [Russian] Communist party and the Soviet Government: You have done giant work as a proletarian movement and government party. . . . Very probably certain mistakes were made at the beginning of the Revolution, only our Russian comrades can know this, we cannot decide this point clearly. This will remain so for all time. That you could not do everything in a proletarian and communist way, and that you had to retreat when the European revolution did not materialise, is not your fault. As proletarians we shall more strenuously fight you *as our class enemies* the more you return to capitalism. But your real fault, which neither we nor History can forgive, is to have foisted a counter-revolutionary programme and tactics on the worlds' working class and to have rejected the really revolutionary one which could have saved us.'

[from 'World Communism']

## **The 'Einheitslern' Disagree**

Ruhle and his comrades drew their own conclusions as to the return to capitalist class relations within Russia and their influence on the policies of the International at an earlier stage than their former comrades in the KAPD.

Ruhle was one of the KAPD delegates to the Second Congress of the International in July 1920 and he travelled slowly through Russia for several weeks on his way to Moscow in order to find out for himself the social conditions and relations in the new



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post-revolutionary society. His conclusion which he wrote up for an article in a socialist paper on his return to Germany was that the system was Soviet in name only. All power lay with the party bureaucracy and that in the industrial areas,

'The Russian workers are even more exploited than the German workers.'

The main object of Ruhle's criticism was the substitutionist role of the Bolshevik party. He described this in 1921 in an article called *'The Basic Issues of Organisation'*,

'Russia has the bureaucracy of the Commissariat; this rules. It has no council system. The Soviets are chosen according to lists of candidates drawn up by the party; they exist under the terror of the regime and thus are not councils in a revolutionary sense. They are 'show' councils, a political deception. All power in Russia lies with the bureaucracy, the deadly enemy of the council system.'

But proletarian autonomy and the socialist economy require the council system; here everything is produced for need, and all take part in administration. The Party prevents Russia from achieving a council system and without councils there is no socialist construction, no communism. The dictatorship of the party is commissar-despotism, is state capitalism. . . . '

' . . . . The Tsarist dictatorship was that of one class over all other classes, that of the Bolsheviks is that of 5% of a class over a other classes, and over 95% of its own class.'

[Originally published in *'Die Aktion'* No. 37 1921. Journal of the AAUD-E]

On arriving in Moscow, Ruhle was confronted with the 'Twenty-One Conditions' for membership of the International and told that unless he and his party accepted these terms, he could not take part in the Congress. No debate, no discussion, simply a *'fait accompli'*. Ruhle immediately left Moscow for Germany. He was censured for this by the KAPD Central Committee. Following this he was excluded from a meeting of the Central Committee of which he was an elected member, in October 1920. He left the KAPD, taking with him the East Saxony and Hamburg sections. These then dissolved themselves, took about half the 200,000 members of the AAUD out of that organisation, and formed the AAUD-E at the end of 1921.

Thus the main points of difference between the KAPD and the AAUD-E as far as the latter was concerned were:-

- i] the AAUD-E's insistence on the political primacy and uniqueness of the factory organisation
- ii] its outright rejection of the Third International from the Second Congress including the '21 Conditions'
- iii] its opposition to the KAPD's tendency to putschism

As far as the AAUD-E was concerned, the KAPD leadership had failed to differentiate itself sufficiently from the 'professional politics' of the KPD leadership except for the KAPD's rejection of parliamentarism. From the founding congress of the KAPD, Ruhle had adopted a position that the party was to exist as a separate organisation only for as long as was necessary to prepare its effective dissolution into the AAUD. It had been at his group's insistence that the words,

'the KAPD is not a party in the normal sense, it is not a party of leaders. Its main work will be in supporting the German working class in so far as it will be able to do away with all leadership.'

had been included in the *'First Appeal of the KAPD'*, at its founding conference on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1920 in Berlin.

Now this outlook was based on a refusal to take any action other than on the basis of the revolutionary self-development of the German workers as a 'class for themselves'.

The reality of the counter-revolution which the AAUD-E recognised somewhat earlier than the KAPD, transformed these intended principles in practice into their opposite. The AAUD-E became a moment in the fragmentation and dissolution of the communist project. Despite claims to the contrary, the rejection of KAPD putschism became in practice the virtual rejection of any armed struggle. Rejection of the party and the need for independent political organisation in a pre-revolutionary period [that is most of the time] becomes a refusal to work through the problem of the relationship of the most conscious members of the working class to the rest of the class - what we refer to as the problem of minority organisation.

In reaction to the substitutionist and voluntarist weaknesses of the KAPD, are also abandoned its strengths. This consisted of an attempt by a revolutionary organisation to identify and develop within the working class a revolutionary understanding of itself, however difficult this may have been at the time.

### ***The 'Einheitlern' - and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat***

Ruhle's idea of proletarian dictatorship will not do - it starts from the wrong headed notion of 'seizure of one's own means of production' as against the collective seizure by the international working class of the global means of production. [This echoes the 'take and hold' idea of the IWW influenced SLP in Britain. Nevertheless it should be noted that the SLP was the nursery for the majority of the 'best' - and worst - militants in the workers movement in Britain]

Further, organisation 'at the point of production' is a necessary but hardly a sufficient basis on which to organise for a class which is not simply to take over industrial production, but transform production of all needs for the whole of society. The



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working class cannot make itself into a political class for all human society on the basis simply of its factory or industrial organisation. These are merely some of the roots which reflect its origin as a producer class for capital. Instead the working class must create political institutions to express its rule *as a class*, such as the soviets [briefly] were in Russia. In addition it must discover or work out the relationship of these soviets to other organisms it creates at the 'point of production'.

Now we are not implying here that in its programme and propaganda the AAUD-E rejected the need for armed struggle or the proletarian dictatorship. What it did do was to lay too much emphasis on factory organisation, 'the terrain of the proletariat' as Ruhle called it, as the basis upon which and from which class rule could be won and exercised. By contrast other areas of social struggle and the necessity for armed struggle become in this outlook secondary or subsidiary questions. Again it is important to stress the international features of this post-war movement. A similar criticism could be made for instance of the Turin workers of 1920.

### **Retreat into the Factories**

In effect the retreat into the factory which was a feature of the AAUD-E's revolutionary politics, coupled with the rejection of all parties *without distinction* as products of bourgeois politics, is not a development of working class politics but a sign of the renewed domination of bourgeois politics and ideas over the workers. Organised within the factory, away from 'political manipulation', free from the 'contamination' of bourgeois ideas, the working class is to develop itself solely on the basis of its organisation as an economic class 'for capital' and somehow transform itself [rather like a caterpillar transforms itself into a butterfly] into a 'political class', the class that socialises society and the economy through revolution. It is very difficult to see how this transformation comes about.

The 'Einheitlern' also asserted that the proletarian revolution is fundamentally an *economic* revolution. We shall now turn to examine this notion more critically.

### **The Revolution - primarily Economic ?**

We have seen that under the pressures of war, the focus of the workers struggles moved or shifted from the parliamentary area to social and individual ones. This is not a shift primarily from 'politics' to 'economics', nor is it the shift of the same struggle to a different geographic location. Rather it marks a tendency within the working class to 'take charge' of its own struggle, to impose its own solutions and in doing this it reveals that the economic basis of capitalist society is a social relationship between classes, that capital is social. How many times have we said this without really comprehending its meaning ?

So even when the earliest expression of this 'shift' in the struggle actually adopted a 'no politics' position - meaning no conventional or party political contests i.e. bourgeois politics - as in pre war syndicalism, this was still a form of politics, and frequently that of Anarchist leaders, who were able to make use of this ideological 'blind'. In Europe this was especially the case in pre-war France, where the syndicalist CGT was dominated for a decade by the Anarchists Pouget, Yvetot, Delesalle, Pelloutier and Grifuehlles. As we have already seen, the war served to spotlight for the developing revolutionary tendencies within the working class the inadequacy of pre-war syndicalism. By contrast the Russian Revolution inspired the *world's working class* in the all too brief moment of its triumph as a self conscious proletarian seizure of political power, a social and political revolution. And lest there is any doubt on this score, we assert that the Russian revolution was led by a working class expressing itself politically in explicit opposition to international nature of the war, an expression of global capitalist crisis. It was part of an international working class movement unleashed by the misery brought about by that war.

### **Russia - A Bourgeois Revolution ?**

Ruhle and the 'Einheitlern' mistakenly described the Russian revolution as a 'bourgeois' revolution, the last gasp of 1789 or 1688! A misconception based on an understanding of the proletarian revolution as primarily economic.

In turn this led them to allege that the class nature of the Russian revolution or any proletarian revolution for that matter, can be seen from the basis of the economy within Russia following the revolution.

In Ruhle's evaluation of class relations inside Russia in 1920 as we have noted, he described the new society in Russia as '*state capitalist*', thereby showing more insight than the KAPD at this time. Today we take for granted the notion of 'state capitalism' and the role of social democracy, welfarism, Keynesian demand management and so on, but all this was in the future so it is a little harsh to hold this against the Left Communists. Today's leftists are still hooked on this version of 'socialism'. The KAPD was still under the illusion even in the late 1920s, that the re-emergence of capitalist social relations meant the revival of private capital to a dominant role in the economy, possibly in the form of *kulaks* or private speculators.

By 1923 however Ruhle had abandoned this notion of state capitalism, and was describing Russia as a country where a 'bourgeois' revolution, the last bourgeois revolution, had taken place. The distinction he failed to make between the class nature of the revolution and the economic basis of the 'national economy' is of great importance. By not doing this, he separates the



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fate of the Russian working class [part of an international working class] from that of their class brothers and sisters, Ruhle included, in Germany and elsewhere.

### **Bolshevik Programme - Anti working Class**

Despite the anti working class elements of the Bolshevik programme - the alliance between workers and peasants, right of 'self-determination' of small nations, distribution of land as private property - all of which Ruhle quite correctly criticises in his discussion of the Russian revolution, the fact remains that the Russian revolution of 1917 was thought of throughout by the Bolsheviks, who played a leading role in it, as merely *one moment* in an international proletarian revolution. And this not only true of the Bolsheviks, this fact was recognised by all revolutionaries both within the German working class and that of other countries. [It was also recognised by our rulers as well - Lloyd George took less than an hour to accept the 'Armistice' terms when he heard that the November revolution had broken out in Germany. November 8<sup>th</sup> to 11th 1918, must have been very busy days in the Chancelleries and Foreign Offices of Europe and North America]

So when Ruhle confined the Russian Revolution within 'its' national boundaries, he *made* it a bourgeois revolution. And moreover a *counter-revolution* at the same time, because in so doing he obliges it to take on the class character and development of its own 'national economy', by isolating it. Just as the Western capitalist countries after the war successfully 'isolated' Russia. Criticism for instance of the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of May 1918 can make no sense unless the international character of the revolution is recognised. It also signals the defeat of the German revolution because this was widely acknowledged as the next 'link in the chain'. The Russian revolution depended on *revolution* in the West [not 'aid' or 'trade' or 'friendly capitalist governments under pressure from mass communist or socialist parties'] to strengthen and develop its working class character.

### **Fatalism**

This relationship between the 'Einheitlern's' and indeed a whole tendency within the German Left's, understanding of the link between the Russian and German revolutions is admitted in a sentence full of desolation and fatalism, a product of the *defeated* German revolutionary experience.

'Even if one admits that in doing so [attempting in Ruhle's formulation to 'jump a whole phase of development in Russia in one bold leap'] they [the Bolsheviks] reckoned on the world revolution which was to come to their aid and compensate' 'for the vacuum in development within, by support from the great fund of culture from outside, this calculation was still rashness, because it based itself solely on vague hope'.

[ 'From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution' - Otto Ruhle p. 13 Socialist Reproduction 1974]

This 'phases of development' theory is used by Ruhle to explain from this standpoint the inevitable bourgeois nature of the Russian revolution and is very much a reminder of what this current was trying to get away from - and that is the fatalistic Second International 'Marxism' of Plekhanov and Kautsky. [It may also explain the subsequent political evolution of many individuals, from the KAPD and both 'Unions'.]

From this faulty internationalism and the misunderstanding that the workers revolution is 'economic' arises the same kind of fatalism faced with the domination of bourgeois politics. It is part of the same misunderstanding - that the working class is only the working class, only free of the domination of bourgeois ideas 'at the point of direct extraction of surplus value', within the factory.

So we have here the roots of a 'workerism' and a 'factoryism' born out of an *abandonment* of the working class as a revolutionary class, as an international political class, part of a historical movement in its own right. We have here the rejection of class organisation except at the point of production, a retreat into the factories and the abandonment of the arena of social relations to bourgeois domination. [This domination has since come to be challenged in a partial way at least only since the re-emergence of 'social' movements in the 1970s.] The outcome is a sort of revolutionary syndicalism, a would be 'political syndicalism' in all but name. In this respect the AAUD-E openly acknowledged the influence of the American IWW.

[Reichenbach, historian of the KAPD, refers 'to the Einheitlern under the leadership of Ruhle, an outspoken Anarcho-Syndicalist tendency shot through with petty-bourgeois ideology and negating the party as an organ of the proletariat altogether . . . . they drew on the conception of the American IWW and their ideas of 'One Big Union'.

- 'Zur Geschichte der KAPD,' Grunberg Archiv 1928 p. 127 -

While it is incorrect to describe the AAUD-E as Anarcho-Syndicalist in origin, it was quite distinct in self conception from the FAUD, it is nevertheless true that its attempt to work out a way forward for the working class on the basis of factory organisation alone led it back towards syndicalism, once the downturn in the struggle became obvious and given its idea of permanent revolutionary factory organisation.

But it must be pointed out that the KAPD also, while not denying the role of the party, held similar misconceptions as to the formal role of the factory organisations as the AAUD-E. This somewhat undermines Reichenbach's criticisms]



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The ultimate end result of this understanding, born as we have said out of a downturn in the international revolution, is that in so far as it gives a formal answer to the revolutionary questions facing the German and international working class - it is primarily an organisational answer. Its very slogans - soviets or workers councils - have been easily picked up and slotted into state capitalist programmes by for a start, all the tendencies spawned by the Trotskyist Fourth International. Everybody is in favour of workers councils [just as everybody is against sin !].

In addition however, in as much as a renewed social crisis has produced autonomous working class activity since the 1970s, many of these groupings although in no sense a direct organisational continuity, have sought a link between themselves and a defeated German Left. There is a modern 'council fetishism', a descendant of the council communist groupings of the 1930s and 40s which it is necessary to beware of.

### The Problem Today

To insist for example on the form of 'unitary' organisation by itself today would seem to solve the problem of the division of the struggle into one of 'politics' or 'economics' from which the old movement suffered. But for today's working class to achieve this unification, more than a simple *form* of organisation is required. For the working class it is a practical question of achieving this synthesis through struggle and with an appropriate content to its form of organisation. If this does not happen, we simply see one organ of bourgeois politics being replaced with another, and one moreover better suited to play its role of maintaining that domination - even to the point of getting rid of management, bosses etc. and getting workers to run the entire productive process. *All this is perfectly possible, because capitalist social relations are preserved.*

Much of modern 'flexible' working is based on doing away with the old fashioned hierarchy of the old production process, and on trying to get workers to 'police' themselves.

In this sense we can see that even a failed workers' movement is *always* a factor in the capitalist's response. The counter-revolution assimilates the old struggle to its own project, the fragments of a failed revolutionary attempt cannot remain preserved or frozen in time. This is why it is necessary to be wary of simply trying to make the conceptions, politics and tactics on one period fit the new reality we face today.

In Germany on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1920, the Weimar Government of the Social Democrats passed the Factory Council Law, which legalised Works Councils and limited their activity to specified economic considerations within each plant or combine. [See '*Works Councils in Germany*' p. 18 M Berthelot published by the International Labour Organisation in Geneva 1924 - for a summary of the legislation where the principle of joint planning and so on was enshrined in the constitution of the Weimar Republic. It is worth consulting this publication, for it shows just how *conscious* the Social Democrats were in suppressing the Revolution, see especially pp 9 - 14. This legislation is the basis for their modern equivalents in Germany, France, Spain and so on and has become enshrined in modern European law by the 'Social Chapter' of the Treaty of Maastricht, Britain of course has 'opted out']

### 'Participation' - A Trap for Revolutionaries

Both the KAPD and the AAUD-E drew a clear distinction between these 'legal' councils, and their own call for the creation of revolutionary workers councils. They described these 'legal' councils as new organs of capitalist control within the factory. In contrast the KPD encouraged its members to stand for election to these new councils. But alternative revolutionary councils could only be a reality if an effective revolutionary movement was developing in society, with a strong presence inside the factories, giving a real content to such councils and finding organisational expression in their creation.

Neither the KAPD, AAUD nor AAUD-E clearly grasped this basic principle, and instead they talked of building up revolutionary councils in the factories, which would prepare the workers for the economic management of future communist society, by creating the skeleton of this society in the form of a network of council organisations within capitalism. [The organisation which regrouped militants from all three organisations, the KAUD in the late 1920s, did finally arrive at this understanding and also attempted to work out the economic basis of a communist society in a work called '*Grundprinzipien Kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung*' published in 1930 by the GIK in Holland]

### Permanent Organisation ?

Whilst we can criticise the failure of the German Left Communists to recognise the counter-revolutionary consequences for the working class of any model of *permanent* organisation of the struggle in the period of capitalist degeneration, it is important to recognise their method of locating and discussing the question of working class organisation in a historical context. The depth of this perspective is revealed so clearly in the following extract from Ruhle's 1921 article, '*The Basic Issues of Organisation*'. This outlines a fundamental class historical perspective which was the subject of his major work '*From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution*' [op. cit.]

'Today's developing generation of workers has, as regards the class struggle grown up in both the organisations of party and trade unions. It saw, and still sees, in membership of these organisations the duty of the class conscious proletariat. The proof of



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its political maturity and expression of its willingness to struggle. To be organised politically and industrially seemed and still seems, something so obvious, serious, almost holy, that every attempt to bring them out of these organisations seems to them to be an enemy act, counter-revolutionary and against the interests of the working class. Those who have grown old in a tradition, think good that which was so in their time. But in our epoch good becomes bad, and true, false: Reason becomes unreason, advantage becomes drawback. The revolution, an epoch shattering transformation which will leave no stone of this society standing on another, does not pass over the old organisations. It breaks up everything old, to build life anew from the ruins.'

### **Conclusions - Communism or Capitalism**

For all its weaknesses and inconsistencies, Left Communism, the '*politics of the revolutionary working class in its infancy*,' remains an essential historical reference point for the development of a communist movement in our period. It is only by beginning to work out the outline of a communist project in the period of decay of capitalist society that we can see the degeneracy and counter-revolutionary nature of the politics of *all* the inheritors of both the Third and Fourth Internationals.

We can now see the counter-revolutionary origins of their version of a socialist programme. This programme being in reality the process through which ownership and management of capital can be transferred from one capitalist fraction to another. This happens through the attempted regulation and subversion of revolutionary communist tendencies within the working class, by means of campaigns for the 'democratisation' of the trade unions, institutions for the control and management of the wage relation - the fundamental basis of capitalist society. Equally reactionary and now discredited are campaigns for the 'nationalisation' of industry under 'workers control' and support for national liberation struggles which only serve to transfer power from one capitalist gang of robbers to another.

Similarly, by seeing how the Left Communists worked out their tasks, tactics and perspectives - through an analysis of the fundamental nature of the historical period, we can see and recognise the bankruptcy and class demobilising influence of 'leader politics'.

This description characterises those tendencies which still hold on to the by now totally superstitious belief that struggles are 'won' or 'lost' because of the 'betrayal' of a particular individual leader, union executive or party committee. Or worse that all will be well if only the existing leaders or executive is removed or replaced.

In the sharpest possible distinction from tendencies, groupings and individuals who still cling on to such pathetic and dangerous articles of faith that turns would-be revolutionaries into mortal enemies of the class whom they claim to 'serve', we find in this Left Communist current, the terms, concepts, outlook and understanding for a principled and necessary critique of Bolshevism as it actually existed - and from the point of view of a revolutionary working class.

Above all we find the beginning of a perspective needed for the further development, through our own struggle, of a truly communist project.

### **DG Liverpool July 1994**

To follow [still to be written] a Bibliography Total no. of words 17249