

The Origins of the Movement for Workers Councils in Germany

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Preface

This pamphlet was originally published in English by Workers Voice in 1974. We are republishing it as we still find the experiences of the workers in Germany from November 1918 onwards a source of inspiration. We do not want their struggles and sacrifices to be forgotten by a new generation who are continuing the same struggle they fought.

This text describes and analyses the revolution in Germany after the First World war. It tells the tale of the mass workers movement of the time, organised in workers councils and the various political and economic organisations formed at the time – notably the Communist Workers Party (the KAPD) and the AAUD (General Workers' Union of Germany) and AAUD-E (General Workers Union of Germany – United Organisation). These were mass organisations with hundreds of thousands of members. It also tells how the official Communist Party (the KPD) and the Third International collaborated in the destruction of these workers' organisations.

We have omitted one section from this edition. Entitled "After Hitler", it deals with theoretical discussions within the remnants of the KAPD to try to describe the way a future communist society may function. This may be found online at : www.af-north.org/?q=other+texts.

Anarchist Federation (Manchester Group) August 2009.

Preface to the Introduction to Origins of the Movement for Workers Councils in Germany

We are reprinting this pamphlet firstly, because despite the myriad of publications that now claim to represent a 'continuity' with the German Left of the period, this history is still unknown to generations of workers.

Secondly the arguments it debates and the issues it raises are still unresolved, and can only begin to be resolved by making this history better known. Despite the best (and worst) efforts of some, these issues cannot be resolved theoretically nor in advance.

Thirdly, it is timely because we are publishing it at a time when many militants are disorientated and demoralised by the prospect of continuing Tory rule in Britain. The implication being that all should 'rally' behind 'one more push' to get a Labour Government re elected.

One of the main reasons for publishing this pamphlet originally was to show how reactionary Social Democracy was in 1918 (the year Clause 4 was written) in immediately using the power of the old workers movement to stabilise society, to preserve that society from the new working class forces which were emerging to challenge the capitalist way of doing things.

Nothing that has happened in the intervening years has caused us to revise our opinion of Social Democracy in general and the Labour Party in particular. It is not beyond the

bounds of possibility that a Labour Government could be elected again. If it does happen, our view is that it will be because our present rulers have lost their way and can no longer hold together. Nothing the Labour Party can do will change its essential nature as saviour of the capitalist system; as such it can hardly have a mass appeal for the working class. Nor has this party a superior understanding of the crisis at present working its way through modern institutions.

But the Labour Party understands only too well its role as a stabilising, conservative force within society, seeking at all costs (along with its paymasters in the trade unions) to prevent the emergence of any tendency within the working class which seeks to break out of the straitjacket of Parliamentary politics and trade unionism.

It was a popular pamphlet when we first published it and now we have managed to catch up with capitalist technology, it is also easier for us to reproduce it. We hope it will prove popular again.

We have not found it necessary to alter the original introduction all that much, beyond altering dated references to politics and events current at the time of the original printing and to add a section on the discussion of the 'Principles', where we alert the reader to new developments, both in the economy and politics which we think need serious study.

In addition the original introduction dealt with many of the ideas which reflected renewed interest in the concept of 'self management'. The intervening years have not been kind to these notions. It is interesting to see how many of the ideas advanced by this movement and criticised theoretically at the time, have been incorporated into modern management theory and have re-emerged as new forms and methods of controlling and directing labour. [' An "ideal" capitalism could tolerate the self management of the conditions of production: as long as a normal profit is made by the firm, the organisation of the work can be left to the workers.' - p. 72 Barrot & Martin, Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement, 1974, Black & Red, Detroit. This text goes on to argue that this has become the programme of some of the more 'left wing' unions in France and Italy since the 'events' of 1968 and 1969 in those countries]

Modern capitalism now demands the active intellectual engagement of the worker, if it is to make the best of 'just in time' and '100% quality control' methods of production and distribution. We feel this shows how parasitic modern capitalism has become, in so far as it has no new dynamic except to draw off the ingenuity and creativity of the working class itself. Whilst for the moment it may not be clear what the way forward is, we feel reassured that the contradictions of this mode of production will continue to generate their own opposition. It is in this process that we hope this pamphlet will prove useful.

D Graham Liverpool March 1994

Introduction

The pamphlet produced here in English was apparently first published in Dutch in 'Radencommunismus' No. 3 1938, the journal of the Council Communist Group of Holland, and later translated into French and published in 'Internationalisme' No. 45 1952. Revised and completed with a resume of the Principles (which were written for the International Communist journal 'Bilan' (Nos. 19 - 21, 1935)¹ and then published by 'Informations Correspondences Ouvrires' (No. 42 1965) from which it has been translated. It was first published in English by Coptic Press in 1968. Appendix 1 was produced as Appendix B in the Coptic Press edition, we have added Appendix 2 ourselves, along with addresses where the original material may be obtained.

It falls into two parts : (i) a critical analysis of council communism in Germany between 1919 and 1929, when it disappeared temporarily from the historical scene, and (ii) the 'Principles' which were produced in 1930 in a study on 'The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution' which was drawn up by the Dutch Council Communist group in collaboration with former Berlin members of the AAUD.

The first part is a useful introduction to British militant and revolutionary workers - and students - of a very important period of German working class history which has its parallel in this country. Very little information is readily available in English on the period 1918 to 1920 on the activities ideas of the council communist movement in Germany and even less on its history prior to 1918 before it acquired it's known 'theoreticians', most of whom are only known by being attacked by Lenin in his brochure 'Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder'.

Importance for Study

The importance of studying the failure of the revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism and its State in Germany, is that it took place in an advanced capitalist country. The lessons of the defeat will have to be understood otherwise we are in danger of repeating the same mistakes or having the same inadequacies. These do not just apply to Germany after the First World War but equally to Italy and especially to the area centred on Turin in 1920 - crucially the failure of the workers to overthrow the capitalist state.

Existing studies of these events tend to fall into two categories. Firstly there is the view that the revolution failed because of the absence of a party of the Bolshevik type. The second glorifies the council movement as being alone necessary (as this one does). The Bolshevik tendencies believe that it is their Party that takes power on behalf of the working class and then 'educates' them to bring about socialism. The council communist position is to praise the decentralisation of the workers' movement into autonomous organisations based on each city, town, factory or section of industry etc.

It was this decentralisation however that allowed the survival of the State and the Army. These bodies along with the Social Democratic Party were able to restore 'law and order' with the help of Freikorps fascists and reactionary armed students. This glorification of

1 Omitted from this edition. They can be found online at: http://www.af-north.org/german_rev/workers_councils.htm

decentralisation actually weakens the working class by making it much more difficult to come to grips with the real requirements of workers in and after the seizure of power.

The Trade Unions

One of the major reasons for continuing to publish this pamphlet is that we believe that it still has real lessons for a workers' movement in this country and internationally. We believe that it is continually necessary for workers to broaden and generalise their experience, and that in Germany this experience even though it failed is particularly fruitful.

Firstly on the question of the unions, the German workers found that in their efforts to form their own organs of struggle, they came up against the old Social Democratic trade unions. We know too, how in Britain and in all capitalist countries, the unions have been more and more integrated into the state and no longer 'belong' to the workers. The time has come to state quite categorically that as time goes on, more and more and larger and larger sections of workers will be forced to break with and fight the unions in order to protect our interests as a class independent of capitalism.

We say this not because we 'hate' the unions or we want to 'disarm' the workers in their struggle with capital (in fact quite the reverse) - it is simply the international experience of the working class that the unions are the arm of the capitalist class within our own ranks. This lesson must be absorbed into the day to day struggle to such an extent that it moulds the whole attitude and outlook of workers. Moreover even 'unofficial' organisation so long as it remains tied to the outlook and mentality of trade unionism cannot escape this process.

Reformism

By this we mean Social Democracy and its representative in this country, the Labour Party. As the pamphlet says, it was once thought sufficient for a Labour Party to gain a parliamentary majority and hey presto we would have socialism. Well we have had seven Labour Governments and it is no nearer, despite 'critical support' for the Labour Party from the Left. Instead we had nationalisation of major industries that were decrepit after the Second World War, and as soon as state subsidy and the 'sacrifices' that workers made to make them productive again had an effect, they are once again in private hands (but with the State now playing the leading role in the economy despite Government propaganda about them being 'competitive')

It is absolutely vital for a new working class movement to take a clear and uncompromising attitude towards the State, Parliament and it's Labour Party hangers on. For too long we have had to suffer the illusions of the Parliamentary trick. The German workers paid the price of not smashing the newly established Weimar Republic at the earliest opportunity. This lesson alone makes the pamphlet worth republishing.

The Role of the German Communist Party (KPD)

As the pamphlet makes a clear, a significant minority of the German working class, could not accept the policies of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht as regards taking part in elections to the Constituent Assembly which set up the Weimar Republic. This policy was

endorsed by the leadership of the Russian Communist Party and the Third International and followed the Bolshevik 'tactic' of taking part in elections to the Russian Duma.

In addition, the KPD followed the Bolshevik policy of 'capturing' the trade unions and aimed to construct a 'mass party' like the SPD had been. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that the minority German workers were correct and the KPD was following an impossible policy. Therefore it was obvious that the KAPD had a better appreciation of the role and influence of Social Democracy within the workers movement.

It is a fact however, that the accumulated weight of tradition, the forms of organisation it imposes are a great load for the working class of a country like Germany (or Britain) with a long history of peaceful, Parliamentary struggle to overthrow. In revolutionary upheavals especially those brought on by defeat in war, it is necessary for workers to shed this load very quickly or they will be defeated even before they can get off the starting line. With the luxury of hindsight, we can say that the advanced sections of the working class should have broken with the German Social Democratic Party long before they eventually did. However prior to 1914 none of the foregoing was clear, only in Russia in 1905 had the workers formed a new kind of organisation capable of responding to their needs as a class - the soviet or workers' council. In Russia they quickly became a battleground for the various political tendencies within the workers' movement. So in Germany the workers were breaking new ground - no wonder they made mistakes.

Participation

Workers' Councils as a form of organisation now has quite a history, unfortunately from our point of view a form is all it is. It is not surprising that our rulers should seize on the creativity and enterprise of the working class to incorporate such movements into their scheme of things. The pamphlet in its latter part makes it clear that the form cannot be understood without its content. This is why so much effort was put into working out the 'Principles'.

[The Workers Councils were legalised and eventually emasculated in an Act of 4 February 1920. This accomplishment was an extension of the policy of Social Democracy since at least the turn of the century. The official report of the International Labour Organisation makes clear the basis upon which the emasculated councils were legalised:-

'1 The Works (sic) Council was to be in no way political body, its duties being purely economic.

2 In the economic sphere, it was not to serve as an instrument of class dictatorship, but merely as a new method put at the disposal of the of the workers to allow (sic) them to defend the rights which were granted to them by legislation and by the Constitution, and to supervise the practical working of labour conditions.'²

Anyone who doubts not just the reactionary but avowedly counter-revolutionary nature of International Social Democracy and the Trade Unions, should read this report]

2 Works Councils in Germany p.18 Marcel Berthelot ILO Geneva 1924

In Britain we have had a movement towards 'participation' ever since the First World War. Indeed it has been the special role of the Labour Party and the trade unions to enter into such collaborative agreements and to deliver workers bound hand and foot by them. Recently management's have recovered their nerve and felt able to browbeat workers into accepting such conditions as they offer by virtue of fear of the sack or redundancy, so that participation in the old sense has been pushed into the background. Nevertheless 'progressive' management has long realised the value of encouraging workers' initiative and creativity, from allowing 'control' of the production process in many Japanese style production units down to the use of suggestion schemes. This has become a breeding ground for the 'less confrontational' type of shop steward identified in the Donovan report as 'more of a lubricant than an irritant'.³

In our opinion much valuable work remains to be done in studying these new 'production' methods, which rely as much on psychological methods (loyalty to mates, concern to be identified with good quality output and encouraging other 'positive' attitudes) as sheer control over and ownership of the productive process itself.

In the introduction to the previous edition of this pamphlet, the view was put forward that workers' councils might arise from the alleged 'democratic' base of the trade union movement and in particular the example of the printing industry was given with its distinctive 'chapel' form of organisation. In the light of what we have written above and more importantly, given the history of that particular industry and especially the national press, it should come as no surprise that we totally repudiate such a view. We have seen how the whole trade union structure has been integrated into the apparatus of the state. Of necessity therefore, we expect workers' councils or whatever new form of organisation is appropriate to come about in opposition to the existing unions as workers seek to advance their separate interests as an independent class.

Workers Councils

The essential difference between 'participation' and the ideas advocated in this pamphlet is that there NO power sharing. Real workers' councils we know are established in the teeth of opposition from management, state, trade unions and even (or especially) shop stewards whose power they threaten. Councils are established not just in factories, but over whole working class districts. They deal not just with workers' organisation of production, but with all aspects of social life - food, housing, transport, education and so on. They are made up of delegates elected by mass assemblies and all delegates are instantly revocable and answerable to those assemblies. These councils first came into existence in Russia in 1905 (the word 'soviet' means council in Russian) and at all times of revolutionary upheaval ever since. In Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, wherever workers form a distinctive section of the population this form of organisation has emerged time and

³This actual phrase was used in the Donovan Report - CMND 3623 of June 1968 'Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations paragraph 110. Those of our readers too young to remember the events may like to recall that it was a favourite fantasy of all sorts of Leftists to see in the shop stewards some kind of embryonic rank and file movement that could 'capture' the base of the trade unions. In this instance the State knew all along how necessary the shop stewards were to 'smoothing' labour relations, which just goes to show that the ruling class has a better grasp of reality than the Left.

again. The establishment of working class organs of power on a wide scale challenges all capitalist institutions, especially the state and its representatives the army and police. The fight of the workers to maintain their hold over production and distribution, and to smash the power of the state is decisive - this is the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is precisely at this moment that the struggle breaks out in the councils for clarity and understanding of the situation. It should be clear that no political parties as such have any role at all with in the councils. However it is inevitable that workers will be influenced by the conceptions and thinking of such groupings.⁴

Political Parties

Suffice it to say that we think workers should be aware of two main tendencies. Firstly all the different varieties of Leninists who will seek to gain entry to the councils and try to tie them to their Party - as was the experience in Russia. This is not the place to outline our estimation of those events. But it should be obvious that a bureaucracy that transmits orders to a passive and demoralised working class, one man management, the militarisation of labour and forced labour to build a 'workers' state' is not our idea of proletarian dictatorship. The soviets were emptied of their revolutionary content and workers became dispirited that all their sacrifice should have been in vain.

The break up of the Soviet Union and its satellites since 1989, not only saw the demise of the orthodox Stalinist parties, but has seen a similar crisis break out within the various Trotskyist movements and other Leftist groupings influenced by them. Trotskyism's only distinctive feature has been a 'critical' analysis of the Soviet Union but there has recently appeared an unhealthy interest in the politics and movements attacked in Lenin's 'Left Wing Communism.....'.

Unless individuals influenced by the counter revolutionary politics of these groupings repudiate the influence of Trotskyism, we believe their only purpose is to dress up and disguise their failed politics by appropriating some of the ideas of the 'ultra- left'.

Trotskyist politics is based upon an acceptance of the Theses, Organisation and Politics of the first four Congresses of the Third International. As this pamphlet makes clear the politics of the ultra-left cannot be welded onto a politics and organisation from which they were systematically hounded by those whom the Trotskyists quite openly claim as their founders. It may be possible for individuals to emerge from Trotskyist and other like organisations, but we do not believe it is possible for such organisations themselves to accept and integrate the critique of the ultra-left into their politics, because they are out and out capitalist organisations. As such their interest in ultra-left or Left Communist ideas is nothing other than an attempt to radicalise the counter revolution.

Being against the role of these Parties within the councils does not mean that we do not fight for a revolutionary perspective within these bodies as though politics could be abolished just like that. There is a role for organised political minorities. It is precisely the role of revolutionary tendencies and organisations (whatever they call themselves) to struggle for a revolutionary consciousness of the working class at all times, and to ensure

⁴ Such representation was demanded 'as a right' by the old Social Democratic Party and Trade Unions as the pamphlet makes clear. It should be obvious given their role why this should have been more vigorously opposed.

that the revolution is successful. Having done this, there is no longer the need for these separate organisations to exist.

Self Management or Autonomy

Secondly, there is what we might term the anarchist conception that sees the councils as autonomous, self managing production units. This may be all very well for a utopia, but in fact this conception does not get rid of capitalism. It ignores the State. It ignores the inter-relationships of the capitalist world market. This conception actually reinforces the existing irrational capitalist production relationships by institutionalising them. It is impossible abolish wages and prices on the basis of some 'self-managed' factories. Indeed we have seen how the capitalist class is very happy to sit back and allow workers take over plants and 'run' them themselves. They know full well that before long such 'experiments' soon collapse or if they do succeed it is only by reproducing the same hierarchy as before (and can be used by bosses to show how 'uneconomic' a plant is unless there are 'savings' - which always pits worker against worker). Either way the workers are defeated and worse still the idea of workers' councils is discredited.

In addition, the idea of autonomous production units supposes that the workers have a ready made productive process that is the basis for socialism or communism, the two are the same thing. But whole sectors of the modern capitalist economy will have to be destroyed (for instance insurance, advertising, arms industry etc.) Do we really want self management of poison gas manufacture? Other sectors will need to be expanded or even created to satisfy the newly discovered needs of society. Factories will in many cases have to switch production. Almost certainly whole industries will simply close down.

Who decides all this? The workers formerly employed in a particular plant or the representative bodies of society? If it is the workers in each particular plant then it is sure recipe for confusion and chaos. As workers in all parts of production are also consumers, then why should a worker in one plant not have equal right to decide what is produced at another and vice versa. This must also hold true for all those outside the sphere of production. Only then will there be the basis for socialism - which is the abolition of wage labour and class society. If this is not done, the self managed production units are in danger of becoming small scale capitalist economies, realising value by selling products and crediting others for supplying raw materials, in short the self management of exploitation. Capitalist social relations will 'spontaneously' spring up, unless the economy the workers introduce is superior to it.

The Principles of Communist Production and Distribution

We can see now how these two considerations are very much interlinked. The second part of the pamphlet details an attempt to work out the principles upon which a communist society might be built. ⁵We are not sure if this is done successfully, but what we are sure of is that such work is not pure speculation. The Left is quite happy to say that they are not in the business of future gazing, but that is because so many of them live in the past. It is our view that you cannot expect workers to renounce the world they know intimately without at least them acquiring the tools with which to construct a new one. In this case even the 'mistakes' made by a previous generation are useful.

5 Omitted from this edition

Capitalism has developed the means of production to such an extent that we now have the means to build such a society.

Unfortunately the 'Principles' of production and distribution are not reproduced here in full, but some things can be said - with the absence of wages, prices and other capitalist forms, there is no 'economics' of socialism in the sense of objective laws that operate 'behind the backs' of the producers. All attempts to find and codify such 'laws' such as we have seen worked out by various Stalinist parties, obsessed as they are by the need to 'build socialism' by accumulating surpluses which will be invested according to a Plan, are reactionary.

Instead the only 'laws' which we recognise are those imposed on us by necessity, the time for workers to make sacrifices for some long distant future is over. The future is here and now, and we mean to have it. Production must be controlled by those institutions which the working class itself creates. The problem of matching supply and demand is not a technical one for specialists, but initially at least, must be debated out in the open through these institutions, which will themselves take stock of their available resources and match them to the requirements, which they themselves will work out. With the worker freed from dependence on wages, and society finally able to consciously plan how to meet its requirements - the last fetter to truly human freedom, class society, will disappear.

It is obvious then that the publication of this pamphlet is no academic exercise. We have sought in this Introduction to show how the practical experience of the German working class in these years is of direct benefit and relevance to workers today, not just in Britain but all over the world. The history of the world since that time also shows the terrible price humanity has to pay for the consequences of the working class's failure to overturn the weight of accumulated tradition and rise up to its historic mission. All over the world the position of the worker is the same, there is no longer any need for workers to ride on the back of other social classes and movements as there was in Marx and Engels day. Neither is it now necessary to wait until the practical movement caught up with their theoretical elaboration. It is on the basis of the German and other working class practical experiences that we set out to make clear the process of history, whereby political and economic power can be transferred from the capitalist class to the working class. It is on these same experiences that we advance a programme and a set of ideas that will make revolution a practical task for the workers of the world.

Dave Graham

1. The Revolution Breaks Out

In November 1918, the German front collapsed. The whole war machine broke up. At KIEL, the officers of the fleet decided upon a last stand 'to save their honour.' They found, however, that the sailors refused to obey. This was not, in fact, their first mutiny; previous attempts to protest against the war had been put down with bullets and promises. But this time, they scored an immediate success. The Red Flag went up, first on one warship, then on another.

The sailors elected delegates who, ship by ship formed a Council. From now on the sailors

determined to make the movement spread. They had declined to die fighting the enemy; neither did they wish to die fighting the so called loyal troops who would be called in on the side of repression. They formed the backbone of the movement for Soldiers, Sailors and Workers Councils. And meanwhile they were going ashore and marching on the great port of Hamburg; from there, the message poured out all over Germany. Delegates left by train, and otherwise, for all parts of the country.

The first blow of freedom had been struck! Events now moved rapidly. Hamburg welcomed the sailors with enthusiasm. Soldiers and workers joined in the movement; they too elected councils. While this kind of organisation was unknown in practice, within four days a vast network of workers and soldiers councils covered Germany. Perhaps some talk had been heard of Russian soviets (1917-18) but in view of the censorship, very little. At all events, no party or organisation had proposed this form of struggle. It was an entirely spontaneous movement.

Forerunners of the Councils

It is true that during the war similar organisations had in fact made their appearance in the factories. They were formed in the course of strikes, by elected representatives, the equivalent of our shop stewards. Given minor offices in the union machinery, in the tradition of German trade unionism, they were the link between the local and central headquarters, to transmit the demands of the workers to HQ. These demands, and the number of grievances, were naturally very high during the War. In the main they concerned intensified work and price increases. But the German unions (like those of other countries) had formed a united front with the Government (the Burgfrieden). They guaranteed social peace in exchange for slight advantages for the workers and in particular participation of the union leaders on various official organisations. Thus the stewards in presenting grievances found themselves hammering at a brick wall. The 'hotheads' and 'trouble makers' were, sooner or later, shanghaied into the Forces, in special units. It became difficult to take up the struggle within the unions.

As a result, the stewards gradually lost contact with union headquarters. Union affairs ceased to interest them, but the workers demands remained what they were. Then, in 1917, a flood of unofficial strikes suddenly swept out over the country. No stable organisation led it. It was entirely spontaneous. It proceeded naturally from the work done by the stewards and the unsatisfied demands of the workers.

The New Movement

This new labour movement had come into existence without the aid of any party, and without any leadership. Any ideological considerations of any nature had to give way before the demands of the moment. In 1918, this sporadic movement, consisting of trends cut off from one another, became united by reason of its identical form of struggle. They came to form a new means of administration.

On the one hand were the 'normal' forms - police, food control, organisation of labour; on the other hand, in all important industrial centres were the workers councils. In Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, the Ruhr, Central Germany, Saxony; the workers councils had to be recognised and reckoned with. But they had up to that time few concrete results. Why ?

An easy victory!

This arose from the very ease with which the workers councils were formed. The state apparatus was breaking down, but not as a result of a persistent struggle by the workers. It was breaking down in the stress of war, and the workers councils met in a vacuum. Their movement was growing without resistance, without the need to fight. All that the population of Germany was speaking of was - Peace and an end to the War. This was of course an essential difference with the Russian position in 1917. In Russia the first revolutionary wave (the February revolution) overthrew the Tsarist regime; but the War went on. The workers movement had to become bolder and more decided; it had to tighten the pressure on the State. But in Germany, the first aspiration of the population, Peace, gave way to the Republic. But what did the Republic mean ?

The Weimar Republic

Before the War, working class practice and most working class theory was that approved of and carried out by the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Unions, adopted and agreed to by the majority of organised workers. To this Socialist Democracy, the bourgeois democratic State was to be the lever for Socialism. They felt it would suffice to have a majority in Parliament, and with Socialist ministers it would be Socialism.

There was also, it is true, a revolutionary current, of which Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were the best known representatives. Never the less, this current never developed a conception clearly opposed to State Socialism. It formed only an opposition within the Social Democratic Party, and was not distinguishable from it by the majority of workers.

New Conceptions

But new conceptions came about with the great mass movements of 1918-21. They were not the creation of the so-called 'vanguard' but were created by the masses themselves. The independent activity of the workers and soldiers adopted the organisational form of councils as a matter of expediency; these were the new forms of class organisation. But because there is a direct connection between the forms taken by the class struggle and the conceptions of the future society, it goes without saying that, here and there, the old ideas of nationalisation etc. began to totter.

The workers were now leading their own struggles, outside the apparatus of the Party and Trade Union; and the workers began to think that they could exert a direct influence on social life, by means of their own councils. There would be a 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat', they said but it would be a dictatorship not exercised by a Party, but would be an expression of the unity, complete and lasting, of the whole working population. Of course, such a society would not be democratic in the bourgeois sense of the term, since that part of the population not participating in the new organisation of social life would have no voice either in discussion or in decision.

We were saying that the old conceptions began to totter. But it quickly became evident that the Parliamentary and Trade Union traditions were too rooted in the masses to be quickly wiped out. The bourgeoisie, the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Unions called upon

these traditions in order to break down the new conceptions. In particular, the Social Democratic Party congratulated itself in speeches about this new means the masses had of asserting their part in social life. The Party even went as far as demanding that this new form of direct power be approved and codified in law.

But despite this ostensible sympathy, the old working class movement in the main reproached the councils for not respecting 'democracy', although excusing them because of their 'lack of experience'. The 'lack of democracy' consisted of not yielding a large enough place to the politicians, and in competing with them. In demanding what they called 'working class democracy' the old party and unions demanded that all currents of the working class movement be represented in the councils, in proportion to their respective importance.

The Trap

Few workers were capable of refuting this argument which corresponded with their own ingrained beliefs. Despite what they had achieved, they still believed in traditional forms of organisation. Thus they allowed the representatives of the Social Democratic movement, the Unions, the Left Social Democrats, the consumers Co-operatives etc., all to be represented on the councils as well as the factory delegates. The councils on such a basis could no longer be directly representative of the workers on the shop floor. They became mere units of the old workers movement, and thus came to work for the restoration of capitalism by means of the building of 'democratic State capitalism' through the Social Democratic Party.

It was the ruin of the workers efforts. The council delegates no longer received their mandates from the shop floor but from the different organisations. The workers were called on to respect and assure the rule of 'Order', proclaiming that 'in disorder there is no Socialism'. Under those conditions, the councils rapidly lost all value in the eyes of the workers. The bourgeois institutions regained their functions without caring about the opinions of the councils; this was precisely the goal of the old workers movement.

The old workers movement could be proud of its victory. The law passed by the Reichstag fixed in detail the rights and duties of the councils. Their future task was to see that social legislation was respected. In other words, they were to become cogs in the State machine. Instead of demolishing the State, they were to help in making it run smoothly. Old established traditions had proved stronger than spontaneity.

But despite this 'abortion of the revolution', it cannot be said that the victory of the conservative elements had been simple or easy. The new climate of feeling was still strong enough for hundreds of thousands of workers to struggle obstinately in order that their councils should keep the character of new class units. There was to be five years of ceaseless conflict (sometimes armed fights) and the massacre of 35 000 revolutionary workers, before the movement of the councils was finally beaten by the united front of the bourgeoisie, the old workers movement, and the 'White Guards' formed by the Prussian land owners and the reactionary students.

Political Currents

Four political currents can be roughly distinguished among the workers:

The Social Democrats - They wanted the gradual nationalisation of the large industries by parliamentary methods. They also wanted to reserve for the unions the right to mediate between the workers and state ownership.

The Communists - Inspired more or less by the Russian example, they advocated direct expropriation of the capitalists by the masses. They maintained the revolutionary workers should 'capture' the Trade Unions and 'make them revolutionary'.

The Anarcho-Syndicalists - They opposed the taking of power, and of any kind of State, according to them, Trade Unions were an integral part of the form of the future; it was necessary to struggle for a growth of the unions in such a way that they would be able to take over the whole of social life.

One of their best known theoreticians wrote in 1920 that the unions should not be considered as a transitory product of capitalism, but rather as seeds of the future socialist organisation of society. It seemed at first, in 1919, that the hour of this movement had come. These unions grew after the crumbling of the Kaiserreich. In 1920, the Anarchist unions had about 200 000 members.

The Factory Organisations - However, this same year, 1920, the effective forces of the revolutionary unions were reduced. A large part of their membership now made its way towards quite a different form of organisation, better adapted to the prevailing conditions, namely the revolutionary factory organisation. In this, each factory had or should have had, its own organisation acting independently of the others, and which did not depend upon the others. Each factory was to be an 'independent republic'.

These factory organisations were a creation of the German masses, spontaneously; but it should be pointed out that they appeared in the framework of a revolution which, though not yet defeated was stagnant. It was quickly evident that the workers could not, in the immediate period, conquer and organise economic and political power through the medium of the councils. It was necessary first of all to carry on a merciless struggle against the forces which opposed the councils. The revolutionary workers began therefore to muster their own forces in all the factories, in order to keep a direct grasp on social life. Through their propaganda they strove to re-awaken the workers consciousness, calling upon them to leave the unions AND join the revolutionary factory organisation. The workers as a whole would then be able to lead their own struggles themselves and conquer economic and social power over all society.

On the face of things, the working class thus took a great step backwards on the organisation plane. While previously the power of the workers was concentrated in some powerful centralised organisations, it was now separated into some hundreds of little groups, uniting some hundreds of thousands of workers, depending on the importance of the factory. In reality, this showed itself to be the only form of organisation that allowed the outline of workers power; and therefore, despite its relative smallness, it alarmed the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats.

The Development of the Factory Organisations

The isolation into small groups factory by factory was not premeditated, nor a matter of

principle. It was due to the fact that these organisations appeared, separately and spontaneously, in the course of unofficial strikes (for example among the Ruhr miners in 1919). Many tried to unite these organisations and present a united front of factory organisations; the initiative for this coming from Hamburg and Bremen. In April 1920 there was the first conference for unification of the factory councils. Delegates came from every industrial region of Germany. The police broke up the Congress; but too late. The general unified organisation had already been founded; and it had formulated its principles of action. This was given the name of the GENERAL WORKERS UNION OF GERMANY (Allgemeine Arbeiter Union Deutschlands – AAUD). The AAUD was based on the struggle against the trade unions and the legalised workers councils, and rejected parliamentarism. Each organisation affiliated to the Union had a right to a maximum independence and freedom of choice as to tactics.

Almost immediately the AAUD began to grow. At that time the trade unions had more members than they ever had, or were ever likely to see in the foreseeable future. The socialist unions in 1920 grouped almost eight million paid up members in 52 unions; the Christian unions had more than a million members; the company (or 'yellow') unions, had about 300 000. Then there were the anarcho syndicalists unions (Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands - FAUD) and also some breakaway unions which, a little while later, affiliated to the Moscow controlled Red International of Trade Unions - RILU.

At first, the AAUD numbered 80 000 (April 1920); by the end of 1920, this was 300 000. It is true that many of its constituent members were at the same time adherents either of the FAUD or RILU.

There were, however, political differences in the AAUD and in December, a number of associations left it to form a new association, the AAUD-E (Einheitsorganisation - or united organisation). Even after this break, the AAUD reckoned on more than 200 000 members (4th Congress, June 1921); but this was by then a paper organisation. The defeat of the Central German rising in 1921 led to the dismantling and destruction of the AAUD. It could no longer resist police persecution.

The German Communist Party (KPD)

Before examining the splits in the factory organisation movement, it is necessary to refer to the role of the KPD. During the War (1914 - 18) the Social Democratic Party had placed itself alongside the ruling classes, to ensure 'social peace', with the exception of a militant fringe including some party officials of whom the best known were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. These agitated against the War and violently criticised the Party. They were not alone. In addition to their group, the 'Spartacus League' (Spartakusbund), there were groups like the 'Internationalists' of Dresden and Frankfurt; the Left Radicals (die Linksradiakalen) of Hamburg and the 'Workers Party of Bremen. After November 1918 and the fall of the Empire, these groups which came from the Social Democratic 'Left' were for a 'struggle in the streets' that would forge a new political organisation and to some extent would follow the lines of the Russian Revolution. They held a congress of unification in Berlin (30 December 1918) and formed the Communist Party of Germany. (A translation of the proceedings of this Congress - into French - with other interesting information, will be found in 'Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin' Prudhommeaux, Cahiers Spartacus, Oct - Nov 1949)

Within the Party there were many revolutionary workers who demanded 'All Power to the Workers Councils!'. But there were many who, from the first, regarded themselves as the cadres of the Left; they felt they were the leaders by right of seniority, notions which they had brought with them from the old Party. The workers who came into the KPD in growing numbers, did not always stand up to their leaders; partly from respect for 'discipline', partly by their own yielding to outdated conceptions of leadership. The idea of 'factory organisations' was a vastly different conception. But of course it was open to misrepresentation. It could mean, and the leadership of the KPD most certainly took it to mean, a mere form of organisation, nothing more, subject to directives imposed on it from outside. It could also mean, and this was what the militants had been taking it to mean, a vastly different matter - a means of control from the bottom up. In its new sense, the notion of factory organisations implied an overthrow of ideas previously held with regard to :-

- (a) the unity of the working class
- (b) the tactics of the struggle
- (c) the relationship between masses and their leadership
- (d) the dictatorship of the proletariat
- (e) the relationship between state and society
- (f) communism as an economic and political system

These new problems had to be faced; they had to be answered, or the whole new idea of revolution would disappear. But the Party cadres were unwilling to face these ideas. All they thought of doing was to rebuild the new (Communist) Party on the model of the old (Social Democratic) Party. They tried to avoid what was bad in the old Party and to paint it in red instead of pink and white. There was no place for the new ideas. And then, these new ideas were not presented in a coherent whole, coming from a single brain, or as if fallen from Heaven. They were the new ideas of the generation, and many of the young militants of the KPD supported them; but side by side with support for the new ideas was respect for the old ideological foundation.

Parliamentarism

The KPD was divided on all the problems raised by the new notion of 'factory organisation' from its very inception. When the Social Democratic President, Ebert, announced elections for a Constituent Assembly, the Party had to decide whether to take part in the elections or to denounce them. It was debated hotly at the Congress. The majority of the workers wanted to refuse to take part in the elections at all. But the Party leadership, including Liebknecht and Luxemburg, declared for an electoral campaign. The leadership was beaten on votes, and the majority of the Party declared itself Anti Parliamentarian. It stated that in its view, the Constituent Assembly was only there to consolidate the power of the bourgeoisie by giving it a 'legalistic' foundation. On the contrary, not only were the proletarian elements of the KPD opposed to participating in such an Assembly; they wished to 'activate' the workers councils already existing and to create others, through

which they would give meaning to the difference between parliamentary democracy and working class democracy, as advocated in the slogan 'All Power to the Workers Councils' (Alle Macht an die Arbeiter Raten !).

The leadership of the KPD saw in this anti-parliamentarism, not a revival of revolutionary thought, but a 'regression' to Trade Unionist and even Anarchist ideas, which in their mind belonged to the beginnings of industrial capitalism. But in truth the anti-parliamentarism of the new current had not much in common with 'revolutionary syndicalism' and 'anarchism'. It even represented its negation. While the anti-parliamentarism of the libertarians centred on the rejection of political power, and in particular, rejected the dictatorship of the proletariat, the new current considered anti-parliamentarism a necessary condition for the taking of political power. It was 'Marxist Anti-Parliamentarism'.

The Trade Unions

On the question of trade union activities, the leadership of the KPD differed from that of the factory organisations. This was only to be expected. It aroused fierce discussion after the Congress (by which time both Liebknecht and Luxemburg had disappeared from the scene having been murdered by the Reaction). Those who supported the councils said, 'Leave the Trade Unions! Join the factory organisations !' But the Communist leaders said, 'Stay in the Unions !' The KPD did not think it could capture the Union HQ, but it did think it could capture the leadership of the local branches. It might then, reasoned the KPD, be possible to unite these locals in a new 'revolutionary' trade union movement.

But once again the leadership of the KPD was defeated. Most of its sections refused to carry out these instructions. The leadership was firm, however, even at the expense of expelling the majority of its members. It was of course supported by the Russian Party, and its chief Lenin, who at this time published his disastrous pamphlet on 'Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder'

At the Heidelberg Conference in October 1919, the leadership succeeded in 'democratically' expelling more than half the Party ..Henceforth the KPD was able to go ahead with its conduct of parliamentary and trade union policies - with pitiful results. The expelled members united with a party of left socialists and quadrupled their members, but for three years only. They formed a new party the Communist Workers Party of Germany, (KAPD - Kommunistische Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands). The KPD had lost its most militant elements and had henceforth no alternative but to surrender itself unconditionally to the Moscow line in the newly set up Third International. (The Comintern's agent in Germany at this time was Radek).

The Communist Workers Party (KAPD)

The KAPD entered immediately into a direct relationship with the AAUD. At this time, the KAPD was a force that counted. Its criticisms of trade union and parliamentary action and its practice of direct and violent action, and its struggle against capitalist exploitation, made it a positive influence, first of all on the factory floor; also through its press and publications that were the best that Marxist literature had to offer in this time of decadence of the Marxist movement. Even so, the KAPD retained some encumbrances in the form of the old Marxist traditions.

2. The KAPD and the AAUD : Differences

Let us leave the parties for a moment and go back to the factory organisations. This young movement had shown that important changes had been made in the working class world. There was general agreement on the following points :

1. the new organisation had to be built up and continue to grow
2. its structure must be such that no clique of leaders could establish itself;
3. once it had established itself with millions of members it would establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

There were two major points of controversy within the AAUD. The first was should there be a political party of the workers outside the AAUD and the second was on the question of administration of social and economic life.

At first the AAUD had only rather vague relations with the KPD. Its differences were of no importance. But it was different once the KAPD was formed. The KAPD immediately became involved in the affairs of the AAUD. Many of its members did not agree with this. In Saxony, Frankfurt and Hamburg etc., there was strong opposition to working with the KAPD. Germany was still extremely decentralised, and its decentralisation was reflected in the workers organisations; hence the possibility of the KAPD working with the AAUD in some districts and not in others. As a consequence, the militants who opposed the formation within the AAUD of a 'leadership clique' (namely the KAPD), left, and formed their own organisation the AAUD-E, which rejected the idea of a party of the proletariat and held that the factory organisation was all sufficient.

The Common Platform

These three currents agreed in their analysis of the modern world. They accepted that because of the change in society, the proletariat no longer formed a restricted minority in society that could not struggle alone and had to seek alliances with other classes, as had been the case in the days of Marx. At least in the developed countries of the West, that period was over. In those countries the proletariat was now the majority of the population while all the layers of the bourgeoisie were united behind big capital. Henceforth revolution was the affair of the proletariat ALONE. Capitalism had entered its death crisis. (This was the current analysis accepted in the 20s and 30s)

But if society had changed in the West at least, then so had the conception of communism to change. The old ideas, in the old organisations, represented quite the opposite of social emancipation. Otto Ruhle, one of the chief theoreticians of the AAUD-E, said this (in 1924) :

'The nationalisation of the means of production, which continues to be the programme of social-democracy at the same time as it is that of the communists, is not socialisation. Through nationalisation of the means of production, it is possible to attain a strongly centralised State capitalism, which will have perhaps some superiority to private capitalism,

but which will nonetheless be capitalism.'

Communism could only arrive from the action of the workers themselves, struggling actively on their own. For that, new forms of organisation were necessary. But what would such organisations be? Here opinions divided, and conflicting views could cause endless splits. Although by this time, the workers had turned away from revolutionary action, and any decisions the movement might take were of little consequence, it may be of interest to note what their interpretations of the future society were.

The Double Organisation

The KAPD rejected the idea of the Leninist party, such as prevailed after the Russian Revolution (a mass party) and held that a revolutionary party was essentially the party of an elite, based on quality not quantity. Such a party, uniting the most advanced elements of the proletariat, must act as a 'leaven within the masses', that is it must spread propaganda, keep up political discussion etc. Its strategy must be 'class versus class,' based on the struggle in the factories and armed uprising; sometimes, even, as a preliminary, terrorist action (such as bombings, bank robberies, raids on jewellers shops etc.) which were frequent in the early 20s. The struggle in the factories, led by action committees, would have the task of creating the atmosphere and the class consciousness necessary to mass struggles and to bringing ever greater masses of workers to mobilise themselves for decisive struggles.

Herman Gorter, one of the principal theoreticians of this party, justified thus the necessity of a small communist party ;

*'Most proletarians are ignoramuses. They have little notion of economics and politics, do not know much of national and international events, of the relations which exist between these latter and of the influence which they exert on the revolution. By reason of their position in society they cannot get to know all this. This is why they can never act at the right moment. they act when they should not, do not act when they should. They repeatedly make mistakes.'*⁶

So according to this theory, the small select Party would have an educational mission, it would be a catalyst of ideas. But the task of regrouping the masses and organising them, in a network of factory organisations, would be that of the AAUD. Its essential objective would be to counter and overthrow the influence of the Trade Unions, through propaganda, but more particularly through determined action, that of a 'group which shows in the struggle what the masses must become' – Gorter. Finally, in the course of revolutionary struggle, these factory organisations would become workers councils, uniting all the workers and controlled by them. The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would be nothing more than an AAUD extended to the whole of German industry.

The AAUD-E Argument

The AAUD-E was, as has been said, opposed to a political party separate from the factory organisations. It wanted a united organisation which would lead the day to day struggle, and later on take over the administration of society, on the system of workers councils. It

⁶ Herman Gorter, Reply to Lenin, Paris 1930

would have both economic and political aims. It differed from revolutionary syndicalism in that it disagreed with the hostility to working class political power and the dictatorship of the proletariat. On the other hand, It did not see the usefulness of a political party (KAPD style). Though granting the same arguments about the backwardness of the working class, for them the factory organisation itself would suffice for the educational role so long as freedom of speech and discussion were assured within them.

The AAUD-E criticised the KAPD for being a centralised party, with professional leaders and paid editors, only distinguished from the KPD by its rejection of Parliamentarism. They derided the 'double organisation' as a 'double pie card' for the benefit of the leaders. The AAUD-E rejected the notion of paid leaders; 'neither cards nor rules nor anything of that kind', they said. Some of them went so far as to found anti-organisation organisations.

Roughly, the AAUD-E held that if the proletariat is too weak or divided to take decisions, no party decision could remedy this. Nobody could take the place of the proletariat. It must, by itself, overcome its own defects, otherwise it will be beaten and will pay a heavy price for its defeat. For them the double organisation was a hangover from the political party and trade union partnership.

As a result of the differences between these three trends, KAPD, AAUD and AAUD-E, the latter refused to participate with the other two in the Central German insurrection of 1921. This was launched and led in a great part by the armed elements of the KAPD (still at that time regarded as sympathetic to the Third International), since the AAUD-E claimed it was merely to camouflage the events in Russia and in particular the repression of the Kronstadt sailors and workers by the Red Army under Trotsky.

Despite continued internal dissension, always very high and often obscured by personalities; in spite of excesses provoked by disappointment, the 'communist spirit', that is to say, the insistence on violent direct action, the passionate denunciation of all political and trade union colours (including the 'palace mayors' of Moscow) continued to permeate the masses. All financed by illegal means; their members, though often thrown out of employment because of their subversive activities, were extremely active in the street and at public meetings etc.

Disappointment

But it had been believed that the growth of the factory organisations of 1919/20 would continue at the same rate, that they would become a mass movement of 'millions of conscious communists' which would override the power of the allegedly working class trade unions. This was not however to prove the case. They started from the hypothesis that the proletariat would struggle and win as an organised class, and would work out the way of building the new organisation. In the growth of the AAUD or the AAUD-E, the development of the fighting spirit and class consciousness of the workers could be measured. But these organisations drew in on themselves after the American financed economic expansion of 1923/29. In the years of Depression they were reduced to a mere few hundred members, a few cells here and there in the factories which employed some 20 million. By the time the Hitlerites came on the scene, the factory organisations had shrunk from being 'general' organisations of the workers to being cells of conscious council communists. Notwithstanding what their aims might be or their press might say, the AAUD

and the AAUD-E had become no more than minor political parties.

The Function of the Organisations

Was it however, merely the withering away of their membership that transformed the factory organisations into minor political parties ? No !

It was a change of function. Though the factory organisations never had for their proclaimed task the leading of strikes, negotiations with employers, formulation of demands (all of which they left to the strikers themselves) - they were the organs of struggle. They restricted their functions to those of propaganda and support. Every time a strike was launched the factory organisations helped to run it; their press was the strike press; they put on speakers, AAUD or AAUD-E and ran meetings. But so far as conducting negotiations was concerned, it was the task of the strike committee and the members of the factory organisations did not represent their group as such but the strikers who had elected them and to whom they were responsible.

The KAPD, as a political party, had a different function. Its task was seen as being above all propaganda, economic and political analysis. At election times it undertook anti-parliamentary activity; it called for action committees in the factories, streets, among the unemployed, etc.

After the bloody repression of 1921, and during the period of economic prosperity, the above named functions became purely theoretical. The activity of the factory organisations became solely that of propaganda and analysis, that is to say political activity. Many members were discouraged and left the movement. As a result of that, too it meant that the factory was no longer the basis of the organisation. Meetings began to be held outside the factory; on the basis of the district, perhaps in a bar where, German fashion, they sang the old workers songs of hope and anger

No longer was there a practical difference between KAPD, AAUD and AAUD-E. In practice they put forward the same line, and were all political groupings whatever they called themselves. Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch Marxist who was one of the great theoreticians of council communism, said in this respect:

'The AAUD, like the KAPD, is essentially an organisation whose immediate goal is the revolution. In other times, in a period of decline of the revolution, one could not have thought of founding such an organisation. But it has survived the revolutionary years; the workers who founded it before and fought under its flag do not want to let themselves lose the experience of those struggles and conserve it like a cutting from a plant for the developments to come.'

Three political parties of the same colour was two too many !

With the dangers threatening the working class as the Nazis started on the road we know so well today, and with inertia and cowardice of the old and powerful 'working class' organisations, there were moves to unity. In December 1931, the AAUD (having already separated from the KAPD) fused with the AAUD-E. Only a few elements remained in the KAPD, and some from the AAUD-E went into the anarchist ranks (the FAUD). But most of the survivors of the factory organisations were in a new organisation, the KAUD

(Kommunistische Arbeiter Union Deutschlands) or the Communist Workers Union of Germany. This expressed in its title the idea that the organisation was no longer a 'general organisation' of the workers, as the AAUD had been at one time. It united all those workers who were declared revolutionaries, consciously communist, but did not claim it united all the workers any longer.

The KAUD

With the change of name, there was a change of conception. Up till then, council communism had only taken note of the 'organised class'. Both the AAUD and the AAUD-E had believed from the beginning that it would be they who would organise the working class, that millions would rally to them. It was an idea close to that of revolutionary syndicalism, which looked forward to seeing all the workers join their unions, then the working class would be an 'organised class'.

Now however, the KAUD urged workers to organise for themselves their own action committees. No longer was the 'organised' class struggle to depend on an organisation formed previously to the struggle. In this new conception, the 'organised class' became the working class struggling under its own leadership.

This change of conception had other consequences. It affected the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, for instance. If the 'organised class' was no longer the exclusive affair of organisations formed before the struggle, those organisations were no longer able to be considered as the organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Thus disappeared one of the causes of dissension: whether the KAPD or the AAUD would have to exercise power. It had to be agreed that the dictatorship of the proletariat could not be in the hands of specialised organisations; it would exist in the hands of the class which was in struggle. The task of the new KAUD would amount to communist propaganda, clarifying the objectives of the struggle, urging the working class to struggle, principally by means of the unofficial strike, and showing it where its strengths and weaknesses lay.

Communist Society and the Factory Organisations

This evolution in ideas had to be accompanied by a revision of recognised notions concerning the future communist society. The general ideology in political circles accepted by the masses was State Capitalism. There were many shades of state capitalism, but state capitalist ideology could be brought down to some very simple principles : the state, through nationalisation, through planned economy, through social reforms etc. represented the lever for socialism, while parliamentary and trade union action represented the means of struggle. According to this theory, the working class had hardly and need to struggle as an independent class; instead they should entrust the 'management and leadership of the class struggle' to Parliamentary and Trade Union commanders. Needless to say, in this ideology, Party and Trade Unions became a component part of the State, and the management and leadership of the socialist or communist society of the future would be theirs.

Indeed during the first phase (following the defeat of the revolution in Germany) this tradition still strongly impregnated the conceptions of the AAUD, the KAPD and the

AAUD-E. All three were in favour of an organisation 'grouping millions and millions' of workers in order to carry out the political and economic dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1922, for instance the AAUD declared that it was in a position to take over, on its reckoning, based on its active membership, '6% of the factories' of Germany.

But these conceptions altered. When there were hundreds of factory organisations, united and co-ordinated by the AAUD and AAUD-E, they could demand the maximum of independence as to the decisions they took and avoid 'a new clique of leaders'.

But it was asked whether it was possible to preserve this independence in the midst of communist social life ?

Economic life is highly specialised, and all enterprises are directly interdependent. How could economic life be administered if the production and distribution of social wealth are not sometimes in centralised forms ? Was the State dispensable or indispensable as a regulator of production and organisation ?

It is easy to see there was a contradiction between the old idea of communist society and the new form of society that was now proposed. While there was fear of economic centralisation, it was not clear how to guard against it. There was discussion about the greater or lesser degree of 'federalism' or 'centralism' : the AAUD-E leaned rather more towards federalism, the KAPD - AAUD leaned more towards centralism. In 1923, Karl Schrâder (1884 - 1950, Spartacist fighter with a price on his head, then a professional leader of the KAPD, was expelled from the KAPD in 1924; later he became an official of the Socialist Party. He was one of the few of his party to organise 'resistance' to Nazism. Imprisoned in 1936 with other KAPD veterans, he is today one of the German Socialist 'martyrs') the theoretician of the KAPD, proclaimed that 'the more centralised communist society is, the better it will be'.

In fact, as long as one remained on the basis of the old conceptions of the 'organised class', this contradiction was insoluble. One side rallied more or less to the revolutionary syndicalist conception of 'taking over' the factories through the unions; the other, like the Bolsheviks, thought that a centralised apparatus, the state, must regulate the process of distribution and production, and distribute the 'national income' among the workers.

But to discuss the communist society on the basis of 'federalism or centralism' is sterile. These are problems of organisation, technical problems, while communist society is basically an economic problem. Capitalism must give way to another economic system, where the means of production, the products of labour power, do not take the form of 'value' and where the exploitation of the working population to the profit of privileged layers has disappeared.

The problem of 'federalism or centralism' is devoid of sense if it has not been shown beforehand what the form of organisation and its economic basis will be. Forms of organisation are not arbitrary: they derive from the very principles of the economy. For example, the principle of profit and surplus value, of its private or collective appropriation, lies at the bottom of all forms of capitalist economy. That is why it is insufficient to present communist economy as a negative system: no money, no market, no private or State property. It is necessary to show up its positive character, to show what will be the economic laws which will succeed those of capitalism. This done, it may well be that the problem of 'federalism or centralism' is no problem at all.

The End of the Movement in Germany

The AAUD had separated from the KAPD at the end of 1929. Its press then advocated a 'flexible tactic'; support of workers struggles solely for wage demands, the improvement of conditions or hours of work. More rigidly, the KAPD saw in this tactic the bait for a slide towards class collaboration, 'horse-trading' (Kuhhandel) politics. After expelling its leader Adam Scharrer for 'making a pact with the enemy' (ie. having a novel published by the German Communist Party publishing house), (Adam Scharrer 1889 -1948 metalworker, Spartacist fighter, afterwards professional leader of the KAPD from which he was expelled in 1930. A novelist like Schrâder, he lived in Moscow after 1934. Later moved to what was East Germany where he was regarded as a 'pioneer of proletarian literature'. Needless to say, some features of his past life were not exactly advertised.) - the KAPD turned to the advocacy of individual terrorism. One of those who accepted this idea was Marinus VAN DER LUBBE. In setting fire to the premises housing the Nazi Parliament, and burning down the Reichstag, he wished by a symbolic gesture to urge the workers to abandon their political apathy and rise against the Nazis. (It should be noted in passing that effective Stalinist propaganda has all but obscured the heroic role of Van der Lubbe, who in English speaking countries at least, has been classified almost as a Nazi stool pigeon - a slander begun by Dimitrov and Thalmann, Communist leaders, in their defence.)

But neither tactic had any results in any case. Germany had gone through an economic crisis of major depth. There was huge army of the unemployed. Unofficial strikes became impossible. While it was true that nobody any longer thought of obeying their trade unions, the latter were collaborating directly with the employers and the state. The press of the council communists was frequently seized. The supreme irony was that the only great unofficial strike of that period - the transport workers of Berlin in 1932 - was organised by the Stalinist and Hitler high priests acting together against the high priests of the Socialist trade unions.

Appendix 1

There was some international influence of the German Council communist movement of the 1920s. In particular, the 'ultra left' ideas of the KAPD spread - they were the first to suggest a Fourth International, an idea taken up by the Trotskyists after their break with Moscow. In Russia, the Workers Opposition (Shliapnikov, Mme Kollontai etc.) kept in contact with the KAPD but finally integrated into the Bolshevik party. Sympathetic groups existed in the Balkans (Greece, Romania and what was Yugoslavia, where one of their leaders was betrayed to the police by the Leninists) especially in Bulgaria, where a strong tendency existed of direct action and individual terrorism as against Leninist parliamentarism (insurrection of 1923, dynamiting of bridges, blowing up in 1925 of Sofia cathedral). There were groups in Belgium and Holland in particular, originally around Gorter, later in the International Communist group (GIK-H). The last active council communist groupings existed in Holland, where the 'Principles' was produced, as a collective effort by German and Dutch workers. (Grundprinzipien der Kommunistischen Produktion und Verteilung 1930)

There were others which had a sporadic existence in Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France (around Andre Prudhommeaux, who later went over to Anarchism) in the United States (around ex KAPDer Paul Mattick and the reviews International Council Correspondence,

Living Marxism and New Essays) in Australia, the journal Southern Advocate for Workers Councils which published the basic work of Anton Pannekoek Workers Councils (Melbourne 1950)

In Britain, there was originally an active movement that included Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers Dreadnought who raised many of the issues during the negotiations to found the Communist Party in this country. (A real appraisal of the foundation of the CPGB has still to be made.) Willie Gallagher, later a 'Communist' MP, sided with the 'Lefts' as a young man and was lectured by Lenin at the Second Congress of the Third International in 1921 into giving up his opposition to Parliamentary Politics. The most consistent advocate of council communism in this country was Guy Aldred, and a movement was kept alive under his influence in Glasgow for many years, known as the Anti Parliamentary Communist Federation.⁷

Those who can read German or French will find more material than is available in English, by consulting the following:

Bibliothek der Ratekommunisten. Rudiger Blankertz Verlag. Friedrich-Wilhelm Strasse 35 .
1 Berlin 42

Internationale Instituut voor Sociale Geschiednis 262 266 Herengracht, Amsterdam

Appendix 2

Origins of the KAPD

Comrades ! Proletarians !

On December 5th 1920, the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) was recognised as a sympathising Party of the Third International. The KAPD and its programme is in direct opposition to the VKPD (Vereinigte or Unified Communist Party of Germany) which was formed in November 1920 from the Left USPD and the former SpartakusBund (KPD) and which belongs to the Third International as a fully recognised section. The KAPD is in also in complete opposition to the tactics of the Third International, as laid down in the Theses of the Second Congress. The KAPD sees in these tactics the terrible danger of opportunism pure and simple; the danger of an opportunism which will lead the Revolution into a morass and will thus prove disastrous to Russia herself.

The KAPD has arisen out of the former opposition in the SpartakusBund. The executive of the KPD, with Russia's help thrives. It is the strongest and largest section of the Party, and the spirit of Parliamentarism has gained in their leaders, Levi, Thalheimer, Kickert and others, under the influence of Radek and Bronski.

Every means has been used to destroy the KAPD. Nevertheless, it has gained in strength and had to perforce be recognised by the Third International as a sympathising Party, with the right of having a permanent Advisory Representative on the Executive. The Greatness of the Third International The KAPD, which had always recognised the fundamental

⁷ <http://www.af-north.org/?q=other+texts> for extensive histories of the APCF.

greatness of the idea underlying the Third International and the necessity for unity with Soviet Russia, is determined to fight opportunism by uniting all the forces of the opposition for a persistent struggle inside the Third International, coupled with a thorough revision of the Theses in a Marxist revolutionary sense as its next aim. Its full views are laid down in an 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin' (An Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: An Answer to Lenin's Pamphlet 'Infantile Sickness of Leftism in Communism' published by the KAPD, Berlin)

We must also at this juncture raise the following essential points which however cannot be discussed and justified in detail:- In Western Europe we have in contradistinction to the overwhelmingly agrarian East, other production conditions and hence other class conditions and a different spiritual structure. Western Europe is dominated by Banking interests and Capital which keep the gigantic proletariat in spiritual and material slavery, and which unite all the bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes. This forces the proletarian masses to independent action which in the Revolution can only be achieved by industrial organisation and by the Abolition of Parliamentarism.

Points of Difference

The Third International believes that the Revolution in Western Europe will follow the line of the Russian Revolution

The KAPD believes that the Revolution in Western Europe will lay down and follow its own laws.

The Third International believes that the Revolution in Western Europe will be able to follow a policy of compromise and alliance with petty peasants, petty bourgeois and even bourgeois parties.

The KAPD believes this is impossible

The Third International believes in the inevitability (during the Revolution) of splits and dissensions between the bourgeois, petty bourgeois and petty peasant.

The KAPD believes that the bourgeois and the petty bourgeois will form a united front against the proletariat right up to the end of the Revolution.

The Third International underestimates the power of North American and Western capital.

The KAPD formulates its tactics according to those of that great power.

The Third International does not recognise the power of the Banks and of Big Business, which unites all bourgeois classes.

The KAPD on the other hand builds up its tactics on this unifying power of Capital.

Not believing in the capacity of the West European proletariat to stand alone, the Third International neglects the spiritual and intellectual development of this proletariat which in every sphere is, after all, still imbued with bourgeois ideology and chooses tactics which allow slavery and subordination to bourgeois ideas to be maintained.

The KAPD chooses its tactics with the main object of setting free the spirit of the proletariat

Owing to the fact that the Third International does not base its tactics on liberation of the spirit, nor in the unity of all bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties, but on compromises and

'splits' it allowed the old trade unions to exist and endeavours to receive them into the Third International.

The KAPD whose first aim is liberation of the spirit, and which believes in the unity of the bourgeois, recognises that trade unions must be destroyed and that the proletariat requires better weapons than the General Workers Union in Germany.

For the same reasons that the Third International allows Parliamentarism to remain, for these very same reasons the KAPD abolishes Parliamentarism. It pulls up evil by the roots

Owing to the fact that the Third International does not believe that liberation of the spirit is the first essential in Western Europe, and does not believe the bourgeoisie has a United Front in the Revolution, it takes within its fold masses without ascertaining whether they are really communistic, without demanding from them tactics which would prove that they are Communists and not just masses.

The KAPD wishes to form Parties in every country which consist of Communists only, and formulates its tactics accordingly. Through the example of these Parties, small at the beginning, it will turn the majority of the proletariat viz. the masses into Communists. Thus the masses of Western Europe are to the Third International themeans; to the KAPD they are the end.

Through these tactics (which were the right ones in Russia) the Third International has adopted a leaders policy.

The KAPD on the other hand conducts a masses policy.

Comrades, Proletarians. The KAPD holds the belief that all of these are vital questions of the proletarian revolution. In the middle of February there will take place a Party Meeting of the KAPD at which special attention will be paid to the tactics of the Third International. You are cordially invited to take your part in it, we beg you to communicate this invitation to your members.

With Communist Greetings

The Communist Workers Party of Germany

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