

Table of Contents

German Socialism in the War

Pannekoek, Anton
1915

Published in International Socialist Review, vol. 15, no. 8, in February 1915. From Marxists Internet Archive at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1915/02/german-socialism.htm>.

A terrible breakdown of the German social democracy—and of the Socialist movement in the other countries—came when the European war broke out. Before that German socialism seemed full size and full strength, admired by the Socialists of the world as an example no other country had been able to equal; those who knew how things were on the inside, however, were aware that not everything was as good and strong as it seemed. Now all socialism seems suddenly to have disappeared; now it is commonly believed in foreign countries that the entire party, filled with enthusiasm for the kaiser, has fallen into the worst kind of chauvinism. But appearances are deceptive in this case also. Socialism is not completely dead, and it has already been made clear more than once, by bringing together evidence from the newspapers and other periodicals, that a part of the party still stands by the old flag. It is of the greatest importance for the American comrades to find out and to understand what is going on in the German Socialist movement in wartime.

German socialism was not in a position to hinder the war by energetic action; in the mood prevailing at the time, the leaders never thought of doing so for a moment. The party consequently might have made a declaration like this: “We are opposed to all wars; it was our wish to keep the war from breaking out, but we are too weak, and every effort is useless. With a heavy heart our workingmen bend to the inevitable; gritting their teeth they march away to the war, vowing in their hearts to take up the struggle for socialism again as soon as the position of the government seems to be shattered.” Such a confession of their own weakness would have been a come-down, of course, from their proud declarations of other days, but the courage of its sincerity no one could have called in question. But no such declaration was made. The group in the Reichstag voted the war-credit unanimously. This especially is what the comrades in other countries did not understand, for the party by this act sided with the war, assumed responsibility for the war, declared its solidarity with the government, placed itself in the service of German imperialism, and tore to pieces the International of the proletariat.

To understand this act, it is necessary to have a clear insight into the different tendencies that stood side by side in the German party. As regards the reformists, who in recent years controlled about a third of the party, held about half of its seats in the Reichstag, and included about all the officials of the trade-unions, this attitude is at once comprehensible: they always tried to change the class struggle into a struggle for minor improvements, in which they joined forces with a part of the bourgeoisie; they would hear nothing of revolution; they had a nationalist and middle-class mentality. Of the radicals the greater half were neither hot nor cold; under the

leadership of Kautsky and the executive committee of the party, they clung fast to the "old, tried tactics," would hear nothing of aggressive, revolutionary movements, and so, as a matter of course, they fell into opportunism practically, though still retaining the old phrases; to this group belongs the majority of the party bureaucrats. They stood confused in the face of the threatening war, without strength and also without enthusiasm, and looked for a middle course that would not bring the party into opposition with the national current. The rest of the radicals, generally referred to as the "extreme left," who often stood for revolutionary tactics, wanted the party to protest against the war, and to refuse to vote the war-credit. This faction, which mustered about a third of the votes at the last national convention of the party, is still, as a matter of fact, far from being uniform and clear in its aims, but there are in it some men well informed on imperialism and some advocates of aggressive tactics. However, in the caucus of the Socialist element in the Reichstag, in which this matter was to be settled, only about seventeen men stood by their proposal to vote against the measure. The overpowering majority of reformists and old radicals were for voting in favor of it. So the Socialist group in the public session of the Reichstag voted the war-credit. Could not the seventeen opponents have voted "No" also in the public session? It is an old custom for the Socialist group in the Reichstag to stand as a compact, uniform body, whose members give their votes not according to their personal judgment but according to the decision of the party. In this custom lies a mighty force; not chance opinions of single individuals but the decisions of the workingmen who make up the party decide the attitude of the party in parliament. The reformists have often opposed this custom, because they would like to have a free field of activity for their personal shrewdness and for political deals with capitalistic parties. But then the force of the distinctive class struggle against the whole capitalist world would be broken, consequently these efforts were always discouraged. It is true, a formal resolution was never drawn up, declaring that Socialist legislators should follow the majority of the party group unconditionally and mechanically; the discipline was nothing but generally recognized normal rules. Because of these rules of discipline it did not occur to the opposition to take a stand against the majority in the open session. Besides, it demanded extraordinary courage and a great deal of it, in the face of the dignified enthusiasm of public sentiment, to take a stand in opposition; and what arguments could they have offered, since the government had arranged everything so neatly that no one doubted that Germany was the victim of a malicious aggression, and wanted to do nothing but defend its national existence and its civilization?

Four months of the war passed by, and the effects of the war inside the country were seen. They were such as could have been expected. No opposition had arisen on August 4th. Consequently the military government was able to manage things to its own liking. Military censorship was established over the entire press. That dangerous war news about movements of troops should be carefully looked after and suppressed when necessary, goes without saying, but the censorship went further. It looked upon it as its duty to see that "the splendid harmony that our people show in war time" should not be disturbed by preachers of discontent; that is to say, the military censorship became a means for the suppression of socialism. It is true, the prohibitive regulations against the social democracy were done away with, and its press was admitted to the army—the military authorities were wise enough to make friends with the Socialist press, which could preach no class struggle, however, because of the censorship. In the Red Cross and food supply commissions delegates from the trade-unions and the party were given places along with the capitalist members, for the latter were unable to handle all the work. This outward recognition of equality, which contrasted so sharply with the former exclusion and contemptuous

disqualification, had completely turned the heads of a good many party members; it seemed to them that this marked the beginning of a time of liberty and equality. But at the same time an open word of criticism, of struggle against the bourgeoisie, of socialism, was hindered as far as possible by the military censorship. "*Vorwaerts*" had to make a promise to publish nothing further about the class struggle; otherwise it would not have been permitted to appear again. And in Thuringia the military commander simply suspended the paragraphs of the constitution which grant every citizen the right of free speech and of association and assembly. Only a few papers which before had sought for Socialist strength above all in thorough enlightenment and not merely in sharp words were able to maintain a Socialist standpoint even under these circumstances. The most of them were reduced to colorless labor papers.

And against this condition of affairs the party had no strength for resistance. It is true, there were everywhere larger or smaller groups of radical workingmen who held fast to the class struggle, who understood the nature of the war, exasperated at nationalism—but the apparent unity of the group in the Reichstag robbed them of all confidence in themselves. If the representatives of the extreme left had spoken their "No" in public, they would have become the leaders around whom all Socialists could rally, who at that time or later were willing to take a stand against the war; in this way the opposition would have become a well defined force. As it is, the silence of the minority group means also to them, "Say nothing and submit." So they were weak and powerless against the prevailing current.

On the other hand, the reformists were in ecstasy; they had reached the goal of their wishes, suspension of the class struggle, recognition of the social democracy as a respectable party with equal rights with other parties, fraternal relations with the bourgeoisie. A good many of their papers outdid the capitalist press in chauvinism, and stirred up bad feeling against foreign countries—so that even the more moderate elements got disgusted with it. One of their most important organs (the Chemnitz paper), expressed the opinion that anyone who wrote as he should write would not need to feel that the censorship was hindering him. In a trade-union paper appeared the statement that the comrades who did not like the new turn of affairs and wanted to criticise would have to be thrown out of the party. The active, radical workingmen of Stuttgart, who in long years of struggle had shaken off the yoke of the reformist leadership of the party in Wuerttemberg, and had got control over the party paper in Stuttgart, saw themselves robbed again of their paper by an act of violence. In short, the reformists feel they are masters of the party, and are trying to take advantage of the situation to serve their ends. They make a great deal of the tactics followed as a victory for socialism: First, because the government recognizes them; second, because the government often has to take forcible possession of private property on account of the war, and for war supplies has to undertake a good deal of industrial organization—all this so many steps in the direction of socialism, say the reformists.

In reality the industrial measures of the government are nearly all undertaken as means of caring for capital. The war loan of five billions was a fine deal for capital, which looked forward in advance to sure gain from it. Millions were made by furnishers of war supplies. But the working masses suffered severely. The outbreak of the war brought on a terrible derangement of the industrial life of all countries, a crisis of great consequence even in America. In Germany the percentage of people out of work, in spite of the large number of soldiers in the field, rose in August to 25 per cent; it sank to 15 per cent only in the following months, as industrial life gradually accommodated itself to the situation, and people went to work on all hands in providing war supplies.

What did the government do to help those in want? Nothing. The unemployed were left to be cared for by private charity. However, a capitalist paper in the middle of November had the following to say: "Private charity has shown itself wholly insufficient; so far only three million marks have been collected, and less and less is coming in all the time; the government must take up the matter." But why should the government take action? A possessing class does something only when it feels itself threatened by the suffering of those in want, but the masses made no movement and found no leadership in an opposition party that would take a strong stand in their favor against the government. When the leaders of the working people lull the masses to sleep with the song of the fatherland in danger, the government needs to take no thought then as to how the masses are to be cared for.

And then came the rise in prices in addition to all this. The war cut off the importation of grain; it was explained, of course, that Germany had of its own harvest nearly enough for a whole year, but wild speculation drove prices continually higher and higher. The government had secured the right to fix maximum prices, but it looked on without taking action till the speculators had gathered in their profit; then in November it set maximum prices that were far too high. Not only for the unemployed but also for the families of the soldiers, who received an extra allowance from the empire, this meant extreme poverty.

In the meantime the true character of the war had come into a better light. Under the appearance of a defensive war, it is in reality a war for world-power, for a stronger position in the world. That is given out without any attempt at concealment in a recently published work of the imperialistic writer, Paul Rohrbach. And the most influential capitalist circles have been demanding the annexation of conquered Belgium, the extension of Germany to the Atlantic coast, the partition of Russia, the degradation of England, an increase in the number of colonies and the lion's share in the opening-up of the Asiatic and Oriental world, without any disavowal whatever coming from the government. So it becomes evident even in Germany that the workingmen had allowed themselves to be deceived early in August.

Under these circumstances the Reichstag assembled again on December 2 to approve another war loan of five billions for the government. Must not the social democracy vote this time different from August 4? In the press it was insisted upon, especially by Bernstein, that a different attitude should be assumed this time, seeing that the war has changed its character, as we are told; in August a war against barbaric Russia was promised us, and now it is a war against democratic France, against innocent Belgium, against free England. Of course, all this argumentation is nonsense; the war is in December what it was in August—a war for world-power. But it was also not to be expected that the social democratic group in the Reichstag would say, "We walked into a trap that time, but no more of that for us." The reformists were entirely satisfied and patriotic; the old radicals were befogged as usual.

But what was not to be expected from the entire group might now have been expected from the minority of the extreme left. This time they could have given their votes in the open session of the Reichstag against the war credit. They had had plenty of time to see the bad effects of the tactics previously followed; how the radical workingmen had lost their bearings; how the impudence of the reformists in the party and the impudence of the military government from above, which worked hand in hand to keep down the opposition, kept growing all the time. They could now point out the true imperialistic character of the war.

But they kept silent. Only one had the courage to say "No." This one was *Karl Liebknecht*, alone among 397 members of the Reichstag; alone among 110 Socialists;

alone among more than a dozen revolutionary Socialists.

Among the members of the left there is more than one better informed on imperialism and who can make finer speeches on the subject than Liebknecht. But in such times as the present it is not so much a case of information as it is of *courage*; not so much a matter of fine, ringing words as of *fearless action*.

Courage is no rare quality. Millions of soldiers risk their lives because they believe they are fighting for the safety of their country. Thousands of Socialists have made extreme sacrifices for their great cause. In every group of persons with common interests the individual must sacrifice himself for the good of the whole body; the approval, the praise, the admiration, the respect of their comrades is the reward for which they endure stout-hearted all the trials and suffering. But very uncommon is the *moral courage* to turn against a person's own comrades when it seems they are going the wrong way, and then to bear quietly their reproaches, their slander, their hatred. The better the group is organized for the struggle on the outside, the former consequently is the discipline, the greater is the moral courage necessary to disregard it. In the German social democracy this discipline was so highly developed because the movement was always in great danger from a powerful enemy and constantly under attack. Now when this discipline has become a reactionary force, since it serves to break up all opposition to fraternal relations with the bourgeoisie, the effect of the old custom and sentiment is still the same. It was unfortunately still so strong that it was able to keep down the opposition of the extreme left. It is consequently to be considered all the more praiseworthy that one was able to free himself from it.

The executive committee of the party has already sent out a threatening warning regarding this "breach of discipline." But thousands of Socialists in all countries will greet his act as an act of obedience to Socialist principle, as the proof that in Germany also a small beginning is being made in opposition to the imperialistic war. Thousands of workingmen will side with Liebknecht; will gather round him, and so form the nucleus of the army which, when the old, the worn-out, the strengthless, has gone down in the whirlpool of the world-war, will again take up the revolutionary struggle against imperialism.