

Putschism and May Day in Berlin

By Max Shachtman

In 1910, Herr von Jaegow, the Berlin police president, attempted to prohibit demonstrations on workers' May Day, and threatened to proceed against the demonstrators with arms if necessary. He was answered when hundreds of thousands of workers poured into the streets of Berlin as a challenge to the Junkers. Von Jaegow did not dare go through with his threat. But that which even the minions of the Kaiser did not dare to do, was left to be accomplished by the German social democracy, in the person of von Jaegow's successor in the post of Berlin's police president, Zoergiebel. Shortly before May 1st of this year, he issued an order prohibiting public demonstrations or meetings of any group in Berlin on May Day. The order was aimed directly at the Communists, and the answer of the Communist Party was a call to the workers of Berlin to fill the streets on May Day.

The prohibition had the unreserved support of the whole social democratic bureaucracy, both in its party and in the free trade unions. The task apparently cut out for the Communists was to mobilize the rank and file in the trade unions and the social democracy, as well as the workers sympathizing directly with the Communist Party, to demonstrate on May Day and break down Zoergiebel's edict under their crushing weight. In this task the present leadership of the German Party failed miserably, and with terrible consequences.

Into a Putschist Swamp.

Ensnared by the ultra-"left" course that the Party has pursued in recent months, self-deluded by the so-called "victories" in the factory councils' elections — gained at the expense of the most important positions of the Party had in the trade unions, intoxicated with exaggerated beliefs in its own strength and influence in the working class, and driven under the lash of the factional needs of Stalin in the Russian Party fight, the Thaelmann Central Committee was able to lead the party into what must be condemned as a putschist swamp. The enormity of the errors — not to say crimes — committed on May Day in Berlin in the name of the "third period" and the "new line" can only be indicated here by a few facts.

Throughout the city, preparations had been made by the trade unions for mass meetings in halls to celebrate May Day. It was the duty of the Party to send its members to these meetings, to take the floor, to call upon the workers to demonstrate in the streets in mass and thereby destroy the ukase of Zoergiebel. The overwhelming majority of the workers of Berlin were sure to be at those meetings, and as it appeared later, such was the case. It was essential to draw these broad masses of non-party and social democratic workers into this struggle so that it would not degenerate into a purely "vanguard" action.

With customary light-heartedness, the Party issued the slogan of boycotting these mass meetings under all circumstances. At the meeting of the Greater Berlin Central May Day Committee, the reporter who spoke for the Party, Kaspar, declared: "Can a revolutionary worker go where one of these traitors, a Severing, or a Hermann Mueller, is speaking? No! We must keep the workers from going there, we must get them to come to us." And further: "May first will be a general test for the coming civil war, both for the proletariat and for the police. If we do not succeed in getting hundreds of thousands into the streets, a fascist terror regime will shortly break out in Germany that will be much worse than in Bulgaria and Italy." At this conference were present 60 delegates (!) representing chiefly small and medium factories, the Party and its auxiliary organizations. When a delegate from the Leninbund (Left Communists) spoke for participation in the trade union meetings with the aim of using them as starting points to mobilize the workers for demonstrations in the streets, he was howled down.

Into Zoergiebel's Trap.

It is with the fabulous idiocy of this May first in Berlin being "a general test for the coming civil war" of turning the backs of the Communists upon the centers where the masses were to gather, that the German Stalinists prepared to mobilize the workers against the prohibition of May Day. It is thus that they fell into the trap prepared for them by the provocation of Zoergiebel. They freed him of any fear that the reactionary police might have to club or shoot social democratic or non-party workers. Rarely have the social democratic murderers had such an opportunity of singing out and isolating Communist workers alone in the class struggle for butchery.

In its May Day number, the Rote Fahne, official organ of the party, wrote:

"The Communist Party, which has defeated reformism in the most important positions and will defeat it ever more decisively in its further advance, is growing with the broadest proletarian masses towards an indissoluble, invincible proletarian unity. In the trough between two waves of the revolution, in the ebb that followed the first stormy years of struggle of the post war period, there follows a new revolutionary tide. The first signals already announce the rumbling thunder of the future proletarian hurricane."

With such "revolutionary" phrase-mongering, the stage was all set for the May Day events; set by the experienced hand of Heinz Neumann, the personal agent of Stalin in Europe, the diseased creature who organized the putsch in Canton in 1927 from the safe distance of Hong-Kong.

The meetings called by the trade unions were every where more than filled by workers. But the Communists had surrendered these workers to the bureaucrats without a struggle. The Party had called for open demonstrations at the two most frequented centers: — Alexanderplatz and Potsdamer Platz, to be pre-
ceded

by gatherings throughout the districts of the city. In those districts with little working class population, like Schoeneberg, Wilmersdorf and Charlottenburg, the Party meetings collapsed before they began. A few people appeared, numbering less than the Party membership in the district, a handful were arrested, and the Schupo (police) had an easy time of it. In the proletarian districts like Wedding, Schoenhauser Quarter, Osten, Neukoelln, and Kreuzberg there was a greater attendance, but still weak in relation to the population.

The Attack by the Police.

Long before the appointed time for the meetings, Schupo appeared armed with clubs and revolvers. The smaller meetings were immediately dispersed. In Weddingstrasse, they began to shoot into the windows of workers' homes at 10.30 A. M. Elsewhere, parades were held for a few hundred yards and then dispersed by the police. In some places, the police appeared for the first time with water pipes and hose to connect with hydrants for the purpose of spraying the demonstrators.

From noon onward, workers began to arrive at Alexanderplatz. At Potsdamer Platz there were less present than on that unforgettable day in 1916 when Karl Liebknecht spoke to the Berlin workers under a state of siege! For two hours the leaderless, unorganized, unprepared mass was jostled about by the Schupo who attacked those present with indiscriminate clubbings. Around Alexanderplatz, at Buelowplatz, Hackeschen Markt and Rosenthaler Tor, the police opened fire with the result that 9 were killed and many more wounded.

The Schupo proceeded most brutally in Wedding. In Koesliner Strasse, after beating demonstrators and passers-by with clubs, they began a fire that lasted for hours. A number of infuriated workers replied with rude barricades. The Schupo advanced with an armored car and machine guns. In some places the workers replied spontaneously by throwing stones at the police or shooting back with old service pistols. But there was no organized resistance to Zoergiebel's police. The latter continued to fire upon men and women, in the streets and through the windows of their homes, for three or four days, until 27 workers had been murdered, 75 seriously wounded and 200 others injured in the name of socialism and the Fatherland... Not a single policeman had been killed. Even some of the bourgeois papers called for an end to this ghastly slaughter engineered by the defenders of the republic, the social democrats.

The Party Continues With Self Delusions

The penalty of the Party for its ultra-"left" policies, however, were not yet paid in full. After the May Day events, the Communist Party declared in an appeal: "Why just in Berlin the bloody police terror of the bourgeoisie and Zoergiebel? Because in Berlin the Communists stand at the head of the workers' movement, because in Berlin the factory councils' elections showed that the overwhelming majority of the workers stands behind the Communist Party of Germany, because in Berlin the advance of the C. P. G. in the coming municipal elections will bring the liquidation of the social democracy and our overwhelming victory as the strongest Berlin party!"

The theses of the Central Committee of the Party said: "The Berlin barricade fighters demonstrate that we are approaching an immediately revolutionary situation with whose development the question of the armed insurrection will inevitably appear on the order of the day... The Berlin May Day events signify a turning point in the political development of Germany."

How much of the above is true and how much of it is rattle-brained fantasy can be judged from the following facts:

The workers unfortunately did not follow the leadership or line of the Party on May Day or afterward: they attended the meetings organized by the trade unions. With a very few exceptions, as in Treptow-Oberschoeneweide, the Party meetings were miserably attended, they were headless, poorly organized and ill prepared. The Party "leaders", like Neumann, Dahlem, Remmele and Gerber were in evidence only as observers of the events, standing aside like good generals...

The workers followed the orders of the social democratic party and the trade union fakers. Where they were told to down tools on May Day, they did so. — Where they were told to continue at work they continued. The outstanding example of this was the case of the traction workers, where the Party recently achieved its great "victory" in the factory councils' elections by putting through its slate. Upon orders of the trade union bureaucrats the traction workers remained at their posts on May Day and traffic ran according to schedule with practically no interruption. On May 2nd, with the slaughter of the workers still going on, the employers were able to discharge the two chairmen of the subway employees' council — both of them communists elected at the recent vote — without a voice being raised for them, not to speak of a protest strike.

The Collapse of the Protest Strike.

Not a single large factory in Berlin followed the Party's call to demonstrate on May Day. On Thursday, May 2, a delegated conference was held under Party leadership to consider a general protest strike in Berlin. Only 45 delegates were present, representing only small and medium factories. Hoping for greater success, it reconvened the next noon, with only 300 in attendance. It was again postponed until Friday evening, when 600 attended. The largest

400 down to 20 workers. A decision was reached to call a general strike for the next day.

In this tense and pregnant situation in Berlin, where according to the manifesto of the Party "the overwhelming majority of the workers stands behind the Communist Party of Germany", only from 20,000 to 25,000 workers responded to the call for a general strike. Another 25,000 went on strike in the rest of Germany, a total of 50,000 workers who followed this urgent call of the Communist Party to protest against the Berlin butchery!

There were no "barricade fighters", and roof fighting existed only in the imagination of the bourgeois press and the police. Shots were fired and stones thrown at the police by outraged workers who defended themselves against the Schupo provocations. There was no organized "barricade action" by the Party or the Red Front Fighters. The phrase-mongers had talked tall for weeks in the Party press. They talked about the impending revolution, about the "general test for the coming civil war", without making the slightest preparations for action, without mobilizing the masses of the workers, without making clear to the workers — or even the Party members — the intentions of the Party. When some workers and Party members acted spontaneously, the Party was nowhere to be found. — The Party leaders had committed the crime against which Lenin warned in his maxim: "Never play with insurrection."

After the pitiful collapse of the general strike, the Party began to agitate for a one-day strike in Berlin to honor the victims of the slaughter; then for a two hour strike; then for a 30 minute strike. But at the appointed time there was no cessation of work worth mentioning. At the burial a maximum of 2,000 people appeared.

The Defeat in Saxony.

Payment for the putsch policy of the Party leaders was again received in the Saxony elections that followed the May Day events. In the face of the growing radicalization of the German workers, exaggerated though it is by the Party, in face of the shameful course pursued only a few days before by the social democrats, the Communists not only failed to make gains, but they even lost ground. The vote stood, as compared with the vote in the 1928 Reichstag elections, as follows:

	1929	1928
Social Democrats	922,117	999,421
Communist Party	345,817	381,561

An even less favorable showing is evident by a comparison of the 1929 vote with the Saxony Landtag elections of 1926. Between these two elections, it is true, the Party gained 3,435 votes, but in the same period the social democrats won 164,112 votes. An even more ominous sign is the fact that the fascists almost quadrupled their previous vote.

These are heavy penalties to pay but they are always the burden of false policy. The burden is doubly heavy when it is brought on by adventurism and putschism. It will not become the lighter for the failure of the Party to estimate soberly and critically its course of action. Up to now there has been no real criticism in the ranks of the Party: there has only been bluff and false front, justification of what cannot and must not be justified.

The "Left" Zig-Zag of Centrism.

The Party is driving headlong on a reckless ultra-"left" path, towards adventurism, sectarianism and isolation. The Berlin putsch is Stalin's peculiar way of "correcting" the opportunist course along which he led the Comintern in the past few years. It is his method of adjusting the actions of the Communist Party to the needs of his factional game against Bucharin and company. It is the "left" zig-zag of Centrism, the rudderless ship that is beaten alternately by waves on the left and the right.

We repeat that the German Party is heading toward opportunist isolation. It yielded to the dastardly provocations of the social democratic police president of Berlin. The words of the social democrats themselves show this better than anything else. In the Prussian Landtag, on May 13, the social democratic minister of the interior, Grzesinsky, said: "Had the prohibition of the demonstration been withdrawn before May 1st, it would have come to great clashes in Berlin between social democrats and Communists. That was the plan of the Communists, for then the police would have shot indiscriminately upon social democrats too. (These blackguards have little compunction about shooting social democratic workers! — M. S.) and then they would have accused the minister of the interior as a murderer of his own Party. That is why the police president acted quite correctly and quite wisely in not permitting the demonstration on May 1st."

This is confirmed by the words of Severing, the social democratic national minister of the Interior, in the Reichstag committee on May 7th: "It is the task of the State to isolate the Communists."

The social democrats needed the provocation to assure the bourgeoisie that a coalition with them was safe. They needed it for the reparations conference in Paris as proof of their readiness to crush the militant of the German proletariat. They needed it to deepen the chasm between the Communists and the social democratic workers. The false tactics of the Communist Party played complete into their hands.

The revolutionary movement in Germany has not been advanced by the May Day events — it has been set back. The lost ground will be recovered only if there is a serious attempt to purge the Party of its opportunist-leftism. The evident intention of the Comintern to repeat the Berlin putsch on August 1st will only retard this inevitable cleansing of the movement.