

Socialist Divisions in Germany

By Franz Mehring

IT may seem conceited of me, as one of your German sympathizers, to take it upon myself to send to you, Russian comrades, fraternal greetings and best wishes. In reality I am writing to you not as an individual, but as the oldest member of the "Spartacus Group," that part of the German Social Democracy that has been fighting for the last four years, under the most difficult circumstances the same fight, with the same means, and along the same tactical lines that you yourself have employed until your endeavors were crowned with victory.

We greeted the news of the victory of the Bolsheviks with a feeling of pride, without envy, as if it were, indeed, our own victory. Gladly we would have joined you, had our ranks not been so terribly depleted. Many of us, and truly not the worst of us, are behind the prison bars, as for instance, Rosa Luxemburg, or in jail, as our Comrade, Karl Liebknecht.

O, that I could send you more promising reports as to the inner life of the German labor world. Like an acid spot, government Socialism continues to dissolve everything with which it comes in contact, although, it has long since run its course morally and politically as well. But it has succeeded, through all sorts of machinations, protected by the state of war, in getting possession of practically every working class paper and organ. Through hundreds of channels it has been able to instill poison and filth into the organism of the masses. That is one of the most crying evils.

There is no denying the fact that the laboring masses are still rushing to the standards of government Socialism, that the Independent Socialists were crushingly defeated in the last three elections.

In the first of these there was, perhaps, the possibility of an excuse. It was the by-election held some time ago in the district Potsdam—Spandau—Ost Havelland. In 1912 Karl Liebknecht had carried this district for the first time. His victory was achieved by a more or less accidental plurality of votes. It was to be expected that the capitalist parties in this district should unite to help the government Socialists in order to protect the Prussian Imperial residence from the election of a Liebknecht man. The victory of the Scheidemann party was a disgrace rather than a triumph.

But such was not the case in the districts of Niederbarmin and Zwickau-Crimitschau, where by-elections were recently held to fill the seats vacated by the deaths of two supporters of the Independent Social Democracy, Stadthagen and Stolle. Both districts were old Socialist strongholds. They had always been represented by radical Socialists. And, as the capitalist parties nominated their own candidates, the issue was fought out clearly and distinctly between the dependent and the independent Socialists.

The dependent Socialists were the victors, of course that made a discouraging impression upon all of our friends.

Of course it is not to be forgotten in this connection, that the fight was carried on with very unequal weapons. The Independents had neither freedom of press, nor the right to hold meetings.

This article an "open letter" to the Bolsheviks by Franz Mehring, dated June 4, 1918, appeared in the June 15 issue of "Pravda," the central organ of the Bolsheviks.

The alignment of Socialist forces in Germany, described by Mehring is now more clearly apparent, since the Revolution marched into action. The Scheidemann Socialists are open traitors to the Revolution; the "Independent Socialists" are hesitating and paltering with the great revolutionary tasks; while the Socialists of the Spartacus Group and the Group Internationale are developing into the masters of the Revolution adhering to a clear, definite and uncompromising program.

Franz Mehring, associated with Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Otto Rühle, is a great Marxian scholar, who uses Marxism as an instrument of revolutionary action, and not as a subterfuge to avoid action. Socialism is to him a theory of action, a means of making history and not simply a means of interpreting history.

As the Revolution develops definitely in Germany, Franz Mehring will appear as a dynamic factor in the great drama.

The usual legal means of political propaganda that were in the fullest measure at the disposal of the dependents were impossible for our candidates. But no matter how much importance we attach this unfavorable circumstance, it can in no wise account for the severity of these defeats. Under the Socialist exception laws the Social Democratic Party more than once carried off a victory under far more adverse circumstances.

The root of the evil lies deeper. These elections have proven what numerous symptoms indicated long ago—that the Independent Social Democracy lacks the revolutionary energy that will arouse and carry away the proletarian masses.

Nothing can be said against its members as individuals. There are efficient people among them, and all of them desire the best of the movement. But the party itself was born under an unlucky star.

It left the government Socialists too late. It hesitated too long and thus, against its own will, became responsible for the misdeeds of its opponents. And when it finally united as a political party, it lacked the foundation of a mutual and clearly outlined world conception. On many, often upon the most vital questions, the views of its individual members are hopelessly divided. The tie that binds them is not the slogan, "Forward," but "Backward."

They aspire to restore the German Social Democracy that existed up to the 4th of August, 1914. They would return to the old "proven tactics," to the "glorious victories," to the successful fight against revisionism from convention to convention.

What could be more utopian and more reactionary? They have exhumed a corpse and are trying to galvanize it into a semblance of life. The old German Social Democracy, with its "old, proven tactics" is shattered, and ground into the dust under the wheels of Imperialism's triumphal chariot. It is gone forever. To-day there exists only the German Social Democracy that came into being in August, 1914.

This mourning of the Independent Social Democracy over irretrievable past shows a complete

blindness to the driving forces of the present time. They seek to cover the wounds they received in Nieder-Barmin by a bitter attack upon the Bolsheviks, under the generalship of Menshevik Stein, with the aid, or, to speak more accurately, under the direction of the great theoretician, Karl Kautsky. There is heroism for you, indeed, and profound statemanship! Karl Marx would turn in his grave if he could see them. It is characteristic of the party that its members should still continue to worship Kautsky as the holy prophet. Did not the 4th of August prove that the learned schoolmaster possesses not a spark of Marxian revolutionary spirit?

For all of these reasons it is obvious that the Independent Social Democracy has neither the impetus nor the power of attracting the German proletariat. The workingman knows full well what class solidarity means to him. He may be ready to split the party. But he will not pay what he justly considers a terrible price in vain.

He will not and cannot be satisfied with a hopeless reactionary utopia. For even if it were possible to realize its aims, this realization would mean the beginning, not the end of crisis. After all, the catastrophe on the 4th of August did not break upon us like a thunderbolt out of a blue sky. It was the inevitable outcome of a disease that had been gnawing at the vitals of the movement for many years, in spite of its glowing exterior.

It has been argued that the Independent Social Democracy did not want the party spirit, that it had been partly driven out of the party by the government Socialists. But the result of this very policy of hesitation, of doing things by halves, was the complete alienation of the masses, strengthening as it does their belief that the Independent Social Democracy is responsible for the division in the ranks of the Social Democracy. And, in truth, what is gained by a split when the Independent Social Democracy insists that its vote against war credits is not based upon a fundamental principle, while the government Socialists maintain that they vote in favor of war credits for purely tactical reasons? In the final analysis both sides, the negative and the affirmative, are actuated by the selfsame motive. They are trying to wash the bear without wetting his skin.

Unless all indications deceive us, the Independent Social Democracy can count with any degree of certainty upon not more than two or three of the seats it now holds. In itself this would be no misfortune, were it not that the party with its support of the "tried and proven tactics" is in the main a parliamentary party. Under these circumstances a decided loss of power is a dangerous symptom for the future.

Actuated by a spirit of self-preservation and an ingrown sense of political responsibility, the Independent Social Democracy goes into the fight again and again, with the "old tried and proven tactics." There were those among us who hoped that it would be possible to act in this new party for the highest good of mankind. The higher the hopes we entertained, the more bitter has been the disillusionment.

Chapters from My Diary

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ments and peoples: these were the nationalists by nature, who had hardly been veneered by a thin coating of Socialist culture, which was being washed off, not day by day, but hour by hour.

The others, with Victor Adler at their head, regarded the war as an external catastrophe, and one had to grin and bear it. The watchful-waiting passivity of the party leaders served merely as a cloak, however, for the unconcealed agitation that was carried on by the active nationalist wing. A sharp and incisive intellect, a charming character, Victor Adler stood far above his policy, which had been completely taken up, in the recent years, with the pursuit of combinations, in the hopeless muddling activity, so characteristic of Austrian conditions, and so fruitful as a ground for pessimistic resignation. Not only was the elder Adler far superior to his policy, but his policy, in turn, was superior, in its naturally individualized character, to the political consorts with whom his policy surrounded the chief. What

was skepticism in him, became cynicism in them, and Adler's voluntary withdrawal into a "decorative" capacity, was transformed, in their case, into open derision as to the basic values of Socialism. And this natural selection of his collaborators constitutes the clearest expression and condemnation of the elder Adler's system.

The son, with his genuinely revolutionary temperament, occupied, by his very nature, a position that was hostile to this system. He directed his criticism, his mistrust, his hatred, chiefly against his own government. When we last met (Aug. 3, 1914), he first of all showed the proclamation the government had just issued to the population, asking them to follow up and intercept all suspicious foreigners. With instantly-kindled aversion he spoke of the opening of the orgy of chauvinism that had set in. His outward reserve only emphasized his profound moral seriousness. Half an hour later, the "Doctor" arrived. He immediately proposed that we go together to the Prefecture, to see Geier, the Chief of Political Police,

in order to consult with him on the intentions of the authorities with regard to the Russian emigrants living in Vienna.

The Chief of Political Police expressed the opinion that tomorrow morning there may be an edict putting all Russians and Serbians under guard. "Those whom we know we will later liberate, but complications may arise. Besides, we should not be able to permit them to leave the country after that."

"So you would recommend leaving the country?"

"Absolutely. And—the quicker the better."

"Very well. I shall go to Switzerland with my family tomorrow."

"Hm!—I should prefer it, if you should leave today."

The time of this conversation was 3 P. M. At 6.40 I was already seated in the train, with my family, and the train was leaving for Switzerland (Zurich).