

Franz Mehring

Ill-fortune seems to dog the footsteps of the Spartacus movement in Germany. Still bleeding from the fearful wound that it received when Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg died a martyr's death at the hands of the mob, it has received another blow with the news of the death of Franz Mehring. Klara Zetkin, mortally ill since her release from prison, alone is left of that brilliant galaxy of stars that, for the last four years, led the revolutionary minority of the German Social-Democracy.

When the German Social-Democratic movement, shortly before the outbreak of the war, celebrated his birthday, it honored in him the great historian, the gifted literat, the remarkable journalist. But the services that the writer rendered to the international movement of the proletariat sink into insignificance before the work that Mehring, the tactician and the revolutionist, accomplished during the last five years of his fruitful life. It was left to these last few years to produce the best that Mehring had to give to the cause of the social revolution.

After a checkered political career Mehring joined the Social-Democratic Party of Germany in 1890. He came from a bourgeois family in Pomerania, and as a young student in Berlin became actively connected with the bourgeois liberal movement. At that time there were still honest bourgeois liberals in German political life. Mehring received his first journalistic training in the fearless democratic newspaper "Zukunft," which was suppressed in 1871 because it opposed the forcible annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. In 1873 his first Socialist brochure, "Herr von Treitschke, the Socialist Killer, and the Aims of Liberalism," a Socialist reply, was published by the Co-operative Press of Leipzig. But Mehring continued to work as Berlin correspondent to the "Frankfurter Zeitung," and continued to contribute regular articles to the "Wage," the weekly edition of the suppressed "Zukunft." Although not a member, Mehring stood in close touch with the Social-Democratic Party that was organized at Gotha in 1875. But a personal conflict that arose between Mehring and the owner of the "Frankfurter Zeitung" at that time drove him further than ever away from the Socialist movement.

Then followed a period in Mehring's political career that for years blackened his name in the eyes of the German comrades. In the first edition of his famous "History of the German Social-Democracy" that appeared at this time, and in a series of articles in the "Gartenlaube," he bitterly attacked, not only the leaders of the movement, but the Social-Democracy itself. This was at a time when the party was writhing under a series of shameful persecutions that culminated in the adoption of the infamous anti-Socialist laws. Later, when Mehring's opponents in the party used his anti-Socialist activity at this time as a basis for their attacks upon him, Mehring explained his position in a pamphlet entitled "Meine Rechtfertigung" (My Justification), saying that at that time he still believed that a monarchistic government could, with honest intentions, inaugurate a policy of real reform, and could therefore accomplish more in the interests of the working class than the revolutionary movement of the Social-Democracy. The way in which the anti-Socialist laws were carried out, however, quickly disillusioned him, and in a very short time, Mehring became the sharpest and most relentless opponent of all who fought the Socialist movement, trying with all his power to undo the harm he had done. Bebel later asserted that Mehring was worth more to the Socialist movement at this time than a whole regiment of Socialist agitators. "Without him we could not have made use of one-tenth of our weapons."

Mehring's defection at that time was not, after all, a betrayal of his own principles. He simply had failed as yet to understand the full import of the Socialist movement. He was not yet a Socialist, and sympathized with the Social-Democracy only inasmuch as it seemed to him to be the expression of the longing of the people for democracy. Even after his change of front, he did not join the party, but tried to found a great democratic party. At this time he became the editor of the progressive "Berliner Volkszeitung," and in its columns fought the battles of the Social-Democracy, which had been deprived of the possibility of voicing its protest in organs of its own. The bold language of the "Berliner Volkszeitung" made it possible, in time, for the Socialist press to write a little more freely in its own behalf. A heated conflict with the influential author, Paul Lindau, in 1890, finally