

Ninetieth anniversary of the German SPD voting for war

August 4, 1914, and its consequences

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This Wednesday marked the ninetieth anniversary of the most fateful date in the history of German social democracy. On August 4, 1914, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) fraction in the German parliament voted in favour of war credits enabling German imperialism to go to war. With the notorious statement of its chairman Hugo Haase, “We will not desert our fatherland in its hour of need,” the SPD placed itself firmly behind Kaiser Wilhelm II and his government in what was to emerge as the bloodiest mass slaughter in human history until that time.

The vote in favour of war credits represented an unprecedented betrayal of everything the SPD stood for. The German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg described the betrayal as follows: “Never before in the history of class struggles, since there have been political parties, has there been a party that, in this way, after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after achieving a first-rate position of power, after assembling millions around it, has so completely and ignominiously abdicated as a political force within twenty-four hours, as Social Democracy has done.” And she concluded: “On August 4, 1914, German social democracy abdicated politically, and at the same time the socialist international collapsed.”

For a period of more than four decades, the SPD had educated the working class on the basis of international solidarity and hostility towards imperialism. In November 1912, the party had played a leading role at the congress of International Socialists in Basel, which expressly called upon the working class to resist moves towards war.

The manifesto drawn up and agreed upon at the conference by all the major European socialist parties declared: “This congress...calls upon the workers of all countries to oppose capitalist imperialism with the power of the international solidarity of the working class.” The manifesto threatened the “ruling classes of all nations” with revolutionary consequences in the event of war and warned: “It would be insane should governments not realise that the mere thought of the monstrosity of a world war would evoke the outrage and anger of the working class. The proletariat regards it as criminal should they be forced to shoot at one another in order to further the profits of capitalists, the ambitions of dynasties or in order to honour secret diplomatic treaties.”

The declaration in favour of “defence of the fatherland” represented a radical departure from these principles. Applied to the International as a whole, it meant that the workers of every country were obliged to participate in the slaughter of workers from other countries in order to defend their own “fatherland.” The decision represented a death blow for the Socialist International.

The support for “defence of the fatherland” meant that the SPD had shifted into the camp of German imperialism. The party went on to suppress any opposition to the war. Along with the vote in favour of war credits went a commitment to a social “cease-fire”—a halt to the class struggle in all its forms so long as the “fatherland” was in danger.

Following the declaration by SPD leader Haase, the German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, was able to state with satisfaction and to the furious applause of the right wing that the German people “united down to the last man” were behind the German army and navy. Social democratic party organisations and the party’s press switched to disseminating propaganda for the war and conducting a venomous and chauvinist campaign.

The SPD had been transformed from an opponent of the ruling order into one of its props. Just four years later, the party took over responsibility to rescue anything and everything that could be saved from the ruins of the Wilhelmine Empire—its military elite, which it embraced as an ally against the revolutionary working class; the dilapidated army units (Freikorps), which later became the backbone of Hitler’s stormtroopers (SA); the authoritarian state and its legal system based on officialdom; the aristocratic large-scale land owners (Junkers); and the capitalist private property of the major industrial barons, banks and trusts.

All the anti-democratic forces and institutions, which would later be described in tones of angry criticism by some social democratic historians, were only able to survive thanks to the support of the SPD. The SPD garbed these institutions with the mantle of the Weimar constitution and allowed them to fester until they shifted into the camp of National Socialism in the 1930s.

The SPD would not have been able to prevent a parliamentary majority for war credits in 1914, even if it had voted en bloc against them. It is also questionable whether an open appeal for resistance would have been able to prevent or delay the outbreak of war. Enthusiasm for war had gripped broad layers of the population in the summer of 1914, although—as one historian, Heinrich August Winkler, notes—there was little evidence of a “widespread nationalist patriotism amongst social democratic workers.”

This, however, was not the decisive issue. Much more important than its short-term effects were the long-term consequences of the social democratic betrayal. A courageous stance against the war might have temporarily isolated the SPD and opened it up to state repression, but its moral and political stature would have grown enormously. If the party had merely stated the truth—that the war was an imperialist war of conquest for which Germany bore the chief responsibility—instead of dressing the slaughter up as defence of the fatherland, it would have established the political preconditions for a powerful socialist movement, which could have not only put a stop to the war but also swept aside the reactionary social structures that had given rise to war in the first place.

The initial enthusiasm for the war on the part of the broad masses could not last long. The war itself did everything to rapidly dissipate this sentiment. The senseless slaughter at the unmoving front lines, together with the poverty and need of the civilian population, undermined the nationalist frenzy and any dreams of a rapid victory.

Just one year into the war, Leon Trotsky, who had closely followed the

moods of the European masses, wrote: “Even though they were not in a position to stop the war or in its early phases call those governing to account, if the socialist parties had rejected any responsibility for the worldwide slaughter from the very start—how great would be the authority of international socialism to which the masses, deceived by militarism and dejected by sorrow and growing need, would increasingly turn to as if to a true shepherd of the peoples!... And every liberation programme which each section of the battered International now drags through the bloody mire at the end of its flagpole would become a powerful reality for the offensive of the socialist proletariat against all the forces of the old society.”

Not only did the social democratic betrayal serve to prolong the war. Without exaggeration, one can say that the rest of the twentieth century would have taken a different course if the SPD had not capitulated on August 4. Had a healthy and vibrant democracy on socialist foundations been formed in Germany after the war, instead of the hybrid known as the Weimar Republic, which provided a pseudo-democratic cloak for the forces of reaction to prosper behind, then Hitler and his brown shirts would never have been able to take power.

And the consequences of the betrayal by the SPD were by no means limited to Germany. The Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union can only be understood in connection with this betrayal.

The Russian Marxists, who were both internationalists and vehemently opposed to the war, undertook precisely those measures in 1917 that the SPD failed to carry out. Not only did they sweep away reaction in the form of the Tsarist throne, they also did away with the social structures on which this throne was based and set up the first workers state in history. This was an act of unparalleled courage and audacity, which could not, however, survive for long on a national basis. The leading Bolsheviks were convinced that support for their revolution would come from abroad. They regarded the October Revolution as just the first stage on the path to the socialist world revolution. Revolution in the West—and, in particular, Germany—would assist the Bolsheviks to overcome the economic and cultural backwardness inherited by the revolution.

However, the revolution in Germany was strangled by the SPD. The Soviet Union remained isolated and rooted in such isolation and backwardness that a bureaucratic cancer emerged that elevated Stalin as its leader, increasingly monopolised political power, and finally, in the late 1930s, undertook the liquidation of an entire generation of revolutionaries. Stalinism also seized control of the Communist International and imposed a course on its sections that led to a series of further defeats for the international proletariat. The most catastrophic of all took place in Germany in 1933, where the political line laid down by Stalin served to split and paralyse the working class, allowing Hitler to assume power without any real resistance.

Since then, the SPD has repeatedly referred to the crimes of Stalinism to justify its own policies. In so doing, it has concealed the original connection between its policies and the rise of Stalinism. Indeed, even basic concepts taken up by Stalin were originally developed by theoreticians of the German SPD. The most important tenet of Stalinism—the theory of “building socialism in a single country”—was originally propagated by the right-wing German social democrat Georg von Vollmar. Vollmar regarded the nation-state as the basis for the construction of socialism. The parliamentary fraction was able to base its stance on his work when it spoke out in favour of “the defence of the fatherland” on August 4.

The term “betrayal” is entirely appropriate to describe the reaction of the SPD on August 4. In voting for war, the party betrayed everything it had stood for up to that point. It would be wrong, however, to interpret this term in a purely subjective fashion. The degeneration of a party with decades of history behind it, with a membership and electoral support numbering millions, cannot be explained on the basis of the behaviour of a

handful of leaders. Such an event must have deep, objective roots.

The First World War signalled the end of an entire epoch in which economic development, and with it the development of the workers movement, had taken place predominantly within the confines of the nation-state. In 1914, Trotsky wrote a penetrating analysis of the collapse of the Second International, *The War and the International*. He recognised the objective meaning of the war in “the breakdown of the present national economic centres, and the substitution of a world economy in its stead.”

“The War proclaims the downfall of the national state,” Trotsky wrote. “The Socialist parties of the epoch now concluded were national parties. They had become ingrained in the national states with all the different branches of their organizations, with all their activities and with their psychology. In the face of the solemn declarations at their congresses they rose to the defence of the conservative state, when imperialism, grown big on the national soil, began to demolish the antiquated national barriers. And in their historic crash the national states have pulled down with them the national Socialist parties also.”

In one way or another, this was the fate shared by many of the sections of the Second International. In Germany, the contradiction between the official revolutionary rhetoric and its capitulation to the national interests of the ruling class took an especially pronounced form because the SPD had always garbed itself in the robes of orthodox Marxism.

“Theoretically the German labour movement marched under the banner of Marxism. Still in its dependence on the conditions of the period, Marxism became for the German proletariat not the algebraic formula of the revolution that it was at the beginning, but the theoretic method for adaptation to a national-capitalist state crowned with the ‘Prussian helmet’.... The entire activity of the German Social Democracy was directed towards the awakening of the backward workers, through a systematic fight for their most immediate needs the gathering of strength, the increase of membership, the filling of the treasury, the development of the press, the conquest of all the positions that presented themselves, their utilization and expansion. This was the great historical work of the awakening and educating of the ‘unhistorical’ class.... This whole many-sided activity, of immeasurable historical importance, was permeated through and through with the spirit of possibilism. In forty-five years history did not offer the German proletariat a single opportunity to remove an obstacle by a stormy attack, or to capture any hostile position in a revolutionary advance.”

“Marxism, of course, was not merely something accidental or insignificant in the German labour movement. Yet there would be no basis for deducing the social-revolutionary character of the party from its official Marxist ideology. Ideology is an important, but not a decisive factor in politics. Its role is that of waiting on politics.... The fact that the class which was revolutionary in its tendencies was forced for several decades to adapt itself to the monarchical police state, based on the tremendous capitalist development of the country, in the course of which adaptation an organization of a million members was built up and a labour bureaucracy which led the entire movement was educated—this fact does not cease to exist and does not lose its weighty significance because Marxism anticipated the revolutionary character of the future movement. Only the most naive ideology could give the same place to this forecast that it does to the political actualities of the German labour movement.”

The declared revisionists who openly rejected the social revolution always represented a minority at the SPD congresses. But the “critical repudiation of revisionism as a theory does not mean its complete tactical and psychological conquest. The parliamentarians, trade unionists and cooperative members continued to survive and operate in an atmosphere of all-round *possibilismus*, practical specialisation and national limitations.”

These elements dominated in 1914 as the SPD was confronted with the

outbreak of war. At the same time, the war exposed the bankruptcy of their reformist perspective. In the past, the revisionists had propagated a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism based on reforms; now they were defending the interests of German capitalism with military force.

The lessons from the events of August 1914 are important in understanding today's SPD.

The speed and the extent of the party's lurch to the right after taking office six years ago has surprised many people. No one had seriously expected that the party would pursue any sort of socialist policies, but there was, nevertheless, a widespread expectation that the SPD would demonstrate a certain degree of consideration for the socially disadvantaged and for democratic rights. Instead, with its "Agenda 2010," the social democratic government has set about destroying social gains dating in some cases to the era of Chancellor Bismarck in the nineteenth century. It has virtually done away with the right to asylum and has enormously accelerated the process of militarism with its reorganisation of the German army into an international rapid intervention force.

When one draws the lessons from the history of the SPD, then this lurch to the right is entirely comprehensible. After the First World War, many workers turned their backs on the party and joined the newly founded German Communist Party (KPD). The catastrophic policies of the KPD served to slow down the decline of the SPD, and cold war policies and economic recovery after the Second World War created conditions in which the party could re-establish political influence. The reformist perspective that had failed so miserably in 1914 now seemed to have a certain credibility. In the post-war period, living standards rose for broad layers of working people without having to raise the issue of the future of the capitalist system. The SPD posed as a party embodying social and democratic progress while simultaneously breaking completely with Marxist conceptions and the class struggle.

The globalisation of the economy, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the volcanic eruption of American imperialism have stripped away the basis for social democratic reformist policies. The world is once again confronting violent eruptions similar to those that emerged at the beginning of the last century, and the SPD is reacting correspondingly. No longer able to reconcile gaping class contradictions, it has lined up unreservedly with the rich and powerful. Its Agenda 2010 is only a taste of what is to come.

Under such circumstances, any attempts to breathe new life into the social reformist policies of the 1970s by putting pressure on the SPD or establishing a new reformist party are simply preposterous. Such attempts can only come to a dead end. To defend social and democratic rights, a programme is necessary that differs fundamentally from that of the SPD and that corresponds to the economic and political transformations that have taken place worldwide. At the heart of such a programme lies the necessity to unite the working class internationally and the reorganisation of economic life along socialist principles.



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