

The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

Part two

30 September 2010

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held its Founding Congress May 22-24, 2010 in Berlin. The Congress adopted the document "The Historical Foundations of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit" on May 23.

We are publishing the document in serialized form. Below is the second of eleven parts.

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V. The centrism of the USPD

27. In Germany on the evening of August 4, the *Gruppe Internationale* (later known as the Spartacus League) was founded on the initiative of Rosa Luxemburg. In *Die Internationale* and the illegally distributed *Spartakusbriefe* (Spartacus Letters) the group decisively opposed the war and, with Karl Liebknecht, who had rejected the war credits, had a deputy in the Reichstag (national parliament). The first editorial in *Die Internationale* from the pen of Rosa Luxemburg began with the words: "On August 4th, 1914, German Social Democracy abdicated politically, and at the same time the Socialist International collapsed. All attempts at denying or concealing this fact, regardless of the motives on which they are based, tend objectively to perpetuate, and to justify, the disastrous self-deception of the socialist parties, the inner malady of the movement, that led to the collapse, and in the long run to make the Socialist International a fiction, a hypocrisy". There followed a sharp reckoning with the rightwing party majority and Karl Kautsky, the representative of the "Marxist Centre" or "theoretician of the swamp", as Luxemburg called him. 12

28. Centrism, as personified by Kautsky, proved to be a far greater obstacle to the revolutionary development of the working class than the largely discredited policies of the rightwing SPD leaders. It wavered between opposition and adaptation, adjusting in words to the radical tendencies among the workers, while tending in practice towards the rightwing course of the SPD leaders. In April 1917, the centrists organized themselves in the Independent SPD (USPD), after several Reichstag deputies had been expelled from the SPD because they had refused to extend the war credits. The USPD was led by Reichstag deputies Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour. In their ranks were many prominent leaders of the pre-war social democracy, like the revisionist Eduard Bernstein, the economist and later Finance Minister Rudolf Hilferding and the theoretician Karl Kautsky. In November 1918, when workers' and soldiers' soviets rose up and forced the kaiser to abdicate, the USPD

opposed the establishment of a soviet republic and joined the government of the majority Social Democrat, Friedrich Ebert. While Ebert allied himself with the army command, disempowered the soviets, suppressed the workers' rebellions and saved the bourgeois order, the USPD served him as a left fig leaf.

29. The programme and politics of the USPD were marked by indecision, compromise and half-heartedness. It stood in glaring contrast to the mood of the workers, who, just 10 days after the party congress establishing the USPD, mounted the first mass strike against the war in Berlin. The USPD's opposition to the war was limited to passive calls for peace. It rejected any revolutionary initiatives. After it entered the Ebert government, Rosa Luxemburg characterized the USPD with the words: "It always trudged behind events and developments, never walking at their head. It has never been able to lay down a fundamental delineation between itself and the dependent [SPD]. Every lurid ambiguity, which led to the confusion of the masses: negotiated peace, League of Nations, disarmament, the Wilson cult, all the clichés of bourgeois demagoguery, which spread a darkening veil over the naked, abrupt facts of the revolutionary alternative during the war, found its eager support. The entire attitude of the party swung helplessly around the cardinal contradiction that, on the one hand, it tried to win the bourgeois governments as the competent powers for peace, while, on the other hand, it put the case for mass action by the proletariat. A faithful mirror of the contradictory practice is the eclectic theory: a hotchpotch of radical formulas hopelessly abandoning the socialist spirit.... Up to the outbreak of the revolution it was a case by case policy, without a comprehensive world view, which illuminates the past and future of German social democracy from a single light source, which has a view for the large sweep of the development". 13

30. The theoretical head of the USPD was Karl Kautsky, who justified its centrist politics with hackneyed bits and pieces of history and denounced the Russian October revolution. "Everything is recognised in Marxism except the revolutionary methods of struggle, the propaganda and preparation of those methods, and the education of the masses in this direction", as Lenin mockingly remarked about Kautsky. 14 At the center of Kautsky's attack on Marxism was the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat. At a time when the war was exposing the democratic state everywhere as a brutal form of bourgeois class rule, Kautsky denied the working class the right to establish its own rule by revolutionary means. After the collapse of official social patriotism, international Kautskyism had become the most important factor on which capitalist society relied, as Trotsky noted. 15

31. The German November revolution confirmed this. By entering the Ebert government, the USPD contributed decisively to its defeat. The November revolution, from which the Weimar Republic emerged, was, as Trotsky wrote, "no democratic completion of the bourgeois revolution, it

was a proletarian revolution decapitated by the Social Democrats; more correctly, it was a bourgeois counter-revolution, which was compelled to preserve pseudo-democratic forms after its victory over the proletariat.”¹⁶ This had tragic consequences. All the social forces that 15 years later would help Hitler to power, survived the revolution unscathed: the Prussian landed nobility, which formed the sediment of political reaction; the industrial barons and the financial aristocracy, who were responsible for Germany’s expansive war aims; the army command, which developed into a state within the state; the judges and officials, who rejected democracy; not to speak of the Soldateska, whom the Weimar Republic could not offer any civilian perspective and who became the foot soldiers of the Nazis. The working class had to pay a heavy price for the politics of centrism. That is the bitter historical lesson from the actions of the USPD in the November revolution.

VI. The KPD

32. Although the Spartacus League sharply criticized the SPD and the USPD, it did not break organizationally with them. While it insisted on full freedom of action, it nevertheless remained within the SPD and in 1917 joined the newly created USPD. Not until a month after the November revolution did it finally leave the USPD and, on January 1, 1919, form the German Communist Party. Just two weeks later, its most well-known leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were killed by the murderous gangs of the social democratic Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske.

33. Rosa Luxemburg justified remaining in the SPD and the USPD with the argument: “It is not sufficient that a handful of people has the best prescription in their pocket and already knows how one is to lead the masses. The masses must be mentally wrested away from the traditions of the last 50 years; they must be freed from them. And this can only be done in the vast process of constant internal self-criticism of the movement as a whole”.¹⁷ This view underestimated the social gulf that had opened up between the SPD and the USPD on the one hand, and the working class on the other. Before the war, the withdrawal from the SPD—a legal mass party, which officially claimed to be Marxist and that enjoyed great authority among workers—would have isolated the revolutionary wing from the class-conscious workers. But after the SPD’s support for the war credits the situation presented itself differently. The SPD had gone over completely to the camp of the ruling class. This had to bring it, inevitably, into conflict with the working class. It was necessary to prepare for this conflict by elaborating a clear political and organizational alternative. If in Russia in 1917 the presence of a party steeled by many years of struggle against opportunism had made possible the victory of the October revolution, the absence of such a party in 1918-19 was the cause of bitter defeats for the proletariat in Germany.

34. Due to its late formation and the loss of its most important leaders, the first years of the German Communist Party, the KPD, were extremely difficult. It lacked political and theoretical unity and an experienced cadre. Bitterness over the betrayal of the SPD temporarily resulted in ultra-left, anti-parliamentary and anarchist conceptions gaining influence, and a leftwing split-off in the form of the KAPD in April 1920. In December of the same year, the majority of the USPD broke with the rightwing leadership and joined the KPD. This made the KPD a mass party, but it also brought new political problems. Between 1919 and 1921, the KPD took part in several premature and badly prepared attempted uprisings. Just five days after its establishment, the party supported the so-called Spartacus uprising in Berlin, which was bloodily suppressed. In 1921, in the so-called March action, the KPD and KAPD jointly called for a

general strike and for the overthrow of the Reich government, after it had deployed armed police units against workers in central Germany. The subsequent defeat cost the lives of approximately 2,000 workers.

35. The Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 argued intensively against the left radicalism in the KPD and other sections. In his pamphlet “Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder”, Lenin criticised “petty bourgeois revolutionism”, which rejects political compromises under all circumstances, which denies the legitimacy of participation in elections or in parliament and which considers it impermissible to work in the reactionary trade unions. The Congress, Trotsky wrote, “advanced the slogan: ‘To the masses’, that is, to the conquest of power through a previous conquest of the masses, achieved on the basis of the daily life and struggles”.¹⁸ It developed a programme of transitional demands, which linked the daily needs of the workers to the goal of the proletarian seizure of power, and endorsed the tactic of the united front. This tactic was aimed at establishing, in daily struggles on the basis of practical joint measures, an effective unity between the reformist, social democratic organisations and parties, which commanded the loyalty of the majority of the working class, and the revolutionary communist parties. The united front corresponded to the needs and instinctive drive of the masses for unity in the struggle to achieve important demands, the defence of wages and political rights and mobilisation against fascist attacks. It did not, however, mean renouncing criticism of political opponents inside the workers’ organisations. On the contrary, it created the conditions for the masses, on the basis of their own experiences, to convince themselves of the effectiveness of the communists and the uselessness of social democracy.

36. The change in course carried through at the Third Congress strengthened and stabilised the KPD. But in 1923 the political situation changed dramatically. France’s occupation of the Ruhr area unleashed a political and economic crisis, which culminated in an exceptional revolutionary situation. The collapse of the German currency led to the pauperisation and radicalisation of broad layers of workers and the middle classes. The SPD rapidly lost influence, while the KPD’s support grew. On the right, fascist groups won influence. In August, a general strike initiated by the KPD forced the rightwing government of the industrial magnate Wilhelm Cuno to resign. The DVU politician Gustav Stresemann formed a new government along with the SPD. It handed executive power to General von Seeckt, the commander in chief of the Reichswehr, and by means of an enabling act eliminated the social achievements of the November revolution, including the eight hour working day. The whole country was polarized. In Saxony and Thuringia, left-wing SPD governments moved towards the KPD, while in Bavaria, fascist forces in alliance with the military prepared a coup against the Reich government.

37. It took a long time for the KPD to recognise the revolutionary situation. Only from August onwards did it undertake serious revolutionary preparations, in close co-operation with the Comintern. But on October 21 the party leadership, under Heinrich Brandler, called off a carefully prepared uprising at the last second, because leftwing SPD delegates at a factory councils’ congress in Chemnitz refused to give their agreement. Instead of culminating in a revolution, the German October ended in a political fiasco. In Hamburg, the decision by the leadership to call off the struggle for power came too late, and the uprising went ahead nevertheless. It remained isolated and was suppressed by force. In Saxony and Thuringia the Reichswehr deposed the left-wing governments. The KPD was banned.

38. Trotsky paid great attention to the lessons of the German October. Contrary to Stalin and Zinoviev, who justified the defeat by invoking the supposed immaturity of the situation, he called it “a truly classic example of a revolutionary situation permitted to slip by”, whose causes “lie wholly in tactics and not in objective conditions”. The Russian October revolution had already shown that the subjective factor, the party, plays

the decisive role in an objectively revolutionary situation. The same had now been proven in the German October, but in the negative.

39. "From the moment of the Ruhr occupation", Trotsky concluded, "it was imperative for the Communist Party to steer a firm and resolute course toward the conquest of power. Only a courageous tactical turn could have unified the German proletariat in the struggle for power. If at the Third Congress and in part of the Fourth Congress we told the German comrades, 'You will win the masses only on the basis of taking a leading part in their struggle for transitional demands,' then by the middle of 1923 the question became posed differently: after all the German proletariat had gone through in recent years, it could be led into the decisive battle only in the event that it became convinced that this time the issue was posed, as the Germans say, *aufs Ganze* (i.e., that it was not a question of this or that partial task, but of the fundamental one), and that the Communist Party was ready to march into battle and was capable of securing victory. But the German Communist Party executed this turn without the necessary assurance and after an extreme delay. Both the Rights and the Lefts, despite their sharp struggle against each other, evinced up to September-October [1923] a rather fatalistic attitude toward the process of the development of the revolution. At a time when the entire objective situation demanded that the party undertake a decisive blow, the party did not act to organize the revolution but kept awaiting it". 19

40. In his pamphlet "Lessons of October", Trotsky stressed that the leadership of a revolutionary party must be capable of recognizing abrupt changes in the objective situation in time and to reorient the party. Based on past experiences, he wrote, "We can posit as almost an unalterable law that a party crisis is inevitable in the transition from preparatory revolutionary activity to the immediate struggle for power". A new tactical re-orientation always meant a break with past methods and customs. "If the turn is too abrupt or too sudden, and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia and conservatism have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party will prove itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of years or decades. The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by and heads toward defeat. A revolutionary party is subjected to the pressure of other political forces. At every given stage of its development the party elaborates its own methods of counteracting and resisting this pressure. During a tactical turn and the resulting internal regroupments and frictions, the party's power of resistance becomes weakened. From this the possibility always arises that the internal groupings in the party, which originate from the necessity of a turn in tactics, may develop far beyond the original controversial points of departure and serve as a support for various class tendencies. To put the case more plainly: the party that does not keep step with the historical tasks of its own class becomes, or runs the risk of becoming, the indirect tool of other classes". 20

VII. Stalinism and the Left Opposition

41. The defeat of the German revolution had a direct effect on the Soviet Union. It strengthened the reactionary forces out of which the Stalinist dictatorship would eventually arise. The economic backwardness and international isolation of the first workers' state led to the development of a bureaucracy in the state and the party that increasingly sought to establish its own interests. Because of the shortage of educated forces, the Soviet government had brought many former tsarist officials into the administration. In the 1921 New Economic Policy (NEP), it had made concessions to capitalist layers, in order to encourage the growth of the economy and to overcome the devastating consequences of the war and

civil war. These conservative elements increasingly exerted an influence on the communist party, which had been exhausted by the civil war. They regarded the programme of the world socialist revolution with distrust and endeavoured to consolidate their own social position.

42. The German defeat gave succour to these conservative currents. It dashed the hope that the Soviet economy would soon win support from an advanced industrialized country. The Soviet Union remained isolated, and the failure of the KPD seemed to confirm all those who did not want to link the fate of the Soviet Union with the international successes of the communist movement, but would rather rest on their own national forces. "Had the German revolution conquered toward the end of 1923", Trotsky wrote, in summarizing the effects of the German defeat, "the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would have been cleansed and consolidated without any internal convulsions. But the German revolution ended in one of the most terrible capitulations in working class history. The defeat of the German revolution gave a powerful impetus to all the processes of reaction inside the Soviet Republic. Hence the struggle against the 'permanent revolution' and 'Trotskyism' in the Party led to the creation of the theory of socialism in one country, and so on". 21

43. Just a few weeks after the German defeat, Stalin and Bukharin announced the theory of "socialism in one country", which expressed the material interests of the bureaucracy and became the main thrust of its attack on Marxism. "Socialism in one country" meant a complete break with the international perspective that had informed the October Revolution, and signified a rejection of the strategic conclusions that Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg had drawn from the collapse of the Second International. Its origins can be traced back to the right-wing German social democrat, Georg von Vollmar, who in 1878 had already propagated the theory of an "isolated socialist state".

44. Trotsky summarized the contradiction between the international perspective of Marxism and the national perspective of the Stalinists with the words: "Marxism takes its point of departure from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market, and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries. The imperialist war (of 1914-1918) was one of the expressions of this fact. In respect of the technique of production, socialist society must represent a stage higher than capitalism. To aim at building a *nationally isolated* socialist society means, in spite of all passing successes, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism. To attempt, regardless of the geographical, cultural and historical conditions of the country's development, which constitutes a part of the world unity, to realize a shut-off proportionality of all the branches of economy within a national framework, means to pursue a reactionary utopia...". 22

45. The perspective of "socialism in a single country" influenced all aspects of Soviet domestic and foreign policy. In domestic policy, it robbed the leadership of a political compass. The Stalin faction pursued an empirical zigzag course, which intensified economic and social contradictions, and which repeatedly drove the country to the edge of civil war. In order to strengthen its position over the working class, it initially promoted the large farmers and speculators. When these threatened to become too powerful, Stalin carried out a panic-stricken shift to the left, pushed through the collectivization of agriculture by force and set about industrialization at a speed that made excessive demands on the workers. Stalin was consistent only in his actions against the Left Opposition, which he persecuted ever more violently after each shift in policy.

46. In foreign policy, the Stalinist regime sacrificed an international revolutionary orientation to national interests. It transformed the Comintern into a tool of Soviet foreign policy and used its sections for its manoeuvres with bourgeois governments. In countries where the Soviet

Union expected support from the government, the communist parties followed a course of class collaboration, which finally turned them into instruments of the counter-revolution. The first consequences of this political perspective were the defeat of the British general strike in May 1926 and the Chinese revolution in April 1927. In Britain, the communist party had placed itself uncritically behind the TUC, the trade union umbrella organization, with which Stalin hoped to establish friendly relations. When the TUC stabbed the general strike in the back—which was not difficult to foresee—the working class was completely unprepared. In China, the communist party supported the bourgeois Kuomintang, which then, in 1927, massacred thousands of communist party members.

47. From 1923, the struggle between the Stalin faction and the Left Opposition dominated the internal life of the communist party of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, whose political course Trotsky and his supporters fought to correct. They proposed measures against bureaucratisation and for the re-establishment of internal party democracy. They argued for an economic policy that strengthened the working class and the poor peasants against the profiteers of the NEP and the better-off peasants. They drew the lessons of the German defeat and argued vehemently against the wrong policies of the Comintern in Britain and China. The centre of the conflict concerned two irreconcilable perspectives, *permanent revolution* and *socialism in a single country*. The Left Opposition insisted on the fact that the fate of the workers' state and its further development to socialism were inseparably bound up with the development of the world socialist revolution. The Stalinists wanted to develop a nationally isolated socialist society on the basis of Russian resources.

48. The analyses, predictions and warnings of the Left Opposition were regularly confirmed in practice. Its ranks included many prominent party members who had played an outstanding role in the October revolution. For a time in 1926, it joined together with the supporters of Zinoviev and Kamenev to form the United Opposition. Now a large part of Lenin's party leadership (including his widow Krupskaya) stood in opposition to the Stalin faction. But the international defeats, for which the Stalinists were largely to blame, strengthened the bureaucracy. "It defeated all these enemies, the Opposition, the party and Lenin, not with ideas and arguments, but with its own social weight. The leaden rump of bureaucracy outweighed the head of the revolution", 23 is how Trotsky summarized the reasons for the victory of the bureaucracy. The Stalinist bureaucracy proceeded using slander, historical falsification, party expulsions, banishment, persecution and, finally, execution squads against its opponents. Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo in 1926 and from the party in 1927. In 1928 he was banished to Kazakhstan, in 1929 was exiled from the country, and in 1940 he was murdered by a Stalinist agent.

49. The Left Opposition found support in the communist parties of Europe and China. In 1928, James P. Cannon brought back Trotsky's critique of the draft programme of the Comintern 24 to the USA and thereby laid the foundations for the American Trotskyist movement. Through a long process of political and ideological clarification, the International Left Opposition and later the Fourth International were to emerge. Following his expulsion from the Soviet Union, Trotsky devoted a great deal of his energy to this task.

To be continued

NOTES:

12 Rosa Luxemburg, *Rebuilding the International*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/xx/rebuild-int.htm>

13 Rosa Luxemburg, *Parteitag der Unabhängigen SP*, In *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, Berlin 1987, p. 423-424

14 V.I. Lenin, *The proletarian revolution and the renegade Kautsky*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/preface.htm>

15 Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/terrcomm/index.htm>

Permanent 16 Leon Trotsky, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/index.htm>

17 Rosa Luxemburg, *Rückblick auf die Gothaer Konferenz*, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, p. 274

18 Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/index.htm>

19 Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/intro.htm>

20 Leon Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/index.htm>

21 Leon Trotsky, *The Defense of the Soviet Union and the Opposition*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1929/09/fi-b.htm>

22 Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/prge.htm>

23 Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/index.htm>

24 Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*



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