Eighty years since Hitler's coming to power

Peter Schwarz
2 February 2013

Eighty years ago, on January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed the leader of the Nazis, Adolf Hitler, as German chancellor. In the ensuing twelve years, the Hitler regime committed crimes never previously witnessed by mankind. It smashed the organized labor movement, subjected the country to a totalitarian dictatorship, destroyed Europe in an unprovoked war of aggression, and murdered millions of Jews, Roma and other minorities.

January 30, 1933 was a historic turning point. Before then, barbarism and anti-Semitism had been considered traits of economic and cultural backwardness. In 1933, however, the elite of a country that was highly developed both economically and culturally handed over power to a barbaric anti-Semite whose party relied on the dregs of society.

The source of this development lay in the irresolvable contradictions of German and international capitalism. The consequences of World War I and the onset of the global economic crisis in 1929 had ruined broad layers of the working class and middle class. German society was deeply divided; democracy existed only in name. The Weimar Republic survived on the basis of emergency decrees and presidential cabinets as it headed towards a social explosion.

Under these conditions, Hindenburg decided to entrust Hitler with the reins of government. The Nazis were needed to crush the workers' movement. They had mass support among desperate layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat, which they mobilized against the organized labor movement. The destruction of the labor movement was the prerequisite for the preparation of the war of conquest that German business so urgently demanded.

Hindenburg's decision was supported by the heads of the army, by big business and by the bourgeois parties. Hitler did not have to conquer power; it was handed to him by the ruling elite. The claim, however, that the majority of Germans supported Hitler is patently false.

In the last election before the handover of power, held in November of 1932, the two major workers' parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD), received half a million more votes than Hitler's NSDAP. The workers hated the Nazis. Not only did they vote against Hitler, they wanted to fight him. But their leaders proved incapable of conducting such a struggle.

The SPD, which had crushed the proletarian revolution of 1918-19, had no intention of mobilizing the workers. The party took refuge behind the state, which it claimed would tame the Nazis. It encouraged illusions in the police and in the army and Hindenburg, whom the SPD backed in the Reichstag election of 1932. Nine months later, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor.

The social democratic-dominated unions went even further. The General Federation of German Trade Unions (ADGB) professed its loyalty to the new regime and demonstrated on May 1, 1933 under the swastika. All to no avail. On May 2, the Nazis stormed the union headquarters.

The key to stopping Hitler rested in the hands of the Communist Party, which had been founded in 1919 in response to the rightward turn of the SPD. Under the influence of Stalin, however, the KPD pursued a disastrous policy. It refused to make any distinction between National Socialists and Social Democrats, designating the latter as "social fascists." The KPD leadership strictly refused to conclude a defensive alliance with the SPD against the Nazis.

Leon Trotsky and his followers fought tirelessly for such a united front, and were bitterly persecuted by the Stalinists. The Stalinist policy assumed an ultra-left form, but in fact it concealed the refusal of the Communist Party to undertake any struggle to expose the SPD leadership, win over social democratic workers

© World Socialist Web Site

and mount a serious struggle to oppose Hitler.

"No policy of the Communist Party could, of course, have transformed the Social Democracy into a party of the revolution," Trotsky wrote in May 1933. "But neither was that the aim. It was necessary to exploit to the limit the contradiction between reformism and fascism—in order to weaken fascism, at the same time weakening reformism by exposing to the workers the incapacity of the Social Democratic leadership. These two tasks fused naturally into one. The policy of the Comintern bureaucracy led to the opposite result: the capitulation of the reformists served the interests of fascism and not of Communism; the Social Democratic workers remained with their leaders; the Communist workers lost faith in themselves and in the leadership."

Trotsky drew far-reaching conclusions from the disastrous defeat of the German working class. Up until that point, the Left Opposition led by Trotsky fought for a political reorientation of the Communist parties and the Communist International. But following the refusal of the Communist International to draw any lessons from the German catastrophe and its prohibition of any discussion amongst its members of the disastrous policies of the KPD, such an orientation was no longer possible.

"An organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism" Trotsky declared, "demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it. To say this openly and publicly is our direct duty toward the proletariat and its future." The task was no longer to reform the Comintern, but to build new communist parties and a new International.

Trotsky met with fierce resistance from centrist groups, which shared some of his criticisms of Stalinism but declared that the establishment of a new International was premature. Such a step, they argued, was possible only on the basis of a fresh upsurge of the revolutionary movement.

Trotsky decisively rejected such arguments. "Marxists, however, are not fatalists," he wrote. "They do not unload upon the historical process those very tasks which the historical process has posed before them… Without a fused and steeled revolutionary party, a socialist revolution is inconceivable."

These words once again take on burning and immediate significance. The international crisis of capitalism, which has worsened dramatically since the financial crisis of 2008, places explosive class struggles on the agenda. In Egypt, Greece, Portugal and Spain workers are rebelling on a daily basis against the brutal austerity measures and political attacks being carried out by their governments. The governments resort in response to authoritarian methods and encourage the growth of fascist organizations, such as Golden Dawn in Greece, the National Front in France, and Jobbik in Hungary.

A host of pseudo-leftist organizations together with the trade unions are doing everything in their power to lead the struggles of workers into a dead end and defend bourgeois rule. The most urgent task today is to build a new revolutionary leadership that unites workers internationally and mobilizes them in the struggle for workers' power and the construction of a socialist society. That leadership is embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site