

The KPD and the United Front during the Weimar Republic

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Translators introduction:

This article sets out the history of the United Front in Germany from the years 1920 to 1926. This was a period in which German Communist Party (KPD) became a mass party, and following the failure of the German Revolution had to find ways to influence workers who were members and voters for the Social Democrats (SPD). The United Front was a tactic developed by the Communist International in the early 1920s and this article charts its development, offering lessons for building revolutionary parties in democratic societies today.

I have kept all footnotes in their original format, slightly Anglicising the references, and added occasional comments where I felt the context may be unfamiliar to an English Speaking audience. Where possible I have tried to keep to the structure of the German text, though I have sometimes altered the sentence where I felt the wording could not easily translate into English.

Introduction

For Communists in Germany the period since 1914 has been characterised by the betrayal of the workers' movement by the Social Democratic Party, the SPD. This began with the First World War, when the Social Democrats voted for the war credits in support of the Kaiser's regime, and then during the November Revolution, when they allied with former general staff of the Kaiser, and crushed the revolutionary movement. In this instance the SPD did not hold back from collaborating with the reactionary Freikorps, who murdered one thousand workers and leaders of the left, including Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Yet only a few years later it appeared that most of the working class forgot about these events. If we judge by electoral results, the SPD remained the biggest workers' party throughout the period of the Weimar Republic. In addition, the party had more members and influence in the trade unions than the Communist Party, the KPD.

This raised a number of questions for the left at the time: what should Communists do when faced with such a situation? How could they prise loose the supporters of Social Democracy and win them over to an anti-capitalist form of politics? What is needed in order to increase the influence of the radical left within the workers' movement? How is it generally possible for revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary situation to become a majority?

The United Front emerged in 1921 as an answer to these questions within the KPD. The first part of this article treats of this well-known concept (of increasing the influence of communists within the workers' movement). Though, to be sure, the KPD pursued the United Front strategy in phases (1921-1 and 1926), and completely departed from the strategy with fatal consequences towards the end of the Weimar Republic. The second part of this article sets out the thesis that this contributed significantly to the victory of fascism in Germany.

The origins of the United Front

The KPD was the child of revolt. It was founded during the turn of the year 1918 to '19, barely weeks after a mass movement had toppled the Kaiser and brought an end to German participation in the

war. At the time the “spirit of revolution” was spread across the whole of Europe, as the British Prime Minister Lloyd George noted.¹ Millions took to the streets, in the years from 1917 to 1920, from Petrograd to Barcelona. They protested for peace and against misery and lack of provisions as a consequence of the war. Many soldiers stripped their officers of their epaulettes, while workers took over factories and peasants the land. In many places councils of workers, soldiers and peasants were set up.²

The young Weimar Republic endured strike waves, mass movements and attempts at insurrection during the first years of its existence. Soviet, or Council, Republics were set up in Bremen and Bavaria for a short period, while the Ruhr was under the control of the Red Ruhr Army. Yet neither in Germany nor anywhere outside Russia was the Soviet movement finally successful. The period marking the ending of this movement in many countries was around early 1921.

By this time the KPD was already a mass party with over 300,000 members, following the decision of the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) to merge. This came about from a strong feeling among the party leaders and the members over the issue of how to seize power. In March 1921 they had sought to force a revolution in the central industrial belt of Halle and Merseburg. The attempted uprising, known as the March Action, ended terribly. Hundreds of Communists were detained, the KPD was banned and members left the party.

Thereupon an inter-party discussion ensued over the debacle, which resulted in a break with the political line that had prevailed up to that time. This change of course was also influenced by the debates that had taken place in June and July at the 3rd world congress of the Communist International (Comintern) – which set aside considerable time to evaluate the March Action. This resulted in a reassessment of the global political situation. While the first two congresses of the Comintern took place amidst an upsurge in the revolutionary struggle and the hope for an immediate breakdown of the capitalist states across Europe, the delegates now were considering the temporary stabilisation of the system.

It was here that the question arose over how the Communist Parties should campaign during a non-revolutionary situation. The congress adopted the ‘Theses on Tactics’, in which the goal now was to “win over the majority of the working class, by playing a vital role in the struggle.” This would only be achieved through participation in all of the workers’ struggles, including struggles which would not lead directly to the end of the capitalism. The slogan of the conference was: “To the masses”, which meant the drafting of open letters to the leaders and members of other workers’ organisations calling to joint action. Altogether this change of strategic direction was a tactic.

More concrete were the resolutions of the KPD’s 1921 conference in Jena. Here the party developed the United Front, whose main advocate was the Chair of the Party, Ernst Meyer. In his introductory address, he set out the basic principles, in which he explained that the KPD must seek: “struggles that link together the entire work force”, by implementing specific demands, which are “so

¹ Braunthal, Julius, *Geschichte der Internationale*, Vol. 1 (Berlin and Bonn, 1978), p. 186, and Ernest Mandel *Oktober 1917, Staatsreich oder soziale Revolution? Zur Verteidigung der Oktoberrevolution* (Köln, 1992), p. 42.

² See Bois, Marcel and Reiner Tosstorff: ‘*Ganz Europa ist vom Geist der Revolution erfüllt*’ Die internationale Protestbewegung am Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs’, in Ulla Plener: *Die Novemberrevolution 1918/19 in Deutschland. Für bürgerliche Demokratie. Allgemeine, regionale und biographische Aspekte* (Berlin, 2009), p.41-60.

plausible, that no worker could listen, who would not agree to these demands and be ready to carry them out.” Meyer also explained that such a policy should not be considered an abandonment of Communist positions: “These demands are a means to an end and not the end itself – a means to the end of gathering the workers together for struggle.” If the KPD understood that this is the right way to struggle, the masses would “recognise that not even the most basic defence of reforms or improvements can be achieved unless the Communists support the entire workforce.”³

The supposition on which this form of politics was based, was that society would only change when the majority of the work force supported the KPD – a notion that Rosa Luxemburg had already at the end of 1918 formulated as part of the Spartakus programme. There can be found the following: “The Spartakusbund would be able to overthrow the government in no other way than through the clear, unambiguous will of the proletarian masses throughout the whole of Germany; nothing less than the conscious adoption of the viewpoint, goals and methods of struggle promoted by the Spartakusbund.”⁴ In 1921 only a minority of the working class supported the KPD. The majority oriented themselves back to the SPD in the hope of improving their social conditions. The prevalent methods of trying to win over supporters of the SPD - attacking the party, reproaching them for their betrayal during the November Revolution, or via an abstract opposition between Communist and Social Democratic principles – had clearly been exhausted.

The newly formulated tactics pointed to a way out. The idea was as follows: if the supporters of the SPD believed that the essential purpose of their party was to implement improvements to their conditions, then the KPD must demonstrate in practice that they, through their unity of purpose, will in reality carry out these improvements. If the SPD make demands for higher wages, then the KPD must urge the SPD officials to participate in a united struggle to achieve this goal, and above all else to stress the importance of extra-parliamentary activity. If the SPD refused to engage in this offer to work together, they would then be separating themselves out from their supporters. They also aimed to demonstrate that through extra-parliamentary action, the workers would see this level of activity as a sign of their own power to make a difference, compared to the passivity of waiting for parliamentary resolutions. Moreover this kind of politics was perfectly suited to counter the Social Democratic claim that the Communists were splitting the workers’ movement.

The central element in the conception of the United Front was the dynamic and radicalising possibility that issued from extra-parliamentary struggles and strikes. It was not so much the radicalism of the demand that was decisive, but the formulation of a demand that could lead to united activity against the state and the bourgeoisie, as Meyer elaborated: “Today the movement is not to be more or less strengthened by a couple of demands. More important is that the demands themselves are implemented through the direct action of the work force.”⁵ As a result the

³ Bericht über die Verhandlungen des 2 [7.] Parteitags der Kommunisten Partei Deutschlands (Sektion der Kommunistischen Internationale), abgehalten in Jena vom 22. bis 26. August 1921, hg. Von der Zentrale der KPD (Berlin, 1922), p. 215.

⁴ *Programm des Spartakusbundes* (1918), in Hermann Weber, *der deutsche Kommunismus. Dokumente* (Köln and Berlin, 1963), p. 34-44, this citation appearing on p.44.

⁵ Meyer, Ernst, ‘Der Kessel ist zum voll,’ in *Imprekorr 2., Number 135*, 18/07/1922, p. 858. The citation appears in Florian Wilde, *Ernst Meyer (1887-1930) – vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus. Eine politische Biographie*, dissertation at the University of Hamburg, 2013, p. 279. (This thesis is available online at <http://ediss.uni-hamburg.de/volltexte/2013/6009/pdf/Dissertation.pdf>.)

underlying message of the United Front – of united self-activity in struggle – would be received by the leadership of the SPD as a form of incitement.

The United Front in Practice (1921-3)

The first opportunity to test the new tactic offered itself immediately following the closing of the Jena conference. On 26 August 1921 members of the radical right-wing Oberland Freikorps along with the nationalist terror group Organisation Consul, murdered the prominent centrist politician Matthias Erzberger. In the days that followed protests erupted in response throughout Germany. They reached a climax on 31 August when five million people took to the streets to protest against right-wing terrorism. The KPD newspaper *die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) had called for participation in the protest so as to “bring together the working peoples” and towards the construction of a “cohesive front of the whole proletariat.” The goal must be: “the relentless disarming of the reactionary formations”, and the “release of all proletarian prisoners.”⁶ Thus when the movement responded, it was also openly clear that the KPD had broken with its previous tactics.

From this point on the KPD regularly invited the other workers’ organisations to take part in joint actions. Most of these concerned economic questions – such as the example of the railway strike in the spring of 1922. The state employed railway workers demanded an above inflation pay-rise. However the government, which included the participation of the SPD, refused these demands. Not only did the state do that, but at the same time they also sought to lengthen the working day and make 20,000 civil servants redundant. As a consequence the usually conservative union that represented the civil servants in the railways, and were not represented within the ADGB [or equivalent of the TUC], came out alongside the railway strike. The SPD put pressure on the Deutsche Eisenbahner-Verband (DEV) – the Railway Union – to ignore the call for joint action out of consideration for the government. And so the President of the Reich, Ebert of the SPD, banned the strike. In spite of this 800,000 railway workers took action.

The KPD alone offered unconditional support to the organisation for the civil servants in the railways, and demanded that the leadership of the SPD, USPD, ADGB and DEV, take collective measures to support the strike. On a local level these efforts actually bore fruit. In most cities workers and organisers in free, or unaffiliated, unions took part.⁷ The national leaders of these organisations did not work together to stop the biggest ever transport strike in German history, which lasted a week.

The KPD leadership found that the ensuring workers’ struggle was a success. Thus the chair of the party Meyer resumed: “Our previous isolation from the workforce has been cast aside. Our influence among the officials and their representatives has already grown extraordinarily through the strike movement.”⁸ The Hamburg police also made the observation that: “the KPD has clearly shown a

⁶ *Rote Fahne*, 29 August 1921.

⁷ See Arnold Reisberg, *An den Quellen des Einheitsfrontspolitik. Der Kampf der KPD um die Aktionseinheit in Deutschland 1921 bis 1923*, (East Berlin, 1971), p. 370 for a list of cities including: Altona, Berlin, Dresden, Erfurt, Essen, Frankfurt, Halle an der Saale, Hannover and Münster

⁸ The report of the meeting of the KPD Central Committee for 15/2/1922 is to be found in the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, which is now available in the national archives (SAMPO-BArch), RY 1, I, 2/2/14 vol.84. See also Florian Wilde (2013), p. 263.

great increase in its membership since the outbreak of the rail strike.”⁹ And a year later during the fourth World Congress of the Comintern, the chair Gregori Zinoviev, praised the leadership of the politics of the KPD during the rail strike as a “classic example of the correct way to make use of the tactic of the United Front.”¹⁰

A greater and more successful example can be found in the campaign following the murder of Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau. On 24 June 1922, the Jewish politician from the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) was shot dead with a machine gun pistol while sitting in the back of his open-top car. As with the murder of Erzberger, the killer belonged to the same far right Organisation Consul. In response the condemnation and rage within the left and republican circles was great. Already on the day after the killing there were mass demonstrations in Berlin, and more was to follow. On 27 June, the day of the funeral, the Trade Unions called for a half day general strike. The KPD decided to withdraw its own call for a general strike on 26 June, and join that called by the Trade Unions. A great part of the organised workforce, including a significant portion of those employed in the civil service, took part in the strike. In all cities there were demonstrations numbering in the millions.

A few hours after the murder of Rathenau the leadership of the KPD, SPD and USPD had met for a conference to discuss defence against right-wing terrorism. The SPD were the most reluctant, but took part under pressure from the protests. So the parties on 27 June demonstrated a unity of purpose, which included the ADGB and the general unaligned unions (AfA-Bund). In a paper called “Berlin Astray”, they called for a law to protect the Republic, which must: “ban and repress every monarchical and anti-republican form of agitation..., ban and so dissolve all monarchical and anti-republican associations, ban the monarchical colours and flags.”¹¹ The KPD knew that it could not call for a general strike over these issues, but a day of action on 4 July was able to attract once again over 100,000 onto the streets. At this time Ernst Meyer wrote to his wife: “The situation is looking good for us; the Saturday and Tuesday demonstrations together, took place despite criticism from the SPD and USPD. The unions have a great respect for us.”¹² The bond between the parties was short-lived, but once again the KPD had demonstrated that they – who once sought the overthrow of parliament through a republic of workers’ councils – had the power to defend the parliamentary republic against the extreme right, and in support of this goal would work with other leftist forces.

Also in consequence the KPD continued to pursue this type of politics. In retrospect the year of the United Front (1922-3) turned out to be the most successful phase in the history of the KPD over the whole period of the Weimar Republic [1918-1933]. The party succeeded in reversing all losses incurred within the workers’ movement as a result of the March Action of 1921. In the first year of the United Front the party’s membership grew to a peak of 250,000 members, a growth of between

⁹ This comes from a police report dated 19 February 1922, and can be found in the Hamburg State Archives, 331-1 I, 898, Bl.39f.

¹⁰ Protokoll des vierten Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale. Petrograd-Moskau vom 5. November bis 5. Dezember 1922 (Hamburg, 1923), p. 35.

¹¹ ‘Zur Verteidigung der Republik under der Grundrechte der Arbeitnehmerschaft. Aufruf des ADGB, des AfA-Bundes, der SPD, der USPD und der KPD vom 27 Juni 1922’, which can be found in *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, volume 7, 2 January 1922 to December 1923, (East Berlin, 1966), p. 103-5.

¹² Meyer-Leviné, Rosa, *Im inneren Kreis. Erinnerungen einer Kommunistin in Deutschland von 1920-1933*. Edited and introduced by Hermann Weber (Frankfurt, 1982), p. 36, footnote.

50 and 90,000. By September there were 70,000 new members.¹³ The increase in influence was also to be found in the numbers of votes the party attracted. In all of the regional elections, the year 1922-3 was a better year for the KPD. In Saxony (November 1922) they more than doubled their votes, in Bremen (November 1923), their vote share trebled, and in Brunswick (January 1922) and Oldenburg (June 1923) their vote increased five-fold. By the time of the vote in Mecklenburg-Strelitz (July 1923) and in Danzig (November 1923) the KPD achieved its best ever vote during the Weimar Republic.¹⁴ By the beginning of 1923 Communists were in the administration in over 80 local councils, in another 170 they were the strongest party, and in several hundred Communist representatives served in coalition with the SPD to form a majority. In the trade unions the Communists gained an equal influence. So the party accounted for an eighth of all the delegates at the annual national trade union conference in June 1922 (90 out of 691 delegates). This was, as the historian Ossip Flechtheim put it, "more than the KPD was able to achieve at a trade union congress before or after during the Weimar Republic."¹⁵ By the year 1923 the KPD benefitted from a greater number of trade union shop stewards and dominated across a whole number of local union organisations among the free trade unions, unaffiliated to the SPD.

The Referendum on the Expropriation of the Royals (1926)

During the early period of the KPD the United Front was subject to significant debate. While the right-wing within the party pushed for stronger connections to the SPD, in order to continue to pursue joint action and radicalise a larger number of workers, the left-wing warned of the need to maintain a strong Communist profile. The art of being neither too close to the SPD, nor too isolated was the greatest challenge to the application of the politics of the United Front. The KPD was unable to succeed in following this type of politics for long, and for a temporary period they completely broke with it. In 1926 they returned once more to it, during the campaign for the expropriation of the property of the royals, which turned out to be the most successful United Front project of the 1920s.

During the revolution of 1918/19 the possessions of the Kaiser and the royal houses of the traditional German states were impounded. During the middle of the 1920's there was a rightward political shift,¹⁶ in which the ex-royal families asserted their claims to their possessions. They began to make progress, so that on 18 June 1925 a judge announced the dispossession of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha unconstitutional. Barely four months later the Prussian finance Ministry did the same thing for the deposed Kaiser and the Hohenzollerns. Therefore three quarters of the disputed land in Prussia would revert to the ownership of the royal house. The Saxon house of Wettin benefitted in 1924 from a similarly favourable judgement by the local government, who paid 100

¹³ Herman Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus. Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, volume 1, (Frankfurt, 1969).

¹⁴ All figures are taken from Herman Weber and Andreas Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuches 1918 bis 1945* (Berlin, 2004), p. 925-30. It should also be noted that a rise in membership was not only a result of the United Front, but could also happen at other times such as when a section of the USPD merged, and during the general political crisis of 1923.

¹⁵ Ossip Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik, mit einer Einleitung von Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten*, (Hamburg, 1986), p. 135.

¹⁶ From the end of 1923 a bourgeois coalition ran the government (the Central Party, the German Democrats and the German People's Party). In January 1925 the right-wing conservative German National People's Party entered the government, and shortly afterwards Hindenburg was elected president.

million Reichsmarks in compensation (King Friedrich August III was the richest man in Saxony when he abdicated).

These concessions to the former rulers was sharply criticised in public – especially given the fact that the number of people unemployed was sharply rising. Approximately eight million Germans were on the brink of starvation. “No question”, writes the historian Robert Lorenz, “was more likely to raise a scandal than the long running struggle over the princes and their property.”¹⁷ Not only the SPD and the KPD objected to these developments, but also the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). On 23 November 1925 the DDP faction in the Reichstag proposed a bill that would put an end to the legal battles over the possessions of the princes. The local authorities would be empowered to decide that all cases about the settlement of former rulers would be excluded from legal procedure. The SPD supported the DPP’s proposal.

On the other hand, the KPD opposed any concessions to the nobility and objected to partial measures over the confiscation of property. Instead they demanded that the property of the nobility be taken without compensation. To this effect their parliamentary representatives presented their own bill, in which the castles of the nobility would be converted into convalescent homes, or for the relief of the homeless. Further, the estates should be turned over to the small peasants and tenants and that the assets should be used to pay families bereaved by the war and disabled veterans. Such a popular set of demands led to a social polarisation. An extra-parliamentary campaign ensued in which the KPD wrote an open letter to the leadership of the SPD and all of the Trade Unions, including those not affiliated to the SPD, and the Civil Service Association. The KPD fighting wing, the Red Front Fighters, also wrote to the leaders of the self-defence force supporting the pro-Weimar Republic parties, the Black, Red and Gold Reichsbanner. Using the title ‘Not a Penny for the Princes’, the Communists campaigned for a referendum demanding confiscation without compensation.

At first the leadership of the SPD refused to engage with the Communist proposal. Phillip Scheidemann declared at the Reichstag on 2 December: “The Communist proposal has been drafted purely for agitational purposes. It is not even parliamentary for a start.” He emphatically warned against an extra-parliamentary demand: “Ladies and Gentlemen! What we have is a tinderbox. We must guard ourselves against the sparks from which great damage could be done. Yet we must rouse the people to participate in the referendum.”¹⁸ In this manner Communists had succeeded in inspiring the leaders of the SPD to join their plan. The *Rote Fahne* reported at this time on the united decisions of the trade unions and professional associations to support the petition that was required to trigger a referendum. At the same time the KPD organised demonstrations in favour of the expropriation of the princes. In Berlin, for example, on the back of intensive work with the SPD, they could get 60-100,000 people to a rally in the Lustgarten.

The resonance among the SPD membership was so great that the leadership felt pressured to support the campaign. They feared that they would lose members to the Communists if they did not share platforms with the KPD. Therefore in January 1926 they leadership agreed to prepare for a plebiscite jointly with the KPD. With the co-operation of the SPD aligned trade union congress, the

¹⁷ Robert Lorenz, ‘Zivilgesellschaft zwischen Frued und Frustration. Der Aufruf der Intellektuellen zur Enteignung der Fürsten 1926’, in Joanna Klatt ed. *Manifeste. Geschichte und Gegenwart des politischen Appells*, (Bielefeld, 2011), p. 135-6.

¹⁸ Minutes of the Reichstag, vol. 388 III, during the period 1924-8, stenographers report, 1926, p. 4734.

SPD and KPD worked together on a parliamentary bill. This would authorise a petition that would act as the preliminary stage for a referendum. To that effect, they set up a “committee to oversee the petition calling for the expropriation of the princes without compensation”. It was to be led by the Economist and Demographer Robert René Kuczynski, and his deputy was the Communist media mogul Willi Münzenberg. The pair proved to be a good choice for the campaign. The historian Robert Lorenz describes how together they: “made use of the latest media channels.”¹⁹ They ensured that placards, leaflets and other written materials were published, and even made a film with the programme title: ‘Not a Penny for the Princes’, which played in the Berlin cinemas. Furthermore the pair made best use of a mass of innovations to broadcast the message through advertising boards and other means despite the resistance of the authorities and a shortage of funds. Well-known artists and intellectuals including Albert Einstein, George Grosz, Kurt Hiller, Erwin Piscator, Max Pechstein, Alfred Kerr, Käthe Kollwitz, Kurt Tucholsky and Heinrich Zille supported the campaign. With great élan, the Red Front Fighters and the Reichsbanner also promoted the petition. The clearly surpassed the required 3.9 million signatures to trigger a referendum, so that by March over 12.5 million people had signed the petition – three times the required number. This set the stage for the next step, which was the referendum that was set for the 20th June.

The political forces on the right did everything in their power to hinder the vote. So the rightwing coalition in the government sought expressly to prevent the constitutional amendments being put forward by the left. They had to find a way to reach the maximum number of voters whom they could – around 20 million people. Right wing parties, the churches, large landowners and employers called for a boycott, but it was impossible to do this. In the end all who were due to vote knew their position. In the rural districts the vote was used as a means to put pressure on the voters not to agree to the expropriation. In Pommerania workers on the land were threatened with unemployment. The landowners in the East Elbe found an unconventional, but no less successful, way. Across a number of districts, on the day of the vote, they put on a free beer festival, with the aim of ensuring that the people going to the festival would forget what they were supposed to be doing that day.

The left meanwhile did not remain quiet, and mobilised on a massive scale for the referendum. The SPD and trade unions stayed firm through, there is ample material to demonstrate this, but not in terms of joint activity with the communists. Yet they built local united front committees, as in the days of the revolution. The former KPD member Wolfgang Abendroth recalled later how: “one could hardly imagine now how good the co-operation was between us and the Social Democrats, even though the heads of the SPD stipulated that each party operated separately.”²⁰ The result on the 20th June was striking: 15.6 million of those eligible to vote were mobilised. In Hamburg, Berlin and Leipzig between 90 and 95 percent of the workers eligible to vote took part.²¹ 14.5 million of those who took part voted for the left initiative. That was a significant proportion of the votes and corresponded to 36.4% of the total vote. However the result fell short of the required quorum of 20 million yes votes. But they had succeeded in reaching some traditional conservative voters. This has to be compared to the results of the left parties in the presidential elections, where they collectively

¹⁹ Lorenz, *Zivilgesellschaft zwischen Freud und Frustration*, p. 142.

²⁰ Abendroth, Wolfgang, *Ein Leben in der Arbeiterbewegung*, edited by Barbara Dietrich and Joachim Perels, (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 77.

²¹ See *Protokoll des Sitzung des Pol.Büros, 22.06.1926*, SAMPO-BArch, RY 1, I, 2/3/6, Bl. 122-137, p.122.

totalled 4.5 million. For Arbedroth the referendum was: “the greatest success reached during the Weimar Republic”.²² In fact the KPD and SPD (including the USPD) never polled so highly together in any other election between 1918 and 1933.²³

On the other hand, despite their victory, the right were dismayed. The former-Kaiser Wilhelm II commented thus from his Dutch exile: “So there are 14 million schweinhunders in Germany.” The leader of the conservative DNVP party Kuno Graf von Westarp displayed his concern that and those of the Right: “in all of the constituencies a group of thieves and robbers have lied and enticed people to vote for expropriation, appealing to ignorance, envy and covetousness.”

The largest organisation representing the landowners, the Reichslandbund, gave expression to their shock in the face of the unexpectedly high ‘yes’ vote. The left, meanwhile, took their defeat as a success. This the SPD spoke of a “great moral victory”. The KPD were pleased with their success: “it was the first time that the communists, the Social Democrats and a large portion of non-party and Christian workers come together in a united front.”²⁴ The communists had in fact good grounds to be pleased. The party was released once again from the social isolation it experienced in the years 1924-5, when the ultra-leftist wing of the party was in control. Their sectarian politics and hostility to the unions had driven a large number of members and voters away from the KPD. Yet now, following the referendum, not only the communist influence in the unions increased, but also party membership rose. In the years 1926 and 1927 the KPD scored a greater number of votes in local elections. By the time of the parliamentary elections of 1928 both the KPD and the SPD benefitted – a sign that the politics of the United Front strengthened not only the KPD, but the entire workers’ movement.

The Struggle Against Fascism (1930-33)

The referendum was the last great United Front project carried out by the KPD. Subsequently the Stalinisation of the party increased along with its dependence on Moscow. In 1928 Stalin announced the ultra-left turn in which the parties of the Communist International were to move away from the United Front strategy. This makes the politics of the final years of the Weimar Republic more understandable. It also helps explain the rise of Hitler, and how, within a few years, the Nazi Party rose from being an “irritating fringe act”²⁵ to become a mass party.

The background to these events lay in the world economy in 1929, when capitalism was shaken to its foundations. This began with the stock market crash in Wall Street in October of that year, but developed subsequently into a global crisis. Between 1929 and 1932, worldwide industrial production sank by 29 per cent. The effects in Germany were especially striking, as the economy was reliant upon overseas credit, being particularly dependent upon US loans. As these were called in,

²² Arbedroth, Wolfgang, ‘Zur Geschichte des Roten Frontkämpfer-Bundes’, in Alwin diemer, editor, *Geschichte und Zukunft: Dem Verleger Anton Hain zum 75 Geburtstag am 4 Mai 1967*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1967, pages 12-32, this quote cited on p. 23.

²³ At least in absolute numbers. In percentage terms the vote share of the workers’ parties exceeded 36.4 per cent on three occasions (1919, 1920 and 1928), so reaching above 40%. However the maximum number of votes [apart from the referendum] was 13.3 million cast in July 1932.

²⁴ All citations have been from Ulrich Schüren, *Der Volksentscheid zur Fürstenenteignung 1926*, Düsseldorf, 1978, pages 234-238.

²⁵ Ian Kershaw, *Hitlers Macht. Das Profil der NS-Herrschaft*, Munich, 2000, p.58.

the level of industrial production sank by between 40 and 50 per cent in two years. Large and small firms were driven to the wall. A large portion of the middle classes were driven into poverty, while standard of living of those working in the countryside deteriorated, as the prices for agricultural produce sank. Wages for workers sank by a third and the number of people unemployed rose from 1.3 million in 1929, to around 6 million by the beginning of 1933.²⁶ Only a third of workers were in full employment by this time.

In March 1930, the last democratically elected government, the grand coalition under the Chancellorship of the SPD's Hermann Müller, was forced to retire. A few days later President Hindenburg announced the first cabinet directly appointed by him. This enabled him to control a cabinet that had no foundation in the composition of parliament. The new chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, ruled in essence through decrees, which enabled him to circumvent parliament. In this way he, like his successor Franz Papen in 1932, could dismantle the greater part of the welfare state. They cut in half the benefits to the unemployed and reduced the period of time people could claim benefits to six weeks. The responsibility for keeping people housed and fed was passed to soup kitchens. Meanwhile pensions were reduced, while the taxes and charges on consumables increased. Hunger took hold in the cities.

From the standpoint of the employers the cause of the crisis lay in the growth of the welfare state, along with wage increases and reductions in working time. Therefore they terminated collective bargaining, reduced pay and abandoned the eight hour day. The government buttressed these measures in 1932, by abolishing the right to collective bargaining and strikes. The aim of these cuts was to put in place measures that would enable German products to become competitive, and so boost the economy. All sectors of industry implemented this strategy, the upswing never happened, and poverty got worse.

The crisis led to the political polarisation of Germany, which was noticeable in the results of the parliamentary elections of 14 September 1930. On the left end of the spectrum, the KPD received 1.3 million votes. This was mainly at the expense of the SPD, who lost around 600,000 votes. Yet what was more striking was the growth of the radical right. The Nazis had received 5.6 million votes, making them the second largest party in parliament.

Regardless of this the leadership of the KPD focused only on their successes. They foresaw a rapid decline in support for the Nazis following its rise. Not only here, but throughout the Comintern there was no clear analysis of the phenomenon of fascism. Certainly the KPD saw Hitler's party as an enemy and engaged in many extra-parliamentary attacks on the Nazis. They called demonstrations and their members took action against the fascists. Yet the outlook of the leadership lacked an understanding of the dangers stemming from the Nazis, and the threat this posed to the whole workers' movement. The Central Committee had already made use of an inflated concept of fascism. They had in mind the form of direct presidential rule that had been in place since 1930. This meant

²⁶ Eberhard Kolb, *Die Weimarer Republik*, Munich and Vienna, 1984, p.118. This work only takes into account the official statistical data. Those, for example, who were long term unemployed were not counted, and so the real rate of unemployment was higher than that found in the official statistics.

that all parliamentary parties were generally labelled as fascist. "The fight against fascism is the fight against the SPD, just as it is the fight against Hitler and the Brüning parties."²⁷

The KPD's position on Nazism was dictated by Moscow. Its theoretical basis lay in the thesis of Social Fascism. This stated that the Social Democrats were the main enemy, as they held the working class back from the struggle against capitalism. Accordingly the leadership of the KPD withdrew from joint activity with the SPD, which included activity against the Nazis: "The Social Fascists know that between us there can be no joint activity. Against the Battleship parties²⁸, against the Police Socialists, against the pioneers of Fascism there can, for us, only be the struggle that leads to their annihilation."²⁹ To the majority of the KPD membership these radical sounding phrases reflected their experiences, in that the SPD leadership displayed little readiness to take part in the same struggles as the communists against the Nazis. In the main their politics were marked by an Anti-Communism that treated the Nazis and the communists alike. Thus the party leader Otto Wels declared at the SPD's party conference in the summer of 1931: "Bolshevism and fascism are brothers. They base themselves on the power of a dictator, even though they behave in a socialist and radical manner."³⁰

In order to block the advance of the Nazis to power and to preserve the life of the Weimar Republic, the SPD pursued a policy of the 'lesser evil'.³¹ From 1930 their parliamentary group tolerated the President's appointed cabinet under the Central Party's leadership of Heinrich Brüning, and thereby put up with many decisions that not only contradicted their programme, but also the interests of their supporters. They based their politics of toleration on the notion that this would prevent the rise of Hitler. From a similar set of principles the Social Democrats backed the campaign to elect the arch-conservative Paul von Hindenburg during the 1932 presidential election. In addition to all this there had been the events known as Bloody May, that took place in 1929, when the May Day demonstration in the capital city ended in bloody clashes between communist demonstrators and

²⁷ This citation comes from Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimar Republik. Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung*, Darmstadt, 1996, p. 367.

²⁸ At the core of the election campaign of 1928 was the proposal by the then governing parties to build battleships. The SPD and the KPD opposed the expenditure of 5 million Reichmarks on battleships, when it could be spent on schools. Yet after the election the SPD cabinet ministers voted for the purchase of the ships.

²⁹ Citation from Weber, *Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, p. 240.

³⁰ 'Protokoll des Sozialdemokratischen Parteitag in Leipzig 1931 vom 31. Mai bis 5. Juni', edited in *Vorstand der SPD*, Berlin, 1931, page 19.

³¹ The politics of the SPD in the final years of the Weimar Republic is hotly debated by researchers, just as the share of the party's responsibility for the rise of fascism. See the following sources: Joachim Petzold, 'SPD und KPD in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik: Unüberwindbare Hindernisse oder ungenutzte Möglichkeiten?' in Heinrich August Winkler, editor, *Die deutsche Staatskrise 1930-1933. Handlungsspielräume und Alternativen*, Munich, 1992, pages 77-98; Bärbel Hebel-Kunze, *SPD und Fascismus. Zue politischen und organistorischen Entwicjlung der SPD 1932-1935*, Frankfurt, 1977; Heinrich August Winckler, *Der Weg in der Katastrophe. Arbeiter und Artbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1930 bis 1933*, Berlin and Bonn, 1987; Heinrich August Winckler, *Streitfragen der deutschen Geschite. Essays zum 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 1997, pages 71-92; Heinrich Potthoff, 'Die Sozialdemokratie in den Anfängen bis 1945,' in Susanne Miller: *Kleine Geschichte der SPD. darstellung und Dokumentation 1848-1983*, Bonn, 1985, pages 11-169 and especially pages 125-141; Erich Matthias, 'Die Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands,' in Rudolf Morsey, editor, *Das Ende der Parteien. Darstellung und Dokumente*, Düsseldorf, 1979, pages 99-278; Georg Fülberth und Jürgen Harrer, *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1890-1933*, Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1974, pages 220-252.

the Berlin police force, under the leadership of the Social Democrat Karl Friedrich Zörgiebel.³² In the face of all this, the leadership of the KPD had an easy time in arguing the case for the Social Fascism thesis.

And yet despite all their hopes, this was no way to win over the SPD's supporters. Contrary to the hopes of the party leadership, an analysis of the elections shows that: "many of the voters who cast their vote for the KPD for the first time did not come from the milieu of the Social Democrats".³³ Moreover the KPD found it difficult to integrate these new members into the party. The fluctuations from 1929 onwards took place at an alarming rate. In the workplaces the communists had barely any presence. By the autumn of 1932 only 11 per cent of the membership consisted of wage-earners who were in employment. Altogether, the KPD were unable to offer an alternative form of politics to the SPD to all of those who were affected by the social breakdown. To the contrary, their generally anti-SPD rhetoric led them into occasional acts of co-operation with the right. So in 1931 they supported a referendum that had been initiated by the Nazis and German nationalists against the Social Democratic led Prussian government.

This stance was strongly criticised by those who stood among the communist or left opposition to the KPD. As theoreticians Leon Trotsky and August Thalheimer stood out.³⁴ Thalheimer took part in the initial setting up of the KPO (the Communist Party Opposition), which split from the KPD in 1929. The Russian communist Leon Trotsky, who was one of the leading figures of the Russian revolution in 1917, lost out in the factional dispute with Stalin, but was alive at this time and operating in exile from the Turkish island of Prinkipo. He was deeply concerned about the rise of Hitler's party and offered an extensive critique of the KPD's positions on fascism.

In contrast to the official communist line, both put forward the view that there existed a significant difference between fascism and bourgeois democracy. Unlike the leadership of Comintern Trotsky, for example, did not reduce fascism to a creature of reactionary finance capital. Rather National Socialism in Germany and Fascism in Italy were the products of a mass movement among the petty-bourgeoisie, thus consisting of the self-employed, employees in lower management and the professions. The petty-bourgeoisie was the most numerous of the classes affected by the crisis, and fascism had here its 'genuine basis'.³⁵ The basis for their sense of grievance lay less in this layers' proletarianisation than in its impoverishment. Thalheimer's theory is similar in that he saw fascism as a mass movement that brought together all those who had lost their class position.

³² Siegfried Bahne, "'Sozialfaschismus in Deutschland. Zue Geschichte eines politischen Begriffs', in *International Review of Social History*, 1965, pages 211-245.

³³ Conran J. Fischer 'Gab es am Ende der Weimarer Republik einen marxistischen Wählerblock?' in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 21, 1995, pages 63-79.

³⁴ There are different nuances between both Trotsky's and Thalheimer's analyses of fascism, though for the purposes of this article they are taken together. For an examination of these differences see Udo Kuckartz, *Der Aufstieg des Faschismus und die kommunistische Arbeiterbewegung in der endphase der Weimarer Republik. Eine vergleichende Analyse der Fascismustheorien Leo Trozki und August Thalheimers*, Aachen, 1978, and Sarah Kröger, *Die Fascismustheorien von Leo Trozki und August Thalheimer. Ein vergleichende Analyse*. Hamburg, 2005.

³⁵ Leon Trotsky, 'Was ist Fascismus?' in his *Schriften über Deutschland*, edited by Helmut Dahmer, Frankfurt, 1971, p. 141.

According to Trotsky, the middle layers felt equally under pressure from the concurrent forces of the larger employers on the one side and the organised working class on the other. It was against both large scale capital and organised labour that the demagogy of the Nazis struck a chord.³⁶

The fact that that fascism was a movement of the middle strata of society did not mean that it was not possible for a section of the bourgeoisie to support them, as Trotsky and Thalheimer pointed out. This threat presented itself just as society was reaching the critical moment which had been reached in Germany. And in order to find a way out from this situation of social polarisation, the bourgeoisie must: “completely get rid of the pressure of the workers’ organisations, shove them aside, reduce them to rubble and tear them apart.” Alone, however, they were too weak. Therefore they reluctantly lent support to an emboldened fascism.³⁷ In this context Thalheimer recalled how in Italy the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini had come to power, and banned the parties of the working class.

The upsurge of fascism could only be stopped through “an unremitting and systematic general assault” by the working class. For this the politics of the United Front would be essential. In this respect Trotsky also concluded that both of the workers’ parties together were a match for the Nazis. But to achieve this it would have been necessary to cast aside the policy of Social Fascism. So long as the KPD did not do this they would not be able to reach the supporters of the SPD: “such a position – a mere cry and a sterile form of left-radicalism – prevents the Communist Party from the outset from being able to reach Social Democratic workers.”³⁸

The United Front had not only to be taken up at the grassroots, but must involve negotiations at the level of the party leaders towards joint action. A clear tactic of the United Front from below would not succeed. The overwhelming majority of Social Democratic workers would surely fight against fascism, but it goes without saying that this had to be together with their leaders. It would have do for communists to struggle with those Social Democratic workers, who were willing to engage independently of their leaders. Furthermore, it goes without saying that it would require the greatest forces of the working class to act in unity. In united activity the communists could prove that they can defeat fascism: “We must help the Social Democratic workers, and test through praxis..., what their organisation and leadership are capable of, when the life and death of the working class is at stake.”³⁹

The United Front must above all else take the form of action, and not simply act through parliament. The unity must build upon a central point, which in this case is the struggle against fascism. It is important that the Communist Party retains its political and organisational independence. The motto should be declared: “March separately, strike together! One has simply to understand, how to strike,

³⁶ Leon Trotsky, ‘Portrait des Nationalsozialismus’, in his *Schriften über Deutschland*, edited by Helmut Dahmer, Frankfurt, 1971, p. 571-580.

³⁷ Leon Trotsky, *Was nun? Schicksalsfragen des deutschen Proletariats*, Berlin, 1932, p.5.

³⁸ Leon Trotsky, ‘Die österreichische Krise, die Sozialdemokratie und die Kommunismus’, in his *Schriften über Deutschland*, edited by Helmut Dahm, pages 53-66.

³⁹ Leon Trotsky, ‘Wie wird der Nationalsozialismus geschlagen? Brief an einen deutschen Arbeiter-Kommunisten, Mitglied der KPD,’ in his *Schriften über Deutschland*, edited by Helmut Dahm, pages 164-175.

who to strike and when to strike!... But on one condition: that one does not bind one's own hands!"⁴⁰

Trotsky's and Thalheimer's demands for a United Front struck a chord among workers and intellectuals. In the face of the advance of the Nazis, there was strong wish for unity. So in the run-up to the 1932 election thirty-three well known personalities drafted an "Urgent appeal", to the SPD and KPD, "to final take steps towards setting up a united front of workers, not only for parliamentary, but wider forms of defence that are necessary." The signatories of the document included Albert Einstein, Erich Kästner, Käthe Kollwitz and Heinrich Mann.⁴¹

In many parts of the country members of the SPD and KPD ignored the intransigence of their leaders and ignored the ban on working together. Recent historical research has shown the extent of this. Joachim Petzold for example has researched and evaluated the reports from the Reich Interior Ministry for 1932. He has come to the conclusion that: "many communists came to the conclusion that they should unite with the Social Democrats in the struggle against fascism." Most remarkable is the "tension between the party's leadership and its grassroots" over this question. This was shown up in a report from June 1932, in which the following is stated: "bloody clashes with the National Socialists... are still regularly taking place, in spite of the animosity between the Marxist parties, a united front remains in practice, and it is not seldom that the communists are most active and energetic in the matter."

In another place it states: "In a whole number of areas the united front in practice is developing. SPD Works'-Councils are marching with their red colleagues. Members of the SPD's fighting arm, the Reichsbanner, appear as delegates at communist gatherings: in Duisberg functionaries from the Iron front debated measures around the united front with communists. Collective vigils over coffins, joint participation in funerals is generally the rule, as well continuous demonstrations organised by people unaffiliated to political parties against the National Socialists. Social Democrats appear in many places at anti-fascist conferences set up by the KPD...; trade union officials declare that one should not repulse the offers of support from the KPD."⁴²

Similar findings can be found in Thomas Kurz's work on the putative "warring brothers the South West of Germany". In that part of the country there were efforts to unite the working class in Baden and Württemberg. In July 1932, the chair of the SPD in Baden made a peace-offering to the communists: "All divisions must be stopped, it is a demand that reflects the severity of the time."⁴³ Pretty much at the same time, Hermann Weber has pointed out that the leadership of the KPD made a similar overture to the SPD and the ADGB trade union federation.⁴⁴ According to the historian Klaus-Michael Mallmann, already in December 1931 the SPD and KPD put forward a joint slate in the local elections in Württemberg. In three other places one can find similar joint slates. Most

⁴⁰ Leon Trotsky, 'Wie wird der Nationalsozialismus geschlagen?' p.172.

⁴¹ *Der Funke, Tageszeitung für Recht, Freiheit und Kultur*, 25.06. 1932.

⁴² Joachim Petzold, 'SPD und KPD in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik: Unüberwindbare Hindernisse oder ungenutzte Möglichkeiten?' In Heinrich Winkler, ed., *Die Deutsche Staatskrise 1930-1933. Handlungsspielräume und Alternativen*, (Munich, 1992), p 94.

⁴³ Thomas Kurz, *Feindliche Brüder im deutschen Südwesten. Sozialdemokraten und Kommunisten in Baden und Württemberg von 1928 bis 1933*, (Berlin, 1996), p.394.

⁴⁴ Hermann Weber, 'Zur Politik der KPD 192-1933', in Manfred Scharrer, ed., *Kampflose Kapitulation. Arbeiterbewegung, 1933*, (Reinbek, 1984). This citation can be found on page 140.

especially the demand for workers' unity was made in the Unterreichenbach district. Here the local KPD split and formed a joint workers' party with the local SPD.⁴⁵

Mallmann shows that the efforts towards a United Front were not spread thinly across the country, but the conditions for collective action were dependent on regional factors. Yet it was undoubtedly a mass phenomenon by the early 1930s. So the "main enemy, that is the Social Democrats, felt the effect of violent encroachments by the Nazi SA, attacks on the party and trade union buildings, raids on local gathering places and specific functionaries, and sorties into workers' districts where with a strong left presence", just like the KPD. It "lent itself to the same need for self-defence, that completely overrode the wider situation." In countless localities there is evidence of collusion, unity and collective action between the local KPD and SPD. "In many places, so it appears, the united euphoria of 1919 was back."⁴⁶

Yet the Communist Party was in the meantime almost completely Stalinised, and all oppositional groups had been forced to leave. So when the grassroots began to show their discontent, all the main functions in the party were occupied by people who were loyal to the Comintern. In the end they stuck to the official line of the KPD. They declared the thesis of Social Fascism through to the end. Once the Nazis had come to power in January 1933, the party weighed up whether to work together with the SPD. But it was too late, both of the parties were banned and thousands of their members were locked up in the first concentration camps set up by the Nazi regime.

Conclusion

The KPD had developed the method of the United Front during a non-revolutionary period, as a way of gaining mass political influence. Hereby they changed themselves from a narrow focus. On the one hand they sought to move away from their sectarian stance towards other workers' parties, especially the SPD. On the other they did not want to lose their own position within a struggle for reforms, and lose sight of the need for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

The United Front strategy was a recipe for success for the KPD while they pursued it. When they made use of this form of politics, between 1921 and 1923 and again in 1926, their influence in the workers' movement grew. The number of their members grew, as did the votes they polled in the local and national elections, and the numbers of their supporters in the trade unions increased.

The consequences of the KPD turning away from the policy of the United Front were greater isolation. This was, for example, observable in the years 1924 and 1925, as the radical left wing of the party took over the leadership. In the final years of the Weimar Republic, when the majority of the population were being radicalised as a result of the economic crisis, the party experienced a certain degree of popularity, despite moving away from the United Front. Yet within the workers' movement they were isolated by their conduct. The Moscow-derived theory of Social Fascism hindered the development of a united struggle of the workers' parties against the ever stronger growth of the Nazis. So the KPD threw away the opportunity to work with the SPD to resist the Nazis' domination of terror. The German left in the following decade paid a high price.

⁴⁵ Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p.373.

⁴⁶ Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, pages 365-380. This citation is found on page 372, and the footnote on 377.

