

The Problem with the German Workers Council Movement -A Response to Comack

September 13, 2013

Martin Comack is absolutely correct to recognize that I wrote a Leninist critique of his book *Wild Socialism* about the revolutionary shop stewards or council movement that existed in Berlin at the time of World War I and on into the early 1920s. I don't think, however, that he responds very well to the central point of my critique, deciding instead to accuse me "errors and misinterpretations" that are really fundamentally just different interpretations. The heart of my review was the argument that the council communist movement—as admirable as the revolutionary stewards were—proved to be *utterly ineffectual* at a key moment in German history that was decisive for Europe and the World. The council leaders were parochial, unable to see beyond Berlin; workerist, unable to see beyond their factories; and sectarian, unable to develop a strategy to challenge the labor union leaders and the Social Democrats in power. The council communists were outwitted by the Social Democrats at every step, usually because of their sectarianism, though occasionally because of their opportunism.

The several thousand German shop stewards and other workers in Berlin's council movement failed to act decisively at key moments in the immediate post-war period, their leaders engaging in revolutionary rhetoric and gestures as the Social Democrats made an alliance with the German Army that crushed the left in early 1919. The councils failed at that moment to join with the Spartacist League which represented the first appearance of a revolutionary socialist tendency, and that was the first missed opportunity to begin to build a revolutionary party that might have changed German history.

The Social Democrats then coöpted the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD)—including one shop steward leader—into their government and at the same time took over the workers council idea, eviscerating it of its radical content. The revolutionary shop stewards had no strategy for forming alliances with the Social Democrats rank-and-file and winning them to a revolutionary perspective. In the early 1920s, some Berlin stewards joined the Communist Party (KPD) and others the Communist International while more joined the independent German Communist Workers Party (KAPD), a larger version of all of the problems of the revolutionary shop stewards.

The "wild socialism" of the KAPD could be characterized as a result of the failure to develop a united front strategy. The disastrous March Action of 1921 led by the Communist Party (KPD) affiliated with the Communist International also represented a caricature of a revolutionary party leading an offensive without having consulted and won the support of their working class base. Comack and I agree that by the mid-1920s the German Communist Party and the International to which it belonged, were well on their way to becoming a disaster for the international workers' movement, and would only become worse after Stalin took power in the Soviet Union.

Young radicals today are interested in the revolutionary shop stewards and in the council movement for all the right reasons. The revolutionary shop stewards showed that workers themselves could turn their factories into powerful and potentially revolutionary centers of organization. They rejected the Social Democrats parliamentary manoeuvres and the trade union bureaucracy, trusting instead on themselves. All of that is admirable and commendable. They failed, however, the key test of a revolutionary organization, the ability to strike when the iron is hot. They failed the test of 1919 just as, for completely different reasons, the Communist Party failed the test in 1921, when the iron had grown cool.

One could not build among the workers in the factories of one large city—even a key, capital city—a revolutionary party capable of leading a nation in revolution, there had to be a national organization, able to relate to all sectors of society, capable of challenging the politics of labor

bureaucrats and social democratic reformists, and then the moment comes, able to act decisively. While embracing their idea that workers' power ultimately resides in the workplace, we should reject the parochialism, workerism, and sectarianism of the shop stewards councils.