

The councilist movement in Germany (1914-1935): A history of the AAUD-E tendency

Article tracing the origins and theoretical development of the 'unitary' current of the General Workers' Union of Germany.

I. The Tendency's Origins: From the First World War to the Defeat of the 1918 November Revolution

It is not our intention to provide a comprehensive review of the history of the German Revolution; as interesting as that would be, what interests us in regard to the historical experience of the German Revolution is recognizing its essential characteristics and what was new about it. In our view the historical elements we shall discuss are sufficient for evaluating the conclusions set forth below.

Our central theme will be the history of the councilist current that at one particular historical conjuncture took the form of the AAUD-E, or the *unitary* current. We shall therefore attempt to shed light on the AAUD-E's process of formation, growth and dissolution, and how revolutionary ideas emanated from the experiences and the problems that shaped the practical process of the revolutionary struggle.

1. The Formative Stage of the Councilist Tendency

The councilist movement was born in the era of the First World War and its aftermath. It was during these years of worsening intercapitalist contradictions and escalating levels of class conflict due to the terrible consequences of the war (especially in the two nations headed for defeat: Germany, and Russia with its weak capitalism), that the various tendencies within the working class movement were compelled to adopt precise practical and political positions on capitalism. This would lead to a series of splits between reformists and revolutionaries which naturally spanned a wide array of positions, and implied practices with quite different contents, from the most moderate like the reformist social democracy, to the most radical like council communism.

This process of transformation affecting the conditions and dynamics of the class struggle can be illustrated by the following statement of Otto Rühle, who wrote:

"With regard to the class struggle, today's workers came of age in party organizations as well as trade unions. They saw, and still see, membership in these organizations as the duty of the class-conscious proletariat, the proof of its political maturity and the expression of its combative spirit. To be organized politically and industrially seemed, and still seems to them to be an almost sacred duty, so obvious and so important, that any attempt to separate them from these organizations appears to be a hostile act, counterrevolutionary and contrary to the interests of the working class. Those who have grown old in a tradition find that which was good in their time to be good now. But in our era, what was good has become bad, the true has become false: what was reason becomes folly, what was beneficial becomes harmful. The revolution, an epoch of profound change that leaves not one brick of this society standing on another, does not spare the old organizations. It destroys all that is old, so as to build a new life from the ruins." ("Fundamental Issues of Organization", 1921.)

The centrifugal forces affecting the social democratic movement due to the war and its consequences began to have an impact on the German Social Democratic Party (the SPD). Within the SPD, the various tendencies that would later crystallize could for the most part already be discerned: the collaborationist and strictly reformist sector (Ebert, Scheidemann, etc.) that held the leadership positions in the SPD; the centrist sector, vacillating between the habits and rewards of reformism and the revolutionary road (Bebel, Kautsky, etc.), that would later form the USPD (independent social democrats); and the radical sector, which could be defined by its support for a revolutionary interpretation of Marxism (Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, etc.), that would subsequently form the Spartacist League (*Spartakusbund*) and later comprise the leadership of the German Communist Party (KPD) after the expulsion of the (majority) left opposition.

Our tendency was in part situated within this latter radical sector. We must point out, however, that the driving force of the formative process of the revolutionary tendency was not to be found within political organizations, but in processes internal to the working class among its most advanced sectors. With the intensification of class conflict, more and more workers advanced toward revolutionary attitudes and perspectives, and joined the most radical and coherent political tendencies in the practice of the class struggle. It was this organic process that led to the separation of the radical tendency (radical with regard to both form and content) from the various reformist tendencies, accelerating the evolution towards new ruptures as well as providing more solid foundations for new practical-theoretical formulations rooted in the experiences of the class.

The radicalization process that affected the Spartacist tendency cannot be understood without taking this sorting-out process of the most radical proletarian elements into account, nor can one understand the characteristics of the new organized tendency that would later take shape (along with other groups) without an understanding of its class composition as the most advanced core of the German industrial proletariat.

The formation of the German Communist Party (KPD) at the end of 1918 was an important moment in the radicalization process affecting the proletarian vanguard. It was at that time that the fundamental disagreements within the Spartacist League and between the latter and the other groups began to develop, marking the start of the process leading to the formation of a "left opposition". In fact, the Spartacist League was really nothing but a form of revolutionary social democracy, that is, it was still ridden with all the bourgeois concepts of the original social democracy, which Marx described as a combination of a red-tinted petit-bourgeois democratism and socialist perspectives adapted to the capitalist structure. The fact that, in terms of theory, Rosa Luxemburg was closer to revolutionary communism than she was to Lenin's Bolshevism, does not rid Spartacist practice of its social democratic traits, even if the latter were expressed in an attenuated form in the Spartacist League.

The Spartacist League always remained a hybrid of communism and petit-bourgeois radicalism after its origins in the SPD. This is the basic reason why the Spartacist leadership converged with Bolshevism and the KPD's left opposition formed the German Communist Workers Party, the KAPD, in 1920.

But, while we are looking at this formation process of the proletarian revolutionary current through the lens of the party-form, we must not lose sight of the fact that its dynamic source was the *intensive* and *integrated* development of proletarian *autonomous action*, of the proletariat's

abilities and class consciousness, expressed in the revolution and the pre-revolutionary struggles. Only this can explain the succession of qualitative changes, such as the fact that anti-parliamentary and anti-trade union positions could emerge victorious during the founding congress of the KPD against the positions of the Spartacist leadership, which at the time included Luxemburg. *Quantity* (the condensed accumulated class antagonism) is transformed into *quality* (into a new kind of praxis): proletarian autonomous action transcends the alienated condition of a ruled class and assumed autonomous and self-conscious forms, i.e., new principles, new forms of action and new goals.

The revolution could not be expected to conform to reformist practice, with justifications concerning the backwardness of proletarian consciousness, the relative weakness of the revolutionary current compared to the forces of reformism and capitalism, etc., for the simple reason that it was already *taking place*. In class society the authentic revolution is not the creation of a conscious will that attempts to mould the world in accordance with its aspirations, but the involuntary result of the development of social contradictions which affect the existence and the consciousness of every individual, the expression of historical necessity that is imposed with the force of a natural process and which in the revolutionary class proceeds in accordance with a conscious will and aspiration. Consciousness therefore does not precede the revolutionary process, but is formed through class struggles, and it is only in the revolutionary process itself that revolutionary consciousness in its intellectual form can acquire a mass dimension.

2. Proletarian Revolution and the Consciousness of the Masses

General class consciousness, the consciousness of the masses, corresponds to the level of development of the general struggle of the masses as a whole. Generalized revolutionary consciousness can only arise through an equally extensive revolutionary struggle. The objective content of the struggle, the result of the material circumstances in which the class lives and acts as well as of its own autonomous activity, determine the subjective content of consciousness.

This does not mean that revolutionary consciousness cannot take shape in a spontaneous form *parallel* to the development of the revolutionary crisis, as the effective expression of the immediate need to resolve the conflict between the social needs of individuals—and of the class as a whole—and the existing conditions of class rule and division in society. The working class is therefore obliged to think and to act in a revolutionary manner with respect to its immediate problems, even though it still lacks an understanding of the consequences implied by its practice and of a wider perspective for social change (an intellectual consciousness). This is how the Workers Councils arose, and what started as a mobilization against war and pauperization was transformed into a revolution.

Thus, with a revolution underway in Germany, there were only two possible roads open to the revolutionaries, as Mattick pointed out: the *first* was to withdraw from the fray and betray the proletarian masses, who were still subjectively under the influence of the social-reformists, but whose objective practice driven forward by the conditions would ultimately and necessarily lead to either revolutionary victory or a crushing defeat at the hands of the counterrevolution; the *second*, to go down fighting or to conquer with the fighting class, devoting all their energies to building the elements needed for the victory of the revolution, despite the fact that such a victory appeared to be unlikely at the time, or even that the revolution was effectively doomed to fail.

Following Leninist reasoning, but without its party deformation, the conditions for victory can also be built, and what may seem to be a questioning of the revolutionary capacity of the class on the part of its “vanguard” actually derives from the crisis of the substitutionist mode of comprehending the vanguard’s leadership role (in alienated terms: a “Crisis of Leadership”, as the Trotskyists say). By not establishing its politics as a function of the spontaneous dynamic of the real class struggle, but by doing the opposite, by attempting to define the orientation of the class struggle on the basis of the “objective” evaluation of the situation by leaders, it was inevitable that sudden changes, discontinuities and new problems, would provoke a “leadership crisis”. But such crises are the effects of the division between masses and leaders and result from an objectivist and mechanistic understanding of historical materialism. The true meaning of events can only be understood on the basis of the totality of intervening factors, but this totality is dynamic, not static, and the individual’s point of view is necessarily partial and relative; which is why truth must be understood as *dynamic* and analyses of a process must always be understood to be *transitory*. Truth, in absolute terms, cannot be understood; it can only be lived and experienced, flowing in the dynamic of the totality. It is not by chance that the typical origin of theoretical leaders in the intellectual class is a determinant factor in their tendency to separate themselves from the dynamic of the class as a whole and to develop a substitutionist perspective.

This contradiction between mass action and the intellectual consciousness of the vanguard formed the background for the debates that reached their peak at the founding congress of the German Communist Party. At that time, Otto Rühle was one of the spokesmen for the KPD’s left tendency, which rejected parliamentarism because (in Rühle’s own words):

“Such participation would be interpreted as approval of the National Assembly. In this way we would only help to divert the struggle from the streets to parliament. For us the only task is to reinforce the power of the Workers and Soldiers Councils.” (Quoted in Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin, Ed. Prudhommeaux.)

The debate over breaking with social democratic methods in the Spartacist League was prefigured by the process leading to the split in the Dutch Socialist Workers Party (SDAP), precipitated by the SDAP’s left tendency (whose spokespersons were, among others, Pannekoek (1873-1960), Gorter and Roland-Holst), as well as the debates concerning the split in the Dutch party which pitted Anton Pannekoek against Rosa Luxemburg, in which Luxemburg identified social democracy with the workers movement and even asserted that *“We cannot remain outside the organization, outside of contact with the masses”* (letter to Roland-Holst, August 1908), and that a bad party was better than no party at all.

Another key debate revolved around the question of trade unionism, which we shall investigate below. The left’s positions on parliament and the trade unions were, however, the outcome of experiences spanning the whole revolutionary and pre-revolutionary process, and were by no means the result of a sudden turn.

3. The Precursors of Council Communism

As we pointed out above, the new communist current would not issue solely or predominantly from the radicalization of Spartacism. Its more remote origins were prefigured in the small groups of politicized workers in many industrial centers like Bremen, Brunswick, Berlin and Hamburg, some of which coalesced to form the ISD (International Socialists of Germany) towards the end of 1915. The roots of the political vision of these groups grew from their

experience within social democracy and from the critique of the role of the trade unions in the mass strikes that took place in Germany and other countries.

The ISD was born from the convergence of groups on the social democratic left that voted with the Bolsheviks at Zimmerwald for the resolution in favor of breaking with social democracy in order to “transform the imperialist war into a civil war” and to form a new international. These groups broke with the SPD at the end of 1916, advocating the necessity of creating a radical organization of the left that was totally independent of the social democracy. Numerous members and sections of the Spartacist League concurred with these views, such as the Dresden section (Rühle). Rühle, who in March 1915 was the second Reichstag deputy after Liebknecht to vote against war credits, joined the ISD tendency after a brief period of membership in the Spartacist League.

On November 23, 1918 the groups of the ISD (Bremen, Brunswick and Berlin), which would be joined by a group from Hamburg, changed the name of the organization to the International Communists of Germany (IKD). The Hamburg group was to a great degree inspired by the revolutionary trade union movement in the U.S.; one of its theoreticians (Wolffheim) had been a militant for several years in California in the IWW trade union (Industrial Workers of the World).

The IKD, like the Spartacists, advocated “all power to the Councils”, but—unlike the Spartacists—also criticized the existing Councils, emphasizing the difference between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution and denouncing the attempts on the part of the SPD and the “Independents” (USPD) to control the Councils.

4. The Theoretical Progress of the Revolutionary Current

The new concepts that arose as critiques of the traditional workers movement of the era must not be considered as finished products, but as elements of a process of elaboration in which concepts and definitions continued to evolve over the entire period (ca. 1914-1924) and even thereafter.

Although, from the perspective of revolutionary hopes, the gaze of the advanced proletariat was directed toward the Russian revolution, towards the image of the Soviets and to a lesser degree of the Bolshevik Party, the most important influence on their day-to-day organization and struggle as a class within capitalism was the example of the American IWW. The latter became increasingly influential with the construction of new industrial complexes, often featuring North American technologies and working methods that were more advanced than their German counterparts, which marked the end of the preeminence of skilled workers in industry.

This influence can be demonstrated by the references made by the members of the KAPD to the experience of the American IWW or the British *Shop Stewards*(Factory Delegates) movement in defense of their own positions. As Hermann Gorter pointed out:

“Lenin and his colleagues have played a strange role. On the one hand, they have revealed the road to communism to the world proletariat; on the other hand, they have helped world capitalism penetrate Russia and Asia. . . . for our part, we shall always consider the real communism towards which the English, North American and German workers direct their efforts to be of the greatest importance.” (H. Gorter, World Communism, 1923.)

Although the Spartacists were closer to the masses, and were involved in many struggles, the groups close to the ISD carried out a much more profound and fruitful process of theoretical

elaboration. *While the Spartacists possessed the appearance, the revolutionary groups grasped the essence.* They wanted to study all the implications for the working class posed by the new capitalist phase that was accelerated and accentuated by the war. A new basis for the class struggle imposed new tasks and required new principles, and also opened up new perspectives.¹

The first outlines of the idea of “unitary organization” appeared in the ISD’s Bremen publication, *Arbeiterpolitik* (“Workers Politics”), and combined the functions of the political party and the industrial organization within the same structure. This unitary organization was nonetheless still viewed within the framework of parliamentary and trade union struggles. Only later would it constitute the basic model for a revolutionary synthesis of critical-praxis against the traditional workers movement.

The process of radical reorientation deepened over the course of the war years, while radical social democracy remained paralyzed by old ideas.

Thus, the theoretical efforts of the ISD-IKD ultimately yielded practical results, crystallizing in a tendency that, encouraged by the increasingly political direction assumed by strikes during the last year of the war, comprised together with the most advanced Spartacists the majority of the delegates at the founding congress of the KPD.

5. The Defeat of the November Revolution

The advance of the counterrevolution, which undermined the power of the councils and brutally repressed the revolutionary tendencies with the passive acquiescence of the majority of the working class, demonstrated the latter’s subjective immaturity and thus the need for a whole process of development of the class as a revolutionary subject, the basis for which must be the most concentrated and vital, direct and unmediated form of class antagonism; i.e., the struggle within the factories.

But the “Retreat to the Factories” did not mean that the revolutionary tendencies were reduced to small groups. To the contrary, after the war the KAPD had 40,000 members compared to the KPD’s 14,000, and at the time of the split between the AAUD (General Workers Union) and the AAUD-E (General Workers Union-Unitary Organization) in 1921 each of the latter two organizations had around 100,000 members. The great limitation of the effective relevance of these organizations in mass struggles must be understood as the result of the brevity of the revolutionary process and the enormous ideological power that the social democratic parties (SPD, USPD, KPD) and the trade unions still exercised over the class (a power that the inevitable historical degeneration of these organizations as extensions of capitalist power, and the resulting maturation of the class, would later greatly diminish).

The subsidence of the November revolution led to both a willingness to return to parliamentary politics as well as an accentuation of the KAPD’s putschist tendencies. This was due to both the reestablishment of bourgeois political hegemony as well as the attitude of the KAPD-AAUD tendency, which was still extensively influenced by the ideological and organizational forms of bourgeois politics. Within the Workers Unions the conflict between the objective necessities of the revolutionary process and the subjective dependence of the proletariat with respect to the bourgeois world intensified, and took the form of a conflict between the AAUD-KAPD tendency and the *unitary* tendency (AAUD-E). The abyss separating reformist practice and revolutionary practice would continue to expand.

In the early stages of the revolutionary process reformist tendencies are often spontaneously overcome by the demands of real life, and revolutionary groups see their positions vindicated by the unfolding of practical struggles or, at least, are presented with exceptional circumstances for propaganda in favor of their program. Outside an openly revolutionary process, however, during periods of reflux, class unity within a *front for the immediate advance of the revolution* yields to the preeminence of internal conflicts. It then becomes imperative to make a clean break within the conscious revolutionary movement with those elements and tendencies that are still weighed down by reformism, and to form a “pure” revolutionary nucleus that unites the tasks of the economic and political struggles. This revolutionary nucleus is not a new party, but a grouping of all those elements consistently committed to the revolution, which during the phase of revolutionary struggle implies an authentic mass organization. Nor is the *unitary organization* the negative consequence of the intensification of internal conflicts, but the positive resolution of the contradiction between the necessity of revolutionary action and the still-capitalist social conditions.

6. The Birth of the Revolutionary Factory Organizations

The defeat of the 1918 revolution was not the end of the revolutionary movement; the latter would, precisely during the course of this setback (and because of it), make new advances.

Since strikes were prohibited by the trade unions, with every new strike necessity forced the adoption of a form of organization in the factory to conduct the struggle, led by “revolutionary men of confidence” (*Revolutionären Obleute*, “Revolutionary Delegates”), most of whom were regularly elected trade union delegates who did not follow the ADGB (General Federation of German Trade Unions) line. These factory delegates, who were opposed to the war and the social truce conceded to the bourgeoisie, formed the organizing center for the biggest strike to take place during the war, in January 1918. At that time about one million workers in the armaments industry mobilized against the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in solidarity with the Russian proletariat. This group would later join the USPD and, as the Spartacist League, would maintain a separate existence within the party. As a result, most of the *Revolutionären Obleute* did not go on to form a trade union left; they were to the USPD what the ADGB was to the SPD.

It was in 1919 that the most radical elements in the *Revolutionären Obleute* decided to issue a call to get out of the trade unions and to form revolutionary factory organizations. According to Jan Appel, a member of the RO and then of the KAPD, it was at a general conference of *Revolutionären Obleute* in Hamburg, which had already come to the conclusion that the trade unions were useless as far as the revolutionary struggle was concerned, where the formation of revolutionary factory organizations as the basis for the Workers Councils was proclaimed. These organizations were to be formal and permanent and would be for the purpose of revolutionary struggle. Propaganda for this goal spread from Hamburg, and later resulted in the founding of the AAUD.

The slogan “Get out of the trade unions!”, which had already echoed during the war, now found fertile soil with demobilization and rising unemployment, and spread effectively throughout the leading industrial centers. Thousands of workers left the trade unions (*Gewerkschaften*), often dissolving their local branches, appropriating their funds and redistributing them as aid to the unemployed. This process marked the beginning of a profound break with social democracy and trade unionism.

As a result, the year 1919 saw the creation of *revolutionary factory organizations*, composed of the numerous workers who had abandoned the trade unions, often formed during or in the aftermath of wildcat strikes.

The *revolutionary factory organizations* were spontaneous creations of the proletariat, the outcome of its alienation from the trade unions and the emasculation and domination of the Workers Councils by the social democratic parties. *It was necessary to begin the struggle against the forces opposed to the power of the councils, opposed to the power of the proletariat as a class (that is, its real emancipation as a class).* The adoption of a new, more decentralized form of organization, although seemingly constituting a step backwards, a retreat in the face of social democratic usurpation that transformed the existing councils into organs of the parliamentary parties and subordinated them to the bourgeois State, *was in reality what was needed to enable a regrouping of the revolutionary workers' forces.*

Starting as small, isolated factory groups, in April of 1920 the latter met at a conference to unify the factory councils, attended by delegates from all the industrial regions of Germany. This conference led to the founding of the *General Workers Union of Germany* (AAUD). The *factory organizations* became the basic structures of the *Workers Unions* (*Arbeiterunionen*), in which they were regionally and nationally affiliated and centralized.

During the early stages of this process of breaking with the traditional movement based on trade unions and political parties, many advanced workers joined the recently formed anarchosyndicalist trade union, the FAUD (Free Workers Union of Germany). The FAUD's predecessor, the FVDG (Free Federation of German Trade Unions), had exercised considerable influence in pre-war industrial struggles. While its most advanced core (the FAU of Rhineland-Westphalia) leaned towards revolutionary industrial unionism, as opposed to trade-based organizational conceptions, the FAUD as a whole generally evolved in the direction of classical anarchosyndicalism (R. Rocker, etc.); it was militant, democratic and more apolitical than anti-political. The FAUD therefore rejected the political struggle and the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, defended the trade unions as organs of revolutionary power, and was incapable of drawing revolutionary conclusions from the political experiences of 1914-1919. For these reasons the tiny Marxist opposition that had formed within the FAUD left the trade union and, together with many other workers, also helped to form the AAUD.

The AAUD was based on the struggle against the trade unions and the legal councils, and rejected both parliamentarism and subordination to a party as well as trade union bureaucratization and division by trades.

At a time when the social democratic trade unions had 8 million members, the Christian trade unions more than 1 million and the company trade unions more than half a million, between April and December 1920 the AAUD's membership increased from 80,000 to 300,000, although some of its members were also still members of the FAUD or the Red Trade Union International (RTUI). This growth was generally connected with the development of the revolutionary crisis situation affecting capitalism.

7. The Formation of the *Dual* Organization AAUD-KAPD and the Opposition of the *Unitary* Current

The AAUD was in the process of being formed when the KPD's majority communist tendency was expelled from the party; this tendency would later form the KAPD in 1920.

The Spartacist tendency, now in full control of the KPD, resolved to return to parliamentary and trade union practice, transforming the party into an ordinary membership party rather than a party of class-conscious militants, a process that would later be reinforced by its merger with the USPD left, resulting in the formation of the VKPD (Unified Communist Party).

As a result, relations between the AAUD and the KAPD, already close because of their overlapping membership base, became much closer, while both groups distanced themselves from the FAUD and the VKPD.

In the KAPD's conception, based on the party's views regarding the decline of capitalism, the *factory organizations* would form the basis of the *council system*, reorganizing production in a communist way. They could only fulfill this function, however, on the basis of the hegemony of communist consciousness in the factory organizations. As a party the KAPD conceived of itself as the organization of conscious communists, whose role was to promote the revolutionary program and conceptions through its participation in the factory organizations. It was in relation to these issues that the discord between the KAPD-AAUD current and the *unitary* current that was later to found the AAUD-E was to revolve.

The KAPD militants were supposed to play a leading role in class struggles through the factory organizations, and thus direct the development of the industrial struggle towards communist perspectives. According to this conception, the members of the AAUD were not supposed to assume the leadership of struggles for factory reforms or wage increases, or of any struggle whatsoever that could not be steered in a communist direction. They were to express their solidarity with these struggles, but were not to accept their capitalist framework, thereby excluding themselves from playing a leading role in such struggles.

The viability of this perspective was inseparably linked to the revolutionary potential of the struggles of the time but it did not clearly distinguish between the spontaneous activation of this potential in the struggles associated with the ascendant stage of the revolution and the dormancy of these struggles during the stages of decline and reaction. From our perspective, this relative dormancy must be addressed by way of a combination of assuming the leadership in everyday struggles and defending a *practical* revolutionary orientation. The KAPD did not think it was possible to unite the struggle for reforms and the struggle for revolution, that is, to apply the tactical principle: *formal flexibility, rigidity with respect to principles*. The AAUD-E would hold the same position with regard to this question as the KAPD.

The conflict within the AAUD between the KAPist tendency and the *unitary* tendency reached a turning point at the Second Conference of the AAUD in March 1920. At this conference the AAUD ratified the positions of the *unitary* tendency of Hamburg (Roche) and Dresden (Rühle), rejecting the role of the party, simplifying the statutes, applying the federalist principle, etc. But after Rühle's current was expelled from the KAPD at the end of October, the Third Conference of the AAUD which took place in November of the same year reaffirmed the KAPD's positions, ratifying a program and guidelines for membership that were almost identical with texts the party had recently published. The necessity of a revolutionary party was therefore recognized, although this necessity was subject to many *qualifications*:

"The goal of the AAU is unitary organization. All its efforts are directed towards the achievement of this goal. Without admitting that there is a justification for the existence of political parties (since historical development is leading towards their dissolution), the AAU does not fight

against the political organization of the KAPD, whose goals and fighting methods are shared by the AAU, and endeavors to advance alongside the KAPD in the revolutionary combat.” (Thesis IX of the AAU Program adopted at the Third Conference, December 12-14, 1920.)

Nonetheless, the preeminence of the factory organization was emphasized:

“The formation of political parties is linked to parliamentarism. To this extent and for this reason, parties have exactly the same characteristics as capitalist organizations and are therefore constructed in accordance with the following principle: leader and masses; the leader standing above the masses, the organization functions from the top down. The leader commands and the masses obey. Above, a leader or a group of decision-makers, below, an army of subjects, a few foxes and millions of donkeys. And the principle of: where one goes, the others follow. The masses constitute the object of politics, an object that the ‘leaders’ manipulate according to their needs. The instrument of such a party is tactics, more precisely the tactics of capitalist businessmen: pure swindling. The leader is the businessman; the party is his property. The neighboring businessman is his competitor. Ever more refined tactics, ways and means derived from experience with capitalist business lead to success. He does not yield for anything. To be a Party man means: to value spiritual narrow-mindedness and hucksterism, to stifle what makes a man human.” (Extracts from the Guidelines of the AAUD.)

“The factory organizations are above all organizations of class struggle. Grouped within the AAU (General Workers Union), they are neither political parties nor trade unions. The latter terms are mired in the meanings they have hitherto possessed, that is, institutions of the kind one sees in today’s parties and trade unions.”

“Within them the proletariat begins to consciously organize for the complete overthrow of the old society and for its unification as a class. In the factory organizations the masses will be united by the consciousness of their proletarian class solidarity: it is here that the proletariat’s unification is organically prepared (that is, as a natural process, in a natural way, in accordance with circumstances). . . .” (Ibid.)

On the other hand, the AAUD did not succumb to a “fetishism of the Council form”, since it had learned the lessons of the first phase of the German revolution:

“It is just as obvious that the Workers Councils are not an empty phrase, but the complete expression of the new proletarian organization. It is the case that, in their process of development, authentic councils decay and petrify into a new bureaucracy. These councils will then have to be fought with the same determination as the capitalist organizations. But the developmental process will not stop and the proletariat will not rest until it has provided the new organization, the Council System, with its historically realizable expression in the classless society, beyond the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.” (Ibid.)

8. The Split in the KAPD and the AAUD: The Birth of the Workers Union as an Integrated Organization

As we have seen, the councilist movement was in many ways unencumbered by the fetishism that would later arise, but with regard to the party form the AAUD could not overcome the dominant influence of the KAPD which, for the most part, was unable to do more than draw ambiguous distinctions between the “traditional parties” and its own concept of the “revolutionary party”, distinctions that would later prove to be insufficient in practice.

But the *unitary* tendency led by Otto Rühle had drawn its conclusions from the process of the Russian revolution as well as from that of the German revolution. The ambiguities of the KAPD had no place in its perspective. It had already analyzed and called attention to the establishment of capitalist relations in Russia and Russia's opportunist-reformist policies in the Third International before their comrades in the KAPD.

As Rühle wrote after his return from Russia as a KAPD delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, the Bolshevik system was soviet in name only: "*The Russian workers are even more exploited than the German workers.*"

Rühle's critique of Bolshevik substitutionism was published in 1921 in an article entitled "Basic Issues of Organization":

"Russia has the ruling bureaucracy of the Commissariat. It does not have a Council System. The Soviets are elected from lists of candidates proposed by the Party; they exist under the terror of the regime, and are therefore not Councils in the revolutionary sense. They are 'show' councils, a political deception. All power in Russia resides in the bureaucracy, the mortal enemy of the Council System."

"But proletarian autonomy and the socialist economy require the Council System; in the latter everything is produced for need, and everyone takes part in its administration. The Party prevents Russia from attaining a Council System, and without councils there is no socialist construction, there is no communism. The dictatorship of the Party is a despotism of the Commissars, it is State Capitalism. . . ."

". . . the czarist dictatorship was that of one class over the other classes, that of the Bolsheviks is that of 5% of a class over the other classes and over 95% of its own class." (Die Aktion, No. 37, 1921; Journal of the AAUD-E.)

After having seen this, the "Twenty One Conditions" for admission to the Third International, and the impossibility of debate and discussion in the face of a *fait accompli*, Rühle chose not to attend the Congress of the International and returned to Germany. As a result, he was censured by the KAPD Central Committee and excluded from the party a few months later after a meeting of the Central Committee, of which he was an elected member (October 1920).

During this time the party was being dissolved into the Workers Unions in the Saxony and Hamburg districts. In Hamburg, anyone who chose to remain in the KAPD was excluded from the Workers Union. The *unitary* current organized as an opposition within the AAUD, and finally set forth its *Guidelines* at the Fourth Conference in June 1921 (these Guidelines were later officially adopted at the First autonomous Conference of the AAUD-E after the latter separated from the AAUD).

The final split was inevitable. The *unitary* tendency's opposition to joining the Communist International, and the KAPD's collaborationist position with respect to the latter, blinded by its illusions concerning the Russian revolution, triggered the split in the AAUD. At the end of 1921, the *General Workers Union-Unitary Organization* (AAUD-E) was formed, which embraced close to one-half the membership of the AAUD and whose supporters published the journals *Die Aktion* and *Einheitsfront*.

9. The Concept of the AAUD-E vs. the Concept of the KAPD: *the Organic Unity of Proletarian Praxis as Content of the Revolutionary Struggle vs. the Hegemony of Organized Revolutionary Class Consciousness*

The AAUD-E differed radically from the KAPD with regard to the following points: 1) the political primacy of the factory organization as the only basis for the revolutionary organization of the proletariat; 2) its unity as a political and economic organization, combining all the political and economic tasks and functions for the preparation and defense of the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) its complete rejection of the Third International; and 4) its opposition to the KAPD's evolving tendency towards putschism (coups and political substitutionism in general). Furthermore, and characteristically, the AAUD-E conceived the unitary organization of struggles (organic unity of political and economic struggle) as a precondition for the development of a unitary mass organization (organic membership of the whole proletariat in the AAUD-E and then in the Workers Councils).

When the KAPD was founded Rühle held that the party must exist as a separate organization only as long as it was needed to prepare for its effective dissolution into the AAUD. It was at the insistence of his tendency that the KAPD defined itself as "*not a party in the traditional sense, not a party of leaders. Its principle activity will be to support the German working class until it will be capable of doing without any leadership.*" (Minutes of the KAPD Congress, 1920.)

But we must not overlook the fact that the disputes concerning "unitary organization" cannot be reduced to the issue of suppressing the party, but also involved the concept of the Workers Councils (and, as we shall see, the concept of the development of class consciousness). For the KAPD, while the councils are the real institutions of the proletarian revolution, they are nonetheless divided into economic councils and political councils² (for the KPD and the Spartacists—the right wing of the original KPD—the councils were merely extensions of the functions of the trade unions and the party; not only did they ratify the distinction between economic and political councils, but their ideas concerning the functions of the councils were openly reformist and counterrevolutionary).

No one involved in the debate concerning the suppression of the revolutionary party was openly opposed to the idea of unitary organization. Instead, and in this respect it resembled the historical debate between anarchists and Marxists over the question of proletarian state power, the central issue revolved around determining the moment when the revolutionary party would *cease to exist*. The *unitary* tendency held that the party must disappear immediately in the Workers Unions, while the KAPD tendency maintained that it would only gradually disappear (in the meantime the party would be a "necessary evil", in the words of Schröder, a KAPD leader).

The KAPD's concept of the relation between the revolutionary party and the Workers Councils was set forth in 1921 in its "Theses on the Role of the Party" as follows: "*To the degree that the masses, after the political victory of the revolution, are prepared in their class organizations to introduce the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the council system, their importance in relation to party will increase. . . . when the masses finally transform their dictatorship into a communist economy, the party ceases to exist.*"

The KAPD rejected the Leninist concept of the party, the mass party (whose core was formed by professional revolutionaries),³ and articulated a concept of the revolutionary party as a party of the elite, based on quality rather than quantity, whose mission was focused on the development of the consciousness of the proletariat by means of propaganda and political

discussions arising in the midst of workplace struggles. The KAPD thereby assumed the intellectual function which (in its view) a mass organization was incapable of performing, while the AAUD grouped the masses in a network of factory organizations, opposing and destroying the influence of the trade unions, by means of both propaganda and direct action. Its activity was that of a “*group that shows in the struggle what the masses must become*” (H. Gorter). It was not understood that the specialized concept of intellectual function practically reproduces the separation of intellectual and manual labor, so that the party had a tendency in practice to fight for political-intellectual hegemony over the movement and within the organizations in which it played a role.

For the AAUD-E the development of revolutionary consciousness would come from freedom of speech and discussion within the factory organizations. This self-sufficiency of the factory organizations, however, and consequently of the Workers Unions, does not imply the absence of an internal vanguard nucleus; this position, to contrary, originated with the most advanced core group within the AAUD-E itself. While this concept can be explained by the era’s revolutionary character (which, in retrospect, can be determined to have entered into decline after 1923), it cannot be understood in isolation from the results of the class struggle and the autonomous activity of the organized proletariat within that struggle. Thus, the revolutionary intellectual core group within the AAUD-E, led by Rühle, probably saw the unitary organization as an open and potentially expanding arena to extend its own influence.

The very idea of *unitary* revolutionary organization already implies the suppression of the separation of intellectual and manual labor within the class movement. The AAUD-E emphasized the autonomous development of proletarian consciousness through unitarily-organized collective activity, as opposed to the idea of the interventionism of the political party. The separation of economic and political struggles also affected the development of proletarian consciousness: it created a tendency towards an “economic” and “pragmatic” consciousness in the mass organization, while the development of theoretical and political consciousness remained more or less a party monopoly.

The AAUD-E also criticized the KAPD for its centralism, with its professional leaders and salaried editors, and claimed that the only differences between the KAPD and the KPD were the former’s rejection of parliamentarism and its critique of trade unionism (a partial critique, since the AAUD was still the “economic” organization of the KAPD). The AAUD-E rejected the idea of paid leaders as well as the distinction between Revolutionary Party and Workers Union, which it described as the lingering hangover of the division between political party and trade union, political organization and economic organization.

This *unitary* critique of the old movement was essential and indispensable for formulating a complete reorganization of the proletarian movement on the basis of new political principles. The continued existence of organizational dualism was a reflection of capitalism, a reproduction of the capitalist division of labor rather than an allocation of labor based on abilities and needs, in which there are no absolutely separate fields or stagnant and artificial specializations, but different degrees of consciousness and committed participation in the class struggle. The “unitary” principle of organization, then, is an application of the universal communist principle that each person—in this case, each organization or collective—does what is best for the whole of its own accord and, correspondingly, the whole is organized in such a manner as to realize the needs for each part’s emancipation (*From each according to his abilities, to each according*

to his needs). Communist coherence is expressed in the practical application of principles, not in the defense of ideological forms.

II. The Decline of the Councilist Movement in Germany and its Reorganization in the KAUD.

1. “Change of Function” of the Factory Organizations vs. Clarification of Their New Characteristics.

Because of its basically different outlook, the *unitary* current (which had not yet coalesced in the AAUD-E) refused to participate in the 1921 insurrection staged by the KPD and the KAPD-AAUD (the “March Action”), denouncing it as nothing but a smokescreen for the events then taking place in Russia, where an economic crisis, a strike wave in Petrograd, and the bloody repression of the Kronstadt Rebellion were taking place. At that time it was the only current that firmly dissociated itself from and denounced the Bolshevik tactics of the Third International:

“Bolshevik power made use of the German revolution until its domestic situation was totally stabilized.”

“The workers must understand that the Action in Central Germany is madness and a crime for which the VKPD is fully responsible.” (Rühle.)

Even after the “March Action” the KAPD did not admit its own incoherence in collaborating with Bolshevik tactics intended to distract attention from the class struggle within Russia, which challenged the power and the “revolutionary” nature of the Bolshevik government. Instead, the KAPD kept its distance from any defense of the Kronstadt Rebellion until it was expelled from the Third International. The KAPD’s insurrectionism and its “tailism” with respect to the KPD even led it to engage in frontal confrontations with sectors of the working class by supporting the KPD again in the disastrous and isolated Hamburg insurrection of October 1923.

As a consequence of the repression and defeat it suffered as a result of the March insurrection of 1921, the AAUD was rapidly on the way to becoming a mass organization in name only. Within that historical context and considering the range of its influence, the outlook for the AAUD-E, formed a few months later, could hardly be any different.

We do not, however, concur with the analysis of H. Canne Meijer, who maintained that the decline of the AAUD and AAUD-E turned them into “*insignificant political parties*” (together with the remains of the KAPD) as a result of a “*change in their function*”.

As they conceived their function in the class struggle, the factory organizations did not lead strikes or negotiate with the factory owners, nor did they formulate demands. All these things must be the work of the participants in the struggle themselves. The factory organizations were institutions of the struggle, they restricted their activities to propaganda and mutual aid, helping to organize strikes, placing their publications at the service of strikes, and organizing meetings. If one of their members participated in a strike committee, he did so as a representative of the strikers, not of the factory organization.

During the normalization period extending from 1923 to 1930, the waning of the class struggle reduced the activity of the factory organizations to propaganda and analysis. According to Meijer, this is “political activity” and it led to an exodus of the membership, as well as the abandonment of the factory as an organizational base, so that meetings were held elsewhere.

But this “change of function”, or more precisely, this shift of the focus of activity towards theoretical tasks (as in other conditions there would be a shift from theoretical to practical tasks, following a dialectical movement), does not constitute “political activity” unless one defines theoretical activity as the purview of a political party.

The problem actually resides in the difficulties standing in the way of overcoming the alienation created by the separation of manual and intellectual labor, that is, the difficulties faced by the proletariat itself in overcoming its reduction to responding to “immediate” problems and assuming a more long-term perspective along with the resulting need for a broad-based theoretical understanding to serve as a guide to action. Furthermore, there was no intentional abandonment of the workplace as an organizational base; instead, this abandonment was an adaptation to the “technical” necessity of coordinating diverse factory groups due to a declining membership.

Thus, the revolutionary factory organization did not undergo a change of function; instead, having been reduced to the status of an advanced militant nucleus, to its natural condition in a non-revolutionary situation, its role as an active mediator between the positive and comprehensive revolutionary program (the elaboration of which requires a group focused on the tasks of theoretical elucidation) and the mass struggle concerned only with immediate needs, also became strikingly apparent. The function of the militant nucleus is, then, not only to instigate proletarian struggles, but also to incite proletarian consciousness towards an essential revolutionary perspective which is merely embryonic, but which—by virtue of its transformation into a practical force—accelerates the process revolutionizing the general struggle of the class itself.

The unity of theoretical and practical functions in the revolutionary nucleus is therefore inherent in its character as an instrument of class struggle, due to its function as mediator between the comprehensive communist program of the intellectualized vanguard of the class and the mass struggle for immediate needs.

Returning to Meijer’s argument, the explanation for the subsequent dynamics of the efforts to reunify the AAUD, AAUD-E and the KAPD does not reside for us in the fact that “*there were no longer any practical differences separating the KAPD, the AAUD and the AAUD-E*” (Meijer). Historical experience does not support the idea that a similarity of “political” tendencies will in and of itself lead to a process unifying different “fractions” into one organization. The cause of this dynamic of recomposition resides in the need to regroup forces when faced by the decline of the revolution and the rise of reaction, in order to be able to hold out for an indefinite period by preserving as much of the organization’s influence in the proletariat as possible.

2. The Beginning of the Movement’s Decomposition

In the original view of the AAUD-E, which was also that of the AAUD, the growth of the factory organizations witnessed in 1919 and 1920 would continue and lead to a mass movement of “millions of conscious communists” that would *overwhelm* the power of the self-designated “class” trade unions. They expected that the revolution would advance, and they saw their own growth as a measure of the development of the fighting spirit and class-consciousness of the proletariat. This view did in fact have an objective basis: the critical situation of the German economy due to Germany’s defeat in the First World War, and its colonization by the victors.

It was only the U.S. “aid” plan, with its credits to rescue the German economy, which made the 1924-1930 recovery possible. Big foreign capital had to come to the assistance of a country undergoing recurrent situations of revolutionary crisis, but not without wanting something in return, of course. Then, in 1930, the great worldwide depression that began at the end of the previous decade had an especially powerful impact on Germany; by then, however, the situation was qualitatively different.

After the 1923 crisis, the Workers Unions went into decline and were reduced to cells of conscious communists. The exhaustion of the proletariat’s energies during the revolutionary years, as well as the subsidence of class antagonisms during the subsequent period of stabilization and recovery of the German economy, resulted in a process of quantitative decomposition of the movement, which was necessarily conjoined with a qualitative concentration, so that only those elements with the strongest militant and revolutionary convictions continued to resist.

This is our explanation for the characteristics displayed by the subsequent reunification process of the councilist movement, as well as the necessary continuity of its decline.

Because the revolutionary factory organizations, the Workers Unions and their intellectual revolutionary proto-organization (the KAPD) were organic forms of a social movement, determined by the dynamic of historical conditions, their decline together with the disappearance of those conditions was completely natural, as soon as the movement was unable to complete its historical mission while the latter still had an objective basis.

As a result, two tendencies arose—each with its own practical and theoretical forms that interacted with each other: reaction/self-movement, decomposition/recomposition—in response to the transformation of the dynamic conditions of the class struggle. The first is reaction and decomposition: most proletarian militants abandoned the revolutionary organizations, which they had joined for purposes of a necessary combat in real life and, as a corollary of this dismemberment, the petit-bourgeois component of these organizations was not only freed from proletarian influence but also powerless to prevent the hemorrhage of members from their organizations. This tendency expressed itself theoretically in an incipient form of “anti-workerism” (which would undergo further development), as it took account of the fact that the greatest enemy of the revolution had been the majority of the working class itself. By adopting this position it tended to lose sight of the real causes of the defeat and the materialist comprehension of the centrality of the proletariat: the revolutionary essence of the proletariat is expressed not in what it thinks or in its particular actions, but only in the general movement of its struggle. The question, then, concerns the preconditions for the growth, development and victory of this general movement, since the latter does not evolve gradually or consciously by progressing from particular movements into a universal movement, nor can its general content be developed except through the universal self-activity of the masses (in their needs and consequently in the extension of those needs).

The second tendency is self-active and recomposing. It takes account of the new conditions and attempts to preserve the theoretical and practical contributions of the revolutionary movement, awaiting a new revolutionary upsurge.

This last feature cannot be interpreted as idealist optimism. The critique that maintains that the preservation of organizational elements and forms of practice was a conservative effort based

on illusions and that persists in characterizing the groups which played such a role as sects loses sight of two fundamental points: first, that organizational elements are necessary both for the revolutionary struggles of the future as well as to maintain a practical example of the necessity and the possibility of new forms of revolutionary organization; second, that sects, strictly speaking, are characterized essentially by their alienated forms of thought and action, as in “groupusculation” (subjective separation from the real movement, the idea that one’s organization is perfect and that it simply must increase the number of its members, etc.) and its attendant dogmatism.

On the other hand, as we shall see with respect to the formation and development of the KAUD, such stagnation does not seem to have taken place and, moreover, very important progress was made toward the clarification of questions concerning the form of the revolutionary organization and tactics during the period of reflux. (In a context where a non-revolutionary dynamic is imposed on the class struggle, however, an objective separation from the real movement, and the corresponding tendency to withdraw into the subjective world, would only tend to become absolute—sectarianism—if the revolutionaries were really outside the real movement, that is, if they were to renounce the class struggle in its existing form and if they were also to renounce revolutionary thought.)

The process of the decline of the revolutionary movement was not part of a process of capitalist restructuring of the proletariat, but an aspect of the decomposition of the old workers movement in the absence of a new workers movement to replace it. The moderation of the class struggle, punctuated by the defeat of the revolution, led, with the onset of the great depression of the 1930s—which acted as a factor aggravating the crisis of the old workers movement—to the triumph of Nazism. Following Mattick, and maybe going a little further, it was the proletarian masses themselves who, with their inaction, allowed Nazism to destroy their old reformist organizations; the counterrevolution managed to do what the revolution could not accomplish. The two extremes converged on that point. Once the revolutionary movement was destroyed, reformism became a nuisance for a crisis-ridden capitalism. So it was condemned.

But, to paraphrase Marx, the revolution relents after having felled its enemy, so the latter reemerges stronger than ever, engendering a powerful counterrevolution, an adversary against which the party of subversion must struggle in order to mature, to become a really revolutionary party. This adversary, however, cannot serve only as the negative foundation of a new class consciousness, but must also sweep aside the old obstacles produced by still-immature capitalist relations in order to compel the proletariat to develop new forms, to raise the level of its struggle.

Germany provides a dramatic example of how proletarian trade unionism and party politics were historically destroyed, and were only able to continue to exist in the form of institutions *structurally* integrated into the capitalist system and inseparable from the latter. Furthermore, this was not the result of a forced convergence, but of the essential identity of their forms of activity and functions with the needs of capitalism and with the economic-political role of the capitalist State. This superstructural, ideological and organizational identity progressively became a more compact structural unity as capitalism had more need of control over the value of labor power.

Henceforth, wherever proletarian combativity sought expression, it necessarily had to adopt the form of assemblies, committees, etc. (formed for the purpose of collective struggles), the form of

activist nuclei in the workplace that encourage the development of those struggles, and the form of individuals or small groups devoted to theory that try to work for the raising and clarification of class consciousness. When the old forms reappear they always do so in order to emasculate and domesticate the movement, to re-channel struggles into the capitalist framework, to attack and silence the proletarian critiques of their reactionary role.

The voluntarism of the radical militants of the old movement could do nothing to affect the tremendous material and spiritual power of the system, nor could they impede the inherent tendency of their own organizations—*which were incapable of developing autonomous proletarian activity by breaking with the foundations of alienation*—to become more and more integrated as part of that system's power, as trade unions and parties acquired practical relevance in the economic process. In the best cases, they strove for political power over the State in order to exchange one form of capitalism for another.

3. The Process of Clarification and Recomposition

At the end of 1929 the AAUD decided to break off all contacts with the KAPD at its Ninth National Conference, due to the conflict between the KAPD's tendency towards substitutionism and the AAUD's tendency towards trade unionism.

While the KAPD was still imbued with the "party spirit", manifested in its putschist pretensions, leadership politics, etc., which were for their part accentuated by discouragement in the face of the definitive ebb of the revolution, it is also true that the decomposition of the AAUD was manifested in its "flexible" tactic of supporting workers struggles for higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions.

For the first time in its history, the AAUD conducted a strike, just like a trade union. This was the result of its new tactic. The KAPD viewed this as the victory of labor parliamentarism, the subordination of the class struggle to the capitalist bargaining table, without any appreciation for its partial truth.

(We recall that for the KAPD the members of the AAUD were not supposed to assume the leadership of any struggles for reforms or wage increases, or any struggle that was incapable of proceeding in an openly communist direction. They were supposed to express their practical solidarity with such struggles but were also supposed to refuse to accept their frame of reference. As a result the KAPD was incapable of addressing the new conditions of the class struggle. This inability reflected the attitudes of its original membership, which was composed for the most part of young and unemployed workers who shared the insurrectionist perspective of the core leadership.)

For the non-councilist "left communists", that is, the Bordigists or the various types of "left Leninism", the rupture with substitutionist tendencies could appear to be the result of the spread of an "anti-authoritarian 'anti-leader' ideology" (P. Bourrinet), and as a degenerative process. From our perspective, on the other hand, the tendency to decomposition is manifested on the organizational plane in a dogmatic and idealist anti-authoritarianism, reaching the extreme of anti-organizational and anti-theoretical positions, etc. But this was not the case with the current we are examining, or at least it did not play a decisive role.

Furthermore, the conflict between the AAUD and the KAPD was not the only one of its kind. All the organizations of the revolutionary left were affected by internal disputes as a result of the

return of the class struggle to the capitalist framework, and were split into various opposed currents.

If, until 1925, the leadership of the AAUD-E was defined by Rühle's tendency, afterwards there appeared: 1) a tendency that wanted to merge with the FAUD; 2) a tendency that wanted to participate in wage struggles and elections for the legal councils (this tendency was excluded); 3) a tendency that defended absolute workplace autonomy, and which later evolved towards anti-organizational and anti-intellectual positions (which quite consistently dissolved its own organizations); and 4) a tendency that defended the principle that the resolutions adopted by the AAUD Congress must be obligatory for all members of the organization (this tendency was victorious, and brought the AAUD-E closer to the AAUD). In 1926 the AAUD-E merged with two other groups, the Industrial Union of Transport Workers and a Trotskyist group expelled from the KPD, forming the Spartacist League of Left Communist Organizations.

But despite the accentuation of what may be considered to be "bourgeois tendencies" in the advanced fractions the latter were still part of the communist vanguard. The conditions of the time finally drove the AAUD and the AAUD-E to conduct discussions with a view towards merger. Anton Pannekoek and the Group of International Communists of Holland (GIKH) participated as invited guests at the Unification Conference so they could offer their contributions to the efforts of clarification.

In its contribution to the Conference, the GIKH presented its theses on the "factory cells" (contained in the GIKH's document entitled "Guidelines Concerning the Factory Cell (*Betriebskerne*)"). The GIKH questioned the AAUD's pretension, expressed in its program, of becoming a "mass organization". The AAUD was incapable of being either a party or a trade union, but must instead consider itself to be an association of "*revolutionary factory cells*", whose principle task was propaganda for "*the association of the free and equal producers*". These cells can never compete with the trade unions by making economic demands. Their task was to contribute, within the context of wildcat strikes, to the formation of a *unitary class front against the trade unions*.

It was only in the mass struggle that the factory organizations could really become the organization of the whole class, while the "*factory cell*" was only capable of "*orienting the struggle*". According to the GIKH, they could only be permanent organizations in the context of a revolutionary uprising. After the struggle is over, only the "*factory cell*" would remain as an arena for propaganda in favor of the self-organization of the class. It would constitute the most active and alert part of the class, so the *Workers Unions* will henceforth be a small core group.

The GIKH was, however, like the AAUD, opposed to the AAUD-E's denial of the need for any kind of "party". They thought that dual and separate organizations would continue to be necessary, although the two organizations must definitely be separate and the AAUD must by no means fall under the domination of a party. It was on this basis that the unification of the AAUD and the AAUD-E took place at the end of December 1931, leaving unresolved the issue of the supersession of the party-form.

4. The Formation of the Communist Workers Union (KAUD)

The new organization resulting from the merger of the AAUD and the AAUD-E called itself the *Communist Workers Union of Germany* (KAUD). It had only several hundred members. A minority of the AAUD remained in the KAPD, and a few members of the AAUD-E left for the

ranks of the FAUD, but the majority was integrated into the *new form* of an *explicitly communist Workers Union (Kommunistische Arbeiter Union)*.

This step implied a change of conceptions. The perspective of the AAUD and the AAUD-E was that they would become the *general* organizations of the proletariat, organizing millions of workers just like a “revolutionary trade union”.

The practical verification of the fact that, outside the direct influence of a revolutionary situation, the Workers Unions were reduced to a very restricted nucleus of advanced militants, who were then much less capable of action or exercising influence over other workers, led to a critique of the idea of the “organized class” as the central subject of the movement, that is, it led to a critique of the centralist perspective that was reproduced in the relation between the Workers Unions and the struggles of the masses. The KAUD called upon the working class to organize itself in its struggles, overcoming the notion that subordinated the *organized struggle* of the class to the existence of an organization formed *prior to* the struggle (which for its part was profoundly anti-dialectical, since the mass struggle and the class organizations are two elements that arise and interact in a single indivisible process).

The masses of the workers would have to organize themselves in the struggle, to act as an “organized class”. For its part, the KAUD united revolutionary workers, ready to fight for the communist goal, but no longer claimed to be a general union of the class. The identification of the organization with revolutionary power, a legacy of the pretensions of revolutionary syndicalism (like the Party-State in Bolshevism) of taking in its hands the economic and political management of society through its own organization, assumed other forms in the AAUD and the AAUD-E, but nonetheless concealed an error. With the change of conception regarding mass organization, the idea that the Council Organizations⁴ would develop until they become a System of Workers Councils, or would be directly incorporated as the foundation of the councils that would be formed, was abandoned. This new position was based on the practical experience of the fact that, in the conditions of a still-ascendant capitalism, permanent revolutionary mass organizations cannot survive, and are rapidly reduced again to the most advanced and active nucleus.

Nonetheless, it is not entirely clear that the idea of developing Council Organizations as the foundation of the Council System was totally abandoned. For our part, we resolve the problem by viewing the Council Organizations as the result of the revolutionary process of development of the real proletarian movement, whereby the revolutionary nuclei acquire the dimensions of mass organizations and the groups devoted to theory can be fully integrated into these institutions, their necessity as separate organizations progressively reduced. That is: *the formation of a Workers Union as an economic and political Unitary Organization will be the ultimate purpose of the revolutionary nuclei of militants.*

The KAUD adopted a perspective in which the place of permanent mass organizations would be occupied only by temporary organizations like strike committees, strike assemblies, etc., created by the working class itself. This adaptation, by partially negating the self-identification of the organization with revolutionary power, helped to partially resolve the disagreements among the AAUD, the AAUD-E and the KAPD and to give rise to the new perspective that the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be placed in the hands of specialized organizations, but into those of the class in struggle.

The functions of the new Workers Union were communist propaganda, the clarification of the goals of the struggle, to drive the struggle forward, principally by means of the wildcat strike, and to show the class how to unleash its forces and overcome its weaknesses. The KAUD saw itself as a vanguard and as a proletarian “elite”.

To summarize: the KAUD form was essentially a development of the AAUD-E form in a direction somewhat more in accord with its real foundations, although this was still not sufficiently clarified. In fact, the KAUD defined itself as an association of conscious communists, a highly developed communist nucleus, which was the reflection of a situation of increasing isolation of the revolutionary nucleus. A nucleus, condensed and isolated from the general movement of the class by the objective developmental trends, increasingly reduced to those proletarian elements with the most advanced understanding and a complete militant dedication to the struggle for the proletarian revolution. This elite composition was the exact opposite of the origins of the Workers Unions as mass organizations.

As a result, the old conceptions of the AAUD-E were in many ways abandoned and in this sense the KAUD also expressed, as its negative side, the decline of the movement. But, despite a certain degree of theoretical vagueness, the new Workers Union was a further development of the unitary principles of organization and struggle, although in different forms. Many of the characteristics of the AAUD-E and the AAUD were no longer practically relevant in an association of small groups, possessed of a consciousness of the totality with regard to the economic and political aspects of the class struggle, but necessarily insignificant in a workers movement once again operating within the framework of capitalism. Nor were the conditions of the time propitious for new developments. It would not be until the 1970s, with the assembly movements and the currents involved with the workers committees or commissions, that these ideas would be viewed from a new perspective.

5. The End of the Councilist Movement in Germany

During the early years of the Nazi dictatorship the movement went underground and was not eliminated by fascist repression. After March 1933, the KAUD published its information bulletin, whose title was frequently changed in an attempt to evade the Gestapo: the *New Programmatic Journal*; *Workers Correspondence*; *Labor Correspondence*; and *Reflections on Fascism*. In the June 1933 issue of this bulletin the KAUD announced that its task was to “*sweep aside the ruins of reformism and help give birth to the revolutionary front of the struggle of the proletarian masses*” through the creation of “*communist cadres who will act as the spores of the proletarian movement*” and the establishment of “*new circles*” and undertaking “*an educational program that will anchor the communist ideology even deeper in the proletariat.*” Unlike the KAPD, it took a stand “*against the renaissance of Bolshevism*”.

The KAUD held three congresses, which resulted in a merger with the remnants of the KAPD. But disagreements concerning the party form were too strong for the organization to maintain a solid foundation, and in December 1933 the new organization was shattered by intense factional struggles.

The members of the KAPD totally rejected the slogan “*go to the masses*” and defended a course of action more consonant with the period of counterrevolution and strictly clandestine work. The most important issue for the KAPD was to preserve the party cadres, not “going to the masses”, thus adopting a position close to Bolshevism. The KAPD rejected any kind of “left” alliance in the name of the common struggle against fascist repression. The organization

therefore dissolved in the summer of 1934, to be replaced by a new one called *Revolutionären Obleute* (Revolutionary Delegates) as the heir of the KAUD.

The new group established contacts with the GIK in Holland and with the council communist organization led by Paul Mattick in the U.S. (Chicago). But this was the end. The revolutionary movement would not recover. Capitalist stabilization was not a temporary process and, as a tendency, would last for decades thanks to State Capitalist methods and the growth of totalitarianism in all nations.

They did not labor in vain, however. Their ideas and contributions are even more pertinent today than they were when they were first formulated and are therefore of immense value, an authentic treasure trove for today's revolutionary communist militants.

Although the minority character of its radical movements prevents us from considering the revolutionary process in Germany as the beginning of a new class movement, it must nonetheless be viewed as the prelude to such a movement, and the reduced remnant of the radical movement must be seen as the precursor to a new general movement, as the beginning of its formative stage which will last until the proletarian revolution (when it will become the process of the revolution itself). The new movement can only develop quantitatively and qualitatively as the result of the decline of capitalism, through processes of ruptures and rapid advances and long periods of gradual development, processes that depend on capitalism but also depend on the outcome of the class struggle; they depend on objective determinations but also on the subjective activity that is nourished by these processes and constitutes the creative element, capable of constructing new class forms, ideas, attitudes and practices.

The new perspectives, ideas and forms of organization and activity that arose during the 1920s in Germany can therefore only be a rough sketch for their present-day counterparts, which must not only be adapted to the concrete conditions of our time but also must be enriched by all the experiences which have accumulated since the 1920s. This is not optional, but a practical imperative. Radical leftists think that it is enough to have ideological conviction based on "principles", ideas, forms, etc. They forget that the emancipation of the class can only be the work of the class itself, of the class as a concrete totality (individuals, their relationships, the combination of their energies and abilities in a collective process of liberation). They also forget that the eminently practical basis for this principle consists in the fact that the developmental trend of capitalist rule makes the further development of proletarian theory, organization and practice a necessity and an indispensable condition even for the defense or conquest of limited improvements within the system (always with temporary, precarious and meager results). Only the experience of the class as a whole can provide a synoptic view of the preconditions for the transformation of the totality of the capitalist society and its system, since particular experience necessarily breeds particular conclusions, the tendency to erroneously generalize them and the consequent inattention to practical questions that directly affect the development of the proletariat in its totality as an effective revolutionary, i.e., collective subject.

Grupo de Comunistas de Conselhos de Galiza (Group of Council Communists of Galicia)

This text was written in 2003-2004 and published in Igneo, No. 7 (Summer 2006), as the first part of what was projected to be a longer work. The second part was to have been devoted to the specific characteristics of the Workers Unions, analyzing them as forms of autonomous revolutionary activity; progress on this part was frankly insufficient and it remains unfinished.

Translated from the Spanish edition published on the [website of the](#) Circulo Internacional de Comunistas Antibolcheviques (CICA). This English version taken from the [Collective Action Notes website](#)..

- **1.** Pannekoek and Gorter had already provided examples of this kind of perspective before the war, with their analysis of the relation between the development of imperialism and the need for mass actions and new organizational forms. (Note added to the CICA online edition.)
- **2.** See the 1920 [Program of the KAPD](#). (Note added to the CICA online edition.)
- **3.** Contrary to all Leninist blather, this idea was clearly implicit in all Lenin's tactics and was explicitly enunciated in his *Infantile Disorder*. (Note added to the CICA online edition.)
- **4.** The concept of *Council Organization (Rateorganisation)* refers to an organization whose form adheres to the parameters defined by the Council-form. Examples include the factory organizations and the Workers Unions. As a result, the term Council Organization refers to any institution that fulfills a prefigurative and constructive role for the Council System. The concept of Council System therefore does not refer only to an interrelated network of particular workers councils but, where necessary, it also includes all those organizations that are congenial to the council idea and whose purpose is to build and to support the Councils. (Note added to the CICA online edition.)