

The advance skirmishes of the German Revolution (1917-1918) and Richard Müller – Charles-André Udry

A brief introduction to Richard Müller, the leader of the revolutionary shop stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute*) among the German metal workers during World War One, and his role in the mass strikes in the German munitions industry in 1917 and 1918, with excerpts from his book, *Eine Geschichte der Novemberrevolution* (A History of the November Revolution) (1924), and an official police intelligence report on the strike wave of January-February 1917 taken from the archives of the Berlin police department.

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In 1916, Richard Müller, a trade union leader of the Berlin metal workers—at a socio-political juncture whose main problems were outlined during a conference of trade union shop floor militants held in April of 1915—supported a position that he summarized as follows: “We do not want to debate, nor are we capable of debating, what is going on in the outside world [the war, the militaristic policies of the government, the repressive measures]”; he thought that they must give the highest priority to what is going on inside the factories. Müller therefore reflected the “classic” division between “economic action”, reserved for the trade unions, and “political action”, which was the task of the social democracy.

Müller, however—an emblematic figure for those trade union militants known as “men of confidence” (*Obleute*) [shop stewards]—openly denounced the suppression of the right to strike and proclaimed his opposition to the Civil Peace: the famous *Burgfrieden* that imposed, beginning on August 2, 1914, the slogan, “there are no longer any parties, there are only Germans”, a sentiment shared by the vast majority of the social democratic deputies in the Reichstag. This stance, which he upheld in 1915 and 1916 and was widely publicized in a pamphlet, only addressed the question of the war from the point of view of its economic repercussions (wages, the organization of labor in the framework of the war economy). Müller thought, like many other combative militants, that the war would be of brief duration.

Richard Müller was a respected figure among the Berlin metal workers, which was itself a reflection, since early 1916, of the effective opposition, on the part of very broad sectors, to the *Burgfrieden*, to the suppression of the right to strike and to Taylorist production methods (associated with war production). At the March 1916 Congress of the Metal Workers Trade Union (the DMV, Deutscher Metallarbeiter-Verband) of the Berlin region, he was asked to take over the leadership of the trade union, replacing Adolf Cohen. This proposal was the fruit of his militant activity and his speeches, which were in sympathy with a similar feeling that was widespread among the metal workers. Müller refused the offer, however, not only because he thought that this post (and taking into account his radical views) would make him an easy target for state and military repression, but also because he still had a certain degree of confidence, even then, in the leaders of the trade union apparatus. In 1919, in one of his articles, he pointed out that at that time (1916) he thought that these trade union apparatuses were still playing a “positive role in the defense of the proletariat”. He later admitted that it was a mistake to have allowed the re-election of Cohen. As it turned out, Cohen only received one-third of the votes, while the other two-thirds of the delegates abstained from voting.

With regard to this shift in his political orientation we may refer to his book published in 1924: *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der revolutionären Arbeiterbewegung während des Weltkrieges* (From the Empire to the Republic: A Contribution to the History of the Revolutionary Workers Movement During the World War). His mistake at the 1916 Metal Workers Congress made it necessary to structure the opposition on the fringes of the DMV, whereas in March of 1916 it would have been possible to promote the cause of the opposition with the leadership of the trade union on a solid base, which would have changed the trade union and political situation of 1917-1918.

It should also be recalled that ever since 1905 the German workers movement had been debating the question of the mass strike, as a result of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Rosa Luxemburg's text, "Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions", is its clearest expression. At that time, not even Eduard Bernstein opposed the mass strike, but conceived it as a "defensive means" against "a brutal assault".

It was in a context in which all the socio-economic effects of the war were manifested in their brutal reality, beginning in June 1916, and then again in April 1917 and January 1918, that combative strikes broke out. It is useful to emphasize their novelty with respect to themes that did not merely repeat those of the past, at least in their main contours. These were not strikes for universal suffrage, like the Belgian strikes of 1906, but strikes that ultimately posed the question of political power and the position occupied by the workers councils (*Räte*) in this process. This is the point that is expressed by the excerpt we reproduce below from Müller's text, "The Second Political Mass Strike". The author analyzes this process in his book, *Eine Geschichte der Novemberrevolution* (A History of the November Revolution), published in 1924-1925. The text reproduced below is part of Chapter 14 of the latter book. Not to take into account the fact that these events and their elaboration, their synchronicity with what was going on in Russia and the impact of those events on the militant German workers, and the idea of speaking of "our Russian revolution", would be evidence of a shallow political and historical myopia.

The Second Political Mass Strike – Richard Müller

In January of 1917, in some cities they had to reduce the potato ration from ten to three pounds.... The irritation in the factories was enormous. And what hunger could not achieve was brought about by the factory owners with their brutal measures with respect to wages and the labor process, especially after the passage of the new law on auxiliary labor service gave them free rein and granted them immunity. [In June of 1916, the first political strike had taken place to protest against the arrest of Karl Liebknecht on May 1, 1916, for his impassioned speech against the war. The main demand of this strike was peace without annexations.]

On February 15 ... the government had to announce through the press the reduction of the bread ration by 25% beginning on April 16.... The working class masses were so enraged that all that was needed was a small spark to set them in motion. In the working class districts of Berlin, several bakeries and butcher shops had already been attacked and looted.

This economic situation was accompanied by political events that had serious repercussions on the working class masses. The Reichstag had voted in favor of the commencement of unrestricted submarine warfare.... The workers wanted peace. In their view, this kind of warfare would only increase the number of enemies of Germany and prolong the conflict.

The news from Russia was also followed very closely. When the first reports arrived in March concerning the street battles in Petrograd, and then shortly afterwards the revolution and fall of the Czar were announced, the workers harbored new hopes. In broad circles many people became aware of the fact that this was also the only salvation for the working class.

The Berlin leadership of the revolutionary factory delegates observed the movement in the factories at first hand. The rank and file urged and even demanded that the leaders should give the signal for the strike. The leadership, however, was aware of the fact that a struggle under those conditions could not be limited to a 24-hour protest strike, that the struggle would also trigger a full mobilization of hostile forces and that it would not end in victory, but would only be one more stage towards new and more violent battles....

In this struggle, the opposition of the trade union leaders would also have to be neutralized. Although these leaders had lost much of their ability to influence the masses and the trade union cadres, decades of practical experience in the mass trade union struggle had also taught them how to manage critical situations....

The trade union leaders realized that it was no longer possible to stop the movement. A safety valve had to be opened to release the pent-up pressure. They convoked conferences and assemblies where the workers could express their discontent. In the past this had often been good enough, but now it was not sufficient. Nor were they unaware of the activities of the revolutionary delegates in the factories, and they had no other recourse than to make the best of a bad situation.

The leadership of the revolutionary delegates had perfectly understood the intentions of the trade union leaders. If the revolutionary delegates wanted the movement to have political repercussions and if they wanted to throw a wrench in the works of the plans of the trade union leaders, they had to challenge the trade union leaders, before calling the strike, to a public debate, so that the masses could clearly see for themselves what the goal of the strike should be.

A suitable occasion for this debate was provided by the general assembly of the Berlin metal workers, scheduled for April 15. All the enterprises were represented at this assembly. Despite the fact that the assembly's agenda featured other questions, it did not prove difficult to have it changed. The new agenda was to analyze the economic situation in its political context, to formulate specific political demands, and to approve the strike. A mass political strike, proclaimed by the supreme committee of the largest local trade union, would necessarily acquire a vast scale and exercise a powerful influence not only on the government and the bourgeoisie, but also on the workers movement as a whole.

Two days before the general assembly, Richard Müller was arrested and transported to a military base in Jüterborg. The trade union leaders knew that Müller was the leader of the movement and they were afraid of his influence. Once he was neutralized, Adolf Cohen, who had taken control of the local administrative office of the trade union, could circumscribe the whole mobilization within an exclusively economic terrain. He was unable to prevent the strike, because the decision to go on strike had already been made by the revolutionary delegates, but the strike lacked any political content, and this was its most serious defect. The strikers were not conscious of the political background of their action and did not formulate political demands. They accepted Cohen's proposals, particularly the election of a commission responsible for negotiating with the authorities concerning the improvement of the food supply and other provisions for the working class.

When the general assembly was informed of the arrest of Richard Müller, it demanded his release and voted to continue the strike until this demand was met. Cohen attempted in vain to downplay the importance of this demand, but he did succeed in preventing it from assuming dangerous dimensions by using every means acquired in his many years of experience to finally convince the assembly to vote for a resolution according to which the general assembly would relinquish the leadership of the strike and transfer its decision-making powers to a conference of delegates nominated by Cohen. Adolf Cohen had won the game.

The strike acquired unusual proportions. According to the metal workers trade union, it affected 300 enterprises and the number of officially registered strikers exceeded 200,000. Experience tells us that many of the strikers did not register, so that a figure of 300,000 strikers would not be an exaggeration. There were street demonstrations and the police withdrew, so that no serious incidents took place.

During the evening of the first day of the strike, the commission delivered its report concerning its negotiations with the government representatives over the question of supplies of necessary goods for

the population. The government representatives had affirmed that the supplies were guaranteed and that within the next few weeks there would be much more meat, bread and potatoes. They also agreed with the proposal that the conference of delegates should appoint a permanent commission responsible for assisting the mayor of Berlin, and the mayor himself declared that he was prepared to listen to the commission's suggestions and to keep the commission informed and up-to-date on supply issues.

The conference of delegates was at first enraged by the meager results of the negotiations, but Cohen managed to present them in such a positive light that they finally came to an agreement. As Cohen demanded, the strike had to end, but the general assembly had demanded the release of Richard Müller. The conference of delegates could not disregard this demand, and despite all Cohen's efforts, it resolved to continue the strike.

On the following day the commission reported on its negotiations with the Army High Command. The Army representatives had informed the commission that the order to draft Müller into the Army was being reviewed and that, "if from the point of view of the interest of Army manpower replacement requirements it would be possible to declare his exemption from military service", this could be approved based on an appeal filed by a factory devoted to war production. The representatives of the Army High Command added that if the strike were to be called off immediately, they would not issue draft notices to anyone as punishment for involvement in the strike.

In its report, the commission presented the results of the negotiations with the military High Command in a much more positive light than they really merited. Nonetheless, at the conference of delegates a strong opposition arose, which demanded the continuation of the strike. In the factories, the report on the promises about food and supplies for the population only provoked widespread indignation. Furthermore, the leaders of the USPD (the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the Spartacus League had circulated, at a large number of enterprises, the platform of political demands of the workers of Leipzig (see below). Cohen, however, succeeded in persuading the conference to vote, by a narrow majority, in favor of the suspension of the strike.

The workers at most enterprises returned to work on the following day. In several large factories, such as the Deutsche Waffen-und-Munitionsfabrik (German Arms and Munitions Factory), the strike continued, with the goal of supporting the political demands of the Leipzig workers. In these factories, the movement had revolutionary overtones, embracing about 50,000 workers. In the enterprises that had accepted the resolution of the conference of delegates to end the strike, the number of strikers who were discontented with the suspension of the strike was also considerable. If the movement was halted half-way, it was only because Adolf Cohen had successfully persuaded the general assembly to relinquish the leadership of the strike and therefore was able to neutralize it. The fury of the workers was therefore also directed against the trade union leaders, as was clearly revealed at subsequent meetings and in pamphlets (see below). A few days later, the workers at the enterprises that had resolved to continue the strike finally returned to work. The factories of Deutsche Waffen-und-Munitionsfabrik were subjected to military control...

The demands of the Leipzig strikers had assumed a distinctly more political tone. Richard Müller cites them in his book:

1. Adequate supply of provisions and coal for the population at a reasonable price.
2. A declaration by the government affirming its immediate readiness to sign a peace treaty without open or concealed annexations.
3. Suspension of the state of emergency and termination of censorship.
4. Immediate repeal of all restrictions on the rights of assembly, association and meetings.

5. Immediate abolition of the shameful law of compulsory labor.
6. Immediate release of all those persons arrested and sentenced to prison for political crimes.
Suspension of all political trials.
7. Full civil liberties, universal, equal, secret and direct suffrage for elections for all public institutions on the national, regional and local levels.

Richard Müller also quotes the text of the following pamphlet:

They have betrayed us!

Comrades,

The trade union leaders have been playing a dirty game with us. From the very start, the Cohens and the Sierings have maneuvered, in tacit connivance with the government, to seize the reins of our movement and to lead it to a dead end. Comrade Müller, whose influence was so feared by these manipulators, was denounced to the military authorities so that he could be neutralized by being drafted into the ranks of the army. This made it possible for them to finish off our powerful strike movement. What have they reported to us about these negotiations, which were nothing more than a comedy whose script was written in advance? Vain promises for provisions, and instead of releasing comrade Müller, the equally vain promise to review his case. When they began to notice our power, they shattered it. Damn the traitors! Comrades, we must learn from this lesson! We must not allow them to force upon us leaders who laugh at our interests. We need comrades who will fearlessly defend us. Only then will we be capable of imposing our demands, like our brother workers of Brunswick, Kiel and other places.

Let us firmly uphold our demands.

We want bread, liberty and peace.

Report dated February 23, 1917, from the Chief of Police of Berlin to the High Command and the Minister of War, on the strikes in the Berlin arms factories.

The Chief of Police of Berlin

To the Commander in Chief of the Military Region,

To the Minister of War,

Berlin, February 23, 1917

Attached is the report of my external service unit concerning the motives of the increasingly more numerous striking workers at the enterprises engaged in war production, as well as the expert opinion of councilor Schmidt. While the latter attributes the current discontent among the workers to their current living conditions, recent information would lead one to think that this is not the only explanation for these strikes. It seems that there are political questions that have played a not insignificant role in this movement. The workers of the Berlin metropolitan area are politically situated in the sphere of radical social democracy. Many of them are supporters of the Spartacus group, whose ideological mentor is Karl Liebknecht. This group is trying to stop the war by provoking domestic unrest, and above all by preaching the general strike. Its influence is particularly notable among the metal workers, which is why we must believe that the current movements are also the product of this subversive project. Having noted the good results obtained from the drafting of disobedient workers before the promulgation of the law on patriotic service of mutual aid, I ask myself if it would not be advantageous, with a view to putting an end to these movements that are so harmful to the public weal, to resort to this procedure in the current situation as well.

Von Oppen

Section VII, External Services

5th Department

Berlin, February 19, 1917

Subversion in the munitions factories of the Berlin metropolitan area.

During the war, due to the intensive subversive activity of certain shameless elements, the state of mind of the metal workers organized in trade unions in the munitions factories of the Berlin metropolitan area has undergone a dangerous process of radicalization. In view of the numerous officially registered striking workers and the fact that in almost all the large factories, the personnel, who are for the most part radicals, have called for a reduction in the working hours, there is a danger that in the future the local munitions factories will not be able to provide the indispensable war materiel in sufficient quantities and within the required time-frames. After establishing confidential contacts with various trade unionists in the arms factories, and also through our official contacts with various directors of the large local firms, the signatory below has been able to ascertain the following:

At the present time, almost all of the responsible officials of the German metal workers trade union (delegates of the white collar employees and delegates of the shop floor workers) who can count on the confidence of all the workforces of the factories, are political supporters of the opposition and, to a large extent, are members of the so-called Spartacus group, whose watchword is to stop the war by paralyzing the factories. During the past year, at the initiative of these trade unionists, a large number of factory assemblies have been convened in the Berlin metropolitan area, at which the most impudent demands have been formulated, and some of these demands have been successfully obtained by way of strikes.

This kind of activity has caused wages to rise towards infinity. The skilled workers, the tool and die makers, the lathe operators, the drill operators, the machinists, etc., now earn a daily wage of between 15 and 22 marks for an average working day of nine hours. Their demands never stop, however. Thus, at the Berliner Maschinenbau-Aktiengesellschaft factory (formerly L. Schwarzkopf), located at Scheringstrasse 13-28, about 700 tool and die makers and lathe operators have proclaimed yet another demand for a wage hike. They are calling for an hourly wage increase of up to 30 pfennigs, when they already make between 18 and 22 marks per day for nine hours of work. Since the company rejected this lunatic demand, the 700 workers have been on strike since Saturday, February 10, so that the manufacture of torpedoes in this important factory has been paralyzed since that date. In this same enterprise, on February 3, and at the initiative of radical elements, some 2,900 workers went on strike, according to them because of shortages of food and supplies, and they participated in a demonstration to call the attention of the government to their grievances, and the production of torpedoes was reduced to three per day.

This same radical agitation has created a similar situation in the factories of Deutsche Waffen-und-Munitionsfabrik in Charlottenburg and Wittmann. Activities of this kind are also underway at other large factories producing war materiel. The tool and die maker Max Janick, who lives at Pankstrasse 44, has been a member of the metal workers trade union for fifteen years and has also been a member of the Social Democratic Party for some time. At a factory assembly he dared to publicly oppose, by way of a resolution he wrote himself, the maneuvers of the radical elements, and for this he has become a target of

reprisals by the radicals. Attached hereto, for your information, is a copy of his text vindicating his activities, sent to the Berlin leadership of the metal workers trade union.

Faced with the brazen confidence with which these trade union radicals operate, even the leaders of the Berlin trade union, Cohen and Siering, feel powerless and must submit to the power of the radicals, since their mandate derives from these trade union cadres and therefore they rely on them for their re-election. Thus, the assistant secretary of the trade union, Siering, is now conducting himself in a way that is almost indistinguishable from the radical militants, and in the various factory assemblies he, too, is calling for a reduction in the working day and an increase in wages, and has thereby won the sympathy of the radical elements. There can be no doubt that the war industry is being undermined by these thoughtless activities and that order cannot be restored in the arms factories until we can prevent the radical elements from doing whatever they please, which might perhaps be achieved immediately by incorporating the ringleaders into the Army. With the collaboration of the management of the enterprises and with the help of our informers, it will be possible to gradually put an end to this agitation.

One final observation: when, during the demonstrations for the release of Liebknecht, there was an incessant campaign of hate-filled pamphlets, the agitators were in part drafted into the Army, and in part arrested; we carried out a preventive action in the factories and these measures had an effect like an electric shock among the workers, so that subsequently there was a period of calm in the factories. When these measures were suspended, however, and our success in this respect was forgotten, the patient work of undermining our foundations was resumed until it has now reached a dangerous turning point.

Meier, Criminal Investigation Brigade

[Source: *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, Band 1, pp. 554-557.]

Translated from the Spanish translation of Viento Sur in December 2017.

Source of the Spanish translation: <http://vientosur.info/spip.php?article12963>

Source of the original French text: <https://alencontre.org/europe/Allemagne/histoire-les-prodromes-de-la-revolution-allemande-1917-1918-et-richard-muller.html>