

Jan Appel



Introduction.

In early May this year one of the last of the proletarian figures directly involved in the revolutionary struggles after World War One died in Holland at the age of 95.

Born in 1890 in Germany, Jan Appel was a docker in Hamburg during the Great War and was active in the SPD until the wave of strikes which paralysed Germany in the last years of the war forced socialists to reconsider the nature of social democracy and brought the proletarian revolution into view. He joined the Spatakusbund of Luxemburg and Liebknecht and was a founder member of the KPD. Active in the AAUD in Hamburg he was president of the Hamburg KPD until the left wing of the KPD was expelled at the Heidleberg Congress. In the KAPD thereafter he was active in all the struggles of that organisation. Following the Ruhr insurrection of April 1920 in which he participated he was sent along with Franz Jung to Russia to discuss with the Executive of the Comintern and the Russian Bolsheviks. They had to hijack the ship they sailed on, forcing it into Murmansk to get to Russia.

Again in 1921 he was one of the KAPD delegates to the Third Congress of the Communist International and on his return to Germany edited the press of the AAUD Der Klassenkampf until he was arrested in 1923 for his maritime piracy of 1920. Released only in 1925 the political situation forced him to

emigrate to Holland and throughout the long period of counterrevolution he continued political activity under a false name in such organisations as the GIC. He lived undercover throughout World War Two and took part in the attempts to regroup communist forces after the war until forced to give up open political activity under threat of deportation. Nevertheless he kept in touch with the reborn revolutionary fractions which emerged in the late sixties and seventies up until his death.

In memory of Jan Appel we wish to recall him as an important member of the German Left, the KAPD as they struggled to come to terms with the period of decadence and the tasks of communists and print below, for the first time in English, one of his interventions at the Third Congress of the Comintern.

Here, under the pseudonym Hempel, he stoutly defended the principles and tactics of the Left against a comintern moving inexorably to the right and a Bolshevik party rapidly turning into a new bourgeoisie. As the KAPD declaration at the end of the Congress put it:

"We do not for a moment forget the difficulties into which Russian Soviet power has fallen owing to the postponement of world revolution. But we also see the danger that out of these difficulties there may arise an apparent or real contradiction between the interests of the revolutionary world proletariat and the momentary interests of Soviet Russia."

The following intervention followed on the report by Radek on the tactics of the Comintern and, coming after the abortive March Action in Germany gives, given the limitations of the time available to him, the persistent heckling he had to face and the limitations of the stenographic report, a concise statement of communist principles and positions in response to the degeneration of the Communist International. It bears careful scrutiny today when a new generation of communists must take up the torch handed over by such as Jan Appel and carry communist politics into the proletarian revolution that capital's mortal crisis has once again placed on the agenda of history.

komintern

Die elite Sitzung.

1. Juli 1921. 12 Uhr 40 Min. mittags.

(Diskussion zum Referat Radek. Redner: Hempel, Terracini, Lenin, Michailuk, Vaughan.)

DISCUSSION ON THE REPORT BY RADEK ON THE TACTICS OF THE INTERNATIONAL

HEMPEL (1)

Comrades! After hearing the report by Comrade Radek on the subject of the tactics which should be adopted by the Communist International, we can say that we support his opening statements; notably the statement that, in the light of the world economic situation we can predict the collapse of the capitalist mode of production, of which the proletarian revolution will be an absolutely necessary consequence. But, when we come to the question: how will this proletarian revolution be accomplished? what is the form of organisation of this proletarian mass in struggle? - then differences arise. I will try in this

short presentation - because I am not allowed much time - to clarify the question. If we consider the period of 1917, the Russian Revolution, the German and Austrian revolutions, all the revolutionary struggles during this period, we find that the form of organisation adopted by the proletariat in struggle in Russia was the Soviets, in Germany we call them Councils. This was the form of organisation of the proletariat, of the masses. We can make the same observation about themselves in Italy as factory occupations. The proletariat had its councils, or at least the form of councils. In England the proletariat had, and is building now, in big strikes by miners, shop committees (the real revolutionary leadership coming from the shop stewards). During the movement in Germany after 1918, in all the

revolutionary struggles - small and big - the form of struggle adopted was based on councils, factories, workplaces. This is what we see in the revolution. We must think on this fact and say: if this is the form of struggle of the proletariat during the revolution, we must ourselves as communists, as people who want to and must lead this revolution, examine the organisation of the revolutionary proletariat from this standpoint. This is what we say, we of the KAPD, and this idea was not born, as Comrade Radek thinks, in Holland in the brain of Comrade Gorter, but through the experience of struggle which we have had since 1919. We are workers, we are not theoreticians. We have only the experience arising from struggle. We have split off the revolutionary workers, who really wanted to struggle, from the old forms of the workers' movement, and have given their struggle a new character derived from the forms of the revolutionary movement.

The reasons for this will become clear if one recalls the tasks the old workers' movement set itself, or to be more precise the workers' movement which existed in the epoch prior to the present eruption of open revolution. Its task was, on the one hand, through the political organisation of the working class, the parties, to send delegates to parliament and other institutions where working class representation was allowed by the bourgeoisie and the bureaucracy. This was one of its tasks. This brought results and was correct at the time. For their part the economic organisations of the working class were preoccupied with improving the position of the working class within capitalism, with struggling and negotiating when the struggle was over. I have had to say all this briefly. These were the tasks of workers' organisations before the war. But the revolution came: new tasks took their place. The workers' organisations could no longer limit themselves to struggling for higher wages. They could no longer see their principle aim as one of acting as parliamentary representatives and extorting improvements for the working class. This is reformism. Now you will object to this. We, the Communist International, you will say, we don't want that. But we reply: we believe you, you don't want it. But if you set out on the path taken by the old workers' movement, you will have to follow it. You won't be able to do anything else and all the theses in the world won't change a thing. This is proved by experience. It's not for nothing that the old workers' movement had its own particular forms of organisation. What does one need if one is represented in parliament? One doesn't need revolutionary fighters. One needs to be instructed in the workings of the state. One needs people who know how to negotiate, and all one has to do is listen to their reports. No more. What does one need from an economic point of view? One needs an organisation of workers. One chooses men that can be trusted, elects workers capable of negotiating with the bosses and the bosses' organisations. The leaders owe their existence to them. Money is collected to finance a future strike. One builds support organisations, ie trade unions, working class instruments with a clearly defined task: to install themselves within the capitalist order. So when communists believe that this organisation, which is incapable of leading revolutionary struggles, which is an inadequate instrument for revolutionary struggle - when they think they can use it in this way, when they try to conduct a revolution with these organisations, they are

wrong and they will fail. Experience continually teaches us that all workers' organisations which take this path, despite all their revolutionary words, flounder in the decisive struggles. This is the main lesson which we want to draw. Consequently we say: the proletariat must have only one aim in its sights and this aim is: the destruction of capitalist power, destruction of the capitalist state. The proletariat must have organisations specially developed for this aim. The proletariat creates them for itself. We see this when in a workplace - in Germany for example - workers make demands which the bosses cannot now afford to concede: what do the workers do then? They choose trusted men that they know, from their own places of work. From these small beginnings workers are already forced to wage their struggle against the unions. This is what we are taught by the long history of small struggles, of small strikes, and right up to the latest large struggles.

Thus the working class is obliged to organise itself - and is doing so at the moment - in its economic struggles from a revolutionary point of view. And we say: as communists we must recognise this phenomenon. We must recognise that the way of the old workers' movement is false. We need a new way. Revolutionary struggle exists, and this is why we can say that the development of revolutionary struggles has already shown that the workers must organise in this way and we, communists, must take the opportunity that will come to us to lead these struggles. This is why we say communists must tell the proletariat to base its organisation on the factory, the workplace, with a complete dedication to the aim of taking over production, the productive forces, the factories - of conquering all this.

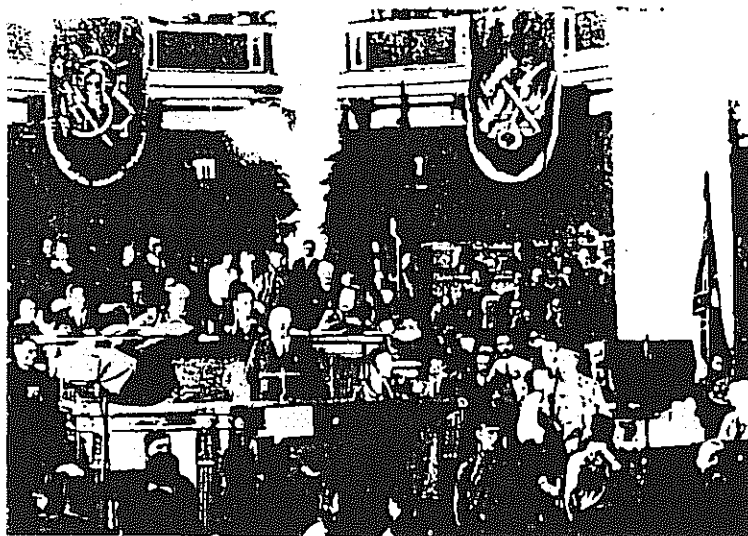
Comrades, I can't go on about this any longer. It's the task of communists to recognise what's needed and get on with it.

We now come to the second point. The form of organisation of the proletariat in struggle and its tasks also determines the methods of struggle. The methods must be revolutionary ones. They are the product, at the present time, of the enemy camp. Today our enemy is taking measures to consolidate its position. This is not new, but such measures are now being applied more vigorously. They aim to maintain our adversaries' grip on power: on the one hand state power, on the other industry and the economy must continue to function to a certain extent. They are not able to set the whole of the national economy moving again. That won't work. But it is possible for them to stabilise a part of the economy, the core, at the expense of other sectors. This is now being done in every country in the world. We communists, we must observe this, and see what will be the results of this policy - the aims of which are quite consciously understood by the capitalists who are carrying it out.

For the proletariat the consequence is that some of their number are secure in firms which remain viable, in the viable sector of the economy. And in all countries we see that this core, the trusts, the super trusts, are uniting on an international level and are predominant. But while a part only of the proletariat is allowed to make a living from these concentrated firms, another part must be eliminated. This is the great mass of unemployed workers, who find no place in the present system and are condemned to

perish. This is the division, the economic split in the working class. The worker who is in the factory, who still has the possibility of drawing a wage, is entrenched there fearful of losing his livelihood. The worker expelled from the factory is the enemy of those who can still make a living. This is the split which is consciously exploited by capitalism and exacerbated by the bourgeois press. This is how the capitalist recovery is being achieved today. We are not talking about a permanent revival of the domination of capital,

launched the slogan: use each struggle, in each workplace, push it forward, extend it, isolate and hem in the capitalists. Develop links between workplaces, bring the struggle to a head. Comrades, we saw that through this, the course of events came to a head in central Germany, and then came the March Action. Following the attacks by Hösing (3), the storm broke in Germany. We say that this was an offensive (as we conceive it) and it was necessary to launch it. But to suddenly order an offensive without the intermediate stages



HEMPEL (K. A. P. D.). Genossinnen und Genossen! Nach Anhörung des Referats des Ren. Radek über die Taktik, die die Kommunistische Internationale einschlagen soll, kön-

but of a revival for a certain period, a revival built on the corpses of proletarians who have died of starvation. We must recognise this. Also this situation determines the tactics we adopt in the struggle, shows us the way forward. We, communists, must ensure that the proletariat prevents this consolidation of one part of the economy, of one part of the proletariat, from being achieved. Because this would mean the defeat of the proletariat. We must struggle against every stage in the process, on the slightest pretext. We must by all possible means - I say, like Comrade Radek, by all possible means - try to prevent this reconstruction of the economy which is being planned by the capitalists. And for this we must use the enormous, ever growing masses of the unemployed, of starving proletarians - we must unite them. Unite them not to vote in parliament so that they can give their approval to resolutions. Rather, unite them around their vital needs, organise them in councils, with trustworthy workers in the factory. Thus we will create the organisation of the proletariat, the unity of the proletariat in action. We must be continually in struggle. As Radek has stated here, the discussions, the resolutions and the "open letter" (2) are not the foundation of revolutionary proletarian unity - the foundation is constant struggle.

Comrade Radek has talked about the offensive and the defensive. At the start of this year, 1921, we in Germany saw the results of this. We saw how the democratic bourgeoisie was supported by all possible means, by the social democrats, the independents, all the parties and parliamentary organisations and by the whole bourgeoisie. This was a secure situation which was how capital needed it. It was necessary to blow it apart. We

is a nonsense. In the same context I would like to explain more fully what the attitude was on the 20th of August last year (1920) when the Red Army was at the frontier of East Prussia, outside Warsaw. (4) This must also be taken into account if we are trying to decide between offensive and defensive. We, the KAPD, in our country, we carried out preparatory work for several weeks, by every means: in public meetings, with leaflets, through propaganda in the workplaces, by exploiting the excitement created by the presence of the Red Army at the borders. And when the question arose as to what to do if troops and munitions coming from France passed through Germany, we decided we would stop at nothing, including insurrection. We had prepared methodically in all the regions. On the 20th of August, and the preceding evening - it is only now we can talk about it, because if we had done so previously many comrades would have gone to prison as a result - the following appeal appeared in Rote Fahne and Freiheit (5) and all the provincial journals: "Workers of Germany, beware! Cops and agents provocateurs, vile elements who want to plunge you into a bath of blood, etc..." Today we recognise, and do so publically, that if we ever made a mistake, it was that day, after we tried by every means to call off the action that was about to break out in all the most important zones in Germany. We succeeded in many places and, now, people scoff at our comrades in Völbach and Köthen for proclaiming a republic of workers' councils. We know that people can scoff at us for this. This doesn't bother us. But the task of communists at that moment should have been to take the offensive. In Germany we will consider this as an offensive; at the international level it was not simply an act of solidarity with our Russian brothers who would have been crushed if the

materials had been delivered. These things must be said if it is a question of choosing between offensive and defensive.

Now we come to the question of partial demands.

(6) I will first deal with the question of the "open letter", then the control of production and partial demands. Comrade Radek has spoken about the different types of partial demand which are possible. The "open letter", in Germany, supported by the unions, by the parliamentary party, such an open letter will be opportunist, it can't be denied. (7) An "open letter" which would be supported by the revolutionary workplace organisations. (8) Radek will not find a letter of this kind being written by the VKPD. What has become of the meetings or action committees which were to lay the foundations for struggle, as set out in the "open letter"? Well we've called it all off because we know who we're dealing with, we know that nothing will be achieved except more horse trading with the government. Just words. That's why we've called it off. We agree with every stepping up of the struggle. But one must also think about what has to be done. Things don't just happen - we're talking about preparations for revolution, preparations which have to be actually carried out. This could have been done if we'd had a revolutionary organisation, if over the past two years the leadership of the Spartacist League and the Third International had not decreed: no workplace associations, use the old unions. We have to see things as they are and we have to ask those who are engaged in permanent struggle; they'll tell you how things are. They'll tell you how to struggle. I repeat, I haven't time to explain all this in detail.

Now the question of partial actions. We say, we don't oppose any partial action. We say: each action, each struggle, because it is an action, must be carried through, pushed forward. One can't say: we oppose this struggle, we oppose that struggle. The struggle born of the economic needs of the working class, this struggle must be pushed forward by all means. Truly in countries like Germany, Britain and all the bourgeois democratic countries, which have undergone 40 or 50 years of bourgeois democracy and its effects, the working class must first of all become accustomed to struggle. Slogans must correspond to partial actions. To take an example: in a workplace, in several workplaces, a struggle breaks out, and extends over a small region. The slogan shouldn't be: struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat. This would be absurd. Slogans must be adapted to the balance of forces, to what one can expect in a given situation. These slogans must also be adapted to the particular characteristics of the struggle. If a general uprising was in progress in the country, the slogan shouldn't be "Everything is at stake". (9)

Now I would like to consider the March Action from this point of view, to show briefly what no-one else here has shown, what can be learned from the experience. The March Action, as everyone says now, was an action which by itself could not have led to the overthrow of capitalist power. We also know this. But despite this, the correct slogan was: overthrow the government. We had to put forward this slogan because in Germany the working class was no longer gaining anything by its struggles. We had to put this slogan forward because there was nothing else for the proletariat

in Germany to do. The existing social order meant famine for several million of them, permanent destitution for an ever growing part of the population. Consequently, for the working class which finds itself in this distress, there is nothing else it can do except to aim to overthrow this social order. This had to be the content of our slogans in central Germany. So that the proletariat could be shown for the first time, the way to escape from its distress.

Here is an example: Germany in January 1918. (10) The war and all its effects weighed heavily on the proletariat. In January 1918 munitions workers and dockers everywhere began to struggle against the straightjacket of the war, against hunger, poverty, destitution. They did this by means of a general strike. What happened? The working class, the proletarians in uniform, did not yet understand what the workers were doing. The ice had not yet been frozen. What were the effects of this struggle throughout the country? What was the effect of the persecution of the workers? Of the way they were pursued across the country? News of the struggle, of this workers' class movement spread far and wide. Everyone knew about it. And when the balance of forces had matured, when there was nothing left worth saving of the war economy, of the so-called German empire, then the working class and the soldiers showed that they had learned from the pioneers in January 1918. The situation in Germany today is a similar one. We don't have sufficient means, means of propaganda sufficient to reach every corner of the country. We have had to leave this to the bourgeoisie and its agents, and they do it differently from us. The bourgeoisie persecutes us, it calls us murderers, dogs, etc, it hunts us. The proletariat today insults us in the same fashion. But if the situation develops and ripens, then the proletariat will be ready to travel the same path and will recognise the path. Thus the revolution will surmount all obstacles. This is why we must put forward the slogan and struggle to overthrow the capitalist order, the existing order. This is the most important lesson for the German proletariat, and the International to be learned from the March Action. More important than all the tittle-tattle we've heard here.

Comrades, now I want to turn briefly to the question of how the proletariat should organise itself in struggle. However, I have no illusions on the subject. The proletariat must no longer organise itself in order to secure representation in the capitalist state, in the political and economic domains. It must not organise with the aim of using the democratic bourgeoisie. The proletariat can only organise with the aim of revolution. The experience of revolutions, provided by the Russian, German and Austrian revolutions, and other struggles, must be taken on board by the proletariat. This experience shows the proletariat how to organise. This is why we communists must now set about creating a core, a framework, which the proletariat will be able to build upon when the development of events leads it into struggle. This framework is workplace organisations (11), linked together in a network of workplaces and economic regions. There are not many of them today. (Interruption: And they're getting fewer all the time.) Today it is they who hold the banner high, who maintain the organisational framework. And when struggles break out, there will be more and more of them,

because the proletariat will find it has no choice but to adopt this form of organisation, because it can't struggle through or with the unions. We must recognise this. This must be the basis of the tactics of the Third International, then we'll be getting somewhere. To maintain these organisations, to lead them, to teach everyone about this class organisation, the proletariat needs a communist party - not a communist party bourgeoisie and its agents, and they do it differently from us. The bourgeoisie persecutes us, it calls us murderers, dogs, etc, it hunts us. The proletariat today insults us in the same fashion. But if the situation develops and ripens, then the proletariat will be ready to travel the same path and will recognise the path. Thus the revolution will surmount all obstacles. This is why we must put forward the slogan and struggle to overthrow the capitalist order, the existing order. This is the most important lesson for the German proletariat, and the International to be learned from the March Action. More important than all the tittle-tattle we've heard here.

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traditions of the parties and unions of the old workers' movement, with the reformist methods of the unions, with parliamentarism. Communists must break with all that: with these methods others have barred the way to revolution. This is not simply the objective result of using the methods I have just mentioned. It has been done willingly by using the means made available to them, by the bourgeoisie to lay traps to capture and transform the revolutionary energy of the proletariat. And this must be banned from the ranks of the communists, and, purified, they will get on with their work alone; they will be drawn into revolutionary activity. This explains - as fully as my time allows - what the line of the Third International should be, because it must take the lead.

If one looks at things from an international standpoint one can see that the forces exist upon which this edifice could be based, from which the revolutionary organisations, this revolutionary international could be built. In France, Spain, Italy, also America, there are syndicalists and anarchists. Perhaps you will say: there you are, you're an anarchist, a syndicalist! But wait a minute. One must recognise: over the years it has been here that one has found the most revolutionary elements of the working class. We know that they are not experienced in class struggle, organised class struggle. Comrades, they lived too early in history, their tactics were several decades ahead of their time. The method of the old German movement was correct but now, at the hour of confrontation, direct action is necessary. These workers, these anarchists and syndicalists have no experience of the collective unity of the working class. Communists must go to their aid, and teach them how to struggle, to regroup their forces; they must give them a form of organisation which can unite them and can adapt itself to them. These elements demand above all that there is a break with all bourgeois traditions, never to return. Any workers who have gone over to the syndicalist camp (ie, revolutionary syndicalist, FAUD in Germany), or the anarchist camp, have gone there because of the betrayal of the parliamentary leaders. This is a recognition of just how serious the faults of the parliamentary workers' movement are. We have to draw them back from where they have gone, and for communists this means making quite sure we have nothing to do with parliamentarism. Rejection of parliament and unions are not principles for communists, they are practical questions and today this is what we should do. If one looks at things in this way, one sees large workers' movements in America and western Europe which demand anti-parliamentarism and a break with the trade union movement. Now the question is: how will the Congress decide? If it takes the line of the old workers' movement, then it will tread the path of this movement. If it resolutely moves towards union with the elements of the left, who are in Moscow today, then the revolution will receive a fresh boost from the Third Congress of the International. If it takes the other path it will be sunk. It is up to the Congress to take the decision. It is on this basis that we will consider our adherence to the Third International. (14)

Notes

(1) Pseudonym of Jan Appel

(2) The "open letter" tactic adopted by the Communist party (VKPD) in January 1921. With

several thousand members (the left wing of the USPD) this party launched a political campaign which was a classic example of "united front" tactics. The central committee of the party sent a letter to all 'workers' organisations" (parties and unions, from the reactionary unions to the AAU) calling on them to "struggle together against capitalism". The basis of this tactic was as follows: "if these organisations accept it is a victory for the VKPD for having taken the initiative. If they refuse it is also a victory since they have been unmasked in the eyes of the masses." This was a strict application of the principles explained by Lenin in Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder, on the tactics to adopt to "win over the masses" which later became known as the tactic of the "united front". Moreover Lenin fully approved this tactic at the Third Congress of the Communist International. Hardly two months later, the VKPD abandoned this tactic and called for insurrection in support of the March Action.

(3) Hörsing: Oberpräsident of the province of Saxony who took the initiative to send in the security police to put an end to the troubles in central Germany, thus provoking the March Action.

(4) This was during the Russian-Polish war. The Red Army had pushed the Poles back to the gates of Warsaw. The Entente powers (above all, France) decided to come to Poland's aid in the form of large consignments of arms and munitions. These had to pass through Germany. The KAPD, the AAU and the FAUD devised a master plan to sabotage the transport of the weapons, along with the seizure of power in certain regions, with the aim of a generalized proletarian insurrection in Germany. These plans were denounced just as they were about

to be implemented in the press of the KPD and the USPD. The KAPD called off the actions. Nevertheless a number of sabotage actions took place.

(5) Official publications of the KPD and USPD respectively.

(6) As opposed to revolutionary demands.

(7) Radek in his support of this tactic had used the example of the "open letter" of the VKPD in January 1921 to formulate a procedure general for application.

(8) That is the AAU.

(9) Es geht aufs Ganze: formula frequently used by the left communist press. However it doesn't make sense here. There are other examples of phrases which don't make sense in the interventions of the KAPD at the Third Congress. Excluded from the Comintern, the KAPD were never able to correct the transcripts of their interventions, which were often delivered over a hostile hubbub from the other participants at the Congress.

(10) The most important strike wave of the war.

(11) That is the AAU.

(12) That is a mass party of the Social Democratic type.

(13) In French: "parti-noyau ultra-forme", in German: "Kernpartei".

(14) The question of the adherence of the KAPD to the Third International.

These notes come from the french translation of the original German text of the minutes of the Congress.

TRANSLATE?

The C.B.G. desperately needs the services of translators.

We would like to make our material available to non-speakers of English, we would like to be able to have some of the material being produced by fractions of the proletarian movement in other languages accessible to us and, in our attempts to learn from the experience of the revolutionary movement of the past, we would very much like to be able to have much of the material that exists in French German, Dutch and especially Russian translated into English.

If any reader feels he can help us in this task we would urge them to contact us at our group address.