

Anarcho-syndicalism in Germany

Gerhard Wartenberg

2025/1932

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Introduction

The text, written by Gerhard Wartenberg (1904-1942) in 1932 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Anarcho-Syndicalist International (IAA), traces an overall vision of German anarcho-syndicalism on the eve of Hitler's seizure of power. Wartenberg is one of the most interesting figures of German anarcho-syndicalism in the Weimar Republic. He was one of the very few graduates (in chemistry) present in the ranks of the anarcho-syndicalist Freie Arbeiter Union Deutschlands (Free Union of German Workers), the organization born in 1919 on the ashes of the previous Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften (FVdG), a revolutionary syndicalist organization born at the end of the nineteenth century. Wartenberg approached anarchism already as a student. In 1922 he joined the Syndicalist Anarchist Youth (Syndikalistische Anarchistische Jugend Deutschlands, SAJD). In 1926 he published several issues of the magazine "Der Bakuninist" with which he proposed to outline a "scientific and practical anarchism" as opposed to an "idealistic and verbose anarchism". After moving to Berlin, he joined the FAUD and in 1928 he married Käte Pietzuch, an anarchist activist he had met at an IAA meeting. In 1931 their only daughter, Ilse, was born. In the dramatic years marked by the economic crisis of 1929, Wartenberg took part in cultural activities promoted by the FAUD such as the Gemeinschaft freier Bücherfreunde [Community of Friends of Free Books], involved in the organization of concerts, conferences, theatrical performances, the publication of books and magazines, and the setting up of popular libraries. In these years he published numerous articles on economic and socio-political questions in the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist press. From 1932 Wartenberg entered the Administrative Commission of the FAUD (its coordinating body), directed the theoretical magazine "Die Internationale" and, from November 1932, the FAUD organ "Der Syndikalist" (from January 1933 published with the new title: "Arbeiter-Echo"). His acute analysis of Nazism is summarized in the pamphlet, published under the pseudonym H.W. Gerhard, entitled *Über Hildburghausen ins Dritte Reich* (Berlin, 1932). After Hitler took power (30 January 1933), a fierce repression hit the FAUD in Berlin and the rest of Germany. On 21 February 1933, the Berlin police chief opened proceedings against Wartenberg for "preparation of high treason" because of articles published in the newspaper "Arbeiter-Echo" (which was later banned) that warned the working class against the mistaken belief that fascism could be stopped by the ballot paper. On the contrary, the anarcho-syndicalists called on workers to go on a general strike and to "use all means of direct action, strike action, boycott, sabotage and passive resistance" ("Arbeiterecho", no. 6, 11 February 1933). From the spring of 1933 Wartenberg was wanted by the Gestapo. During these dramatic weeks Wartenberg took part in the organization of the clandestine network of the FAUD, maintained contact with local groups of the clandestine FAUD present in the country, gathered information on the persecutions in progress and organized support for arrested anarchists and their families. In April he took part in the plenum of the IAA in Amsterdam, where he presented a painful report on the situation of the workers' movement in Nazi Germany. In May he handed over the management of the clandestine FAUD to the Erfurt group and then to Ferdinand "Nante" Götze in Leipzig. In September Wartenberg left Berlin for Leipzig where, from the end of 1933 to the spring of 1934, together with other anarcho-syndicalists he compiled and distributed under the most difficult conditions the anti-fascist newspaper "Die Soziale Revolution". Arrested for the first time in 1935, he was imprisoned in 1937 and sentenced in 1938 to five years in prison. After serving his sentence in the regime's infamous detention centers, on July

13, 1942 he was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. There, Wartenberg died a few months later, on December 22, 1942, due to the terrible conditions in the camp.

Anarcho-syndicalism in Germany by H.W. Gerhard [Gerhard Wartenberg]

Following the centuries-long rule of the Hohenzollern in Prussia and later in the whole of Germany, by which not only external conditions of government were defined, but the entire character of the German people was also corrupted, Germany became one of the countries in which the authoritarian and centralizing spirit has put down its roots most deeply. It should be borne in mind that in other European countries, especially in Spain, France and England, the unitary state had already been formed in remote times with its central government, so that the popular masses had already experienced the evils of centralism first-hand and retained more or less a healthy libertarian federalist conscience. In Germany (as in Italy) on the other hand, several small states had developed, which constituted a strong brake on economic development in the era of industrialization and world trade. The natural consequence was that strong aspiration for "national unity" which animated the bourgeois revolutionaries in this country throughout the 19th century. This attitude still produces its fruits today and this is certainly one of the main reasons why German socialists of all tendencies rot in state centralism. Industry and the proletariat continued to develop much more rapidly than could happen to the organization of the modern liberal-democratic constitutional state. The bourgeoisie therefore already had to deal with a strong proletarian and revolutionary movement without having yet been able to assert its domination over feudalism. Around 1870 the German bourgeoisie therefore threw itself completely into the arms of Bismarck's military regime out of fear of the "Red Revolution", renounced political power in favor of the Junkers, and was content with economic profit. The Bismarckian state weighed like a nightmare on the German proletariat for almost fifty years and consequently induced the German workers' movement to postpone its task of purely proletarian social and economic struggle in order to fight first and foremost the feudal state. This essentially bourgeois-democratic political activity of the workers' movement produced several extremely unfortunate consequences:

- first of all, the greatest burden of the struggle fell on the party (the Social Democracy) and economic and cultural tasks were neglected.
- secondly, the party, in addition to the workers, increasingly attracted elements of the petty-bourgeois opposition and thus became petty-bourgeois and reformist itself.
- thirdly, the idea of the predominance of the political party and of the electoral battle was so impressed upon the workers that they almost forgot the importance and role of the social-revolutionary economic struggle.

In November 1918, when political power fell into the hands of the German proletariat, it could only elect a national assembly in which the bourgeois parties had a majority. They were content with political democracy, they allowed the first council organizations to be almost completely destroyed and there was not even a remote thought of taking economic power from the capitalists and the big landowners through the expropriation of companies.

To tell the truth, not all workers were imbued with bourgeois false consciousness. The trade unionists, who before the war had been only a small organization with several thousand mem-

bers, now occupied a prominent place among the revolutionaries. In the revolutionary period of 1919-21, approximately 100,000 organized trade unionists can be counted, although their influence extended over millions of workers. In the various general strikes, especially in mining and heavy industry, these forces were predominant. But the ruling Social Democracy realized that it had to stifle all organized political forces of the proletariat by using massive armies of mercenaries. And when the exchange rate of the mark was stabilized at the end of 1923, and the Weimar Republic was consolidated, the truly revolutionary movements found themselves in an extremely difficult situation. Only the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) succeeded in establishing itself as a mass party, having firmly established itself on the parliamentary terrain. All other revolutionary movements were practically ruined and anarcho-syndicalism was again reduced to the importance and dimensions it had had before the war.

In the last years the German bourgeoisie had almost completely moved over to the fascist camp, while social democracy had been pushed out of the leadership of the state. The opposition of the proletariat was barely felt, since a great discouragement had taken hold since the time of the attempted revolution in the post-war period with terrible disappointments, splits, etc. It is a fact that a certain will to fight emerged only recently around the spring of 1932.

In Germany today the only thing in common that exists among the mass parties is in reality only dictatorial centralism; the KPD, which is increasingly playing the role of the pre-war Social Democracy, is openly totalitarian and dictatorial; in the same way, although with different motivations, the National Socialist Party which controls the majority of the bourgeoisie and peasants, advocates the necessity of dictatorship. The parties of the center, Social Democratic and Catholic, accepted the constitution of the de facto semi-dictatorship of the Reich Chancellor Brüning without contradiction and supported him for two years. Abroad one can hardly form an idea of how deep the faith in the omnipotence of the State is among the German proletariat. Consequently, it is difficult to understand how great is the obsession with the "conquest of political power" - this fact obviously represents a great obstacle to the anarcho-syndicalist doctrine of direct action and social revolution. The recognition of the bourgeois state desired by the Social Democrats in November 1918 led to the replacement of socialism with social policy. In this new society the "free" reformist German trade unions lived exclusively in the social insurance institution, in labor-related lawsuits, in conciliations and in the fixing of wages. Real struggles were almost no longer conducted; one always relied on the verdict of the conciliation judges. The trade union and state apparatuses merged to such an extent that it is now almost impossible to divide them. When the reformist trade unions obtained by these means the effective monopoly of workers' representation, the revolutionary formations were completely deprived of all rights. Therefore today belonging to a revolutionary formation means having a notable degree of revolutionary consciousness, especially since the terrible unemployment has allowed employers to remove revolutionaries from the companies without any consideration. The German anarcho-syndicalist organization, the FAUD, is made up of 80 to 90% unemployed, and many have been so for years. To these unfavorable external conditions must be added the internal and structural weaknesses of the German revolutionary workers' movement that show no signs of improving. But the knowledge of errors has always been the first step to eliminating them.

In the years of revolutionary attempts, the anarcho-syndicalist movement suffered from a lack of theoretical clarity. Many revolutionary workers who joined the movement without experience and a tradition of struggle brought with them many confused ideas, which were continually transferred into practice, which greatly damaged the movement. Here it is appropriate to mention the

localist aspirations and the excessive exasperation of the anti-authoritarian principle that would have led to the movement's atomization. In 1927, even an "Opposition" was formed, which in truth could never achieve any importance. In the years following 1922, a work of clarification was carried out. The IAA[Internationale Arbeiter Assoziation, i.e. the Anarcho-syndicalist International], contributed to this by transmitting foreign experiences. Especially at the last FAUD congress in Erfurt in 1932, a real tactical line was developed. However, these internal and external oppositions have tempered the spirit and energy of our members. We still have in hundreds of places in Germany nuclei of capable and self-sacrificing militants, who sell hundreds of thousands of newspapers, pamphlets, who hold public meetings on important events, who tackle every job and who stand up to every representative of opposing organizations in assemblies. In several industries where our members have greater influence, they stand out among the first and most active in strikes and other struggles. The anarcho-syndicalist movement is able to publish a weekly, "Der Syndikalist" ("The Trade Unionist"); a newspaper for the unemployed that appears every two weeks, "Arbeitslose" ("The Unemployed"); a monthly theoretical organ, "Die Internationale" ("The International"). In addition, there is a publishing activity combined with a well-stocked bookshop, and a publishing house is in operation that has already launched a dozen works of a libertarian nature. The number of local organs is large. In recent times, a paper for farm workers and direct farmers was even created. The next goal is to publish an organizational paper to be able to discuss the internal problems of the movement.

Youth organizations, the anarcho-syndicalist youth, collaborate closely with the FAUD, which irregularly publishes a press organ, precisely "Junge Anarchisten" ("Young Anarchists"). In recent times this organization has contributed with a strong activity to the formation of children's groups. In this area the successes are quite great, there is even a libertarian monthly for children "Proletarisches Kinderland" ("The Proletarian Children's Country"). This youth movement gives rise to the best hopes, the reason is that since 1918 the renewal of study methods has been the strongest factor for the overthrow of the authoritarian spirit in Germany. Finally, noteworthy is the considerable influence of the anarcho-syndicalists in other workers' organizations of a sporting or cultural nature. In particular, mention should be made of the Community of the Proletarian Freethinker, an organization above the anticlerical and revolutionary parties with about 15,000 members. Of course the syndicalists do not use their influence to push out other tendencies, but they obtain the leadership of these organizations in many places, thanks to their prevalent work and activity. Unfortunately, the organization of solidarity for the persecuted constitutes a sad chapter, especially because of the great financial needs. This is, in other words, efforts to create special solidarity funds for such purposes. This is becoming more and more necessary because the persecution of revolutionary movements is now increasing. Exceptional laws, fascist attacks, newspaper bans, seizures, bans on renewals of permits, arrests and other harassment are raining down everywhere. "Der Syndikalist" has had to stop publication three times in one year, "Die Internationale" once. Many of our militants are in prison; several of them are threatened with long periods of forced labor. This shows how our German organization, despite its numerical weakness, develops an extraordinary activity and how it is therefore treated in proportion by the reaction. It is to be hoped that the German proletariat will soon defeat the currently dominant reaction, and that it will open the way for a new development of the FAUD. This will certainly not happen without difficult struggles, in which the German anarcho-syndicalists will find themselves in their place. We do not know whether this will immediately produce organizational successes. In any case, the German anarcho-syndicalists are working with iron determination

to create in the German proletariat the place that their ideas deserve and to give the IAA in Germany, in the ancient bastion of Wilhelmine authority, a section that is worthy of the great example of other countries.

Original location of the text

H. W. Gerhard [Gerhard Wartenberg], Der Anarchosyndikalismus in Deutschland, in IAA. 10 Jahre internationaler Klassenkampf. Gedenkschrift zum zehnjährigen Bestehen der Internationalen Arbeiter-Assoziation, IAA, Berlin, 1932, pp. 44-47.

The translation proposed here is taken from: AIT 1922-1932. Ten years of struggles of the International Workingmen's Association, Political Growth, Florence, 1973, pp. 89-95, reprinted in: Hartmut Rübner, Anarcho-syndicalism in Germany. Affirmation, rise and decline (1892-1933), Edizioni Malamente, Urbino, 2025, pp. 93-99. For Wartenberg, see the profile of Hartmut Rübner published on pages 115-119 of the same book.

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