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The Beginnings of German Syndicalism

Rudolf Rocker

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(Translator’s note:- Expelled from Britain at the beginning of 1918, Rudolf Rocker resided at first in the Netherlands at the home of veteran libertarian socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis; he returned to Germany in November at the personal invite of Fritz Kater, Secretary of the syndicalist Free Association of German Trade Unions (Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften – FVdG). The following passage give’s Rocker’s account of the process whereby the FVdG, hitherto an alliance of anarchist and disillusioned Social Democratic workers, became the FAUD, with a firm commitment to anarcho-syndicalism. JG)

Soon after my arrival in Berlin I had various discussions with the business committee of the syndicalists, aimed at reaching agreement with its members on a clear position for the movement. I had received the first issue of *Der Syndikalist* while still in Amsterdam; on their own, those guidelines published in the paper were still

quite unclear, something which was easy to understand in view of the sudden political turnaround after the war and the indescribable complexity of the whole situation. In particular, the demand that comrades across the land support the left wing of the socialist movement, the Independents and Spartakists, and the papers' espousal of "proletarian dictatorship", were not to my liking.¹ I had already conferred with Domela-Nieuwenhuis on the matter, who fully shared my point of view.

Although I did not deny that qualified co-operation with other tendencies on particular points was useful and appeared wholly appropriate to the situation in Germany, it was clear to me, however, that for the movement to preserve its independence on questions of principle and tactics, it needed to undergo an internal process of clarification. Right from the beginning, Germany's socialist workers' movement had been markedly authoritarian and the strongly centralised character of its organisation promoted within its ranks that iron discipline known only in Germany and which was the main factor paralyzing any further intellectual development of the movement. Its theoretical bases were tailored to the dogmatic reasoning of Marxism, admittedly loosened later, here and there, with the appearance of the so-called revisionists", but nonetheless acknowledged by the great majority of party members at all party congresses up to the outbreak of the First World War. The later splits during and after the war did nothing to change this situation. There were no theoretical differences between right-wing socialists (Rechtssozialisten), Independents and Communists. They all acknowledged the teachings of Marxism, were strict centralists, authoritarian to the core, and where libertarian ideas were concerned hadn't the faintest clue. Their differences were of a purely tactical nature and revolved mainly around whether one should revert

¹ Independents, i.e. Independent Social Democratic Party (Unabhaengige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – USPD). Anti-war, part revolutionary, part revisionist pacifist, split from mainstream Social Democratic Party after 1917.

ing a thorough debate my blueprint was unanimously adopted by the delegates with a few technical alterations. [...]

back to pre-war methods following the collapse of the monarchical regime, or whether one by a continuation of the revolution should create a new set of circumstances in Germany. Thus I explained my views to the comrades and explained to them that it was now above all important to develop a broader base for libertarian socialism in Germany and to create a movement which rejected all tutelage from political parties. I especially recommended that they maintain the closest contact with the syndicalist and libertarian movement abroad, something which was urgently needed in view of the revolutionary situation in Europe brought about by the war.

Our discussions were very comradely and fruitful and at their end I was entrusted by the business committee with the working out of a declaration of principles to be presented for debate to the 12th Congress, announced for 27th December.² Copies of this declaration were sent in advance to all local branches to enable delegates to formulate their suggestions to submit in writing to the Congress.

The Free Association of German Trade Unions had been founded by the former state-qualified architect, Gustav Kessler, and other comrades in 1897 and before the outbreak of the war counted some 8,000 members.³ This Alliance originally bore purely Social Democratic ideas, but it differed from the large centralised trade unions in the federalist character of its organisation. This “federalism”, however, was in no way the product of a social and political realisation, as with Piscane in Italy, Proudhon in France, and Pi y Margall, and later adopted by the anarchist movements of those countries; it arose much more out of the attempt to circumvent the regulations of the then Prussian Law of Association, which admittedly permitted the discussion of political matters in the assemblies of purely local unions, but denied the same right to

² 12th Congress of the Free Association of German Trade Unions (FVdG).

³ Gustav Kessler (1832–1904), former Progressive Liberal, later radical Social Democrat, expelled from Berlin in aftermath of successful bricklayers’ strike of 1885. Thereafter associated with the localist wing of Social Democratic trade unionism. Editor of the FVdG paper Die Eingkeit (Unity) until his death.

members of the centralised trade unions. The so-called Lokalisten, for whom it was above all a matter of educating their members in the spirit of Social Democracy, did not wish to forfeit this right and wishing better to pursue their propaganda work, organised in accordance with the law.⁴

However the leaders of the centralised unions, who over the course of time had succeeded in winning an ever greater influence within the Social democratic Party, succeeded at one party congress in ensuring that a decision was taken, in accordance with which the localists were to join the centralised unions within a year or be expelled from the party.⁵ So one witnessed the grotesque spectacle of a socialist party threatening members with expulsion for being over-enthusiastic Social Democrats who had moreover wished to implant the spirit of Social Democracy in their own trade unions. But in Germany much was possible which in other countries would hardly be believed possible.

The large majority of localists obeyed the dictate of the party and entered the centralised unions.⁶ The minority, however, preferred to leave the party, for which so many had risked their freedom and the well-being of their families during the difficult time of the Anti-Socialist Law. From this minority emerged later Germany's syndicalist movement. Only after the supporters of this

⁴ This law, one of several such across late nineteenth century Germany which pre-dated its unification, dated from 11th March 1850 and the repression which followed the revolution of 1848. Walking the legal line between 'local' and 'associative' was always a fine one; during the period of the Anti-Socialist Law 1878–90, the nascent localist building workers' organisation in Berlin had been caught in its dragnet on several occasions.

⁵ Social Democratic Party congress, Mannheim, 1906.

⁶ In 1907 by its own figures the FVdG counted 17,633 members; in 1910, 6,454. However, delegates to the eighth congress of the Free Alliance in January 1908 had rejected a proposal for merger with the centralised Free Trade Unions by 91 to 48 votes. Minutes for the same congress report an immediate loss of membership of some 6,000. Rocker's statement should be taken as accurate if it describes this process over time.

minority had left the party did the awareness arise among most that the centralisation of the workers' movement had contributed considerably to the paralysing of its effectiveness, sacrificing its lively spirit to the dead hand of a mechanised organisational model which, as was later clearly shown, completely failed when tested with the outbreak of the revolution.

Under the strong influence of French syndicalism, the Free Alliance of German Trade Unions moved ever increasingly into syndicalist waters. The acceptance by a mass rally in Berlin in August 1904 of a resolution following on from a speech by the former Social Democrat and later Anarchist Dr. Raphael Friedeberg, which later found wider circulation in the form of a special brochure, showed this especially clearly.⁷ This movement was forcibly stopped in its tracks with the outbreak of the First World War, but came once more to the fore with a greatly increased membership following the collapse of the Kaiserreich.

119 delegates from all parts of the country were present at the twelfth congress of the FVdG, which met in Berlin from 27th-30th December 1919. Among them were people of all ages: young intelligent workers and middle-aged men, long active in the movement, and also old veterans who had experienced the struggles from the time of the Anti-Socialist Law. The two most important points on the agenda were given over to the debate over the new declaration of principles and, in connection with this, discussion of the new organisational blueprint as presented by the business committee. At the latter's behest, I explained in the course of a long speech the principles I had drawn up, which shortly afterwards by decision of the congress appeared in print as a special pamphlet.⁸ [...] Follow-

⁷ Dr. Raphael Friedeberg (1863–1940), Social Democratic city councillor in Berlin, later anarchist and participant at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam. *Parlamentarismus und Generalstreik: Vortrag von Dr. R. Friedeberg, Berlin 1904.*

⁸ Rudolf Rocker, *Prinzipienerklärung des Syndikalismus*, Berlin 1920.