Is There a Special German Road to Socialism?

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The most significant all issues which now need to be resolved is the question: On what grounds and with what programme should the unification [*of the KPD and SPD*] occur? Out of the problems that arise from this a comprehensive debate shall take place.

However, this discussion of the programme can by no means be only the concern of certain leaders, of certain theoreticians, although the leaders of the KPD and of the SPD do have an obligation to submit clear positions to the party membership on the complicated issues which will inevitably arise.

Unification instead means accommodation between tens of thousands of active social-democratic and communist functionaries, and between hundreds of thousands of members of both parties. From the bottom to the top, both party structures ought to coalesce into an inseparable whole. Consequently, it is clear that the clarification of programmatic questions in particular is a matter not only of the leading minds of the parties but of the membership of both and, furthermore, of all those working people in possession of proletarian class-consciousness who will undoubtedly stream into the Unity Party in large numbers, because it will work like a magnet on all those workers and working people who by their very nature stand on the side of the socialist movement but who cannot decide today either for the SPD or for the KPD.

Can the working class come into possession of total political power on the democratic-parliamentary road, or only by means of the revolutionary use of force?

In Russia things unfolded the latter way. The Soviet Union remains to this day the only country where a fundamental transformation of the structure of society has actually been achieved. We cannot ignore this historical experience.

Let us first consult Marx and Engels, who have repeatedly and with utmost thoroughness engaged with the same question.

In the first section of their *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels give an overview of the entire development of society since the abolition of slavery. They begin this first, fundamental depiction of the materialist conception of history with the words: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”

The conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie occurs as the harshest class struggle (“more or less veiled civil war”), until the proletariat in open revolution overthrows the bourgeoisie and establishes its own rule.

Here we have an eminently concise answer to the question of how the working class *can* enter into possession of total power, an answer that admits no ambiguity, no evasion.
So reasoned the young Marx and Engels on the eve of the revolutions of 1848 in France, Italy, Germany, and Austria.

But perhaps the more mature Marx and Engels amended this theory? Perhaps in more peaceful periods both arrived at different opinions?

The Paris Commune furnished the final proof that the proletariat must seize power through an act of force in order to eliminate the old state apparatus and build up its own.

For our present discussion, it is of particular import that Marx and Engels in this regard make no substantial distinction between the capitalist state in the form of a bureaucratic-materialistic monarchy (such as Bismarckian Germany) or in the form of a bourgeois-democratic republic which has ossified into a bureaucratic-militaristic power apparatus. The one and the other state machinery were, for Marx and Engels, instruments of power for the oppression of the working classes, both of which must be shattered.

To violently detonate the shell of the old state constitution [*Gesellschaftsverfassung*] and furthermore (as the most urgent task) to break the shackles of the still semiabsolutist political order – Engels saw in this the role of social-democracy, and he deplored that this was not expressed in the Erfurt Programme[1] out of deference to the brutality of the police.

Engels foresaw two phases of struggle. The first phase: the struggle for the democratic republic. The second phase: within the democratic republic, the working class takes up the struggle for total power, whereby this will be a violent blow against the structure of the state. And that is the driving concept behind Engels’s criticism of the Erfurt Programme of 1891!

Engels in the introduction to his 1895 *'Class Struggles in France'* speaks of suffrage as a "means of liberation", but in what sense? Universal suffrage is, according to Engels, a weapon in the hands of social-democracy:

1. Because electoral success enhances the workers' certainty of victory and so becomes social-democracy's best means of propaganda;

2. Because it provides a benchmark for mutual forces involved in the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, thereby avoiding both the falling behind or the rushing ahead of social-democratic tactics as they develop;

3. Because social-democratic election campaigns provide the best opportunity for winning over the widest layers of the working people;

4. Because parliament constitutes an outstanding platform for social-democratic deputies.

More cannot be discerned from Engels's words on the right-to-vote as a means of liberation. Above all, note what Engels says here about the purpose of parliament for its democratic representatives. For Engels parliament is under no circumstances the arena where the working class fights out its struggle for liberation, but the soapbox from which the deputies have to lead the fight for the masses.

Engels's introduction to '*Class Struggles in France*' was written in a relatively peaceful period and for the tactics of social-democracy in this period. Only adventurers and provocateurs were capable of demanding a barricade-tactic from social-democracy in 1895. It was perfectly clear that, in this relatively peaceful but by no means revolutionary situation, peaceful and lawful means of struggle had to take centre stage.

In the introduction to his '*Class Struggles in France*' Engels concludes his observations. He foresees what actually later came to pass, albeit under different circumstances: The growth of the revolutionary-socialist forces under the conditions of a bourgeois-democratic regime will be answered by the reactionary ruling powers with the suspension of the constitutional state of affairs, with the establishment of an openly dictatorial reign of violence. Universal suffrage can familiarize the workers' party with the struggle for power, but at the point this is arrived at their progress is reversed, because the bourgeoisie never voluntarily nor peacefully abrogates its hegemony but instead resorts to violence and annuls universal suffrage as soon as it threatens to be detrimental.

Thus the dream of peacefully growing into socialism is over. Wherever the proletariat tries to pursue the peaceful path to its end, the bourgeoisie resorts to the means of civil war and compels the workers' movement to the appropriate response, i.e. to open struggle, necessary if the renunciation of socialism and a full and shameful capitulation is not to be made.

Whichever path is pursued, whichever means of combat is to be applied, does not depend solely on the one party of those collectively struggling [*i.e. the socialist party*]. In the battle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, the former may scrupulously and strictly adhere to the lawful rules of the game [*i.e. legality*]. But the moment the bourgeoisie sees itself in danger of losing it resorts to the most invidious means of fending off the looming defeat and of breaking the backbone of the socialist workers' movement. This course of development is inevitable, even in a democratic country and among the most progressive bourgeoisie, because it would mean falling back into the outlook of the petty-bourgeois utopian socialists if one wanted to assume that the capitalist class would voluntarily relinquish its power and would renounce its privileges, its wealth, its exploitation of the working people, and its sole salvation of profit.

The class-nature of their adversary makes it impossible for the proletariat to peacefully progress to the higher, socialist social order. That is the quintessence of the entire historical experience of the workers' movement.

Developments in Germany itself are probably the clearest evidence of that which the reactionary big capitalists are capable of if their system is threatened with serious jeopardy. As revolutionary forces grew in the years of the Weimar Republic democratic freedoms were increasingly curtailed, constricted, contorted, and suspended. It began with press and assembly bans, emergency decrees, and exceptive laws in the years of the Great Depression, and culminated in fascist barbarism. From there the bourgeois gentlemen demonstrated in a truly unsurpassable fashion what their democratic freedoms, rights, laws, and human dignity were worth.

What could ever make us assume that the same forces would not start the same criminal game anew if the working people[2] behaved suicidally and provided them the opportunity to do so again?

All this had to be extensively set forth first, if the question of whether there is a special German road to socialism is to be addressed without creating confusion and fresh illusions which would have disastrous impact.

A transition is possible in a relatively peaceful way if the bourgeois class, through specific circumstances, does not possess the militaristic and bureaucratic apparatus of state violence which otherwise makes it possible for it to answer the proletariat's claim to power with civil war and the terroristic suppression of the proletariansocialist movement.

Such a unique, exceptional situation is not, however, impossible in the historical development of our age, which is so rich in vicissitudes.

There is no doubt that we are presently dealing in all respects with quite extraordinary circumstances, circumstances which cannot bear any comparison with any situation in any other country at any other time.

Above all, Germany is an occupied country. Supreme authority and the decisive factor of power are represented by the Allied Military Administration, in the separate zones of occupation by the four different occupying powers. Whether it will prove possible, through peaceful means and without coming up against counteractive elements, to proceed along the course of further progress from the democratic renewal of Germany towards socialist transformation depends first and foremost on a factor which lies outside the influence of the socialist German workers' movement. But with that we can leave aside this aspect of the question; for, even if we presuppose the complete neutrality of all the occupying powers in relation to the prospective social structure of a theoretical Germany, a further, critical problem for the socialist German workers' movement becomes immediately apparent.

It is our curse that the Hitler regime was not overturned from within through a revolutionary, antifascist-democratic revolution. But the reactionary state-machinery is nonetheless largely dismantled – to wit, through the force of the Allies' stronger weaponry, or through the measures taken by the Allied Control Authority after Germany's occupation. Reactionary Prussian-German militarism shall be liquidated, in accordance with the resolutions of the Potsdam Conference. The German people [*Volk*] are guaranteed the opportunity of building up a new, democratic Germany. Therefore, the question of the way forwards is resolved through the following, additional question:
If the new, democratic state develops into a new instrument of force in the hands of reactionary powers, the peaceful transition to socialist transformation is rendered impossible.

But if the antifascist-democratic republic develops into a state of all working people under the leadership of the working class, then the peaceful road to socialism is

entirely possible, insofar as the use of force against the working class's claim to total power then becomes out of the question.

The question of a special German road to socialism is consequently less a theoretical question than one of practical politics, i.e. it is the question of whether or not the German working class, in alliance with all progressive strata of the productive population [*schaffenden Volkes*], attains decisive influence over the democratic restructuring of Germany.

In this regard there already exist a number of positive, but also a number of negative, points.

The positive is that in large parts of Germany the de-nazification of the administrative apparatus is being carried out consistently, and new forces, the forces of the productive population, occupy decisive positions.

The negative is that in other places this reformation of the administrative apparatus leaves something to be desired, and reactionary and sometimes even Nazistic elements have remained in influential positions.

Such consistent measures as the democratic land reform or the dismantling of trusts, concerns, and banking syndicates have an extraordinarily positive effect because they deprive the most reactionary and imperialistic forces of their economic base.

But an equally negative effect comes from the continued existence of part of this base, because that inevitably compels developments to move along a particular course. For we Marxists know that, viewed over a longer period of time, the economically dominant class must also become the politically dominant class. If (as took place in 1918) the economic power-base of finance-capital is preserved, then sooner or later this reactionary force will once again, thanks to the power of its wealth and influence, its relationships and connections, hold decisive influence over politics and the state in its hands.

Other factors, such as the workers' extensive rights to codetermination in industry and economy, must have an extremely positive effect, because they show to advantage the impact of forward-thinking influences and progressive tendencies on the development of the economy as a whole.

On the other hand, that such an extensive right to codetermination cannot be considered guaranteed everywhere could have extremely negative consequences,

because it gives free rein to the tendencies of every modern capitalist economy to establish, or respectively to restructure, monopolies.

The most positive point, however, is the reality of the steadfast unity of the antifascist-democratic forces in wide areas of the Reich, above all of the growing drive to create a Unity Party of the workers. Only the unification of the KPD and SPD, and with it the growth of the forces of socialism among a legion of millions of active comrades-in-arms, can create the guarantee that not the upper-middle-classes but the working class and the working population [*werktätige Volk*] determine the course of further development.

On the other hand, the progressive forces must with the greatest vigilance be ready to face facts which are not only negative but also downright alarming, such as the fact that the forces for the restoration of a reactionary, imperialist Germany are already creeping out of their mouse-holes, venturing a brash attack here and there, obviously anxious to regain the legal instruments of their policy, above all a press and an organization for counter-revolution. Such a name as the 'Bavarian King's Party' alone in this regard speaks whole volumes.[3]

The more thoroughly and comprehensively we evaluate all the pros and cons of the approaching developments, all the more strongly must we give expression to the conviction that the rapid evolution of the militant progressive forces in the working class and in the entire productive population will prove the decisive factor.

At present everything in Germany is still in progress, everything is in flux and somewhat transitional, not yet definitively resolved. This state of affairs cannot and will not endure (amongst much else, this is demonstrated by the local election results so far available).

The hour calls for a decision, and we will not have a decade, perhaps not even a year, until we have to say again: Yet another brilliant opportunity, perhaps the most propitious, has been missed. This is the underlying reason why the unification of the KPD and SPD can by no means be placed on the back burner. For later developments should hardly prove me wrong if I state: On which road and at what pace Germany moves towards future socialism depends exclusively at what speed the Unity Party is presently being realized.

Therewith is the answer to the possibility of a special development in Germany, insofar as the fundamentals of the transition from capitalism to socialism are concerned. It holds true for Germany, as for any other country, that socialism cannot be built without the entire power of the working class rising up. The coming weeks

and months will determine whether the working class can come into possession of total power from its present starting point in a peaceful way and by restricting itself to purely legal means. And this will happen in the sense that, within this short period of time, the decision will be made as to whether the democratic republic will constitute a new instrument of power in the hands of reactionary forces or whether it will become a progressive state, one which will not pose an insurmountable obstacle for a later development toward socialism. No one wishes more fervently than we that new battles, new bloodshed can be avoided.

In all matters that do not pertain to the fundamental questions of the revolutionary transition to socialism just described, Germany's course of development will undoubtedly have its own largely specific character in this case or that. Or in other words: When it comes to the details, the special characteristics of the historical development of our people, their political and national idiosyncrasies, the particular features of their economy and their culture, will be especially strongly pronounced.

The opinion set out in the joint resolution of December 21, 1945 is thus well founded: "The Unity Party shall be autonomous and independent. Its task is to develop its policies and tactics in accordance with the interests of the German working people and the special conditions that exist in Germany. In the realization of both the minimum-programme and the maximum-programme[4] it shall pursue its own path, derived from the special characteristics of our peoples' development."

None other than Lenin emphasized that it would be the greatest error to overstate the truth about the universal applicability of the Russian experiences and "to extend them beyond certain fundamental features of our (i.e. the Russian) revolution." (see Lenin: "*Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, chapter I: 'In What Sense Can One Speak of the International Significance of the Russian Revolution?')

In October 1916 Lenin voiced extremely profound thoughts on the special nature of developments in each country in the article: 'A Caricature of Marxism': "All peoples will come to socialism, that is inevitable, but they will not all get there in exactly the same way, each will contribute something of its own character to this or that form of democracy, to this or that variety of proletarian dictatorship, to this or that pace of the socialist transformation of the various aspects of social life. In this respect nothing would be more miserable from the viewpoint of theory, or more pathetic from that of practice, as to paint a vision of the future in monotonous grey 'in the name of historical materialism.'" (Lenin, *Collected Works*, volume 19, page 281) In this sense we must affirm a special German road to socialism.

One of the October Revolution's idiosyncrasies, for example, was that it took place in a country which had lagged far behind the advanced countries in economic terms. Labor productivity was relatively low, industry underdeveloped, the number of skilled workers slight. Moreover, the aftermath of the War had precipitated a catastrophic economic decline.

In Germany today we are facing an even greater economic catastrophe, but labor productivity in our country had already reached a much higher level than in that of Tsarist Russia of 1917, and this high level can swiftly be reattained. And in spite of the bloodletting in Hitler's war, the number of skilled workers is incomparably larger than it was in Russia in 1917.

This difference may have an effect in the direction that, in proportion with the sacrifices which had to be borne by the Russian people for the construction of socialism, our tribulations will be relatively fewer; the growth of socialist prosperity may, under certain circumstances as a result, proceed more rapidly.

Another distinctive feature of the October Revolution was that the Russian working class did not represent the majority of the total population, as is the case in Germany. This will likewise be of great importance after the victory of working-class power in Germany, because it will alleviate inner political struggle, demand of the workers fewer sacrifices, and accelerate the development of socialist democracy.

If Germany succeeds in establishing the political and organizational unity of the workers' movement on the basis of a consistent Marxism before the victory of labor over the bourgeoisie, then this state of affairs will shape further political developments here significantly differently than occurred after the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, which entailed the victory of the Bolshevik Party and the defeat, and eventually the crushing, of the Menshevik Party (which had become a counter-revolutionary party). In this sense a distinctiveness in German developments may therefore consist of the fact that a stronger (and consequently more acrimonious) internal conflict within the working class and the productive population does not need to erupt after their class-victory over the bourgeoisie. Such a circumstance must also result in a speedier development of all positive forces, a more rapid emergence of a consistent socialist democracy.

Additionally, the low level of material and intellectual culture in Tsarist Russia brought about, after the October victory, fundamental obstacles to the development of socialist conditions and a new, socialist culture.

This is only the beginning of this discussion; no more. Nonetheless, the statements made justify the optimistic view that Lenin will be proved right when he said that it was easier to seize power in Russia, but incomparably more difficult to build socialism there, than would be the case in the advanced capitalist countries.

Everything else depends on subjective factors, i.e. first and foremost on the level of maturity, resolve, and unity of the German working class and working people.[5] May the age find us up to the task!

Translator's Notes

1. The Erfurt Programme was the second party platform adopted by the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, named after the Erfurt Congress at which it was ratified in 1891. It superseded the earlier Gotha Programme of 1875, which was famously criticized by Marx for its Lassallean and reformist (rather than revolutionary) aspects. The Erfurt Programme received similar criticism from Engels. In a letter to Kautsky on 29 June, 1891, he critiqued parts of the programme's wording and message. While Engels recognized that admitting openly to revolutionary aims was "dangerous" considering the absolutist nature of the Reich government, he nonetheless opined that it was still an "obvious absurdity" to attempt to seek a socialist transformation of society through the German Empire's "reactionary" constitution and Reichstag as the Social-Democrats proposed.
2. *"Working people"* – The words used here in the original German are *"arbeitende Volk"*; the word 'Volk' reappears several times throughout Ackermann's article. 'Volk' is a complex term whose meaning is ultimately colored by context. On a surface level it translates as 'people' or 'nation', although with a broader ring to it suggestive of the *whole* of the people/nation regardless of region, creed, class, or other differences. In the hands of National Socialist or völkisch writers the term's populist sense takes on racial connotations, with blood being implicitly or explicitly understood as what unites and defines the Volk above all else. 'Volk' is not *necessarily* a racial term, however, and it is not at all uncommon to see it in socialist or communist writing. Typically when translating National Socialist documents I often leave the word untranslated, since English readers understand it as a racial term and its populist, racial essence becomes lost if translated into English simply as 'people'. For Ackermann's writing, however, I have chosen to forgo this and translate the word as 'people' or 'population' in order to avoid giving readers the impression that Ackermann had völkisch inclinations.
3. A reference to the *Bayerische Heimat- und Königspartei*, 'Bavarian Homeland and King's Party' (BHKP), founded in October 1945 by members of two associated pre-War organizations – the Bavarian King's Party and the Bavarian Homeland and King's League. Members of both groups before the War had been persecuted by the National Socialist government, and after the War the newly-founded BHKP committed itself to parliamentary-democracy. This did not stop the BHKP itself from being briefly banned by the US occupation authorities in 1946 out of concern that German monarchism was of "archaic and doubtful democratic character" and that toleration of the party might create friction with the Russians. The ban was also timed to prevent the BHKP from competing in Munich's first post-WWII council elections of 26 May 1946. The BKHP was

later legally reconstituted in 1949 but remained a very minor party in Bavarian politics until sometime in the '50s, when it seems to have finally petered out or dissolved. Its leadership consisted of a number of conservative-monarchist personalities who had been involved in the anti-National Socialist resistance movement.

4. The 'minimum-programme' and 'maximum-programme' constituted the two core features of the proposed Socialist Unity Party of Germany's (SED) early political platform. While the basic points of this platform were initially developed and agreed upon through a joint KPD-SPD resolution within the Soviet Occupation Zone in late 1945, the platform's detail was fleshed out primarily through private discussions between Walter Ulbricht and Stalin in February 1946. The 'minimumprogramme' focused on more immediate or short-term objectives (i.e. land reform, punishments for war criminals, establishing a united German parliamentary republic), while the 'maximumprogramme' had a more long-term focus (i.e. the ultimate objective of capitalism's destruction and the transformation of Germany into a truly socialist state). From February the platform was further refined through discussions between the KPD leadership and Moscow, with no real input from the SPD membership. The platform and its minimum and maximum programmes were eventually ratified at the unification congress of April 21, 1946, at which the KPD and the SPD amalgamated to form the SED.
5. *'Working people*' – In German the term used here (and at several other points earlier in the text) is '*Werktätigen*'. '*Werktätigen*' had a particular meaning within the context of the ideology of the KPD and the later SED-state, being a slightly broader term than '*Arbeiterklasse*' (working-class), which was typically interpreted as referring to the proletariat only. 'Werktätigen' by contrast included all working people who did not make their living through exploitation, and as such the term encompassed the proletariat along with certain white-collar employees, civil servants, and homemakers. It employment in communist writing was deliberate, intended as a way of not alienating those sections of the German population who were not actual proletarians yet whose support and cooperation was nonetheless viewed as both ideologically and materially essential to the proper functioning and development of the socialist German state.

ARTICLE TRANSLATED FROM FRANK SCHUMANN'S (ED.) *DER DEUTSCHE WEG ZUM SOZIALISMUS: SELBSTZEUGNISSE UND DOKUMENTE EINES PATRIOTEN* (2005), DAS NEUE BERLIN.

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