



*Mobilization in 1914: heading for the front*

## V. Upheaval: the trade unions in the First World War 1914–1918

The outbreak of the First World War did not come like a bolt out of the blue to the Social Democratic labour movement – but it was caught unprepared none the less. For years it had been warning of the growing danger of war that imperialism entailed. Though the need to defend the country was not questioned, the resolutions of the congresses of the Second International in Stuttgart (1907), Copenhagen (1910) and Basel (1912) raised expectations that the Social Democratic movement would do all in its power to prevent a war, or at least to end it swiftly. The Stuttgart congress had adopted Bebel's draft resolution to the effect that, at the threat of war, "the working classes and their parliamentary representatives in the countries involved [shall be] committed to do their utmost to prevent the outbreak of war by the methods they deem most effective". It went on: "Should war nevertheless break out, it is our duty to work for its rapid termination and direct all our efforts to exploiting the resulting economic and political crisis to rouse the people and thus accelerate the elimination of capitalist class rule."<sup>1</sup> True, there were no similar decisions by the International Trade Union Federation, and the Free Trade Unions had not exactly been fervent champions of the political general strike. But might one not expect the Social Democratic labour movement – party and unions together – to try to prevent any war?

### 1. *Beginnings of the political truce: for defence of the realm, peace through victory and social reform*

The assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 merely provided the immediate pretext for the imperialist powers of Europe to put into effect the bellicose "solution" to their economic and political clashes of interest for which they had long planning. Within a few weeks war had broken out between the German Reich and Austro-Hungary on the one side, and Tsarist Rus-

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<sup>1</sup> Kongress-Protokolle der Zweiten Internationale, vol. 2: Stuttgart 1907 – Basel 1912; reprinted Glashütten im Taunus 1976. p. 66

sia, France and Great Britain on the other. The entry of the United States into the war in April 1917 made it a world war.

It soon became clear that the plans of the German general staff were not working. According to the Schlieffen Plan, a swift victory over France would enable Germany to avoid the threat of a war on two fronts and turn the entire might of the German Army against Tsarist Russia. Russia did, indeed, suffer a crushing defeat at Tannenberg at the end of August 1914. But in the west, the planned mobile war became bogged down at the Battle of the Marne in early September 1914 and turned into trench warfare, with immense casualties on both sides in the battles around Verdun and on the Somme in 1916.



As members of the great *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) evoked by Kaiser Wilhelm II on 1 August, when he said that he “no longer knew any parties”<sup>2</sup>, many Social Democrats forgot the decisions of the Second International, some succumbing to the general enthusiasm for war and confidence in victory, others responding with resignation. Although the General Commission issued another call for peace on 1 August 1914, the day Germany mobilized<sup>3</sup>, the executive conference the following day stated despondently, “All the efforts of organized labour to preserve peace and stop this murderous war have been in vain.”<sup>4</sup> And what was the position within the SPD? As late as 25 July 1914, “Vorwärts” had published an appeal by the party executive concluding with the call, “Down with the war! Long live international brotherhood!” But on 31 July, signalling an about-turn, the same paper stated: “Our solemn protests and our repeated efforts have failed; the circumstances in which we live have again become stronger than our will and that of our comrades in labour; we must now resolutely face whatever the future may hold.”<sup>5</sup>

2 Quot. Schulthess' *Europäischer Geschichtskalender*, Neue Folge, 30th edition, 1914, vol. 1 (Munich, 1917), p. 371

3 Die Kriegsgefahr, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 3 of 1. 8. 1914, p. 469 f.

4 Protokoll der Konferenz der Verbandsvorstände of 2.8.1914, in *Quellen zur Geschichte der deutschen Gewerkschaftsbewegung im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1: *Die Gewerkschaften in Weltkrieg und Revolution 1914–1919*, compiled by Klaus Schönhoven (Cologne, 1985), hereafter referred to as “*Quellen vol. 1*”, pp. 74–85; this quot. p. 83

5 Party executive appeal of 25.7.1914, in *Vorwärts* No. 200 a (special edition) of 25. 7. 1914; Parteigenossen! Party executive appeal of 31. 7. 1914, in *Vorwärts* No. 207 of 1. 8. 1914

By August 1914 it was evident that both the Free Trade Unions and the SPD had become constituent parts of the Wilhelminian Empire. Both looked with pride at the organizational and political successes they had scored on the basis of the status quo. Both identified with the German Reich, its thriving economy and its pioneering social welfare policy. Both saw willingness to take part in the war effort not only as proof of their own patriotism but as a sort of “advance payment” for the long-overdue social and democratic development of the country. The unions may also have been influenced by the belief that their indirect decision to observe a political truce on 2 August, reinforced by the “official” abandoning of all wage struggles on 17 August, might help to preserve their organization through the war.

The unions’ readiness to show their “allegiance” for the duration of the war, indirectly announced on 2 August, also had implications for the political deliberations of the SPD parliamentary party on 3 August. Yet it is hardly likely that their decision to vote the necessary war credits would have gone differently even if the unions had not announced their intention to refrain from striking. At most, the policy of the unions may have strengthened the majority of the SPD group in the stance which it had already adopted.

By deciding on a policy of political truce (*Burgfrieden*), the Free Trade Unions led the way for the other federations, too. Certainly, incorporation into the “national united front” presented no problems for the Christian-national trade unions. To them the war was a test of the nation’s mettle: it would bring about “moral regeneration of the country”; it was “the furnace that will purge humanity of impurities and errors”<sup>6</sup>. War might have “threatened man’s outward culture and happiness; but it has ennobled and uplifted the inner man”<sup>7</sup>. It was not by chance that in 1915 Theodor Brauer, the Christian unions’ leading theoretician, praised the war “and its attendant phenomena” as “a grand confirmation, overwhelming in its nature, of the principles” of this section of the labour movement<sup>8</sup>.

The liberal-national *Gewerkvereine* were also happy to fall in line with the “national united front” in August 1914<sup>9</sup>. They saw the Free Trade

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6 Ursachen und Zusammenhänge des Weltkrieges, in *Jahrbuch der christlichen Gewerkschaften für 1915*, ed. by the General Secretariat of the Federation of Christian Trade Unions of Germany (Cologne, 1915), pp. 24–35; this quot. p. 24

7 Weltkrieg und sittliche Volkserneuerung, *ibid.* pp. 36–45; this quot. p. 36

8 Theodor Brauer, *Der Krieg und die christlichen Gewerkschaften* (M.-Gladbach, 1915), p. 5

9 Cf. Erklärung von Zentralrat und Geschäftsführendem Ausschuss des Verbandes Deutscher Gewerkvereine zum Kriegsausbruch, in *Gewerkschaft No. 62* of 5. 8. 1914, p. 237

Unions' political truce policy as an "outright acknowledgement of our principles". They, too, expected the "national community" born of war-time to become a lasting social compact and lead to a policy of social reform.<sup>10</sup>

Such patriotic declarations of loyalty were part of a wave of nationalism that swept through the German media in the early stages of the war. Many people – including the trade union federations – believed that the German Reich was involved in a war of defence that had been forced upon it. The "counter-attack" breaching Belgian neutrality therefore seemed justified. Much as they regretted it, they could not escape "the observation that the German army command was in a predicament, and that by taking the action it did it was only anticipating a breach of neutrality already planned by the enemy."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in the months that followed, the Free Trade Unions professed their belief in war aims – modest though they may seem compared with those of industry. Firstly, it was a matter of economic advantages for the German Reich, in which the working class would also share; secondly, a "reward" was expected for the sacrifices made by the German working class. After the "peace through victory" (*Siegfrieden*), the Prussian three-class voting system would undoubtedly be scrapped and the right of association would be extended to all wage earners.<sup>12</sup> But there were more overtly military and political war aims, too: at the beginning of 1916 the *Correspondenzblatt* was still describing the "assumption" that occupied areas would be evacuated "without any compensation for the sacrifices incurred since then [as] so absurd that no German will engage in such discussions".<sup>13</sup> And as late as May 1917 – after the American entry into the war – Adam Stegerwald of the Christian unions presumed to state: "If a 'power peace' (*Machtfrieden*) is attainable, then let us have a power peace at all costs."<sup>14</sup> The differences of substance

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10 Quot. Hans-Georg Fleck, *Soziale Gerechtigkeit durch Organisationsmacht und Interessenausgleich. Ausgewählte Aspekte zur Geschichte der sozialliberalen Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Deutschland (1868 bis 1933)*, in E. Matthias and K. Schönhoven (eds), *Solidarität und Menschenwürde*, pp. 83–106; this quot. p. 104 f.

11 Die italienischen Gewerkschaften und wir, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 47 of 21. 11. 1914, p. 617 f.; this quot. p. 618

12 Wilhelm Jansson (ed.), *Arbeiterinteressen und Kriegsergebnis. Ein gewerkschaftliches Kriegsbuch* (Berlin, 1915); similarly, *Die deutsche Arbeiterklasse und der Weltmarkt*, in *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* No. 22 of 27. 5. 1916

13 Rückblick auf das Jahr 1915, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 1 of 1. 1. 1916, pp. 1–4; this quot. p. 1

14 Arbeiterinteresse und Friedensziele. Vortrag, gehalten von Generalsekretär Adam Stegerwald auf der Konferenz der Vertrauensleute der christlich-nationalen Arbeiterbewegung am 6. Mai in Essen (Cologne, 1917), p. 9

between the federations on this point were rather small. The tone adopted by the Christian unions was, however, decidedly cruder; for example, in October 1917, Stegerwald called for the "ruthless continuation of the war"<sup>15</sup>; yet to hope for a victorious outcome could not, at this juncture, be anything more than whistling in the dark.

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All these announcements brimming with reformist confidence and belligerent self-assertion cannot disguise the fact that union organization and policies were badly hit by the war. Even in 1913 the slowdown in the economy had an adverse effect on union membership; although spring 1914 seemed to bring the first signs of an improvement in the economic situation, the beginning of the First World War was gravely detrimental to the economic life of the country. The switch from peacetime to wartime production was by no means a smooth one. The proportion of unemployed trade unionists soared from 2.9 per cent in 1913 to 7.2 per cent in 1914, before declining to 3.2 per cent in 1915, 2.2 per cent in 1916, 1 per cent in 1917 and 0.8 per cent in January–October 1918.

Conscription and the expansion of arms production caused a major shift in the composition of the working class. Whereas the number of adult males in industrial enterprises employing more than ten people decreased by one quarter during the war, the number of women rose by 50 per cent. In 1914, twice as many men as women belonged to a sickness insurance scheme; by 1917 numbers were equal. Moreover, the working population grew younger owing to the increase in workers under sixteen. The consequences of this shift in the working population were exacerbated, for the unions, by the enormous turnover in manpower. For example, from the outbreak of war until mid-1917, Siemens-Schuckert had a staff turnover equivalent to eight times its workforce. The war had the effect of speeding up earlier, pre-war trends: the increased number of working women, the increase in unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and the rise in employment in the chemical and metal-working industries and in electrical and mechanical engineering.

All the federations suffered from the effects of conscription, unemployment and changes in the working population. The self-imposed curbs on the unions' freedom of action under the political truce policy may also

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Stegerwald, *Arbeiterschaft und Kriegsentscheidung*. Vortrag, gehalten auf der 4. Deutschen Arbeiterkongress, 28.–30. Oktober 1917 in Berlin (Cologne, 1917), p. 17

have contributed to the fact that many workers did not consider it important to belong to a union. Between 1913 and 1916, trade union membership fell from almost 3 m to 1.2 m; the Free Trade Unions alone lost more than 1.5 m members.

This fall in membership was accompanied by a collapse in internal union work. The conscription of officials and shop stewards brought union activity in many smaller areas to a halt; the trade union press was censored; declining revenue and the rising cost of benefits emptied union coffers. For these and other (political) reasons, trade union congresses were cancelled for the duration of the war – it even became rare for individual unions to hold conferences – and discussion of war policy was banned at local union meetings.

As early as 2 August 1914, Carl Legien had announced at the executive conference: “As things are today, democracy is a dead letter in the trade unions; now the executives have to make decisions on their own responsibility – for which they must answer to their own consciences.”<sup>16</sup> The question is whether Legien – and other union chiefs with him – were perhaps rather too eager to submit to the “force of circumstances”: were the curbs on internal union democracy imposed by the war used to push the executive’s line through unopposed? Both the substance of the policies pursued and the shift of decision-making upwards, away from the discontent developing among the working class and the membership, contributed to the growing alienation of the grassroots from the leadership of the unions.

## 2. *Towards political integration*

All the trade union federations saw the First World War as a war of defence that had been forced upon the German Reich. They supported the war effort from the very outset, for example through appeals for help with the harvest, which unemployed factory workers were initially obliged to undertake, replacing farm labourers who had been called up. They all switched their expenditure from the industrial struggle to welfare benefits, particularly for the unemployed and soldiers’ families, which incidentally helped to take the pressure off public funds. All the trade union federations hoped for “peace through victory” in order – more or less openly – to achieve economic and social war aims. The political peace pledge, whereby they themselves had renounced all militant defence of their memb-

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<sup>16</sup> Konferenz der Verbandsvorstände am 2.8.1914, in Quellen, vol. 1, pp. 74–85; this quot. p. 84

ers' interests, was regarded by them as voluntary proof of their sense of national responsibility. They believed it entitled them to seek acceptance for some long-standing demands of theirs.

The Reich, stressed the *Correspondenzblatt* in 1915, could not be defended "against a world full of enemies by a handful of capitalists". Precisely because the working class had done its duty, because it was needed, because it was bearing the main burden of the war, the "days of factory feudalism" were gone for good.<sup>17</sup> And in the exuberance of the first months of the war, the *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*, the engineering workers' paper, claimed to discern not just the "solid co-operation" of all sections of society but "socialism wherever we look".<sup>18</sup>

But the unions were far too optimistic in their assessment of developments. The oft-evoked "spirit of the trenches" soon proved to be an illusion. War profits and war aims, food profiteering and the black market soon created quite a different picture of the German "national community". And the desired concessions by the employers, particularly in the arms industry and other large-scale industries, were not forthcoming. In industries dominated by small and medium-sized companies, which were prepared to conclude collective agreements even before the war and now found themselves overshadowed by the effects of rearmament on the economy, the unions were able to achieve increased recognition. This was partly because the manufacturers hoped in this way to win the support of trade unionists as champions of their particular industry in relations with the civil service and the military commanders. Patriarchal attitudes lingered on well into the war, at least in heavy industry and mining: "The colonel cannot engage in negotiations with the soldiers in the trenches -nor must the workers be given the power to make decisions on fundamental company matters." With this much-used comparison between military and industrial obedience, the trenches or barracks and the company, the head of the Association of Iron and Steel Manufacturers, Jakob Wilhelm Reichert, confirmed the entrepreneurs' claim to lead and rule at a meeting of the association's executive on 16 November 1916.<sup>19</sup>

This attitude of harsh dismissal of union demands for recognition and co-determination was, however, hard to keep up in practice. Ever since autumn 1914 there had been a shortage of skilled workers in various

17 Nichts gelernt und nichts vergessen, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 17 of 24. 4. 1915, pp. 189-191; this quot. p. 191

18 *Der Krieg und die sozialen Aufgaben*, in *MetallarbeiterZeitung* No. 45 of 7. 11. 1914

19 Quot. Gerald D. Feldman, *Armee, Industrie und Arbeiterschaft* (Berlin and Bonn, 1985), p. 77



branches of the arms industry. Competition for staff aggravated the already serious problem of high turnover. In this situation the employers called on the state to help. Ernst von Borsig, chairman of the Association of Berlin Engineering Manufacturers, called for the introduction of forced labour. The War Ministry rejected this proposal on the grounds that forced labour would “have a paralysing and destructive effect on the co-operativeness of the unions”.<sup>20</sup> When in January 1915 the Berlin Munitions Board prohibited workers from changing jobs for the sake of better pay, the unions – with Adolf Cohen, chairman of the Berlin engineering workers at the forefront – protested, declaring that in that case they could no longer guarantee the survival of the domestic political truce. At this, the Munitions Board took over Borsig’s idea of making a change of jobs conditional on the issue of a “leaving certificate”. Clearly it was necessary to end the argument and reach agreement with the unions to avoid endangering arms production. The engineering industry and the engineering unions set up the “War Committee for the Engineering Works of Greater Berlin”, a body composed of representatives of both sides charged with adjudicating in disputes that could not be settled at company level.

The creation of committees of this type did not meet with the approval of the leading manufacturers’ associations, who probably feared the gradual undermining of the employers’ claim to be the sole legitimate decision-makers. The fact that in spite of this several such committees were set up at the instigation of the military authorities – for example, by the engineering industry in Hanover and Frankfurt – shows the concern of the High Command to ensure that arms production should proceed as smoothly as possible, which it believed could best be done by involving the trade unions. For their part, the unions saw any form of institutional co-operation with the employers and any backing given to them by the “decrees of the military authorities, framed with such refreshing clarity”<sup>21</sup> as evidence of the success of their political truce policy. It was a way of consoling themselves and the workers in their disappointment at the fact that by autumn 1916 no far-reaching social reform was in prospect. The concessions by the employers, the military authorities and the government went no further than was necessary to persuade the unions to continue observing the political truce, which served to maintain discipline among the workers, without carrying out the social reforms demanded in return.

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20 Ibid. p. 77

21 Der Krieg und die sozialen Aufgaben, op. cit.

When their hopes remained unfulfilled, and the swift victory in which all believed failed to materialize, the trade unions adopted a more strident and urgent tone. It was no longer a matter of positive goals such as social reform; any departure from the political truce policy was unthinkable because of the feared outcome. In early 1916 the view was that support for the war effort was in keeping with "the unions' most vital interests, holding off any foreign invasion, protecting us from the dismemberment of German territory and the destruction of flourishing German industries, and preserving us from the fate of a disastrous end to the war, which would burden us with war reparations for decades to come."<sup>22</sup>



As the war dragged on there was a growing need for emotive appeals of this kind to justify the political truce policy to the working class when the dividend in terms of social reform was not forthcoming, or was at best double-edged. This also applied to the Auxiliary Service Law (*Hilfsdienstgesetz*), which the unions greeted as the greatest success of their policy. In the summer of 1916, the Third Supreme Command under Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, in collaboration with the representatives of heavy industry, put forward a programme to boost arms production, designed to mobilize all available manpower. As they also wanted to exploit demonstrable public readiness to perform "patriotic auxiliary service" as a weapon of war, the programme had to receive the broadest possible support from the population, documented by a parliamentary resolution. This was partly why, in the government's deliberations and in co-ordinating talks with the parties, Wilhelm Groener's view that the war "could not be won against the workers" gradually gained ground; it was clear to him, as head of the Prussian War Office, that "without the trade unions we cannot make the thing [the Auxiliary Service Law] work".<sup>23</sup>

The trade union federations, making the most of the fact that they were indispensable to the success of the auxiliary service scheme, made a concerted effort to push through improvements to the bill, for which they made sure they had the support of the parties to the left of the Conservatives. As a result of the co-operation between the federations they managed to put together a majority in the Reichstag stretching from the SPD to the left wing of the National Liberals, which made a number of

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<sup>22</sup> Quot. H. Grebing. *op. cit.*, p. 144

<sup>23</sup> Quot. *Vaterländischer Hilfsdienst*. in *Zentralblatt der christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands* (hereafter referred to as *Zentralblatt*) No. 25 of 4. 12. 1916, p. 202

amendments to the bill in favour of the unions, without changing its general tendency, however. Owing, in part, to the bill's dual character, opinions were divided within the SPD parliamentary party: in an internal vote, 21 out of 49 members of the SPD group rejected the bill, and in the Reichstag vote one third of the SPD deputies defied the party whip. Neither were the Free Trade Unions so well disposed to the bill as a glance at the General Commission's publications would lead us to believe. In particular, there were massive protests at a shop stewards' meeting of the Greater Berlin engineering workers, and also at the general assemblies of the shoemakers' and woodworkers' unions.

Perhaps the protests would have been even more forceful, had there been more opportunity to voice them. For the Auxiliary Service Law as adopted on 2 December 1916 was a rather daunting measure. It introduced compulsory service for every male German between 17 and 60, conscripts excepted. In connection with this, freedom of movement and contracts of employment were largely abolished; a change of job was henceforth only possible with the approval of a bipartite mediation committee. The compensation for these restrictions on the wage earners' basic rights was the compulsory setting-up of worker committees in companies vital to the war with more than 50 employees; where there were more than 50 white-collar staff, a staff committee also had to be set up. The above mediation committees were also created. Long-awaited recognition of the unions as the legitimate representatives of the workers was granted by allowing union representatives on to all the official conciliation and arbitration bodies right up to the War Office level.

Although the unions had to grapple over the coming months with the implementation regulations and the interpretation of individual passages – setting up the worker and staff committees proved particularly awkward – approval of the law remained more or less intact. They all put it down as a success for their policy – some Free Trade Unions even saw it as a “piece of state socialism”.<sup>24</sup> The vehement rejection of the law by many employers may also have encouraged trade unionists to take a positive view of it. Some employers in heavy industry labelled it the Trade Union Auxiliary Law<sup>25</sup>, and in a March 1918 memorandum of the Federation of German Employers' Associations the Auxiliary Service Law was said to be “an emergency law born of the constraints of war [. . .] which there will

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24 Der militärische Zukunftsstaat. in *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* No. 48 of 25. 11. 1916

25 Quot. Hans-Joachim Bieber, *Gewerkschaften in Krieg und Revolution. Arbeiterbewegung, Industrie, Staat und Militär in Deutschland 1914–1920* (Hamburg, 1981), vol. 1, p. 301

obviously be no reason to retain once the war is over". It was therefore pointless to discuss whether the law "has really achieved the aim it was intended to achieve, viz. to step up arms production by increasing manpower and reducing job changes."<sup>26</sup> In fact, the effect of the law on the wartime economy was rather modest. Because reserves were so low the shortage of skilled workers remained a persistent problem, and high turnover was only stemmed for a limited time.

But what did the balance sheet look like from the unions' point of view? Recognition by the state and the formation of workers' and arbitration committees were registered as clear successes. These seemed to be the pre-conditions for the rapid rise in their membership and, above all, the entry of the unions into the big companies that had hitherto remained closed to them. After the low of 1.18 m in 1916, combined union membership climbed to 1.65 m the following year and reached 3.51 m in 1918, thus exceeding the pre-war figure by more than half a million (Table 1a).

But for the trade unions the Auxiliary Service Law also had its drawbacks. The newly formed workers' committees often evolved narrow objectives of their own, selfishly seeking to further the interests of the company. In fact, many employers preferred the workers' committees to the trade unions as a negotiating partner and probably tended to make concessions over pay to the workers' committees quite deliberately, in order to make the unions in general seem superfluous. Finally, the workers' committees were often politicized in ways that were not congenial to the union executives. They were, after all, much closer to workers and their problems – a hectic work rate, longer working hours, and the disastrous food situation – than the union leaderships. To make matters worse, the union leaders – and this also contributed to the emergence of a broad-based protest movement – were engaging in close co-operation with state and military administrative bodies and the employers over the implementation of the Auxiliary Service Law.

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Precisely by virtue of its dual character, the Auxiliary Service Law brings out with full clarity the fundamental problem of union policy during the First World War. Recognition of the unions, often deemed a success, could only be achieved at the cost of progressive integration into the ruling system of the *Wilhelminian Kaiserreich*, for whose policies the unions

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<sup>26</sup> Quot. Roswitha Leckebusch, *Entstehung und Wandlungen der Zielsetzungen, der Struktur und der Wirkungen von Arbeitgeberverbänden* (Berlin, 1966), p. 216

assumed a measure of responsibility and – in the eyes of a growing number of workers – some of the blame, too. Unions of all political hues accepted some political responsibility without being able to influence the broad lines of policy, though they did try to mitigate its worst social consequences. It was largely because this policy was such a limited success that the gap between the trade union leaders and sections of the membership grew ever wider.

The clearest illustration of this is the question of food supplies. The longer the war lasted, the more disastrous the food situation became. Lack of manpower and fertilizer (saltpetre was used for munitions) caused farm production to decline, and with the encirclement of Germany no food imports were coming into the country. Food shortages and price increases were the result. As early as January 1915 bread rationing was introduced, followed soon afterwards by fat, meat and milk. The black market began to prosper. “The unequal distribution of scarce goods”, a police report stated, appeared to be “more conspicuous and provocative than the scarcity itself”.<sup>27</sup>

To coordinate measures to ensure food supplies (and to demonstrate the government’s willingness to take action) the Wartime Food Office was set up in May 1916, its board including August Müller, a Social Democrat, and Adam Stegerwald, the Christian trade union leader, who were thus rendered partly responsible for the unsatisfactory food situation. As a result, the hunger riots of the latter half of the war and the growing protest movement were also directed against the trade unions, who during the First World War not only acted as the champions of the working class on social matters but at the same time sought to channel its anxiety and protests.

There is no denying that by accepting posts on committees and in offices dealing with civilian and military supplies, thus assuming part of the political responsibility, all the trade union federations allowed themselves to become implicated in the war policy of the German state. Moreover, Stegerwald entered the Prussian Upper House as the first worker deputy, and Johannes Giesberts was appointed to a post at the Imperial Office for Economic Affairs as expert adviser to the secretary of state on social matters. Both Stegerwald and Max Schippel were given places on the Imperial Treasury’s twenty-four man strong financial advisory council to examine the economic consequences of future tax proposals. Every new duty that gave the unions a say in decisions was seen by

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<sup>27</sup> Quot. Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914–1918* (Göttingen, 1973), p. 34

them as another success for their political truce policy, and as a sign of a change of heart by the leading representatives of the state, the armed forces and the employers. In fact, the unions appeared to consider the growing intervention of the state in the economy – from the management of raw materials to the regulation of employment and supply policy – as a manifestation of “state” or “war socialism”<sup>28</sup>. From the vantage point of the present, this was a staggering misjudgement, but they were chiefly concerned with ensuring the smooth running of the arms-based economy and this required limited and double-edged concessions, designed to secure the loyalty of the masses to the unions’ political truce policy.

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In view of the restrictions on pay that the unions accepted as part of the political truce, it is not surprising that the question of social reform assumed increasing importance the longer the war lasted. The Christian-national unions presented their demands in programme form in 1916, as did the Free Trade Unions in 1917–18, setting out what they expected of state policy and also the points on which they differed from it.

As early as September 1916, the committee of the German Workers’ Congress published a basic programme, which was not finally put to the vote until after the war to give the members of the Christian-national labour organization who had been conscripted into the forces the opportunity to participate. The affiliated unions professed their unqualified allegiance to the “common culture and destiny of the German people”, to the “maintenance of a strong defence force”, to the “national necessity” of a global economic and colonial policy, to private property and to the monarchy. It then went on to detail measures giving equal rights to the workers, and other measures covering industrial safety, insurance, food supplies, housing reform and fiscal policy.<sup>29</sup>

As Franz Behrens made quite plain in his commentary on the programme, it was intended to give a clear statement of the Christian-national position for their own benefit and hence also to distinguish it from that of the Social Democrats. For when its supporters had “marched off to battle like everyone else and stood their ground as well as the next man”, the question of the *raison d’être* of the Christian-national labour movement had come under scrutiny. Certainly, the Christian-national and the Social

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28 *Der militärische Zukunftsstaat*. op. cit.

29 *Die christlich-nationale Arbeiterbewegung im neuen Deutschland*, hrsg. vom Ausschuss der christlich-nationalen Arbeiterbewegung (Cologne, 1917), p. 14 ff.

Democratic labour movements could work together from case to case, but the fundamental differences between them – on Christianity, “national cohesion” and private property – should not be forgotten.<sup>30</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in November 1917 and January 1918, the Free Trade Unions followed suit. They, too, put forward a social programme, the eighteen points of which presented a lengthy list of demands, not only in the sphere of social policy proper but covering all the issues of social reform. It set out their proposals on such matters as employment exchanges, insurance and the law on collective agreements as well as industrial safety, popular education and housing.<sup>31</sup> However far-reaching these reform plans were, they were all quite clearly rooted in existing conditions. At any rate, this programme certainly did not strain the “common work” of the trade union federations that developed in wartime.

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On a number of political questions – from the certificate of employment and the protection of home workers, to the Auxiliary Service Law and the deletion of paragraph 153 of the trade regulations – opportunities for co-operation across federation boundaries regularly presented themselves. The white-collar organizations also sought to pool their strength under the pressure of the war. In 1915 the Association of Technical Unions and the Association for a Standard Salaried Employees Law, from which emerged the General Free Union of Salaried Staff (the Afa-Bund), were set up. In October 1916, the bourgeois nationalist organizations merged to form the Association of Commercial Unions. In view of the poor employment position, falling salaries and the food crisis, in mid-1917 the three white-collar associations began to work together more closely. The clearest manifestation of the federations’ readiness to co-operate politically was the joint founding of the “Popular League for Freedom and Fatherland” (Volksbund für Freiheit und Vaterland). Moreover, the broad trade union and party political co-operation tested in the auxiliary service discussions became the jumping-off point for cross-party co-operation in the Reichstag between the Majority Social Democrats, the Centre and the Progressive Party, which jointly tabled the peace resolution of 19 July 1917, calling for a peace without any territorial demands or claims for reparations.

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30 Franz Behrens. *Das neue Programm der christlich-nationalen Arbeiterbewegung* (Leipzig, 1918), pp. 18 f. and 21 f.

31 Reprinted in Paul Umbreit, *Sozialpolitische Arbeiterforderungen der deutschen Gewerkschaften. Ein sozial-politisches Arbeiterprogramm der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands* (Berlin, 1918), pp. 102–12

### 3. *The trade union mass movement and non-union mass protest*

Neither for the Hirsch-Duncker associations nor for the Christian unions did the war entail a challenge to their political programmes, as they had both seen themselves as nationalist movements ever since the turn of the century. Not so, the Social Democrats. Since the beginning of the war and the debate on the war credits and the political truce policy, there had been growing internal opposition within the SPD. This included not only the radical Left, whose spokesmen were Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, but also a number of Social Democrats of the “centre”, including Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein and Hugo Haase. The leadership of the Free Trade Unions, itself a party to the political truce policy, resolutely supported the line of the group majority. Partly to avoid the split in the SPD spreading to the unions it advocated the consistent exclusion of those opposed to the political truce policy, which it believed was jeopardized by the internal opposition. As early as February 1915, Legien demanded the expulsion of Karl Liebknecht from the SPD parliamentary party for a breach of group discipline: he had, after all, openly voted against the granting of further war credits in December 1914. When an appeal was published in the Leipzig “*Volkszeitung*” in June 1915 – also signed by 150 trade union officials – calling on the SPD leadership to break with the “policy of 4 August”, the General Commission responded with a sharp condemnation of any “sectarianism” within the SPD. The union executives backed this stance and reaffirmed their support for the policy pursued “by the great majority of the Social Democratic group, the party committee and the party executive”. It went on to say: “The views represented by the sectarians in the party are in contradiction with the very nature and work of the unions; to implement them would be to put at risk all that the unions have created and achieved.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, if the established political line was not consistently pursued, the General Commission threatened to set up its own trade union party. So the General Commission’s actions further reduced the scope for compromise between the party leadership and the internal opposition, thus aiding the policy of marginalization. In spring 1916, the dissident deputies were expelled from the parliamentary party and set up the “Social Democratic Association”. After meeting for a special conference in January 1917, which resulted in their expulsion from the party, they founded the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) at Easter 1917.

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32 Protokoll der Konferenz der Verbandsvorstände vom 5.–7. 7. 1915. in Quellen. vol 1, pp. 181–219; this quot. p. 216



In March 1916 the General Commission expressly welcomed the split in the SPD group, since it meant a clarification of the situation. At the conference of union executives on 20–22 November 1916, the majority – with only three votes against – came out in favour of the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD), thus rejecting neutrality in the current party dispute.<sup>33</sup> But if the union leaders, particularly the General Commission, thought that that was the end of the problem, they were very much mistaken. Opposition was afoot in the unions, too. Its centres were Berlin and the industrial areas of central Germany and Rhenish Westphalia. The opposition was particularly strong where trade union and party groupings provided mutual assistance, especially in Berlin, Brunswick, Bremen, Hamburg and Leipzig. Furthermore, oppositional groups achieved considerable strength in some individual unions. At the Cologne conference of the German Engineering Workers' Union in June 1917, the executive line was approved by only 64 votes to 53; and in 1919 the opposition even took over the leadership. Even during the war the shoemakers' and textile workers' unions took the USPD line, and there were strong oppositional wings in the bakers', glass workers', shop assistants' and furriers' unions.

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Although the Free Trade Unions, with their “marginalization policy”, did not manage to prevent the internal struggles between the different wings of the SPD from affecting their own organizations, it did not lead to a split in the movement. The internal opposition within the unions – unlike their Social Democratic counterparts – continued to accept the political truce, for all their criticism. As a result, the protest movements of the latter half of the war developed without the participation of the unions, which believed that if they took the opposition line they would be jeopardizing the achievements which they ascribed to the political truce, or the rewards which they expected to obtain later. It was precisely what the union leadership counted a success that was partly responsible for large sections of the working class mounting a protest movement without, indeed even partly against, the trade unions.

The reduction in the bread ration announced in April 1915 had already led to protest strikes, which resulted in the decision being rescinded. The longer the war lasted, the more dissatisfaction and the urge to protest

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<sup>33</sup> Protokoll der Konferenz der Verbandsvorstände vom 20.–22. 11. 1916 in Quellen, vol. 1. pp. 252–58; see p. 255

grew, triggered more than anything by the inadequate and unfair supplies of food and directed against the war, as was the case with the strike by 50,000 Berlin engineering workers on 28 June 1916. From 1915–16 on there were continual hunger disturbances, chiefly involving women and young people, who suffered particularly badly from the disastrous situation and were not threatened by conscription. The “turnip winter” of 1916–17, in particular, caused the protest movement to spread and gave rise to numerous spontaneous strikes. War fatigue and the desire for peace, falling incomes and the catastrophic food shortages led to a number of strikes from January 1917 on, often without any union involvement. Even the incomplete figures of the Imperial Statistical Office reflect the increase in strikes: in 1915, 141 strikes involving 15,238 workers were recorded; in 1916, 240 strikes, involving 128,881; in 1917 the number of strikes soared to 562, and the number of strikers to 668,032 (Table 2c). The strike movement reached its first peak – probably in the wake of the February Revolution in Russia – in April 1917, when some 300,000 munitions workers in Berlin, Brunswick and Leipzig took to the streets in protest at the food shortage and for political reasons. After more strikes in the summer of 1917, about a million armament workers downed tools in January 1918. Under the slogan “Peace, freedom and bread” they demonstrated for an immediate halt to the war with no territorial claims, for a thorough democratization of the whole of society and improved food supplies. In Berlin alone, 400,000 workers came out on strike. The strikers elected 414 workplace delegates, who formed the Greater Berlin Workers’ Council, headed by an action committee of 11 members, of whom three belonged to the MSPD and three to the USPD – but none to the trade union leaderships.

As a result of these strikes a new form of organization developed at company level, seen for the first time during the strike of April 1917. Under pressure from radicalized company workforces, a new group called the “revolutionary representatives” (Revolutionäre Obleute) emerged from the ranks of the shop stewards. Politically they were close to the USPD. Under the leadership of Emil Barth and Richard Müller they represented a new concept in the organized expression of opinion, the idea of councils. Whereas those who took part in the mass actions of 1917–18 were chiefly women, youngsters and unskilled workers, who were all outside the trade unions, these strikes were frequently organized by skilled artisans with trade union training who had joined the revolutionary representatives out of disgust at the political truce policy. In some cases strike movements were headed by the workers’ committees set up under the Auxiliary Service Law.

The strikes did not meet with much direct practical success, nor did they seem to have much effect on the basic line of trade union policy. The mass protest did influence events indirectly, however, bringing home as it did to those at the head of the state and the armed forces the necessity of conceding at least the moderate demands of the trade unions, in order to strengthen their position. The unions themselves made use of the mass movements – which they otherwise tended to dismiss – with the very same argument.

Though the Free Trade Unions were able to prevent a split in their organization, they still had to keep a careful eye on the radical workers' protest movement, since it had clearly emerged from among their own supporters, or at least from those sections of the working class that were most easily mobilized by the unions. Of course, the strikes and protest movements of 1917–18 which finally culminated in the revolution must not be allowed to disguise the fact that some workers thought that trade union policy represented their interests well. While the anti-war strikes bypassed the unions, the *Durchhalteappelle* (the appeal to hold out), which all the trade union federations addressed to the workers in 1917–18, met with a good response. Both mass mobilization outside the unions and trade union recruitment of members were most successful in the big cities and large companies, so that it is not possible simply to talk about a “crisis of confidence” in the unions. The high level of political mobilization, taking in large sections of the working class who had previously not been politicized, thus occurred both inside and outside the unions. But the trade unions, which continued to feel committed to the political truce, forfeited the leadership of the rapidly expanding protest movement, which saw them as one of the chief buttresses of the *Durchhaltepolitik*, the policy of “holding out” until final victory.

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Despite the political truce policy and the “common work” in individual cases, the balance sheet of trade union policy in the second half of the war was, on the whole, no more impressive than before. On 5 June 1916, against the votes of the Conservatives and the Social Democratic Association (which had split away from the SDP group), an amendment to the Law on Association was passed, finally limiting the possibility of declaring the trade unions to be “political associations” and hence subject to a special law. Under the Auxiliary Service Law, the unions were recognized as the representatives of the workers. And, finally, in May 1918, paragraph 153 of the trade regulations, which laid down specific penalties for

forcing anyone to join a closed shop, but did not apply to employers who sought to interfere with freedom of association, was dropped without any replacement. But the abolition of the Prussian three-class voting system was deferred in the Kaiser's Easter message on 7 April 1917 until after the war.

Were the recognition of the trade unions, the establishment of workers' committees and the abolition of paragraph 153 really successes for the unions' political truce policy? Or was it not rather the indirect influence of mass protest that was at work, against which the union "dam" had to be strengthened? If one considers the point in time at which the triumphs blazoned on the union banners were achieved, much of the credit must be attributed to the strike and protest movement.

After the war in the east was terminated by the dictated peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which the Russian leadership was forced to accept in order to safeguard the revolution, the Supreme Command of the army



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tried to force a conclusion in the west by launching a “great offensive” in spring 1918. This attempt failed, but the Supreme Command did not admit defeat until 29 September 1918, calling on the government to start ceasefire negotiations immediately. In early October Prince Max of Baden took over the government, which for the first time was in the hands of the majority parties in the Reichstag. And once again the unions were prepared to accept a share in the responsibility for the consequences of the policy of August 1914, for Gustav Bauer of the General Commission and Johannes Giesberts of the Christian unions joined the government that was faced with the difficult task of setting the final seal on the country’s defeat.

The reforms “from above” up to and including the introduction of parliamentary democracy, had two basic aims. First, the representatives of democratic and social reform, from the trade unions to the parties allied to them, were to be made to share the responsibility for war policy, in order to divert attention from those who were really to blame – the Supreme Command and the nation’s leaders. Second, something had to be done to take the wind out of the sails of the newly radicalized masses in order to prevent the overthrow of the state – the dreaded revolution.