VIII. In the shadow of the Depression: the dissolution of the trade unions 1930–1933

After a few short years of comparative political and economic stability, the trade unions ran into a new, serious crisis which finally threatened to sweep away the very basis of their existence. The trade unions were rapidly caught between the front lines of political radicalization, which restricted their scope for integration and action even further. Moreover, with the concentration of decision-making over economic policy and collective agreements to the political executive under the emergency decree policy (*Notverordnungspolitik*), they were once again obliged to shift the main emphasis of their work into the political sphere, though this strategy was not destined to be a success. The unions could do nothing to prevent the slump, with its disastrous social consequences for the working population, nor the Nazis' seizure of power – nor even their own break-up. Even though the Weimar democracy did not fail owing to objective economic difficulties but was deliberately wrecked, the Great Depression formed the background against which the irresolute conduct of the labour movement and the success of their opponents must be viewed.

1. *The Depression and the weakening of the trade union organizations*

Ever since 1928 there had been signs in Germany of a downturn in the economy – a decline in the profits of German industry and a corresponding fall in investment. The downward trend became even more noticeable in 1929, the turning point coming in 1930, when there was a sharp drop in both output and employment.[1] This process of economic contraction was evident in the rapid decline in national per capita income : from 1413 Marks in 1927, it rose to 1453 Marks in 1928 but then declined steadily to 1436 (1929), 1372 (1930), 1201 (1931) and 1094 Marks (1932).

Socially and politically, the unemployment figures are one of the most important indicators of economic crisis. After reaching its lowest point under the Weimar Republic in 1927, the number of those out of work was

1 The following figures are from Karlheinz Dederke, Reich und Republik. Deutschland 1917–1933 (Stuttgart, 1969), pp. 278 and 193.

Mass unemployment in 1933: applicants for one vacancy as a shorthand typist

Unemployed engineering workers collecting the dole in Leipzig, 1932-33

averaging 1,892,000 by 1929, rose to 3,076,000 in 1930, reached 4,520,000 in 1931 and continued rising to reach an average for the year of 5,575,000 in 1932; it peaked in February 1932, with 6,128,000 registered jobless (Table 5a). This meant that by 1931 one tenth of the population had experienced unemployment at first hand – those on short time not included. This proportion was, however, much higher in the highly industrialized areas, where it could reach one in four, for example in the cities of the Ruhr district, which was particularly hard hit by the crisis.

The cold facts of the economic situation in the early 1930s cannot give an idea of the misery and despair caused by the Depression, the extent of resignation, on the one hand, and radicalization on the other. As the 1931–32 yearbook of the Engineering Workers' Union said: "The sufferings of the unemployed are immense. The loss of outward happiness, the struggle against economic distress are perhaps not even the worst part of it. The destruction of physical, spiritual and moral labour power, and thus the inner happiness of the unemployed and their dependants is appalling. The longer unemployment lasts, the more depression and passivity increase, and criminality assumes menacing proportions."[2] Käthe Kollwitz expressed this feeling in her diary (Easter 1932): "Then there's the unspeakably dreadful general situation. The distress. People sinking into the darkest distress. The repellent political incitement."[3]

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The deterioration in the conditions for union action caused by the Depression hit the development of the organizations particularly hard.[4] In 1929 the trade unions once again registered an overall increase in membership. But the trend reversed in 1930 and 1931. Compared with the end of 1929, the Free Trade Unions lost 16.5 per cent of their members, the Christian unions 14.2 per cent and the Hirsch-Duncker associations 11.2 per cent. Membership continued to fall in 1932; the ADGB unions alone (the only ones for which figures are available) lost 600,000 members, that is, more than 14 per cent (Table 1a).

2 Der Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Verband im Jahre 1931. Jahr- und Handbuch für Verbandsmitglieder, hrsg. vom Vorstand des Deutschen Metallarbeiter-Verbandes (Berlin, 1932), p. 56

3 Käthe Kollwitz, Aus meinem Leben, hrsg. von H. Kollwitz (Munich, 1957), p. 126

4 See Klaus Schönhoven, Innerorganisatorische Probleme der Gewerkschaften in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik, in Gewerkschaften in der Krise. Anhang zum Reprint: Gewerkschafts-Zeitung, 1933 (Berlin and Bonn, 1983), pp. 73–104

The white-collar unions had a different story to tell. The three largest amalgamations were still able to record an increase in membership in 1930 – the Christian-national Gedag even managed it in 1931, too, when the Afa-Bund and the liberal GdA were already losing members. During the Depression the nationalist white-collar unions continued to gather support, while the Christian-national worker trade unions suffered almost as many losses as the Free Trade Unions (Table 1b).

These overall figures – even if one simply looks at the Free Trade Unions – conceal a number of quite different processes, though in most cases members of the same union were equally affected by the general pattern of unemployment. By 1929 the hat makers, shoemakers, tobacco workers, leather workers and textile workers were all losing members, with average unemployment levels ranging from 29.3 to 10.3 per cent. In other unions, such as the building workers' union, the initial sign of the onset of the Depression was a slowdown in the rate of increase compared with the previous year. By 1930 the Depression had affected virtually all industries and trades; 23 per cent of Free Trade Union members were out of work and 13.4 on short time. Particularly high losses – 10 per cent or more – were, however, the result of unemployment that was well above average; examples illustrating this are the stonemasons, roofers and saddlers, with unemployment rates of 47.7, 48.3 and 35.9 per cent respectively.

If one takes turnover into account, that is, the total number of members joining and leaving each year, one finds that the drop in membership in 1930 was not (yet) mainly due to resignations, but to the fall in new members, which obviously reflects the unions' dwindling popularity. Not until 1931 did the unions actually start to lose members. Crucially, not only were a disproportionate number of these semi-skilled and unskilled workers, but the skilled unions also found that their "core membership" was being eroded.

Another factor of major importance from the union viewpoint – and this can be demonstrated using the engineering union as an example – was the change in the age structure of union members. Between 1919 and 1931, the proportion of members under 20 years old went down from 22.7 to 12 per cent; the DMV, however, continued to derive its main support from the 20–40 year-old age group (56.6 per cent in 1931, compared with 54 per cent in 1919). This trend reflected the surge of new members in the revolutionary post-war period, and the fall in the birth-rate during the First World War, which reduced the pool of potential new recruits to the unions. Finally, youth suffered disproportionately from mass unemployment in the early 1930s, so that many of them never found their way into a union. No matter how much the unions deplored this and stepped up their

agitation, there was little they could do about the Depression's deleterious effects on solidarity.

The proportion of women members also fell during the Depression. Whereas in 1919 21.8 per cent of ADGB members had been women, this had dropped to 14 per cent by 1931. Nevertheless, at 617,968 the number of unionized women in 1931 was almost three times what it had been in 1913 (230,347). The fact that women found it hard to feel "at home" in the unions may have accounted for their poor representation on trade union bodies, as well as other factors, such as their role in the socialization of children, gender stereotyping and workplace conditions. There were hardly any women delegates at trade union congresses, and there were no female members at all on the federal executive. The exclusion and absence of women from posts of responsibility certainly encouraged the "estrangement" between female wage earners and the unions that contributed to the continuous decline in the proportion of women from 1919 to 1931.

From 1930 on, the efficiency of the unions was undermined. The fall in membership, unemployment, short time and wage cuts for the remaining members brought a drop in the number and size of membership dues coming in. In 1930, over half the ADGB members paid more than 52 Marks per year; by 1931 only a third of members were still in this contribution category. In 1931, the Free Trade Unions' revenue fell by more than one fifth, but spending could only be cut by about 10 per cent. The number of claimants increased, so the unions were forced to reduce the duration and level of their benefits to make the money go round. In 1931, spending on benefit payments was down 11 per cent on the previous year; administrative and staff costs were also cut, by 12.2 per cent. Part of the financial burden of the crisis could be met by money saved on industrial disputes. Despite mass unemployment strikes were still organized to fight wage cuts and so on; but the number of actions fell by a third between 1929 and 1931, while the number of strikers in 1931 was just over a quarter of the figure for 1929 (Table 2c).

Of course, the Depression did not leave union enterprises intact. Their banks and insurance companies, building and consumer co-operatives all had to face cuts in turnover and profits from 1931 on – not only restricting the financial scope for union action but also heightening the sense of crisis and reinforcing the growing feeling of resignation.

The unions did not view the economic developments of 1929–30 as the start of an unprecedented slump. Throughout this period the republic was too dogged by crises to make a fresh rise in unemployment seem anything "extraordinary". Of course, there was no overlooking the fact that at the first hints of economic stagnation confrontations with the employers – heavy industry, in particular – had intensified. But the unions underestimated the interplay between economic forces on the one hand and the employers' economic and political crisis strategies on the other, which as the slump worsened became more and more clearly aimed at dismantling the Weimar republic's social legislation, and eventually the democratic foundations of the state itself.

The deterioration of the overall economic situation confronted the unions with a host of new tasks: attempts to stabilize wage levels, to safeguard insurance benefits and to reduce prices went hand in hand with demands for the "equitable" distribution of the burden of the Depression; efforts to achieve shorter working hours and create new jobs were accompanied by the demand for the phasing-out of reparations. Union work "at grass-roots level" often included local employment and cultural programmes designed to consolidate the organization. But the wide variety of these activities cannot disguise the fact that – as the crisis deepened, the emergency decree policy was implemented and state intervention in the economy increased – the focus of conflict shifted from clashes between individual unions and employers' federations to confrontation (or co-operation) between the union leaders and central government.

The collapse of the Grand Coalition in March 1930

The limits of trade union influence on policy had been apparent at the time of the Grand Coalition under Chancellor Hermann Müller of the SPD. The succession of conflicts in which the Free Trade Unions saw their claims ignored in order to save the coalition government culminated in the dispute over the funding of unemployment insurance. Like the eight-hour day, this was an issue of great symbolic importance to the labour movement, especially as it interfered in the laws of capitalist economics not only by mitigating the social consequences of unemployment but also by relieving the downward pressure on wages. When the deficit in the unemployment insurance scheme again became acute in March 1930, the Free Trade Unions advocated a rise in contributions from 3.5 to 4 per

cent to prevent benefits from being cut. But the DVP was not prepared to accept this solution, claiming it would lead to increased costs for an economy already under strain, thus ruining its export capability. With an eye to saving the governing coalition, the majority of the SPD ministers accepted a proposal put forward by Heinrich Brüning (Centre), though it was only designed to provide temporary cover for the deficit, so that before long benefits would have to be cut anyway. In the SPD group in the Reichstag, however, the trade unionists prevailed: the SPD rejected Brüning's compromise. The Müller Cabinet, the Weimar republic's last parliamentary government, resigned on 27 March 1930.

This conflict was really about far more than safeguarding unemployment insurance. The issue was basically: who should bear the brunt of the crisis? Bearing in mind earlier setbacks over social policy and competition from the KPD, the Social Democrats and the Free Trade Unions had their backs to the wall. This situation was not respected by the DVP – on the contrary, they exploited it to force the SPD out of the coalition through its own intransigence. The end of the Müller government demonstrated that the (Free) unions were strong enough to bring the SPD into line; but they could not swing policy round in their favour. In addition, the first clear signs had emerged of the conflict between the SPD as a popular party prepared to enter a coalition and the unions as the traditional champions of workers' interests.

The "Brüning Era": fruitless tolerance and loyalty

Union expectation of Heinrich Brüning's government, the first "presidential Cabinet", varied from one federation to the other. In the early 1920s Brüning had been secretary of the Christian-national DGB, and Stegerwald, the Christian trade unionist with the highest profile, now became Minister for Labour. The Christian unions hailed Brüning's Cabinet as a "turning point in German politics".[5] But the ADGB did not have such optimistic expectations. The new government called itself a "bourgeois united front", but according to the union newspaper, it was a "business-like commercial company with limited liability", which was not based on

5 See Wende in der deutschen Politik! Rettung der staatlichen Grundlagen gesunden sozialen Lebens, in Zentralblatt No. 8 of 15. 4. 1930, p. 113 f.

a parliamentary majority "that is able to summon up a unified, long-term, political will".[6]

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Like the Müller Cabinet before it, the Brüning government pressed for a balanced budget. In response to the steady decline in state revenue – from 20.1 bn Marks (1929/30) to 13.8 bn (1932/33)[7] – Brüning implemented a rigorous programmme of economies, which actually helped to make the crisis worse by reducing state investment and cutting social benefits and wages.

This soon put the Christian unions in the awkward position of having to combine political loyalty to the government with the task of representing their members' interests. Despite all protests they eventually decided they would have to be silent in the face of the clearly "unsocial" emergency decree policy – not primarily because they had to choose the lesser of two evils, but because they did not wish to cause their "own" government even more difficulties than it already had. Furthermore, their very "proximity" to the Brüning government, whose assessment of the reparations question as the central problem of German domestic and foreign policy they shared, prevented the Christian unions from developing their own alternatives to the policy of deflation. They went no further than declarations opposing wage and price cuts, supporting an emergency levy on the highly paid and those in permanent jobs to stabilize unemployment insurance, and calling for joint action by employers and unions to create jobs.

While the tone adopted by the Free Trade Unions was certainly more aggressive, there were initially no major differences of substance between their demands and those of the Christian unions. The government pursued a policy that was largely in line with employers' demands to cut production costs (taxes, wages, social costs) as a preliminary to price cuts designed, so it was said, to ensure or restore the competitiveness of the German export industry in the world market. The Free Trade Unions, on the other hand, pointed out, as they had in the late 1920s, that the way out of the crisis lay not in an increase in exports but in stimulating demand at home.

6 Die neuen Steuern und der neue Kurs, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 17 of 26. 4. 1930, p. 261 f.

7 Horst Sanmann, Daten und Alternativen der deutschen Wirtschafts- und Finanzpolitik in der Ära Brüning, in Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftspolitik 10 (1965), pp. 109–40; see p. 113

Considering the measure of agreement on the question of price reductions, there did seem to be a chance of a co-ordinated crisis policy. In May–June 1930, the employers and unions met to draw up a joint declaration on economic policy which also explored the chances of a parliamentary coalition. At first a compromise seemed to be on the cards, at least over wage and price cuts. But the talks failed. The (Free) trade unions considered that their position as a party to collective agreements had been called in question; the employers attempted to shift the burdens of the crisis on to the workers by means of pay cuts, the relaxation of collective agreements and the dismantling of social provisions. The first clear signal was the Bad Oeynhausen mediator's decision of May 1930, declared binding on 10 June, cutting all wages and salaries in the north-west German iron industry that exceeded the going rate by 7.5 per cent. The wage struggle of August 1930 in the Mansfeld copper mining industry illustrated the same process: though the employers did not obtain the reductions of 15 per cent which they had demanded, pay was nevertheless cut by 9.5 per cent.

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Despite the incalculable consequences of government and employer policy, the Free Trade Unions considered it necessary to hold back; they did not wish to jeopardize the policy of toleration vis-à-vis the Brüning government it had decided upon after the elections of September 1930. The shock of these elections – in which the NSDAP had leapt from 12 seats to 107 – affected the ADGB's attitude to the Brüning government, whose programme was deemed as inadequate as it was unjust as far as measures to tackle the crisis were concerned. In line with the policy of the SPD parliamentary party, the ADGB also saw no alternative to tolerating "Brüning's quiet dictatorship" in order to prevent the "lurch into overt dictatorship".[8] For the end of toleration, so it was feared, would lead to a Hitler-Hugenberg government, that is, an NSDAP/DNVP coalition, which would not only result in the isolation of Germany abroad but in grave social conflict at home. So in view of the threat of National Socialism, disputes about social and economic policy had to take second place to the struggle to save parliamentary democracy and basic civil rights, which it was the unions' duty to safeguard – even if it demanded sacrifices.[9]

8 See Das Jahr 1930, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 1 of 3. 1. 1931, pp. 1–4; this quot. p. 3

9 See Jahrbuch 1930 des Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes, pp. 47 f. and 91 f.

Particularly the Hirsch-Duncker unions under the leadership of Anton Erkelenz were constant advocates of "the loyalty of the wage earners to the state, the republic and democracy". But with the setting-up of the German State Party to succeed the DDP in July 1930, which led to Erkelenz's defection to the SPD, the H-D unions increasingly lost their political importance. They continued to see themselves as representatives of a "sensible" middle way, as much opposed to the Communist doctrine of class struggle as to the National Socialists' racial theories.

Unions of all hues were agreed in rejecting national socialism, whatever differences may have emerged in their public arguments. Whereas the Christian unions – linked with the DHV under the umbrella of the DGB – found it hard to form a convincing defensive front, the H-D unions and the Free Trade Unions were united in their approach. All the unions were perfectly well aware that the impetus of national socialism could not be halted by "somebody proving the irrationality or factitiousness of any of the National Socialist theories".[10] It was partly for this reason that union policy was directed above all at achieving a swift economic upturn which would lessen "social tension" automatically, as it were.

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One of the key demands of union policy was the safeguarding and, at the same time, the "equitable" distribution of such jobs as still remained. So when the ADGB demanded the introduction of the 40-hour week in a federal committee resolution of 12–13 October 1930, it was chiefly to combat unemployment. This put the Christian unions on the spot, as their own discussions were not yet concluded. Theirs was a "wait-and-see" attitude, according to Bernhard Otte, "not a dismissive one".[11]

In autumn 1930 the introduction of the 40-hour week was still intended purely as a temporary measure. This reservation was probably a way of taking heed of misgivings in the unions' own ranks. Even the supporters of this demand did not really expect a cut in working hours to have a major effect on the labour market: at most, half a million jobless might be able to find work as a result.[12] And doubt was cast even on this modest

10 Walter Dirks, Katholizismus und Nationalsozialismus, in Die Arbeit No. 3, March 1931, pp. 201–9; this quot. p. 205 f.

11 See Rundschreiben des Gesamtverbandes der christlichen Gewerkschaften an die angeschlossenen Verbände of 16. 10. 1930 (Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Kleine Erwerbungen 461–2, No. 126 f.)

12 See Theodor Leipart, Gewerkschaften und Wirtschaftskrise, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 48 of 29. 11. 1930, pp. 756–59

success. Because there was little chance of a shorter working week being introduced with no loss of wages, it was often rejected within the trade union movement on the grounds that it was merely a "redistribution of misery".

As average hours worked in industry fell from 49.9 in 1927 to 41.5 in 1932, a legal cut in hours would only have had a marked effect on the labour market in 1930 (Table 4a). Nevertheless, the trade unions clung to the demand for a 40-hour week: from spring 1931 they wanted it introduced as a permanent measure. In August 1931 they presented a detailed survey entitled "Labour market, Wages and Working Hours"[13] in support of their campaign on working hours. It was emphasized that "it is not enough simply to make the demand. The demand is followed by the struggle. The struggle will be hard." However, with mass unemployment, membership that had been declining ever since 1930/31, strike pay that was constantly being cut and, above all, the dissension among the different federations, the Free Trade Unions' militancy seemed somewhat contrived. The demand for a 40-hour week was regarded more as "an appeal to workers in work to show solidarity with the unemployed and also [as] a demand addressed to the employers and the legislature, to the powers that dominate politics and the economy".

The question of working hours was the biggest stumbling block in contacts with the employers. No sooner had the top-level talks between the unions and employers failed in the summer of 1930, than a fresh attempt was made a few months later to reach agreement on the urgent economic and social questions. While the two sides had come together on their own in June, in November 1930 they met at the invitation of Stegerwald. Agreement was close on the issue of price cuts, but the parties differed over their extent, and especially over the importance of wage cuts in bringing prices down. There was no *rapprochement* in sight on the issue of reductions in working hours, where anyway the unions themselves did not agree. But while the executives of the DGB and the H-D associations gave their negotiating teams approval for a draft agreement drawn up on 9 December, the ADGB's federal committee referred the decision to the union executives, who predictably voted almost unanimously for rejection. At the end of January 1931 the Free Trade Unions declared that they could not accept the December draft.

13 See Die 40-Stunden-Woche. Untersuchungen über Arbeitsmarkt, Arbeitsertrag und Arbeitszeit, hrsg. im Auftrage des ADGB von Theodor Leipart (Berlin, 1931); quotations from pp. 5 and 203

The Christian unions regretted the decision of the ADGB unions and after the latter's departure continued to pursue a policy of institutionalized contacts with the employers. But the attempts of the Christian unions in particular to give the Brüning government what help it could by reaching a compromise with the employers on economic and social matters were a failure. The wrangling continued unabated between the employers' federations and the unions over the problem of collective agreements, the issue of state intervention in the economy, and pay and social policy; indeed, it grew visibly worse. Soon it was no longer a question of wage cuts but of the very existence of collective bargaining. The employers' attempts to force through the adjustment of wages to suit the needs of individual companies, entailing a wage cut on a broad front, and to amend the law accordingly, under the slogan "Relax the collective bargaining system", were a manifest threat to the collective agreement.

The employers' position also had its impact on arbitration, for example, in the Berlin engineering industry. In October 1930, 85 per cent of the organized engineering workers of that city voted to reject a mediator's decision decreeing a wage cut of 8 per cent in some cases and 6 per cent in others. On 15 October some 130,000 workers came out on strike. The unions, however, broke off the strike, against the will of the workers involved, and agreed to a fresh arbitration procedure. The outcome was fairly predictable: the mediator's "new" ruling only softened the cuts slightly.

The Brüning government did little to help the unions strengthen their position. It made no attempt to be accommodating. On the contrary, the emergency decrees of 1931, with their continual cuts in pay, eventually started interfering with existing wage agreements. Union statistics for 1931 showed wage cuts affecting 7.3 million employees; at the beginning of 1932, agreed hourly rates were 17 per cent below the 1930 level; real weekly wages were 15–20 per cent lower than in 1929 (Table 3b). Even worse, price cuts failed to keep pace with wage cuts.[14] The trade unions protested, but persisted in their powerless and hopeless policy of "keeping quiet", the main aim of which was to keep the National Socialists out of power.

The Communists took this policy, which they condemned as "opportunist" and "social fascist", as a pretext for stepping up their struggle against the leadership of the Free Trade Unions. Since about 1925–26 the KPD had tried to organize dissident trade unionists – not in unions of their own, but within the Free Trade Unions, as decided at the first

14 See Schönhoven, Innerorganisatorische Probleme, p. 81

national congress of the RGO on 30 November–1 December 1929. The setting-up of cells within the Free Trade Unions, designed to facilitate the independent preparation and conduct of industrial disputes, was particularly controversial. However, at the fifth congress of the RGO in August 1930, the view prevailed – true to the theory of social fascism – that autonomous "revolutionary fighting trade unions" should be established. The KPD continued to support dissident groups within the Free Trade Unions in the years that followed, but it also carried out the RGO decision. Autumn 1930 saw the formation of the "United Union of Berlin Engineering Workers" and the "United Union of German Miners"; and at the second national congress on 15–16 November 1930 the RGO set itself up as a trade union organization in its own right. But these unions did not experience a mass influx of members; by spring 1932 the RGO had "only" some 260–300,000 members, three-quarters of whom belonged to no party.[15]

With increasing bitterness the Free Trade Unions saw themselves caught "between the fronts". The annual reports of trade union officials repeatedly complained of systematic "subversive activities by the Nazis and Kozis" – meaning both the National Socialist company cell organization (NSBO) and the RGO. These were often blamed by union officials for the difficulties they encountered in their own organizational work: the KPD was accused of waging "war on our movement" in combination with the Nazis.[16]

The NSBO and RGO won support from the unskilled and unemployed in particular, and especially from the young. The 1931 works councils elections give a rough idea of the relative strength of the different factions: the H-D unions won 1,560 seats, the RGO 4,664, the Christian unions 10,956 and the Free Trade Unions 115,671.[17] In some industries, though, the proportion of "oppositional" unions was very high. Thus the Free Miners' Union's share of the vote dropped in 1931 from 52.5 (in 1930) to 45.1 per cent, while the RGO increased its share from 19.4 to 24.7 per cent, and the non-striking groups went up from 3.2 to 5.7 per cent; the NSBO list managed 2.4 per cent. In the Ruhr district the Free Trade

15 See Frank Deppe and Witich Rossmann, Kommunistische Gewerkschaftspolitik in der Weimarer Republik, in E. Matthias and K. Schönhoven (eds.), Solidarität und Menschenwürde, pp. 209–31, especially p. 226

16 See Jahrbuch 1930, hrsg. vom Vorstand des Verbandes der Bergbauindustriearbeiter Deutschlands (Bochum 1931), p. 246; quot. K. Schönhoven, Innerorganisatorische Probleme, p. 92 f.

17 See Deppe and Rossmann, op. cit., p. 226

Unions obtained 36.4 per cent of the vote, the RGO 29 per cent, and the National Socialists 4.1 per cent.[18]

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On the other hand, the economic and political situation brought the "established" unions closer together. After several internal moves, there was eventually a public exchange of views on the topic of trade union unification, under growing pressure from the crisis.[19] In the autumn of 1931 the DMV had proposed "a strengthening through unification" in the engineering workers' newspaper, the "Metallarbeiterzeitung": in view of the political and economic crisis, it claimed a merger of the front-line unions was the only way of acquiring more influence. The Hirsch-Duncker engineers responded in their newspaper, the "Regulator", with "three questions". Desirable as the elimination of trade union division might be, it must be clarified whether party political neutrality, freedom of religious opinion and the struggle against "Communist-Bolshevik revolutionizing", against a militant, reactionary entrepreneurial class and for improved living standards for workers could be accepted as common basic principles. The "Metallarbeiterzeitung" answered these questions in the affirmative. The importance which the ADGB attributed to this discussion is probably best illustrated by the fact that Leipart himself wrote an article on the subject in the "Gewerkschafts-Zeitung". On behalf of the ADGB, Leipart accepted the demands for party political and religious neutrality, and posed a question of his own: did not politics and religion lack any significance as trade union problems if they were omitted from propaganda work? The final question in the "Regulator" was also answered in the affirmative by Leipart, to the effect that "in his opinion what unites us far outweighs what separates us". At least between the ADGB and the H-D associations there were "no contradictions that might justify maintaining the separation". In addition, Leipart expected "that a unification of the trade unions would open up entirely new perspectives for the consolidation of the republican state through the formation of a comprehensive social and political power bloc".

Even before the appearance of Leipart's article, the Christian engineering workers' union had also entered the discussion. It saw the stance of the

18 See Deppe and Rossmann, Kommunistische Gewerkschaftspolitik, p. 226

19 See documents 42a–e, in Ulrich Borsdorf, Hans O. Hemmer and Martin Martiny (eds), Grundlagen der Einheitsgewerkschaft. Historische Dokumente und Materialien (Cologne and Frankfurt, 1977), p. 196 ff.

"Regulator" as proof of the critical position within the H-D associations, which had been prompted by the "demise of the liberal idea" and the financial crisis of their benefit funds. The DMV's appeal was also seen as a sign of the weakness of the Free Trade Unions, who were feeling the loss of the thrust that Marxist ideas had provided. Unification with the Free Trade Unions was impossible, it claimed, as short-term common interests could not bridge fundamental differences in outlook.

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While all the unions agreed on the demand for the creation of jobs, it was the ADGB that presented a practical programme based on the idea of a policy to counter the effects of the economic cycle. In the summer of 1931, Wladimir Woytinsky, the head of the ADGB's statistical bureau, published an action plan for boosting the economy.[20] This led to a fierce debate within the Social Democratic labour movement. The critics' spokesman was Fritz Naphtali, who objected to Woytinsky's proposals on the grounds that they would be undeniably inflationist and thus entail "a misdirection of the energies" of social democracy.[21] Bearing in mind the experience of runaway inflation, these fears are understandable; but they were based on a false assessment of the economic situation, as demonstrated by the prevailing policy of deflation, which contributed to a process of progressive contraction. As for the attitude of the Social Democratic parliamentary party, which largely supported the reservations expressed by Naphtali, their chief concern might have been the decision to tolerate the Brüning government, who would have been opposed to the idea of pursuing an active economic policy by extending credit. Fundamental reservations about the independence of the Free Trade Unions, which had been growing ever since the turn of the century, and about the use to which they put it, may have played some part in the SPD leadership's delaying tactics. For the Woytinsky plan could, in fact, be seen as offering socially motivated survival aid to the system of private capitalism, which seemed to be in a "terminal crisis", thus robbing the programme to overcome capitalism of all credibility. This was exactly the same problem that Fritz Tarnow addressed in his speech at the SPD party conference (31 May – 5 June 1931), "Capitalist economic anarchy and the working class", where he put

20 Wladimir Woytinsky, Aktive Weltwirtschaftspolitik, in Die Arbeit No. 6, June 1931, pp. 413–40; this quot. p. 439

21 Fritz Naphtali, Neuer Angelpunkt der Konjunkturpolitik oder Fehlleitung von Energien? in Die Arbeit No. 7, July 1931, pp. 485–97

forward the controversial idea that the economic crisis might well turn the SPD and the Free Trade Unions into doctor and heir at the sickbed of capitalism, whether they liked it or not.[22] The delegates approved the resolution arising from the speech, but these ideas were never spelt out in practical terms in the discussion within the SPD about its programme.

On the other hand, the job creation ideas of Wladimir Woytinsky, Fritz Tarnow and Fritz Baade, leader of the national research centre for agricultural marketing and member of the SPD parliamentary party, were taken further. At the end of 1931 and beginning of 1932 they presented the WTB Plan, so called after its authors, urging public works to a tune of 2 billion Marks, putting one million unemployed back into production for a year, to a certain extent as pump-priming.

The crisis congress of 13 April 1932 rounded off the internal trade union discussion and was to be a "signal", around which all those who supported an immediate end to the crisis should gather. The resolution passed by congress summarized the ADGB demands and also attempted to link them with the programme for "rebuilding the economy".[23]

The ADGB was not the only trade union organization to discuss a plan for actively combating the economic crisis. The Christian unions, too, repeatedly called for action to create jobs; but no practical definition of tasks nor any financial models were ever forthcoming, so that the demand for job creation was really more declamatory by nature. Nor should we forget the economic programme of the AfA-Bund[24]; the traditional Social Democratic ideas on a planned economy were undoubtedly more conspicuous in this scheme than in the WTB Plan. On this point the Afa-Bund programme was obviously largely in accord with the intentions of the Social Democrats' Reichstag group. In particular, the articles on the subject of job creation starting in the January/February 1932 issue of "Vorwärts", and then the SPD's parliamentary bills of late the same summer, followed various planned economy models, to which the ADGB gave its backing, albeit very cautiously, in the paragraph on "rebuilding the economy" subsequently added to its job creation programme.

22 See Sozialdemokratischer Parteitag in Leipzig 1931 vom 31. Mai bis 5. Juni im Volkshaus, Protokoll (Leipzig, 1931), pp. 32–52; this speech p. 45

23 Protokoll der Verhandlungen des ausserordentlichen (15.) Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands (5. Bundestags des ADGB), abgehalten im Plenarsaal des Reichstages in Berlin am 13 April 1932 (Berlin, 1932), p. 18 f.

24 See Fritz Croner, Kurs auf Sozialismus! in Marxistische Tribüne für Politik und Wirtschaft No. 7 of 1. 4. 1932, pp. 201–4; Otto Suhr, Mobilisierung der Wirtschaft, in Marxistische Tribüne No. 8 of 15. 4. 1932, pp. 250–52

Then, in June 1932, the ADGB published detailed "Guidelines for rebuilding the economy".[25] Linking up with the AfA-Bund's proposals, this presented a whole list of demands, bundling the Free Trade Unions' goals of nationalization and a planned economy, and combining them with demands on economic, social and financial policy. Admittedly, these guidelines did not offer by and large any fundamentally new demands, but in summary they acquired a programmatic quality that promised to appeal above all to the "Left" – though without leading to mass mobilization.

Thus the programme for "rebuilding the economy" overlooked the shift in the balance of power in the summer and autumn of 1932, just as the job creation plan had. Although one should not be over-optimistic in assessing the chances of the job creation programme and its impact on the employment situation, one must ask oneself whether a policy of this kind, had it been introduced in the early spring of 1932, might not have been able to boost confidence in the government's readiness and ability to take action, and perhaps that of the Weimar Republic as a whole, or at least to stem the loss of confidence.

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Though from autumn 1931 on the unions resisted Brüning's policies with increasing vehemence, they were forced further and further on to the defensive. This impression remains, even if one takes into account the fact that the Free Trade Unions organized company branches into *Hammerschaften* (Hammer Squads) and set up the "Iron Front" with the SPD in December 1931, and that the Christian unions formed a "Popular Front", a militant organization to fend off attacks by the National Socialists. How to stop the National Socialists seizing power using parliamentary, legal means – that was the dilemma. This was also the intention in supporting the re-election of Hindenburg as President, which was accepted by the Free Trade Unions as a "necessary evil", though unreservedly advocated by the Christian unions. It was this same Hindenburg who then withdrew his confidence from Brüning and by appointing Franz von Papen Reichskanzler hastened the destruction of the Weimar republic.

25 Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 27 of 2. 7. 1932, p. 418 ff.

Against the Papen Cabinet: powerless opposition

From the outset, the Papen Cabinet was fiercely criticized by all the unions. The unions saw their fears confirmed by the emergency decree of 14 June 1932, which scarcely managed to disguise the continuing run-down of the welfare system with a job creation programme costing 135 m Marks. Although the ADGB came out against the emergency decree together with the other union federations, a united front with the KPD was rejected.[26] The goal and path of the new government seemed clear, in view of the new burdens placed on the workers by emergency decrees, the dissolution of the Reichstag and the lifting of the ban on the S.A. and the wearing of uniforms. It is noticeable, however, that only two "pillars" of the DGB – the Christian unions and the Federation of German Transport and State Employees – signed the joint protest statement issued by the union federations; a united DGB reaction to Papen was probably thwarted by the opposition of the DHV.

The days of the republic were numbered. Another step towards the destruction of democracy was the "Prussian coup", whereby the Social Democrat-led Prussian Government was deposed on 20 July 1932. Trade unions of all political tendencies responded with a declaration of protest, culminating in an appeal to observe discipline.[27]

In view of the big gulfs between the Social Democrats and the Free Trade Unions on the one hand, and the Communists on the other; in view of the Communists' theory of "social fascism", which the Social Democrats countered with the charge that the KPD was the pawn of Moscow; in view of the differences in the assessment of the Weimar Republic; and, finally, in view of the radically different policies of the ADGB and the RGO – hopes of setting up a "united front" for the defence of the republic were certainly illusionary.[28]

Among the rank and file, on the shop floor and in the course of day-to-day political work at grassroots level there may have been instances of obvious common ground, especially where the brutality of Nazi gangs had to be confronted; but at a higher level hostilities had grown to such an extent that it blighted ideas of unity for years after 1933. The unions' reactions to Papen's "Prussian coup" show that the national federations were

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26 Erklärung der Gewerkschaften zur Notverordnung, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 26 of 25. 6. 1932, p. 401

27 Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 30 of 23. 7. 1932, p. 465

28 See Zur Frage der Einheitsfront, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 26 of 25. 6. 1932, p. 412 f.; Nach der Reichsexekution gegen Preussen, ibid. No. 31 of 30. 7. 1932, p. 484 f.

closer to one another than to the RGO or KPD. The unions believed that Papen would be paid out for his policies not by means of the strike weapon but through the ballot box.

The most striking result of the elections of 31 July 1932 was a further rise in the NSDAP vote, which did not lead to a kind of union toleration of the Papen government, even though they were in overall agreement with it on the central question of job creation and supported its scheme to promote voluntary labour service, though with reservations. Instead, the Papen government's economic plan, first unveiled on 28 August 1932, was hailed as an "incomprehensible monstrosity" and after it was made the basis of an emergency decree to boost the economy on 4 September it was sharply rejected on account of its social-reactionary basic tendency, which ruled out any prospect of success.[29] Of course, some individual (notably Christian) trade unionists did acknowledge that the Papen programme signified a shift towards an "active economic policy"; but they emphasized that it was a policy for which the workers would have to pay and that consequently no thorough-going revival of the economy could be expected.[30] Alongside payments to employers for taking on more staff, the possibility of undercutting the agreed rates of pay came in for particularly fierce criticism, since, according to Leipart at a meeting of the ADGB federal committee on 9 September 1932, it rendered collective agreements worthless. Therefore, the rescission of the emergency decree was demanded in advance.[31] The basic tendency of trade union policy remained protest and fierce opposition to the Papen government.

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This was also evident at the September 1932 congress of the Christian trade unions, which professed allegiance to the Weimar republic more clearly than ever before. It was the position taken in the speech by executive member Jakob Kaiser on the "popular-political and national will of the Christian unions".[32] Many of the words and concepts used by Kaiser,

29 See Fritz Tarnow, Ankurbelung der Wirtschaft, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 36 of 3. 9. 1932, p. 561 ff.; Belebung der Wirtschaft durch Papen, ibid. No. 38 of 17. 9. 1932, p. 593 f.

30 See Wladimiar Woytinsky, Das Wirtschaftsprogramm der Reichsregierung, in Die Arbeit No. 10, October 1932, pp. 585–97

31 See Die Gewerkschaften und die Notverordnung, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 38 of 17. 9. 1932, p. 595

32 Jakob Kaiser, Der volkspolitische und nationale Wille der christlichen Gewerkschaften. Vortrag, gehalten auf dem 13. Kongress der christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands in Düsseldorf am 19. September 1932 (Berlin, 1932)

ranging from *Volkstum, volklich, national* to *Blut und Eisen*, though current at the time, today seem dated and alien. Furthermore, Kaiser rejected "mechanical, westernizing democracy" and turned his back on "formal democracy"; he was willing to accept a further development of the constitution, provided the foundation of a "social *Volksstaat* is preserved". For him, this foundation rested on "the political and social equal rights and equal worth of all Germans, all strata and classes of society".

At the same time, however, there was an apparent return to ideas about professional classes (*Berufsstände*), for which the Christian unions' best known theoretician, Theodor Brauer, was seeking support, with Pope Pius XI's encyclical at his back. At the Düsseldorf congress Brauer expounded his ideas for social reform to favour the idea of professional groups.[33] More clearly than ever before he distanced himself from professional programmes, "behind which [. . .] lurks a marked antagonism to democracy". He also deemed it apt to give a more up-to-date interpretation of the "outmoded term *Berufstand*" (professional group or class); "in its modern sense" it could only mean "the totality of all those who work together in a branch of production and through this co-operation produce an overall result". If closely scrutinized this meant the abandonment of the traditional concept of a profession or trade, based on certain values as well as certain skills, in favour of accepting the various branches of trade and industry as the building blocks of the economy. It was only the husk of the term that was preserved, and it was to this husk the Christian unions clung – even at the risk of getting into social-reactionary and anti-democratic company, since the distinction between a society based on class or *Stände* ("estates") and a society based on professional groups or classes (*Berufsstände*) is a fluid one. But what mattered above all to the Christian unions was that the old "honourable" terms held a fascination capable of glossing over the lack of any actual substance – which was probably the intention. The idea of reconstructing the old professional classes was hailed as the universal panacea in the Depression years, though the absence of properly thought-out plans for reform was hard to conceal.

We must consider whether comments revealing an equivocal attitude to the parliamentary republic and the propagation of ideas of "professional class" did not contribute indirectly to a weakening of the Weimar democracy. True, the policies of the Christian unions showed that they underestimated the National Socialists' desire for power, though they did

33 Theodor Brauer, Der Kampf um die Sozialpolitik als gesellschaftliche Kraft, in Niederschrift der Verhandlungen des 13. Kongresses der christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschland, Düsseldorf, 18.–20. September 1932 (Berlin, undated), p. 368–93

not greatly differ from the Free Trade Unions in this. But the Christian unions' efforts to steal the thunder of the National Socialists by flaunting their own nationalist sentiments or to "tame" them by letting them participate in government, may have helped give the NSDAP a certain aura of respectability.

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The emergency decree of September 1932 was followed by a spate of strikes which in many cases successfully fended off or at least reduced the size of wage cuts. Although industrial action of this kind helped to strengthen the organizations, the unions were reluctant to become involved. This was also true of the strike of Berlin transport workers, the so-called BVG strike.[34] The national federation of workers in publicly owned industry and passenger and goods transport had negotiated an agreement that their wages would not – as the management had wanted – be reduced by 10–17 Pfennigs per hour from 1 November but "only" by 2 Pf. When balloted, 66 per cent of the workers, but not the required three-quarters majority, voted in favour of a strike. But as the votes cast were sufficient as a proportion of all those entitled to vote, the NSBO and RGO called a strike anyway. It ended in defeat on 8 November, after five days. Like the events of 20 July 1932, this demonstrated the basic pattern of trade union policy: the "old" Social Democratic trade unionists' experience and mentality made them sceptical with regard to industrial disputes – and suspicious if there was reason to fear that the strike might slip out of their hands politically. This paralysis was particularly noticeable when strong radical groups determined to take part in a strike to broaden their mass base – and in the case of the BVG strike two groups had done so at once.

The election campaign for 6 November 1932 was dominated by resistance to the NSDAP and the Papen government, which was branded "unsocial" and undemocratic. This verdict related to government plans for constitutional reform, which were not only designed to strength the hold of central government over the *Länder,* but also (and this was the primary objective) to strengthen the executive at the expense of Parliament. The election results, especially NSDAP's vote losses, was optimistically assessed by the ADGB: it claimed the NSDAP was breaking up, while the SPD was standing its ground – despite losing 700,000 votes.[35]

34 See the documents in Frank Deppe and Witich Rossmann, Wirtschaftskrise, Faschismus, Gewerkschaften. Dokumente zur Gewerkschaftspolitik 1929–1933 (Cologne, 1981), p. 212 ff.

35 Das Wahlergebnis, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 46 of 12. 11. 1932, pp. 721–23

The fact that the trade unions gauged the extent of the National Socialist threat largely by the yardstick of election results clearly shows the faith of the Social Democratic labour movement in the ability of the parliamentary system to function even in times of crisis. Yet their political adversaries – the NSDAP – had long before realized the importance of mass mobilization and made use of it. In any event, the balance of power had shifted "behind the scenes" in favour of the National Socialists, so that the Schleicher government was merely an interlude.

The Schleicher Cabinet: a last-minute attempt at stabilization

The government formed by Kurt von Schleicher on 2 December 1932 was regarded with a good deal of optimism by the trade unions. Their hopes seemed entirely justified. In putting the Cabinet together, Schleicher had already been in touch with the unions, giving top priority to job creation and on 14 December it finally repealed the particularly objectionable sections of Papen's emergency decree of September that year. The chief factor behind this policy was no doubt Schleicher's efforts to forge a parliamentary base for his government by creating a "trade union axis", grouping together all deputies with trade union ties, irrespective of their party political allegiances. Instead of wrenching 60 deputies, headed by Gregor Strasser, away from the NSDAP group as intended, the attempt failed and Strasser himself was stripped of power. Nor did the Christian trade unions show any inclination to drop their co-operation with the Centre. The ADGB – probably under pressure from the SPD leadership – adopted a wait-and-see attitude to the Schleicher Plan. Leipart's end-of-year appeal, however, showed a readiness to co-operate with the government, in spite of reservations, though he believed time was needed to prepare for this, to allay the misgivings of the SPD and union members.[36]

But the period for such preparations had already expired a few days later: on 28 January the Schleicher government resigned. Once again the unions tried to influence the formation of the government; on the same day, the union federations appealed to President Hindenburg not to permit a Cabinet consisting of "social reactionaries". But as far as the chancellorship was concerned, the die had been cast on 4 January 1933 when, at a meeting at the house of the Cologne banker Kurt von Schröder, Papen

36 Theodor Leipart, An die deutsche Arbeiterschaft, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 53 of 31. 12. 1932, p. 833

and Hitler had struck a deal. On 30 January 1933 Hitler was appointed Reichskanzler.

3. *The trade unions in the Weimar Republic: a balance sheet*

The balance sheet of trade union policy during the Weimar Republic is confused. Certainly, the workers' achievements during the Weimar Republic are notable compared with the situation under the Empire (not to mention the Nazi dictatorship). Equal suffrage and parliamentary democracy, freedom of association and social and economic co-determination, the eight-hour day and works councils, the extension of the welfare system and the creation of an unemployment benefit scheme – the list of improvements introduced under the revolution and the republic could be made longer still. It should not be forgotten that more and more trade unionists entered parliaments at all levels and moved into leading administrative and governmental posts, spearheading the drive towards democratization as a "political reserve elite".

Of course, the achievements with which unions of all tendencies credited themselves – with greater or lesser justification – had a number of weak spots. The eight-hour day could not be retained. Co-determination rights at company level and on social and economic policy-making bodies were severely limited or existed on paper only (as was the case with the National Economic Council). Social policy never freed itself from dependence on the economic situation, on which the unions had no influence at all. In addition, social policy and wage levels provided the starting points for employer campaigns that not only shifted the blame for the critical state of the economy on to the unions but were soon also denying the unions' very right to exist, eventually culminating in a fundamental rejection of parliamentary democracy.

But do the successes of union policy justify the conclusion that the Weimar Republic was a "trade union state"? Without a doubt, the position of the unions in the state and society had been radically transformed with the establishment of parliamentary democracy. This opened up quite new opportunities to exert political pressure on the basis of their members', and hence to some extent the public's, approval. And the unions were, indeed, taken seriously by some parties as instruments for influencing and mobilizing the electorate. But the integration of the unions into the political system does not entitle one to draw the conclusion that they exerted a decisive influence. All too often the limits of their power were brought home to them: the series of defeats ranges from the consequences

of the Kapp Putsch to the legal regulation of working hours, from fiscal and economic policy to the question of job creation – and finally to the demise of the parliamentary system and the dissolution of the trade unions themselves.

In view of the limited extent to which the unions succeeded in defending their interests and the way in which the state made use of them – for instance, in the Ruhr struggle – the Weimar Republic certainly cannot be regarded as a "trade union state". It is not even possible to speak of a tendency to seek absolute power; the unions' aim was power-sharing within the framework of a pluralist society. They were probably not even aware that in the 1920s they had made a vital contribution, in extremely difficult economic and political conditions, to an initial attempt to bring about a social and democratic social order, to construct a modern "social state". And although the unions may have proved too weak to "save" the Weimar Republic, the waning popularity of which was a constant source of new opponents, the unions were certainly not among those who deliberately took advantage of the crisis to destroy it.