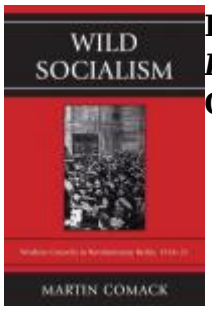
Wild Socialism

written by Dan La Botz | August 7, 2013



Book Review of Martin Comack. *Wild Socialism: Workers Councils in Revolutionary Berlin, 1918-1921.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. Chronology. Bibliography. Index. 97pp. Paperback or e-book: $24.99

Martin Comack—who proudly lists on his book his checkered career as soldier, merchant seaman, civil servant, and university lecturer—tells us that it was his encounters with the German anarchist Augustin Souchy and with the German anti-Bolshevik Communist Paul Mattick in the 1970s that first led him to take an interest in independent workers councils as an alternative to both Social Democracy and Communism. With a renewed interest in what could be called "left communism" since the eruption of a series of mass protests from the *Indignados* in Spain to Occupy Wall Street to Gezi Park in Turkey, this book is timely. Especially after Occupy Oakland helped to shut down the Port of Oakland, people have been asking about the relationship between union officials and rank-and-file workers and between the organized and the unorganized. Many young people have been attracted to anarchist, syndicalist, and left communist theories, experiences, and organizations. This book will certainly interest them.

In his short but tightly packed *Wild Socialism: Workers Councils in Revolutionary Berlin, 1918-1921,* Comack presents a sympathetic but hardly uncritical account of the radical German workers' movement of those years. Comack's narrative history—a mere 76 pages of actual text organized in 12 little chapters—is located within the broader context of Germany industrialization and the rise of the Social Democratic Party and its trade unions. It focuses on the development during the First World War of a particularly radical group of workers based in heavy industry in Berlin and their evolution through a series of events and organizations. At the center is the Revolutionary Shop Stewards (Revolutionäre Obleute or RO) led by Richard Müller, a lathe operator, which grew from 50 or 80 in the metal industry in 1916 to several thousand in a variety of industries by 1918. The RO proved capable of organizing mass political strikes of hundreds of thousands under the conditions of a virtual military dictatorship in Germany during the war.

Comack argues that the RO could be considered the core of the German working class, but they were not the only leftists. The Social Democratic Party and its Free Trade Unions, which had in 1914 supported the war and entered into a partnership with the Imperial government, maintained a grip on the majority of workers. The Independent Socialists were a coalition of several radical socialist tendencies and worked closely at times with the RO. The Spartacist League (which later became the Communist Party of Germany or KPD) led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht led wave after wave of street actions which were disdained by the RO as exhausting the working class in useless struggles. All of these groups attempted to provide leadership to the German Revolution of 1918 which broke out at the beginning of November after naval mutinies in the fleet's bases in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven spread through the country.

As the German Empire collapsed, throughout the country workers and soldiers formed councils that took over factories and temporarily ran municipal governments. The German workers

councils (Arbeiterräte), unlike the Russian soviets, generally did not see themselves as an alternative to parliamentary government, but rather generally conceived of themselves as supplementing bourgeois democracy. The RO, which for a moment stood at the center of the workers council movement in Berlin, contemplated a coup to take power—but failed to act. While the RO hesitated, Friedrich Ebert, head of the Social Democratic Party, under pressure from massive strikes and demonstrations, proclaimed a republic. The RO, still seeing revolution as a possibility, then occupied the Reichstag, the German legislature and elected a Council of People's Commissars as a provisional government, but they took no decisive action to actually seize power.

The very next day Ebert changed the name of his cabinet to the Council of People's Representatives and incorporated into it three Independent Socialists, one of whom was a shop steward and a member of the RO. The cooptation of the more moderate Independent Socialists was one part of his strategy, a deal with the military was the other. While the RO and the rest of the far left continued to make vague revolutionary gestures, Ebert made a pact with General Wilhelm Groener who offered to support the new republic if he could have a free hand to crush Bolshevism and the councils. Ebert agreed and the die was cast.

The German capitalists and the Social Democratic trade unions also had their plans. The General Commission of the trade unions and the German Employers Association met and on November 15 adopted a social pact (Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft or ZAG) that not only legally recognized the unions and outlawed company unions but also created works committees under the supervision of the unions in all workplaces of more than 50 employees. Unlike the workers councils, some of which saw themselves as not only taking over the factories but also as the basis for an alternative government and society, the works committees confined themselves to workplace problems and economic issues. The Ebert government, in a clever move to compete with the workers councils, arranged elections to these works committees by all white collar and blue collar employees. At the same time the unions grew rapidly. Unions which had had 1,500,000 members in 1914 had 7,300,000 by 1919—as the workers councils withered.

By December 1918, Ebert and the Social Democratic government had succeeded in winning the support of the financiers and industrialists, the army, the enormous government bureaucracy, most of the working class and the general population. When the First German Congress of Workers and Soldiers councils met in Berlin, a quarter of a million workers demonstrated outside calling for all power to the councils, while inside the Social Democrats held a majority that blocked radical resolutions. The Spartacist Week that opened on January 5 with the dismissal of Emil Eichorn of the Independent Socialists from his post as police chief saw protests by the RO, the Independent Socialists, and the Spartacists. Karl Liebknecht joined a Revolutionary Committee made up of the Independent Socialists and the RO that called for the overthrow of Ebert and said it was taking over the government—but failed to seize any government buildings and didn't attempt to seize power. The next day the Spartacists issued a call for a council republic, but Müller and other RO council leaders withdrew from the Revolutionary Committee.

Ebert had appointed Gustav Noske to be Minister of Defense, who hired and deployed Freikorp units, rightwing mercenaries, to suppress the radicals and the councils, leading to the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and the summary execution of a number of others on January 15. A few days later, on January 19, the Social Democratic Party won 38 percent of the vote for parliament, much larger than any of the other socialist groups—the Spartacists had boycotted the election—though the center and right parties won a majority. The Weimar Constitution adopted in August 1919 included an Article 165 on the councils, intended to encourage worker participation in industry, though workers were to increase production, not infringe on management's power.

While Comack does not explain this, Müller and the RO refused to join in the initial formation

of the Spartacist League, which became the German Communist Party (KPD), because it refused to participate in elections or in the Social Democratic Trade Unions. Müller and the RO saw that as a sectarian policy. At the same time, the RO stood apart from the attempt to build a revolutionary party. Only later in October 1920 did many of the revolutionary shop stewards join the KPD, though by then the immediate post-war revolutionary moment had passed.

Comack writes: "The last months of 1918 and the early weeks of January 1919 had seen the high tide of political power for the workers council organizations of Berlin. They would never again regain such direct influence over government policy." One wants to ask: *What influence over government policy?* The RO had at least twice called for revolution and failed to organize to seize power. The Ebert government had outflanked them in the workers councils themselves, in the establishment of the rival works committees, and in the elections to parliament. Most important Ebert and Noske controlled not only the army—not all of which could be relied upon—but also the rightwing Freikorp units and had used them to suppress strikes, councils and left parties. In the new Weimar government parliament the Social Democrats also defeated the councils' calls for the socialization of industry, arguing that the country could not socialize industry while it was surrounded by hostile capitalist powers and while the nation's economic situation was so dire.

The Social Democrats and especially their labor unions, as the workers council activists realized, had become the principal bulwark against socialist revolution. Why did German workers generally reject the left socialists and in particularly the workers council advocates? Comack suggests several reasons. First, most workers remained loyal to the Social Democrats and their unions, the historic organizations of the labor movements. Second, workers were "indifferent or confused" by the proliferation of left groups and programs. Third, most workers—with the exception of those in Berlin—saw the workers councils as useful adjuncts to trade unionism, not as autonomous organizations and certainly not as an alternative form of government. Based on Comack's description one could say that working class consciousness was highly uneven throughout Germany, with only pockets of revolutionary workers organizations in a sea of mostly reform-minded workers. The workers councils, however, based in heavy industry in Berlin, were not capable of overcoming this problem.

Defeated by 1919, the council advocates retreated from the political sphere to the economic, rooting themselves in the factories; their slogan: "Make every factory a fortress." They also took up education and produced a theory: workers councils represented the road to socialism. The workers councils began to produce a newspaper *Die Arbeiter-Rat* (The Workers Council) and other literature on the idea of council communism, much of it written by the socialist journalist Ernst Daumig. Müller, the outstanding leader of the RO became editor of the *Metall-Arbeiter-Zeitung* (the Metal Worker Times) newspaper with the goal of creating first an economic and then a political system based on workers councils, though he lasted in that position only six months.

Still the struggle continued. The Kapp Putsch of 1920, an attempt by the Prussian civil servant Wolfgang Kapp to seize power and overthrow the Social Democratic government led to the mobilization of all of the country's left parties and labor unions—from the Socialist to the Catholic unions—in the organization of a general strike. The independent workers councils revived briefly, but remained a minority movement and increasingly isolated.

In the early 1920s, a variety of anarcho-syndicalist, council communist, and left communist groups sprang up in Germany. Rudolf Rocker and Augustin Souchy returned from exile to found a syndicalist labor federation that "embraced the idea of workers councils." Another independent, leftist labor federation involved members of the German Communist Party (KPD). The anti-parliamentary German Communist Workers Party (KAPD) also became a small force at this time with about 40,000 members. Many of those in these organizations saw the workers councils not simply as

a means or locus of struggle but as the organizations through which workers could take power, as the basis for socialism. Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian Communist Party, polemicized against these left communists, arguing that their abstention from elections and refusal to join the Social Democratic labor unions made them irrelevant to the real struggle for power. After the Communist Party's March Action in 1921, a failed attempt at a mass workers' uprising, the initial revolutionary period in post-war Germany had passed. The council movement subsided, reduced to just a few thousand.

Comack admires the workers councils in Germany and in other parts of Europe in that era for their horizontal and decentralized organization based on the solidarity of the workplace or the neighborhood, a form of organization that he implicitly counterposes to the centralized party form of organization, whether of the Social Democratic or Communist model. His own account, however, suggests that the council movement never became very significant outside of Berlin, and that during the period from 1918 to the early 1920s, its attractiveness actually declined. Most significant, Comack's account suggests that the council form of organization proved incapable of acting decisively when the opportunity presented itself and its parochialism proved an obstacle to building a revolutionary party.

The German councils did not become, as the Russian soviets had been, the parliament of the labor movement where all Russian working class organizations were represented both in 1905 in Petrograd and initially in all of the urban centers of Russia in the period from 1917 to the early 1920s. The German revolutionary shop stewards and the workers councils seemed to function as just one more organization on the splintered revolutionary left. On the basis of Comack's book, the German councils appear to be a model not to be embraced, but to be eschewed. Had the shop stewards or later the councils become organically linked to a national revolutionary communist movement, whether Luxemburg's and Liebknecht's Spartacist League or the later German Communist Party, German history might have developed differently. As it was, the RO stood apart, and the left remained divided in the early 1920s.

One could argue another and perhaps more important point here. Comack has provided convincing evidence that a revolutionary left existed within the Social Democratic Party before World War I. The failure of that left to leave the Social Democratic Party and create a revolutionary party before the outbreak of the war meant that German workers would face the task of attempting to create a revolutionary party in the midst of a revolutionary situation, an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. One could argue that what the Social Democrats derided as "Wild Socialism" was this frantic and failed attempt to build a party in the midst of the crisis. Comack, who is not interested in such a revolutionary party or who rejects the idea of a revolutionary party, favoring the workers councils as an alternative, is not interested in this problem and does not discuss it.

A final word or two. If the virtue of this book is that it is short and dense, the weakness is that it does not take enough time to explain the political positions of the various groups and the differences between them. Those who want a much more complete story will want to read Pierre Broué's *The German Revolution, 1917-1923* published by Haymarket.