Chapter 7

Richard Müller and the Council Movement: 1918–19

The German Revolution and its council movement cannot be judged solely on the basis of the experience of the Berlin Executive Council. While the Executive Council was stalemated between the USPD and the SPD, sidelined by the Council of People’s Deputies and ultimately replaced at the national level by the Central Council, the council movement as a whole was much more vibrant. Demands for the democratisation of the postwar army and the socialisation of key industries as a first step toward some form of socialist economy were shared by a broad majority of workers in the council movement, which accounted for a majority of the working class and included the rank and file of the SPD. This chapter will outline the council movement as such and the attempts by Richard Müller and his fellow Shop Stewards to make it a coherent political project. This included developing a political theory of council socialism, which Müller and his friend Ernst Däumig did in 1919.

The chapter also explores the reasons why these attempts failed, at least in achieving their most radical goals. Even as Müller and Däumig were developing their council communist vision, a broad ‘coalition of order’ that included the military, the capitalist class, the state bureaucracy, and the Social Democratic Party wanted to abolish the councils altogether and secure the authority of a ‘regular’ parliament – the National Assembly. To Müller, the councils were the original representation of the working class. In the eyes of his opponents, the mass mobilisation, which turned every street and factory into a parliament, was ‘pure anarchy’, the opposite of politics. The councils’ potential for a different structure of representation was opposed and suppressed by the coalition of traditional elites purporting to represent ‘the people’.

The Council Movement in War and Revolution

What was the council movement about? Strike committees calling themselves ‘workers’ councils’ had formed by spring of 1917. Berlin’s January 1918 strike leadership likewise used that title, giving the council principle national exposure.¹ Richard Müller retrospectively claimed that already by 1917 the Shop Stewards

¹ Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 25.
in Berlin were preparing ‘to stop the democratic state claptrap and establish a council republic based on the Russian model’.\(^2\) It was unclear, however, just what a council system would look like. Ultimately, the councils did not develop along Russian lines but rather as spontaneous resistance organisations. Originally emerging because the traditional organs of the labour movement had failed during the decisive crisis of August 1914, councils became a new way for workers to represent their interests, and neither the Social Democratic Party nor the unions represented workers’ opposition to the war and the Burgfrieden any more. These councils were simply a new form of the labour movement’s democratic assembly traditions.\(^3\) But once peace had been won, the future of the councils was uncertain. An intense debate about Germany’s future arose in advance of the first national council congress in December 1918, focusing on a central issue: national assembly or council system? The USPD, including the Spartacus League and the Shop Stewards which had been part of this large umbrella organisation of anti-war socialists since 1917, advocated a council system which the SPD regarded as an abhorrent ‘state of lawlessness’,\(^4\) insisting on the early establishment of a national assembly which alone could ratify the future constitution.

The most decisive and best known advocates of the council system were Ernst Däumig and Richard Müller. Müller’s bold remarks made him a symbol of the council republicans. He categorically rejected the demand for a national assembly at a Berlin council assembly on 19 November 1918, declaring, ‘I have put my life on the line for the Revolution and I will do it again. A national assembly is a path to bourgeois rule, a path to struggle; the path to a national assembly will go over my dead body!’\(^5\) For the usually soft-spoken Müller, this was a rare grand gesture. While it made him a symbol of the council republicans, it also earned him the moniker Leichenmüller (Müller the Corpse), which, thanks to the efforts of the bourgeois and SPD press, would stick to him forever.\(^6\) The irony could not be heavier. Unlike Liebknecht, Müller was down to

\(^{\text{2}}\) Müller 1924a, p. 173.

\(^{\text{3}}\) Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 327f.

\(^{\text{4}}\) SPD pamphlet, Nur über meine Leiche, without author credit, Vorwärts Verlag, Berlin 1918.


\(^{\text{6}}\) Vorwärts applied this derogatory nickname to Müller regularly over a long period. For example, a 24 September 1918 article dripped malice from its title as well as its content: ‘The Living Corpse’, stated, inter alia, that ‘Richard Leichenmüller has not justified his existence at all since entering the National Assembly. He must have committed hara-kiri long ago’. See also the above-mentioned pamphlet Nur über meine Leiche, Vorwärts publishing house, Berlin 1918.