Chapter 9

From Council Socialism to Party Communism and Beyond: 1920–24

Although Richard Müller had been a member of the USPD since 1917 and had even contested the October 1918 Reichstag elections on its ticket, his political home had always been the DMV and the council movement. He was not a major figure at USPD party conferences. He would occasionally speak briefly on union issues but, unlike his friend Ernst Däumig, he was not a part of the party leadership. However, as the council movement began to drift into the sands of the works councils after 1920, and Müller lost his position as editor of the DMV’s central newspaper, party politics became the only way to continue his struggle for council socialism. Müller was part of the USPD’s left wing, and when it merged with the Communist Party in 1920, he became the coordinator of the KPD’s union activities, until a factional dispute ended his career in the party too. This was also the end of his work in the labour movement as a whole. This chapter will follow Müller’s path from council socialism to party communism and reconstruct why he eventually could not accept the theory and politics of the still-nascent Marxism-Leninism.

The Leninist Model and the USPD Split

Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards were the most influential left tendency among USPD workers, but they could not parlay that influence into real power within the party. That became clear when they lost to the party’s executive board during the internal crisis of December 1918. Müller and the Stewards had refused to run on a slate with the moderate Hugo Haase in the national assembly elections, but could not get enough support from the rank and file for a more radical slate. They had hoped to strengthen the council socialists and to

limit the influence of moderates willing to cooperate with the majority SPD – but failed. As David Morgan pointed out, the Stewards lacked a well-developed programme and were inexperienced in party politics: Georg Ledebour and Ernst Däumig were their only two long-serving party politicians. Moreover, the Shop Stewards had never taken great interest in party politics. For them, politics happened at the grassroots level. Councils and unions were their vehicles of choice in class struggle and they initially saw the USPD only as an organising platform.

It was the defeat of the revolutionary wave of November 1918 that transformed Müller willy-nilly into a party politician. Its chief lesson, as also that of the suppression of the local council republics and the March strikes of 1919 was that the revolutionary left needed an active revolutionary organisation that was able to act on the national level. This was when Müller and his group converted to Leninism. At first, they sought to reconcile the Leninist-style primacy of the party with their council-democratic foundations. In an article published in September 1920, Müller assigned the party the leading role as an ‘integrating and guiding centre’ of the union-party-council triumvirate. He used Russia’s Communist Party as a model. The party, he argued, should dominate the councils as well as the unions intellectually, but not organisationally: ‘A political party that wants to lead the working masses must also endeavour to guide and govern the council organisation intellectually as we, according to our party program, have done until now and as the Third International now urges’.

At this time, Müller considered both the Bolsheviks’ dominance in Soviet Russia and the USPD’s dominance within the German workers’ councils to be deeply legitimate and he did not see his turn towards Leninism in any way contradicting his previous work. His equation of the political practices of the USPD and the Russian Communist Party was also a product of the evolution of his personal relationship with the USPD. Whereas during the World War he and his Shop Stewards had viewed the party merely as an instrumental ally, he now identified more clearly with its goals and its claim to political leadership.

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2 Morgan considers this lack of influence on the Shop Stewards’ part to be critical to the USPD’s subsequent history: ‘With a credible programme and shrewd political leadership, [the Shop Stewards] could have mounted a formidable threat to the established direction, or even the existence, of the USPD. Their lack of these assets, then and later, was important for the history of the party’: Morgan 1975, p. 211.