Our Path: Against Putschism

Paul Levi

Heavens above, what is going on here! Genuine remorse, even if enforced, or nothing of the kind? Do you really know what you have done? The best action, the noblest and highest cause... a cause that God just for once put in your hands, you have treated like muck in a pigsty.

(Gerhart Hauptmann, Florian Geyer)

At the time that I was planning this pamphlet, Germany had a Communist Party with half a million members. When I came to write it eight days later, this Communist Party was shaken to its foundations, and its very existence put in question.

It may seem risky in such a serious crisis as that in which the Communist Party presently finds itself, to come out with such an unsparing criticism. But it needs little reflection to conclude that this criticism is not only useful but necessary. The irresponsible game played with the existence of a party, with the lives and fates of its members, must be brought to an end. It has to be ended by the will of the members, given that those responsible for it still refuse to see what they have done. The Party must not be dragged with eyes closed into anarchism of a Bakuninist kind. And, if a Communist Party is to be built up again in Germany, then the dead of central Germany, Hamburg, the Rhineland, Baden, Silesia and Berlin, not to mention the many thousands of prisoners who have fallen victim to this Bakuninist lunacy, all demand in the face of the events of the last week: 'Never again!'

It goes without saying that the white terror now raging must not be used as a cloak behind which those responsible can escape their political responsibility. Nor should the anger and insults now raised against me be a reason for refraining from this criticism. I address myself to the

1. The title page of the original edition reads:
   'Unser Weg Wider den Putschismus
   von Paul Levi
   Mit einem Artikel von Karl Radek als Anhang'
   The appended Radek article was 'Die Lehren eines Putschversuchs' ('Lessons of a Putsch Attempt'), directed at the Vienna action of June 1919, and partly translated in Gruber (ed.) 1967. Levi's aim was to show how Radek had argued in similar vein against the Austrian Communists.
members of the Party in this spirit, with an account that must tear the heart of anyone who worked to build up what has now been torn down. These are bitter truths, but 'what I hand you is medicine, not poison'.

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Paul Levi

I.

Working-class debate about the revolution immediately raises the question of tempo. Opinions spread between those of little faith at one extreme, who see the whole question as 'still on the horizon', and, at the other extreme, the optimistic ones who believe the revolution could 'break out tomorrow' if some people somewhere were not putting the brakes on. When such questions are discussed, however, it is rare for people to indicate the concrete factors that are decisive for this faster or slower pace, so that the question as to the timescale of the revolution fails to rise above the level of whether a particular date would be too soon or too late. In prison, the day is always long, walking in the woods in spring it's always short, even though it's the same day of twenty-four hours. In fact, the pace of the revolution depends on two kinds of factors: objective and subjective. The objective factors are the strength of the contradiction between relations of production and the system of distribution, the possibility and ability of the existing system of production continuing to function, the condition of the proletariat, how acute is the antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie, the intensification of crises within the world-bourgeoisie, and so on.

It would be superfluous here to repeat again what has so often been said. Rising unemployment, the growing impoverishment of the proletariat as well as the commercial and intellectual middle class and civil servants, the ever greater bankruptcy of the state, the reorganising of bourgeois states into new and hostile interest-groups, the world contradiction of the oppressors against the oppressed of all countries, with the latter being for the first time in world-history united into a conscious body, thinking and planning on a world-political level in the Communist International with Soviet Russia at its head: these are the objective factors.

In the present case, however, we need to consider the subjective factors, or, rather, the subjective factor which today is always decisive in the formation of objective conditions: How far is the revolutionary class willing and able, indeed mature enough, to take power? How far has the counter-revolutionary class been spiritually worn down and exhausted so that power can be taken from its hands? These two forces, the conquering will of the revolutionary class, and the defensive will of the counter-revolutionary class, are not two distinct things. Each is, rather, a function of the other; the struggle of parties is the reflection of this, possession of state-power its goal, and the strength of the use of state-power its measure.

It is a well-established fact that, in this sense, despite its growing economic decay, the German bourgeoisie has managed a certain consolidation. In November 1918, state-power was a 'no man's land'. It had slipped from the bourgeoisie, yet no one would claim today that the proletariat took it up. The bourgeoisie, despite the numbing blow it had received, was the first to get back on its feet; Noske's mass slaughters of January and March 1919 were the milestones, the Weimar constitution the outwardly recognisable sign, that it felt itself master once more. Since that time, the