

Youth against militarism: The legacy of Karl Liebnecht

Wed, 23/04/2008 - 11:23

The life of Karl Liebknecht spanned the period between two European wars. Born August 13th 1871 in the aftermath of the Franco Prussian War, he was murdered by the hirelings of the German military and capitalists on January 15th 1919. His life was dedicated to, and ultimately sacrificed for, three inseparably linked causes: the organization of working youth into a conscious movement, the struggle against militarism and imperialist war, and the fight for proletarian revolution.

Karl's father, Wilhelm Liebknecht, was a personal friend and comrade of Karl Marx from the days of the 1848 revolution. The elder Liebknecht was in the 1860s and 1870s along with August Bebel, the founder of the German Social Democratic Workers party. This party was the first permanent, organized, mass party of the proletariat. Within its framework were developed many of the methods of organization and tactics which are a permanent heritage of the revolutionary workers' movement.

The growth of a working class youth movement in Germany pledged to socialist goals and actively engaged in antimilitarist work owes its origins to an initiative from a group of young workers. It began when some Berlin apprentices organized in 1904 to resist the heavy oppression and super-exploitation they suffered in their workplace and in society. As their work and their labour were super-exploited under the pretext of training and they were forbidden to resort to trade union organization. In society at large they had no civil rights, no vote, no right to join or form organizations or even to attend political meetings. By 1905 groups of young workers all over the industrial north of Germany linked up in the Union of Free Youth Organizations of Germany. Because of the notorious Prussian 'Law of Association' they were subject to constant police harassment, in Königsberg when the police broke up the town's socialist youth group and arrested and imprisoned its leading member, the young workers formed illegal groupings to carry on the work. Under such hostile conditions it is hardly surprising that the youth movement was a force against the conservatism, routinism and bureaucracy that were triumphing in the 'adult' Social Democratic Party and in the Trade Unions. Indeed from its earliest years it was in collision with the party and union bureaucrats. In these clashes the youth found a tireless advocate in Karl Liebknecht.

As early as 1904 he addressed the Bremen conference of the SPD calling for an extensive anti-militarist propaganda campaign amongst potential recruits to the army. The old party leaders objected that the government and the courts would never tolerate such activity, that it would expose the whole party to being outlawed, that it was impractical and unnecessary. Militarism could not be overthrown short of socialism, said the party executive's spokesman and therefore anti-militarist activity was a waste of time.

Undeterred, within a year, Liebknecht had won the SPD to undertaking a series of pre-induction meetings for army recruits, explaining their formal rights, which were certainly going to be violated in an army where brutalisation and assaults on young recruits were common. In 1906 at the Mannheim Congress he defended the newly formed Youth Organization and clashed bitterly with his father's old comrade and

summing co-founder of the party August Bebel. The growing national chauvinist poison had affected even Bebel, the anti militarist hero of the Franco Prussian War, When Liebknecht pointed to the outstanding youth organisation in Belgium, the Young Guards and their anti war agitation, Babel scornfully replied that it was 'A country which stands for nothing?', and ruthlessly defeated Liebknecht's motion by making it a vote of confidence in the executive.

Catastrophic war

Liebknecht was not stopped by this hostility and obstruction. The whole past period indicated to him as escalating drive towards a catastrophic European war. The previous decade had seen four major wars with an imperialist character; the Sino Japanese War of 1905, the Boer War of 1899, the 'Boxer' War in China in 1900 and the Russo Japanese War of 1904. The rapacious imperialist appetites of the major European powers were obvious as, too, was their bitter rivalry. It was merely a matter of time before clashes over colonisation erupted into a war in Europe. In 1904 Britain and France formed an alliance (the famous **Balance Cordiale**) clearly aimed at Germany. The Morocco crisis was the first ominous clash between the alliances.

The world congress of the Second International meeting in Stuttgart passed a resolution that clearly characterised the approaching war and its causes: 'Wars between capitalist states are as a rule the result of their rivalry for world markets or every state is not only concerned in consolidating its own market, but also in conquering new markets, in which process the subjugation of foreign lands and peoples plays a major part. Further, war arises not of the never ending armaments race of militarism, which is one of the chief implements of bourgeois class rule and of the economic and political enslavement of the working class.'

It went on to outline the tactics of the socialist parties against militarism:

'The Congress holds, therefore, that it is the duty of the working classes, and especially their representatives in parliaments, recognising the class character of bourgeois society and the motive for the preservation of the opposition between nations, to fight with all their strength against naval and military armament, and to refuse to supply the means for it, as well as to labour for the education of working class youth in the spirit of the brotherhood of nations and of socialism, and to see that it is filled with class consciousness.'

The Congress sees in the democratic organisation of the army, in the popular militia instead of the standing army, an essential guarantee for the prevention of aggressive wars, and for facilitating the removal of differences between nations.'

It further tackled the question of what was to be done in the circumstances of an immediate war threat or an outbreak of war: 'In the case of a threat or an outbreak of war, it is the duty of the working classes and their parliamentary representatives in the countries taking part, fortified by the unifying activity of the International Bureau, to do everything to prevent the outbreak of war by whatever means seem to them most effective, which naturally differ with the intensification of the class war and of the general political situation.'

Unabashed chauvinism

Should war break out in spite of this, it is their duty to intercede for its speedy end, and to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people, and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.'

The debate on this issue saw the majority of the German party amongst the most unwilling to envisage any

action against war. The right wing of the SPD, figures like Friedrich Ebert, Philip Scheideman and Gustav Nooks, were unabashed in their chauvinism. The last named men exclaimed: "The Social Democrats will not lag behind the bourgeois parties and will shoulder their rifles We want Germany to be as well armed as possible."

In the same year as the Stuttgart Congress Liebknecht published his famous book *Militarism and Anti Militarism*, aimed at encouraging the growth of the youth movement against the war, it immediately caused a furore. The book started life as a talk made before the Young Workers Union of Germany and was originally entitled *Youth and Militarism*. On the initiative of the Prussian War Minister the book was seized and its author charged with high treason. He was sentenced by the Imperial court at Leipzig to eighteen months imprisonment.

Propaganda

His speeches in court and demonstrations outside furthered the cause of antimilitarist propaganda and the copies of his book which escaped destruction were consumed all the more eagerly. Liebknecht's book analysed the necessary connection between capitalism and militarism, it pointed out that military action is the "most concentrated form of political action" and that the latter arises out of economic rivalries between the great powers. "I know that this tension is a necessary consequence of the sharpening economic competition between England and Germany on the world market, therefore a direct consequence of unrestrained capitalist development and international competition."

Liebknecht calls the various disarmament schemes of the major powers such as the Hague Conference "simple folly, empty talk, attempts to cheat". He outlines the policy of the International with regard to militarism, pointing to its principled outright opposition to all standing armies as a "tool for reactionary coups d'etat and social oppression." He gives numerous examples of the use of the military as strike breakers murderers of workers fighting for their class and democratic rights. Whilst supporting the slogan of the universal arming of the people a militia Liebknecht looking at the example of Switzerland, points out that "The general and equal arming of the population can only become a permanent and irreversible characteristic when the production of... itself is in the hands of the people." This is of course only possible when all the decisive large scale means of production are in the hands of the collective producers. This by no means denies the efficacy of fighting for the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by a citizen militia since this democratic slogan exposes the real motives of the militarists not defence of the people's hearths and homes, but defence of the bosses' profits and plunder whether against foreign rivals or "their own" workers.

Liebknecht however mercilessly exposes the false, utopian idea that disarmament, to such a degree that it would end the danger of war, can be achieved within capitalism: "Disarmament means moreover neither more or less than the abandonment of these international interests that might cause the ruling class, capitalism, to appeal to the "last resort of Kings", that is to say to justify those interests which are regarded by capitalism as most important, indeed vital for its life, especially the policy of expansion?"

Merciless criticism

Turning from the hypocrisy of official bourgeois patriotism, Liebknecht mercilessly criticises the pacifism of the anarchists and libertarians:

"The anarchist method of applying anti militarism of giving effect to anti militarist arguments is again of a more individualist and fantastic character. It lays great stress on individual refusal to serve in the army, individual refusal to resort to arms and individual protest."

Liebknecht attacks the moralism and voluntarism of the anarchists' anti-militarist tactics a continuation of

propaganda of the deed aimed at 'enlightening' or opening people's eyes, as if wars were simply the product of people being duped. Turning to the Marxist position on anti-militarist tactics he defends the utilisation of special agitation aimed at and carried out by youth especially young workers.

'For the working class youth is the working class to be. he (sic) is the future of the proletariat. He who has the youth, has the future,' Liebknecht argues strongly that given 'the different conditions of life, the different level of understanding, the different interests and the different character' of young people 'it follows that (agitation) must be of a special character... and that it would be sensible to put it, at least to a certain degree in the hands of special organisations.'

It should be aimed, he stresses, at young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty one and will be more agitational than the normal education work of the party. Liebknecht, in discussing the content of anti-militarist propaganda amongst youth, draws out useful lessons. Abstract, strident, 'anti-patriotism' is useless little more than self-indulgence for the cowardly provocation to the still backward sections of the youth. He advocates the publication of propaganda on the massive expenditure on war preparations and the exploitation through taxation that this involves; on the ill-treatment and injuries suffered by soldiers; on the use of troops as strike-breakers; on anti-working class actions and statements of the High Command and officers. This should illustrate and convince young workers of the class nature of the army as the instrument of capitalist oppression; thus incitement to military disobedience is not necessary, except at the point where 'direct conflict or an insurrection is on the order of the day.'

Liebknecht concludes in ringing tones 'The proletarian youth must be systematically inflamed with class consciousness and hate against militarism. Youthful enthusiasm will take hold of the hearts of the young workers inspired by such agitation. These young workers belong to Social Democracy, to Social Democratic anti-militarism, if everyone carries out his task, they must and will be won. He who has the young people has the army.'

These were the tasks that the German working class youth organisations set out to achieve. The Free Youth Organisations of Germany had their own monthly paper Working Youth with a circulation of over 20,000 in 1909 and of 97,000 in 1913.

The Youth organisation in these years despite its growth, or even because of it, suffered a series of attacks from the trade union and party leaders aimed at destroying its organisational independence and self-government. As early as 1906 Carl Legien, head of the German TUC wanted a trade union controlled organisation under firm 'adult' control. In 1909 a definite plan was adopted by the congress of trade unions, whose power in and over the SPD was growing by leaps and bounds to shackle the youth. Their resolution declared that 'a special youth organisation is not required'. Youth education should be exclusively 'by lectures on natural science, law, history, art, etc' plus social and sport activities. Committees should be set up to organise this made up of trade union and party officials 'which should co-opt a few representatives of the youth', 'Economic interests and the decision of political party questions shall always remain the tasks of the trade unions and the political organisations respectively.'

The message was clear to youth keep out of politics and trade union struggles and we, the bureaucrats, will provide improving classes and sports facilities instead. This recipe for the death of youth work was bitterly realised by the youth themselves and the whole left wing of the party led by Liebknecht and with the help of Rosa Luxemburg and Klara Zetkin. Though they won the right to keep the Youth organisations the new strongman of the party bureaucracy, Ebert, was put in overall charge of supervising the youth. The following years saw a series of attempts to smother the flame of youth radicalism.

War credits

Liebkecht's struggle, his anti militarist cause, seemed to be met total defeat when on August 4th the German Social Democracy voted war credits and supported the Imperialist War so long foreseen. The chauvinism of the Legions and Eberts was momentarily totally triumphant. Karl, himself a Reichstag deputy, though bitterly opposed to the war credits vote, followed discipline and voted with the party in August. The voice of internationalism was apparently stifled. Yet, when it rang out again a few months later, it was the voice of Karl Liebkecht, in a speech motivating his own solitary note against the December 1914 renewal of war credits. His speech was attacked from the Reichstag proceedings, yet it was soon circulating as an illegal pamphlet. Many of those who risked imprisonment or immediate dispatch to the carriage of the trenches were the young workers trained and recruited by the Youth organisation. They were the nucleus of cadre of the Internationale group and eventually of the new party of revolutionary Marxism, the German Communist Party. On May Day 1916 Liebkecht was the first to address a public demonstration against the war. On the Potsdamer Platz ten thousand workers gathered. Liebkecht shouted 'Down with the War! Down with the Government!' The police stopped his speech, arrested him, yet his words carried across Germany and indeed across Europe.

His name became synonymous with Internationalist opposition to the war; his slogan 'The main enemy is at home' the touchstone of revolutionary action against the war.

Tragically Karl Liebkecht fell in the first phase of the revolution that engulfed Germany in the aftermath of the war. Though his actual murderers were the hired thugs of the Freikorps (returned soldiers in the service of restoring capitalist 'order') the instigators and abettors of the crime were none other than Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske, the latter now nicknamed 'the bloodhound', 'someone has to be the bloodhound' he is reported to have said proudly.

Organise the youth

But Liebkecht's life work could not end there and did not die with him, joining Bolshevism it flowed to merge with the broad stream of the revolutionary fight against imperialism. Today it can and must inspire us to take up his banner, to organise youth against a new and more horrific imperialist holocaust. His watchwords still retain their full force: organise the youth of the working class against imperialist war; only the destruction of capitalism can remove the threat of catastrophe; the main enemy is at home! His enemies remain our enemies 'the capitalist warmongers, the bloody generals and their underlings, the chauvinist politicians. Amongst these enemies are also the conservative bureaucrats in the Labour movement itself. Without a struggle against them we can never settle accounts with the main enemy. Young anti war activists today sick and tired of the pacifist windbags of CND and the poisonous CIA stooges who can be found in the Labour Party and who head too many unions can find all the inspiration they need in the life and work of Karl Liebkecht.

All quotes by Liebkecht and from his book 'Militarism and Anti Militarism', which should be read by all anti militarist youth.

Obituary of Liebkecht by Leon Trotsky

In the personal life of Karl Liebkecht there was, alas, already we say 'was'! the incarnation of kindness, simplicity and fraternity. I first met him more than 15 years ago. He was a charming person, attentive and sympathetic. You could say that in his character there was almost a woman's tenderness, in the best sense of the word. But along with this womanly tenderness he was distinguished by an exceptional temper of revolutionary will, an ability to fight for what he considered just and true, to the last drop of his blood. His spiritual independence was shown even in his youth, when he dated more than once to insist on his own opinion against the indisputable authority of Bebel. His work among young people was distinguished by

great courage, and was his struggle against Hohenzollern war mongering. Finally, he revealed his true worth when he raised his voice against the united warlike bourgeoisie and the treacherous social democracy in the German Reichstag, where the whole atmosphere was permeated with the miasma of chauvinism. He revealed the full measure of his personality when, as a soldier, he raised in Berlin's Potsdam Square the banner of open insurrection against the bourgeoisie and its militarism. Liebknecht was arrested. Prison and penal servitude did not break his spirit. In his cell he waited and confidently predicted. Liberated by the revolution of November last year, Liebknecht immediately took his place at the head of the best, the most decisive elements of the German working class. A Spartacus appeared in the ranks of the Spartacists and died with their banner in his hands.

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