



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 The Strikes of January 1918

The events in Russia in 1917 had signaled a turning point for the German Left. The Independent Socialists (USPD) accommodated both “Centrists,” who called for an immediate end to the war as a prelude to political reform, and the radical Left, which gathered in the “Spartacus League” and advocated political revolution as a means to stop the war. The most dramatic sign of the USPD’s importance was the massive anti-war strike that began late in January 1918. Its epicenter lay in the munitions and metal plants of Berlin, where some 400,000 workers went on strike at the end of the month. Within days, the strike had spread to other industrial centers, from Kiel and Hamburg to Mannheim and Augsburg. The army arrested the strike’s leaders and dispatched many of them to the front.

Berlin, January 25, 1918

On Monday, the 28th of January, the mass strike begins.

Workers!

Onward to the mass strike! Onward to battle! The Austro-Hungarian proletariat has just spoken powerfully. For five days work came to a halt in all the factories in Vienna, Budapest, etc., – in the whole empire. In Vienna the workers shut down the tram system; even the railway system was partly shut down; not a single newspaper appeared. In many places it came to an open uprising of the people and to battle with the government’s power. In Prague and Budapest, the republic was proclaimed. In Vienna the workers occupied the bridges in order to prevent the police from invading working-class districts.

In trembling fear of the threatening revolution, the central government was forced to recognize the Viennese workers’ council, which was elected on the model of the Russian revolution, and to negotiate with it. The government hurried to make concessions in order to bring the movement under control – an effort naturally in which it was freely abetted by the governmental Socialists and trade-union leaders.

The repeal of laws that had militarized the factories, the repeal of the law that had legalized forced labor, the fulfillment of the workers’ demands for food provision, equal and universal suffrage for men and women in communal elections, and the promise to abstain from all annexations in the peace negotiations with Russia – these are the immediate concessions. The historical significance of the workers’ uprising in Austria-Hungary does not lie, however, in these concessions, but instead in the very fact of the uprising. The movement has admittedly stopped halfway, but this is only the first step, which others will follow. The aid of the German worker –

our mass strike – will whip up the flame of revolution in the Dual Monarchy into a new, mighty blaze.

Workers! We must complete what our Austro-Hungarian brothers have begun!

The resolution of the issue of peace lies with the German proletariat!

Our mass strike will be no powerless “protest,” no empty demonstrative strike of limited duration, but a struggle for power. We will fight until our minimal demands are fully realized: lifting of the state of siege, of censorship, of all restrictions on the right to organize, to strike, and to assemble, the freeing of all political prisoners – these are the conditions that are necessary to let loose our struggle for power, *for the people’s republic in Germany, and an immediate general peace.*

Any kind of separate peace will lead only to the prolongation and intensification of collective murder. We must at all costs transform the separate peace into a general peace. This is our goal.

Workers! Before we leave the factories, we must establish a freely elected representative body on the Russian and Austrian model, whose function will be to lead this and future struggles. Let each factory elect one delegate per thousand workers; factories with fewer than a thousand workers are to elect only one delegate. The factory delegates must immediately convene and constitute themselves as a workers’ council. In addition, for every factory a governing committee is to be elected. Take care that trade union leaders, governmental socialists, others who wish to “stay-the-course” are under no circumstances elected as delegates. Throw these guys out of the workers’ meetings. These stooges and government agents, these mortal enemies of the mass strike, have no business among the fighting workers! During the mass strikes of April last year, the Cohens, the Severings, the Körstens, the Scheidemanns and their newspapers perfidiously broke the back of the strike movement, in that they exploited confusion among the masses to steer the struggle down the wrong path. Let us not allow ourselves to be beguiled by empty phrases about peace and by those who don the mask of sympathy with our struggle, which these Judases will now use after the events in Austria. The movement faces much graver danger from these wolves in sheep’s clothing than it does from the police in Prussia or elsewhere.

And now, workers, onward to battle! We have a powerful weapon in our hands – our class solidarity. Let us use this weapon. *All for one and one for all!* In this way, we are protected from all the threats, disciplinary actions, and persecution of those whose rule is based on force alone.

After the strike last April, that rough servant of military dictatorship, General Groener, mocked every striking worker as a scoundrel. Let us show the world that the “scoundrels” in Germany still have something to say!

Man of labor, awaken!
And recognize your strength.
All the wheels stand still
When your strong arm it wills.
Down with the war! Down with the government!
Long live the mass strike!

Source: "Aufruf zum Massenstreik" ["Call for a Mass Strike"], in Ernst Meyer, ed., *Spartakus im Kriege. Die illegalen Flügblätter des Spartakusbundes im Kriege* [*Spartacus during the War. The Illegal Pamphlets of the Spartacus League during the War*]. Berlin, 1927, pp. 183-85.

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