

Fight the Nazi Scourge! Fascism and the German Left

BERLIN, 24 April—German fascism continues its ominous resurgence. In the three years following the capitalist reunification of Germany in October 1990, there were over 75 fascist-inspired murders in Germany. Clandestine fire-bombing attacks on immigrants and minorities occur every week. The Nazi principle of eliminating “useless eaters” has resulted in a horrifying wave of murderous attacks on handicapped children and adults, homeless persons and the elderly. Fascist attacks on leftists are on the rise, and Nazi propaganda is increasingly directed at the trade unions, which are accused of “endangering German coal and steel.” There has also been an increase in anti-Semitism. Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated and recently the synagogue in Lübeck was the target of arson.

The fascist bands are growing, but they are still relatively small and, at least in the major urban areas, have not been able to achieve physical superiority over militant anti-fascists. Yet so far no effective counter-movement has developed.

The prolonged siege of asylum seekers in Rostock by fascist-led mobs in 1992 was bad for Germany’s image abroad. After the massive international media coverage of the firebomb murders of Turkish women and children in Mölln and Solingen last year, the German government felt compelled to announce a “crackdown” on rightist terror. The fascists responded by holding large national rallies to celebrate the firebombings. The police attended and looked on impassively.

While officially disapproving of Nazi terrorism, the state’s real attitude is reflected in the extremely lenient treatment accorded the handful of fascists arrested and brought to court. Even those convicted of murder usually receive extremely light sentences. Occasionally, for public-relations purposes, a Nazi group is banned, but it reappears the next day under a new name.

On those rare occasions when the police “forbid” Nazi mobilizations, they do so because of the “danger to social peace from counter-demonstrators.” The Nazis obligingly change the location of their provocation to somewhere less accessible for the left and inevitably receive massive police protection. During the August 1993 march through Fulda to mark “Rudolf Hess Memorial Day,” the police closed the area to anti-fascist demonstrators and left the streets open to the Nazis.

The German capitalists certainly have no intention of handing over political power to the deranged Hitlerite hooligans. But the Nazi gangs have a certain utility as the ruling class seeks to deflect social unrest caused by falling living standards and rising unemployment by scapegoating foreigners. This xenophobic sentiment, in turn, provides a fertile milieu for the growth of fascism. The racist attacks provide the rulers with a cheap and effective way of discouraging “illegal” immigrants and refugees, while also exerting pressure on Germany’s sizeable immigrant population. The fascists may some-

times be a bit of an embarrassment, but they are valuable auxiliaries to the official capitalist state apparatus.

Fascism and the ‘New Right’

More than 30 hard-core fascist organizations in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands are linked in an underground network with above-ground umbrella front organizations for legal cover. They seek to recreate the Nazi SA (storm troopers) with squads of “political soldiers,” coordinated through an electronic communication network. Nationally circulated leaflets and newspapers such as *Einblick* publish the names, addresses and photographs of anti-fascists with thinly disguised invitations to murder. Fascist “bulletin boards” relay information and instructions, even including plans for building firebombs. In many localities in the east, youth centers have been taken over by gangs of racist skinheads. Pubs and musical concerts for youth have been attacked. All of this takes place under the nose of the “democratic” authorities, who claim to be powerless to act.

The racists and ultra-nationalists of the far right, who constitute the mass base for the fascist gangs, are gathering strength under the democratic constitution. Public meetings of the extreme rightist parliamentary political parties such as the REPs (Republikaners) and the DVU (German Peoples Union) are often protected by phalanxes of fascist skinheads as well as the usual heavy police mobilization. Meanwhile “New Right” intellectuals are busy trying to make fascist ideology “respectable” enough for the right-wing parliamentarians to embrace openly. Nationalist groups such as the “Thule-Seminar,” far-right political and economic “think tanks,” and newspapers such as the weekly *Junge Freiheit*, *Mut* and *Criticon*, are laying the basis for a fusion of the “nationalist democrats” with the fascist shock troops.

The demarcation between the right wing of “normal” bourgeois politics and the anti-democratic racist fringe is being erased, as the whole political spectrum shifts dramatically to the right. Jackboot Nazis and pseudo-academic Holocaust deniers, racist skinheads and anti-Maastricht nationalists, revanchists, and even some nationalist social democrats, are all linked through a growing web of German “patriotic” organizations and publications.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), the party of the labor bureaucracy, has joined in the xenophobic hysteria against immigrants. Last year, when the government decided to gut the constitutional provision of the right of asylum (thereby bestowing parliamentary respectability on the Nazi terror campaign), the SPD supported the decision. More recently, there was the obscene spectacle of Herbert Schnoor, SPD interior minister in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen, personally participating in the campaign to drive out thousands of Roma and

Sinti (“gypsies”) who had fled pogroms in the Balkans, Romania and Hungary.

Even in “Red Hamburg,” where the social democrats have run things for decades, the SPD tried to cling to power by swinging far to the right and running an ugly anti-immigrant campaign in a special state election late last year. But they failed to win a majority. Meanwhile the far-right REPs and DVU, who ran an openly racist campaign and also attacked the Maastricht deal, gained an unprecedented eight percent of the vote. This year’s round of elections is expected to be dirtier than any campaign since the late Weimar Republic, as the traditional parties try to fend off (or undercut) the ultra-nationalists and racists.

‘Left’ Nationalists Drift Right

The SPD leadership tolerates the crudely German nationalist “Hofgeismarer Circle” within their party. These people approvingly quote Niekisch, a minor “national-revolutionary” figure from the 1930s who criticized Hitler for being “too legalistic.” This is of course faintly embarrassing for many SPDers, but is a logical extension of social-patriotism in a period of growing reaction. There has been a progressive capitulation to German nationalism, the ideological wellspring of fascism, by broad layers of the liberal/radical petty-bourgeois left. An early symptom was the development of a “Green/Brown” nationalist wing of the ecology movement. Another was 1968 student radical Rudi Dutschke’s denunciation of the “victimization” of Germany by U.S. and Soviet imperialism, a position embraced by German Maoists in the 1970s.

In 1989-90, much of the supposed “left” supported capitalist reunification under the banner of German imperialism’s inalienable “right of national self-determination.” Initially German public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the imperialist coalition in the Gulf War, but, after a barrage of bourgeois propaganda equating Saddam with Hitler, many members of the peace movement and the Greens ended up supporting some kind of military action (e.g., the naval blockade) against Iraq. Most of these same former “anti-imperialists” supported the creation of new German client states in Slovenia and Croatia, a development that accelerated the disintegration of the former Yugoslav deformed workers’ state and the onset of communal warfare. Today the “left” nationalists are discussing the possibility of supporting German participation in the UN/NATO imperialist intervention against the Serbs.

While there has been a profound shift to the right in German politics, there is still immense popular revulsion at the results of fascist terrorism. To date this sentiment has, for the most part, been channelled into impotent demonstrations “against hate,” candlelight vigils and other forms of moral witness. The bureaucrats who head the DGB (German Trade Union Federation) have not only opposed any union mobilizations to confront the fascist terror gangs, but have also endorsed the use of police against anti-fascist demonstrators.

Confusion, Abstention and Prostration

Many members of the PDS (Party of Democratic So-

cialism), the left social-democratic successor to the former East German Stalinist ruling party, which retains a sizeable popular base in the east, have shown an appetite to fight the fascist thugs. But the PDS leadership so far has shown far more interest in conducting a dialogue with these racist killers. The PDS ranks were shocked when Christine Ostrowski, a well known PDS spokesperson, engaged in a “discussion” with the fascist National Offensive. It is unlikely that she was acting on her own initiative and, in any case, she drew only the mildest reprimand from the party leadership. Similarly, the chairman of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern PDS, Johann Scheringer, was only gently admonished for giving an interview to *Junge Freiheit*. Responding to leftist critics in the ranks, Gregor Gysi, the popular former general secretary of the PDS, said that personally he saw nothing wrong “in principle” with talking to *Junge Freiheit* (“Declaration of the PDS/LL Press Bureau,” 26 August 1993).

The Spartacist Workers Party of Germany—SpAD (German satellite of the Spartacist League/U.S.) sometimes takes very militant-sounding positions. For example, in their writings on fascism they talk about the importance of mobilizing workers against the Nazis. But the SpAD has a credibility problem. Its practice falls far short of its sometimes formally correct literary posturing. It tends to denounce every bloc entered into by rival leftist groups as class-collaborationist “popular fronts” regardless of whether such charges have any basis in fact. The SpAD’s tendency to hysteria, and its willingness to slander its leftist opponents, have rendered it largely irrelevant to political developments in the left. SpAD members are simply not taken seriously.

If the SpAD tends toward sectarianism, the SAG (Socialist Workers Group), aligned with Tony Cliff’s Socialist Workers Party in Britain, strongly inclines to right-opportunism. The SAG is occasionally prepared to engage in united-front activities against the fascists, but is open about its appetites to build a multi-class anti-fascist movement. Its inclination to adapt to the current level of political consciousness has led the SAG to advocate a campaign to pressure local governments (including those headed by the conservatives of the CDU/CSU) to ban fascist meetings and demonstrations. Apparently the SAG thinks that things would be a lot better if only the “elected representatives make clear that Nazis are not welcome” (*Klassenkampf* No. 125).

This kind of timid sub-parliamentary cretinism points in exactly the *wrong* direction, and can only embolden the fascists. Revolutionaries do not call on the capitalist state to ban the Nazis (or to make them feel “unwelcome”!) because the fascists represent the extra-legal reserve force of the capitalists. All prior historical experience indicates that such legislation, even if ostensibly aimed at the right, is inevitably used against the left and workers’ movement.

How To ‘Educate’ Nazis

VORAN, the German sister section of the British Militant tendency, plays the leading role in the German YRE (Youth Against Racism in Europe). The YRE, founded in 1992, claims 10,000 members in Europe. The YRE pro-

gram opposes “poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and destruction of social services” and proclaims the group’s intention to lead “struggles against racist and fascist attacks.” VORAN supporters in the German YRE national leadership are quite capable of sounding militant. They correctly called for “preventing Nazi marches, meetings, and information booths” (*Voran*, No. 156). But in practice VORAN has been swinging back and forth between revolutionary rhetoric and opportunist accommodation, between militant anti-fascist action and tailing social democracy.

The December/January issue of *Voran* contains an article about “social work” with young Nazis, which comments that, “Naturally young fascists are victims of this society in so far as they react to unemployment and homelessness.” Perhaps realizing how this might sound to immigrants facing daily fascist terror, the author adds that of course the Nazis are “first of all perpetrators.” But the writer continues to fret about how to save the misguided fascist “fellow travellers” or “next-generation young Nazis” from their leaders and claims that it is:

“necessary to drive a wedge between the base of the Nazis and their political leaders....But this will succeed not through acceptance but through political struggle, through creating a gulf between them.”

As an afterthought the *Voran* article mentions the need for “political and concrete blows” against the Nazis, but fails to take a hard line against dialogue with Nazis. This question was addressed head on in a submission to the YRE’s national conference last January by a delegate from Berlin-Kreuzberg:

“The strength of fascism does not lie in its arguments or in its political program. Its strength consists in merging together the hatred and desperation (fear of descent into ‘skid row’) of declassed elements into a reactionary (irrational) program of direct action against ‘scapegoats’....This program is really a call for war and genocide and cannot be met by ‘better’ arguments. Anyone who discusses with Nazis presumes indirectly that there is a (common) level of (rational) argumentation with fascist propaganda. With such an approach one makes fascist arguments acceptable and puts a higher value on them. There is nothing to debate about genocide! Fascists have no rights. Actions to smash the Nazi gangs are necessary. “...the focus of our political work today must be to win leftist youth and especially the trade-union youth for the struggle against fascism. Our direct actions to smash the fascist gangs contribute to demoralizing the Nazis and to drying up their potential field for recruiting.”

VORAN’s Illusions in the Bourgeois State

In theory the Militant tendency opposes reliance on the capitalist state to ban fascists, but the leadership’s opportunism leads in other directions. In Britain, Militant Labour advises the state to “close the [fascist] BNP offices or we will do it,” and appeals to local councils to adopt a policy of “No rental of public meeting rooms to fascists.” At the British YRE conference last December, Militant supporters argued for the YRE to adopt a demand for the “democratic accountability” of the police. Militant has long pushed reformist-utopian calls for “community control” of the cops and is in favor of police “unions” affiliating with the labor movement.

VORAN has not yet attempted to shove this down the German YRE’s throat, but their appetites were clearly revealed when they invited a representative of the “Critical Police” to the January 1994 conference. The “critical” cops didn’t show up. Gruppe Spartakus (GS) supporters within the YRE denounced VORAN’s dangerous illusions on this question and argued that the police, who constitute the armed fist of the capitalist state, cannot be “reformed” to serve the oppressed. As Trotsky noted in “What Next,” his brilliant 1932 essay on fighting fascism, “The worker who becomes a policeman in the service of the capitalist state, is a bourgeois cop, not a worker.”

VORAN’s Capitulation to Social Democracy

For VORAN, this opportunism is a matter of smart “tactics.” The hard leftist phrases that appear sometimes in its press are useful for attracting young militants who want to fight the Nazis. But the VORAN leadership worries that revolutionary criticisms of the state, the cops, and/or the labor misleaders and SPD, raised in the context of a serious mass mobilization against the fascists, could “frighten the [social democratic-influenced] masses.” This deeply ingrained political adaptation to German social democracy can be traced to the fact that VORAN’s leading cadres were shaped by the decades they spent as deep-entrists within the SPD. As the SPD moved rightward, the VORAN leadership found it almost impossible to maintain any semblance of socialist politics and eventually gave up on burrowing in the “stinking corpse” of German social democracy. But the effect of their training is still evident in VORAN’s call for workers to vote SPD in 1994.

The young militants who joined the YRE because they wanted to smash the Nazis are not in general favorably predisposed to the SPD. They know that the social democrats joined the racist campaign against immigrants and refugees. Within the YRE, VORAN attempted to make its pro-SPD position more palatable by posing it in the negative, “Speak out against the right—Vote against the fascists and the [bourgeois ruling parties] CDU, CSU, and FDP.” But it is very difficult to convince anyone that to vote for the SPD is to “speak out against the right.” On virtually every political question—from driving down wages, to dismantling social services, to supporting imperialist interventions abroad—the SPD leadership eagerly champions the interests of the bourgeoisie against the workers. In the upcoming elections the SPD is campaigning on the basis that it can do a better job “modernizing” German imperialism than the bourgeois parties.

Even VORAN is forced to concede that “this [SPD] program means that an election victory for the SPD doesn’t mean a political turn” (*Voran*, No. 157). The most that VORAN can hope for is that an SPD government might provide a better “point of departure” for workers’ struggles because it would be more susceptible to pressure from the working class. But the only concessions that any capitalist government ever makes are those it is forced to make by hard class struggle. To give any kind of electoral support to the SPD when it is campaigning

on an openly anti-working-class program can only confuse militants and undercut the possibility for future resistance. The real reason that VORAN still supports the social democracy is because the proletariat, “in spite of all disappointments sees the SPD as the only alternative to the Kohl government,” (*Voran*, No. 158). This is tailism, not Leninism.

Whether dressed up as a vote “against the right” or “a point of departure,” a lot of YRE members can see no reason to support the social democrats. At the national convention a third of the delegates (including some VORAN members!) voted for a motion supported by the GS to refuse any electoral support to the treacherous SPD. The VORAN leadership was evidently taken aback at the size of the opposition on this issue, and as a result, YRE members and local groups are free to express their own views on the election.

‘Don’t Give an Inch to the Fascists’ Coalition

A major British/German soccer game was scheduled for Hitler’s birthday, April 20, in the Berlin stadium where the Nazis staged the 1936 Olympic games. The CDU/SPD “Grand Coalition” which governs Berlin approved the match knowing full well that the Nazis intended to use it as an occasion for a national mobilization. The fascists have so far not been able to appear publicly in a major German city, so it was extremely important that this provocation be dealt with aggressively.

The union brass concentrated on selling tickets to the game that had been arranged by their “comrades” in the Berlin municipal government. A high-profile protest committee composed of the PDS, Greens, Humanist Union, some of the anarchist “autonomen,” and a few trade unionists, sought to pressure the Berlin authorities and the British Football Association to cancel the game—as if calling off this particular event would solve the growing fascist danger. This committee explicitly stated its intention of ignoring the fascists, although it also promised to try to provide some protection for a few “endangered points.”

The anti-fascist Genclik Committee, composed largely of Turkish immigrants, organized a demonstration of 3000 in the Kreuzberg district in the late afternoon of the 20th. But they explicitly rejected proposals to involve German leftists and trade unionists in a united militant defense. This sectarian attitude significantly narrowed the base of the demonstration and thereby increased the dangers of police persecution of the largely immigrant demonstrators.

Spurred by GS supporters, the Berlin YRE helped launch a united-front coalition in early March, aimed at interdicting fascist activity in Berlin on 20 April. Besides the YRE, the “Don’t Give an Inch to the Fascists on 20 April!” coalition included VORAN, SAG, GS and, later on, the Sozialistische Liga. A few weeks after the coalition was launched, the national YRE leadership ordered their members to withdraw from it, using as a pretext the reluctance of the bureaucrats heading the ÖTV (Public Services, Transport and Traffic Union) to endorse the initiative. After VORAN pulled the YRE out of the coa-

lition, the SAG followed immediately, and the united front was effectively scuttled. Instead of trying to organize sufficient forces to shut down the planned fascist mobilization, the national YRE leadership proposed to distribute “red cards” to fans entering the stadium. The idea was that the fascists would be demoralized by the sight of people waving these little pieces of paper inside the stadium.

Our comrades in Gruppe Spartakus proposed to the organizers of numerous decentralized self-defense groups in immigrant centers and other likely Nazi targets that these mobilizations should be coordinated and attempt, if tactically feasible, to prevent a Nazi march. YRE Kreuzberg and YRE Pankow endorsed this initiative. Two weeks prior to the event the British soccer authorities unilaterally withdrew from the match. This created confusion about whether or not the Nazis were going to go through with their threatened provocation.

As it happened, the Nazis did not appear. But in the days leading up to 20 April there were practical preparations for organizing defense squads in districts where the likelihood of fascist violence was high. Typically, many of the Nazi attacks are carried out by small dispersed gangs which visit pre-selected targets and/or launch random assaults on any identifiable immigrants, gays, leftists, etc., that they happen to encounter. If a pack of racist thugs is spotted heading for a particular neighborhood, a prompt report to a properly prepared squad of militants based in the area could neutralize the Nazi gang.

The Berlin leadership of the YRE decided to participate in the defense squads in some areas. Plans were made for establishing communication links among the different branches of the Berlin YRE to coordinate tactical responses. VORAN supporters at the meeting then stated that the YRE units should also *immediately call the police* with any information about fascist movements! A GS supporter then moved that, “The ‘YRE headquarters’ will in no case inform the police when it gets any information about a Nazi rally/Nazi activities.” This motion failed, with about a third of the leadership voting in favor, and the rest (including all the VORAN supporters) voting against.

Trotskyists do not, on principle, rule out any form of cooperation with elements of the bourgeois state against fascists. But in the present situation in Germany it is absolutely clear that the cops would intervene on the side of the fascists. Informing the police of the activities of self-defense squads in advance, as VORAN proposed, could only endanger the anti-fascist militants and protect the Nazis.

This decision suggests that the VORAN leadership intends to resolve the earlier contradiction in the YRE between calling for smashing the fascists and attempting to pressure the capitalist state to ban them. If VORAN succeeds in pushing through such a right turn, the YRE will soon be emptied of youth who want to fight the Nazis will be made up instead of those who believe that all good things come to those who work through the proper channels.

As Trotsky wrote in 1932, “An organization may be significant either because of the mass it embraces or

because of the content of those ideas that it is capable of bringing into the workers' movement." VORAN has neither. Instead of relying on the capitalist police for protection against capital's fascist praetorians, a revolutionary organization must orient to the most militant elements among the working class and oppressed, and

seek to turn them in the direction of mass, organized resistance to the murderous fascist bands. The only way to discourage the Nazis is through smashing them physically, and to do that requires courage, organization and intelligence. But the first requirement is the revolutionary will to struggle. ■