

Workers Political Revolution in the DDR? **Robertsonites in Wonderland**

The tragic infatuation of the East European working class with the restoration of capitalism is a result of decades of Stalinist corruption, repression and gross economic mismanagement. The bureaucrats and their police thugs falsely claimed the heritage of the Bolshevik Revolution, only to discredit it and thereby pave the way for its destruction. They were unwilling and unable to establish the democratic proletarian states envisioned by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky: free societies of free men and women, “freed at last from the drudgery of wage slavery,” as the great American revolutionist James P. Cannon once put it. In the absence of revolutionary organizations rooted in the working class that could represent a socialist alternative to the brittle Stalinist regimes, popular hostility to the status quo was channelled into capitalist-restorationist movements.

In the former German Democratic Republic (DDR), there was an opening for the growth of a pro-socialist, anti-Stalinist current in the working class. The political tenor of the demonstrations that brought down Erich Honecker’s regime is proof of this. (Honecker was the leader of the SED, the ruling Stalinist party, and the DDR head of state until October 1989.) Unfortunately, the handful of revolutionaries who intervened in the struggle with a Marxist line (who came together last year to found the Gruppe Spartakus, German section of the International Bolshevik Tendency) did not possess the social weight to play a major role. Nonetheless the political analysis and programmatic positions advanced by our comrades were proven correct.

James Robertson’s International Communist League (ICL—formerly the international Spartacist tendency) has a different record. On an organizational level, the ICL’s intervention in the DDR in 1989-90 was probably its most ambitious undertaking to date. Politically, the intervention was a disaster. In its own small way, the ICL contributed to disarming the pro-socialist elements in the DDR politically. This should give those who still think of the ICL as a revolutionary organization something to ponder. Moreover, every step was directly supervised by the ICL’s central leadership. This same leadership is now testing the credulity of its most loyal members by attempting to blame the ICL’s spectacular failure on the ranks of its German section, the Spartakist-Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SpAD), formerly the Troztkistische Liga Deutschlands (TLD).

Defeat in the face of long odds and making some tactical errors in the course of a campaign are in themselves no dishonor. But to misrepresent political reality so fantastically, while *knowing better*, requires a particular sort of cynicism. The ICL’s DDR intervention was based on a patently false supposition: that a proletarian political revolution was actually unfolding. (For more on the ICL’s imaginary political revolution, see 1917No. 8). Furthermore, the ICL’s strategy centered on an oppor-

tunist adaptation to the Stalinist SED (which subsequently changed its name to the Party of Democratic Socialism—PDS). When this failed, it executed an abrupt turn into what can only be characterized as sectarian hysteria.

Gruppe Spartakus, German section of the International Bolshevik Tendency, has prepared a detailed account of the ICL’s misadventures in the DDR (to be published separately in German). This study is not only of historic interest. The workers of the former DDR are beginning to engage in large-scale mobilizations against the “benefits” of the “free world”: poverty, unemployment and hunger. In coming to political consciousness, militants in the German workers movement must necessarily grapple with the lessons of the historic defeat represented by the capitalist reunification. They must also carefully investigate the records of those in the workers movement who claim to represent the traditions of revolutionary Marxism.

Below we print some excerpts from the forthcoming pamphlet.

After the fall of Honecker, [Egon] Krenz’s [Honecker’s successor] line of safeguarding the privileges of the bureaucracy, while maintaining the economic foundations of the workers state, prevailed at first. Then, as a result of massive popular pressure, Krenz was replaced by [Hans] Modrow’s faction, [Modrow was the liberal SED bureaucrat who took over as Prime Minister after Krenz resigned] supported by [Gregor] Gysi [Krenz’s successor as SED/PDS leader]. This faction represented the part of the bureaucracy that sought to save itself by further concessions to capital and the rightward-moving “democracy movement.”

With his perspective of a “treaty community” between the DDR and the BRD [West Germany], Prime Minister Modrow had already signaled his readiness to capitulate to West German imperialism when the new government was formed on 17 November 1989. The concessions he offered did not, however, give the bureaucracy its anticipated breathing space, but only provided further impetus to the counterrevolutionaries. The right won on the ground, while confusion prevailed among the more politically conscious workers who trusted the “honest, reformed” Stalinists. This is why the Modrow regime was *especially dangerous*, and why it was *imperative to warn* the workers against it.

The ever thinner threads that had connected the bonapartist regime to the proletarian economic foundations of the DDR (state control over the means of production) were finally severed. With the formation of a “grand coalition” at the end of January 1990, Modrow revealed his political bankruptcy. After the formation of this bourgeois coalition, Modrow was transformed initially from a *sellout leader* of the DDR deformed workers

state to a *buyer* for the West German capitalists, and by this to their direct representative. At this time the Gruppe IV. Internationale [one of the Trotskyist organizations that fused to form the Gruppe Spartakus, see 1917 No. 9] wrote:

“A new Modrow regime with the bourgeois opposition exerting the dominant influence has, as a pro-capitalist regime, the task of ensuring the safety of the social counterrevolution through the politics of *Anschluss* with the BRD. Pushed to the wall by imperialist pressure, and threatened with the dissolution of their apparatus of power, the rightist faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy seeks a capitalist ticket to the salvation of their privileges and makes itself the direct agent of the bourgeoisie. Berghofer’s [one of the first SED leaders to join the social-democrats] hasty conversion to the democratic counterrevolution exemplifies the attitude of these parasites and careerists in the state apparatus and factory management who don’t want to come away empty-handed from the formation of a new bourgeoisie and the re-establishment of old capitalist conditions. The weak bonapartist Modrow distances himself from the SED-PDS and shows his definitive capitulation with the removal of the last hurdles for West German capital.”

—*Bulletin* No. 1, January 1990

And where did the ICL stand? As we will show, it hoped for a potentially revolutionary faction in the bureaucracy. *The ICL avoided a sharp confrontation with the Modrow regime.* Fearing isolation, it saw such a confrontation as inopportune, since all tendencies in the Stalinist party supported Modrow to the end. Such a confrontation would have endangered the ICL’s policy of “Unity with the SED.”

In this period, the ICL did not *focus* on attacking Modrow as a sellout whom the workers must sweep away in defense of the DDR. Instead, they criticized him only in passing....

It was impossible for the ICL, without roots in the proletariat, to directly influence events in the DDR. However, the pressure of the sweeping political developments demanded an answer. At that time, the SED was the only organization with significant influence over the leftist sections of the working class. The ICL leadership adapted to the pressure, and attempted *to bloc with sections of the shaken SED bureaucracy*, which led the ICL straight to opportunism. Robertson’s efforts to find a shortcut to building a party gave the ICL’s revisionism new impetus.

To break the base of the SED-PDS from its reformist leadership, the Gruppe IV. Internationale said: “SED members! Instead of a ‘third way’—draw the revolutionary consequences from the Stalinist betrayal! No new edition of the Stalinist SED—Fight the pro-social-democratic course of Modrow, Gysi, and Berghofer—For a Leninist-Trotskyist Party” (*Forderungskatalog*, 11 December 1989). Revolutionaries know that when it is necessary to “swim against the stream,” authority cannot be won by adaptation to what is popular, but only by taking clear positions. Therefore our comrades said that “a Leninist-Trotskyist faction must be formed in the SED” (*Bulletin* No. 1).

By contrast, the ICL attempted to swim with the stream. Formulations like “We need a new communist

party based on Leninist norms” (*Arprekor* No. 5, 13 December 1989) were *deliberately* unclear about how would-be communists in the SED should organize against the Gysi leadership and its support for the Modrow regime. It was *left open* as to whether the Leninist party the ICL advocated could be a reformed SED....

The two greetings from the ICL leadership to the SED’s extraordinary session in mid-December 1989 exemplify this anti-Leninist concept of party building. Not a word was said about the *actual* politics of the SED! Instead, the ICL assumed the manner of a school teacher with appeals to share Lenin’s ideas (*Arprekor* Nos. 8 and 9, 18 and 19 December 1989). The International Secretariat [IS] of the ICL gave the SED a couple of tips on how to stabilize the economy, as if this confused, demoralized and increasingly powerless party stood at the head of a militant pro-socialist workers movement. This parody of Trotskyism reached its peak in the codex [contained in the IS greetings] which set forth rules of behavior specifying what kind of strikes the proletariat could count on the ICL leadership’s support for. The ICL leadership did not want to take a position on strikes over wages and working conditions, which were underway at the time and were being strangled by the SED/FDGB [Stalinist-dominated union body in the DDR] bureaucracy.

TLD Opposes Workers Strikes

At a forum on 18 November 1989, TLD central committee spokesperson Max S. came out in opposition to strikes [in the DDR] on the grounds that the workers should not strike against themselves and their own interests. Throughout the course of further events in the DDR, the TLD remained unwilling to say anything more on this point....

Why did the ICL attempt to avoid the question of economic strikes? They did so because such strikes *obstructed their plans for unity with the SED-PDS.* Support for the strikes would have meant a direct confrontation with the Modrow regime which the SED-PDS was backing. Instead, the ICL took *responsibility* for the Stalinists’ economic mismanagement. A member of the Spartakist-Gruppen on 4 February 1990, with the approval of the TLD/ICL leadership (*Arprekor* No. 22, 8 February 1990), demanded that the proletarians: “Work better, more cleanly, in a more orderly manner! No factory should be uneconomical.” The TLD/SpAD thereby supported the anti-working class austerity politics of Modrow....

“The planned economy is fundamentally sound,” (*Arprekor* No. 25, 27 February 1990) said the ICL, as it extended its hand to the Stalinists....

Stalinist Contradictions and Political Revolutions

The ICL attempts to justify its policy of currying favor with the Stalinists by citing Trotsky’s analysis of the bureaucracy. The ICL knows that the bureaucracy of a deformed workers state is not homogeneous. The politics of the Stalinists are contradictory: on the one hand, the pressure of imperialism drives them to ever broader capitulation at the expense of the working class. On the

other hand, they attempt to safeguard their power and privileges, which derive from the proletarian state's control over the means of production, against the capitalists. "As history shows, parts of the bureaucracy will go over to the side of the workers in a political revolution," the TLD quite correctly wrote in *Arprekor* No. 4 (12 December 1989). Hungary in 1956 is a classic example of this. But the ICL makes two decisive mistakes in the application of this Trotskyist theory. First, the development of those elements of the bureaucracy that go over to the side of the workers depends *decisively on the level of proletarian class struggle*.

"A real civil war could develop not between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the resurgent proletariat but between the proletariat and the active forces of the counterrevolution. In the event of an open clash between the two mass camps, there cannot even be talk of the bureaucracy playing an independent role. Its polar flanks would be flung to the different sides of the barricades."

—L. Trotsky, "The Class Nature of the Soviet State"

Only through a consistent struggle against *all* factions of the bureaucracy can parts of this caste be drawn to the revolutionary side—a policy that the ICL in an opportunistic manner omitted.

Secondly, the development in the DDR did not occur as Trotsky anticipated. The social revolution carried out from above in the territory of the SBZ [Soviet Occupation Zone] was accompanied by the systematic annihilation of the independent initiatives of the East German proletariat. The ensuing 40 years of Stalinist repression reinforced illusions in the social democracy and its "successful" organization of the "social market economy" [in West Germany]. Although the state of class consciousness in the various sectors of the working class was certainly not uniform, it was nonetheless generally at a very low level. In addition, the workers did not have enough time after the fall of Honecker to develop the political consciousness necessary for the tasks at hand. There were no *revolutionary* class struggles. Considering this background, *the capitulation of the Stalinists all along the line* is not so surprising. Once again, contrary to the ICL's thesis of an unfolding proletarian political revolution and its hopes for parts of the bureaucracy, *no* wing of the Stalinists was prepared to come out actively and openly for the defense of the DDR.

So the opportunist policy really hung in mid-air when [the ICL] said "Many thousands of SED members, parts of the leadership [!] not excluded, want to tear out Stalinism by the roots and defend the collectivized foundations of the DDR against capitalist repossession [Wiedervereinnahmung]" (*Spartakist* No. 66, 3 January 1990).

The capitulation of the ICL, evident from the publications of the TLD/SpAD, is underscored in their internal documents. The slogan "Unity with the SED" is not our invention. This bizarre opportunist course was baptized at the mass anti-fascist demonstration in Treptow.

SpAD's Debacle at Treptow

On 3 January 1990, 250,000 people streamed to Berlin-Treptow to protest Nazi vandalism at the Soviet war memorial. This powerful demonstration frightened the

German bourgeoisie and its lackeys in the DDR, who had considered that any such mobilization against the right wing, especially by the SED's base, was no longer possible. The bourgeois press responded with an anti-communist outcry. They accused the SED-PDS of having instigated the vandalism in order to conjure up...a non-existent fascist threat to justify retaining power. The pressure on the Modrow regime was massively intensified and the isolation of the Stalinists was increased.

The further Treptow recedes into the past, the greater it becomes in SpAD legend. *Spartakist* No. 72 (5 June 1990) proclaimed:

"Our German comrades initiated a call for a massive workers' united-front action to stop the fascists. We brought the call directly to the SED leadership and invited them to take part. The SED was so far removed from the working class and feared it so much that at first they declined our invitation. But when our call was distributed in factories all over Berlin, the Stalinists mobilized their forces and ultimately took over the demonstration."

What really happened? Comrades Melt and Dahlhaus contacted the local SED-PDS committee on behalf of the TLD, and only *after* SED sponsorship had been obtained was the call printed! The TLD/SpAD was not, and is not, capable of organizing a mass mobilization of the East Berlin proletariat. So much for the facts—now for the politics.

In the *TLD's call* for the demonstration there was *absolutely no criticism of the SED-PDS's* course of capitulation, and *not one word* about Modrow bowing to BRD imperialism and German nationalism. But it was these politics that had initially emboldened the Nazis who had carried out the attacks [at the war memorial].

In her speech at the Treptow demonstration, TLD/SpAD comrade Dahlhaus laid out the "SED-Unity" line in full: "Our [!] economy is suffering from waste and obsolescence. The SED party dictatorship has shown that it is incompetent [!] to fight this." (*Arprekor* No. 15, 4 January 1990). This statement, along with "the SED's monopoly on power has been broken" was all that was said about the politics of the Stalinists (*Ibid.*). In Dahlhaus' speech only Honecker's SED, which the demonstrators wanted nothing more to do with anyway, was mentioned. But the actual illusions in the "reformed" SED-PDS were not attacked.

The next day the TLD initiated the myth that the speech was answered with tens of thousands of whistles [a form of booing in Germany] as a result of its "sharp political criticism of the SED" (*Ibid.*). But what was the real cause of the whistling? Dahlhaus used the word "Ostdeutschland," which set off a commotion. This term was correctly associated with the traditional refusal of the West to recognize the DDR. Poor comrade, she had received the speech (in English) straight from New York, and in making an impromptu translation stumbled over "East Germany"! After this slip hardly anything else [she said] could be heard in the square....The ICL managed to discredit itself and, what is worse, Trotskyism, in the eyes of tens of thousands of DDR leftists.

Even weeks after Treptow, the ICL leadership rejected requests from its DDR comrades to initiate united

actions against the Nazis in Leipzig on the grounds that it might endanger the SpAD electoral campaign. Leninists have a name for this: parliamentary cretinism.

SpAD's Turn—Away from the SED-PDS

Now, a year later, the ICL leadership feels compelled to note the “tendency [of its German comrades] toward liquidating into a strategic united front” (*Spartacist* No. 45-46, Winter 1990-91). By rights, the Robertson clique in New York should take the blame for the SpAD disaster, since they directed the intervention in the DDR. *Workers Vanguard* editor Jan Norden was responsible for the editorial line of *Arprekor* and *Spartakist*, and Helene Brosius of the International Secretariat looked after the organizational side of things. One of the ICL crown princes, Al Nelson, coordinated operations, and was constantly in touch with Robertson via cellular phone. In mid-January 1990 the guru himself came to Berlin to personally carry out the attempted bloc with the Stalinist bureaucrats. It was Robertson's idea that meetings should be arranged for him to confer directly with [Soviet General B.V.] Snetkov, [Stasi master-spy Mark-us] Wolf, and Gregor Gysi!

“Workers leader Robertson meets top representatives of the Soviet military command and the state party of the DDR,”—so the headlines of *Workers Vanguard* and *Spartakist* could have read. How unfortunate that the SED-PDS turned him down. This initiative of Robertson is noteworthy in itself. It not only demonstrates a complete misappraisal of the Soviet Stalinists in particular; it also illustrates how out of touch with reality this Lilliputian dictator is, to think that he could force the lords of the Kremlin into a “revolutionary” bloc....

Confused and groping, by the end of January 1990 the ICL leadership turned away from the SED-PDS, without any discussion of its previous political orientation. The available financial resources were running out. The PDS leadership and General Snetkov had rebuffed the ICL. Gorbachev had given his consent to reunification. In short, the capitulation of the Stalinists could no longer be denied, any more than the running aground of the SpAD's opportunistic “SED-Unity” line could be denied. To avoid responsibility, Robertson and his clique had to cover their tracks. In a timely manner, the master returned to New York to resolve a “financial dispute,” as it was called. Here he could, from a safe distance, allow it to be intimated that: “Jim [Robertson] has again said that we should stop giving so much thought to the SED, since it is dissolving, and that our main rival on the left is the KPD [a Stalinist party founded by former SED members]” (translation of Supplement by Lizzy to the reports of William and Rachel on the iSt financial deliberations. 2 February 1990).

As for the previous line on the SED, *which Robertson had fully endorsed*, and at a decisive point had personally attempted to carry out (the Snetkov initiative), in his usual cynical manner he now allowed it to be suggested that:

“On the question of ‘Unity with the SED,’ comrades have the feeling that this was not merely the product of a single person who misunderstood and incorrectly repeated what Jim had said, but that this was in part the result of

the exhaustion of the leading cadre there and in part a reflection of the panic that many felt in the DDR.”

—*Ibid.*

One can only be disgusted at the cowardice of this leadership clique which unloads political responsibility on its subordinates. And woe to any who are not prepared to play along with Robertson's maneuver and attempt to look for deeper political reasons—they soon find themselves out of the organization! Comrades in the IBT know this from personal experience. The leadership of the ICL must be infallible—or the house of cards would fall apart!...

The SpAD now began to modify its politics and set its course for “mass-oriented” *independent* action. Little had to be changed from the methods used in the previous period. Since the PDS did not want to organize the defense of the DDR, the SpAD proclaimed that it wanted to carry this out *in its place*....After a *New York Times* article reported that a quarter of the DDR's population was against capitalist reunification, Nelson demanded of the SpAD central committee that they organize these masses. The SpAD parliamentary electoral campaign was supposed to serve as the vehicle for this maneuver. The SpAD sallied forth to organize its next defeat.

The boastful “mass method” of the SpAD has continued to this day—only the slogans have changed. “The Fourth Reich has won the Volkskammer elections,” *Arprekor* No. 30 (10 April 1990) reported. At this point the SpAD modified its line on the defense of the DDR, making the struggle against the “Fourth Reich” a central part of its propaganda. Anyone halfway interested in politics, in Germany or internationally, associates the “Fourth Reich” with the regime of the Third, i.e., Hitler's terror. *The SpAD tends to identify the BRD with fascism*. This new mobilization ploy was designed to avoid critical reflection by the membership on the electoral campaign and the entire DDR intervention. Don't think, act! “Who wants to be awkward and argue when fascism is around the corner?”, some members may have thought....

From mid-1990 this propaganda became more and more hysterical: “Aldi—Supermarket of the Fourth Reich” (*Spartakist* No. 72, 5 June 1990); “Whose Creature is Kohl? The Man Who Wants to be Fuehrer” (*Spartakist* No. 73, 3 July 1990); “What Hitler couldn't do with the Wehrmacht, they want to do now with the D-mark. All the parties of the ‘democratic’ [!] Fourth Reich are participating, particularly the social democracy...” (*Ibid.*).

The SpAD's Phobia Regarding the Social Democracy

When we refer to the SpAD's “turn,” we mean the change from its SED/PDS orientation to the blustering representation of itself as *the* revolutionary mass alternative. In its sectarian attitude toward the social-democratic workers, there was no turn—this sectarianism has been characteristic of the TLD/SpAD since 1989. This phobia toward the SPD was expressed by the ritual repetition of slogans like “Bloodhounds of the SPD”....

In the DDR everyone knew that among the opposition groups the SDF/SPD [the DDR/BRD social demo-

cratic parties] fought hardest for the capitalist *Anschluss*. Hypnotized by the allegedly unfolding proletarian political revolution, with its gaze fixed on the SED-PDS, the ICL did not consider it necessary to worry about the growing influence of the SPD in the DDR working class....

In this connection Treptow is worth mentioning again. An invitation to the SDP/SPD to participate in the mass demonstration against the fascists was indispensable. Workers had to be broken from the SPD. One way to raise the class consciousness of the SPD's base would have been to challenge its leadership to take a position *before* the demonstration took place. When Vogel, Boehme, Meckel & Co. [SDP/SPD leaders] initiated the bourgeois outcry against the demonstrators *after* January 3, the anti-fascist mobilization naturally had to be defended against these SPD scoundrels. Revolutionaries had to try to win SDP workers and SDP branches to support this defense.... The ICL, on the contrary, refused to try to draw the SDP into a united action, and justified this a week later on the grounds that the SDP had "no proletarian mass base" (*Arprekor* No. 18, 12 January 1990).... The TLD [SpAD] *deliberately* sought to involve *only* the SED in the Treptow demonstration. [For the Robertsonites] obviously the SDP/SPD workers were part of the "reactionary mass," and the TLD even had the gall to cite Trotsky's writings against fascism as a basis for this (*Arprekor* No. 16, 8 January 1990).

Abstention Toward the *Betriebsraete*

[The *Betriebsraete* are a peculiar German institution that arose initially in the revolutionary turmoil of 1918-23. The West German capitalists attempted to co-opt them by enshrining them in labor law as workplace committees elected every three years to represent the interests of employees in "consultation" with management. For example, *Betriebsrat* members have a legally defined right to "confidential" information on a company's financial state, but are not supposed to reveal any of this to other workers. They must be consulted in the case of layoffs or hiring, and overtime must be cosigned by them. Members of the *Betriebsraete* get time off from their regular jobs and the committees therefore frequently serve as a training grounds for aspiring union officials. However, because they are elected by the rank-and-file, and therefore responsible to them, they are not simply capitalist organs. Militants and leftists frequently stand for election to the *Betriebsraete* against conservatives. Participation in such contests, like participation in general elections, can be an important means for revolutionaries to fight for influence in the proletariat.]

"West Germany's *Betriebsraete* are purely and simply

organs of class collaboration;" "*Betriebsraete* at best serve more to split the working class than to unite it" (*Spartacist* No. 68, 1 March 1990) the SpAD proclaimed during the West German *Betriebsraete* elections in 1990.... It is one of the ABC's of revolutionary trade-union work in Germany that the *Betriebsraete*—a product of the German revolution of 1918-1923—must be brought back under the direct control of the employees. In the *Betriebsraete*, communists, with the perspective of building workers councils, must struggle against social-democratic class collaboration and the *Betriebsraete* law which requires "confidential cooperation" with the capitalists.

Afterword

We had already written the greater part of our brochure when the documents from the ICL's discussion on the "Collapse of Stalinism" (*Spartacist* No. 45-46, Winter 1990-91) came to our attention.

Robertson did not undertake to draw an official balance sheet—instead he published signed articles from his pet writers, Seymour and St. John, that "did not necessarily express the editorial viewpoint."

Having geared up the membership to pursue a non-existent SED left on the grounds that a mythical political revolution was underway, the ICL tops now announce that the SED program, and that of the other leftists in the DDR, "ran at an angle of 180 degrees to the objective interests and periodic impulses of the working class." It now turns out, according to St. John, that "the proletariat in the DDR did not mobilize" because, as he quotes Trotsky, "Workers in general do not easily break with the party that awakens them to conscious life." Indeed the "false consciousness and clinging to the SED" by the working class was reflected in the illusion that "the SED could be reformed."

A reader could hardly guess that instead of calling for a break with the SED, the TLD had pursued a policy of adaptation to it and/or its imaginary left wing....

Why didn't the DDR operation fulfill St. John's hopes...?

"the failures of the earlier period were due—as was Lenin's [!] problem in 1905—primarily to political resistance to turning our face to the masses and historic weaknesses within the TLD itself, *which more or less oscillated between sectarianism and passivity and a tendency toward liquidating into a strategic united front.*"

—*Spartacist* 45-46, emphasis added

The same people who led their German comrades into the swamp and controlled their every move now denounce their obedient servants as sectarians and capitulationists. ■