

Austrian Workers' Tragic Heroism

Workers all over the world have been moved to admiration by the heroic resistance of the Austrian workers, fighting in defence of their trade union and political organisations. These men were organised in a party to which we are opposed, a party whose policy we know to be wrong, but that should not, and does not, prevent us from welcoming the spirit in which they defended themselves. Their conduct is a proof that the working class can produce men and movements as tenacious, and possessed of as much endurance and integrity, as anything the ruling class can show, despite the manifold advantages of their position.

The fighting in Austria began on Monday morning, February 12th, at Linz, where, according to the official account, Social Democrats resisted with rifle-fire a move by police and Heimwehr to occupy their head-quarters. On the previous day the Heimwehr -- the armed organisation of Anti-Hitler Fascists—after frequent conferences with Dr. Dollfuss, in whose government they are strongly represented, had decided upon the dissolution of all municipal councils controlled by the Social Democrats (including the Council of Vienna), and on the suppression of the Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats were well aware that their hour had come; they must either yield without resistance, or face the whole power of the State and the Heimwehr. The attack had long been threatening and the Social Democrats had prepared for it months ago by notifying all members and branches that in any one of several eventualities (e.g., an attempt by the Government to occupy the Vienna City Hall), all members and branches were to take the initiative of a general strike without awaiting further instructions. This was to prevent the Party and the trade unions from being disorganised by a sudden seizure of their headquarters and the arrest of their officials. Immediately the news came of the events in Linz the leaders in Vienna met to consider their course of action. They were only too well aware of the military weakness of the workers in face of the armed force at the disposal of the Government, and were in favour of waiting until the Government made a further declaration of policy, expected that day, regarding the Heimwehr threat to the municipal councils. However, for reasons which will be explained later, the workers were no longer prepared to accept the advice of the Executive Committee of the Social Democratic Party. They took the initiative themselves. Trams, trains, newspapers, a large number of factories, and the electric light and gas plants were brought to a standstill, but the strike was not by any means general.

The Government had all its plans ready and promptly declared martial law. It seized the City Hall, arrested Social Democratic leaders, and commenced a powerful attack on the barricades, trenches, blocks of flats, and other buildings which the workers' defence corps (declared illegal a year ago) had occupied. The defence corps retreated from the centre of the city to working-class quarters, where they hoped to be able to defend themselves.

The workers were terribly hampered by the Government's full control of communications. Different areas even of Vienna were completely isolated by troops. The workers inside these areas had no means of communicating with those outside owing to the military barriers and the seizure of the telephones. The Government was thus able to make the fullest use of wireless broadcasting as a means of discouraging and dividing the workers. They hit upon the clever scheme of broadcasting the deliberate lie that Bauer and Deutsch, two prominent leaders, had fled to safety in Czecho-Slovakia. The effect of this on the Social Democrats can be well imagined. The workers at Linz tried in vain to seize the broadcasting station. The workers were also hampered by the arrest the previous week of local leaders of the Workers' Defence Corps, and by shortage of even light arms and ammunition—the Government had

been confiscating these steadily during the past year.

That the workers had arms in their possession at all is a sufficiently unusual circumstance to require explanation.

In most cases the arms were those brought home at the end of the war when the army supported the Republican overthrow of the Monarchy. It is stated that some other arms and munitions were smuggled from abroad in recent months. The Social Democrats had no artillery, only rifles, machine-guns, and some hand-grenades, while the army, the police, the Heimwehr, and other Government-armed bodies, were immeasurably better equipped. Without any loss of time they began the assault on the workers' strongholds in various parts of Vienna and other towns with field-guns, howitzers, armoured cars and armoured trains. From all accounts the Government used aeroplanes only for purposes of observation, and one newspaper report states that, at Linz, two aeroplanes were even used by the Social Democrats to distribute propaganda leaflets.

Heavy fighting went on not only in the Capital, but in Linz, Steyr, Graz, Innsbruck, and other provincial centres. Women took part in the defence as well as men, and a number were killed.

For four days and nights the fighting continued with terrible losses on the workers' side. Hour after hour their barricades and the buildings they occupied were smashed and blown up by artillery. It was not sentiment, but the provisions of the Peace Treaty which deprived the attackers of heavy artillery, or the destruction would have been even worse. These politicians, with Christian and patriotic phrases on their lips, released this inferno on their own Austrian fellow citizens, men, women and children, during a time of peace. The gallant military men placed artillery in position to fire on the tenement houses in which there were women, children, and bedridden persons, and opened fire without giving them an opportunity to escape. They had taken the precaution, too, to place their artillery at a safe distance—out of range of the rifles and machine guns of the Social Democrats.

The Government was probably surprised by the vigour of the defence, which, perhaps, explains their declaration on the opening day of the struggle that they had it well under control. On the other hand, this may have been a deliberate lie, like many other statements they issued. The Social Democrats gained some minor successes here and there for a time, but only before the full strength of the Government forces had been brought to bear. Never at any time had the Social Democrats the slightest chance of success, unless backed up by a revolt in the regular army. This was rumoured, but falsely. (The one English newspaper which gave colour to reports of a Social Democratic victory—*The Daily Herald*.—was the journal which, a few months since, was hailing Dollfuss as the defender of democracy!) The struggle was not even a forlorn hope, for there never was any ground for hope.

It was a desperate and spontaneous decision to be crushed fighting rather than to be crushed without that gesture of defiance. As one Social Democratic leader wrote in Vienna during the struggle, it was, in effect, an unequal battle between "old rifles and a few cartridges" on the one side, and artillery and machine-guns on the other. Prince Starhemberg, Heimwehr Commander, himself commented on the poor equipment and deficient military leadership of his Social Democratic opponents. He said that at Linz, the workers had only rifles, 15 machine-guns, and a few hand-grenades—no match at all for trained troops with artillery and abundant ammunition and small arms. (The Prince expressed his profound admiration for the courage of his defeated opponents, and nobly tempered his class hatred by hoping that the

captured leaders would be shot instead of hanged !)

One lie needs to be nailed, that is the Dollfuss Government's defence that it was resisting a plot to seize power.

True it is that the Party and the trade unions had determined beforehand to try to resist suppression, but there is not the slightest evidence to support the Dollfuss story. So ludicrous was it that several correspondents of British newspapers went out of their way to expose it. For example, Mr. John Segrue, special correspondent of the *News-Chronicle* in Vienna, says (February 17th) : —

Vice-Chancellor Fey organised the plan that goaded the workers into resistance. Last Sunday, in a speech at Strebersdors, near Vienna, he told the Heimwehr that Dr. Dollfuss was "one of them," and added that he intended to begin work in earnest against his enemies on the following day.

.... the workers' movement was one of resistance, not of " rebellion."

The Editor of the *Economist* (February 17th) takes a similar view. So plainly was this the case that the *Times*, in an editorial on February 13th, openly regretted that the Heimwehr had succeeded in preventing Dollfuss from coming to an arrangement with the Social Democrats.

The cold-blooded nature of the attack on the workers, organised and planned by the Government and the Heimwehr, can be seen from the fact that, on February 9th (i.e., three days before the attack began), Leopold Kunschak, leader of the Christian Social Party on the Vienna Municipal Council, proposed that his party (that is Dollfuss's own party) should collaborate with the Social Democratic Party in order to avoid a continuance of the inflammable situation then existing throughout the country. This was at once agreed to by Dr. Danneberg, speaking for the Social Democrats, and by the Social Democratic Mayor of Vienna, Karl Seitz.

Instead of accepting the proposal, Dr. Dollfuss hastily gave a press interview, on February 10th, brushing it aside and proclaiming the Government's intention to carry out "unchanged " the plans it had made. Major Fey repeated this.

Dr. Dollfuss deliberately refused even to meet representatives of the Social Democratic Party—the largest single party in Austria—while the fighting was in progress, although he knew they wished to arrange a peaceable settlement, subject only to the Party and the trade unions not being suppressed. Dr. Dollfuss and Major Fey had decided that workers' blood must be spilled and wantonly went on with their plans to bombard the blocks of flats with artillery.

The Penalty of Defeat

What price the Austrian workers have paid, and have yet to pay, for their armed resistance it is impossible to say. Estimates of the deaths among the defenders vary from a few hundreds to nearly 2,000. Dr. Dollfuss says only 241, but this may be another piece of propaganda, no more reliable than the official broadcasts during the fight. A number of executions have taken place, and imprisonments and confinements in concentration camps are expected on a wholesale scale. Also the Dollfuss Government has declared the trade unions and Social Democratic Party illegal (this was expected, anyway) and, with the capitalists' notorious disregard for the rights of the workers to any little property they may possess, has confiscated the funds and premises of the suppressed organisations. He has also imitated Hitler down to

the last dishonesty of stealing the workers' paper, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, and continuing its publication under the same name, but by nominees of his own, and carrying on propaganda for his party.

If the executions have not been as numerous as intended by the victors, this is due to the protests by foreign ambassadors. That Christian gentleman, Major Fey, promised "hangings all over Austria," and celebrated the victory of his troops by engaging more hangmen.

The first prisoner who was hanged was badly wounded—which outraged some of the foreign newspaper correspondents. They might, however, have recalled the similar execution of James Connolly in Dublin, in 1916, at the hands of the British Government.

Before dealing with the events which brought the Social Democrats to their present position, it will be useful to explain some of the parties and forces operating in Austria.

Parties and Forces in Austria

The Government is a coalition between the Christian Social Party (Dr. Dollfuss, Chancellor), the Fascist Heimwehr (Major Fey, Vice-Chancellor) and certain smaller groups. Major Fey is Commander of the regular army and police and works in close co-operation with Prince Starhemberg, who commands the Heimwehr, an officially-supported party-army upwards of 40,000 strong and practically equal to regular troops.

The Christian Social Party is strongly Catholic, and is composed largely of peasants, but with a fairly strong working class wing. The peasant element of the Christian Social Party and the so-called "Middle class" in the towns, lean towards the Fascist Heimwehr, while its working class wing and the poorer peasants were disposed to co-operate with the Social Democrats in the defence of Parliament and the Republic.

The Heimwehr declares itself frankly Fascist, differing from Hitler only on two points, opposition to Nazi doctrines about Aryan racial superiority and opposition to Austria being united with Germany. The Heimwehr are financed and supported by Italy.

Then there are the Nazis, financed and supported from Germany, who want union with Germany.

Both Heimwehr and Nazis, and the Heimwehr sympathisers in the Christian Social Party, favour suppression of the trade unions, and the abolition of Parliamentary Government.

At the 1930 General Election the Christian Socials obtained 35 per cent, of the votes, the Social Democrats 43 per cent., leaving only a small minority of votes to be divided among the Landbund (a small agrarian party supporting Dollfuss) and the Heimwehr and other small groups.

With the rise of Hitler in Germany the Christian Socials have lost heavily both to the Heimwehr and to the Nazis, and at the Provincial elections in 1932 their vote in Vienna was only 20 per cent., compared with 60 per cent, given to the Social Democrats. The latter are a reformist party based on the trade unions and having a programme rather like that of the I.L.P. a few years ago, but, dressed up in more Marxian terms and showing a somewhat better grasp of the workers' position. Their conception of Socialism does not go beyond State control of banks, industry, etc. The Social Democrats have their chief strength in Vienna and

provincial towns, but are weak in rural areas. They, too, have lost some support to the Nazis in recent months.

Owing to the weakening position of the Christian Socials and the growing strength of the Heimwehr and Nazis (both threatening and preparing for armed revolt with foreign aid—from Italy and Germany respectively), Dollfuss has had to look for support outside his party. At one moment a year ago it seemed as if he might be willing to follow the advice of the democratic wing of his party and seek Social Democratic support. Whether he intended to do so or not, and whether if he did, it was ever more than a manoeuvre directed to crushing them later, it is impossible to say. In any event, the Social Democrats were in a difficult position. If they supported Dollfuss they feared losing the confidence of the more independent groups of workers.

Dollfuss decided, however, to turn to the Heimwehr, who, although weak in voting strength (perhaps 20 per cent, of the votes) are strong in arms due to Italy's support.

Among the economic factors influencing the parties are the following. The peasants have been hit by falling prices and demand lower taxation and lower wages, ends which they hoped to achieve by crushing the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions. Hotel keepers and others dependent on tourist traffic, particularly near the German frontier, favour the Nazis, because union with Germany, or, at any rate, a cessation of the present strained relations with Germany, would restore to them the German tourist traffic at present prevented by the German Government. Army officers and ex-army officers, and many groups of professional workers, look hopefully to a restoration of the monarchy as a provider of jobs—they therefore support the monarchist groups in the Heimwehr and Christian Social Party. As an offset to Germany's bait of restored tourist traffic, the Government and the Heimwehr are trying to arrange Italo-Austrian-Hungarian commercial and customs treaties.

The working-class supporters of the Christian-Socials and the Nazis are to a considerable extent attracted simply by the promise of jobs and promotion. Quite a large part was played by this factor in the Fascist movement in Italy and the Nazi movement in Germany. Unemployed and other workers join these movements because they are promised appointment to Government and other posts rendered vacant by the dismissal of Social Democrats when once the Fascists get power. Dollfuss has been pursuing this line busily during the past year and thousands of dismissals are now taking place.

One factor which may prove of some importance, but is of minor importance now, is that Dollfuss is trying to strengthen three other small armed militias in order to lessen his dependence on the Heimwehr. It remains to be seen whether he will succeed or whether the Christian Socials will be gradually pushed aside by their Heimwehr allies under the pressure of the efforts of the Nazis to set up a pro-Hitler dictatorship.

Many observers, including two principal leaders of the Social Democratic Party, anticipate that the violent suppression of their party and the trade unions will drive many former Social Democrats over to the Nazis.

The ironical position has arisen that the Nazi Movement in Germany is broadcasting appeals to the Austrian workers to rally round Hitler as the defender of Socialism and of the working class against the brutal tyranny of Dollfuss and the Heimwehr!

In spite of the Russian Government's pose that it is the defender of the working class everywhere, it appears to have maintained an attitude of "correct diplomatic neutrality."

The Social Democrats

Let us now attempt to weigh up the weak points of the Social Democrats' position.

The first point to notice is that the Social Democratic Party in Austria was a reformist party, although superior in many respects to its counterparts in Germany and England. Its supporters have been won by its programme of reform demands and by its efforts to carry them out (for example, its large-scale housing schemes in Vienna). It has itself helped to encourage the propaganda for union with Germany, which has lately caused it to lose some of its support to the second of the two Fascist movements, the Nazi movement.

From 1918 onwards, until last year, one plank in the official programme of the Social Democrats and of the trade unions was to seek union with Germany. On the rise of Hitler this point was suddenly dropped, but no organised movement can escape the consequences of years of mistaken activity by suddenly renouncing it. Many workers who had been encouraged to believe that unity with Germany mattered, have continued to believe it—going over to the ranks of the Nazis. Then, again, the Social Democrats supported the War and took part in the Coalition Governments of the early post-war years, co-operating to stabilise the capitalist republic—with some of the very people who have crushed them now that their help is no longer needed.

Lastly, being built up on the confused doctrines of reformism instead of on a clear understanding of Socialist principles, the Social Democratic Party found itself faced with a dilemma from which there was no escape. The leaders have for years preached the need to strive for so-called practical, every-day reforms, as stepping-stones to a distant Socialism. But in order to justify this position they had also to claim that the achievements were in themselves of great value. They had to tell their followers that the housing schemes of Vienna, and the various other little gains and liberties, were vital inroads into capitalism and must be defended at all costs. Consequently, when the Government finally made a frontal attack on the Vienna Council the Social Democrats had either to fight or else admit that these things were not worth fighting for. To do the latter meant renouncing the doctrines of a lifetime of propaganda, and was unthinkable. Yet the fact remains that it is not worth while for a workers' movement to go down in suicidal glory for the sake of the nominal control of part of the machinery of local government.

Neither in Austria nor anywhere else have the workers' organisations made any serious inroads into capitalist control. The only way of doing so is for a party solidly based on Socialist knowledge and conviction to gain control of the machinery of Government, national and local, including the armed forces. Attempts by a minority to seize power by force of arms against those who control the Government and the armed forces, or attempts to resist the Government, are always foredoomed to failure except in the rare and exceptional event of the armed forces themselves going over to the workers. Therefore, a workers' movement which understood the nature of power would never get itself in the false position occupied by the Social Democrats. It would never imagine that it had crippled capitalism and overawed the ruling class when in reality it had only been invited into a nominal share of the Government in order to tide over a period of transition during which the capitalists were not sure of their grip on the situation.

Then again, a well-grounded movement would never have cherished the illusion that Austrian workers could ignore the Great Powers and the neighbouring countries. Austria is the cockpit where Italy and Germany are fighting out their commercial and territorial rivalries, with France, England and Czecho-Slovakia also playing a hand. It has long been said that France for various reasons had exacted a pledge from Dollfuss that he would not suppress the trade unions and Social Democrats, and it is certainly curious that the attack on them followed sharply after the overthrow of Daladier's Government in France.

Italy, as a result of the peace treaties, had gained much territory and had pushed Austria-Hungary—Germany's close ally—off the Adriatic Sea. If Germany were now to absorb the much-diminished Austria, a German drive towards the Adriatic would again have to be feared by Italy, not to mention the likelihood that Germany would seek to regain the German-speaking territories taken by Italy from Austria. In this situation the Italian Government supplies money and arms to the Heimwehr, and is alleged recently to have promised Dollfuss unlimited support against the Austrian Nazis, on condition that he first smashed the Social Democrats and trade unions. Dollfuss, as abject a figure as MacDonald, has carried out his part of the bargain.

Against the armed forces of the Government, backed up by foreign powers, the Austrian Social Democrats, becoming weaker in numbers, and weaker even in the matter of small arms, under the constant Government searches and confiscations, had no defence. The international trade union and labour movement was helpless to do more than pass resolutions and now to collect a little money for the victims.

Realising the hopelessness of armed resistance, the Social Democratic leaders urged the workers to ignore the Government's deliberate attempts to provoke them, and tried to play for time. Again and again they offered conditional support to Dollfuss and offered to give up their arms if he would disarm the Heimwehr. Their very willingness to give Dollfuss no excuse was one of the factors which made the workers' weak forces still weaker at the final clash, for, as a Social Democratic Leader explains in the Press report issued by the "Labour and Socialist International" (February 18th), many workers became very dissatisfied with the executive's attitude. When, therefore, on February 12th, the executive again counselled delay, the workers acted on their own initiative, thus losing what advantage there would have been in a more unanimous action, and giving Dollfuss a slight tactical advantage in the chance to argue that he was resisting a plot to seize power.

The truth is, as was pointed out in these columns in June, 1933, when dealing with the Austrian situation, that a party which struggles for a series of reforms is bound to be divided at the moment of crisis—those on one side counselling another coalition in order to safeguard the reforms already won, while those on the other side urge independence and resistance. It was true, then, as we said, that the Austrians faced a problem to which there was no solution. A better understanding among the Austrian workers could not have turned defeat into victory, but it would have prevented the illusion being held that armed resistance was a practicable possibility. They would have realised the hard but inescapable truth that the first step is to win a majority, and that, when that is done, there is still no road to Socialism except through the control of the machinery of Government, including the armed forces, and that the Socialist movement must be organised internationally.

We admire the great courage of the Austrian workers and only regret that they should have been in a position in which such heavy sacrifices were demanded without the possibility of

commensurate achievements. H.

(*Socialist Standard*, March 1934)