

Why Liebknecht Turned to the Youth

By Max Shachtman

KARL LIEBKNECHT is often referred to as the leader and founder of the revolutionary youth movement. In him is symbolized the activities of the new generation of proletarian rebels who fight in the forefront of every struggle, who rally to the red banner the most oppressed and exploited section of the working class: the toiling youth which has gained its political consciousness in the period of wars and revolutions. The immortal struggle of Liebknecht against capitalist militarism, the placing of his hopes in the youth movement as the standard bearers of the battle, his incessant efforts to form and build a mass movement of the working class youth, form one of the most brilliant pages in the history of the revolutionary movement of the world.

"The Future Belongs to the Youth."

To Liebknecht, the slogan of the "Future Belongs to the Youth" meant more than a casual reference to some inheritance that would go to the young generation when they came of age.

The slogan had a deep political significance which even now forms one of the basic factors in the Bolshevik connection of the labor movement.

Liebknecht was born in the period of the end of the long struggle for national unity in Germany and its entry into the imperialist epoch. The furious objections raised the Iron Chancellor, Bismarck, against the acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine and the nascent tendencies towards colonial development were already voices of a dying period. In the short span of two or three decades Germany was taking its place among the foremost imperialist nations. When Liebknecht was being tried in Leipzig for his anti-militarist book, the Austrian consul in Berlin wrote that:

"Never before was economic Germany so entirely under the absolute rule of a group of men, barely fifty

in number; and in no former period of industrial expansion was the old formula of the 'free play of forces' abandoned to such a degree, when the momentous decisions as to the extent of production, sales, prices, the granting of credit, the raising of new capital and the fixing of wages lay in the hands of a few persons found at the head of the large banks, mammoth industrial undertakings and great cartels."

This was in 1906. Four years later, Germany was already producing twice as much steel as Great Britain and ranking second only to the United States in its metallurgical power. In less than forty years after the Franco-Prussian war the capital of two of its chief banks had grown some 900 per cent. By 1907, the policy of the imperialist Kolonialverein was crowned by the establishment of a special colonial office with the Jewish financier, Dernberg, at the head. The wild scramble for colonies in Africa, the threat to British imperialism of the *Drang nach Osten*, the demand for a "place in the sun," were signs of the growth of a mighty imperialist nation, a well-rounded imperialist policy—and an imperialist corruption of profound consequences within the ranks of the working class movement.

The Decay of the Social-Democracy.

It is axiomatic that the bitter exploitation of the colonial peoples and the intensification of exploitation of the unskilled, unorganized masses of workers at home have as their complement a corruption of the upper layer of the working class, the labor aristocracy and the bureaucracy. The insidious poison of revisionism, against which the struggles of the patrons of the German social-democracy became weaker and weaker with the passing of time, was becoming the unofficial, and even the official policy of the huge social-democratic party of Germany. Their platform, their pronouncements, their activities

no longer reflected the traditions of the elder Liebknecht and Bebel. The unity of Gotha with the von Schweitzers was coming to its full blossom, carefully fertilized by a steady stream of imperialist profits which dribbled into the pockets of the labor aristocracy. The party of Kautsky and Scheidemann was becoming a labor adjunct to German imperialism, an alliance to which they sang shameless hymns of joy in the great betrayal of August 4th, 1914.

Why wonder, therefore, that Scheidemann loftily waved aside the anti-militarist proposals and agitation of Liebknecht with slander and cheap wit? It was therefore a piece of knavish consistence that led the guardians of the social-democracy to fight against Liebknecht's efforts to form a youth movement, which, while politically led by the party, would be organizationally independent from it. The youth was not corrupted by imperialism: it suffered from it. The youth did not acquiesce in the militarist development of the empire: they revolted against the bitter months of compulsory service under Prussian lieutenants and the prospects of working class corpses strewn over foreign plains for the greater glory of Deutsche Bank and the Disconto Gesellschaft. The youth needed no theoretical disproof of Bernstein's declaration that the conditions of the workers were improving under capitalism; the burden which grew heavier on their shoulders every day, in the shop and outside of it, was sufficient.

The youth, forming one of the most compact sections of the working class which was ready and eager to enter into the struggle against militarism and imperialism, became, with Liebknecht, a natural basis for his work. The healthy instincts of Liebknecht, revolting against the opportunism and servility of the party officialdom, turned him to years of great work for the youth. And while he did not forget, as none of us can, that among the

adult workers also there were great sections which would fight against imperialism, he gave his attention to the youth as a section of the working class which was most energetic, least weighed down by hoary tradition, and fit to carry on a militant battle against the enemy.

The struggle led by Liebknecht did not die on January 15th, 1919. Liebknecht was essentially a man of the movement. With the knowledge that the organized working class alone could carry out its emancipation did he work to transform the social-democracy into a revolutionary party and to build up a revolutionary youth movement. His work and the work of countless, nameless revolutionary heroes the world over, have born their fruit. The inheritors of the best traditions of Liebknecht are the Communist International and the Young Communist International, the latter of which inherits not only the organization which Liebknecht helped to found in 1907, but its militant spirit, intensified and clarified by Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin.

The anniversary of the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg is a call to the working class youth of the world. New world wars hang like menacing clouds on the horizon of the people. The constant, anxious, and futile conferences, called every month by the desperate rulers of the capitalist nations of the world find themselves confronted by their own helplessness in the face of growing revolutionary movements and sharpening crises in their imperialist policies. As in 1914, the innate sores of imperialism are coming to a head. The workers are threatened by a new inundation of imperialist war, with its slaughter of the working class youth and the destruction and misery of millions of the people.

On the shoulders of the youth falls the task of carrying on the struggle against militarism and imperialism. In America, the most powerful im-

perialist nation in the world, the Young Workers (Communist) League, the American section of the Young Communist International, must be in the forefront of the struggle, and not only in words. The danger is an immediate one and calls for swift, energetic action. To unite the entire working youth, and the farming youth, and the students of America behind a unified struggle against imperialism is now a main task of our league. The call for a concerted battle must go to every factory, every shop and mine, to the fields; to every working class youth organization and every working class organization in general; to every progressive student body. And while we work for the unification of all forces in a united front against militarism, let us not forget our other tasks in this field. Let us not forget that we have not begun to carry onward, no, not even with the most meager attempt, the isolated work which was started by our comrades Crouch and Trumbull: the building of Communist nuclei in the army and navy, the great Leninist task of shattering the most deadly and hated weapon of the bourgeoisie. Even in the darkest days Liebknecht did not omit the conducting of this work, and we, who pride ourselves on following in the spirit of Karl Liebknecht, should materialize our pride in carrying on this work which is already to the glorious credit of our brother leagues in Germany, France, Italy, Bulgaria, the Baltic, yes, and even in Anglo-Saxon England.

The burden of militarism rests on the youth: the youth must lead in the struggle against it. Liebknecht turned his face to the youth because it was uncorrupted and a potential militant fighter against imperialism. The youth must fulfill the spirit and work of Liebknecht and its greatest master, Lenin. Our work will be of one piece with the great revolutionary traditions which have been given to us.