

# Unions and the Nazi Labor Front

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Both Marxist and liberal historians have always depicted the Nazi movement as the bitter enemy of unions and the victory of German fascism as the death knell of the labor movement. A critical examination shows that, in fact, the opposite was the case and the Nazis used the unions in the same manner as their predecessors.

“Organized Labor versus ‘The Revolt Against Work’” \* described spontaneous opposition to an increasingly bureaucratic and collusive unionism. Greater centralization of control over workers and more institutionalized business-labor-government cooperation have made transparent trade unions’ role as the last effective police force of wage labor.

In passing, the article suggested a developing similarity in some ways to the situation in National Socialist (Nazi) Germany, where labor discipline was maintained via the Labor Front, the forced membership of all working people in one big national organization. This suggestion met with much predictable ridicule, though it was buried within a paragraph and mentioned but once.

Some research, however, gives convincing arguments that the point is valid and that the reference deserves discussion in its own right.

## **The Changing Face of Unions: Before Hitler**

The standard thesis about German labor and the Nazis—generally accepted by bourgeois and Marxist commentators alike—is that the unions were the backbone of Weimar democracy and the consistent enemies of Nazism. They were, therefore, savagely attacked by the reactionary Nazis, and destroyed on May 2, 1933 when all union offices and resources were seized and union officials imprisoned.

This event is seen as the effective inauguration of the dark night of German fascism, and the Labor Front which then replaced the unions is considered to have been a kind of giant concentration camp, the very antithesis of free trade unionism. The subject, in fact, has been largely ignored, owing to the absence of similarity between the unions and the Labor Front, and the fact of total hostility between unionists and Nazis. With these obvious facts and the zero degree of continuity, in other words, there has seemed little to discuss and certainly nothing much of relevance to an understanding of the role of contemporary unions.

Yet there may be very much in the German experience worth our consideration today, for this overall assessment does far more to conceal the truth than to reveal it. The connection between unionism and fascism, in fact, was a very real one.

If the Workers’ Council movement was curbed and rendered non-revolutionary in the years following World War I, employer-union collaboration was begun in earnest in the closing days of the War. The unions (principally the Free Social-Democratic Unions) formed the Cooperative Association of German Industrial and Commercial Employers and Workers with the employers’ groups in November 1918. In many ways a replica of the Nazi Labor

Front, this institutionalized collusion endured until worker opposition and economic crisis in late 1923 brought an end to the effort.

This candid class collaboration was superseded by the Temporary National Economic Council, which assumed many of the Association's duties, and by a similar example of growing state involvement, the trend toward government arbitration, also supported the unions. Franz Neumann saw this process accurately:

“Bound so closely to the existing regime and having become so bureaucratic, the unions lost their freedom of action...The spontaneity of the working classes had been sacrificed to bureaucratic organizations...National Socialism grew in this seed-bed.”

Hermann Rauschnig saw the unions' constant betrayal of the workers' interests as resulting in their becoming used up in the service of capital and in time a political liability to the ruling classes. A leading industrialist said:

“It was quite all right to make these trade union officials, the big and little busybodies alike, look thoroughly ridiculous. When we had flattered these gentlemen into donning dinner jackets and tail coats we had begun to make progress...The workers began to get sick of their own men...We just had to get rid of these fellows.”

General von Brauchitsch echoed these sentiments, explaining why the unions were no longer useful to the Weimar rightists:

“The trade unions were too ponderous and lethargic; and they had not struck roots deeply enough politically in the younger generation. They were the organizations of the old men, not of the younger generation, which was what mattered.”

Hence, “Labor's influence upon the fate of the German Republic was rapidly declining,” as Adolf Sturmthal put it. At the end of Weimar there had to be at least the public impression of their demise; to quote Sigmund Neumann, “The destruction of the pre-Nazi labor organizations was an inescapable result of political defeat.”

In the last months of the Weimar Republic, the unions had increasingly clamored, however, to be retained in the service of the bourgeoisie. In October 1932 the ADGB (Free Trade Union Association, which represented nearly all unionized workers) printed an article in the Nazi *Schwarze Front* paper pledging its faith in the “National Idea,” and in the November transport strike in Berlin, “the trade union leaders fought openly against the strikers.” Schleicher, the last Chancellor before Hitler, recognized the service the unions were giving the state and strongly considered their incorporation into the government leadership, based on his appreciation of their increasingly nationalist policy.

After Hitler's accession to the Chancellorship on January 30, 1933, rightists and unionists continued to work for an open labor collaboration with National Socialism. On March 4, former Chancellor Papen declared that unionism could be a very strong support of the Nazi regime. On March 20, the ADGB Executive Committee swore its fealty, reminding Hitler that “Unions are indispensable and inevitably integrated into the state.” On April 1 the Metal Workers Union, Germany's largest trade union, announced that it would solidly and loyally work with Nazism.

On April 7, Leipart (head of the ADGB) proclaimed the Nazi government and asked for a role in loyally representing the workers. On April 9, a Statement to the Government by the ADGB Executive Committee declared unreserved willingness “to place at the service of the new state the labor force's own organization which the trade unions have devoted years of activity to creating.” It further pledged its full cooperation for National Socialist efforts to overcome “all tendencies toward disunity” and its support for state “efforts to unify the trade unions.”

Other union statements and meetings with the Nazis led Erich Matthias to see the development of a “national trade unionism,” in which the unions jettisoned any allegiance to democracy in order to obtain benefits from an all-powerful state. On April 19, the ADGB decided to send out a call to all members, inviting their participation in the Nazi celebrations planned for May 1.

It should now be clear that when, say, Richard Grunberger admits that the trade union leaders wanted to cooperate with the Nazis, or Franz Neumann says that union officials agreed to step down if the trade union structure

were retained, a real understatement is being conceded. And when the trade union offices and equipment were confiscated and the top officials arrested on May 2, there was no resistance for a deeper reason than merely the unions' rottenness.

Active cooperation was at work in the scenario, and a vital continuity was insured. When Labor Front head, Dr. Robert Ley, declared that the unions had been "brutally and ruthlessly" seized, then, he spoke for public consumption. Much closer to the truth of the situation was the August 7, 1933 article in the *Manchester Guardian*, which spoke of ongoing conferences between union and government officials, toward the organization of the Labor Front.

## **Building the Nazi Labor Front**

In terms of structure, personnel, and policy, basic continuities are to be found between the Weimar unions and the Nazi Labor Front. B.N. Prieth's unpublished doctoral dissertation, widely considered the most complete study of the Front in English, acknowledges that it was built on the administrative structure of the old unions. Similarly, Vaso Trivanovitch found that the Front was organized according to the basic industries. "There are eighteen industrial organizations, corresponding to the former German trade unions."

Far from being the antithesis of the unions, the Labor Front "absorbed the former trade unions," and consolidated them in an extension of the centralization tendencies of Weimar unionism. As Florin-sky wrote in 1935, "Within the Labor Front, the trade unions, whose number has been greatly reduced through re-organization, continue to retain their identity." Rauschnig perceived this continuity when he referred to "the Labor Front formed out of the trade unions."

Though nearly everyone has been confused by the formal inclusion of business in the Front, and by Nazi rhetoric intended to obscure the continuity involved, the National Socialists realized the necessity of unions. As Dr. Ley confided late in 1933, "Nothing is more dangerous to a state than uprooted men deprived of their defense organizations...Such men undoubtedly become a constant source of disturbance." Maxine Sweezy expressed this point well: "The National Socialist government recognized that—destruction of the labor unions might strengthen radicalism among the workers."

Related to the sameness of structure is the sameness of personnel and policy. "The trade unions were not simply dissolved," according to Pascal, and "Lower functionaries remained...in positions such as treasurers of branches (locals), etc. The subscriptions (dues) were still collected." The discredited top leaders had to go, but the Labor Front "retained the services of minor officials of the former trade unions," to quote Helga Grebing.

Otto Nathan found that many Labor Front officials "Considered themselves genuine successors of the earlier trade-union movement, and others actually had been functionaries in the pre-Nazi trade unions," a finding that would not contradict Karl Bednarik and others who saw the co-existence of national socialist and Marxist views among Weimar unionists.

Similar is Albert Speer's recollection regarding the Front's "Beauty of Labor" project: "We were able to draw former union leaders...into this campaign." And C. W. Guillebaud, an expert on Weimar labor legislation, noted that often "the same individuals who had held important posts in the Labor ministry under earlier Governments were still in high offices there." He also found "a continuity of policy which he had not altogether expected to find."

Indeed, an examination of Nazi Party documents illustrates the continuation of the Labor Service, created in the late Weimar period, and the Labor Courts, instituted even earlier. Franz Neumann's assessment underscores the essential continuum:

The Labor Front has driven the process of bureaucratization to its maximum. Not only the relations between the enterprise and the workers but even the relations among the workers themselves are now mediated by an autocratic bureaucracy.

It is also worth noting that even leading resistance figures saw the "benefits" of the Labor Front. Wilhelm Leuschner, a bourgeois Weimar parliamentarian, wanted its extension in post-Nazi Germany, as the solution to the social problem. "Other resistance leaders, such as Haberman and Witmer, considered the Front a unified trade union and called for the change of its name to "German Trade Union," to be the only change necessary. The 'German Trade Union, as Goedeler explained, was to be "an organic continuation of the equally comprehensive Arbeitsfront."

And the German Communist Party (KPD) apparently shared this manipulative mentality; the KPD saw the Labor Front as probably the most useful vehicle for “the conquest of the trade union masses.” German socialists, for their part, cynically adopted fascist ideas into their “Neo—Socialist” slogan of “Order, Authority, Nation.” As the trend toward state capitalism seems to generally beget state trade unionism, the Left exhibits only its familiar opportunism.

## **Consolidating Power for Fascism**

The Nazi factory cell organization (NSBO) engaged in many union-type activities before the establishment of the Labor Front, and in fact, often displayed more militancy than did the trade unions. Thus in February and March 1933, for example, NSBO partisans attacked company unions, breaking up their meetings and the like. With National Socialism in power, state anti-depression measures caused real wages to rise, unemployment to decline, and the number of paid holidays was doubled.

The tendency of workers to regard the Labor Front as their union, noted by Grunberger, begins to appear less surprising, and Guillebaud went so far as to characterize it as having a “strong pro-worker bias.” As Noakes and Pridham observed, Front officials “did not hesitate to apply pressure on employers.” Peter Viereck saw its unionist nature perhaps most succinctly: “Ley’s Labor Front is the world’s largest labor union inasmuch as every single German worker is forced to join.”

It is significant, too, to consider the growth in relative power of this super-union, within the practical development of National Socialism. Dr. Ley, as head of the Front, gave more orders than anyone else in Germany and in effect supervised every human being, according to Wallace Deuel. David Schoenbaum states that the Nazi Party declined and the Labor Front gained in power after 1933. It “has more and more excluded all other organizations with the exception of the Hitler youth] from the field of social activity,” in the judgment of James Pollock.

When the Labor Front was established, it was proclaimed by the Nazis, “an achievement of working-class solidarity.” At the same time, the factory cells were deprived of their authority, to preclude any possibility of worker organization at the local level. The “solidarity” was based, of course, on compulsory worker membership in the Labor Front. Under Weimar, the closed shop was not legal; it came with the Nazis. (One is reminded somewhat of the current drive for the closed shop in France, pushed by progressive employers since the factory occupation movement of May 1968.)

Dues to the Labor Front were thus automatically deducted from wages, along with such other practices familiar today, as the use of the work book or union book, and the growth of compulsory arbitration. And the Nazis were more advanced than the Marxists in their appreciation of the changing work force: their conception of the working class, “workers of Faust and Stirn,” included both blue-collar and white-collar employees. In fact, Nazi labor “leftism” went so far as the Labor Front’s demand, in the January 7, 1938 Party paper *Volkischer Beobachter*, for nationalization of the war industries.

## **Modern Counterparts To The Arbeitsfront?**

Regarding unionism today, we find increasing bureaucratization and centralization: more merging of locals and unions, more workers forced to join unions, the general absence of even formal union democracy, closer and more institutionalized collusion with business and government, more arbitration bargaining taking place at ever higher levels.

When Harvard’s George Wald thought he saw a union-based fascism developing [in the U.S.] in the hard-hat violence of 1970, he missed the point. What he witnessed was only a union-engineered release of the tensions built up from a growing imprisonment of workers. The developing fascism has deep roots. Jacques Ellul’s description is instructive:

“In reality, the growing integration of unions into the state mechanism makes them increasingly an element of state power, and their tendency is to reinforce that power; at that moment a union becomes a mechanism for organizing the laboring masses for the benefit of the state.”

The other side of the story is obviously the worker autonomy and resistance which makes this development necessary in a given form. The militancy of German workers is well-known, and the Labor Front was far from totally successful in containing it. (The miners resorted to passive resistance in 1938 and 1939, and in November, 1939 wage cuts were rescinded, due to plummeting productivity; this was a massive defeat for the regime.)

The “revolt against work” here—absenteeism, turnover, sabotage, low productivity, anti-unionism—is calling for strenuous disciplinary efforts from the unions. We will see whether the American Labor Front, apparently in the process of formation, is as successful as its German predecessor.

\* Available in *Telos* No. 28 or in *Unions Against Revolution*, with G. Munis, Black & Red, 50 cents—available from Ammunition Books (see bookstore ad).

“Unionism and the Labor Front” is extensively footnoted, though they are deleted here for space considerations. They are available from author Zerzan at Upshot, Box 40256, San Francisco, California 94140.

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