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May Day 2016: Once again, German militarism is rearing its ugly head

By Uli Rippert

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The following speech was delivered by Uli Rippert, general secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, Germany), to the International May Day Online Rally held on May 1, 2016.

100 years ago today Karl Liebknecht spoke at Berlin's Potsdamer Platz and called upon workers to oppose war.

The mass slaughters on the battlefields of WW1 had been raging for almost two years. Millions had already fallen. In the midst of this terrible war Liebknecht courageously raised his voice.

His appeal against war comprised of three points. He began with the collapse of the Second International and spoke about the devastating effects of the betrayal of the SPD, which had agreed to war credits in 1914.

He explained the class character of the war and spoke out against the capitalist profiteers. And he stressed that there was only one force that could put an end to the carnage: the proletariat on the basis of an international socialist program.

In his call for the demonstration Liebknecht wrote:

“The proletarian International cannot be re-established in Brussels, Hague or Bern by a few dozen functionaries. It can only be established by the activity of millions. It can only be established here in Germany and over in France, in England, and in Russia, when masses of workers everywhere take up the banner of class struggle and raise their voices thunderously against the genocide ...”

One year later, Russian workers rose up against tsarism and, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, carried out a socialist revolution that ended the war.

Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered when this revolution spread to Germany in November 1918. Here in Berlin the SPD government led by Ebert, Noske and Scheidemann drowned the revolution in blood.

Liebknecht and Luxemburg were killed before they could fully draw the lessons from the betrayal of the SPD, but Lenin and Trotsky emphasized that the struggle against war required a relentless struggle against opportunism and nationalism.

Today—100 years later— all of the unresolved problems of the last century are returning. Once again German imperialism and militarism is rearing its ugly head.

Two years ago the federal government announced the “end of military restraint.” Since then militarism has been systematically promoted. The German army, the Bundeswehr, is at the forefront of the NATO deployment against Russia in Eastern Europe, in wars in the Middle East and even in Africa.

According to German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in an interview a few days ago: “The situation today is more dangerous than during the Cold War.” He continued: “The old order has not yet been replaced by a new one. This struggle for influence and hegemony is not taking place in a peaceful seminar environment, but is exploding violently.”

The military build-up in Germany is being pursued with a vengeance.

The German government has announced plans to increase military spending in the coming years to €130 billion. The spring report of the Bundeswehr listed 20 armament projects worth €60 billion. A new ultra-modern “cyber strike force” consisting of 13,500 soldiers will be set up and equipped with the latest technology.

In the early 1930s German militarism had already astonished the world when it rapidly overcame the defeat of World War I and the limitations of the Versailles Treaty to once again build up one of the most modern and powerful armies ever known. Today, German imperialism is once again striving to be in the frontline of the global arms race.

At present, this policy is taking place in close cooperation with the US. In his recent visit to Germany, President Obama organized a war summit to prepare a new military offensive in Syria and Libya. Immediately afterwards, the Bundeswehr announced it would be deploying troops

and heavy military equipment to Lithuania in order to strengthen Western aggression against Russia.

However, the resurgence of German militarism has not only exacerbated the confrontation with Russia, but also led to increased tensions between European powers. The spectre of a European war returns and transatlantic conflicts can rapidly assume military forms.

All parties support the military build-up and the war drive. The SPD acts as cheerleader and leading warmonger. As for the Greens they have long since ditched their “eco-pacifism” and support the drive to war on the basis of defending “human rights.”

A particularly treacherous role is played by the Left Party. Under the slogan “Unity against the right!” it support the war parties and strives to stifle a socialist development of the working class.

The trade unions also support the war policy. They demand protective tariffs and protectionism and have formed an official pact between the DGB and the Bundeswehr.

These parties and the media constitute a political conspiracy against the people.

However, unlike the situation 100 years ago, when the SPD suppressed the revolution and rescued capitalism, the social democratic parties and trade unions are losing influence. In the recent presidential election in Austria the SPÖ candidate—a former union president—gained just 11 percent of the vote and failed to make the second round.

In France thousands of workers and youth have been demonstrating for weeks against the labour market reforms of the Hollande government. And here in Germany strikes in the public service and engineering industry commenced last week.

We welcome the growing rebellion against the social democratic parties and trade unions. While the Left Party and all of the pseudo-left desperately seek to maintain the authority of the bureaucracies, we fight for the political independence of the working class.

However, the anger and opposition of millions of people demands a new strategy. The struggle against social cuts, dictatorship and war requires the mobilization of the international working class on the basis of an anti-capitalist and socialist program. This is the significance of our international campaign against militarism and war.

When we opposed right-wing professors and their war propaganda at Berlin’s Humboldt University we won considerable support. We were able to repulse all the attempts by the university administration to intimidate us and suppress our opposition to the blatant falsification of history and trivialisation of Nazi crimes. Earlier this year we were able to quadruple the number of our representatives in the student parliament.

We have now decided to expand this political campaign to factories and workplaces.

We have put up our own candidates for the election to the Berlin House of Representatives this autumn and already commenced our campaign. We are turning the election into a referendum against militarism and war.

We will not allow the same corporations and banks that twice plunged the world into the abyss, and committed the greatest ever war crimes, to organize a Third World War.

We combine the militancy and courage with which Karl Liebknecht opposed the First World War 100 years ago with the great political lessons contained in the history of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

That is the big difference. One hundred years ago, the SPD and the Second International collapsed after assuming an opportunistic direction years earlier.

Today, our party is winning influence—a party that fought for decades under difficult conditions, but never gave up the struggle for an international socialist program and assembled a powerful international cadre in the process.

These principles acquire enormous actuality and force today.