

Ernst Meyer, Theorist of Revolutionary Realpolitik

Despite his close relationship with Rosa Luxemburg, early KPD chairman Ernst Meyer is rarely remembered among the historic leaders of the German left. Yet his writing on “revolutionary Realpolitik” offers key insights for socialist strategy today.



An East German stamp featuring Ernst Meyer. Creative Commons

Last year marked the hundredth anniversary of Germany's 1918 [November Revolution](#), which gave rise to the Weimar Republic. Though hopes of socialist revolution in these years were dashed, the centenary offers an opportunity to recall the radical tendencies present in the German workers' movement and especially the Communist Party (KPD) at the time. It is particularly worth paying attention to otherwise forgotten militants, especially when their work can help us respond to current strategic dilemmas on the Left. Ernst Meyer (1887-1930), KPD chairman during its early years, is one of those figures. Meyer was part of a revolutionary Marxist current strongly present in KPD during its early years. After the failed, isolated attempts at insurrection that had marked the post-1918 period, this current believed in the necessity of a Communist *Realpolitik* — a hard-nosed, practical approach to realizing Communist aims under unfavorable circumstances. They saw themselves as German Leninists in the [tradition of Rosa Luxemburg](#), and tried to combine struggles for reforms within capitalism with the goal of overcoming it through

revolution. They advocated for a united-front policy towards the Social Democrats (SPD) and trade unions, a truly *democratic* centralism in the KPD, and a degree of independence from Moscow.

Ernst Meyer's memory has faded even more than other personalities associated with this heterogeneous group such as Paul Levi, Clara Zetkin, Heinrich Brandler, and August Thalheimer. Yet in the 1920s he was an outstanding exponent of this current — and a key theorist of revolutionary *Realpolitik*.

The Forgotten Party Leader

Born in 1887, Meyer joined the SPD in 1908. During World War I he was a major organizer in the Spartacus Group's conspiratorial underground work and played an important role in the November Revolution. He narrowly escaped the fate of his political teacher and friend Rosa Luxemburg, who was murdered by far-right Freikorps soldiers in January 1919. Meyer was in the leadership of the KPD almost without interruption in the early years of the Weimar Republic, and was its faction leader in the Prussian state parliament between 1921 and 1924. As chairman of the KPD from 1921 to 1922, he implemented ideas derived from Luxemburg's own [revolutionary *Realpolitik*](#). This is especially true of the united-front strategy, which he was decisive in pioneering.

Meyer's time at the helm of the KPD also provides a vivid example of the high degree of democracy in the organization's early years. In the [“German October”](#) of 1923, he rejected the purely military insurrection preparations undertaken by his successor Heinrich Brandler and argued that the uprising must emerge from an intensification of social struggles. He was also one of the earliest and fiercest critics of abandoning revolution as a serious objective — an objective that would indeed ultimately be abandoned, almost without a fight.

Though Meyer was subsequently pushed to the margins, he became KPD leader once again in 1927. He resisted implementing party structures dictated by Moscow and was committed in defending Luxemburg's legacy, internal party democracy, and the united-front policy. He was ultimately defeated in internal faction fights and died of tuberculosis in 1930 at the young age of forty-two, dejected by the bureaucratic and authoritarian degeneration evident in the world Communist movement.

Meyer was able to leave his imprint on German Communism during various phases of its development, albeit with varied results. This was particularly true of the period between the Jena and Leipzig Party Congresses (August 1921 to January 1923), when he led the organization.

Meyer's most important achievement was his central role in consolidating what was still a very young party. Just after uniting with the left wing of the

Independent Social Democrats (USPD), the KPD found itself in a severe crisis, after launching the catastrophic 1921 “March Action.” This armed workers’ revolt, initiated by the KPD, the ultra-left KAPD, and other far-left forces in the industrial areas around Halle, Leuna, Merseburg, and the Mansfeld region, had rapidly led to disaster. Yet taking over the leadership in the wake of the catastrophe, Meyer avoided major splits and halted the exodus of members — in fact, under his chairmanship the party even managed to bring in forty-four thousand new comrades. Communist influence in the trade unions rose significantly, along with election results.

With Meyer as chairman, the KPD was able to develop and consolidate its identity as a mass party — such as it would remain until the end of the Weimar Republic. He contributed to this consolidation on two levels: on the one hand, his balanced and integrative leadership style enabled the heterogeneous party to develop a common political practice. On the other, he succeeded in changing the KPD’s relations with the non-Communist working class through the policy of the united front.

When Meyer returned to the helm for several months in 1927 — now alongside his rival [Ernst Thälmann](#) — his influence on KPD policies was again profound. The party continued to grow during this period, increased its influence, and consolidated its standing through intensive education work — especially in the field of party history, to which he held dearly. Meyer contributed to the party’s positive development just as he had in 1921–22: his organizational style promoted cross-current cooperation among the leadership, and he again succeeded in pushing for a united-front policy.

The United Front’s Unflagging Champion

The continued development and deployment of the united front strategy (as adopted at the 1921 Third World Congress of the Comintern) constitutes Meyer’s personal contribution to Communist theory and practice, at least in the German context. In short, the united front is an example of revolutionary *Realpolitik* — an attempt to carry out effective revolutionary politics on a mass scale in a non-revolutionary environment.

As a pupil of Rosa Luxemburg, Meyer believed the indispensable precondition for revolution was winning proletarian majorities to Communism. At the time, however, the majority of the working class still supported [Social Democracy](#), and the KPD was forced to look for ways to pull them away from the SPD. Meyer considered the united-front strategy to be the most effective means of doing this.

Here, the decisive criterion was no longer whether a demand was sufficiently

radical, but whether it could lead to broad extra-parliamentary struggles that would include the entire working class and spark a wave of radicalization extending beyond the current horizon of parliamentary politics. According to this approach, to combine struggles for concrete improvements with work towards revolutionary upheaval in society did not represent a contradiction, but rather an internal unity of action. The approach also required the KPD to issue proposals for joint action with the SPD. But an indispensable requirement of this was that the Communists should maintain their organizational independence and freedom to criticize their allies — publicly, if necessary. Meyer's aversion to dogmatism and opportunism can be seen in how he approached the question of a possible "workers' government," i.e. a joint government of Social Democrats and Communists. Indeed, a strategy of common SPD-KPD struggle for concrete demands required consideration of what kind of government would eventually implement them.

Meyer rejected government participation as a long-term strategy that assumed capitalism could gradually be overcome through reform. He argued that such a strategy would lead to the party's integration into capitalism, a politics of representation, and thus also the abandonment of any prospect or hope of revolution.

At the same time, however, he rejected the assumption — made by the left wing of the KPD and the Comintern — that a workers' government should be understood as nothing more than the "dictatorship of the proletariat." For Meyer, a workers' government was an independent element in a wider strategy of socialist transformation. If accompanied by intensifying class struggle and an offensive by the proletariat, it could contribute to the weakening of the bourgeoisie.

Such a workers' government would have to rely not only on parliament, but also on a united front of the organizations of the working class (works councils, control committees, proletarian militias) and be accountable to them. Meyer believed that such a government could significantly strengthen the position of the working class, for instance if it imposed control over production, drastically raise taxes on the rich, or disarmed fascist organizations and armed the workers. At no time did Meyer's *Realpolitik* constitute a turn away from overthrowing capitalism through revolution. On the contrary, this marked an attempt to reach the revolutionary goal under capitalist conditions. Understood this way, Communist participation in government could function as a springboard to a democracy based on workers' councils, and socialism.

A Democratic Communist

Ernst Meyer was also the KPD leader who, through various phases of the party's development, most resolutely emphasized the necessity of democracy and freedom of discussion within the organization. He consistently favored solving political conflicts politically, through broad debate and persuasion. Expulsions following intense political arguments were regarded as a last resort — albeit sometimes a necessary one — while he viewed administrative and bureaucratic methods of “resolving” internal party differences as an abomination. He advocated for the integration of different positions and currents into a common, and thus de facto plural Communist Party as early as 1921. He adopted a similar attitude to “right-wing” opposition in the KPD in the late 1920s, earning him the defamatory nickname “The Conciliator.” Meyer operated in the space between discussion and democracy and effective and centralized action. This represented the dual lesson he had learned from negative developments in Social Democracy during World War I, when the struggle against the SPD's party apparatus and its bureaucratic methods had shown him the need for internal party democracy. At the same time, he came to the conclusion that it was vital to cultivate a common praxis binding members together, seeing the SPD as a party that had failed to develop a praxis corresponding to its own radical program. Meyer believed this explained how, despite all its antiwar rhetoric, the SPD had sunk so deep into the waters of support for imperialism.

This experience turned him into a passionate supporter of democratic centralism. In his view, the principles of this position were: freedom of internal discussion, unity in external action and subordination of the minority to jointly passed resolutions or democratically elected bodies — with a strong emphasis on *democratic*. His approach differed markedly from the model that later came to dominate the “Stalinized” Communist parties, a model of bureaucratic centralism lacking any real freedom of discussion. Meyer stuck to this commitment to party democracy throughout his career.

Leading the “Conciliators”

After the defeated “German October” of 1923, a group emerged, concentrated around Meyer, on the basis of critiques of this insurrectionary experience. It advocated for a continuation of revolutionary *Realpolitik*, earning itself the nickname of the “Meyer” or “Middle Group.” Its followers — including Arthur Ewert, Gerhart Eisler, Hugo Eberlein, Jacob Walcher, and Paul Frölich (who was also the best man at Meyer's wedding) — believed that the united-front strategy was an elementary instrument for winning proletarian majorities to Communism under non-revolutionary conditions.

As humanist Marxists, they joined the opposition in the second half of the 1920s as internal party democracy was dismantled across the Communist movement. They defended the emancipatory traditions of revolutionary Marxism against the party's increasingly draconian bureaucratic regime, and called for a revolutionary *Realpolitik* in stark contrast to the leadership's abstract revolutionary slogans.

There were significant programmatic overlaps between the "Conciliators" and the "KPD Right" around Heinrich Brandler. Disagreements did exist, however, particularly in their respective evaluations of October 1923. While Brandler viewed it as an expression of the objective balance of forces, Meyer faulted what he saw as Brandler's incorrect and opportunistic interpretation of the united-front strategy. They disagreed again in their evaluation of the party's left wing around Thälmann: in Meyer's view, the group consisted of sincere revolutionary workers who had rejected the united-front strategy as a consequence of the 1923 defeat — a decision which Meyer disagreed with in substance, but considered a psychologically understandable reaction.

Meyer's strategy was to peel Thälmann and his followers away from the ultra-left concentrated around Ruth Fischer and win them over to a "concentrated leadership" together with his Middle Group. Meyer hoped to convince them that the united front was the correct strategy through practical cooperation. The KPD did in fact return to this path temporarily in 1926–27, forming a party leadership with Thälmann and Meyer at its head.

The Russian faction fights between Nikolai Bukharin on the "right" and a newly "left" Joseph Stalin spread into the KPD following the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, and Brandler's "right" supporters soon faced expulsion from the party. They found their most committed defender in Ernst Meyer. He insisted on maintaining democratic principles and freedom of discussion, and resisted attempts to resolve political conflicts on an organizational level by simply expelling longstanding and experienced comrades. Nevertheless, by the end of 1928 Brandler's supporters saw themselves compelled to found their own organization, the KPD (Opposition). A number of Meyer's former supporters joined them.

A Lesson in Socialist Continuity

To overcome capitalism in the twenty-first century, the socialist movement must first reestablish a popular mass base. It will only succeed if it can credibly claim that humanity's emancipation from all forms of exploitation and oppression can be achieved by a unity of socialism and democracy, and that this universal emancipation requires the emancipation of the working class as its precondition.

Ernst Meyer remains a particularly relevant example of a twentieth-century activist and party militant who consciously strove to embody the emancipatory traditions of the workers' movement. Engaging with his legacy can help to promote strategic thinking and learning on the Left today.

His united-front policy and his attitude to workers' governments are particularly meaningful for us. Their history contains lessons for socialists' relationship to Social Democracy and trade unions, questions of left-wing hegemony, and ongoing debates about the strategic goal(s) of left governments. Through Meyer, it becomes clear that struggles for concrete reforms and a revolution to overcome the system are by no means contradictory goals, and can indeed be made into an organic unit of anticapitalist strategies. Dogmatism and the authoritarian rule of the party apparatus were not inscribed into the Communist project from the outset. On the contrary: in the first decade of its existence, the KPD was an extremely vibrant, pluralist party where a variety of viewpoints and strategies were discussed with a high degree of internal democracy.

Looking back on figures like Meyer can help us to recognize the potential of an alternative development in the Communist movement. The buried and forgotten current of those KPD Leninists who stood in the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg can serve as a point of reference for everyone who seeks to revive and reconnect with revolutionary traditions, and retrace and consider historical lines of development that can be used to construct a new mass socialist movement in the twenty-first century.

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