

The Enduring Lessons of Red Vienna

For almost two decades at the start of the twentieth century, Austria's Social Democrats pursued a radical agenda of social progress in the country's capital – even as dark clouds gathered around them.



On 15 March 1933, the Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss ordered the police to dissolve a session of the Austrian Parliament, threatening armed force against any resistance. This act of police intervention was triggered by the resignations of all three of the National Council's presidents eleven days earlier.

Reflecting on those dark hours, the Social Democratic leader and theoretician Otto Bauer wrote that Vienna's City Hall — 'the Austrian Social Democrats' proudest fortress' — had fallen:

it is occupied by the military; right there, in the city centre, where no workers live and none could resist. Only Mayor Karl Seitz put up a fight, telling the police sent in by the fascists: 'I will not leave my office! Two thirds of the people of Vienna have sent me here and no one has the right to remove me. I will not comply with this violation of the constitution.' The police then violently seized him and, seeing as he would not submit, hauled this 66-year-old, sickly man—who had once served the National Council as its first president—off to prison.

The violent events of 15 March precipitated the rise of Austria's one-party, clerical

fascist state, known as the *Ständestaat*. Using what he called the ‘self-elimination of parliament’ as a pretext for authoritarian rule, Dolfuss caused a rupture in the Austrian state which culminated in a brief but violent civil war between fascist and socialist forces in February 1934. However, his tenure as dictator was short, and he was soon assassinated by Nazi agents in June of that year; four years later, Austria was absorbed into the Third Reich under the terms of the *Anschluss*.

15 March was also the end of Austria’s first experiment with republicanism. Spanning the end of the First World War up until 1933, this period was marked above all else by deep political tension between the reactionary state and Vienna, the country’s socialist capital. That political struggle officially began in 1920 when the Social Democrats lost control over the Austrian federal government and were compelled to focus exclusively on municipal communal politics, while a coalition of conservative Christian Socials and the nationalist Great German People’s Party ruled nationally.

Despite their minoritarian position in parliament, Austrian Social Democrats did not recoil from actively challenging the conservative coalition or their allies in the media and the church. Instead, they sank resources in drawing global visibility to their socialist experiment, hatching strategies aimed at regaining control of the state through the mobilisation of a mass movement of working-class people.

This socialist experiment would come to be known as Red Vienna, a period of widespread reform in the Austrian capital, most visible in the domains of social housing, education, and public health. Indeed, despite the many challenges that Austrian Social Democrats faced—which included a global Great Depression, a federal deficit bequeathed to the First Republic by the old Habsburg Monarchy’s wartime adventurism, and the political opposition they faced from the country’s ruling federal parties and clerical fiefdoms—Vienna’s socialists poured their efforts into building enduring institutions, many of which survived the two violent regimes that followed their fourteen-year rule and endure to this day.

Fighting Visionaries

On 3 November 1926, Austrian Social Democrats convened for their party convention in the Austrian town of Linz to articulate a tactical position that would secure their accession to state power. The result was their ‘Policies for a Social-Democratic Party of German-Austria’, or the ‘Linz Program’, one of the founding documents of ‘Austromarxism’, which represented a compromise between the pragmatic and revolutionary wings of the party.



Red Vienna's world-renowned Karl-Marx-Hof social housing project was emblematic of the Social Democrats' reforms for workers. (Credit: Getty)

Describing the history of democratic republics as the history of hegemonic struggle between the bourgeoisie and working classes, the document lays out a vision for working-class militancy and a path towards nothing less than a revolution within the Republic and its democratic institutions:

1. Austrian bourgeois hegemony is realised not only through political power, but through tradition, the press, school, and the Catholic Church. Thus, the goal of the Social Democrats must be to overthrow those class interests in order to create a majority rule of working people — both in the country and in the city.
2. Should the bourgeois class be threatened, it will turn its interests over to the monarchists or the fascists in order to maintain its power. The Social Democrats must prepare to defend the Republic against these forces through alliance with the Republic's soldiers and through physical and psychological defensive training. Should the fascists nevertheless succeed in mobilising fascist or monarchist forces, the working class would be forced to pursue a civil war in order to gain control of state power.
3. The Social Democrats would pursue state power only in the form of democratic institutions.
4. Finally, the working class' aspirations to state power are not based in asserting one form of class dominance over another, but rather lie in the dissolution of all forms of class domination.

The Linz Program reveals a strong commitment to political militancy often obscured in narratives of the period. This owes, in part, to the outcome of the struggle between socialism and fascism in the 1930s and the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. Yet, the

Program shows that the socialists were neither meek nor naïve. On the contrary, they were acutely aware of the imminent threat of the reactionary forces controlling Austria's state and ruling cultural institutions. Moreover, the municipal project of Red Vienna did not represent a timid retreat from state politics: rather, the Social Democrats used Red Vienna as a springboard for their larger plans for obtaining state power, a goal which hinged on their ability to capture and positively channel the energies of the working classes.

Social Housing

Perhaps more than any achievement of Red Vienna, the Social Democrats' prodigious accomplishments in social housing and architecture stand out for their utility as instruments of a militant and fighting working class. The spectacular Karl-Marx-Hof, a housing complex conceived of as a 'superblock' of working-class apartments running over a kilometre in length, was the apogee of working-class residential 'fortifications' and serves as the most visible architectural symbol of Red Vienna to this day.

Critics of the socialists' social housing projects bemoaned the incongruity of these mammoth units in a formerly imperial city dotted with the elegant palaces of the Austrian nobility and the lush apartments of the industrialists on the Ringstraße. They also voiced concern over the tactical proximity of social housing projects to bridges, train stations, and other crucial transit points. Fearing armed resistance from these red fortresses, they viewed Social Democrat housing projects not only as an affront to the city's retiring Biedermeier aesthetics, but as an important step in the working classes' effort to supplant the ruling bourgeoisie with proletarian dictatorship.

Located in the neighbourhood of Heiligenstadt, a bucolic Viennese district known for its profitable viticulture, wealthy wine merchants, and rotund singers performing at local taverns, the Karl-Marx-Hof was a bold provocation to the surrounding area's bourgeoisie. Built on marshy ground, it was, moreover, a literal demonstration of the durability and the strength of socialist projects and ideas. At its opening ceremony in October 1930, the Social Democratic educational theorist and Vienna Board of Education President Otto Glöckel announced: 'Where we once built castles and fortresses for knights and the nobility, for the people's oppressors, we now build people's fortresses.'

Thus, the castles of yore, intended as bulwarks against incursions from enemy armies, were transformed by the Social Democrats into housing projects that offered physical protection to workers from their reactionary enemies. However, they were also testaments to utopian aspirations and socialist ingenuity. Within the Karl-Marx-Hof, residents could take advantage of municipal kindergartens, pools, laundries, stores, post offices, and a clinic. Writing for the *Worker's Newspaper* about a visit to the Winarskyhof in Vienna's twentieth district in 1927, the German expressionist playwright (and president of Munich's short-lived Soviet Republic) Ernst Toller observed that:

Every room has parquet flooring, every housing unit has a central washing and drying unit, a kindergarten, library, assembly hall, cinema, and conference room. Just think

what it means to the proletarian woman to know that she can leave her child at her home, deposit her laundry in one of the electrically-powered wash cauldrons, and accomplish menial tasks that would otherwise last two days in a few strokes ... one need only look at the city's old working residences to see what it has *created*. Toller's praise for the Winarskyhof and the Social Democrats' accomplishments in social housing also demonstrate the subtler overtones of the Red Vienna socialist project in the 1920s. Progress in working people's lives was measured not only in the tons of brick and stone that went into building the Karl-Marx-Hof, but also by the incremental changes experienced by workers in their daily lives. Thus a poster advertising a series of lectures on sexual morality, socialism, and the role of women in a socialist society to women and girls advertised for 19 January 1932 announces: 'Women and girls! Come to these interesting and informative lectures. Learn what you didn't learn in school! We have heating.' Vienna's Social Democrats understood that to make their politics attractive to working people, they should spare no effort in providing workers with mental and physical nourishment.

Education and the Future

Austrian Social Democrats understood their project in the Marxist context of a protracted class war that needed to be fought on all fronts: culture, politics, and the economy. For this war to succeed, they needed to enlist workers—both adults and children—to their cause. A key strategy for that success was an investment in early childhood and adult education.

On this front, the Austromarxist leader Otto Glöckel referred to education and schools in his foundational 1917 pamphlet as the 'Towers of the Future'. During the 1926 Linz party convention, Glöckel passed a robust educational reform package; entitled 'Guidelines for Public Education', these proposals limited the size of school classes to thirty students, created special schools for children with mental and physical handicaps, and guaranteed children access to education until they were of working age. Glöckel's school reforms were articulated with the aim of 'abolishing the monopoly of the bourgeoisie on education.'



A soldier stands guard by the distinctive arches of Karl-Marx-Hof, following the outlawing of the Social Democrats. (Credit: Getty)

Otto Felix Kanitz, a Social Democrat politician and Marxist who ran ‘Kinderfreunde’, a revolutionary proletarian educational institute at an old imperial summer residence, advanced an equally militant approach to childhood education. For Kanitz, a properly proletarian education afforded no room for ‘neutrality’. Neutrality, he argued, was in effect anti-Marxist, and the goal of Marxist educators should be to teach children about the history of class oppression through history, culture, and literature.

Education, he wrote, had long been the domain of the class oppressors, who taught their own children the skills of logic and clarity — tools that had long been denied the children of the proletariat. A properly socialist education, he concluded, need not diverge from the bourgeois model, but rather extend its riches to working children.

The Social Democrats also pioneered reform in adult education, putting together workers’ libraries, cultural programs that offered theatrical entertainment, and adult schools. By 1932, workers’ libraries had lent a total of 2.3 million books out. An article titled ‘Nothing but time! How do I spend my free time?’ published anonymously in the *Worker’s Newspaper* in 1929 mocked the capitalist’s hegemony over workers’ labour time, encouraging laborers to spend their time pursuing worthwhile cultural endeavours: ‘What did the boss tell me again today? Did he say that I’m dumb, incapable, and inept? Who cares! For today I am free! ... I think I’ll go to the political cabaret!’

The City Builders

The brutal end to Red Vienna’s socialist experiment was by no means a foregone conclusion. What the Social Democrats had not reckoned with was the military, which would side with the fascists. Writing about the end of the First Republic, Otto Bauer

reflected on the failures of the Social Democrats:

There are some that say that we have failed because our politics have been too doctrinaire for years now — too radical, too uncompromising, too *left*. Others say: our politics were too timid, too cautious, and that we lacked the revolutionary spunk that we needed to mobilise the broader masses ...

This second story has formed the broader narrative in surveys of the Austrian Social Democrats' experiment in Red Vienna, while the first has received little attention. The failures of Austrian socialists are chalked up to their naiveté and failure to understand the broader appeal of fascism. Yet that story elides an important aspect of the Social Democrats' radical program during the 1920s and early '30s. Their achievements in education, social housing, and other areas demonstrate an uncompromising vision for an alternative future for a former imperial capital, succeeding often despite terrible odds. Indeed, the Social Democrats pulled Vienna out of miserable pre-war poverty and offered the working classes both a cogent theory of their own historical immiseration and the confidence to pursue self-realisation through culture, literature, and art.

A relatively unknown terracotta relief in Vienna's working-class tenth district gives an idealised depiction of a scene from Red Vienna. It shows four brawny workers—two men and two women—in classical garb. The men each wield a hammer and a spade, while the women loosely embrace each other. Like Atlas, the men's hands extend to hold up a mural crown (the medieval symbol for a city), while the women form a pillar of support between them. The artist, Otto Hofner, gave his 1924 relief the title: 'city builders.'

Vienna faces new challenges in 2020 — exactly 100 years after the socialists first lost their control of the federal government. That challenge emanates, in part, from the successors to the Austrian Social Democratic Party, the SPÖ (Socialist Party of Austria), which has presided over a rise in rents through real estate speculation and is currently embarking on a coalition with the neoliberal NEOS Party, promising to 'modernise' the city through further privatisation schemes.

Another threat—albeit recently blunted—comes from the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria): the successors to the fascist party, who have been temporarily stalled by a 2019 corruption affair, but whose appeal still holds sway over many working people who have retreated from socialist promise to a xenophobic worldview. Yet Hofner's relief provides encouragement in its symbolisation of the city, for it shows who builds cities and who should continue to own their most prized assets: workers.