

August 15, 1975

TO THE LENINIST TROTSKYIST FACTION STEERING COMMITTEE

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed is a translation of a document by Siegfried Kreisler taking up the issues raised by the article on Republica in the June 26 issue of Was Tun. This document has been submitted to the discussion bulletin of the GIM. (The Was Tun article is published in the SWP Internal Information Bulletin No. 1 in 1975.)

Comradely,

Mary Alice Waters

The Republica Affair

Was Tun on the side of the MFA and the Stalinists
against Freedom of the Press in Portugal

by Siegfried Kreisler, Heidelberg

The lead article in Was Tun, no. 79, "Portugal: The Up-roar over Republica," signed by H.D./W.W. takes a position on fundamental questions of the Trotskyist program. This being the case, a thorough discussion in the leadership bodies was called for. But, in accordance with what has now become common practice, this did not happen. Instead, most members of the leadership had to read about the line in the newspaper. And this is then also reflected in the line itself. In the following we will attempt to prove that the GIM has been damaged by this article.

In this article the following assertions are made:

1. In the closing of Republica it was "not a question of the freedom of the masses being threatened, rather the freedom of the few," that is, "the freedom to agitate against the struggles of workers and their organizations...; the freedom to poison the open atmosphere of discussion, mass experience and independent activity of the masses with lies and manipulations" (IIB, no. 1 in 1975, pp. 31-32).*

2. What was fundamentally involved was a labor dispute: "The workers were reacting to threatening lay-offs and unemployment" (ibid., p. 32).

3. The printers' political differences with the editorial board occurred "in addition." The editors "were specially pushing into the foreground of the newspaper sharp attacks against other workers' parties, above all against the PCP" (ibid.).

For all these reasons, in the opinion of the authors of the article, the occupation of the socialist newspaper Republica by the troops of the military government and the closing of the newspaper were justified.

This position is based on contrived "facts," is self-contradictory, and in contradiction to the program of the Fourth International.

* The titles and the by-lines of the two Was Tun articles in this bulletin were inadvertently reversed. The article referred to here mistakenly bears the title "Soviets in Lisbon?" by Franz Sprechler.

Let us start with the facts. The assertion that it was a question of a labor conflict is supported by maintaining that the workers reacted to threatening lay-offs. We would be grateful to the authors if they could tell us the source of this report. It cannot be found anywhere except in Unsere Zeit [newspaper of the German CP], which considers no lie too bold for covering up the machinations of its Stalinists sister party in Portugal. All the statements of the printing workers and the printers' union show quite clearly that it was exclusively a question of the political line of the paper, which did not suit the printers and the CP-dominated printers' union. The printers became unemployed as a result of the occupation of the newspaper with government troops, who exploited the action of the Stalinist-led printers' union. Hence it was in no way a matter of a normal labor conflict about economic questions.

Having straightened out the facts, we can move on to the questions of principle.

Is the closing of Republica a blow just (?) to the capitalists?

First of all, it must be said that Republica was the principal medium through which the Socialist Party brought its views to the masses, even if it was not an official party newspaper. Thus the banning of the paper hit very directly against the party which at the present has the broadest base in the working class and the masses, as was made clear by--among other things--the elections which took place a few months ago. In this respect, the closing is the equivalent of a massive restriction on freedom of opinion for a whole wing of the workers' movement, namely the social democratic wing.

Our conflict with the MFA and the Stalinists is therefore on the question of whether we are for the right of the social democracy to express their opinions freely without any limitations and repression. In our view the answer is a clear yes! We Trotskyists are for the right of all currents in the workers' movement to bring their views to the masses. We are even for the right of openly bourgeois currents to express their views in their own papers.

Why? Because we believe that the working class and its revolutionary wing can only profit from the greatest possible freedom of the press, discussion, etc. We are not afraid of this exchange of opinions, on the contrary we consider it to be useful and necessary for the education of the working class. We agree with Trotsky who answered supporters of a ban on the reactionary press by saying:

"In reality, only the greatest freedom of speech, of the press, and of association can create conditions for the advance of the revolutionary movement of the working class.

"In reality, it is essential to wage a relentless struggle against the reactionary press. But workers cannot let the repressive fist of the bourgeois state substitute for the struggle that they must wage through their own organizations and their press." ("Freedom of the Press and the Working Class," Intercontinental Press, June 9, 1975, p. 800.)

Every limitation on a democratic right is thus a blow against the working class's freedom of movement under capitalism.

"For the bourgeoisie, democratic rights are not essential to preserve their class rule; in fact, in today's world, democratic rights stand in the way of maintaining their rule--which is why we see such an erosion of democracy in the "free" world. For the working class, democratic rights are precious assets in the struggle for social emancipation." ("The Reopening of Republica--a Significant Victory," IP, June 16, 1975, p. 802.)

Even when the repression is not aimed directly against the workers' movement at the outset, it is potentially affected, because every form of state repression creates a precedent that the bourgeois state employs to create the instruments it can use to suppress the workers' movement.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Portugal today.

Background of the Republica affair

The long-term goal of the MFA is to obtain absolute control over the state and over public life as a whole. It must accomplish this quickly, if things are not to slip from its grasp. Their major problem is to contain the mass mobilizations unleashed by the fall of Caetano, and to achieve a step by step depoliticization of public life. At present, this is only possible with great difficulty. The MFA has to adapt to the general radicalization and not infrequently even to race to the head of it.

The MFA's major partner in achieving its ends is at present the Communist Party. The CP brings the necessary prerequisites to this alliance: a) strong influence in the organized workers' movement by virtue of occupying leadership positions in the trade unions, b) an efficient party apparatus which can serve as a transmission belt for exercising influence on public life, and c) the kind of bureaucratic homogeneity which makes it possible for the leadership to direct the membership without any "unnecessary" questions being asked.

How these factors work together within the CP's role can be seen in the example of the strikes that have taken place recently, very much against the will of the MFA. In each case the MFA employed the CP as a strikebreaker, a role that it

played brilliantly. The CP used a) its weight in the trade union leadership to end the strikes; it used b) its influence in the mass media to defame the strikes and isolate them (take for example the postal workers' strike that the CP branded as a "fascist provocation"), and it c) directed its rank and file to develop regular strike breaking activities.

At the moment the SP leadership cannot promise all of this, although it commands more sympathy among the people and a broader base, and even though they would gladly replace the CP as the military's favored errand boy.

The MFA's medium-term goal is to push back the political parties. This is summed up in their polemic against "party squabbling." They have already taken a whole number of steps in this direction. We should note the following:

a) the pact with the parties made this spring, assuring the MFA a long-term leading role in the government regardless of the outcome of the elections.

b) the introduction of the unified trade-union federation, providing institutional assurance for the CP bureaucrats' control over the trade unions.

c) the theory of creating direct rank and file organizations of the MFA, in which political currents and parties would have no role, and which would incorrectly be called "soviets."

d) actions against various Maoists, their press, headquarters, demonstrations, etc.

e) the June 21 communique of the MFA council, announcing a new law which envisions "quick and decisive intervention" against journalists who "intentionally distort the news" and present a "damaging picture" of Portugal.

f) finally, the closing of the newspaper Republica, the only Socialist Party daily.

At present, the MFA is not able to achieve all of this alone, utilizing its own strength. It needs the help of the CP, which is, of course, happy to be able to play its real role as the agent of the imperialist bourgeoisie in the workers' movement so brilliantly. However, the better and the more successfully the CP plays its role, the sooner it will itself come under the gun. When its services are no longer needed, it will share the fate of its Chilean sister.

What kind of socialism do we want--and how will we achieve it?

It is clear that we have a deepgoing difference with the authors of the Was Tun article about the form of society we Trotskyists are fighting for and how we plan to achieve it. The authors counterpose the "freedom [of press] of the few," that is of the capitalists, which is allegedly being abolished by the bourgeois regime, to the "freedom of the masses," which is allegedly defended by the imperialist Portuguese government, if we are to believe our Was Tun authors.

Such a distinction is totally out of order when dealing with general democratic rights like freedom of the press and speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association. Where do you draw the line between what is "permissible" to say and what not. And who is to decide that? the "party"? The government? What danger is there in allowing the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois parties to freely express their opinions? Do we think that the masses are so susceptible to their arguments, and if so, will the problem be solved by forbidding freedom of speech?

We disagree 100 percent. We want to encourage the working class to keep the bourgeoisie from forming governments, from retaining the means of production as their private property, and from encroaching upon the democratic rights of the masses. We do not wish to keep them from forming their own parties, from having their own parties, running in elections, etc.

In contrast, our authors justify the banning of the newspaper Republica on the grounds that what is at issue here is the freedom of the bourgeois press "to agitate against the struggles of workers and their organizations...; to poison the open atmosphere of discussion, mass experience, and independent activity of the masses with lies and manipulations."

H.D./W.W. obviously don't feel that they are up to such a public exchange of ideas and think they must resort to bans. But then they must answer the following question: esteemed comrades, why don't you demand the banning of the CP newspapers? It can be very easily shown that the CP newspapers have agitated "against the struggles of workers and their organizations" much more viciously, have manipulated on a far more massive scale, etc. Will you be on the side of the MFA when it undertakes to ban CP newspapers?

Moreover, if we take a closer look at why the military regime and the Stalinists felt Republica was a thorn in their side, the reason is quite easy to see: it was the critical reporting of the CP's actions which the SP published for its own partisan reasons. In the last issues before the closing there was: a list of 70 people, almost all of them well-known opponents of the Salazar dictatorship. who the CP wanted to purge from the television stations; a report on the opposition

in the metal workers union which opposed the CP's proposal to lengthen the work week; and a report on a strike wave that started at the beginning of May.

We Trotskyists are for the freedom of the bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, Stalinist and social democratic press to spread lies, agitate against the workers, etc. We are not afraid of this. And above all we deny every capitalist government the right to limit any democratic right of anyone. We grant the bourgeois state no right what so ever to take repressive measures, not even against the reactionary press.

There is a further problem involved in the Republica affair. The Was Tun authors celebrate the occupation of the editorial offices by the printers as a step toward workers' control of the press. However, here they overlook one small detail: if this action is to set a precedent it means that the party that controls the printers' union can paralyze and take over practically every newspaper in the country, and any differing political opinion can be suppressed. This sort of "workers control" is more reminiscent of Stalinism than the Trotskyist program.

What about the thousands of workers who support the SP and regard Republica as their newspaper. Sixty thousand of them took to the streets in Lisbon to defend "their" paper. Don't they have a right to freedom of opinion and freedom of information?

Of course, there is a fundamental difference between freedom of the press under capitalism and freedom of the press under socialism. Freedom of the press in the bourgeois democracies must remain largely an empty formality because the press--like almost everything in capitalism--works on the profit principle and so only big capital can use this right to the fullest extent, while the press that is independent of the bourgeoisie has to live a marginal existence. To this are added measures of direct political and economic repression against the workers' press as soon as the bourgeoisie senses a serious threat from this quarter and the relationship of forces allows it. Then they begin to do away with even the formal rights.

Under socialism, on the other hand, the actual weight of the working class will also be reflected in the press. A workers' state in a highly industrialized country of Western Europe or North America will have sufficient resources to make it possible for every political current to participate in public discussion of all political questions in accordance with its actual social bases.

"But the Bolsheviks..."

It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Was Tun authors and the comrades who agree with their views will fall back on the argument that the Bolsheviks and even Trotsky himself

used repressive measures against the bourgeois and Menshevik press.

On this the following can be said: With the USSR what was involved was a workers' state. We in no way dispute the right of a workers' state to use repressive measures for the purpose of self-defense. But these can only be emergency measures in extremely critical situations. This was the case in the USSR at the time of Lenin and Trotsky. The newspapers and the parties of the bourgeoisie, the Social Revolutionaries, and the Mensheviks were only banned when they called for an armed uprising against the Soviet republic and the civil war began. But the ban on the bourgeois and the petty bourgeois press was not the program of the Bolsheviks, just as the civil war was not part of their program.

Thus it was wrong in every respect to refer to the measures of self-defense taken by the young Soviet Republic in discussing freedom of the press in Portugal.

The position taken by the authors of the Was Tun lead article is so dangerous because it does not recognize that the attack on freedom of the press by the military regime and the Stalinists is not so much directed against the Portuguese SP, which shares the CP's perspectives, but against the right of the working class as a whole to organize against the policies of the military regime and to counterpose itself to the regime.

What would have been necessary here in West Germany would have been a clear position in favor of the right of all political currents to express their opinions freely. Only that would have put us in a position to counter the renewed demagoguery from the right to the effect that socialism is once again revealing its totalitarian nature, while they themselves defend freedom of the press. These are, unfortunately, arguments that still fall on fertile ground among broad layers of the masses, in view of the monstrous dictatorships which present themselves as "socialism." And how will the GIM present itself to the social democratic workers, if it tells them that within the GIM's concept of socialism, there will be no place for their views and their press.

The result is clear: The newspaper of the GIM, by parroting Stalinist arguments, has brought Trotskyism into disrepute-- not in the eyes of the left (which is certainly pleased) but in the eyes of the politically approachable workers.

Mannheim, July 10, 1975