How Labor Faced Hitler's Invasion

By JAY LOVESTONE

HOW did Hitler manage to accomplish the invasion of Austria so easily, something that only six or seven months before no one in Europe had thought he would even dare to attempt? Chamberlain, the British prime minister, opened the door and Stalin paved the way. As a matter of fact, Hitler broke in thru an open door. Schuschnigg had really no popular support in the country. He himself was but the representative of a certain brand of fascism—clerical-fascism which, tho differing from the Hitler type, was thoroly fascist nevertheless. Thruout, Schuschnigg depended upon the Catholic Church, and to do this nowadays one must be deaf, dumb and blind.

Schuschnigg's Dilemma

As the situation became desperate, Schuschnigg began to realize that he could no longer rely on the Church for protection. It certainly was not unknown to him—I noticed it myself—that, two weeks before Hitler's entry in Vienna, young Catholic priests and Catholic students could be seen parading along with Nazi elements thru the streets of Vienna. In the plebiscite he was planning, the Nazis, being very well organized, seemed likely to win at least 30% of the votes, if not more. Without any strong forces behind him, he felt himself compelled to turn to the workers and try to mobilize their support. At best, he could hardly expect to get more than 75% of the vote. In an ordinary party election contest, this would be considered a pretty good majority but, in a totalitarian plebiscite, such an outcome would hardly be a great triumph. That is why Schuschnigg was so anxious to win the support of the broad masses of the people, at least during the emergency. He therefore finally decided to turn to the labor leaders.

I participated in the deliberations of the workers deputies to formulate a policy in dealing with Schuschnigg. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, affiliated with the Socialist International, a very strong left organization, worked hand in hand with our comrades.

At the conference with Schuschnigg, it appeared that there was considerable difference of opinion among the representatives of the democratic and radical organizations. Very significant was the position taken by the Stalinist communists. The Stalinites came out for Schuschnigg without any question or reservation. Their motto was "Red, White, Red—with Schuschnigg till death." They made no demands and asked for no concessions to organized labor. The Revolutionary Socialists and the trade unionists, on the other hand, demanded definite concessions to the labor movement. They took the attitude that, if Schuschnigg wanted the workers to vote "Yes" in the referendum, he would have to promise to loosen up his own dictatorship. Concretely, the demands were: 1. free elections in the unions; 2. the right to wear their insignia and to carry their own banners and flags; 3. freedom for the press; and 4. the reestablishment of the rights of the workers.

We also advanced a demand which we considered the most important of all, namely, to open the streets to the working masses and allow the workers to carry arms. The Schuschnigg government was strengthened in its opposition to our demands by the attitude of the Stalinites, who were ready to give Schuschnigg unqualified support in the proposed plebiscite without asking anything. The revolutionary elements refused to surrender. We insisted in our demand for freedom of the streets.

Dr. Skubel, the police commissioner, said that perhaps our demands had some justification but that Friday was yet too early for the workers to come out in mass demonstrations in the streets of Vienna. Here, too, the Stalinites agreed that it might be better to wait until Saturday. Unfortunately, Saturday proved to be too late, as on Friday night Hitler's hordes had already crossed the border and marched into Austria.

The police refused to issue arms to the workers, altho subsequently they did grant us the miserable sum of twelve thousand shillings, which was hardly sufficient to buy up more than a few rusty revolvers in the pawn shops. The most tragic angle of the situation was that, on Friday at 7 o'clock in the evening, the workers representatives were supposed to advise the delegates to

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inform their respective organizations on how to vote in the referendum. This, however, never came to pass. At 2:30 of the same day, Hitler's Reichswehr had already crossed the Austrian border and Saturday at 2:30 they entered Vienna.

On Friday at 5:30 P. M., I participated in an important labor meeting. When the meeting was over, everybody went home to listen to the broadcast on the forthcoming plebiscite. Upon reaching the street, we noticed a change in the atmosphere. The police were very weak and the Nazis had become arrogant, as if they were already the masters of Vienna. In the streets, I heard women speaking to each other, saying there would be no plebiscite, that Seyss-Inquart was chancellor and that Schuschnigg was out. I called this to the attention of my friends. They, however, maintained that there was no cause for alarm as it was a well-known trick of the Nazis to spread all sorts of rumors in order to create confusion and sentiment for themselves. When we again came out in the street after supper, everybody realized that the upheaval had taken place. The police were already wearing swastikas and were giving the Nazi salute. Like all hired servants, the police quickly sensed who their new masters were and tried hard to please them. The Nazis were freely selling their sheet, Volksruf, and shouting "Buy the Volksruf and drive the Jews to Palestine." Such was the last chapter of the Austrian tragedy.

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(*The above paragraphs constitute a section of an article on Austria by Jay Lovestone which first appeared in the April* 3 *issue of the New York paper,* The Day. *Lovestone was in Austria when these events happened.* The Editor.)