

February 1934 in Austria: armed struggle and the uprising against fascism

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From 12 February 1934 to 16 February 1934 the short Austrian Civil War took place. It was an armed conflict between the anti-fascist and revolutionary forces of the working class and the forces of the authoritarian bourgeois government and its fascist allies.

Although these struggles lasted only a few days and remained regionally limited, they were and are of historical and strategic international importance. It was the first attempt of the working class in Europe to confront fascism with weapons in hand. And this attempt at an armed uprising – heroically led by social democrats, socialists, communists and trade unionists – failed. We would like to take a brief look at the history, the background, the facts, the results and the consequences of the Austrian Civil War, but we also want to draw some conclusions from it.

The prehistory begins with the end of the First World War. At that time, especially in 1918, the situation in Austria was acutely revolutionary. Following the example of the Russian October Revolution, which had just triumphed, the Austrian working class also wanted to put an end not only to the war, but also to capitalist exploitation and oppression. In January 1918, more than a million workers took part in the biggest strike movement in Austrian history – after the October Revolution in Russia, this “January strike” was also the largest workers’ uprising in the world at that time. Workers’ and soldiers’ soviets were formed all over the country, in the Austrian navy there was a sailors’ mutiny at the most important military harbour at Kotor (Montenegro), and some garrisons also had mutinies among the land forces. In spring 1919 it would have been possible to connect the Hungarian and Bavarian soviet republics along the Danube. But the socialist revolution in Austria failed to take place despite optimal objective conditions and despite the will of the working class and the masses. – Why?

The reason for this was the leadership of Austrian social democracy. The Social Democratic Party (SP), led by party founder Victor Adler, already of advanced age, and right-wing leader Karl Renner, decided against the revolution and saved capitalism in Austria, which the bourgeoisie would certainly not have succeeded in doing at that time. The SP had already supported Austria’s and Germany’s imperialist-dynastic war of aggression in 1914 and now once again betrayed the interests of the working class. With radical rhetoric, but calming real policies and false promises, it took over the government and steered the protest of the working class into controllable channels. It prevented the revolution and instead embarked on a reformist path within the framework of the bourgeois state and the capitalist mode of production. At the same time, it succeeded in limiting the size of the new, young Communist Party (KPÖ), founded in November 1918. In short: in 1918 there was not or not yet a revolutionary, Marxist militant party of the working class in Austria, not a party of the Russian Bolshevik type. And without such a party, socialist revolution was not possible – and is, in general, not possible.

Nevertheless, the SP's social and democratic reform policy at the time initially chalked up some successes in the interest of the workers and their living conditions. This was, of course, not only the introduction of universal, equal suffrage for men and women, but also, for example, the introduction of the eight-hour working day; statutory unemployment benefits and holiday entitlements were introduced for the first time, there was a legal basis for the formation of works councils and the establishment of the labour chambers to represent the workers' interests – the bourgeois version of the soviet, so to speak. With the administrative division of the largest Austrian province of Lower Austria into Vienna on the one hand, and the surrounding Lower Austria on the other, the federal capital was given a special position by means of which the SP was able to implement further positive reforms in what was known as “Red Vienna”, not least the well-known social housing construction. All this was tolerated by the bourgeoisie as a necessary defensive measure. But in the 1920s, their main party, the Christian Social Party (CSP, today the People's Party, ÖVP), returned to government and the SP ended up in opposition. It had done its job as a useful idiot of capital. Only “Red Vienna” and some smaller cities remained as bastions and showcase projects of social democratic reformism, which declared: If we have 50% and one vote in nationwide elections, then we will also introduce socialism – naturally on a constitutional, parliamentary-democratic basis. But this did not happen, rather there was the offensive of big business, of monopoly capital and its tool, fascism.

Originating from White Guard groups at the end of the World War, the paramilitary Home Guard movement (Heimwehr-Bewegung) was formed in Austria. It is considered as the actual fascist movement in Austria, but it was very closely associated with the CSP. And this is very important, because Austrian fascism – Austrofascism, as we say – did not come to power, as seems to be the case in Germany, Italy or Spain – from “below” or “outside”, but from the government position. In 1933, the CSP government succeeded in eliminating the parliament and the constitutional court and governing by means of “emergency ordinances”. This was already a constitutional violation and the end of Austria as a democratic state: the CP was also banned, as was the Republican Protection League (Republikanischer Schutzbund), the SP's paramilitary association with 80,000 members, while the Communist Youth League had been illegal for some time. But in Red Vienna the SP remained in power for the time being. The “Christian-Social” and Home Guard fascists naturally wanted all the power in the state, which is why they continued to harass, provoke and logically tried to disarm the organisations of the workers' movement.

Even in this situation, where the complete fascist seizure of power was only a matter of time, the SP leadership continued to rely on a “negotiated solution” with the fascists, which naturally did not happen. At the grass roots of the SP and the Protection League, however, many workers were now prepared to take the view of the otherwise not very influential CP and to wage a consistent fight against fascism. And on 12 February 1934, a group of about 30 armed workers in Linz, Upper Austria, were the first to take action – against the expressed wishes of the SP leadership.

When units of the police and the Home Guard arrived at the premises of the Linz SP in the early morning to carry out a search for weapons, the workers had already

barricaded themselves in the building and opened fire. Even here, however, the first problems of the insurrection attempt became apparent: it took place on the defensive, i.e. they were only defending their own buildings. Secondly, the Linz workers at this first battlefield had only one machine gun, otherwise only a few old World War I rifles and pistols – not even enough for all those present. The fascists, who were supported by the army during the course of the day, besieged the building, shelled it with grenade launchers and fired on it ready for attack until they could take it corridor by corridor, staircase by staircase, floor by floor, room by room. The other battlefields in the city of Linz – or at least the most of them – were isolated too and the fighting workers – about 1,000 in Linz – could not or hardly support each other. This or something similar was what would happen almost everywhere in Austria's battlefields.

News of the outbreak of fighting in Linz soon reached Austria's other cities, especially Vienna of course. The SP leadership was surprised and in principle unable to act. It reluctantly called a general strike and declared armed defensive measures to be permissible: the workers should only defend themselves with force of arms if they were attacked, but should not take any offensive actions – this of course is the anticipated end of any military uprising. Many workers, members of the Protection League, but also the communists, who had been actually expelled from the Protection League in 1927, but unconditionally supported and joined the uprising, no longer cared about the SP leadership anyway. They gathered at the agreed meeting points and in municipal enterprises in particular and demanded the handing out of the hidden weapons. But in many places this was prevented by the top social democratic officials – they hid, handed themselves over to police custody, and some committed open betrayal. However, some had already been arrested on the previous evening, because surveillance had informed the government of the planned uprising in advance. As a result, the fighting had to take place without real central control, with battlefields isolated from each other, with poor and inadequate arms and without a real insurgency strategy, which of course would have required an offensive against the city centre, the government buildings, the military bases including their arsenals, arms depots, and the infrastructure. Almost everywhere in Vienna's workers' districts, the fighting workers only defended their own buildings, barricaded themselves in the organisation buildings and in the municipal housing. It was therefore relatively easy for the fascist and government forces, which in the course of the day received support from the armoured vehicles and artillery of the army, to shell the individual nests of resistance, smoke them out and take them one after the other. Only in some districts of Vienna, among them Floridsdorf, Meidling and partly Ottakring, was a real urban warfare in the streets, with house-to-house fighting, where offensive actions undertaken, police stations were attacked, railway tracks were rendered useless for the troop transport and infrastructure was occupied. But the supremacy of the army, police and Home Guard was overwhelming everywhere. Already on the second day, despite remaining resistance groups, the government had regained control almost everywhere in Vienna.

Outside Vienna, workers in major cities and industrial areas also attempted desperate insurrections. In Bruck an der Mur, a town in Upper Styria, the workers, with a troop strength of more than 400 men, even gained complete control before they had to retreat into the mountains in the face of the approaching army. But also, for example in Graz, Wiener Neustadt, Sankt Pölten, Steyr, even in Tyrol in the industrial areas

east of Innsbruck, there were armed conflicts, brief sorties by the struggling workers, but finally they withdrew everywhere. The attempted insurrection was heroic, but was doomed to failure from the outset because of the inferiority in weaponry, the false defensive strategy and the lack of support and betrayal by SP officials. After four days the brief Austrian Civil War was over. It ended with the victory of the fascists and the defeat of the working class.

The immediate result of the suppression of the February Uprising was, of course, the complete establishment of the Austrofascist dictatorship – the “corporate state” was formally constituted with the May Constitution of 1 May 1934, which was also supported internationally by the already fascist states of Italy and Hungary.

The February fighting cost the workers’ movement about 200 lives and almost twice as many wounded. During and after the fighting, under martial law 24 death sentences were handed down against members of the Protection League and workers; nine of these sentences were carried out. Thousands of February fighters, trade unionists and workers’ functionaries were arrested, and about 1,200 were given prison sentences. And in the wake of the February fighting hundreds of people were deported to the austrofascist regime’s concentration camps: on 1 May 1934, over 500 social democrats and communists were incarcerated in Wöllersdorf, the most famous – or rather infamous – concentration camp.

The SP, like the CP before it, was banned, its public representatives were removed from office, its leading functionaries persecuted and (at least temporarily) imprisoned, among them top functionaries such as Karl Seitz, mayor of Vienna, and Karl Renner, former head of government. Others such as Otto Bauer, chief theoretician of so called “Austro-Marxism”, managed to flee abroad.

Thousands of SP members and Protection League members who were disappointed by the failure of social democracy joined the illegal CP, which for its part had participated in the February fighting within its means, although it considered the timing to be unfavourable. In this way, within a short time after February 1934, membership of the CP quadrupled, making it for the first time a party with mass appeal and influence in the period of illegality. Thus the CP – and with it the Communist Youth Association – even more so after the renewed social democratic surrender in 1938, became the most important pillar of anti-fascist resistance in Austria from 1934 to 1945.

This was associated with some lessons for the international communist movement: at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1935, attempts were made not only to deal with the defeat of the powerful KPD in Germany, but also of the Austrian working class. The well-known result was the popular-front strategy of the Comintern, based on a precise analysis of fascism that Georgi Dimitrov presented to the congress.

A significant number of former Protection League members, socialists and communists, went into exile in 1934 (many to the Soviet Union) and did not return until 1945 – among them the chairman of the CP, Johann Koplenig. Others fought against fascism in the ranks of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 – most of them in the mainly Austrian “12th of February”-Battalion of

the Eleventh Brigade (“Thälmann”-Brigade).

A historically particularly momentous result of the February fighting and the establishment of the Austrofascist dictatorship was also the weakening of Austria in the face of pressure and annexation efforts on the part of Nazi Germany. The propaganda of the Austrian Nazis now also increasingly easily fell on fertile ground. The fact that in March 1938 the German “Wehrmacht” was able to occupy Austria without encountering military resistance therefore also had its causes in the years from 1933/34 to 1938. A democratic Austria with a militant working class and a legal workers’ movement would certainly have had other possibilities for defence than the Austrofascist dictatorship, which was rejected by the majority of the population. And so, with a certain internal consistency, the Christian Social and the Home Guard movement became Austria's gravediggers, despite the fact that besides communists, social democrats and Slovenian partisans, Christian Democrats also played their commendable part in the resistance against Nazi fascism and German foreign rule from 1938 to 1945.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the political heirs and continuers of the Christian Social movement, who were also in some continuity with Austrofascism in terms of personnel, have still not distanced themselves from the crimes of their movement – on the contrary: in parts of the ÖVP even the murderer of workers and fascist dictator Dollfuss – transfigured into an anti-Nazi (and sometimes “anti-Bolshevik”) “resistance fighter” – is still revered today.

Even if all in all only a small part of the Austrian working class participated in the February struggles, this attempted insurgency nevertheless marks a historic act that should not be underestimated. The Austrian workers – social democrats, trade unionists and communists – were the first in Europe to oppose fascism with weapons in their hands. This merit remains indelible – and in this tradition many workers and especially the communists continued to fight against the fascist dictatorships until Austria was largely liberated by the Soviet Union’s Red Army in 1945.