

# RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

## EAST EUROPE

• CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
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### YOUTH DEMAND RIGHT TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Summary: In his contribution to the discussion at the December 1965 national students' conference in Prague, student delegate Jiri Mueller of Prague demanded the right of students to develop their own political activity. Such activity, he said, might even entail opposition to the Party. He also proposed a structural reform of the Youth League, based on the principle of federalization, with special unions for industrial, agricultural and student youth as its components. Mueller's demands reflect a widespread dissatisfaction among Czechoslovak students over the never-ending Party tutelage.

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On 18 and 19 December 1965, a national conference of university students convened in Prague to discuss specific problems of university youth, in particular their relation to the Czechoslovak Youth League, their position as a political factor and questions related to studies.

In the presence of Party CC Secretary Vladimír Koucky, a lively discussion developed. The most outspoken and impressive contribution to the discussion was by Jiri Mueller of the Prague Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. Opening his speech, Mueller described in unequivocal terms the all-pervasive atmosphere of disillusionment among the students, resulting from the manifest discrepancy between ideals and reality. Since the leadership of the Czechoslovak Youth League (of which the organization of university students is a part) has failed to improve this situation, the speaker saw no alternative but that of a thorough reorganization. The underlying idea of his argument was that a students' organization should be a genuine representative of students' interests.

In essence, Mueller proposes a split of the Czechoslovak Youth League into two age groups: those under 18 years should take in special interest groups refraining from real social activity; those above 18 should enter groups of a genuine political character. The latter category should be organized on a federative basis, with special unions for industrial, agricultural and student youth. The federative body representing specific interests of these sectors should become part of the National Front in its own right and these delegates its own representatives to all state organs, including the National Assembly.

The referred Youth League, Mueller argued, should draft its own program whose final goals would correspond to those of the Party. This harmony in ultimate aims, however, should not preclude the right to "reasonable, academic" opposition to Party policy on specific issues. A refusal by the Party to grant this right would, in Mueller's opinion, constitute evidence of the Party's mistrust in the youth. He contended that the Party had repeatedly asserted its confidence in the youth, but made it very clear that "mere words or official declarations" would no longer be considered satisfactory, and that only deeds would in future be taken as a proof of sincerity.

Several students supported Mueller either directly or indirectly. Support for his contention that the League be a true representative of its membership's desires and interests was particularly evident. The aspect of Mueller's contribution is evident from the fact that Party Secretary Vladimir Kousky devoted his closing remarks exclusively to a debate with him. He tried to convey the impression that he was sympathetic to student wishes, but turned over of Mueller's proposals almost word for word, or conceded. Kousky, himself an experienced debater, was driven back into desperate details of Mueller's proposals that there is no room for free discussion within the Youth League. Just as the point, he argued, of conceding the right to opposition when responsibilities already existed for full and frank discussion within the Party and Youth League as well as between them. As for the League's formalization, this, said Kousky, would be decided at the next Youth League Congress.

In view of the delicate nature of the subject, it is no wonder that the Party has handled the conference debate like a raw egg. Although official media did cover the conference, the main target contained by Mueller's proposals was ignored. Only after a month's delay, did the weekly Pravda (20 January 1966) publish something from his contribution.<sup>(1)</sup>

#### A Repeating Scenario

This is not the first time that the students have demanded an institutionalized mode of expression. Already in May 1964, President Kousky and 37 delegates from Soviet and independent youth in his unpublished speech to a Party Central Committee plenum that he, as well as his colleagues Kousky, and both confronted with students' demands for an opposition to the Party and for co-operation to set up an organization would be outside the framework of the National Front and outside Party influence. He rejected these notions as reflecting a very unsharp sense of affairs and called on the Youth League, Party organizations, the Ministry of Education and university authorities to help set matters right.<sup>(2)</sup>

(1) Cf. Czechoslovak Press Survey, No. 1795, 11 February 1966.

(2) The lack of institutionalized means was shown by a recent sociological survey which established by an anonymous poll that only 11.8 per cent of students or youth in the Party had joined it out of "inner need," 21.6 per cent did so for material advantage, 4.6 per cent under unscrupulous influence, and 44.2 per cent for "other reasons," among which materialistic motives

Hendrych's exhortations failed to produce the desired effect. Quite the contrary, cries for an institutionalized opposition have gone beyond the confines of students' organizations. The philosophical substantiation of the need for "integrated" and "institutionalized criticism" was provided by the philosopher Julius Strizka.<sup>(1)</sup> Using Hegelian dialectics, Strizka demonstrated that integrated power must be confronted with integrated and institutionalized criticism, if further progress is to be ensured.

There can be no doubt about the meaning of Strizka's words: in the long run, political, economic and social progress is unimaginable without liberty and the institutionalized right to political opposition. The December 1965 student conference clearly demonstrated that Strizka's ideas found an enthusiastic response among the youngest echelons of the Czechoslovak intelligentsia.<sup>(2)</sup>

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- and environmental influences were predominant (cf. Student No. 1, 19 January 1966). To this it should be added that only something over five per cent of all students are members of the Communist Party.
- (3) Cf. Valterova Times, 26 November 1965 (Czechoslovak Press Service, No. 1731, 13 December 1965); for analysis, cf. Background Report "Czechoslovak Marxist Goes Left to Refute Socialism," 2 December 1965.
- (4) One of Mueller's proposals, that of federalization, was most recently picked up by the Slovak youth daily Pravda (Feb 15). The secretary of the Slovak Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Youth League, Robert Harencar, admitted that the idea of a federalized league was widely debated, and that such an arrangement was feasible. However, he was reluctant to commit himself at this early stage, noting that the League in its present form had not yet exploited all its possibilities.