

Circular by Robert Ley on the Action to “Coordinate” the Free Trade Unions (April 21, 1933)

Abstract

Hitler not only aimed to secure complete control over all sources of state authority; he also sought the total mobilization of the general population behind the Nazi cause. To that end, he demanded the abolition of all competing organizations within public life, including the free trade unions. Although the Nazi government had already declared May 1 “National Labor Day” and was planning to celebrate this as a legal holiday with great pomp and ceremony, it was simultaneously preparing for the final destruction of the unions, as is evident in the following directives issued on April 21, 1933, by Dr. Robert Ley (1890–1945), staff chief of NSDAP political organizations. Ley went on to oversee the National Socialist takeover of the unions by the German Labor Front [*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, DAF].

Source

Circular No. 6/33

The action to coordinate the Free Trade Unions [*Gleichschaltungsaktion*] will begin on Tuesday, May 2, 1933, at 10:00 am.

The direction of the entire operation lies in the hands of the Action Committee.

The Action Committee is composed as follows:

Dr. Robert Ley, Chairman.

Rudolf Schmeer, Deputy.

Schuhmann, Commissioner of the General German Trade Union Federation.

Peppler, Commissioner of the General Independent Employees' Federation.

Muchow, Organizer.

Bank Director Müller, Commissioner, Director of the Bank for Workers, Employees, and Officials.

Brinckmann, Commissioner, Chief Treasurer.

Biallas, Propaganda and Press.

All the provisional leaders of the unions belong to the extended Action Committee.

The essential part of the operation is to be directed against the General German Trade Union Federation and the General Independent Employees' Federation. Anything beyond that which concerns the Free Trade Unions is left to the discretion of the Gauleiters.

The Gauleiters are responsible for executing the coordination action in the individual areas. Those involved in the action should be members of the National Socialist Factory Cell Organization [*National-Sozialistische Betriebszellen-Organisation*].

SA as well as SS are to be employed for the occupation of trade union properties and for taking the relevant persons into protective custody.

The Gauleiter is to proceed with his measures on the basis of the closest understanding with the appropriate regional factory cell leader [*Gaubetriebszellenleiter*].

In Berlin, the action will be conducted by the Action Committee itself.

In the Reich, the following will be occupied:

The headquarters of the unions;

The trade union buildings and offices of the Free Trade Unions and the party buildings of the Social Democratic Party of Germany insofar as trade unions are housed there;

The branches and pay offices of the Bank for Workers, Employees, and Officials, Inc.;

The district committees of the General German Trade Union Federation and of the General Independent Federation;

The local committees of the General German Trade Union Federation and of the General Independent Employees Federation.

The following are to be taken into protective custody:

All trade union chairmen [*Verbandsvorsitzende*];

The district secretaries and the branch directors of the Bank for Workers, Employees, and Officials, Inc.

The chairmen of local committees and the employees of unions are not to be taken into protective custody but are to be urged to continue their work.

Exceptions are granted only with the permission of the Gauleiters.

The taking over of the independent trade unions must proceed in such a fashion that the workers and employees will not be given the feeling that this action is directed against them, but, on the contrary, against a superannuated system that does not conform to the interests of the German nation.

The provisional local leadership of the General German Trade Union and of the General Independent Employees' Federation is to be taken over by a commissioner of the National Socialist Factory Cell Organization.

Dealings with the authorities and other organizations are to be immediately handed over to the newly installed commissioners.

All funds and accounts of the independent trade unions are to be blocked immediately and are to remain so until Thursday afternoon at 18:00. Insofar as incumbent treasurers are permitted to remain in office, they will be subject to the authority of the commissioner. All payment receipts must be countersigned by the commissioner.

After the block on funds is lifted, the usual payments for the support of persons, etc., must be unconditionally assured, so as not to create a feeling of uneasiness among the members of the trade unions.

Mass meetings are to be arranged as soon as possible; all trade union members will be free to attend them. In these meetings, the importance of this action must be put forth, and it must be explained that the rights of the workers and employees are being unequivocally guaranteed.

The following unions belong to the General German Trade Union Federation [Here follows an enumeration of 28 unions].

The following unions belong to the General Independent Employees' Federation [Here follows an enumeration of 13 unions].

Up to the present time, the following have been proposed for commissioners: [Here follows an enumeration of 17 names as commissioners for the most important institutions of the General German Trade Union Federation].

For the rest, new commissioners to be installed will be nominated by the Gauleiters in close cooperation with the Regional Factory Cell Office.

It must be understood that this action is to proceed in a highly disciplined fashion. The Gauleiters are responsible for this; they are to keep the direction of this operation firmly in hand.

Heil Hitler!

[signed] Dr. Robert Ley

Source of English translation: Circular Letter Nr. 6/33 (April 21, 1933), in United States Chief Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Volume III. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946. Document 392-PS, pp. 380–82. Translation edited by GHI staff. Available online at: https://www.loc.gov/item/2011525363_NT_Nazi_Vol-III/

Source of original German text: Rundschreiben Robert Leys vom 21. April 1933 mit Anordnung einer ab 2. Mai 1933 gegen die Freien Gewerkschaften durchzuführenden Aktion: Gewerkschaftshäuser sind durch SA oder SS zu besetzen und Gewerkschaftsführer sind in Schutzhaft zu nehmen (Beweisstück US-326), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945–1. Oktober 1946*. Volume XXV, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg 1947. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989. Document 392-PS, pp. 534–36.

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