



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866
The Socialists: Ferdinand Lassalle: "Open Letter" (1863)

In his famous "Open Letter in Response to the Central Committee for the Calling of a General German Workers' Congress in Leipzig" (1863), the influential socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) in effect publicized a new party program, calling for the founding of a socialist labor party to support not only workers' demands but also the causes of parliamentary government and democratic suffrage not honored by the liberals.

Gentlemen!

In your letter you urge me to express to you, in any form that seems appropriate to me, my views on the labor movement and the means that it must employ in order to achieve an improvement in the situation of the working class in a political, material, and intellectual respect, and also, in particular, [to give you my views] on the value of associations for the completely impecunious popular class.

I have no qualms about complying with your wish and shall choose the simplest, most obvious form (considering the nature of the matter), the form of a public missive and reply to your letter.

I shall simply remark that, as a result of my time being greatly absorbed at this moment by my important work, this letter must endeavor to obtain the greatest possible brevity, which incidentally corresponds to its actual purpose.

When, in October of last year, at which time I was absent from here, you held the first preparations in Berlin for the German Workers' Congress, which I followed with interest in publications in the newspapers, two opposing views were advanced in the assembly.

The one effectively said that you need not bother with the political movement at all, and that this was of no interest to you.

The other effectively said, by contrast, that you should view yourselves as an appendage of the Prussian Progressive Party, and serve as a selfless choir and soundboard for them.

If I had been present in the assembly at the time, I would have spoken out against both in equal measure.

It is almost wholly narrow-minded to believe that political movements and developments should be of no concern to the workers!

On the contrary, the worker can expect fulfillment of his interests only from political action.

Already the question of how to assemble and discuss your interests, how to form associations and branch associations to safeguard those interests, is a question dependent upon the political situation and political legislation, and therefore it is not even worthwhile to refute such a narrow-minded view by way of further exposition.

But no less erroneous and misleading was the opposing view that you should view yourself simply as an appendage of the Progressive Party!

It would indeed be unfair not to acknowledge that, at that time, the Prussian Progressive Party rendered a certain, if modest, service on behalf of political freedom during its conflict with the Prussian government by sticking to the right of budgetary approval and by its resistance to military re-organization in Prussia.

Nevertheless, even back then the fulfillment of this demand was completely ruled out for the following reasons:

First of all, an attitude like this was, from the outset, not befitting so powerful and independent a party – a party pursuing more principled political goals – as the German Workers' Party has to be, [when] compared to a party, which, like the Prussian Progressive Party, has in principal only planted its flag on the Prussian constitution, and takes as the focus of its struggles such things as the rejection of a one-sided change in the military organization – which has not been attempted in other German lands – or the maintenance of the right of budgetary approval – which has not even been disputed in other German lands.

Secondly, in any event, it was never certain whether the Prussian Progressive Party will carry out its conflict with the Prussian government with the dignity and energy which alone is suitable to the working class and [which] can count on its warm sympathy.

Thirdly, it was just as uncertain whether the Prussian Progressive Party, once it had achieved a victory over the Prussian government, would have exploited this victory in the interest of the entire people or only to maintain the privileged position of the bourgeoisie; i.e., whether it would use this victory to establish universal, equal, and direct suffrage, which is called for by the democratic principles and the legitimate interests of the working class.

In the latter case it obviously could not lay claim to the slightest interest on the part of the German working class.

This is what I would have had to tell you at that time in regard to this suggestion.

Today I can add that what, admittedly, was already easy to predict back then has actually proven true – that the Prussian Progressive Party is completely lacking in the energy necessary to bring even so limited a conflict between itself and the Prussian government to a dignified and victorious end.

By continuing, in spite of the government's actual denial of a budgetary approval right, to hold sessions and conduct parliamentary business with a ministry that it has declared to be criminally responsible, it humiliates (by way of this contradiction) itself and the people via the spectacle of an unparalleled weakness and lack of dignity!

By continuing, in spite of the violation of the constitution it has declared, to hold sessions, to keep debating, and to manage parliamentary business with the government, it has become serviceable to the government and even offers it a hand in maintaining the fiction of a constitutional state of affairs.

Instead of declaring the sessions of the Chamber closed until the government declared itself unable to continue the expenditures refused by the Chamber, and thereby holding the government to the unavoidable alternative of either respecting the constitutional right of the Chamber or else renouncing the fiction and apparatus of a constitutional state of affairs, managing business openly and frankly as an absolutist government, shouldering the immense responsibility of such [an absolutist government], and so eliciting the very crisis that inevitably occurs as the fruit of open absolutism – it places the government in the position of combining all the advantages of absolute power with all the advantages of an ostensibly constitutional state of affairs.

And – instead of pressing the government to [reveal its] open, unconcealed absolutism and enlighten the people through the fact of the nonexistence of a constitutional state of affairs – by agreeing to continue playing its role in this comedy of fictitious constitutionalism, it helps maintain the fiction which, like every governing system based on a fiction, has to have a confusing effect on the people's intelligence and a corrupting effect on their morals.*

Such a party has thereby shown that it is and will always remain thoroughly helpless in the face of a decisive government.

Such a party has shown thereby that it is completely incapable of bringing about even the slightest real development in the interests of freedom.

* For more on this, see my brochure “Was nun? Zweiter Vortrag über Verfassungswesen” [“What now? Second lecture on constitutional systems”], Zurich, 1863 (original footnote).

Such a party has shown that it has no claim to the sympathies of the democratic sections of the population, and that it lacks any sense and understanding for the political feelings of honor that must pervade the working class.

Such a party has, in a word, really shown that it is nothing more than a resurrected version, adorned with another name, of disreputable Gotha-dom.*

Today I can add this for you.

Both today and then I should have told you that a party which, through its dogma of the "Prussian leadership," forces itself to see in the Prussian government the Messiah appointed for Germany's rebirth, while there is not a single German government (and, indeed, this includes Hesse) that might stand behind the Prussian [government] in political terms, while there is almost no single German government (and, indeed, this includes Austria) that would not yet be well in advance of the Prussian [government] – hereby alone, already, [such a party] renounces any claim to represent the German working class: for, based only on this, such a party displays an absorption in illusion, self-importance, and an incompetence satisfied with mere verbal intoxication, which must eliminate any hope that a real development of freedom for the German people might be expected from it.

From this it follows with certainty which position the working class must take in political terms and which relationship to the Progressive Party it needs to observe.

The working class needs to constitute itself as an independent political party and make universal, equal, and direct suffrage into the principle watchword for and banner of this party. The representation of the working class in the legislative bodies of Germany – this alone is what can satisfy its legitimate interests in political terms. To introduce a peaceful and lawful agitation toward this end with all lawful means, this is and must be the program of the workers' party in political terms.

It is self-explanatory how this workers' party has to behave toward the German Progressive Party.

To feel and constitute itself everywhere as an independent party thoroughly separated from the Progressive Party, while nevertheless supporting the Progressive Party on points and questions where there is a common interest, to turn its back on it and oppose it whenever it departs from this [common interest], to force the Progressive Party thereby either to move forward and exceed the level of progress or sink even deeper into the swamp of meaninglessness and

* Moderate liberals who tried to cooperate with the conservative Prussian government after the latter had suppressed the revolutionary movements of 1848/49 – ed.

powerlessness in which it has already become knee-deep – that must be the simple tactic of the German Workers' Party vis-à-vis the German Progressive Party.

So much for what you have to do in political terms.

[. . .]

Source: Ferdinand Lassalle, *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften* [*Collected Speeches and Writings*], ed. Edward Bernstein. Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1919-20, vol. 3, pp. 41-47.

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