



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Songs of the Cologne Catholic Workers' Clubs (1896-1899)

The theories of Marx and the Social Democrats were less attractive to working-class Catholics than other population groups. This difference resulted in part from the ability of Catholic doctrine to address working-class concerns. Additionally, communal solidarity and a shared framework of values and beliefs bound Catholics of all classes together. In the following songs, class consciousness and Church doctrine are fused together in a meaningful synthesis.

I. "The Worker's Hymn" (c. 1896)

What roars so terribly through the lands?
It is the heathen song of labor:
Tear apart the bonds of society,
Destroy what separates you from the beast!
Yes, "forward" sounds in every language,
But forward in the storm against God!
And even in the very mouth of Hell,
God builds for spite on the tower of Babel!

What sounds so mildly down from Rome?
A great word from the Labor Pope:
Work will again be Christian,
St. Joseph is your protecting refuge!
See there the Master of all worlds,
See the Savior in working clothes,
This example, this alone is of worth,
It is the fall of slave labor!

As a carpenter he builds the bridge,
Where poverty and wealth divide,
And if you want to go "forward," turn back
To Christ, who knows the meaning of labor!
Therefore, raise a cheer for work! Let us sing,
In Christ resides your reward and happiness;
Let it ring throughout the land!
Yes, "forward", but first turn back.

II. "The Song of Labor" (c. 1899)

The wheels rattle, the anvil rings,
The tongues of fire hiss,
The heavy hammer falls in rhythm,
Swung by the sinewy arm.
The disc turns, the saw rips and tears
The flywheel circles, violently, in an arc.

The wheels stand still, the anvil is silent.
The flames blaze in vain.
And hammer and saw lean on the flywheel,
They are all resting together.
They rest powerless, if one person wants:
If God's machine, Man, stands still.

We struggle and create in harsh need,
We strain strong arms
Only because the Lord has so commanded
That He may have mercy on us:
Not human will, not money and possessions
Drives the foaming blood through the veins.

And even if half the world despises us,
And even if the revolution denounces us:
On the cross, there hung a brave hero
Who has ennobled our labor;
His blood, so red, and our sweat,
Are a prize made holy by fierce effort.

Therefore brothers, extend the calloused fist to one another,
And stand without shaking;
And even if the storm roars from below as well,
Hell must surrender;
And even if the weakling quakes and falls,
We hold the entire world before God.

Source: Ernst-Detlef Broch, *Katholische Arbeitervereine in der Stadt Köln 1890-1901* [*Catholic Workers' Clubs in the City of Cologne 1890-1901*]. Wentorf, 1977, S. 81-82, 116-17.

The original German songs, together with the above translations, appear in Raymond Chien Sun, *Before the Enemy is within our Walls: Catholic Workers in Cologne, 1885-1912: A Social, Cultural and Political History*. Boston: Humanities Press, 1999, S. 305-08.

Translation: Raymond Chien Sun; reproduced here with permission.