



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Kaiser Wilhelm II's Decree to Bismarck on Workers' Protection and Social Policy
(February 4, 1890)

In June 1888, after the death of both his grandfather and father earlier that year, Wilhelm II became German Kaiser. A showdown with the aging Bismarck, who had been appointed Prussian minister president in 1862, became more likely with each passing month. One bone of contention between the two men was social policy, which had become acutely sensitive in the wake of massive strikes in 1889. In January 1890, Wilhelm II developed plans to implement better protection for workers and decided that a conference should be held to discuss the issues involved. These intentions are outlined in the royal decree Wilhelm sent to Bismarck on February 4, excerpted below. Because Bismarck at this time was steering toward a showdown with workers – one designed to make him indispensable to the young Kaiser – a different sort of crisis occurred, leading to Bismarck's dismissal on March 18, 1890.

I am resolved to lend a hand in improving the situation of German workers within the limits that have been drawn on account of the need to keep German industry competitive on the world market and to thus secure the livelihood of workers. The decline of domestic enterprises due to the loss of foreign sales would not only cost entrepreneurs but also workers their livelihood. International competition is the root cause of the difficulties involved in improving our workers' situation, and these difficulties can only be diminished, if not entirely overcome, through international agreement between those countries that share in the domination of the world market. Convinced that other governments are also inspired by the wish to subject these efforts to joint examination, an examination already undertaken by the workers of these countries in the course of international negotiations, I would like, as a start, for My diplomatic representatives in France, England, Belgium, and Switzerland to officially inquire as to whether those governments would be inclined to enter into negotiations with us for the purpose of an international agreement on the possibility of making concessions regarding the needs and wishes of workers that have come to light through the strikes of recent years. As soon as assent to My suggestion has been reached in principle, I commission you to invite the cabinets of all governments taking an equal interest in the workers' question to a conference for the purpose of consultation on the relevant questions.

Wilhelm I. R. [King and Kaiser]

Source: Kaiser Wilhelm II's Decree of February 4, 1890 to the Reich Chancellor. *Reichs- und Staatsanzeiger* [*Reich and State Gazette*], no. 34 (February 5, 1890).

Original German text reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte* [*Documents on German Constitutional History*], 3rd rev. ed., vol. 2, 1851-1900. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1986, pp. 510-11.

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