

# Party and Programme: from communism to social democracy - Part 1

Dave Hughes Tue, 04/10/1977 - 09:28

Dave Hughes

***In the 1970s, Dave Hughes, a founder member of Workers Power and the Movement for a Revolutionary Communist International, wrote a series of articles on party and programme to explain the importance of programme in Marx, Engels and Lenin. Part one deals with the debate in Germany during Marx's lifetime***

In any period, conscious communist cadres constitute a minority in the working class. In the struggle for leadership they are in contention not only with openly bourgeois programmes and leaders, but also with a spectrum of more or less ?radical? schemers and fighters, standing between the nucleus of revolutionary communists and pro-capitalist tendencies there are inevitably a range of centrist programmes and formations - those subjectively opposed to capitalism but objectively incapable of developing a strategy or programme for its revolutionary overthrow.

These divisions are not simply posed on the level of ?ideas?, of discussion between groups of intellectuals with their pet schemes and programmes. Capitalist society, its inherent instability and crises, propels the most conscious elements in the working class towards communist politics, But the struggle of the working class within capitalism does not of itself solve the questions of programme and strategy facing revolutionaries in all periods is to win leadership in the struggles of the working class, to win leadership for their programme for working class power.

This was the fundamental pre-occupation of Marx and Engels in their struggle in the international Workers Movement in the nineteenth century. They faced the task of winning ascendancy against the ranks of utopians and adventurists offering themselves as leaders in the newly burgeoning workers movement. They faced the task of winning workers already under the sway of these misleaders to communist politics. The lessons to be drawn from Marx and Engels? battles to develop a communist workers party are vital to two central questions facing revolutionaries today. Firstly, how to develop a programme for workers power?

Marx and Engels were perfectly aware that they could not win leadership, arm and equip a vanguard through the abstract proclamation of principles. The principles of the communist tradition - developed throughout the years of Marx and Engels life - had to be focused and concretised into programme, strategy and tactics for the workers? movement. Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky were to learn this again when they stood with Kautsky and co. on a series of common principles against the revisionists, but where the developing left found itself opposed to the orthodox Kautsky leadership on the question of strategy and tactics for the coming period.

For Marx and Engels the programme was not a timeless blue-print document. As we shall see, it had to be rooted in the specific period and perspective of capitalist development, in the living struggles and

experience of the working class, and in a scientific analysis of the tasks facing the working class on the road to power. In this article we shall look at the method of programmatic elaboration developed by Marx and Engels in their party-building struggles.

Secondly, what should be the relationship between the communists and the centrists and vacillators? Marx and Engels were absolutely consistent on this. They maintained at all times, the integrity and independence of their programme. They refused all compromise or accommodation on programmatic questions. They waged a relentless war, throughout their lives, against all other tendencies and programmes in the workers' movement to that programme, a clear recognition of, and ruthless attention to, each and every step that won the real workers' movement, in struggle, towards communist politics.

This experience and method is of immediate relevance, to us today. A new period of instability and crisis has opened for world capitalism. But the revolutionary left, bound together by a common thread of communist principles (the dictatorship of the proletariat, the revolutionary as opposed to reformist road to socialism), whole sections of which claim allegiance to a common programme (the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International) is divided on fundamental questions of strategy and tactics. The communist programme - consistently re-elaborated, re-focused in the history of our movement - has not been re-elaborated and focused on the new period of struggle facing the working class movement.

Inevitably the crisis of capitalism, the crisis of leadership in the working class has thrown up, on a world scale, a variety of new centrist and revisionist groupings. On an international scale the question of the elaboration of the Communist Programme, of the basis for unity, the relationship between tactical differences and differences of principle and programme are posed ever more sharply. It is in this context that we examine the struggles of Marx and Engels, in order to learn from those struggles.

Against the background of crisis and fragmentation the IMG, in particular, have attempted to rewrite the history of the communist tradition to fit in with their present practice and orientation. To justify their present drive for unity on the left, for unity with explicitly anti Trotskyist forces, to justify their project of building a class struggle left wing tendency in the workers movement they have sought to recast the splits and polemics in the workers' movement they have sought to recast the splits and polemics in the communist tradition in a new mould.

Particularly in their Party and Faction series published in Red Weekly, they argued that splits between socialists are only, indeed have only been, justified between those who stand on differing sides of the class struggle. In Workers' Power Number Four we dealt with the IMG's attempt to prove that Lenin only split with the Mensheviks because they broke discipline, and that the split only became final and irrevocable when sections of the Mensheviks supported the Tsarist autocracy in the first imperialist war. We showed that for Lenin, and all communists, the question of unity with other tendencies is always subordinate to the maintenance of the independence of the communist programme, to a persistent and open struggle with all centrist and revisionist tendencies.

This is the tradition founded by Marx and Engels.

The article analyses the development of the communist tradition in the building of international and national workers' parties. It examines the struggles of Marx and Engels to win the most conscious workers away from an allegiance to false and utopian programmes through unity in action and struggle, and independence of programme, strategy and tactics at all times.

### **Marx and Engels in 1848**

There can be no single model of the Marxist programme valid for all time. There is however a method for the development of a programme which can be seen in the great programmes and programmatic debates

of the revolutionary tradition - in the ***Communist Manifesto***, in the preamble to the ***Rules and the Inaugural Address and resolutions of the First International***, in the ***Critique of the Gotha Programme*** ; in the Erfurt Programme and in Engels critique of it and in the ***Theses of the Cominter*** and the ***Transitional Programme of the Fourth International***.

The tasks of a programme are to succinctly expound the strategy and key tactics of the proletarian revolution in the context of an understanding of Capitalism. At the most general level this necessitates the understanding of the basic features of Capitalism and of the class struggle. The basic correctness of Marx and Engels understanding of the laws of motion of capitalism - the root of capital accumulation in the unpaid labour of the proletariat, the internal contradictions and thus crisis prone nature of capitalism, the inevitability of the class struggle, the necessity for the working class to seize political power and expropriate the expropriators, the necessity of the working class political party lies at the heart of the universal relevance of the Communist Manifesto.

Later developments - the dictatorship of the proletariat; the necessity of 'smashing the old bureaucratic military state machine' (1) etc, constitute the general theoretical conceptions which are a matter of codification in any programme. Clearly, whilst no programme which overthrows them can claim to be a revolutionary communist one, they are not self sufficient to make a programme so. A programme must outline the general questions of strategy and tactics which address the features of the class struggle posed by the epoch of development of capitalism and its principle features and the particular period and its features.

It may be added that Marxists have further outlined their strategy and tactics in relationship to particular conjunctures i.e. in programmes of Action. Further a programme must define the evaluation communists make and the tactics communists operate with regard to non-communist tendencies within the working class movement. In this context it must be remembered that these tendencies are only sociologically within the movement: politically they represent the influence of non-proletarian strata (i.e. the bourgeoisie, the petit-bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the labour aristocracy, the lumpen proletariat etc).

The Communist Manifesto had, as Engels notes in 1882 'as its object the proclamation of the inevitably impending dissolution of modern bourgeois property?'. (2) It was as Trotsky remarked 'calculated for a revolutionary epoch?' and thus contained demands 'corresponding to the period of direct transition from Capitalism to Socialism?'. (3)

This revolutionary perspective was based on Marx and Engels prognosis of an 'immediately impending?' series of bourgeois revolutions in Germany and in other central and southern European countries, an impending proletarian revolution in Britain and a revolution in France which completed the bourgeois tasks and moved onto the tasks of the proletarian revolution. Brilliantly confirmed in some respects this perspective had serious flaws. (4)

It mistook capitalism's first serious period of crises for the impending general collision of the productive forces against the limits of capitalist property relations. In fact capitalism's period of ascent, its creation of a world market was only just beginning. Here the limits of their existing work on political economy told against them.

It overestimated the revolutionary role that the bourgeoisie would be 'compelled to play?' and it did not foresee the recoil from the revolutionary tasks which the emergence of the proletariat would produce in its ranks It overestimated the cohesion and consciousness and organisation already existing in the proletariat and to a certain extent underestimated the harmfulness of trends such as Louis Blanc's 'Social Democracy?' or the muddle of official Chartism.

None of this is to say that Marx and Engels were wrong to develop a programme for the revolutionary upheavals of 1847-49 - that the time was 'not ripe' because capitalism was still 'progressive'? Capitalism was, and Marx and Engels never ceased to stress it was progressive viz a viz feudal and patriarchal relations of production.

It was however, reactionary as against the possibilities of socialist development of the productive forces. It was Trotsky who pointed out that 'had it been possible in the second half of the nineteenth century to organize economy in Socialist beginnings, its tempo of growth would have been immeasurably greater?.'

The result of the mistakes of 1848 prompted Marx to undertake his life's work of placing communism more firmly upon the basis of a scientific understanding of the laws of motion of capitalist society. Secondly it prompted both Marx and Engels to a more thorough consideration of involvement in the questions of organising the proletariat for its struggle with capital and combating the existing dominant trends of utopianism and sectarianism. Above all it convinced them of the importance of winning mass organizations in struggle to the communist programme. It was with aim in mind that Marx and Engels worked in the IWMA and played a leading role in the development of German Social Democracy.

### **The First International**

It is sometimes maintained that the First International was a propaganda International. This is not so, though of course Marx and Engels carried their conceptions into its programmatic statements and thus into every section of the labour movement associated with it. Their polemics with the followers of Proudhon, Mazzini and Bakunin helped win a small nucleus of sympathisers in the principle European Countries and in North America. But in the sense that 'propaganda international' can mean anything i.e. of an international tendency limited by circumstances to largely propaganda work for a detailed and coherent common programme - the First International was by no means that. Marx and Engels summed up its role thus:

'The International was founded in order to replace the Socialist or semi-socialists sects by a real organisation of the working class for struggle. The original statutes and the Inaugural Address show this at a glance'. (5)

The conditions prevailing in the 1860s determined the form of the International. Engels characterised these as the reawakening of the labour movement after the destruction and repression of the 1850s, the temporary weakening of sectarianism and economism and opportunism.

The strengthening and growth of workers' organisations in Britain, France and Germany forced the leaders of the sects of the Proudhonists and Lassalleans into international co-operation. Even the insular craft trade union leaders in Britain faced with a resurgence of class struggle were radicalised and sought the assistance of their continental brethren through the medium of the General Council of the IWMA.

These tendencies were still dominant in their respective labour movements but were muted by the pressure upon them from government repression on the one hand and the re-emergence of workers organizations on the other. The 1860s and early 70s was a renewed period of upheaval in Europe and North America - in certain respects the delayed culmination of the aborted struggles of 1848. The Polish rising, the liberation of the serfs in Russia, the wars of Italian and German unification, the Civil War and abolition of slavery in America, the granting of the suffrage to a majority of the male working class in England and the Paris Commune were the living context of the International Working Mens Association. As Engels said 'its aim was to weld together into one huge army the whole militant working class of Europe and America. Therefore it could not set out from the principles laid down in the Manifesto.

It was bound to have a programme which would not shut the door on the English trade unionists, the

French, Belgian, Italian and Spanish Proudhonists and the German Lassalleans?.(6) )his however is not to say that Marx simply ignored the principles of the manifesto. Indeed Ryazanov in his ?Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels? points out ?the new manifesto (i.e. the Inaugural Address) had to be written in a manner which would take account the low level of proletarian class consciousness among the masses and the leaders, but which would,? at the same time, adhere to the basic principles laid down ?in the Communist Manifesto?. Ryazanov points out that in essence the IWMA was a ?united front? that the Address formulated demands and emphasised points on which the existing movement should unite! and on the basis of which a further development of the labour movement could be expected?. From the immediate major tasks and struggles of the working class movement as it was whether through cooperatives or trade unions, Marx points out the need to replace capitalist production by co-operative production and the absolute necessity of organizing this at the level of society as a whole. Thus the Address states: ?To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes?. (7) Marx was able thus to relate to the various strands of the varied national labour movements a line of international co-operation and advance which led inexorably from co-operation in the daily struggles of the 1860s to the same task outlined in the Communist Manifesto: ?the organisation of the proletariat along class lines, the overthrow of bourgeois domination, the proletarian seizure of political power, the abolition of wage labour, the passing of all the means of production into the hands of society?. (8)? One may add to Ryazanov?s list the disappearance of classes: ?the abolition of all class rule? (Provisional Rules).

The Inaugural Address and the Provisional Rules was not a magic talisman. They had to be fought for and explained in concrete struggles and in polemic against the utopian nostrums of the other tendencies before the masses in struggle. Engels again clearly states this ?For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the Manifesto Marx relied solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion. The events and vicissitudes in the struggle against capital the defeats even more than the successes, could not but demonstrate to the fighters the inadequacy hitherto of their universal panaceas and make their minds more receptive to a thorough understanding of the true conditions for the emancipation of the workers?.

As events showed the workers struggles particularly in Germany and Britain did not develop on a broad or far reaching enough scale for Marx?s principles to win a dominant position and oust the existing sects. The Paris Commune, the first experience, albeit confused and brief, of workers holding power in a large capital city, was, in Engels? words ?bound to explode this naive conjunction of an fractions?. It is to Marx?s everlasting honour as an organise as a practical ?party leader? (in which terms he is often unjustly contrasted with Lenin) that he managed to carry the International through the experience of the Commune and align its sections alongside the Communards in an atmosphere of reactionary hysteria and witch hunt - not merely keeping the programmatic banner of the IWMA unspotted but taking it forward in a tremendous leap in hailing the first proletarian dictatorship in history.

The defeat of the commune -annihilating the flower of the European working class-, the proletariat of Paris-dealt a staggering blow to the International. The opportunists wavered and began to slink away. The British skilled Trade Unionists after receiving the vote and legal protection for their unions were already becoming increasingly conservative. On the other hang the Bakunist re-hash of a mixture of abstention from politics of conspiracy-mongering unrelated to the class struggle, of demagogic attacks on leadership, threatened to overtake the weakened organization. To accept this would have meant abandoning the crucial lessons, negative and positive of the Paris Commune, the dictatorship, the need for resolute leadership and mass organization. Marx with Engel?s assistance, fought like a tiger to save the programme of the International from relapse into the old sectarian backwardness. To do this they were prepared in the last analysis to sacrifice the organisational existence of the International itself. Was this an act of embittered sectarianism? The IMG?s thesis would force us to say yes. An anti-Pabloite, on the other hand, would commend their

actions as universally valid.

The answer lies with neither position. Marx and Engels saw after the defeat of the Commune that in Europe at least the development of the forces of the working class on a mass scale had suffered a serious set-back. In these circumstances it was extremely unlikely that the counter attacks of the sectarians could be fought off forever, or that a defeat on central programmatic importance could be reversed.

The London Conference of the International had already declared 'considering that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act as a class, except by committing itself into a political party, distinct from and opposed to all old parties formed by the propertied classes. That this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the Social revolution and its ultimate aim - the abolition of classes.' (9)

To this central task Marx and Engels now devoted themselves. Their voluminous correspondence is testimony to the world-wide scope of this task and the London homes of these two men provided an invaluable 'International' to which the socialists of all countries had recourse. Engels explained his and Marx's strategy and tactics in a polemical critique of what they regarded as the best strand in the French working class movement - the Blanquists. Blanqui himself whilst recognised as a 'man of action' is characterised as 'essentially a political revolutionary: 'without socialist theory', Engels attacks the unscientific nature of Blanquism, because it is not based on an understanding of the development of capitalist society (and in this respect retains the rationalism of the utopians). 'The revolution' is simply to be 'made' at a given moment when the conspirators are fully prepared. Further it has no conception of relating to the proletarian masses except by the exemplary 'coup'; in this respect Blanquism does not escape the Communist Jacobinism of Babeuf and Buonarrotti. It is completely incapable of relating to the day to day struggles, economic and political' of the proletariat. Against this he contrasts German Communism, 'The German Communists are Communists because through all intermediate stations and compromises, created not by them but by historical development, they clearly perceive the ultimate aim the abolition of classes, the inauguration of a society in which there will be no private ownership of land and means of production', (10) The 'German Communists' were however few in number. Perhaps only Wilhelm Leibknecht and one or two others understood the programme of Marx and Engels and imperfectly at that. However Germany - newly united 'from above' by Bismarck was the only advanced country with an organized working class party - or to be more accurate two. Marx and Engels turned to the task of winning real working class formations to communism.

### **Germany and the birth of mass organisation**

The origins of the revived German workers movement of the 1860s lay in the agitation launched by Ferdinand Lassalle. On April 12th 1862 he delivered an address to the machine workers of Borsig in the Berlin suburb of Oranienburg, which was shortly printed, as his famous pamphlet 'The Workers Programme'. He visited Marx in London in July and failed to persuade him to support his agitation. Nothing daunted he proceeded to launch his 'German General Workers Association' on 23rd May 1863 in Leipzig, and there after he travelled the length and breadth of Germany building branches of the new organization. In January 1864 he launched into a fierce polemic with the founder of the Liberal co-operative movement Herman Schulze-Delitzsch. On the 31st August 1864 he was shot dead in a duel in Switzerland. Marx and Engels soon recognised the historic significance of Lassalle's brief agitation 'After fifteen years of slumber, Lassalle has roused again the labour movement in Germany. This will remain his undying merit.' (11)

Yet Marx would not support Lassalle Why? Because he has the most profound disagreements with him, differences which extended over Lassalle's programme, tactics and organizational methods.

At the level of programme Marx utterly rejected Lassalle's primitive and unscientific approach to the political economy of capitalism. Lassalle concentrated exclusively on what he termed 'the iron law of wages'. This theory resurrected the old 'law of wages' of the classical bourgeois political economists, which argued the impossibility of raising wages above subsistence level. Lassalle invoked Malthus 'law of population'. If living standards increased so would the birth rate thus reducing standards to subsistence again. The conclusion was that workers could not by industrial combination (trades unions) improve their lot 'Association rights cannot be of any use to the worker they cannot bring about a serious improvement in the workers conditions', Hence flowed Lassalle's hostility to trades unions. This contrasted sharply with Marx and Engels assessment of them as 'the real class organizations of the proletariat, in which the latter wakes its day to day struggle against capital; in which it schools itself.' (12)

The abstention from the trade unions was the first element of sectarianism Marx perceived in Lassalle's programme. The second element was 'Lassalle's' 'answer' to the problem of the exploitation of the proletariat. The working class must win universal suffrage, use it to vote state credits to voluntary producer co-operatives, which would gradually replace capitalism. Both economically and politically this programme had nothing in common with that of the Communist Manifesto. It had a great deal in common with the 'petit-bourgeois socialists' of 1848, with Louis Blanc's 'Organisation of Labour' which envisaged a similar scheme. Lassalle added his typically Hegelian assessment of the positive role of the state.

"Thus the purpose of the state is to bring about the positive unfolding and progressive development of man's nature, in other words, to realise the human purpose, i.e. the culture of which the human race is capable; it is the education and the development of the human race into Freedom". (Workers Programme)

Marx pointed out that co-operatives financed by Prussia would merely make the workers pensioners. Lassalle's formulation of the role of the state was accompanied by a pledge to work only by 'peaceful and legal means', Lassalle was in the habit of saying to intimate friends 'When I say universal suffrage, I mean the Revolution'. Marx and Engels rejected this typically Lassallean real politik, which involved deceiving the workers. For them nothing could excuse miseducating the workers as Lassalle was doing. Their attitude was summed up thus:

"Beyond a doubt the disappointment in Lassalle's hapless illusion concerning socialist intervention on the part of a Prussian Government will come, The logic of things will have its say. But the honour of the workers party demands that it reject these optical illusions even before their flimsy texture is rent by experience. The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing."

Lassalle's programme turns its back on the trade unions espousing a struggle for the suffrage as the sole political demand. This programme on its positive side led to a stress on the need for an independent workers party and a sharp clash with the Liberal bourgeoisie (who favoured a limited franchise based on a property qualification). It was however fatally vulnerable in the face of a political phenomenon that appeared in France in the 1850's and in Prussia in the 1860's and 1870's - Bonapartism, whether of the Napoleonic or Bismarkian variety. Lassallean statism played right into the hands of Bismark. Marx and Engels again and again vigorously attacked Lassalle and his disciples total ignoring of the Military - big land owner class who actually ruled Germany. Marx and Engels were no lovers of the bourgeoisie yet their strategy in Germany was still to support the bourgeoisie in its clashes with the Junker Monarchy.

Lastly in the field of organisation, where Lassalle set the precedent of appointing himself as an all powerful President of the General Workers Union of Germany, Marx dissented sharply.

There, where the workers are under the thumb of bureaucracy from childhood on and believe in authority, in constituted authorities, it is a foremost task to teach them how to walk by themselves.' (13)

The other strand in the German Labour Movement inaugurated by Wilhelm Liebknecht at a later date (and also August Bebel, was born out on the left wing of Liberalism. In 1866 the two of them founded the Saxon Peoples Party - a radical party which they were able in three years to build into a small national formation and rename 'The Social Democratic Workers Party' - at a congress at Eisenach: (Hence forth they were known as Eisenachers.)

The name 'Social-Democrat' common in both strands of German socialism, was never the object of admiration by Marx and Engels. For one thing it had associations with Louis Blanc's party in 1848. They referred to it as 'a pig of a name' and to the end of his days Engels regarded it as 'inexact' for a party . . . whose economic programme is not merely socialist in general, but downright communist and whose ultimate political aim is to overcome the whole state and consequently, democracy as well.' (14)

Marx and Engels always referred to themselves as Communists, and the question of the name is not an accidental or trivial matter. For Marx and Engels the Social-Democrats in Germany were not fully developed communists - they were a formation with which they struggled to win them to the communist programme.

Initially the struggle was to overcome the Lassallean sectarian programme, At first Marx corresponded with the Lassallean leader J.B. Von Schweitzer when the latter appeared to be taking steps away from sectarianism by calling a congress to organise trade unions. However Liebknecht and Bebel were more receptive to the advice offered from London. They were, however; scarcely less in need of it. The programme adopted at Eisenach marked only the first steps away from Radical Liberalism but it had certain marked superiorities to that of the Lassalleans. In a series of articles written by Bebel (later collected as a pamphlet entitled 'Our Goals') he exposed the error that a 'half-free or despotic state could ever accomplish the workers emancipation'. He broke silence on the need to replace the Prussian State with one, which embodied the will of the majority - a 'Peoples State' (Volkstaat) i.e. in the language the censor imposed - a republic. Bebel's views come close to the 'social republicans' of 1848.

### **The 'Critique of the Gotha programme'**

In May 1875 a joint congress was held of Bebel and Liebknecht's Social Democratic Workers' Party and the Lassallean General German Workers Union. This Gotha Congress adopted a common programme for a unified workers party in Germany. Marx and Engels subjected this programme to withering criticism. The heart of the criticism that Marx and Engels made of the draft of the Gotha Programme lay in its political demands and here the thrust of their argument was directed as much against the Eisenachers as against the Lassalleans, The Lassalleans had for long shamelessly failed to expose the Monarchical Bonapartist state as totally inimical to the workers - the demand for state aided co-operatives would have turned them into pensioners of the King of Prussia. The Eisenachers as their newspaper's title (Volkstaat) suggested were pledged to a democratic transformation. (Peoples State was understood to mean Republic, a word they could not legally use. By inserting 'Free Peoples State into the programme, the Eisenachers no doubt felt they had preserved the essence of the democratic programme but, Marx singled out for heavy attack, their formulation:

"The Socialist Labour Party of Germany strives with every legal means for the Free State and the Socialist Society".

Marx's attack on this is twofold. Firstly it is evasive even as a democratic demand - and Germany was a country where the democratic tasks were the ones immediately facing the proletariat.

"Even vulgar democracy, which sees the millennium in the democratic republic and has no suspicion that it is precisely in this last form of state of bourgeois society that the class struggle has to be fought out to a

conclusion - even it towers mountains above this kind of democratism which keeps within the limits of what is permitted by the police and not permitted by logic.? (Critique of the Gotha Programme)

Secondly the programme fails completely to embody the key lesson of the Paris Commune.

"Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat".

These two criticisms run like a red thread through Marx and Engels later relations with the German Social Democrats. Marx and Engels made it clear that they would take no responsibility for this "thoroughly objectionable programme that demoralises the party". Their position on the Gotha unification was that it was wrong.

"... one should simply have concluded an agreement for action against the common enemy."

The only sort of programme that is possible in such circumstances is a "programme of action" (K. Marx letter to W. Bracke, 5th May 1875)

The attitude of the party leaders to the advice of the "Londoners" is symptomatic. Liebknecht expressed relief that "the party was not under the direction of the theoreticians. Even Bebel, to the end of his days never fully understood their objections.

"It was no easy job to come to an agreement with the two old fellows in London" (My Life - 1913)

The aid of the "theoreticians" was needed sooner than?. Liebknecht could have expected. The party leaders following on from the formlessness of the programme opened? the publication of the party to all shades of opinion - looking to all "Socialists" to assist them. The State Socialist Eugen Duhring, rapidly came to exert an enormous influence within the party.

Liebknecht and Bebel at first welcomed this. Bebel in the "Volkstaat" recommended one of Duhring's books on economics as "the best thing on the subject since Marx wrote Das Kapital?". Bracke wrote articles referring to Duhring as a party comrade.

Liebknecht only became alarmed when it became apparent that Duhring was developing a faction within the party, then panic stricken he turned to Engels, pleading for a "reply" from London. The response was "Anti-Duhring?".

In these articles, later published as a book, Engels with Marx's assistance produced the first handbook of scientific socialism, which not only demolished the Berlin professor but educated a whole generation of the leaders of Social-Democracy throughout Europe.

### **The anti-socialist laws and the battle against Evolutionism**

Marx and Engels remained deeply pessimistic about the likely future development of Social-Democracy in Germany.

"A rotten spirit is making itself felt in our party in Germany not so much amongst the masses as amongst the leaders. The compromise with the Lassalleans has led to compromise with other half way elements too." (15)

This "rotten spirit" was reformism and was the natural offspring of sectarianism. Marx understood that the utopian element in the Gotha synthesis was not the profoundly progressive, critical utopianism of Owen, Fourier and St Simon, which had prefigured many of the essential features of scientific socialism. In the context of a modern labour movement and in complete counter position to "materialist - critical socialism" it was in Marx's words "silly, stale, and fundamentally reactionary".

The 'other half-way elements' were a considerable influx of petit-bourgeois intelligentsia, including Dr Karl Hochberg and his secretary Edward Bernstein. Of them Marx observed:

"These fellows want to take the teeth out of Socialism. . .to make the party respectable in the eyes of the philistine. They are poor counter-revolutionary windbags? (16)

Far worse in Marx's eyes was the attitude of his own closest collaborators. Far from fighting these ideas they connived at their propagation.

"Hochberg was stunned when Engels told him the unvarnished truth he is a peaceable evolutionary. He declared that Liebknecht had told him that we all agreed au fond (at bottom), All those in Germany - i.e. all the leaders shared his view etc. Indeed after making the great mistake in the transactions with the Lassalleans, Liebknecht has opened the doors wide to all these barbarians, and thus paved the way malgre lui (in spite of himself) for a demoralisation in the party.?" (17)

This development of 'peaceable evolutionism' was only checked by the onslaught of Bismark on the Social Democrats. The Anti-Socialist Law passed the Reichstag in October 19th 1878 and was renewed at roughly two yearly intervals until September 30th 1890.

Two tremendous dangers faced the Social Democrats - capitulation or putchism. Bismark obviously hoped to provoke the party into an outburst that would have given him the loophole of elections to the Reichstag open to them. For 12 years Bismark tried to block it without success. The dangers of an outbreak were real - feeling amongst the Berlin workers ran high. But the opposite danger was the greater as Marx had been, amongst the leaders. In 1879, Liebknecht in the Reichstag pledged the Social Democrats to keep completely within the law and added for good measure that the party aim was to reach its goal by 'peaceful reforms' and that 'violent revolution' was an absurdity. An article by Vollmar in **Sozialdemokrat** declared 'The assertion of our enemies that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the goal to which we are striving is branded as a lie by the clear wording of our party programme'.

The leadership of the party lay with the parties deputies to the Reichstag - the Fraktion. All party papers in Germany had been closed down. The party had allowed the only Social-Democratic organ to be published in Zurich by Hochberg, Bernstein et al.

Marx and Engels were so alarmed at the capitulation of the leadership that, as with the Gotha Programme, they resorted to a Circular letter to the party leaders. This remarkable document is a prophetic indictment of Reformism. It clearly defines Hochberg and Co as a 'bourgeois' trend in the Social- Democratic party. Marx and Engels also foresaw where this trend would end.

"If Berlin should ever again be so uneducated as to have another March 18th (1848), the Social Democrats, instead of taking part in the fight like 'riff-raff with a mania for barricades' (p. 88), must rather 'follow the path of legality?', put on the brakes, clear away the Barricades and if necessary march with the glorious ,army against the one-sided, coarse, uneducated masses.?" (18)

Marx and Engels likewise saw through this pre-figuration of the disease that was to kill Social Democracy for the revolution. 'The programme is not to be given up but only postponed - for an indefinite period. One accepts it, though not really for oneself and ones own lifetime but posthumously, as an heirloom to be handed down to one's children and grandchildren. In the meantime one devotes one's 'whole strength and energy' to all sorts of tricks and the patching up of the capitalist order of society so as to produce at least the appearance of something happening without at the same time scaring the bourgeoisie.?' (19)

The conclusion they drew was that this tendency had to be driven out of Social Democracy. 'If these

gentlemen constitute themselves into a Social Democratic petty- bourgeois party they are quite entitled to do so, one could negotiate with them, form a bloc according to circumstances etc.

But in a workers' party they are an adulterating element. If reasons exist for tolerating them there for the moment it is our duty only to tolerate them, to allow them no influence in the party leadership and to remain aware that a break with them is only a matter of time. That time, moreover, seems to have come. How the party can tolerate the authors of this article in its midst is incomprehensible to us."

They concluded with the threat that if the party organ remained in the hands of the 'Zurich Trio' they would be immediately obliged, 'publicly to declare our opposition to it, and to dissolve the bonds of the solidarity with which we have hitherto represented the German party abroad.' (20)

So near to rupture did it come that a delegation, including Bebel, was despatched to London. The result was an alliance between Engels and Bebel to fight opportunism in the German party, an alliance that lasted until Engels' death. A by product was the conversion of Bernstein, also on the delegation, from his 'peaceful evolutionism', to which he was to return within a year of Engels' death.

Throughout the 1880's, at first with Marx and then alone, Engels fought to educate the party. The situation of illegality and the massive growth of the industrial working class hardships of illegality drove them out of the party. The semi anarchist tendency of Most and Hasselmann was defeated and expelled at the Weyden Conference in August 1880. At the same time, to the delight of the Londoners, the word 'lawful' was struck from the phrase, 'the party strives by an lawful means...' The Marxian perspective alone offered guidance to the illegal party nuclei. The growing numbers of workers grasped eagerly at the illegal pamphlets and papers emanating from the party centre in Switzerland. Under Engels' direct encouragement, *Der Sozial Demokrat* was established in Zurich as the illegal party organ. Its intransigence and militancy led it to clash with the Reichstag fraktion on many occasions, most notably when it condemned their vote for the Steam Ship Subsidy in 1885. At one point 'Der Sozial -Demokrat' was officially renounced by the party leadership an action which produced mass protests by the workers of Berlin' and Saxony.

In the 1880's Engels concentrated on hammering out a party strategy with Bebel and the other party leaders. He sought to draw their attention to the unfinished tasks of Germany's bourgeois-democratic revolution. In 1885, he wrote a preface to a reprint of Marx's old pamphlet, 'The Communist Trial in Cologne'. In it he explained the strategy and tactics of the Communists in 1848. He reprinted the old pamphlet, 'Demands of the Communist Party in Germany Today' advising his readers that they could, 'still learn something from it'. They could of course find in it a courageous and outspokenly republican programme with a series of measures pointing beyond the bourgeois republic, 'universal arming of the people' ... national workshops and the right to work ...the nationalisation of the means of transport' etc.

Engels saw the Bismarkian system as chronically unstable and doomed to disruption. The bourgeoisie, despite its subjective cowardice would, believed Engels, be forced into conflict with it as the expansion of the productive forces came into conflict with the social and political relations of the Second Reich. Though never finished or published in his life time, Engels began a masterly concrete study of German society, 'The Role of Force in History'. In numerous articles for *Sozial-Demokrat* he tried to draw the attention of the party to the tasks, which lay ahead of it. In particular he pointed to the need to win the rural labourers, the raw material of the Prussian regiments, to the party. He advocated agitation around the demand that the Crown estates in Prussia be leased to co-operatives of rural labourers for common cultivation; Bebel replied that it was a waste of time demanding things that the existing government would not grant. Here he put his finger on a question of political method, which was to become a decisive negative feature of Social Democracy. While paying tribute through constant propaganda to 'Our Final Goal' and maintaining a

parliamentary stance of absolute intransigence, 'Not a man, Not a penny for this system?', the daily agitation of the Social Democracy was limited to those things which could be expected within the system. Engels outlined a different method.

The Social-Democrats should certainly not dream up utopian demands on the existing Bismark Government. This could only, as with Lassalle, paint the existing sordid reality in the colours of the - Society of the future. But even the demand for cooperatives could be useful in a concrete situation. Even in 1875 he had suggested that the Lassallean demand for co-operatives would be admissible as a subordinate transitional measure, one among and alongside of many other possible ones if it were not presented as, the universal panacea.

Now he suggested the demand for agricultural cooperatives as a means of, 'drawing their attention (i.e. the rural labourers) to the fact that their future calling is the cultivation of the estates of their present gracious lords for the common account'. (21)

He further explained, in essence, the way in which, 'transitional measures' could be used. Replying to Bebel's insistence 'I go further, when we suggest socialist measures calculated to lead to the overthrow of capitalist production (like this one), then only measures which are objectively practicable but impossible for this government ... This proposal will not be carried out by any Junker or bourgeois government. To show the rural proletariat of the eastern provinces the way to end Junker and Tenant exploitation; to put the means to do this in their hands; to set in motion the very people whose enslavement and stultification produces the regiments which are the foundation of Prussia; in short, to destroy Prussia from within at the root - they certainly wouldn't do that. It is a proposal, which we must take up under all circumstances as long as the large estates exist ... With this alone can we destroy Prussia, and the sooner we popularise the proposal the better.' (22)

The party had seemed to stagger badly after the passage of the Anti-Socialist Laws but by the mid-80's things stood on a much firmer basis. In the Reichstag elections of 1884 the party gained 550,000 votes (9.7% of the total). Engels was enthusiastic, pointing out that mass working class movements, as opposed to secret societies, had never before resisted oppression. Everywhere the German workers learned to rebuild the party organisations often behind a variety of legal fronts, gymnastic societies, singing clubs etc. Nine thousand copies of **Sozial Demokrat** per issue were smuggled into Germany - often using the Imperial Mails by Julius Motteller who became known as, the Red post master.

The party made full use of the Reichstag elections, the one loophole in Bismark's repressive apparatus. Bismark had said that if he did not want any chickens then he would have to smash all the eggs, by the late 1880's the eggs were hatching out all over Germany. The Hamburg organisation alone had between 5,000 and 6,000 members. It is hardly surprising that electoral work became known as the tried and tested tactic to thousands of party activists.

### **The victory over Bismark**

Engels was not naively elated at the growth of the Social-Democrats. He recognised that the immediate period ahead was one of massive expansion of German industry and with it the proletariat. Neither could he ignore the parallel growth of militarism - hence his repeated eagerness for the Social Democrats to penetrate the recruiting grounds of 'The King of Prussia's regiments'. The Franco-Prussian War had a dual consequence which Marx and Engels realised. The passage of the leading role in the International working class movement to the Germans, and the possibility of a future war of catastrophic proportions. The seizure of Alsace-Lorraine made certain a Franco-Russian alliance against Germany and a 'world war' would follow unless there was a revolution in Russia. The consequences of the war would be incredible, 'chauvinism would swamp everything', though he did not believe the existing order could last

more than three years of protracted war. However Engels was convinced that ten more years of peace would see the Social Democrats in such a powerful position that the seizure of power would be on the order of the day. He thus envisaged two basic revolutionary situations, one arising out of the exhaustion of a devastating war; the other the product of a clash between the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois parties and the military Junker regime, which would open the road to the Social-Democrats.

In the late 1880's the Bismark 'dictatorship' was clearly in a process of dissolution. What is more German society was experiencing the accumulated effects of twenty years of industrial expansion - a chronic housing shortage, appalling working conditions, low wages. An economic upswing which lasted from 1888 to 1891 tripled the number of workers in the unions under Social-Democratic influence - a parallel to the Docks Strike and New Unionism in Britain. On January 25th 1890, the Catholic Party, the Liberals and the Social Democrats in the Reichstag combined to reject, Bismark's request for the renewal of the Anti-Socialist Law.

The new Kaiser, Wilhelm II announced his support of extended labour legislation - against Bismark's express advice on February 4th and on the 20th Germany went to the polls. The results were shattering for the Iron Chancellor. The SPD doubled its strength with 1,427,298 votes (nearly 20% of the vote) giving them 35 Reichstag deputies Bismark tried to force Wilhelm's hand for further and more savage repression with his familiar offer to resign, To his astonishment the Kaiser accepted it. The Bismark era was over - on September 20th the Anti-Socialist Law lapsed. There were massive celebrations all over Germany.

There were events that in retrospect can be seen as ill omens. Firstly, Bebel and the party stood aside from the Ruhr miners strike, advising caution and to vote for Social-Democracy. Secondly the International Congress in Paris in 1889 had called for strike action on May 1st Bebel and the executive called off the strike and with the British Trade Unionists celebrated May Day on the Sunday following. Engels, ruefully, endorsed the decision.

## **THE ERFURT PROGRAMME**

In 1890, a triumphal year for Social Democracy, these events must have seemed like spots on the sun. We cannot smugly pass judgement on Engels, deciding with the benefit of hindsight that he aided and abetted Revisionism - a practice common amongst academic and humanist 'Marxists'. However we must utilise the light which the 1914 collapse casts on Social Democracy to examine the initial political malformation which Engels only faintly perceived. That he did partly perceive it becomes clear from his activity at the time of the adoption of the Erfurt programme. This period also brings to the fore the figure who was to succeed Engels as the most widely recognised theoretician of the Second International.

Karl Kautsky, who was to become known as, 'the Pope of Marxism' in the period before 1914, was won to Social Democracy by reading Engels' Anti-Duhring. He first met Engels in 1881, and in January of 1883 began publishing the theoretical journal 'Die Neue Zeit' which became in time the most famous journal of its kind in the world. In 1887 he published, with Engels' assistance, 'The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx', a handbook that was to educate two generations of party militants. Engels contributed a series of articles to the journal, which became a major weapon in combating the theoretical eclecticism of Social Democracy and obliterating the doctrinal vestiges of Lassalleanism.

The prospect of legality opened up a period of profound self questioning amongst the Social Democrats on the subject of the party's strategy and tactics. As early as 1887 the Congress held at St. Gall in Switzerland had appointed a commission to revise the party programme. Its members, Ignaz Auer, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, represented the right, centre and left of the party respectively. Engels had to conduct something of a conspiracy with Kautsky to get Marx's 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' published. The party leadership were angry at what seemed to them unnecessary attacks on

the revered memory of Lassalle. Engels, however, was eager to see the party adopt a consistent revolutionary strategy, to see its transition to Communism. He recommended the party leaders to take Marx's, 'Introduction to the Programme of the French Workers Party published in 1880, as a guide. This introduction was based on winning or extending a series of democratic rights, the 8-hour day, equal pay for men and women, a progressive income tax and the universal arming of the people. However, the formal division of the programme did not have, for Marx and Engels, the significance it was later to assume, that is the divorce of the immediate aims from the communist goal. It did, however, represent their belief that the tasks facing the proletariat were organisation and preparation in struggle for the assault on the bourgeois order. In different countries different obstacles confronted the organised workers. For example, in France and the USA, conservative bourgeois republics existed. Assaults had to be launched at the bourgeois bastions within them - the standing army, the independent power of the chief executive, the bureaucracy and the unelected, or indirectly elected elements in the legislature. In Germany the immediate tasks were different. Political power was not directly in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The Reichstag, despite its election by manhood suffrage, had no control over the executive and the Emperor who ruled through a camarilla or princes, generals, landowner-politicians and big bankers. In this sort of state the struggle for bourgeois-democratic rights stood to the fore. When Social-Democracy re-conquered legality the crucial question was how to use it, and to what ends. It is in this light that the discussion of the Party Programme assumes a tremendous importance.

Liebknicht was the first to produce a draft of the new programme. Engels wrote a critique of it, hailing it as having broken with the major inadequacies dating from the Gotha Programme, 'both the specifically Lassallean and vulgar socialistic: 'He welcomed its adherence to, 'present day science'. Many of the specific drafting criticisms Engels made were incorporated in the final version. It is worth looking at those which were not.

Firstly, Engels suggested that, the sentence which links the preamble to the demands should say, 'Social-Democracy fights for all demands which help it approach this goal' or, 'even better, say directly what it is all about, i.e. that it is necessary to catch up with what the bourgeoisie has missed.' Instead the final draft has 'Setting out from these principles the Social Democratic Party demands immediately'. This formulation stresses the separation of the demands from the goal and retreats some distance from pointing up the party's struggle against the state structure of Wilhelmine Germany.

The most telling criticism Engels made was closely related to this very point, 'It is an obvious absurdity to wish to 'transform all the instruments of labour into common property' on the basis of this (i.e. the contemporary German) constitution' This central fact had to be tackled because of the, 'opportunism that is gaining ground in the Social-Democratic Press. 'Not only would the general struggle for Socialism within capitalist society, 'necessarily outgrow the old social order ... burst; this old shell by force' but, Engels continued, 'in Germany in addition, it will have to smash the fetters of the still absolutist, and moreover, indescribably confused political order.' (23)

Engels conceded that it might be advisable to not call explicitly for a Republic in the programme, but he insisted it was necessary to demand, 'the concentration of all political power in the hands of the peoples' representatives. ...complete self-government in the provinces, districts and communes through officials elected by universal suffrage. The abolition of all local and provincial authorities appointed by the state.' In other words all the key elements of a Unified Republic.

Engels spelt out the consequences of not raising such demands, 'In the long run such a policy can only lead one's own party astray. They push general abstract political questions into the foreground; thereby concealing the immediate, concrete questions, which, at the moment of the first great events, the first political crisis automatically poses themselves. What can result from this except that at the decisive moment the party suddenly proves helpless, and that uncertainty and discord on the most decisive issues

reign in it because these issues have never been discussed? ? (24)

The final draft was written by Kautsky and Bernstein, the former dealt with the maximum programme, the latter with the immediate demands. The maximum programme made no direct reference to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat - a concession to opportunism according to Plekhanov. Instead it simply said, 'It (the working class) cannot effect the passing of the means of production into the ownership of the community without acquiring political power'.

In Kautsky's commentary on the Erfurt Programme it is baldly stated that the working class will, 'make use of its mastery over the machinery of government to introduce the socialist system of production.' (25) In the same work Kautsky widened the gap between the immediate demands of the party and its goal, 'the Social Democratic Party can make positive propositions only for the existing social order.' 'Whilst true against utopianism was fatally one-sided, Kautsky later recalled his rejection of the suggestion that 'measures of transition' should constitute a section of the programme, 'When, more than ten years ago, the German Social Democracy proposed to include in its programme demands for such measures as would accelerate the transformation from a capitalist to a socialist manner of production, I opposed this because I maintained that the party could not lay out a definite road for conditions of which we can only have a dim presentiment and which may easily surprise us with much that is wholly unexpected.' (26)

The Erfurt Programme thus covered over a disjuncture between principles and tactics and at the Erfurt Congress the first far-ranging discussion on the latter accompanied the programmatic debate. During the period of the Anti-Socialist laws the party had been left one loop-hole, electioneering. Thus, organising for elections and the propaganda work associated with them, had become the central tactic for the party. Its leadership had become the Reichstag Fraktion, although the editorial board of Sozial Demokrat, in alliance with the Bebel wing of the Reichstag deputies, gradually achieved ascendancy. The outstanding success of the electoral work strengthened it as the tried and tested tactic. Bebel's attitude is well summed up in a speech he made to the party conference 'the power of the Social Democratic Party rests fundamentally upon parliamentary activity and its participation in the elections. Thus, it is not the participation in elections which harms the party, but only the over-estimation of parliamentarism which is dangerous.' 'Whoever believes that the final goals of socialism can be reached by the existing parliamentary-constitutional road either does not know its goals or is an impostor.' (27)

At the Erfurt Congress there appeared a faction known as the 'Jungen' (Young Ones) - composed of young intellectuals like Paul Ernst and Max Schippel and skilled workers such as Wilhelm Werner and Karl Wilderberger. Though not opposed to parliamentary work per se they condemned the 'success mongering parliamentary direction of present Social Democracy.' 'They had, however, little but negative criticism to offer - certainly they had no programmatic or tactical alternatives. Engels supported Bebel who crushed them decisively, expelling Werner and Wilderberger at Erfurt. Liebknecht's contributions to the attack on the 'Jungen' indicate the developing tactical impasse of Social Democracy, 'I hold, we all hold, that the centre of gravity for our party's activity is not to be found in the Reichstag, but outside it, and that our activity in the Reichstag, as long as we do not have a decisive influence there, should have propaganda chiefly in view... If we had as many votes, and as much force behind us as the bourgeois parties have, the Reichstag would be as little unfruitful for us as it now is for them... To say this is not to maintain that every question can be solved by legislation but let someone show me any other road that leads to the goal! The essence of revolutionism lies not in the means but the end.' (28)

This splitting of ends and means was the seed of the collapse of Social-Democracy. At Erfurt the party failed to re-orient itself tactically. Already the right-wing, led by Georg Von Vollmar, were proposing the abandonment of the 'propagandist' use of the Reichstag in favour of electoral pacts with the Liberals,

special reformist programmes for the medium-sized peasant proprietors of Southern Germany; voting for the Budget in certain states where Liberals might offer social reforms in exchange. Engels observed, ?...this fellow is more dangerous than the former (Jungen) group.? All in all, however, Engels was satisfied with Erfurt, Not only that he supported and defended the Bebel leadership's tactics for the next four years. When, in the same year, Marx's French son in law had criticised the Germans as ? flabby? and? hesitant? because they again backed off from the May Day strike, Engels replied, ?The German Socialists best demonstration is their existence and their slow, steady, irresistible progress. We are still far from being able to withstand an open fight, and we have the duty, in relation to the whole of Europe and America, of not suffering a defeat, but of winning, when the time comes, the first great battle.? (29)

Engels supported Bebel vigorously against the right - in the debate over Agrarian policy, against Bernstein who, in 1893, advocated a deal with the Liberals in the Prussian Landtag elections, but also against ?left? attempts to alter the party's tactics. Why? Not because Engels had become convinced that the Junker-Capitalist Reich would drop like a ripe plum into the hands of the calmly waiting Social Democracy. He had a very different perspective. On an international scale, Engels still held the view that a Franco-Russian conflict with Germany was possible, indeed inevitable, unless revolution erupted in Russia.

In the event of a revived Bonapartist regime in France and this threat appeared very real throughout the 1890's from the time of the movement around General Boulanger to the Dreyfus incident - Engels believed that a combined attack on Germany was likely. In these circumstances Engels saw the task of Social Democracy as winning the leadership of the movement of resistance to these reactionary forces, which would attempt to dismember Germany. This was predicated on the belief that the Hohenzollern regime would rapidly prove itself incapable of leading such a resistance. When this became clear the Social Democrats should seize power and lead a war of national resistance. Domestically, Engels still worked on the assumption that the German bourgeoisie would be forced into sharp collision with the Hohenzollerns and Junkers should the latter stage a royal coup d'etat to halt the growth and organisation of the workers.

Engels saw the legality of the early 1890's as a short breathing space in which to win over the mass of the workers and the rural proletarians and, a theme he frequently stressed, to penetrate the Prussian Army, undermine it from within so that soldiers would revolt if ordered to fight the workers. Parliamentary work was thus, for Engels, temporarily central and to this end he supported Bebel against what he saw as semi-anarchist criticisms. At the same time he resisted the transform-ation of this tactic into an exclusive strategy for conquering state power. In every instance where he supported the party leaders his position was, it is clear from hindsight, different from theirs - a fact that is borne out by their increasingly frequent misrepresentations and falsifications of Engels' advice, Let us look at certain key examples of this.

The General Strike, which had been the subject of great discussion in the early days of the workers' movement, had, by the late nineteenth century, become the preserve of certain sections of the Anarchists who saw it as the sole and sufficient tactic to overthrow capitalism and dissolve the State. The advocates of the general strike increased in numbers after the Belgian General Strike of 1893, in which over 300,000 workers had responded to the Labour Party's strike call. The strike resulted in important concessions being granted by a divided and uncertain ruling class. A discussion on the question of the General Strike ensued in which Engels again supported the SPD leaders. In later years Engels' authority was to be cited against the advocates of the mass strike tactic. Yet, if one looks closely at Engels' criticism, it is far from being a blanket rejection of the general strike. Writing to Kautsky, he linked this tactic to the question of armed insurrection,

You yourself remark that the barricades have become antiquated (they may, however, prove useful again should the? army turn one-third or two-fifths socialist and the question arise of providing it with the

opportunity to turn its bayonets) but the political strike must either prove victorious immediately, by the threat alone (as in Belgium where the army was shaky) or it must end in a colossal fiasco or, finally, lead directly to the barricades. ? (30)

Here Engels puts his finger on the most important feature of the general strike - its political nature. Other than in exceptional cases, where the ruling class is unusually weak or divided and where the strike's objectives are limited, the general strike poses the question of political power and, therefore, must lead on to the armed insurrection (barricades). Engels own opposition to the semi-anarchist proponents of the general strike is thus clearly a revolutionary opposition. Yet his authority was increasingly misused, The most famous case of such misuse was the way in which the party leaders censored Engels' preface to Marx's 'Class Struggles in France'.

In it Engels observed that military developments, the precursors of the modern machine gun and street planning, had made barricade fighting, in its traditional role as the initial act of the revolution as in 1848, impossible, at the same time he re-emphasised participation in parliamentary activity as an essential way to mobilise and educate the working class. However, he added warnings that this tactic was not an absolute or good for all time. These warnings were deleted, without his permission, from the printed version - a censorship not fully discovered until the 1920's. Engels himself protested vigorously to Kautsky, 'To my astonishment I see in Vorwärts today an extract of my Introduction, printed without my prior consent and trimmed in such a fashion that I appear as a peaceful worshipper of legality at any price.' (31) Engels wrote to Lafargue in Paris at the same time, making his position clear, 'Liebknecht has taken from my Introduction everything that could serve him to defend the tactics of peace at any price and of opposition to force and violence, which if has pleased him for some time now to preach... I am advising these tactics only for Germany of today and even, then with an important proviso. In France, Belgium, Italy and Austria, these tactics could not be followed in their entirety and in Germany they may become inapplicable tomorrow. ? (32)

In a letter to Richard Fischer, Engels protested even more vigorously against: legality at any price? and against being law abiding as a moral compulsion. The SPD's observance of the laws of Wilhelmine Germany, he stressed, was a matter of compulsion and tactical convenience. When the people had enough power they would break these laws.

Within three months Engels was dead and the whole matter remained hidden. Even Rosa Luxemburg was unaware of it when, in 1919 she was presenting a new programme to the founding conference of the German Communist Party (KPD). Luxemburg had been a student in Zurich at the time of Erfurt and was in sympathetic contact with the oppositionist currents in the SPD. Later, she recalled those years as central to understanding Social Democracy's turn away from the revolutionary road, 'The parliamentary struggle was counterposed to direct revolutionary action by the proletariat and the former was indicated as the only practicable way of carrying the class struggle, parliamentarism and nothing but parliamentarism was the logical sequel o/this criticism. It was characteristic of the party conditions at that time that the socialist parliamentarians should have the decisive word alike in theory and practice. They assured Engels that it was absolutely essential to safeguard the German Labour Movement from a lapse into anarchism and in this way constrained him to write in the tone they wanted. The upshot of this change was that at every annual congress the energetic protests of the left wing against a purely parliamentarist policy, its 'urgent warnings against the sterility and danger of such a policy were stigmatised as anarchism, anarchising socialism, or at least, anti-Marxism.' (33)

In conclusion it must be asked, what responsibility did Engels have for the development of the SPD's 'passive radicalism'? Was he some sort of precursor of Kautsky? Many modern commentators have thought so.

The most sophisticated version of this approach is that contained in Lucio Colletti's essay, 'Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International' in which Engels' political position is defined as, '...by no means yet revisionism. But if it is not revisionism, it is nonetheless, its unconscious preamble and preparation'. This approach is not new. During the First World War voices were heard blaming Engels for the catastrophe, not in itself surprising since the Social Chauvinists were filling the pages of their journals with mangled and out of context quotes from Engels to justify their position. Lenin rejected this approach in a letter to Inessa Armand he wrote 'In my day I have seen an awful lot of hasty charges that Engels was an opportunist, and my attitude is supremely distrustful.'

Lenin's attitude can be summed up as, 'Try and prove it'. On the issues of 'defence of the Fatherland' in 1891, and of Engels' views on the Belgian general strike of 1893, Lenin's approach was to look at Engels' position in their concrete historical setting, in their relationship to his positions on other matters, and their validity as borne out in the development of events. Thus, he could conclude that Engels was, 'absolutely right' to advocate defence of Germany against any combined attack by a restored French Bonapartism and the Tsar. The parallel with 1914 was invalid, Lenin asserted, because, 'no imperialism existed at all.' On the other hand he could conclude that Engels might well have been wrong about the Belgium general strike. Why? Explaining this, Lenin wrote, '...events in recent times in general and 1905 definitely, have provided something new about general strikes which Engels did not know. Engels had been accustomed to hear about the general strike only from the empty phrases of the anarchists, whom he legitimately hated and despised. But, later events have demonstrated a new type of mass strike, a political one, i.e. a particularly non-anarchist one. This new feature Engels did not know yet, and could not know.' Lenin likewise rejected the conclusion drawn from these 'cases', Engels was the father of passive radicalism? Untrue. Nothing of the kind. You will never be able to prove this?'

What Engels did not, and could not, do, was to fully foresee the passage of world capitalism into a new epoch that of Imperialism and to re-adjust the strategy and tactics of the proletariat to deal with this. This task fell to a generation of militants who were drawn to Marxism in the 1890's - Luxemburg, Lenin, Liebknecht, Trotsky and others. They were aroused to this task by the controversy, which broke out within a year of Engels death.

## **THE REVISIONIST CONTROVERSY**

Scarcely a year elapsed before the Erfurt synthesis of theoretical radicalism and practical reformism found itself under attack from the right wing of the party, principally from Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein had spent the 1890's in London as Engels' closest disciple. However, even in Engels lifetime he had shown a liking for the writings of the Fabians - Bland, Webb and Shaw. Engels had remarked disapprovingly on his 'Fabian enthusiasm'. After the old man's death in 1895, Bernstein's abandonment of Marxism was rapid, and led to a debate, which shook the whole International.

Bernstein opened his attack towards the end of 1896 in a series of articles entitled, 'Problems of Socialism' which appeared in Kautsky's theoretical weekly *Die Neue Zeit*. The first article, 'Utopianism and Eclecticism' attacked the Marxists for allowing their politics to be dominated by the idea of a sudden, revolutionary, transition to socialism. In following articles he attacked Marx's theory of capitalist crisis, maintaining that capitalism was becoming more stable. He argued for a policy dominated by the struggle for meaningful reforms, a cessation of opposition to all actions of the existing state and, in particular, and resistance to the colonial policy.

Belfort Bax, the most frequent contributor from Britain to *Die Neue Zeit*, had been engaged in a theoretical debate of some bitterness with Karl Kautsky on the question of Ethics, a subject on which he had written a good deal in both English and continental journals. Kautsky acidly wrote to Adler in

November 1896, 'Though I have little in common with the Fabians theoretically, they are yet more attractive to me than Hyndman and Bax with their utopianism concealed behind Marxist phraseology. The Fabians have damaged our movement in England much less by their criticism of superficial Marxism than Bax and Hyndman have by having compromised Marxism,' Bax, supported by Hyndman, had been arguing for the autonomy of ethics from economic determinism and as an important causal factor in men's actions. Heavily influenced in this by Kant, he was, as it happens, closer to Bernstein than to Kautsky.

However, Bernstein's conclusions were diametrically opposed to those of Bax and when he went on to attack socialism as an end to which immediate tactics must lead and be subordinate, Bax attacked him. It was Bax's attack, the first in what was to be a long battle which raged throughout all the European parties and drew in nearly all the distinguished figures of the period, which really provoked Bernstein into coming out into the open. Bax censured Bernstein for ignoring the final goal of socialism, particularly with regard to the latter's acceptance of Imperialism. Bernstein, stung by the sharpness of the attack replied, in words which were to dog him in the years to come, 'I confess openly, I have extraordinarily little interest or taste for what is generally called the final goal of socialism. This aim, whatever it be, is nothing to me, the movement everything. And by movement I understand not only the general movement of society that is social progress, but political and economic agitation and organisation for affecting this progress.' This article, 'The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy' repeated Kautsky's sneer at Bax's 'utopianism' Kautsky himself remained silent, indeed when questioned he said he regarded Bernstein's case with the utmost sympathy. 'Vorwärts', the SPD daily referred to the articles as 'stimulating observations'.

Bax returned to the attack, in 'Justice' the SDF paper, he accused Bernstein of, 'trying to show Marx in the light of the Fabian ass in the lion's skin of Social-Democracy'. He mounted a full attack in an article published in 'Die Neue Zeit' on the 21st of December 1897, a month after the opening of Bernstein's second series of articles. Bax's article, 'Kolonialpolitik Und Chauvinismus' took up Bernstein on his attitude to Imperialism, repeating the arguments of Bax's earlier onslaughts on the dangers to socialism of a nationalist outlook, 'What he (Bernstein) writes and says, the Liberals also say, only in slightly different words.' To the accusation of utopianism Bax replied, 'In conclusion I will only stress that, far as I am from the tendency of the parliamentary socialists, though the final goal without the movement sounds mere self-indulgence to me, I nevertheless stress (and that is my offence in Bernstein's eyes) that the socialism of the present can progress only if it remains constant to its final goal, the Communist society of the future.'

Bax fought Bernstein alone for nearly a year. Kautsky and the German leaders maintained an indifferent, or even hostile, silence. Since 1891 they had been moving further to the right themselves and had just won the final battle with the Anarchists and left socialists. The Bernstein debate was highly unwelcome to them and once again disturbed the 'balance' in their expanding party - that 'Erfurt' approach which was summed up by Bebel's words, 'The bourgeois society is working so forcefully towards its own downfall that we have only to wait for the moment to pick up the power that drops from its hands.' (34)

However the opposition then spread to their own party and became more sophisticated. Alexander Helphand (Parvus), editor of the 'Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung' opened up a fierce series of denunciations under the title, 'Bernstein's Overthrow of Socialism' between January and March 1898. Amazed at the silence of the party leaders, Georg Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, joined battle in an article in 'Die Neue Zeit' in July 1898 entitled 'Bernstein and Materialism'. Kautsky called for a moratorium and invited Bernstein to collect his views in a book and this he agreed to do.

The Stuttgart Party Congress in October brought the whole matter into the open. A new left was now openly in process of formation consisting of Parvus, Luxemburg, Bruno Schonrank, Clara Zetkin and Plekhanov, the last being present at the Congress as an observer. Luxemburg's two speeches signalled

the new revolutionary approach. Referring to Bernstein's celebrated reply to Bax, she countered, "On the contrary, the movement as such, without regard to the final aim is nothing, but the final aim is everything for us."

Bebel, Liebknecht and Kautsky still did not come out with an open criticism of Bernstein, they reserved their reproaches for the "tone" of the left's polemics. They hoped it would blow over, but the battle, both in their own party and in the International, was only in its earliest stages. Though formally settled at SPD Congresses in 1899 and 1900 and at the International Congresses of 1900 and 1904, though solemnly exorcised by Kautskyan orthodoxy, the debate continued. It had opened up the contradictions within German Social-Democracy, though few could see it. Lines had been drawn and, though many of the protagonists were to cross them, they were, at root, the lines of cleavage of the period 1914-1920.

Although Bax, Plekhanov and Parvus were to find themselves amongst the chauvinists of 1914; although Bernstein was to find his place among the pacifists of the Kautskyite centre, both sides had taught important lessons to others who were more willing to carry them out to their logical conclusion.

Parvus, a creative though erratic Marxist, did not limit himself to a negative, or "orthodox" criticism of Bernstein. Already in 1895/6 he had taken up the question that Engels had been concerned with but left unsolved - what tactics to employ in the event of a reactionary onslaught on the legality won in 1890/1. Parvus published in "Die Neue Zeit" a series of articles entitled "The Coup d'Etat and the Political Mass Strike". In these articles he examined the willingness of the workers to use the political mass strike in Belgium and the fight for the eight hour day. He thus raised in a Marxist manner the use of the new mass trade unions for political struggle. By 1901; Parvus had come to the conclusion that, "Only a revision to the left of our party principles is now possible in the sense of the extension of political activity.. of the intensification of social revolutionary energy - of a bold endeavour and will and not of fearful reserved softness."

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how Marx and Engels elaborated and themselves amended and developed a scientific communist programme. This programme, and the tactics associated with it, were based on an understanding of expanding capitalism - of capitalism in the process of creating a world market, of obliterating pre capitalist modes of production and the political structures based upon them, above all, creating its own gravedigger, the modern proletariat.

Marx and Engels life work was to actively intervene in the growth of real mass organisations of the proletariat, trades unions and political parties, and to win them to the communist programme. This necessitated irreconcilable ideological struggle with all confusionists, whether sectarians or opportunists, no matter how successful or popular they might be in the working class organisations. Their criticism was sharp and unsparing when it came to all questions of strategy and tactics, having nothing in common with the view, widely propagated by centrists in all periods and today by the IMG and SWP, that this polemic is "sectarian". On the other hand, towards every real step forward of the working class they showed the greatest care and patience.

The last period of their lives was spent in aiding the political development of the first permanent workers' party, the German Social Democracy. Again their criticisms of the leaders were often harsh. Yet till their deaths they saw this party was on the road to communism. In hindsight we can see that from at least 1890 this forward movement had begun to falter. The tactics which had been adopted in certain concrete circumstances had been raised to the levels of principles universally applicable whatever the circumstances. (34) Erfurt Protokoll, 1891, p171.

Liebknicht and Kautsky had only partially grasped the doctrine of the two 'old men'. Most essentially the question of the State and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was seriously misunderstood by them. Moreover, Marx and Engels active conception of tactics, intimately related to mobilising the workers in any given political situation for the onslaught on the ruling class, was increasingly replaced by a fetishism of organisational growth and a passive waiting for the collapse of capitalism which, in the context of the expansion due to Imperialism, seemed indefinitely delayed. These leaders, above all their ideologue Kautsky, separated Marxist principles from day to day tactics. The former they could, at best, defend as a barren orthodoxy. They could repeat a pruned and amended version of Engels' later writings, but they could not use his method either to redevelop a programme that took account of the changed circumstances - Imperialism - or to develop new tactics to meet its challenge.

When a new period of stormy class struggle developed in the 1900s these leaders could offer no way forward for the struggles of the proletariat, nor offer to the vanguard the programme and tactics they had inherited from Marx and Engels. This task fell to the younger generation who had been schooled in struggle alongside the Orthodox against the open Revisionists. Parvus, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky believed, initially, that they were defending orthodoxy. Yet they were doing more than this, by grappling with the key questions of the battle tactics of the new period; the analysis of Imperialism, the question of the mass strike, developing a strategy for relating the bourgeois revolution to the proletariat in backward countries, discovering in practice how to build a combat party in conditions of illegality or semi-legality, they were laying the basis for a communist programme for the Imperialist epoch. They were re-discovering the method, which had guided the work of the co-founders of scientific socialism. In part three of this series we shall look at this work and the lessons it holds for us today.

The third article in our Party and Programme Series. It will look at how the political heirs of Marx and Engels adopted their programmatic method to grapple with key questions of battle tactics necessary for that new period.

[Part two](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and [Part three](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

## Endnotes

- (1) Viz 'Eighteenth Brumaire', S.W. (3 vol) vol 1 P 477. 'Civil War in France' SW (3 vol) vol 2, passim. 'critique of the Gotha Programme' ibid, vol 3. The experience of the rise (1849-51) and fall (1870-71) of Napoleon III's Bonapartist state, analysed by Marx was the basis of his additions and clarifications.
- (2) 'Ninety Years. of the Communist Manifesto' LD Trotsky. 'Age of Permanent Revolution' ed Deutscher? p 285.
- (3) Ibid
- (4) Ibid
- (5) Marx to Bolte, November 23rd 1871: 'Letters to Americans', p 90.
- (6) Preface to the German Edition of the Communist Manifesto -1890 - Engels
- (7) Ibid
- (8), 'Karl Marx and F. Engels', D. Ryazanov, p 153.
- (9) 'Resolution of the IWMA London Conference No. 9, 'Political Action of the Working Class' - The First International and After (penguin) p 269
- (10) Programme of the Blanquist Commune Emigrants - Engels, June 1874, SW, 3 vol, p 380-86.
- (11) Marx to J B von Schweitzer, October 13th 1868. Selected Letters, p 200.
- (12) Engels to Bebel, March 18th 1875, Selected Letters, p274.
- (13) Letter to J.D. Von Schweitzer, September 13th 1868.
- (14) Engels' preface to 'On International Topics from 'The Peoples State' '(1894).

- (15), Marx to Sorge, October 19th 1877. Letters to Americans, p 116.
- (16) Marx to Sorge, London September 19th 1879.
- (17) *ibid*
- (18) Marx and Engels - Circular Letter to Bebel, Liebknecht, Bracke et al September 17th/18th, 1879. Selected Letters, p 302 - 307.
- (19) *Ibid.*
- (20) *Ibid.*
- (21) Engels to Bebel, 11th/12th December 1884; cited in Ernst Wnfmans Introduction to Engels 'The Role of Force in History?', p 23/24.
- (22) Engels to Rebel, 20th January 1886, *ibid*, P 24.
- (23) Engels. Critique of the Draft SD Programme of 1891. SW 3 vol, Vol III, p434.
- (24) *Ibid*
- (25) Karl Kautsky, 'The Class Struggle?', p 191. Here Kautsky states what was to be a central kernel of his 'Marxism', the taking over of the State machinery.
- (26) Karl Kautsky, 'The Social Revolution?' German first edition, 1900. English first edition, 1902, p 103.
- (27) Cited in 'The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878 - 1890, Vernon L. Lidtke.
- (28) Cited in 'History of Socialist Thought?', GDH Cole Vol 111, p 253.
- (29) Engels to Lafargue, Jan. 31st 1891: Letters to Paul and Laura Lafargue, vol III, p 22.
- (30) Engels to Kautsky, November 1893, cited by Trotsky in 'Whither? France?'
- (31) Engels to Kautsky, April 1st 1895. Selected letters, p 461.
- (32) Engels to Paul Lafargue, April 3rd 1895, Selected Letters, p 461.
- (33) Rosa Luxemburg : Speech to the Founding Convention of the KP: 'Rosa Luxemburg Speaks. p 40.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/party-and-programme-communism-social-democracy-part-1>

**Links:**

[1] <https://fifthinternational.org/http>