Friedrich Engels on the Socialists' Gotha Program (October 12, 1875)

Abstract

At the socialist congress in Gotha in 1875, the Lassallean General German Workers' Association merged with the rival Social Democratic Workers' Party (the "Eisenachers") to form the German Socialist Workers' Party. As the following letter to August Bebel (1840–1913) reveals, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and Karl Marx (1818–1883) were appalled by the compromises and muddled diction forced through by the Lassalleans. They dubbed the endeavor a short-lived "educational experiment." The merger nonetheless rendered German Social Democracy more able to withstand the repressive Anti-Socialist Law enacted in 1878.

Source

London, October 12, 1875

Dear Bebel! Your letter wholly confirms our view that our unification [of the workers' parties] was overhasty and already contains the seeds of conflict. It would be good if we could manage to postpone that conflict until after the next Reichstag elections. […] The program as it now stands consists of three parts:

1. Lassallean phrases and catchwords, the adoption of which remains a disgrace to our party. When two factions settle on a common program, they incorporate those points on which they agree and leave out those on which they disagree. Admittedly, the Lassallean state support scheme was part of the Eisenach program, but only as one of numerous transitional measures; and, as far as I have heard, if not for the unification it most likely would have been thrown out at this year's congress at [Wilhelm] Bracke's request. Now it figures as the one, exclusive and infallible remedy for all social evils. To have the "iron law of wages" and other hollow phrases of the Lassalleans imposed upon us constitutes an enormous moral defeat for our party. It thus converted itself to the Lassallean creed. That is simply undeniable. This part of the program is the Caudine Forks,[1] below which our party crawled through for the greater glory of Saint Lassalle;

2. Democratic demands that are formulated entirely along the lines of the People's Party;

3. Demands aimed at the "current state" (so that it is unclear to whom the other demands are then addressed), which are very confused and illogical;

4. General formulations, mostly borrowed from the Communist Manifesto and the statutes of the International, which, however, are rewritten in such a way that they either contain something completely wrong or, alternatively, constitute pure nonsense, just as Marx has demonstrated in the essay known to you.

The entire thing is extremely untidy, confused, incoherent, illogical, and shameful. If the bourgeois press possessed even a single critical mind, he would have gone through this program sentence by sentence, examined each statement as to its actual content, laid out the nonsense for all to see, elaborated on the contradictions and economic blunders (e.g., that today the means of production are the "monopoly of the capitalist class," as if there weren't any landowners; the empty talk about the "liberation of labor" instead of the liberation of the working class, when today labor itself is in reality much too free!), and

ridiculed our entire party in the most dreadful way. Instead, the asses from the bourgeois newspapers have taken this program entirely seriously, reading into it what is not there and interpreting it along communist lines. The workers seem to be doing the same. It is this circumstance alone that has made it possible for Marx and me not to renounce such a program publicly. As long as our adversaries and the workers, too, falsely attribute our intentions to the program, we can remain silent about it. […] You are quite right that the entire matter is an educational experiment that may promise a very favorable result even under these conditions. The party unification as such will be a great success if it can last for just two years. Undoubtedly, however, this would have been possible at a far cheaper price.

NOTES

[1] The Caudine Forks was a battle in the Apennines in 321 BC in which the Romans were trapped in valley, forced to surrender, and then allowed to go through—ed.

Source: *Elementarbücher des Kommunismus* 12, 2nd ed. (1930), pp. 51ff; reprinted in Felix Salomon, *Die Deutschen Parteiprogramme*, vol. 2, *Im Deutschen Kaiserreich 187*1–1918, ed. Wilhelm Mommsen and Günther Franz, 4th ed. Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1932, pp. 42–43.

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