

Paul Göhre Describes a Socialist Election Campaign in Chemnitz (1890)

Abstract

Paul Göhre (1864–1924) was a Protestant pastor and social reformer who lived undercover as a factory worker in Chemnitz for three months in 1890 in order to experience working-class life first hand. During this time, he observed the local election campaign waged by the Social Democrats, who dominated the constituency in Chemnitz—just as they did in many other urban, industrial areas. Here, we see that even under the Anti-Socialist Law, which was still in effect at the time, the socialists were able to organize and agitate successfully. Göhre describes how the party not only educated workers in political matters, but also won their allegiance through cultural and leisure activities.

Source

Chapter IV.

The Agitation of Social Democracy

Chemnitz is one of the first and oldest seats of German social democracy. As long ago as the year 1867 it returned to the North German Reichstag the social democrat, Försterling, a coppersmith from Dresden, who did not, however, long remain a member of that assembly. Then, shortly after the war, the “furious Most” made Chemnitz his headquarters, and was there chosen deputy in 1874, and again in 1877. In the election of 1878, after the attempt on the Emperor’s life, he was overwhelmingly defeated; but in 1881 social democracy won back the district through the Breslau author, Bruno Geiser, and controlled it also in 1884, only to lose it once more in 1887. In the last election, however (1890), another social democrat was returned, the well-known Max Schippel, son of the superintendent of schools in Chemnitz.

Thus for almost twenty-five years social democracy has been agitating in Chemnitz and the vicinity, and here, during the whole of this period, the party leaders have been engaged in the work. It is not surprising, therefore, that as early as 1881 more than 10,000 social-democratic votes were cast here, which increased in 1887 to over 15,000, and in 1890 to 24,642; nor is it to be wondered at that in the suburb where our factory was situated, and where most of us lived, 750 social democratic, and only 150 so-called “patriotic,” votes were cast.

Faithful to this record, the party agitation was incessantly active during the summer of 1891, and here, as in nearly all other German cities, it was the only one observable. It was thoroughly well planned, forcible and detailed. Large weekly public meetings for men employed in some particular branch of industry, or for men and women both, were the ordinary means employed for keeping the attention of the entire wage-earning population fixed upon the Labour party. At these meetings, to be sure, or, at least, those of them where I was present, the attendance was usually rather slight; it was only in the event of some special interest touching more than one of the different trades, or when some famous speaker or social-democratic leader from a distance was to appear, that they swelled to imposing mass meetings; at other times the average audience varied between 100 and 200 persons. Working men prominent in the movement always gave the tone to any discussion of social-democratic affairs. Commonly, these were men of good standing. I remember that in the first meeting of the sort to which I went in the character of a workman, I was the only one present in the soiled suit in which I had been working, without white collar or necktie; all the rest had put on their good clothes. But, at all events, the purpose of these meetings—to fix the attention of the people on the movement itself—was effected by the great red placards posted in

every nook and corner of the city and suburbs announcing them. Besides, they formed only the framework for the more ardent and individual agitation in the different parts of the city and suburbs.

Hardly one of these districts but had its social-democratic campaign club, which, not only in the case of a forthcoming election, but throughout the entire year, pursued a quiet but sagacious and comprehensive policy of agitation, and whose members were the most fervid and intelligent adherents of the party. The campaign club takes charge of the agitation for the elections to the Reichstag, and latterly for the local elections as well; in great campaign meetings it furnishes a never-failing contingent to cheer the Labour orators at every opportunity, in blind fidelity to the accustomed boisterous party tactics. It is one of the treasuries of the party funds, and most important of all, it is the training school for social-democratic speakers. For it is not only the recently established working men's educational associations which serve this end, nor special institutions like that which is said to flourish *sub rosa* in Hamburg; it may be boldly asserted that every social-democratic campaign club forms such a school of oratory for beginners. At least, in our club, which was supposed to number about 150 members, with monthly dues of ten pfennigs, this was certainly the case; and this is the reason why the utmost stress was always laid on the debates which followed either upon the lecture of the evening, or the readings selected from articles in the social-democratic *Volkstribüne*. Indeed, the president of our club frankly avowed this at the opening of every debate, by urging everyone present to take an active part in it; an invitation always couched in the same words, somewhat as follows: —“Our campaign club holds its meetings principally for the sake of debate. It is desired that everyone should take part, and that everyone should express his opinion. No matter how poorly this is done, everyone may be sure of not being laughed at, since we meet every fortnight for precisely the purpose of training ourselves to cope successfully with the arguments of our opponents in larger assemblies.” And it must be confessed that this exhortation was faithfully followed. The debates of these workmen, tired as they were with the day's toil, usually lasted from about eight o'clock in the evening until midnight. Young and old, without distinction, spoke whatever was in their thought. Ideas were expressed, often in the crudest form, and in sentences not one of which was properly constructed, betraying a fearful jumble of knowledge and ignorance, practical experience and total inability to grasp the situation, with often such extravagance of views as startled the more cautious and practical members of the club. But beside these there were several speakers so clear, so ready in retort, of so keen and well-trained judgment, that I listened in silent and shamefaced admiration to these weavers, master-mechanics, and common workmen, whose eloquence and directness of thought and bearings are to be equalled, as far as my experience goes, by but a small proportion of what are generally known as the educated classes. And all who spoke, even if they spoke the most arrant nonsense, were quietly and attentively heard, with a gravity almost childlike; and what they were trying to express was, to my amazement, clearly and correctly understood. The fact that they gave each other hard hits in these debates, and that there was a constant clashing of the most diverse opinions, is worthy of especial mention, because it is in distinct contrast to the perfect unity which appears among social democrats on any public occasion of meeting their political opponents. The debates were conducted, in a certain sense, by means of answers to questions which were put in the query-box by the audience during the evening, and which usually asked for an explanation of some point touched upon by the speaker, or an unfamiliar or foreign word, or some article which had appeared in the daily paper. The answers, whether given by the president, the speaker, or someone among the audience, were usually fairly to the point, but often inadequate, or even altogether incorrect. But they were always given with the triumphant certainty which is one of the marks of the half-educated man who believes in his cause and in himself. Compared with the debates, the value of the lectures was small. They were generally short, and were always delivered by Chemnitzers prominent in party work, and they were often absolutely worthless, and evidently patched together from the columns of the last newspaper. In accordance with a custom prevalent everywhere among social democrats, however, such a lecture would be delivered by its author not only in our club, but in half-a-dozen sister organisations, each time with the same expression and the same emphasis word for word. Such a phenomenon can be explained only by the fanatic zeal for agitation, and the half-education which prevents the tedium of such a rehash from penetrating the

people's consciousness.

Lecture and debate were followed, as I have said, with the closest attention by the forty or more men who were usually present. One saw in their bright and thoughtful eyes how their brains were at work to comprehend and assimilate the ideas presented to them. They generally smoked pipes, but now and then cigars, and they drank, on an average, one, or at most two, glasses of beer, costing either eight or fifteen pfennigs the glass, according to quality. Only a few left the meeting before its close; a few also, overcome by the fatigue of the day's toil, fell at last quietly asleep, otherwise the most undivided attention prevailed; such evenings were for these men no mere recreation, but hard work; they were always hours of eager learning and profound reflection; they were inspiration and encouragement in the unvarying monotony of factory life. It may be said, without exaggeration, that such evenings have taken the place of the old accustomed churchgoing. And herein, precisely, lies the great agitative importance of the Social-Democratic Campaign Club, with its regularly recurring meetings, in centres like Chemnitz. It is these evenings which act silently, persistently, lastingly, upon the working man inclined towards social democracy, until he is identified in heart and mind with the whole system of thought of the Socialist party; it is they which train their convert so that the fire of conviction kindled within him shall not uselessly flicker out, but shall burn high in agitation among his fellow-workmen and in his own family, as well as in public assemblies, when he enters the lists, for the common cause, against his political opponents.

Outwardly these evenings passed always in the same manner and under the same order of business, which was as follows: —The admission of new members, the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting, the lecture, or, in its default, the reading of leading articles from some one of the social-democratic papers, ordinarily the *Berliner Volkstribüne*, a journal well suited to this purpose, and finally the questions and debate. Equally uniform and stereotyped were the words with which the otherwise eloquent president opened the meeting, and those in which the secretary presented the report of the previous evening; it was easy to see how superficial was the knowledge of parliamentary form among these simple people. Guests were always welcomed, but they were not very numerous, and were, without exception, from the labouring class. Every session was under the supervision of a royal gendarme and a local officer alternately; but these never stirred from their retired corner, and, on the whole, the personal relations between them and the workmen seemed friendly enough. There was almost always a mutual "good-evening" exchanged, and on other nights I often saw the same officer, in his uniform, in a certain cosy "kneipe" much affected by our workmen, amicably drinking his beer at the round table with all the rest.

[...]

Our club meetings were held in our own suburb in a restaurant which was the official, though not the only, rendezvous of the social democrats of the quarter. The proprietor and his wife were both social democrats, although they conscientiously refrained from taking part in long political discussions. The hostess displayed a coarseness of feeling such as I had never before seen in a woman. I remember well enough how, one evening, yawning and sleepy, she dismissed us, the last guests, with a blasphemy, "I want to go away and be with Christ." But, as I said, this was not the only meeting-place of social democrats. It may be broadly stated that all of the small restaurants ("kneipen") of our quarter were kept by social democrats. In two of the largest establishments, where there were spacious gardens, much frequented by the so-called best society of Chemnitz, and where, every Sunday, the best public dance-music was to be found, only the rooms, sublet for "cabmen's shelters," were social-democratic in tone. In almost every case it was visibly pure business interest which had converted the saloon-keepers.

The same thing was apparent in the small grocery shops, the "büdchen," as they are called. I often noticed with what zealous care the shopkeeper, especially if it were a woman, agreed to all the socialistic views of the customer. This socialism for business reasons is far more wide-spread in all such industrial

centres than is commonly supposed; it is to be found among a great many different kinds of tradespeople, and is the despair of the ideally-inclined social democrats, for in most cases it is synonymous with absence of genuine conviction. But at the same time it is another proof of what a real power the social-democratic movement has become in such places.

In all the restaurants and beer-shops of which I have spoken, beside the local newspapers of different or no party bias, beside “Kladderadatch” and “Fliegende Blätter,” there were always to be found one or more copies of social-democratic journals, the *Chemnitz Presse* in especial, and occasional trades publications. It is a fact long since recognised that social democracy wields a mighty weapon of agitation in its army of newspapers—more than 130 at the present time—scattered broadcast over Germany. In our suburb their influence and importance were manifest. It was a matter of course that every workman should read his paper. Here, too, the exception only proved the rule. As a general thing the men subscribed singly, or more often two or three together, to the *Social-Democratic Press*, a thoroughly circumspect sheet, better edited on the whole than our small provincial local paper, and independent enough to publish now and then a poem of Gerok or Uhland, as well as the windy utterances of the newest German school of poetry, captured by the social-democratic camp. Besides this, the *Landesanzeiger* (*Country Advertiser*), a good and discreetly-written paper, was taken, as also its cheaper offshoot, the *Neueste Nachrichten* (*Latest News*), a compact and thoroughly unpartisan little sheet. The tolerably fair-minded and patriotic *Chemnitzer Tageblatt* was glanced at now and then on account of its full advertising columns, but it was regularly read by only a very small number of workmen, the *élite* of the social democrats, who made it a rule—worthy of recognition and adoption by many a Philistine “patriot”—to subscribe for one paper of each of the great political parties, which, among these people, invariably means a regular and thorough study of them. In this small circle I often found the *Berliner Volkstribüne*, then under the scientific, straightforward, and high-toned direction of Max Schippel, without personal gossip or party recrimination, virtues which it seems, unfortunately, to have lost under its new, more radical, and demagogic editor, Paul Ernest. Oftener yet I found the official organ of the Metal-Workers’ Trades Union, which by no means confined itself to technical matters.

The distribution of other socialistic literature was undertaken in our district by a man out of work on account of the First of May, who acted as colporteur for the excellent social-democratic comic paper *Der Wahre Jakob*, as well as for its companion sheet, *Glühlichter*, published in Vienna. He received and filled orders for social-democratic periodicals, tried to sell photographs of Schippel, Bebel, and Liebknecht, or watch-charms, matchboxes, scarf-pins, printed with their pictures, and was always at the meetings, as well as on the pleasure excursions, which he often helped to organise. What else he did I do not know, but at all events I never saw any importunate attempt at propaganda on his part, especially among the new men. He was agent for the three social-democratic bookstores in Chemnitz. It is well known that these social-democratic bookshops, with unheard-of narrowness, deal only in social-democratic literature, or such literature as indirectly promotes the party cause. It is only recently that they seem to have reached a point of sufficient intellectual freedom and fairness to place on sale such books as the works of Schiller and Goethe, which are, to be sure, in their eyes, the productions of *bourgeoisie* incarnate. These shops are fruitful sources of agitation in Chemnitz, and have proved themselves to be important factors in popular education there.

A peculiar influence in the party agitation, and one not to be under-estimated, was that wielded by the two social-democratic comic papers, sold by the colporteur whom I mentioned. Whoever is familiar with them will agree that these papers are very respectable publications of their kind. The illustrations are almost always good artistically, the jokes pointed and clever, but of course nearly always coloured by party politics; the humour is healthy and good. Their existence has always been a source of inward satisfaction to me, for it is a proof of the peaceful character of the whole great social-democratic movement. A band of rabid conspirators, a party with the single and conscious aim of bringing about a bloody revolution, whose sole and greatest joy lay in the total overthrow of existing institutions, would

hardly occupy itself with comic papers like these; would, indeed, be incapable of producing them. Where, as in these two publications, wit can express itself blended with a genuine and joyous humour in distinction from mere satire filled with bitterness and inspired by hatred, the suspicion of blood-thirstiness is more and more removed; and it is from such small signs, trivial in themselves, that we may acquire the conviction that this movement, with all its moral dangers and its intellectual immaturities, with all the dangerous explosive material which is undeniably to be found within it, yet possesses such healthy vigour and pulsates with such fresh life that, under right influence and guidance, it may be made to become a mighty factor, blessed of God, in the future development of humanity.

The working men's and children's festivals, which take place nearly every Sunday throughout the summer, play a special part in the agitation. I do not know whether these are peculiar to the Chemnitz social democrats; certainly in Berlin in the winter, all sorts of balls, theatrical performances, concerts, and masquerades are equally prominent. I joined in three of these summer festivals; one in our own suburb, two others in places charmingly situated at a couple of hours' distance from Chemnitz. The impression is very clearly given that these festivals are meant for those who take no part in politics or economics, namely, the wives and children of the workmen. These, who cannot be reached by serious political party considerations, are to be won over to the party by means of pleasure in gay company and all kinds of entertainments, and so gradually to be filled with the spirit of social democracy in this easy and agreeable manner. By making the children happy, the mothers' hearts are won; by getting up a little dance, the girls and boys, thinking only of their own amusement, are brought unconsciously into connection with the social-democratic movement, and their superficial interests, however disconnected in reality, seem to be bound up with those of the party. In places where social democracy has not yet established itself firmly, these festivals are especially popular, for they present a very attractive and harmless front, acceptable and not in the least terrible to even the most timid and undecided working man. In such cases, the summer festival does pioneer work for agitation in a peculiar sense, and usually far more successfully than any number of public meetings could do. They have, besides, one other especial function. They are invariably financial undertakings of the local party management, and their net profit, an object always in view and generally attained, helps to swell the party fund. So there are all sorts of devices, which I shall presently describe, for easily imposing a little extra expense. All this, however, does not interfere with the fact that many of those present simply give themselves over to quite harmless fun, and that, with many more, the real party aim is secondary to the childlike pleasure, deeply implanted in the people, of an unrestrained frolic among themselves. [...]

This is what I have seen in the way of concerted, organised agitation on the part of the social democracy of our locality. I do not say and I do not believe that this was the whole of its activity, but I can only describe what actually came under my observation. Its head and front was the not very numerous group of *élite* social democrats, the fanatical partisans who form the phalanx of the movement everywhere, who are the pole of crystallization for the thousands attracted about them. From this group arise the candidates for social-democratic votes, the subordinate leaders in individual districts, the chiefs of campaign clubs and trade unions, the members of committees appointed for agitation during elections. They were all more or less acquainted with the plans of the general central management, whose executive organs they were, and from which alone they took their instructions. They directed the festivals, led the debates in public assemblies and discussions, acted as travelling orators in the outlying districts, were untiring lecturers in the regular meetings of campaign clubs and trade unions, and even dictated the course of the most influential men in industries where not one of themselves was represented. By the other workmen they were recognized—outwardly at least—as leaders, without opposition, and treated with an extraordinary and interesting mixture of assured good-fellowship and reverential respect, to which, on their side, they responded with a kind of studied *bonhomie* and conscious reserve. Yet they were not all honoured and respected equally; one was better liked than another, this one more popular than that one, according to tact of manner or address, or the whole disposition of the man. There were the two brothers N., for example, who stood at that time at the head

of the agitation in Chemnitz, and who—particularly one of them—were very prominent speakers at the meetings of our club, as well as at the Sunday festivals; now, however, as I hear, one of them has been expelled from the party, and the other has withdrawn from it. These brothers were unpopular on account of their blustering and arrogant manners, while others were commended for their mild, firm, serious bearing. I have often heard this kind of perfectly independent criticism of their leaders from the older workmen in the factory, yet nevertheless the men acknowledged them as the guiding spirits, listened to their words of authority, and accepted the instructions which were resolved upon for furtherance of the agitation, which was exceedingly well planned, and systematically organised and conducted. [...]

Chapter V.

The Social and Political Tendencies of My Fellow-Workmen

[...]

The wage-earners among whom I lived are not, therefore, to be imagined, in regard to their political and social ideals, as a uniform, symmetrical and homogeneous body, but rather—to use a metaphor—as a mighty pyramid, consolidated by the strong cement of social-democratic agitation. Its apex are the “élite” social democrats I have described; from these, the leaders, and the small band of their most trusty followers, the vast structure gradually descends in ever-widening strata, to the chaotic multitude of all those who are social democrats only—nor can they be blamed for this to-day—because they give their votes to “one of their own sort,” a labour candidate and a social democrat.

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