

Socialist Leader August Bebel Condemns Anti-Socialist Legislation (September 16, 1878)

Abstract

Otto von Helldorff-Bedra's call for support for Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Law did not go unopposed. In this short excerpt from a much longer speech delivered immediately after Helldorff-Bedra's appeal, the Socialist leader August Bebel (1840–1913) denounces anti-Socialist persecution as “uncivilized.” He protests that accusations of socialist involvement in the assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm I are patently false, and he accurately predicts that repression will only fuel the socialists' resolve: “In a few years, we will be stronger than ever before.”

Source

It is [...] essential to finally establish—not just before the Reichstag but before the entire German nation, nay even before the entire civilized world, which has taken a keen interest in the events to this very day—what truth there is to all of the accusations hurled about for weeks and months. We have been persecuted in a way reminiscent of the darkest periods of the Middle Ages. Just as followers of different religious faiths—Jews, Huguenots, and Protestants—were persecuted in the Middle Ages, a general hate campaign, joined by almost all political parties, has been launched in the last quarter of the nineteenth century against the Social Democrats, who are treated as followers of a different political faith. Men holding Social Democratic convictions were forced out of their work and deprived of their daily bread in an attempt to cut off their livelihoods, they were insulted and slandered, declared to be without rights and honor. Obviously all of this was done to provoke unrest; the goal was to provoke us to extreme measures so that we would allow ourselves to be lured into violence of some kind. Apparently for some people the assassination attempts were not enough. No doubt, some circles would have been pleased if this malicious agitation had tempted us to violent action, providing them with more plentiful and significant material against us to launch the most severe intervention. Probably never before has a party been in such a difficult situation as ours, and probably never before has a party shown more clearly that it wishes to develop quietly and peacefully, that it is unwilling to respond to provocations or be induced to rash steps. I believe that Social Democracy has shown this for anyone to see, both during the months of continuous rabble-rousing and during the past election campaign. But I repeat: We demand that an end is finally put to these unfounded suspicions and this malicious agitation, that the protocols^[1] will finally be brought to light, and that these will be made available in print to the Reichstag and especially to the committee responsible for drawing up this draft legislation.

[Most of Bebel's speech addresses the relationship between Bismarck and Ferdinand Lassalle in the year 1863. Then the speaker deals with the effects of the law and remarks, among other things:]

Additionally, the result would be that our entire public and private life would be unsettled or poisoned, that even the calmest and most peaceful citizen would be dissatisfied with these circumstances. We have no doubt at all that this will be the unquestionable outcome of this law and that Social Democracy will only benefit from it—that is our genuine opinion. (Various calls from the floor.) Gentlemen, perhaps you are trying to say: “Well, why don't you vote for the law then?!” (Yes indeed! on the right.) Gentlemen, if we could endorse such injustice as that to be committed here, we might even do so. I can definitely assure you that I have overheard some very capable party comrades say, “I hope the law passes!” You could not help our cause any better than by passing the law, for thousands and thousands who have not yet become Social Democrats will certainly do so then. In a few years, we will be stronger than ever before.

(Quite right!)

NOTES

[1] Bebel refers here to Dr. Karl Nobiling, the second of two would-be assassins of Kaiser Wilhelm I, who fired a shotgun blast at the monarch and seriously wounded him on June 2, 1878, before turning the gun on himself. Although Nobiling's true motives were never ascertained, phantom evidence of his association with the SPD was used by those who advocated anti-socialist legislation—ed.

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, 4th legislative period, 4th sitting (September 16, 1878), vol. 1. Berlin, 1878, pp. 39, 45. Available online at: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k4_bsb00018398_00057.html. Original German text reprinted in Hans Fenske, *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 200–3.

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