

The Effects of Social Democratic Activities and Unemployment on a Working-Class Marriage (1880s)

Abstract

Advocacy of socialism triggered severe state repression during the 1870s and beyond. After 1878, the Anti-Socialist Law and reprisals by employers put enormous pressure on Social Democratic activists to keep their activities secret—even from their spouses. This passage, which was written by a wife who felt aggrieved by her activist husband on many levels, shows the human cost of such repression and secrecy, even though, in this case, both marriage partners sympathized with the same political movement.

Source

After our wedding, I followed my husband to Dresden. The early days passed peacefully, and the quiet life in the lovely town of Plauen near Dresden proved a source of relaxation, something also much needed for my physical well-being. I hardly knew anything about politics, but even as a girl, when Reichstag elections rolled around, I had always preferred the leaflets of the Social Democrats, for they described the situation of the working people, to whom I belonged as well, in a way that was most comprehensible to the common folk. I had no understanding of partisan conflict. After we had been married for about a year, we were dealt the first blow. I had always been very pleased when my husband managed to earn extra income from his collaborative work on a trade journal for industrialists. Suddenly this stopped. Why? The reason was completely unclear to me, for it was only later that I learned the difference between workers' and entrepreneurs' journals, and my husband had also kept his participation in the political movement—which operated in secrecy back then—from me.

Participation in politics, however, was the reason for this loss of income, which I could not manage to recoup through exquisite needlework, despite my best efforts. So when the first disciplinary action was taken against my husband, and when this was followed by a period of unemployment, poverty took root in our dwelling. It was then that I was informed of the reasons for his dismissal. But naturally it took a while for me to learn of the actual underlying issues. This interval, a real period of transition, sufficed to alienate me from my husband. We absolutely did not get along any more. A friend of my husband's, an older party member, who had deliberately sought to interest him in party activity, and whom I greatly respected because he had taught me the ABCs of Socialism as well, was not able to prevent this alienation from growing. Quite the contrary: as blow after blow befell us, one disciplinary measure followed another; as poverty and deprivation increased unrelentingly, and *still* my husband failed to come home at night, the alienation mounted and escalated into aversion. Certainly, I also made the greatest effort to study the principles of Socialism; I, too, was an honest party member insofar as I understood its goals; but my practical sense told me that, above all, I should not neglect my own economic situation if I wished to be of use to the party. I did not get through to my husband when I put forward such views. — In the most abject poverty, I had once again found employment as a leather stitcher in a sizeable shoe factory and was trying to make ends meet as best I could. However, according to my calculations and considering our means, my husband spent too much money in pubs—in my opinion he did nothing, or at least not enough, to improve our sad state. In short, I felt that he became slovenly and indifferent with respect to domestic matters. So when the time came for him to serve his first sentence, my familiarity with the principles of Socialism and my personal estrangement from him made me pity him more as a party comrade than a spouse.

Source: “Lebensbilder XIX: Von einem Ehepaar sozialdemokratischer Gesinnung,” in *Ethische Kultur* 2 (1894): p. 398; reprinted in Klaus Saul, Jens Flemming, Dirk Stegmann, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Arbeiterfamilien im Kaiserreich. Materialien zur Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland 1871–1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1982, pp. 40–41.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: The Effects of Social Democratic Activities and Unemployment on a Working-Class Marriage (1880s), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-546>> [May 04, 2024].