

Wilhelm Liebknecht on Elections to Parliament as a Means of Agitation (May 31, 1869)

Abstract

On May 31, 1869, a new electoral law for the North German Reichstag was passed. It introduced universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage for all male residents. This law, in fact, endorsed voting rights that had already been granted and exercised (twice) for Reichstag elections in 1867. It was subsequently adopted by the German Reich after unification in 1871. The speech excerpted below was given on precisely the same day in 1869 that the electoral law was passed. It was delivered at a public meeting of the Democratic Workers' Association of Berlin. The speaker is Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900), who, together with August Bebel (1840–1913), founded the Saxon People's Party (1866) and, in August 1869, the Eisenach wing of the Social Democratic movement. Although Karl Marx often complained that Liebknecht did not fully understand his teachings, Liebknecht explains why, and how, speeches delivered on the floor of the Reichstag could serve the revolutionary cause. Previously, Liebknecht himself had expressed skepticism about participating in a constitutional monarchy whose parliament lay far from the fulcrum of power. He had also opposed another early socialist leader, Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), for making a fetish of universal suffrage. Thus, he notes in the following speech that the ballot box on its own “can never be the cradle of the democratic state.” But Liebknecht considers the pros and cons of the matter and concludes that elections serve an important function in the dawning age of mass politics.

Source

Since it was made impossible for me to take the floor at all during the Reichstag in this session, it is doubly pleasing to me now to be given this opportunity to present my social-political point of view.

[...]

The new society is in irreconcilable contradiction with the ancient state. This new society cannot develop in the feudal state, in the police state, in the military state. Any one desiring the new society must aim above all things at the destruction of the ancient state.

[...]

This is a sufficient indication of the attitude of the Social-Democracy on the “rebirth of Germany.” The “great deed” of the year 1866 is for German history what the *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851, is for French history. Bismarck's *coup d'état*, like that of Louis Bonaparte, was aimed against democracy. These *coups d'état* are not reprehensible in our eyes because of their *use of force*—for the ultimate resort of nations, like that of kings, is force—but because of the fact that in the case of France, the *coup d'état* was practiced to the advantage of a host of disreputable adventurers, and in the case of Germany to the advantage of a class no longer having any right to exist, namely, the class of the Junkers.

The so-called “*Prussian Constitution struggle*” was an attempt on the part of the people, particularly of the bourgeoisie, to attain the state power by means of *parliamentary* methods. The year 1866 lowered the parliamentary struggle to the status of a feat of stage prestidigitation, and transferred the true theater of war to another field. The North German “Reichstag” has absolutely no power in spite of the universal suffrage; it has not a decisive vote, only an advisory vote; and, being powerless, it cannot be

used by the democracy as a battlefield for the *attainment of power*.

As, in the case of France, the French democracy opposed the Emperor with every means at its disposal, so, in the case of Germany, the German democracy has opposed the North German Alliance, with all its appurtenances, in a negative and hostile manner. If we should leave this purely negative position, we should not only be relinquishing our principle and the very essence of democracy, but we should also be violating the most fundamental rule of practice.

I shall now discuss the question: is it the duty of the democracy to send delegates to the “Reichstag” at all? The question of whether we shall vote or not, once the universal suffrage has been attained, is merely a question of expediency, not a question of principle. We have a *right* to vote—the fact that this right has been refused us does not deprive us of our natural right—and if there is any advantage to be gained thereby, let us vote. It is from this point of view that we in Saxony judged the matter when the Reichstag was convoked. Some of us were opposed to the elections, on grounds of expediency, others were in favor of the elections. It was pointed out, by those who opposed the elections, that elections merely emphasized the utter lack of rights on the part of the people; those in favor of the elections said that if the democracy should abstain from them, their opponents would have sole possession of the speaker’s platform, would have the sole right to be heard, and could thus the more readily confuse the people’s sense of justice. This consideration was triumphant—we decided to take part in the elections. My personal view was that the representatives elected by us should simply enter the “Reichstag,” deliver their protest, and then march right out again, without, however, resigning their mandates. This view of mine remained that of the minority; it was decided that the representatives of the democracy should make use of every opportunity that seemed practical, to make felt in the “Reichstag” their standpoint of negation and protest, but that they should refrain from taking part in the actual parliamentary transactions, because this would be equivalent to a recognition of the North German Alliance and the Bismarckian policy, and could only deceive the people with regard to the fact *that the struggle in the “Reichstag” is merely a sham struggle, merely a comedy*. This is the line we actually followed in the first and second sessions of the “Reichstag.” In the discussion of the “Gewerbeordnung,” which constituted the principal subject of the present session, some of my party comrades considered it necessary, in the interests of the workers and for purposes of propaganda, to make an exception; I was opposed to this step. The Social-Democratic Party must not, under any circumstances, or in any field, engage in transactions with its opponents. *We can only transact business where there is a common basis*. To do business with those who are your opponents in principle is equivalent to a sacrifice of principle. Principles are indivisible; they are either *clung to in their entirety or sacrificed in their entirety*. The slightest concession in matters of principle is a relinquishing of the principle. He who parliamentarizes with the enemy is fencing in the air; he who parliamentarizes compromises. [...]

If the Social Democracy now commits the same error as the *Fortschrittspartei* committed six years ago, the same cause will inevitably produce the same effect.

But, altogether apart from the matter of a political point of view only, a participation by our party in the parliamentary debates cannot have the slightest practical result.

No one will pretend to say that there is any possibility, in view of the composition of the “Reichstag,” of presenting motions that are important in principle, from our point of view; I think you will concede this at the outset.

“But,” one of you may say, “we have the best opportunity in the Reichstag to expound the principles of the Social-Democracy.” No doubt we have an opportunity, but I very much doubt whether it is the best opportunity or even a good one.

Do you believe that the “Reichstag” will permit us to use its speaker’s platform as a pulpit? Let us assume

that a Karl Marx should desire to deliver to the delegates a series of theoretical lectures; how long and how often do you think they would listen to him? Perhaps once, through curiosity, but never a second time.

There is no possibility of our having *an influence on legislation*, as I have just said; then tell me, in heaven's name, what would be the use of a presentation of our principles in the "Reichstag"? Do you think you would convert the members of the "Reichstag"? Merely to think of such a possibility would be more than childish, it would be infantile.

It will be just as useful to preach our principles to the waves of the sea—and not quite so ridiculous. Men like Braun^[1] and his followers know very well what we are after. As far as they are concerned, in fact, as far as any of the *ruling class are concerned, who now constitute almost the entire membership of the Reichstag, socialism is now no longer a question of theory, but a question of power, a question of the type of those that are fought out not in parliaments, but in the streets, on the battlefield, like any other question of power.*

"Yes, indeed, we do not have in mind any influencing of the 'Reichstag' itself; all that we desire is to use the speaker's platform of the 'Reichstag' for the purpose of addressing the people on the outside."

So far, so good. Even I have made use of the speaker's platform of the "Reichstag" in my day for this purpose and shall again make such use of it in due time. But is this the best place for such theoretical discussions? It is forbidden to read one's speech in the Reichstag, and you will all agree with me that even the most skilled orator—even assuming a condition not present in the "Reichstag," namely, that he is given silence and attention—would not be capable of delivering a piece of learned criticism from memory and dictating it in as good form to the stenographer as he could write it at home, seated at his desk.

"But he would be able to state many things in the 'Reichstag' which he would not be permitted to state elsewhere."

That is untrue. It is true that I can make in the "Reichstag" attacks on the present *political* order of things that would not pass unpunished in any other meeting anywhere *in Prussia*, but as far as *social* matters are concerned, particularly from the point of view of theory, there is nothing that cannot be said elsewhere with just as great impunity as in the Reichstag. And why should we fear to take up the struggle with the laws? The fact is that far more revolutionary things are being written and spoken in Prussia every day than can be found in all the speeches on social questions that have ever been heard in the Reichstag.

But, even assuming that it would be possible to smuggle in some great truth into the "Reichstag" which could not be spoken anywhere else—what would be the good of this accomplishment? The law, to be sure, does permit an unhindered printing of the speech in question, but the law makes the press responsible for *every word* of any speech printed by any newspaper either in full or in part, or if the newspaper print only *one* speech instead of the entire debate, or only a *section* of a single speech. And even the largest newspapers could not afford to print the entire debate—which they are allowed to print only from the officially approved stenographic report, because they have not space enough, which is a condition far more unfavorable from this point of view to the small Social-Democratic sheets.

Accordingly, even if we had so cleverly smuggled important truths into the "Reichstag," we should still be left with no other means for smuggling them out of the "Reichstag" among the people again, except the official stenographic report, which is entirely inaccessible to the masses, however, because of its volume and its price.

All that the workers learn of the debates concerning the social question is given them through the labor

papers, and all that these papers print in the form of parliamentary reports could be far better published—and in much more careful elaboration—in the form of independent articles and essays.

[...]

I do not mean to say in this statement that the parliamentary struggle must always and under all circumstances be rejected. In periods of chronic enervation, in which the blood flows sluggishly through the channels of the body politic, in which the downcast spirit of the nation can perceive no salvation ahead for decades to come, in such periods it may be of value to keep alive a little lamp of liberty in some parliament or other, which may shed its bright little light in the midst of the surrounding darkness.

And when the people, when the “battalions of workers” stand armed and accoutered at the gates of parliament, perhaps on such occasions a word flung from the speaker’s platform may have a kindling effect, may give the signal for the liberating deed like an electric spark.

But—thank God!—we are now *no longer* in a period of chronic passivity and, I regret to say, we are *not yet* at the eve of a revolutionary act about to issue forth from the inmost heart of the people.

I do not underestimate the value of the spoken word. But at moments of crisis, at moments when one world is in the moribund state and another about to be born, *the representatives of the people must go among the people*. For my part, I consider it not only more honorable but even more profitable to address a meeting of honest workers, than to speak in that motley company, assembled at the beck and call of a statesman who despises justice and despises men, a band of Junkers, apostates and nonentities, which is known as the North German Reichstag.

But the Reichstag is the child of the *universal suffrage*; the universal suffrage is the will of the people, and as democrats we must respect the will of the people and—consequently—we must respect also the “Reichstag.”

In this reasoning, which is rather frequently met with, we may *discern that unintelligent overestimate of the universal suffrage* which, based for the most part on the authority of Ferdinand Lassalle, has recently developed into a *veritable idolatry*. Particularly in Northern Germany, many persons seem to consider the universal suffrage as the wonderworking root which will enable the “disinherited” to force the gates of the national authority; these persons are under the delusion that they will be able to drag themselves out of the social misery, although they are surrounded by the state of the police and the soldiery, with the aid of the universal suffrage, just as Münchhausen once dragged himself out of the morass by his pigtail. You should have *Münchhausen’s* queue hanging down from the back of your head.

To be sure, the universal suffrage is a general privilege of the entire people, a fundamental condition of the democratic state. But when isolated, when detached from the liberty of citizens, when unsupported by freedom of the press and freedom of associations, when subjected to the domination of the sword of the police and the sword of the soldiers—in a word, *in the absolutist state, the universal suffrage can be nothing more nor less than a plaything and a tool of absolutism*.

After Louis Napoleon had assassinated the Republic, he proclaimed the universal suffrage.

When Count Bismarck had gained the victory over the Prussian particularist Junkers, when he had conquered the liberal bourgeoisie by his “successes” of 1866, and rended Germany asunder, he did precisely what his great prototype had done fifteen years earlier, he proclaimed the universal suffrage.

On both these occasions, the proclamation, the granting of the universal suffrage, was the keystone of the victory of despotism. This should be sufficient to open the eyes of the naïve persons who are so enthusiastic for the gospel of universal suffrage.

We are not concerned here with an examination of the motives of Louis Napoleon in proclaiming the universal suffrage. As for Count Bismarck's motives, they are quite evident.

The Three-Class Election System, undemocratic and anti-democratic as it is, is in addition anti-feudal in character, since it shifts the center of gravity of parliamentary representation to the possessing classes, who, though they are quite ready to make common cause with absolutism against the workers, against the democracy, are nevertheless—with the exception of the great landed proprietors, enemies of the absolutist state and “liberal” up to a certain point. *The liberal Chamber of Deputies (Diet), the product of the Three-Class Election System, was inconvenient to the Junker government; that government found it necessary to create a counterweight, and this was found in the universal, direct, and equal suffrage.*

Very few persons are to be found in the present-day police state, in the state of mental and military regimentation, who are spiritually and mentally independent. The peasant population alone, which in our country is obliged to obey every whim of the authorities without a will of their own, constitutes fully two-thirds of the whole population of the country.

Count Bismarck was well aware of this fact, and his calculations were not in error. By means of the universal suffrage, he set aside the opposition of the well-to-do classes and created a willing majority in the Reichstag, such as he could never have obtained by means of the Three-Class Election System.

In other words, the universal suffrage was not granted the population as a lever of democracy, but as a weapon in the hands of reaction.

This universal suffrage is completely under the control of the government—even more in our country than in France, where the population has more political training, where it has already passed through three revolutions and is now facing the fourth. It may be asserted with safety that no delegate can be elected in Prussia to the “Reichstag” if the government is *seriously opposed* to his candidacy. [...] Let us assume that a candidate comes up for election and that the government is absolutely opposed to having him in the “Reichstag.” The government will confiscate the newspapers that advocate his election—it will do so legally; it will confiscate his election handbills—also legally; or it will give permits for meetings of electors and then dissolve them—again legally; it will arrest the candidate's campaign managers—quite legally; it will arrest the candidate himself—also legally; did they not arrest recently a delegate to the “Reichstag” and would not that delegate be in prison to this day if the National Liberals had not been convinced by a smile on the part of Bismarck of the harmlessness of the “martyr”?

But let us assume that the government—either because it feels it is strong enough, or because of some other calculation—makes no use of its powers, and that it becomes possible, as some socialist statesmen of imagination still dream—to elect a social-democratic majority in the “Reichstag”—what would this majority proceed to do? *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* Now is the moment for transforming society and the state. The majority will adopt a world-historic decision; the new era is born—don't you believe it! A company of soldiers will eject the Social-Democratic majority from its stronghold and if these gentlemen make any objection to this procedure, a few policemen will take them to police headquarters and there they will have time enough to ponder the consequences of their Quixotic aspirations.

Revolutions are not made by getting the permission of the high powers that are in authority; the socialist ideal cannot be achieved within the frame of the present-day state; it must overthrow the state in order to secure the possibility of life.

No peace with the present-day state!

Away with the worship of the universal and direct suffrage!

Let us take part with all our energy, as we have done thus far, in the elections; but let us use the elections

only as a *means of agitation*, and let us not neglect to point out that the ballot-box can never be the cradle of the democratic state. The universal suffrage will not attain its decisive and final influence on state and society until *after* the police and soldier state has definitely been eliminated.

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NOTES

[1] Karl Braun (1822–1893) represented the National Liberal Party as a Reichstag deputy from 1871 to 1887—ed.

Source of English translation: Wilhelm Liebknecht, *The Speeches of Wilhelm Liebknecht*. New York: International Publishers, 1928, pp. 16–31.

Source of original German text: Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Über die politische Stellung der Sozialdemokratie insbesondere mit Bezug auf den Reichstag. Ein Vortrag, gehalten in einer öffentlichen Versammlung des Demokratischen Arbeitervereins zu Berlin am 31. Mai 1869*, 3rd unrev. ed. Leipzig: Genossenschaftsbuchdruckerei, 1874, pp. 3–16; reprinted in Peter Wende and Inge Schlotzhauer, eds., *Politische Reden II. 1869–1914*. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, pp. 9–27, here 9–22.

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