

# The Socialists: Ferdinand Lassalle, Excerpt from “Open Letter” (1863)

## Abstract

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In his famous “Open Letter,” the influential socialist leader [Ferdinand Lassalle](#) (1825–1864) essentially put forth a new party program, calling for the founding of a socialist labor party to support not only workers’ demands but also the causes of parliamentary government and democratic suffrage not honored by the liberals.

## Source

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Gentlemen!

In your letter you ask me to express, in any form I deem appropriate, my views on the workers’ movement and on the means it must use to improve the situation of the working class politically, materially, and spiritually, and also, especially, to give you my views on the value of associations for that class of people who are wholly without means.

I hasten to comply with your wishes, and for this purpose I shall choose the simplest form recommended by the nature of the matter, the form of an open letter of reply to your letter.

I shall only remark that since my time is very much occupied at this moment by necessary work, this letter must be as brief as possible, which, incidentally, should suit your own purpose.

In October of last year, at which time I was not present, you held the first preliminary discussions about the German Workers’ Congress in Berlin. I followed the proceedings with interest in the newspaper reports. Two opposing views emerged there.

The one effectively said that you need not bother with the political movement at all, and that this should be of no interest to you.

The other effectively said, by contrast, that you should view yourselves as an appendage of the Prussian Progressive Party and serve as a selfless choir and sounding board for them.

Had I been present in the assembly at the time, I would have spoken out as equally opposed to both.

It is completely narrow-minded to believe that political movements and developments are of no concern to the worker!

On the contrary, it is only through political action that the worker can hope for the fulfillment of his legitimate interests.

Already the question of how to assemble and discuss your interests, how to form associations and branch associations to safeguard those interests, is a question that depends on the political situation and on political legislation, and therefore it is not necessary to refute such a narrow-minded view by way of further exposition.

But no less wrong and misleading was the opposing view that you should view yourself simply as an appendage of the Progressive Party!

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Admittedly, it would be unfair not to acknowledge that, at that time, the Prussian Progressive Party did have a certain, albeit modest, claim to defending political freedom on account of its adherence to the budget appropriation in its conflict with the Prussian government and its resistance to military re-organization in Prussia.

Nevertheless, even back then the fulfillment of this demand was completely ruled out for the following reasons:

First of all, such an attitude was from the outset not befitting a party as powerful and independent, as committed to principled political goals, a party of the sort that the German Workers' Party must be in contrast to the Prussian Progressive Party, which has in principal only planted its flag on the Prussian constitution, and whose struggles focus on rejecting a one-sided restructuring of the military organization—which is not even attempted in other German lands—or adhering to the budget appropriation law—which is not even contested in other German states.

Secondly, it was never certain whether the Prussian Progressive Party would carry out its conflict with the Prussian government with the dignity and energy that the working class deserves and whether it would defend working class interests.

Thirdly, it was just as uncertain whether the Prussian Progressive Party, once it achieved victory over the Prussian government, would use this victory in the interest of the whole people or only to maintain the privileged position of the bourgeoisie; i.e., whether it would use this victory to establish universal, equal, and direct suffrage, which democratic principles and the legitimate interests of the working class demand.

In the latter case, the party could not lay claim to the slightest interest on the part of the German working class.

This is what I would have said at the time.

Today, I can add that since then it has been clearly shown—and back then it was already easy to foresee—that the Prussian Progressive Party completely lacked the energy needed to bring even so slight a conflict with the Prussian government to a dignified and victorious end.

By continuing, despite the government's denial of its right to vote on the budget, to hold sessions and conduct parliamentary business with a ministry that it has declared criminally responsible, the party humiliates itself and the people through this contradiction, through this unparalleled spectacle of weakness and this utter lack of dignity!

By continuing to debate and conduct parliamentary business with the government, despite having previously declared that it violated the constitution, the party is itself assisting the government and even offering it a hand in maintaining the semblance of a constitutional state.

Instead of declaring the sessions of the Chamber closed until the government declared itself unable to continue the expenditures refused by the Chamber, and thereby holding the government to the unavoidable alternative of either respecting the constitutional right of the Chamber or else renouncing the fiction and apparatus of a constitutional state of affairs, conducting business openly and frankly as an absolutist government, shouldering the immense responsibility of such [an absolutist government], and thereby eliciting the very crisis that inevitably occurs as the fruit of open absolutism—it puts the government in the position of combining all the advantages of absolute power with all the advantages of an ostensibly constitutional state of affairs.

And—instead of pressing the government to reveal its open, unconcealed absolutism and [instead of]

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enlightening the people about the non-existent constitutional state of affairs—by agreeing to continue playing a role in this comedy of fictitious constitutionalism, the party helps maintain a fiction that—like every governing system based on a fiction—has a confusing effect on the people’s intelligence and a corrupting effect on their morals.<sup>[1]</sup>

Such a party has thereby shown that it is and will always remain thoroughly helpless in the face of a decisive government.

Such a party has thereby shown that it is completely incapable of bringing about even the slightest real development in the interests of freedom.

Such a party has shown that it has no claim to the sympathies of the democratic segments of the population, and that it lacks any sense and understanding of the political feelings of honor that must pervade the working class.

Such a party has, in a word, really shown that it is nothing more than a resurrected version of the disreputable Gotha spirit,<sup>[2]</sup> adorned with another name.

That is what I can add today.

Then as now I should have added that a party that, through its dogma of “Prussian leadership,” forces itself to regard the Prussian government as the Messiah destined to bring about Germany’s rebirth, while there is not a single German government (and, indeed, this includes Hesse) that lags behind the Prussian government in political terms, while there is almost no single German government (and, indeed, this includes Austria) that is not yet ahead of the Prussian government—in this alone, such a party already renounces any claim to represent the German working class; for based only on this, such a party displays an absorption in illusion, self-importance, and an incompetence which is satisfied by excessive verbiage that precludes any and all hope that liberty for the German people might develop from it in any genuine sense.

This gives rise to certainty about the position that the working class needs to assume in political matters and the type of relationship that it needs to have with the Progressive Party.

The working class needs to constitute itself as an independent political party, and it must make universal, equal, and direct suffrage its core principle and slogan. The representation of the working class must be a fact in the legislative bodies of Germany—this alone is what can satisfy its legitimate interests in political terms. To introduce a peaceful and lawful agitation toward this end with all lawful means, this is and must be the program of the workers’ party in political terms.

It is self-evident how this workers’ party has to position itself vis-à-vis the German Progressive Party.

To understand and constitute itself everywhere as an independent party thoroughly separated from the Progressive Party, while nevertheless supporting the Progressive Party on points and issues where there is a common interest, to turn its back on it and to oppose it whenever it departs from this [common interest], to force the Progressive Party thereby to either move forward and push for greater progress or to descend even deeper into the swamp of meaninglessness and powerlessness in which it is already mired knee-deep—that must be the simple tactic of the German Workers’ Party vis-à-vis the German Progressive Party.

So much for what you must do with regard to politics.

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## NOTES

[1] For more on this, see my brochure “Was nun? Zweiter Vortrag über Verfassungswesen” [“What now? Second lecture on constitutional systems”], Zurich, 1863 (original footnote).

[2] Moderate liberals who tried to cooperate with the conservative Prussian government after the latter had suppressed the revolutionary movements of 1848/49—ed.

Source: Ferdinand Lassalle, *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften*, edited and with an introduction by Eduard Bernstein. Volume 3, *Die Agitation für den allgemeinen deutschen Arbeiterverein*. Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1919–20, pp. 41–47.

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