

# Baron Hans Hermann von Berlepsch, “Why We Advocate Social Reform” (1903)

## Abstract

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The growing conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie represented the most important political challenge since national unification in 1871. Here, Baron Hans Herrman von Berlepsch (1843–1926), former Prussian Minister of Commerce and Trade (1890–1896), outlines for the Society for Social Reform [*Gesellschaft für Soziale Reform*] his own reasons for advocating policies that would improve the lives of workers and legitimize the role of the Social Democratic Party as a vehicle for political mobilization. His policies were met with criticism, and in 1896 he resigned from his post on account of political pressure.

## Source

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The development of cultural and social conditions in this country of equal voting rights, mandatory schooling, and obligatory military service led the worker to a point where he no longer wanted only to follow and obey but wanted to have a voice in shaping working conditions, which for him translate into living conditions; and he laid claim to the equality that is the subject of the Imperial Edict of February 4, 1890. Who can disapprove of these strivings and still maintain even the slightest appearance of fairness? With what justification should workers be refused that which all other classes of citizens are granted: the right to assemble in order to maintain or raise the price of their wares (with their wares being their “work”), the right to improve their working conditions and, with them, their quality of life? To do, in fact, exactly what businessmen freely do through their countless cartels and trusts, their umbrella organizations, and associations of all kinds? Whoever heard of these people or the propertied classes encountering any difficulties with respect to the laws governing political associations when their organizations, having been established to insure their own professional interests, take advantage of the laws of the state?

And yet this happens continuously to workers’ associations and unions in Germany [...]: workers are constantly confronted with court judgments and actions taken by governmental authorities that generate in them the bitter feeling that they are being denied pertinent rights, expressly guaranteed to them, and that a different measure is being applied to them than is used for other German citizens.

There has never been a justifiable answer to the question of why citizens are treated in such different ways. Likewise, it has never been claimed that the very answer lies in the existing laws. Furthermore, it has never been contested that the application of laws governing political associations has left workers’ and other vocational organizations constricted by judgments from which the associations of other professional classes have been spared. This cannot be disputed; indeed, there does not seem to be anyone who wants to dispute this fact, and at the same time a reason is given for this obvious injustice – namely, that because the unions reportedly consist (either primarily or exclusively) of social democratic members, that because they are supposedly political organizations of the Social Democratic Party (even if their statutes facilitate only the pursuit of professional interests), the unchecked expansion of the organizational activities of the unions would lead only to a strengthening of the Social Democratic Party. [...]

And now I ask: is there really any better way to advance the Social Democratic cause of those who preach again and again to the workers that in bourgeois society, and among those in power, they will receive no assistance, find no justice, and that together these elements constitute a reactionary multitude that is

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intent upon enriching themselves at the expense of the workers – than to curtail the path of the workers towards self-help, the only path that would allow them to attain equal footing with management in the economic struggle for better working conditions? Or, as yet another example, what better way to advance the Social Democratic cause than to apply to the workers' coalitions and their professional organizations legislation that by necessity must generate in those affected by it the feeling of having been treated unjustly? I know of no other more effective means of strengthening the Social Democratic Party than just such practices – unless, of course, one compares them to acts of violent suppression by the police. Whoever has not yet grasped in today's world that for the foreseeable future we will have to reckon with the Social Democratic Party as the representative of the majority of industrial workers, and whoever today still imagines that he can break the hold of the Social Democratic Party on the working classes through force or small-minded police actions has not only been struck blind but, if he also has influence on the direction of politics in governmental matters, is highly dangerous, since, on the basis of a false diagnosis, he will reach for the wrong means to solve the problem.

The mission of circumspect politicians cannot be the elimination of the Social Democratic Party, since they would only work in vain towards this end; rather, it should be the elimination of the barriers that stand between the Social Democratic Party as it is now and its transformation into a workers' party that attempts, without class hatred and without waging a war of annihilation against existing circumstances, but rather by way of reform and social development, to secure for workers a place in the sun, to which they are entitled, like every other citizen. And one of the most difficult barriers to this transformation is the failure of the guarantee of equal rights in the economic struggle for better working conditions. And for this reason any social reform that does not encompass the "demands generated by the efforts of the workers in unions and professional organizations to improve their situation," or the rights of workers according to the Imperial Edict of February 4, 1890, or the exemption of the statutes governing coalitions and construction unions for workers from the constraints of the political union laws is not really social reform at all.

I know well that various severe charges are being leveled against workers' organizations. They have been accused of terrorizing workers who do not support the Social Democratic Party and also of misusing force. Here, as in all such cases, I consider the use of force against a weaker party (regardless of whether it is only temporarily or more permanently the weaker party) for the purpose of achieving material advantage to be one of the most offensive aspects of our social life. But is it just the workers' unions that are guilty in this respect? Is it not common knowledge, for instance, that the trust of petroleum producers has used every available means to eliminate unwanted competitors, that it has subjugated petroleum producers around the world, right down to the smallest retail dealer? In the context of these accusations of strikes and terrorism, shouldn't we also consider lockouts and blacklists? – In addition to the not infrequent refusal of management to call upon the appropriate legal tribunal to resolve or prevent labor disputes?

[...]

The workers' movement as a whole is dissatisfied with this situation and is attempting to improve it by exerting influence on determining working conditions and by demanding government intervention. According to its perception, the current authorities of government and society are not only not providing the movement with the assistance it has called for but are also erecting barriers to its demands for equal rights in its economic struggles. For this reason, many wage laborers are hostile towards these authorities and their responsible institutions. These workers have distanced themselves as a class from all the other social groups in the state, are now engaged in class struggle, and are convinced that an improvement in their situation can be brought about only through the actions of the workers' movement itself. A deep rift has opened between this segment of wage laborers and the rest of the population of our Fatherland, making mutual understanding almost impossible; and only recently over the past decade have a few bridges been built, now and then, upon which a reconciliation may be possible. There can be

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no doubt that the inner peace of our Fatherland has been shattered and endangered in the most serious manner.

In light of this very challenging situation, we, who have come together in the Society for Social Reform have taken on the following dual task:

First, to work in a careful yet consistent and energetic fashion to improve the inadequate situation of the wage laborers, to eliminate misery from the lives of the working classes, to progressively increase the number of workers whose lives are not fully consumed by the struggle for existence, and thus:

Second, to eliminate the discontent among wage laborers by striving to eliminate the causes of this discontent, and, consequently, to give the laboring workforce the conviction that it does not stand completely alone, opposed to all other social classes, in its struggle for a better existence, and, in short, to restore the inner peace of our Fatherland.

We oppose all use of force and coercion against the workers' movement as long as this movement does not violate current criminal law. Furthermore, we want to see this movement protected by the rule of law, and we strive for this in the firm conviction, bolstered by the experience we have gained here in Germany, even in light of the so-called Anti-Socialist Law, that while it may be possible to achieve temporary successes and to address superficial symptoms of our social problems with the use of force and coercion, through these means we can never change attitudes. [...]

Source: Baron Hans Hermann von Berlepsch, "Warum betreiben wir die soziale Reform", *Schriften der Gesellschaft für Soziale Reform* 11 (1903); reprinted in Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart*. 3rd edition. Göttingen, 1996, pp. 54–57.

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