

Social Democratic Tactics: Georg von Vollmar (1891)

Abstract

When state persecution came to an end in 1891, the Social Democratic Party looked for a practical as well as an ideological way forward. The influential Bavarian party leader Georg von Vollmar (1850–1922) pleaded for a reform of the party that would turn it from radical opposition towards parliamentary cooperation.

Source

[...] The chief characteristic of the Bismarck regime was the complete paralysis, the iron rigidity of our public conditions. Reich politics remained closed, principally and doggedly, to even the most insignificant modern idea, especially in the area of the workers' movement. Conditions were carried to the extreme in a willful – indeed, deliberate – manner; after all, after his downfall, Bismarck declared candidly that he had wished to “resolve” the struggle with Social Democracy “militarily” as soon as possible, while the latter was not yet in a position of superiority. This threatening situation no longer exists today. The immovable has begun to move; at first, that movement must naturally be slow and often halting, but its progression must become increasingly vigorous and cannot be stopped. The earlier paralysis has subsided, the old ice has melted; many forces that were captive until then are beginning to bud, to stir. The greatest curse that was weighing on the Reich has been lifted: the Anti-Socialist Law. Without a doubt, its repeal can be attributed above all to the stance of Social Democracy, as vigorous as it is circumspect, and to the realization that it cannot be defeated; but this must not prevent us from acknowledging the good sense of those who dropped it without external coercion. The principled opposition to every kind of change and reform has been broken. To be sure, the ruling classes, especially the mighty interest groups of the agrarians and large industrialists, still hold too much power in their hands. But that power is no longer as absolute and unshaken as it once was; rather, it has received a blow here and there, and these privileged ones will have to prepare to give up at least their most excessive demands. At least the first step toward improvement has also been taken in the area of workers' protection. To be sure, there is a vast, sad gap between the nice promises in the Kaiser's message and the Industrial Bill [*Gewerbenovelle*] that was presented by the government and eventually adopted by the Reichstag. The influence of capitalism working at full tilt, bureaucracy's desire to be in command, and the selfishness and ignorance in national life have distorted, almost to the point of unrecognizability, the good will that was present. That is also why we had to reject the Industrial Bill; our justified opposition to its feeble provisions, some of which are in fact hostile to workers, does not rule out, however, that this law does contain a number – though small – of real improvements. More important than all this, however, is that we have started upon the path of workers' protection legislation, upon which, in spite of all resistance, one will be driven onwards by the logic of facts. The difference from before is expressed especially in this fact: today, we have been essentially placed on the ground of common law, of formally equally law, and we have the possibility of exerting a certain influence on the shaping of public affairs by legal means.

This change cannot fail to affect our party and its political conduct as well. [...]

In a word: our principles are ours, but their application to life, political tactics, depends on the respective political and economic conditions and needs and is determined for the most part by the conduct of those who hold power and the other parties.

What this means is that our tactics today cannot be the same as during the State of Emergency. Even

then we did not give up parliamentary activity and participation in the politics of the day; except that the primary tasks of the party at that time had to lie in the most relentless, ruthless opposition to the government, which was placing us in principle outside of the law and was intent on destroying us politically and personally, hence there could be only war with the government, not negotiations. Today, the situation is different. To be sure, the government has not given up the struggle against us. But this is no longer the barbaric war of annihilation; instead, they have recognized us as a belligerent power and are engaged in an orderly quarrel with us, in which we can achieve substantial successes through our abilities. [...]

Source: Georg von Vollmar, *Über die naechsten Aufgaben der deutschen Sozialdemokratie. Zwei Reden gehalten am 1. Juni und 6. Juli im "Eldorado" zu München*. Munich: Ernst, 1891, p. 5 f; reprinted in Rüdiger vom Bruch and Björn Hofmeister, eds., *Kaiserreich und Erster Weltkrieg 1871–1918*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, vol. 8. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 2000, pp. 218–20.

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