

# The Erfurt Program (1891)

## Abstract

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Although the following reform program, enacted at an Erfurt assembly in 1891, continues to call for revolution, it also provides evidence of a new practical orientation within the Socialist Party – one that encouraged its members to work through existing political institutions. The resignation of Bismarck a year earlier and the expiration of the Anti-Socialist Law had ended a state-sanctioned policy of persecution against the party.

## Source

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The economic development of bourgeois society invariably leads to the ruin of small business, which is based on the private ownership by the worker of his means of production. It separates the worker from his means of production and turns him into a propertyless proletarian, while the means of production become the monopoly of a relatively small number of capitalists and large landowners.

Hand in hand with this monopolization of the means of production goes the displacement of these fractured small businesses by colossal large enterprises, the development of the tool into a machine, the gigantic growth in the productivity of human labor. But all the benefits of this transformation are monopolized by the capitalists and large landowners. For the proletariat and the sinking middle classes – petty bourgeoisie and farmers – it means an increase in the insecurity of their existence, of misery, of pressure, of oppression, of degradation, of exploitation.

Ever greater becomes the number of proletarians, ever more massive the army of excess workers, ever more stark the opposition between exploiters and the exploited, ever more bitter the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which divides modern society into two hostile camps and constitutes the common characteristic of all industrialized countries.

The gulf between the propertied and the propertyless is further widened by crises that are grounded in the nature of the capitalist mode of production, crises that are becoming more extensive and more devastating, that elevate this general uncertainty into the normal state of society and furnish proof that the powers of productivity have grown beyond society's control, that the private ownership of the means of production has become incompatible with their appropriate application and full development.

The private ownership of the means of production, once the means for securing for the producer the ownership of his product, has today become the means for expropriating farmers, artisans, and small merchants, and for putting the non-workers – capitalists, large landowners – into possession of the product of the workers. Only the transformation of the capitalist private ownership of the means of production – land and soil, pits and mines, raw materials, tools, machines, means of transportation – into social property and the transformation of the production of goods into socialist production carried on by and for society can cause the large enterprise and the constantly growing productivity of social labor to change for the hitherto exploited classes from a source of misery and oppression into a source of the greatest welfare and universal, harmonious perfection.

This social transformation amounts to the emancipation not only of the proletariat, but of the entire human race, which is suffering from current conditions. But it can only be the work of the working class, because all other classes, notwithstanding the conflicts of interest between them, stand on the ground of the private ownership of the means of production and have as their common goal the preservation of the

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foundations of contemporary society.

The struggle of the working class against capitalist exploitation is necessarily a political struggle. Without political rights, the working class cannot carry on its economic struggles and develop its economic organization. It cannot bring about the transfer of the means of production into the possession of the community without first having obtained political power.

It is the task of the Social Democratic Party to shape the struggle of the working class into a conscious and unified one and to point out the inherent necessity of its goals.

The interests of the working class are the same in all countries with a capitalist mode of production. With the expansion of global commerce, and of production for the world market, the position of the worker in every country becomes increasingly dependent on the position of workers in other countries. The emancipation of the working class is thus a task in which the workers of all civilized countries are equally involved. Recognizing this, the German Social Democratic Party feels and declares itself to be one with the class-conscious workers of all other countries.

The German Social Democratic Party therefore does not fight for new class privileges and class rights, but for the abolition of class rule and of classes themselves, for equal rights and equal obligations for all, without distinction of sex or birth. Starting from these views, it fights not only the exploitation and oppression of wage earners in society today, but every manner of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, party, sex, or race.

Proceeding from these principles, the German Social Democratic Party demands, first of all:

1. Universal, equal, and direct suffrage with secret ballot in all elections, for all citizens of the Reich over the age of twenty, without distinction of sex. Proportional representation, and, until this is introduced, legal redistribution of electoral districts after every census. Two-year legislative periods. Holding of elections on a legal holiday. Compensation for elected representatives. Suspension of every restriction on political rights, except in the case of legal incapacity.
2. Direct legislation by the people through the rights of proposal and rejection. Self-determination and self-government of the people in Reich, state, province, and municipality. Election by the people of magistrates, who are answerable and liable to them. Annual voting of taxes.
3. Education of all to bear arms. Militia in the place of the standing army. Determination by the popular assembly on questions of war and peace. Settlement of all international disputes by arbitration.
4. Abolition of all laws that place women at a disadvantage compared with men in matters of public or private law.
5. Abolition of all laws that limit or suppress the free expression of opinion and restrict or suppress the right of association and assembly. Declaration that religion is a private matter. Abolition of all expenditures from public funds for ecclesiastical and religious purposes. Ecclesiastical and religious communities are to be regarded as private associations that regulate their affairs entirely autonomously.
6. Secularization of schools. Compulsory attendance at the public *Volksschule* [extended elementary school]. Free education, free educational materials, and free meals in the public *Volksschulen*, as well as at higher educational institutions for those boys and girls considered qualified for further education by virtue of their abilities.
7. Free administration of justice and free legal assistance. Administration of the law by judges elected by the people. Appeal in criminal cases. Compensation for individuals unjustly accused, imprisoned, or

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sentenced. Abolition of capital punishment.

8. Free medical care, including midwifery and medicines. Free burial.

9. Graduated income and property tax for defraying all public expenditures, to the extent that they are to be paid for by taxation. Inheritance tax, graduated according to the size of the inheritance and the degree of kinship. Abolition of all indirect taxes, customs, and other economic measures that sacrifice the interests of the community to those of a privileged few.

For the protection of the working classes, the German Social Democratic Party demands, first of all:

1. Effective national and international worker protection laws on the following principles:

(a) Fixing of a normal working day not to exceed eight hours.

(b) Prohibition of gainful employment for children under the age of fourteen.

(c) Prohibition of night work, except in those industries that require night work for inherent technical reasons or for reasons of public welfare.

(d) An uninterrupted rest period of at least thirty-six hours every week for every worker.

(e) Prohibition of the truck system.

2. Supervision of all industrial establishments, investigation and regulation of working conditions in the cities and the countryside by a Reich labor department, district labor bureaus, and chambers of labor. Rigorous industrial hygiene.

3. Legal equality of agricultural laborers and domestic servants with industrial workers; abolition of the laws governing domestics.

4. Safeguarding of the freedom of association.

5. Takeover by the *Reich* government of the entire system of workers' insurance, with decisive participation by the workers in its administration.

Source: *Protokoll des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands: Abgehalten zu Erfurt vom 14. bis 20. Oktober 1891*. Berlin, 1891, pp. 3–6.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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