August Bebel and the political awakening of the working class

Ulrich Rippert
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August Bebel died 100 years ago this month. The news that the founder of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) had succumbed to a heart attack on August 13, 1913 in the Swiss spa town of Passugg produced shock and mourning in factories and working class districts around the world. Bebel was loved by the working masses and honoured with the title of the "workers' Kaiser."

Paying tribute to Bebel shortly afterwards Leon Trotsky wrote: "An entire epoch in European socialism is passing." He added that Bebel "embodied the stubborn and unswerving movement of the new class on the ascendancy…This frail and withered old man seemed to be made wholly of will, trained towards a single goal. In his thinking, his eloquence and his literary work he would never at all permit those expenditures of intellectual energy which did not lead directly towards that goal; he was not only an enemy of rhetoric but was also completely alien to conceited aesthetic niceties. Herein lay, incidentally, the higher beauty of his political spirit. In himself he reflected that class which learns in its few spare hours, cherishes every minute and avidly swallows what is strictly essential." [*Political Profiles: An Epoch Passes (Bebel, Jaurès and Vaillant)*, December 1915]

Trotsky compared Bebel with the French socialist Jean Jaurés, who was murdered on the eve of the First World War in a Parisian café. Both of them—the French philosophy professor, whose writings and speeches were marked by theoretical erudition, poetic fantasy and an aristocratic flair, and the German hand-worker, whose theoretical outlook consequently resembled plebeian democracy—symbolised an historical period that came to an end with the war 100 years ago.

Trotsky remarked, "Bebel was a materialist, Jaurès an eclectic idealist, Bebel an irreconcilable supporter of the principles of Marxism, Jaurès a reformist, a ministerialist etc. But in spite of all these differences in politics they reflected through the prism of German and French culture one and the same historical epoch. This was the epoch of the *armed peace*—in international relations as also in domestic ones."

August Bebel aroused the German working class to life in close collaboration with Wilhelm Liebknecht, who was 14 years older and was a close associate of Marx and Engels. Nevertheless he was unable to prevent the catastrophe of 1914.

The tremendous and successful political and cultural educational work tirelessly conducted by Bebel for over a half century contains many critical lessons. Two of them will be discussed here.

First, the advances realised by the revolutionary Social Democrats under the banner of Marxism refute the widespread conceptions that the broad masses of working people are incapable of playing an independent political role, and that a "movement from below" inevitably develops in a right-wing direction. Representatives of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, above all those associated with the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas and others), drew the most pessimistic lessons from the catastrophe of 1933. They insisted that the working class was responsible for the victory of Hitler.

In fact, Hitler's central task was the destruction of the organised workers movement and the democratic rights and social achievements for which it had fought. This was why on March 24, 1933 all of the bourgeois parties voted decisively in favour of legislation granting Hitler emergency powers.

It is an historical fact that democratic rights and social achievements were fought for by the working class under the Marxist leadership of the Social Democrats. These include the universal right to vote, free public education, the equality of men and women, the eight hour day, and the compulsory social insurance programmes introduced by Bismarck out of fear of the growing influence and rise of the SPD.

Bebel's SPD revealed the enormous energy, creative power and cultural potential contained within the working class.

The rise of the SPD under Bebel also disproves the claim that the trade unions are the principal organisations of the working class. In reality the rise of the working class began as a political movement with its own revolutionary socialist party. The trade unions emerged later and quickly formed the right wing of the socialist movement. They were fierce opponents of revolution, attacked Rosa Luxemburg and blackmailed Bebel in the years prior to his death.

Bebel was himself a worker. He was born in February 1840, the son of a poor junior Prussian army officer in Cologne, and he experienced the European revolutions when he was eight years old. In his autobiography, he described how he received his first concrete political lesson during that time. In the revolutionary years of 1848-49, there was widespread support for republicanism in the Rhineland region. So when the young Bebel spoke out in favour of the monarchy at school along with another classmate, they were given a sound beating. The first "class thrashing," as Bebel later remarked humorously.

During his years as an apprentice craftsman he joined the "Industrial Education Association" and undertook intensive self-education. When Ferdinand Lassalle founded the General German Workers Association (ADAF) in Leipzig in 1863, Bebel maintained his distance. He was repelled by the eccentric appearance and authoritarian behaviour of Lassalle and strongly opposed his approaches to the reactionary Prussian premier Otto von Bismarck.

In the conflict with Lassalle, Bebel studied the writings of Marx and Engels, and his friendship commenced with Wilhelm Liebknecht. In the autumn of 1867 he was elected president of the Union of German Workers' Associations, and he implemented the statutes of the International Workers Association which Marx had formulated. They stated, "The emancipation of the working class must be fought for by the working class itself." On this basis Bebel drew a clear line against bourgeois liberalism, which had until then strongly influenced the workers' associations.

Two years later, Bebel and Liebknecht founded the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP) in Eisenach in August 1869. The party programme authored by Bebel oriented towards Marxism, calling among other things

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for the abolition of the capitalist system of production. However the influence of liberalism is still visible in the programme, such as with the demand for "the establishment of a free people's state."

Bebel confronted a wave of hatred the following summer after his abstention, together with Liebknecht, in a vote in the North German Reichstag over Prussian war credits to fight France, which had declared war two days earlier. Anger intensified the following year in May 1871 when Bebel explicitly defended the Paris Commune.

Both Bebel and Liebknecht were subsequently convicted of preparing high treason, but they were praised for their stance by many workers. When Bebel emerged from the train in July 1872 to begin his sentence at Hubertusburg prison, rail workers saluted him in as if acknowledging a head of state.

While Bebel used his years in prison to work on his book *Women and Socialism*, the followers of Lassalle and the SDAP drew closer together. One month after Bebel's release from prison, the unification congress took place in Gotha in May 1875. This congress is known above all for the sharp criticism made of the Gotha programme by Marx.

After the unification, the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (SAPD) grew rapidly, changing its name 15 years later to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Three years after unification, the party already had 47 local newspapers, with *Vorwärts* (Forwards) as its central organ. It achieved 10 percent of the vote in elections to the Reichstag, an increase of 40 percent compared to the combined total of both organisations before unification. Bismarck responded with his anti-socialist law. All organisations and newspapers of the party were banned, but Bismarck failed in his attempt to outlaw the parliamentary fraction and the work of its deputies.

Bebel gained political prestige and theoretical clarity during the years of illegality. There were sharp faction fights. Moderates and radicals struggled for the dominant position in the party. Eventually the radicals won the upper hand, which was above all due to the superior tactical abilities and reputation of Bebel. The main reason for this victory was the growing authority of Marxism, with which Bebel's faction was identified. The publication of Engels' *Anti-Dühring* had made Marxism the authoritative voice of socialism within the workers' movement.

The more Bebel and his supporters clearly advanced Marxist principles and a revolutionary perspective, the more the SPD's presence in the factories grew. This was clear in the big strike movement of 1889. The work stoppages began in the mines in the Ruhr, before spreading quickly to Aachen, the Saarland, Saxony and Silesia. In the Ruhr, 97,000 miners (86 per cent of the workforce) joined the strike. There were armed clashes and soldiers intervened, but the strikes continued to grow. By April 1890, the number of strikes reached 715, with a total of 289,000 workers participating in the building, textile and metal industries.

In the elections to the Reichstag in the same year, the SPD doubled its vote total to 20 percent. Bismarck resigned a few weeks later, and in October of that year the anti-socialist laws were revoked.

The SPD grew even more quickly as a legal party. In the course of a quarter century, from the end of the anti-socialist laws in 1890 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, it became the largest party in Germany. But the number of votes the party received does not fully explain the breadth and depth of its influence within the workers' movement.

At that time, the SPD was an historically unique phenomenon: the first truly mass working class party. It aroused the fantasies, enthusiasm and creativity of a class which created all of society's wealth and was capable of building a classless society.

At the turn of the 20th century, all areas of working class life were organised by the SPD. The following statistics illustrate the cultural development in the working class bound up with the growth of the SPD. Between 1900 and 1914 Bebel's party was involved in the founding of 1,100 libraries. These libraries had a collection of over 80,000 volumes. By 1914 there were 365 librarians on the payroll of the party.

However, the rapid rise and increased political influence of the SPD had dangerous consequences. It intensified the conflict between its revolutionary perspective, as had been laid down in the Erfurt Programme of 1895, and the unavoidable reformist character of the party's day to day work.

Karl Kautsky, who had emerged as the party's leading theoretician, sought to bridge the gap between the revolutionary goals and the reformist activities of the party with his concept of "maximum and minimum programmes." The first represented the historic goals of the SPD, while the latter contained the practical demands of the party. He still defended the revolutionary program, but the party's practice was already characterised by an opportunist adaptation to the framework of "possibilism," as it was then termed.

Bebel underestimated the danger that came with the growing opportunism in the party and the increasing influence of the trade unions. Until the mid-1890s, the growth of the trade unions lagged behind that of the party, which provided political leadership and material support to the unions. But a major economic boom that began in 1895 and continued almost until the outbreak of World War I encouraged a tremendous expansion of the trade unions, fundamentally changing the relationship between them and the party. As the trade unions gained considerable financial resources, they became increasingly hostile to the socialist movement.

The reason for this lay with the role of trade unions under capitalism. They represent workers in a very specific economic role, namely the sale of their labour power. Since capitalist economic relations are at the basis of their existence, the basic tendency of the trade unions is toward the suppression of the class struggle and opposition to the socialist movement. This is why Rosa Luxemburg was banned from speaking at many trade union congresses.

Eduard Bernstein emerged as the theoretician of opportunism in parallel with the growth of the trade unions. He claimed that the unions had proven that they could ensure a constant increase in the percentage of workers' incomes within the national framework. Therefore, Marx's theory of the impoverishment of the working class was supposedly refuted. Bernstein defended the position that the long term interests of the working class were not to be realised by a revolutionary perspective, but rather by the constant accumulation of reforms achieved by the trade unions.

Bebel sought to bridge the growing divide between the revolutionary and opportunist wings of the party and prevent a split. After the Russian Revolution in 1905, the trade unions blackmailed Bebel by openly threatening to split from the party after the debate on the mass strike at the party congress in Mannheim in 1906. Bebel agreed to a secret deal with the trade unions, which in subsequent years strengthened their influence and that of the opportunist tendency in the party.

The terrible consequences became evident in 1914, when the SPD leadership voted for war credits. Four years later, they assembled the troops of the Freikorps to bloodily suppress the November revolution and organise the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

In the last years of his life, August Bebel was no longer in a position to cope with the revolutionary challenges which emerged during the transition to the epoch of imperialism.

No one outlined the tragedy of the SPD as succinctly and brilliantly as Leon Trotsky: "The organization of the German proletariat grew uninterruptedly, the funds swelled, the number of newspapers, deputies and municipal councillors multiplied unceasingly. At the same time reaction held on firmly to all its positions. From here flowed the inevitability of the collision between the two polar forces of German social life. But this collision did not set in for a long time, while the forces and the resources of the organization grew so automatically that a whole

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generation had time to get used to such a state of affairs, and although everyone wrote, spoke or read about the inevitability of the decisive conflict, like the inevitability of the collision between two trains going towards each other along the same track—they finally ceased to sense this inevitability within themselves. Old Bebel stood out from many others in that to the end of his days he lived in the certainty that events would lead fatally to their denouement." [Ibid.]

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