

Programme: Lessons of Erfurt

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The Erfurt programme was adopted in 1891 by the Social Democratic Party of Germany. It is famous (or notorious, depending on your point of view) for its division into a maximum part (the ultimate aims) and a minimum part (immediate demands). This article is not about the proximate origins and detail of the Erfurt programme. Rather, it is about parties and programmes in a longer view. What is the background to socialists building a party round a programme of the Erfurt type?

We have to start for this purpose with the origins of political parties in the modern sense. This goes back to the years 1679-83 in England. There was then a crisis of the restored monarchical regime, and an opposition to it which was looking for constitutional government in some sense came into being. Its opponents gave it a name intended as an insult — they called it a ‘party’, the ‘Whiggamores’, which meant ‘Scottish Presbyterian rebels’, shortened to ‘Whigs’. The Whigs retaliated against their opponents, who called themselves the supporters of the king and church, referring to them as the ‘Tory’ ‘party’. ‘Tory’ meant ‘Irish Catholic rebels’.

So ‘Whig’ and ‘Tory’ are both insults in origin. The Whigs were largely suppressed from 1681, and the Tories were in the ascendant until 1687. Then they refused to accept James II’s policies of Catholics taking positions in the army and the University of Oxford. These policies sent the Tories into opposition. James II briefly and without much success tried to bring the Whigs on board, but the end was 1688 and the ‘Glorious Revolution’. The period between 1688 and 1714 was referred to at the time as the period of the “rage of party”: general elections every three years and many more of them contested in the parliamentary seats. From this period, the Whig and Tory parties became more or less established parliamentary and election campaigning groups, and the names ceased to be mere insults.

How were these parties organised? There were parliamentary caucuses. The existence of the parliamentary parties as ideological formations has been disputed, but recent historical work has tended to reaffirm that there really were parliamentary parties that voted together en bloc. There were London party clubs, like the Whig Kit-Cat club and Tory October Club in the early 18th century, or the Tory Carlton Club and Liberal Reform Club in the 19th. And there were local clubs and societies in the parliamentary constituencies. There were vague ideological attachments — to ‘liberty’ for Whigs, to ‘church and king’ for Tories — but no definite political platform.

This very loose type of party organisation continues to exist in the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States, and the Tory Party still shows some remnant features; but it was gradually superseded with the coming into existence of parties like the SPD, which have organised memberships, conferences and a political platform.

This loose structure was combined with a sense that continued into the 19th century of the underlying illegitimacy of political parties: that it would be better if the 'political classes' (meaning the propertied classes) were all united in a uniform point of view. The idea that 'party' was an insult persisted in political discourse. (There is actually a worthwhile and provocative article by Chris Cutrone, 'Lenin's liberalism', on the Platypus website,[1] where Cutrone argues that the idea of the illegitimacy of political differences persisted into the workers' movement and that Lenin helped legitimise such differences with the split in 1903.)

From sect to workers' party

The workers' movement in the early 19th century was characterised by the dominance of what are widely known as sects. They are called sects because they usually arose as a result of an individual writing a long, theoretical book, attracting a group of adherents. So in England there were Owenites based on Robert Owen's ideas, Paineites based on Thomas Paine's ideas, Spencean communists based on Thomas Spence's ideas, and so on. In France there were Saint-Simonians, Fourierists and from the late 1840s on Proudhonists, and so on.

The new idea of a workers' political movement founded on a short summary statement of principles began in 1838 with Chartism and the six points of the People's Charter: A vote for every man over the age of 21; the secret ballot; no property qualification for members of parliament; payment for MPs (so poor men could serve); constituencies of equal size; annual elections.

Chartism as a movement remained half within the tradition of British political parties like the Whigs and Tories. It consisted of local organisations loosely tied together, but unified by the goals of the Charter.

Engels' Socialism: utopian and scientific offers a narrative of a passage from utopian socialism, through Hegel's philosophy of history as human evolution, to historical materialism, grounded in political-economic analysis and class. Karl Kautsky in 1908 rendered this narrative into the idea that Marxism comes from the union of German philosophy, English political

economy and French socialism.[2] Lenin, in turn, developed this idea of Kautsky's further in his 'The three sources and three component parts of Marxism' in 1913.[3]

There is an unfortunate gap in both these texts, caused by Kautsky's belief in 1908 that British politics was already in the 1830s-40s dominated by 'compromise' and 'pragmatism'. The fundamental influence of Chartism on Marx's and Engels' political ideas has gone missing. Chartism was already a guiding light for Marx and Engels in 1846, when the 'German Democratic Communists of Brussels' congratulated Feargus O'Connor on his election as a Chartist MP in July 1846.[4] Engels wrote, towards the end of chapter 2 of Socialism: utopian and scientific:

... already much earlier certain historical facts had occurred, which led to a decisive change in the conception of history. In 1831, the first working class rising took place in Lyons; between 1838 and 1842, the first national working class movement, that of the English Chartists, reached its height.

And in the 1892 English Introduction:

During the reform agitation, the working men constituted the radical wing of the reform party; the act of 1832 having excluded them from the suffrage, they formulated their demands in the People's Charter, and constituted themselves, in opposition to the great bourgeois Anti-Corn Law party, into an independent party, the Chartists, the first working men's party of modern times.

From the Chartists Marx and Engels obtained two ideas which are really fundamental to their politics. One, that the working class needs to be organised for political power in the form of radical democracy. And two, the idea of a workers' movement which is founded on a short statement of principles.

The Communist manifesto is a different sort of entity. It conceives the communists as part of the organised Chartist movement, not a separate party, a part whose role is expressed in the following statement:

The Communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only:

- 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.*
- 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.*

This conception means that the Manifesto contains a description of the historical context within which the workers' movement appears, and polemic against the various forms of the sect, against 'feudal' and 'bourgeois' socialisms, and so on. Even so, towards the end there is a short general statement of the measures which the working class would need to undertake in power in order transform society.

Another version, containing a political programme derived from the Charter plus the anti-feudal policy of the French revolution, together with social and economic demands, is provided by the 1848 Demands of the Communist Party in Germany.[5] Unlike the Manifesto, but like the Charter, the Demands is merely a bullet-point list without overarching goals.

In 1848-49 the British state smashed Chartism by repression, as is detailed in John Saville's 1848: the British state and the Chartist movement (Cambridge 1990). At the same time or slightly later, the revolutions of 1848 in France, Germany and so on were defeated. Marx and Engels went back into exile, the Communist League, the organisation founded on the basis of the Communist manifesto, fell apart politically.

First International

The International Working Men's Association or First International founded in 1864 was a very different project. It started with an actually existing political movement: the solidarity of the British workers with the north in the American civil war and, arising out of that solidarity, the effort to set up a movement in solidarity with the Polish national movement. On that basis the First International was formed.

The First International was not a party founded on a platform. It was an organisation based on immediate practical solidarity on an international level, but also the proposal that working class organisations of all political shades should get together and organise, and discuss what working class policy should be. That is what the international actually did. It engaged in practical solidarity work: the general council did far more in the way of appeals for practical solidarity in relation to strikes in various parts of Europe than either the bureau of the Second International or the international executive committee of the Communist International, the Third International. But it was also an organisation which discussed what working class policy should be in relation to land, education, the question of nationalities, and so on.

The First International broke up because it was witch-hunted after the Paris

Commune. The Proudhonists in France, who were a substantial component of it, were smashed by executions, exile and imprisonment. The British trade union leaders took fright from the Commune, but the other side of the coin was the Reform Act of 1867 and the Trade Union Act 1871, which enabled the bourgeois parties to claim that they could 'do something for the working class'.

At the same time there was a split between those who sided with Marx and the Bakuninists. The Bakuninists argued for the immediate abolition of the state and introduction of communal anarchy. Their conduct led to a split because that they insisted that the International should be a broad front, with a revolutionary Bakuninist minority which organised secretly within it.

There were two other projects going on at the same time in Germany.

Germany

One was the General Association of German Workers (ADAV), initially organised by Ferdinand Lassalle in 1863. The ADAV was not a Chartist or 1848-style communist party committed to political democracy. When founded, it adopted as its platform a 40-page article by Lassalle, the 'Open letter'.^[6] In spite of its length, this document proposed the idea of a workers' party independent of the liberals, on the basis of two demands only: universal suffrage, and state-supported producer cooperatives. The rest of the text was theoretical argument, principally the "iron law of wages".

The ADAV operated what Lassalleans called "democratic centralism". By this they meant that a congress elected a leader ('democratic' — first Lassalle, then later Schweitzer after Lassalle was killed in a duel), and the leader had dictatorial powers ('centralist') over the party organisation — and equally over the trade unions, which were later founded in association with the party organisation. In addition, Lassalle, and after him Schweitzer, were happy to say that the working class could ally with Bismarck and with the Prussian monarchists against the liberals, because the liberals represent the capitalist class, while the monarchists were prepared to make social concessions to the working class.

The second project was what became the Eisenach party. This started with Wilhelm Liebknecht attempting to organise an opposition within the Lassallean ADAV in Berlin; but Bismarck, hearing of this, had Liebknecht deported from Prussia to Saxony. Liebknecht went into a Saxon liberal party called the Volkspartei (People's Party) and organised a left tendency within it, in the process winning August Bebel. In 1869 this tendency fused

with a split from the ADAV, and created the Social Democratic Workers' Party or 'Eisenach party'. This organisation was based on a clear platform, the Eisenach programme, which has a set of six general principles and a set of 10 specific demands.[7] The general principles are:

1. The current political and social conditions are extremely unjust and thus have to be combated with the utmost energy.

2. The struggle for the liberation of the working class is not a struggle for class privileges and special rights, but for equal rights and obligations and for the abolition of class rule.

3. The economic dependency of the worker on the capitalists constitutes the basis of any form of servitude, and therefore the Social Democratic Workers' Party aims for each worker to get the full earnings from labour through a cooperative system; concomitant to this is the abolition of the current method of production (wage system).

4. Political freedom represents the most essential precondition for the economic liberation of the labouring classes. Consequently, the social question is inseparable from the political one; its solution is conditional on the latter and is only possible in a democratic state.

5. Considering that the political and economic liberation of the working class is only possible if the struggle is conducted under common, united principles, the Social Democratic Workers' Party is adopting a unified organisation, which nevertheless allows each individual member to assert influence for the general welfare.

6. Considering that the liberation of labour is neither a local nor a national but rather a social task, encompassing all countries with a modern [form of] society, the Social Democratic Workers' Party regards itself, to the extent that the associational laws permit, as a branch of the International Workers' Association and is affiliated with the efforts of that body.

It is important to be clear that the Eisenach programme has within itself most of the faults which Marx criticises in the Gotha programme. Indeed, Bakunin wrote a critique of the Eisenach programme, parts of which Marx plagiarised in the Critique of the Gotha programme.[8] At the same time, the concept of the Eisenach programme is the same concept as that of the Charter, or the Demands of the Communist Party in Germany. It is a departure in that sense from the First International idea of a general association, which does not have a definite programme, but provides a framework within which the working class can discuss what its policy ought to be, and a return to the idea of a workers' political movement founded on a short, clear political platform.

Between 1869 and 1875 the main political event was the Franco-Prussian war. Bebel and Liebknecht, who had been elected to the parliament of the north German confederation as Eisenach party MPs, refused (against the advice of Marx and Engels) to vote for credits for the Prussian war effort. The ADAV in contrast gave clear support to the Prussian war effort. Bebel's and Liebknecht's decision was retrospectively validated by the military victories of the Prussians and also by the fact that the Prussians turned out to be annexationist, seizing Alsace-Lorraine. In retrospect the two were seen to have made an enormous stand on principle against Prussian military aggression.

At the same time, the organisers of trade unions under the framework of the ADAV were becoming increasingly opposed to the system under which Schweitzer as the elected leader was simultaneously the president of every trade union associated with the ADAV. There was also opposition to the fact that Schweitzer had the right to intervene in local parties, appoint their organisers and even dissolve them. In contrast, the Eisenachers regarded the effective autonomy of the branches, trade unions and so on as being a fundamental part of their political conception — that the working class needs political democracy; and that implied democracy in its own movement as well, and the opportunity for creativity in the localities, in the branches and so on. All this is very explicit in the Eisenach programme.

Gotha

At Gotha in 1875 the two organisations unified, on the basis of the Gotha programme.[9] Marx's Critique of the Gotha programme more or less says that the non-Marxist content of this programme resulted from Wilhelm Liebknecht's concessions to the Lassalleans. But in fact the Gotha programme was completely drafted by Liebknecht.

The Gotha programme is a step further forward relative to the Eisenach programme, in that it does two things. Again, it is a short document. It begins with a short statement of general principles (to which most of Marx's critique is addressed):

1. Labour is the source of all wealth and all culture, and, since universal productive labour is possible only through society, therefore to society — that is, to all its members — belongs the collective product of labour. With the universal obligation to labour, according to equal justice, each should have in proportion to his reasonable needs.

In the present society the means of labour are the monopoly of the capitalist class; the servitude of the labouring class, which is the outgrowth of this, is the

cause of misery and of slavery in all forms.

The liberation of labour demands the transformation of the means of production into the common property of society and the associative regulation of the collective labour with general employment and just distribution of the proceeds of labour.

The emancipation of labour must be the work of the labouring class, opposed to which all other classes are only a reactionary body.

2. Proceeding from this principle, the Socialist Labour party of Germany seeks through all legal means the free state and the socialist society, the destruction of the iron law of wages, the overthrow of exploitation in all forms and the abolition of all social and political inequality.

The Socialist Labour party of Germany, though working chiefly in national boundaries, is conscious of the international character of the labour movement and is resolved to fulfil every duty which is laid on the workers in order to realise the brotherhood of humanity.

The Socialist Labour party of Germany demands as a step to the solution of the social question the erection, with the help of the state, of socialistic productive establishments under the democratic control of the labouring people. These productive establishments are to place industry and agriculture in such relations that out of them the socialist organisation of the whole may arise.

Then comes a section of political demands, “as the foundation of the state”; and finally, a section of “demands within the present society” largely addressed to the immediate situation.

Here, in a sense, is the beginning of the idea of having a maximum programme and a minimum programme. There is a separation between the overall aims, the political element of the programme, and the social reform demands tailored to the immediate circumstances. The overall aims add to the immediate demands in politics and economics the element of inspiration: the idea that, to use the Social Forums tag, ‘another world is possible’.

In spite of what was said in the Critique of the Gotha programme, the unification of the Eisenach party and the ADAV created a snowball effect. The German socialist groups were not so large (about 12,000 in the ADAV and about 7,000 Eisenachers), but within a very few years the united party reached hundreds of thousands of members.

The snowball effect of unification is equally true in relation to the history of the Second International in general. The 1889 Hainfeld programme of the Austrian social democracy was a fusion programme. The Italian Socialist

Party, the French Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) and the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party all originated as a fusion of a number of different groups. The creation of a unified organisation enables it to advance massively compared to the disunited forces which existed beforehand.

We have seen this phenomenon again more recently, even if it has taken place on a less than principled basis, in the Brazilian Workers Party (PT); in Rifondazione Comunista's opening up to forces to its left; in the Scottish Socialist Party; in the Left Bloc in Portugal; in the Red-Green alliance in Denmark. The unification of relatively small forces of socialists in itself creates a different dynamic.

If we ask ourselves why that should be so, the answer is actually perfectly obvious. The working class as a class has a profound interest in united action in spite of political differences. Because without the framework for united action among people who have political differences, you cannot organise a strike, you cannot form trade unions, credit unions or cooperatives. The working class objectively needs unity. Hence, insofar as the left sets itself up against unity in favour of purity, it takes us back to the times before Chartism, and we are forced to give all the competing tendencies the names of their theoretical leaders. To take just Britain, the Cliffites, the Mandelites, the Healyites, the Matgamnaites, etc — like the Paineites, Spenceans, Owenites, and so on.

Parti Ouvrier

The next step forward from the Gotha programme is the programme of the Parti Ouvrier, the French Workers Party.

The preamble drafted by Marx simply states:

Considering

That the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race;

That the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production;

That there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them:

1. The individual form, which has never existed in a general state and which is increasingly eliminated by industrial progress;

2. The collective form, the material and intellectual elements of which are constituted by the very development of capitalist society;

Considering

That this collective appropriation can arise only from the revolutionary action of the productive class—or proletariat—organised in a distinct political party;

That such an organisation must be pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal, including universal suffrage, which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation ...[10]

This short statement of general aims is followed by a section of political demands, quite similar to those of Gotha; and an ad hoc collection of immediate economic and social demands.

The organising framework of the PO programme is thus that of the Gotha programme. The introductory part is much more general. Its character is still within the framework of the Charter. The working class needs political power and pursues that aim by laying collective hands on the means of production. The fact that the working class aims for political power means that it has to be thoroughly democratic in its political orientation.

It was in the context of this programme that Marx seems (in correspondence) to have coined the phrase, ‘minimum programme’, bringing together the political section and the section of immediate demands.[11]

In 1888-89 the Austrian social democratic groups unified on the basis of the Hainfeld programme. The design and length is broadly the same. Hainfeld also displays a lengthened version of the general principles from the programme of the Parti Ouvrier.

Erfurt

After the legalisation of the SPD in Germany there was felt to be a need to revise the Gotha programme. Germany had changed enormously in the period since its formulation. There had been major industrialisation; there were large state welfare institutions and so on; and Germany had begun to be an imperial power.

Again it was Wilhelm Liebknecht who wrote the first draft of the Erfurt programme.[12] Engels wrote a fairly sharp critique of it, regarding it as a step forward from Gotha, but not much more. Then there was discussion in the SPD executive, with the result that Karl Kautsky drafted the

introductory section.

The whole programme is still pretty short, though the introduction is longer than any previous version. It is followed, as in Gotha and the Parti Ouvrier programmes, with a political section and an economic/social section.[13]

Engels criticised Liebknecht's first draft, among other things, for failing to demand the republic, though he admitted: "It would seem that from a legal point of view it is inadvisable to include the demand for a republic directly in the programme." He suggested "the concentration of all political power in the hands of the people's representatives" and "Complete self-government in the provinces, districts and communes through officials elected by universal suffrage. The abolition of all local and provincial authorities appointed by the state.[14] The final version used a version of the second formula: "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."

Just for completeness we can look at the roughly three pages of the programme of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party adopted in 1903. The explanatory part is a little bit longer than Erfurt, but the specific demands are more extensive. They are again divided into political and economic. The latter are of a very different character because of the different situation of tsarist Russia, in that they are longer and much more detailed.

Basic character

What is to be drawn from this history? To start with, the whole idea that the Second International was a movement 'of the whole class' is quite false. The First International was indeed conceived as a movement of the whole class, which then worked out its politics through discussion. But the Second International and its parties were political parties founded on the basis of a definite political platform.

And this definite political platform, first, excludes the anarchists by insisting on the political action of the working class. And, second, when the Lassalleans signed up to the Gotha programme (contrary to what Marx said in the Critique), they broke with the labour monarchism of Lassalle and Schweitzer and their 'labour dictator' centralism in party organisation, and adopted the idea that the proletariat has an interest in political democracy, which is the line of the Charter, the Communist manifesto and the Eisenach programme. So actually, in spite of Liebknecht's muddled theoretical

explanations, it was the Lassalleans that gave up the most in the Gotha unification.

The programme therefore forms a definite political conception. The working class has to take control of the means of production and it can do so by taking political power. To take political power it needs political democracy. There follow a common body of political demands. Attached to that basic idea is a set of current economic and social demands of one sort and another. This is a conception of the party and a conception of a programme which derives ultimately from the Charter.

The result has become substantially more complex; and indeed party programmes of this type tend to become longer. Partly they do so just as a product of political experience: when the working class is contesting elections, and all the more when it is represented in a parliament, the workers' parties and representatives are forced to take positions on current policy debates.

But the very elementary conception is that of a programme for political power: that the working class needs political democracy as the means of its own emancipation, on the road to the emancipation of all human beings without regard to sex or race; that the working class aims to take power in order to supersede itself; that it has to take collective control of the means of production.

This elementary idea turns out to be the engine for the creation of enormous, mass socialist parties and even broader, mass socialist sentiment. And it is the existence of those mass socialist parties, and that mass socialist sentiment, across most of Europe, that makes it possible for the question of the working class actually taking power to be posed in 1916-18.

Without working class political organisation and effective unity for this project, the class becoming conscious of its own strength and hence of the possibility of taking power, the question of actually taking power could not in fact have been posed.

This very basic conception of programme and party — which stems from the Charter, through the 1848 Demands, the Eisenach programme, the Gotha programme, the French Parti Ouvrier programme, the Erfurt programme and its imitators across Europe — is, I think, a lesson to which the present-day left needs to pay serious attention.

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Notes

1. <http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenin%E2%80%99s-liberalism>. Compare also David Adam's reply to Cutrone: <http://platypus1917.org/2011/09/26/lenin-the-liberal>.
2. 'Les trois sources du Marxisme: l'oeuvre historique de Marx': www.marxists.org/francais/kautsky/works/1908/00/kautsky_19080000__04.htm.
3. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/mar/x01.htm.
4. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1846/07/17.htm.
5. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/03/24.htm.
6. http://debs.indstate.edu/134613_1901.pdf.
7. http://archive.org/stream/EisenachProgram/725_socDemWorkersParty_230_djvu.txt.
8. <http://libcom.org/library/a-critique-of-the-german-social-democratic-program-bakunin>.
9. www.archive.org/stream/GothaProgramme/726_socWrksParty_gothaProgram_231_djvu.txt.
10. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm.
11. Marx to Sorge, November 5 1880: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/letters/80_11_05.htm (original emphasis).
12. MECW Vol 27, note 184.
13. www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm.
14. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm.