

# Marx and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (1848-49)<sup>1</sup>

Frederick Engels<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. **Marx & Engels: Collected Works**, vol. 26, pp. 120-128, 2010. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren, November 2019.
  - 2 Engels wrote this article for the newspaper *Der Sozialdemokrat* on the first anniversary of Marx's death. This article was published in English for the first time in Marx K. and Engels F., **Selected Works**, Vol. 2, Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1936.

On the outbreak of the February Revolution, the German "Communist Party," as we called it, consisted only of a small core, the Communist League, which was organized as a secret propaganda society. The League was secret only because at that time no freedom of association or assembly existed in Germany. Besides the workers' associations abroad, from which it obtained recruits, it had about thirty communities, or sections, in the country itself and, in addition, individual members in many places. This inconsiderable fighting force, however, possessed a leader, *Marx*, to whom all willingly subordinated themselves, a leader of the first rank, and, thanks to him, a programme of principles and tactics that still has full validity today: the *Communist Manifesto*.

It is the tactical part of the programme that concerns us here in the first instance. This part stated in general:

"The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties."

"They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole."

"They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

"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*."

“The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, *practically*, the most resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, *theoretically*, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.”<sup>3</sup>

And for the German party it stated in particular:

“In Germany the Communist Party fights with the bourgeoisie whenever it acts in a revolutionary way, against the absolute monarchy, the feudal landowners and philistinism.”

“But they never cease, for a single instant, to instil into the working class the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat, in order that the German workers may straightway use, as so many weapons against the bourgeoisie, the social and political conditions that the bourgeoisie must necessarily introduce along with its supremacy, and in order that, after the fall of the reactionary classes in Germany, the fight against the bourgeoisie itself may immediately begin.”

“The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution,” etc. (*Manifesto*, Section IV.)<sup>4</sup>

Never has a tactical programme proved its worth as well as this one. Devised on the eve of a revolution, it stood the test of this revolution; whenever, since this period, a workers' party has deviated from it, the deviation has met its punishment; and today, after almost forty years, it serves as the guiding line of

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3 See present edition, Vol. 6, p. 497. Engels' italics.— *Ed.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 519.— *Ed.*

all resolute and self-confident workers' parties in Europe, from Madrid to St. Petersburg.

The February events in Paris precipitated the imminent German revolution and thereby modified its character. The German bourgeoisie, instead of conquering by virtue of its own power, conquered in the tow of a French workers' revolution. Before it had yet conclusively overthrown its old adversaries—the absolute monarchy, feudal landownership, the bureaucracy and the cowardly petty bourgeoisie—it had to confront a new enemy, the proletariat. However, the effects of the economic conditions, which lagged far behind those of France and England, and thus of the backward class situation in Germany resulting therefrom, immediately showed themselves here.

The German bourgeoisie, which had only just begun to establish its large-scale industry, had neither the strength nor the courage to win for itself unconditional domination in the state, nor was there any compelling necessity for it to do so. The proletariat, undeveloped to an equal degree, having grown up in complete intellectual enslavement, being unorganized and still not even capable of independent organization, possessed only a vague feeling of the profound conflict of interests between it and the bourgeoisie. Hence, although in point of fact the mortal enemy of the latter, it remained, on the other hand, its political appendage. Terrified not by what the German proletariat was, but by what it threatened to become and what the French proletariat already was, the bourgeoisie saw its sole salvation in some compromise, even the most cowardly, with the monarchy and nobility; as the proletariat was still unaware of its own historical role, the bulk of it had, at the start, to take on the role of the forward-pushing, extreme left wing of the bourgeoisie. The German workers had above all to win those rights which were indispensable to their independent

organization as a class party: freedom of the press, association and assembly—rights which the bourgeoisie, in the interest of its own rule, ought to have fought for, but which it itself in its fear now began to dispute when it came to the workers. The few hundred separate League members vanished in the enormous mass that had been suddenly hurled into the movement. Thus, the German proletariat at first appeared on the political stage as the extreme democratic party.

In this way, when we founded a major newspaper in Germany, our banner was determined as a matter of course. It could only be that of democracy, but that of a democracy which everywhere emphasized in every point the specific proletarian character which it could not yet inscribe once for all on its banner. If we did not want to do that, if we did not want to take up the movement, adhere to its already existing, most advanced, actually proletarian side and to advance it further, then there was nothing left for us to do but to preach communism in a little provincial sheet and to found a tiny sect instead of a great party of action. But we had already been spoilt for the role of preachers in the wilderness; we had studied the Utopians too well for that, nor was it for that we had drafted our programme.

When we came to Cologne, preparations by the democrats, and partly by the Communists, had been made there for a major newspaper; they wanted to make this a purely local Cologne paper and to banish us to Berlin. But in twenty-four hours, especially thanks to Marx, we had conquered the field, and the newspaper became ours, in return for the concession of taking *Heinrich Bürgers*<sup>5</sup> into the editorial board. The latter wrote one article (in No. 2) and never another.

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5 Later became a liberal. [Note by the Sozialdemokrat editors.]

Cologne was where we had to go, and not Berlin. First, Cologne was the centre of the Rhine Province, which had gone through the French Revolution, which had provided itself with *modern* legal conceptions in the *Code Napoléon*,<sup>6</sup> which had developed by far the most important large-scale industry and which was in every respect the most advanced part of Germany at that time. The Berlin of that time we knew only too well from our own observation, with its hardly hatched bourgeoisie, its cringing petty bourgeoisie, audacious in words but craven in deeds, its still wholly undeveloped workers, its mass of bureaucrats, aristocratic and court riff-raff, its entire character of a mere "*Residenz*."<sup>7</sup> Decisive, however, was the following: in Berlin the wretched Prussian *Landrecht*<sup>8</sup> prevailed and political cases were tried by professional magistrates; on the Rhine the *Code Napoleon* was in force, which knows no press trials, because it presupposes censorship, and if one did not commit political misdemeanours but only crimes, one came before a jury; in Berlin after the revolution young Schlöffel was sentenced to a year's imprisonment for a trifle,<sup>9</sup> while on the Rhine we had unconditional freedom of the press—and we used it to the last drop.

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6 Referring here and below to the *Code Napoleon*, Engels meant the entire system of bourgeois law as represented by five codes (civil, civil procedure, commercial, criminal and criminal procedure) promulgated in 1804-10 during Napoleon's reign. These codes were introduced into the regions of Western and South-Western Germany conquered by France and remained in force in the Rhine Province even after its incorporation into Prussia in 1815.

7 *Residenz*: Seat of the reigning prince.— *Ed.*

8 The *Prussian Law* (*Das Allgemeine Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten*) was promulgated in 1794. It included civil, commercial, credit, maritime and insurance law as well as criminal, ecclesiastical, state and administrative law, and endorsed the obsolete legal standards of semi-feudal Prussia. To a large extent the Prussian Law remained in force until the introduction of the civil code in 1900.

9 After the March 1848 Revolution Gustav Adolph Schloffel, a German democratic student, began to publish the *Volksfreund* newspaper in Berlin. On April 19, in its issue No. 5, the newspaper carried two of his articles in which he attacked private property and defended the rights of the working people. For this Schlöffel was brought before a court of law and sentenced to six months' imprisonment in a fortress on a charge of incitement to revolt.

Thus, we began, on June 1, 1848, with very limited share capital, of which only a little had been paid up and the shareholders themselves were more than unreliable. Half of them deserted us immediately after the first number came out and by the end of the month we no longer had any at all.

The editorial constitution was simply the dictatorship of Marx. A major daily paper, which has to be ready at a definite hour, cannot observe a consistent policy with any other constitution. Moreover, Marx's dictatorship was a matter of course here, undisputed and willingly recognised by all of us. It was above all his clear vision and firm attitude that made this publication the most famous German newspaper of the years of revolution.

The political programme of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* consisted of two main points:

A single, indivisible, democratic German republic, and war with Russia, including the restoration of Poland.

The petty-bourgeois democracy were divided at that time into two factions: the North German, which would not mind putting up with a democratic Prussian emperor, and the South German, then almost all specifically Baden, which wanted to transform Germany into a federative republic after the Swiss model. We had to fight both of them. The interests of the proletariat forbade the Prussianisation of Germany just as much as the perpetuation of its division into petty states. These interests called for the unification of Germany at long last into a *nation*, which alone could provide the battlefield, cleared of all traditional petty obstacles, on which proletariat and bourgeoisie were to measure their strength. But they equally forbade the establishment of Prussia as the head. The

Prussian state with its set-up, its tradition and its dynasty<sup>10</sup> was precisely the sole serious internal adversary which the revolution in Germany had to overthrow; and, moreover, Prussia could unify Germany only by tearing Germany apart, by excluding German Austria. Dissolution of the Prussian and disintegration of the Austrian state, real unification of Germany as a republic—we could not have any other immediate revolutionary programme. And this could be accomplished through war with Russia and only through such a war. I will come back to this last point later.

Incidentally, the tone of the newspaper was by no means solemn, serious or enthusiastic. We had altogether contemptible opponents and treated them, without exception, with the utmost scorn. The conspiring monarchy, the *camarilla*, the nobility, the *Kreuz-Zeitung*, the entire "reaction," about which the philistines were morally indignant—we treated them only with mockery and derision. No less so the new idols that had appeared on the scene through the revolution: the March ministers,<sup>11</sup> the Frankfurt and Berlin Assemblies, both the Rights and the Lefts in them. The very first number began with an article which mocked at the inanity of the Frankfurt parliament, the pointlessness of its long-winded speeches, the superfluity of its cowardly resolutions.<sup>12</sup> It cost us half the shareholders. The Frankfurt parliament was not even were ground out and resolutions adopted which were intended to inspire the German philistines but of which no one else took any notice.

The Berlin Assembly was of more importance: it confronted a real power, it did not debate and pass resolutions in the air, in a Frankfurt cloud-cuckoo-land.

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10 The Hohenzollerns.— *Ed.*

11 The reference is to the Camphausen-Hansemann liberal ministry formed in Prussia on March 29, 1848.

12 F. Engels, "The Assembly at Frankfurt".— *Ed.*



Consequently, it was dealt with in more detail. But there too, the idols of the Lefts, Schulze- Delitzsch, Berends, Eisner, Stein, etc., were just as sharply attacked as those in Frankfurt; their indecisiveness, hesitancy and pettiness were mercilessly exposed, and it was proved how step by step they compromised themselves into betraying the revolution. This, of course, evoked a shudder in the democratic petty bourgeois, who had only just manufactured these idols for his own use. To us, this shudder was a sign that we had hit the bull's eye.

We came out likewise against the illusion, zealously spread by the petty bourgeoisie, that the revolution had come to an end with the March days and that now one had only to pocket the fruits. To us, February and March could have the significance of a real revolution only if they were not the conclusion but, on the contrary, the starting-points of a long revolutionary movement in which, as in the Great French Revolution, the people developed further through its own struggles and the parties became more and more sharply differentiated until they coincided entirely with the great classes, bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie and proletariat, and in which the separate positions were won one after another by the proletariat in a series of battles. Hence, we everywhere opposed the democratic petty bourgeoisie as well when it tried to gloss over its class antagonism to the proletariat with the favourite phrase: after all, we all want the same thing; all the differences rest on mere misunderstandings. But the less we allowed the petty bourgeoisie to misunderstand our proletarian democracy, the tamer and more amenable it became towards us. The more sharply and resolutely one opposes it, the more readily it ducks and the more concessions it makes to the workers' party. We have seen this for ourselves.

Finally, we exposed the parliamentary cretinism (as Marx called it) of the various so-called National Assemblies.<sup>13</sup> These gentlemen had allowed all means of power to slip out of their hands, in part had voluntarily surrendered them again to the governments. In Berlin, as in Frankfurt, alongside newly strengthened, reactionary governments there stood powerless assemblies, which nevertheless imagined that their impotent resolutions would shake the world in its foundations. This cretinous self-deception prevailed right to the extreme Lefts. We told them plainly that their parliamentary victory would coincide with their real defeat.

And it so happened both in Berlin and in Frankfurt. When the "Lefts" obtained the majority, the government dispersed the entire Assembly; it could do so because the Assembly had forfeited all credit with the people.

When later I read *Bougeart's* book on *Marat*,<sup>14</sup> I found that in more than one respect we had only unconsciously imitated the great model of the genuine "*Ami du Peuple*" (not the one forged by the royalists) and that the whole outburst of rage and the whole falsification of history, by virtue of which for almost a century only an entirely distorted Marat had been known, were solely due to the fact that Marat mercilessly removed the veil from the idols of the moment, Lafayette, Bailly and others, and exposed them as ready-made traitors to the revolution; and that he, like us, did not want the revolution declared complete, but lasting.

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13 Engels is referring to the articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* devoted to a critique of the French and Berlin National Assemblies. Some of these articles were written by Marx (see present edition, vols 7, 8); Engels summarised this critique in his work **Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany** (see present edition, Vol. 11, p. 79).

14 A. Bougeart, **Marat, L'ami du peuple**, vols I-II.— *Ed*

We openly proclaimed that the trend we represented could enter the struggle for the attainment of our real party aims only when the most extreme of the official parties existing in Germany came to the helm: then we would form the opposition to it. Events, however, saw to it that besides mockery at our German opponents there also appeared fiery passion. The insurrection of the Paris workers in June 1848 found us at our post. From the first shot we were unconditionally on the side of the insurgents. After their defeat, Marx paid tribute to the vanquished in one of his most powerful articles.<sup>15</sup>

Then the last remaining shareholders deserted us. But we had the satisfaction of being the only paper in Germany, and almost in Europe, that had held aloft the banner of the crushed proletariat at the moment when the bourgeois and petty bourgeois of all countries were trampling the vanquished in the ground with a torrent of slander.

Our foreign policy was simple: to support every revolutionary people, and to call for a general war of revolutionary Europe against the mighty bulwark of European reaction — Russia. From February 24<sup>16</sup> onwards it was clear to us that the revolution had only one really formidable enemy, Russia, and that the more the movement took on European dimensions the more this enemy was compelled to enter the struggle. The Vienna, Milan and Berlin events were bound to delay the Russian attack, but its final coming became all the more certain the closer the revolution came to Russia. But if Germany could be successfully brought to make war against Russia, it would be the end for the

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15 K. Marx, "**The June Revolution.**"— Ed.

16 On *February 24*, 1848 Louis Philippe was overthrown in France. On *February 24* (March 7), 1848, having received news of the victory of the February Revolution in France, Nicholas I ordered a partial mobilisation in Russia in preparation for the struggle against the revolution in Europe.

Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns and the revolution would triumph along the whole line.

This policy pervaded every issue of the newspaper until the moment of the actual invasion of Hungary by the Russians, which fully confirmed our forecast and decided the defeat of the revolution.

When, in the spring of 1849, the decisive battle drew near, the language of the paper became more vehement and passionate with every issue. Wilhelm Wolff reminded the Silesian peasants in the "Silesian Milliard" (eight articles),<sup>17</sup> how on being emancipated from feudal services they had been cheated out of money and land by the landlords with the help of the government, and he demanded a thousand million talers in compensation.

It was at the same time, in April, that *Marx's* essay on wage labour and capital appeared in the form of a series of editorial articles<sup>18</sup> as a clear indication of the social goal of our policy. Every issue, every special number, pointed to the great battle that was in the making, to the sharpening of antagonisms in France, Italy, Germany and Hungary. In particular, the special numbers in April and May were as much proclamations to the people to hold themselves in readiness for direct action.

"Out there, in the Reich", wonder was expressed that we carried on our activities so unconcernedly within a Prussian fortress of the first rank, in the face of a garrison of 8,000 troops and confronting the guardhouse; but, on account

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17 A series of articles "*Die schlesische Milliarde*" written by Wilhelm Wolff, a friend and associate of Marx and Engels, appeared in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Nos. 252, 255, 256, 258, 264, 270-72 and 281 between March 22 and April 25, 1849. In 1886 these articles with some changes were published as a separate pamphlet with Engels' Introduction (see this volume, pp. 341-51). A detailed analysis of these articles is given by Engels in his work "**Wilhelm Wolff**" (see present edition, Vol. 24).

18 K. Marx, "**Wage Labour and Capital.**"— *Ed.*

of the eight rifles with bayonets and 250 live cartridges in the editorial room, and the red Jacobin caps of the compositors, our house was reckoned by the officers likewise as a fortress which was not to be taken by a mere coup de main.

At last, on May 18, 1849, the blow came.

The insurrection in Dresden and Elberfeld was suppressed, that in Iserlohn was encircled; the Rhine Province and Westphalia bristled with bayonets which, after completing the rape of the Prussian Rhineland, were intended to march against the Palatinate and Baden. Then at last the government ventured to come to close quarters with us. Half of the editorial staff were prosecuted, the other half were liable to deportation as non-Prussians. Nothing could be done about it, as long as a whole army corps stood behind the government. We had to surrender our fortress, but we withdrew with our arms and baggage, with band playing and flag flying, the flag of the last, red issue, in which we warned the Cologne workers against hopeless putsches, and called to them:

“In bidding you farewell, the editors of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* thank you for the sympathy you have shown them. Their last word everywhere and always will be: *emancipation of the working class!*”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* came to an end, shortly before it had completed its first year. Begun almost without financial resources—the little that had been promised it very soon, as we said, was lost—it had achieved a circulation of almost 5,000 by September. The state of siege in Cologne suspended it; in the middle of October it had to begin again from the start. But in May 1849, when it was suppressed, it again had 6,000 subscribers, while the *Kölnische*, at that time, according to its own admission, had not more than 9,000.

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19 K. Marx, F. Engels, “**To the Workers of Cologne**” (see present edition, Vol. 9, p. 467).—*Ed.*

No German newspaper, before or since, has ever had the same power and influence or been able to electrify the proletarian masses as effectively as the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.

And that it owed above all to Marx.

When the blow fell, the editorial staff dispersed. Marx went to Paris where the dénouement, then in preparation there, took place on June 13, 1849;<sup>20</sup> *Wilhelm Wolff* took his seat in the Frankfurt parliament—now that the Assembly had to choose between being dispersed from above or joining the revolution; and I went to the Palatinate and became an adjutant in Willich's volunteer corps.<sup>21</sup>

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20 On June 13, 1849, the Party of the Mountain organised in Paris a peaceful protest demonstration against the despatch of French troops to Italy to restore the power of the Pope in Rome and consolidate French influence in that country. The proposed troop despatch was a violation of the French constitution which prohibited the use of the army against the freedom and independence of other nations.

The vacillations and indecision of its leaders led to the demonstration's failure, and it was dispersed by government troops. Many leaders of the Mountain were arrested and deported or were forced to emigrate from France. The Legislative Assembly adopted a number of laws suppressing democratic rights.

21 Concerning Engels' part in the Baden-Palatinate uprising of 1849, see **The Campaign for the German Imperial Constitution** (present edition, Vol. 10, pp. 147-239).