

How Socialists Won Our Democratic Rights

By

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The myth of modern democracy is that it was handed down from on-high. In fact, the ruling class resisted extending the franchise at every turn – and it was socialists who fought them for the right to vote.

Since the advent of the modern state, ruling classes have tried to restrain the voting power of workers and those not “well born.” Contrary to the mainstream story that capitalism naturally gave rise to democracy, establishment powers in nineteenth-century Europe restricted the vote for as long as they possibly could. Only when faced with mass mobilisation — or when continent-wide war wiped out working-class males en masse — was it clear that the franchise could no longer be withheld.

The particulars of individual European countries varied. In some nations, following intense struggles, workers won limited forms of universal male suffrage before World War I. More commonly, broad suffrage rights appeared only after the war.

But what was consistent were the actors pushing for universal suffrage: trade unions and, crucially, socialist parties. In fact, what has been called the “democratic breakthrough” of the nineteenth century could easily be called the “socialist breakthrough.”

Belgium

On August 10, 1890, seventy-five thousand men and women took to the streets of Brussels to demonstrate for universal suffrage. Like all other putatively democratic nations of the time, Belgium limited the right to vote to male property owners. Workers were entirely shut out of the country’s political life. Over the next twenty-five years, that would change — but not until a series of general strikes convulsed the country and World War I ripped the country to shreds.

In 1890, the year of the first general strike, ruling elites worried that conferring the vote on the working class would give the ascendant socialist movement a battering ram to bludgeon their autocratic citadel. Though founded just five years earlier, the Parti Ouvrier — like its sister parties in the Second International — was steadily growing, fusing workers together into a powerful, coherent political bloc. Party leaders hoped they could pursue a patient reformist

course, winning trade union and suffrage rights without resorting to a revolutionary strategy of mass strikes.

But the stubbornness of reality — the powers that be resolutely blocked pro-worker measures in parliament — and the militancy of workers forced the party's leaders to concede that more radical action was necessary.

In 1893, following up on the mass action three years earlier, the Council of Workers declared a general strike. Mass demonstrations broke out in multiple cities, miners cut telegraph and telephone lines, and soldiers chased party leaders through the streets with bayonets drawn. Women chucked rocks and broken pottery at the police behind barricades built by miners.

The militant action worked. Property restrictions were abolished. The leaders of the Parti Ouvrier, including a marble worker named Louis Bertrand who helped found the party, were invited into parliament.

But progress would not occur in a straight line. The elections the next year sent shock waves through Europe when dozens of socialist deputies were elected to parliament rather than the expected handful. The party immediately went to work, drafting laws to support unions and set up disability insurance and pensions. Ruling elites, realising their mistake, pushed through a system of “plural voting” that gave additional weight to citizens living in strongholds of the conservative Catholic Party.

So workers — often over the objections of party leaders — kept up the pressure. When the government tried to deepen inequalities in voting rights, the socialist movement again declared a strike, in 1902. This time over three hundred thousand flooded the streets.

The thrust and parry continued in the subsequent years. Catholic parties, still aided by plural voting, strengthened their majority in 1912 and attacked full universal suffrage in the legislature the following year. Socialist leaders, trying to balance the competing politics of rural miners and urban social-democratic politicians, still held out hope parliament would enact universal suffrage.

Instead, 1913 brought another general strike — the largest in Western European history. Strike funds were set up via a system of coupons, and co-ops and childcare were organised. *Le Peuple*, a socialist daily, published recipes for *soupes communistes* to cook in the communal kitchens. Art exhibitions, museum visits, and country hikes drew working-class families together, offering not just respite but cultural nourishment.

The strike didn't achieve its aim of full and equal universal suffrage. It was only after World War I, in 1919, that plural voting finally fell, and women wouldn't receive the right to vote until 1948.

Yet those early battles for the franchise had an enormous impact on the consciousness of other socialists around the continent — the Parti Ouvrier, Rosa Luxemburg said, had inspired the entire Second International to “speak Belgian.”

The Russian Empire

During Belgium's 1902 general strike, the city of Louvain was the site of a frightful massacre: twelve workers eventually died after state officers opened fire. Further east, another government-led mass murder triggered a seminal general strike — the 1905 Russian Revolution.

While in late 1904 liberals and progressives had successfully pressed for workers insurance, the abolition of censorship, and expanded local representative government, the Russian Empire still lacked a federal parliament. In January 1905, strikes erupted in multiple cities, culminating in a peaceful march in St Petersburg of men, women, and children, singing hymns and brandishing a petition demanding an elected parliament. Troops fired on the marchers before they could reach the Winter Palace, killing upwards of one thousand.

Theatrical performances were spontaneously interrupted, and thousands of students and professionals struck in

solidarity with the workers. The merchants club, hardly a redoubt of radicalism, barred its doors to guards for their involvement in the massacre.

Within a couple weeks, half of European Russian workers and 93 percent of all workers in Russian-occupied Poland were out on strike. In Lodz, strikers held the provincial governor hostage in a hotel. Throughout the entire empire, the rail network ground to a halt.

Revolution was in the air. The next few months would witness the country's first open celebration of May Day and the legendary Potemkin Mutiny off the shores of Odessa, later immortalised by filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. And by the end of October, the tsar had reluctantly signed the manifesto that established the Duma — and extended the franchise toward universal male suffrage.

Elsewhere in the Russian Empire, radical actions for the vote had even more far-reaching consequences. A general strike in Finland in 1905 led not only to the adoption of universal male suffrage and a unicameral parliamentary system, but also the granting of women the right to vote and to stand for elections — the first country in Europe to do so. Over the coming decade, the country's workers would use these expanded rights — before the strike, only 8 percent of the population could vote — to press for increasingly revolutionary reforms.

Sweden

Among American liberals, it's popular to imagine Sweden as a social-democratic utopia, a nation where enlightened values have won out over rank selfishness. But the history of the Swedish workers movement is a testament to the tenaciousness of the country's ruling class — including its dogged resistance to voting rights.

The political expression of the labour movement, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP), formed in 1889 amid a broader surge in worker organising. As elsewhere, those without property lacked basic political rights. The Swedish socialist movement's goal was to first win political democracy.

In 1902, a two-day general strike for universal suffrage served as a warning shot at the stridently right-wing government. Called by the political parties and never intended to last longer than a couple days, the strike made a strong impression on the government due to its impressive level of mass support. Still, the strike lacked the crucial participation of the trade unions.

This would come in part with the 1909 general strike, which lasted a month and convened almost half a million workers. The initial aim was to combat worker lockouts and wage freezes. But as chairman of the transport workers, Charles Lindley, recalled, "In that time there was an almost unlimited faith in the general strike as the decisive means to get universal suffrage." The economically inspired strike increasingly reflected workers' democratic political aspirations.

The strike shut down all core export industries in the country, and workers attempted to spread it further. Employers responded with a standard tactic: importing striker breakers. In one case, three unemployed Swedish workers independently organised to bomb a ship that housed strikebreakers coming from Great Britain.

As days turned into weeks, however, strike leaders were forced to retreat, faced with meager strike funds and the prospect of having to divert relief from other workers in an economic recession. Liberals began to turn on the strikers when typographers joined, seeing their participation as an attack on "freedom of speech." Workers' families struggled mightily with the mounting deprivation. The Swedish Employer's Association was therefore in a position by the end to dictate terms — and they did.

But while the strike was in many ways a setback, it is universally recognised today as laying the groundwork for the democratisation of Swedish society. Later that year all men in the country, regardless of their property holdings,

gained the right to vote in at least one chamber of federal government. Full political democracy, while distant, was now on the horizon.

Germany

Almost two-thirds of late-nineteenth Germany lay within the Kingdom of Prussia, which had enforced the unification of the German states in 1871. Despite the passage that year of the general, equal, and secret right to vote for all males over age twenty-five, Prussia maintained a system from 1849 that divided voters into three classes based on their tax bracket.

The obviously unequal arrangement — early socialist leader Wilhelm Liebknecht referred to the Reichstag as the “fig leaf of absolutism” — created a situation where 4 percent of the first class held as many voters as the third class, who made up 82 percent of the eligible voting population. And there was another anti-democratic check on workers’ power: the upper chamber, the Reichsrat, could block any constitutional changes passed by the directly elected representatives of the Reichstag. The Second Reich, Marx declared, was a “police-guarded military despotism, embellished with parliamentary forms.”

Somehow, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) flourished in spite of these adverse conditions. It was the largest socialist party on the continent, the Second International party par excellence. The SPD’s Erfurt Program, ratified in 1891, declared: “The struggle of the working class against capitalistic exploitation is of necessity a political struggle. The working class cannot carry out its economic struggle and cannot develop its economic organisation without political rights.” At the top of the party’s demands: “universal, equal, and direct voting rights via secret vote for all citizens over twenty years of age, regardless of sex.”

The country’s elites were not amused. Following the development of a country-wide strike movement, employers insisted that the kaiser both rescind the vote from all those affiliated with Social Democracy and legally limit strikes. The kaiser, showing no aversion to despotic rhetoric himself, told a group of new military recruits in Potsdam in November 1891:

the current socialist machinations could result that I order you to shoot down your own relatives, brothers, even parents . . . but even then you must follow my orders without any grumbling.

The SPD patiently agitated and organised to become the largest party in the Prussian parliament by 1908. They led repeated mass demonstrations for full suffrage, which were inexorably met with brutal repression.

On the eve of World War I, suffrage rights were still the province of the elite. But for their efforts, the SPD was rightfully recognised as the most consistently democratic force in prewar Germany.

Great Britain

Of all the European countries of the Second International, Great Britain had the least democratic voting system — the proportion of men over the age of twenty-one who could cast a ballot at the start of World War I was smaller than in eight of nine countries for which full data is available.

Mass disenfranchisement was deeply rooted in the country’s political system. At the start of the nineteenth century,

in an electoral system marred by extreme gerrymandering, only 4 percent of the population could vote. In the middle of the century, the pro-suffrage demonstrations of the Chartists — the first mass working-class movement in European history — were met with elite antipathy. As late as 1884, access to voting remained unequal between the towns and the countryside — and after reforms altered that undemocratic hindrance, eligible voters still had to prove a base payment in rent to qualify.

The ruling class simply couldn't countenance approving a measure they thought would give "the rabble" political power: universal suffrage, in the estimation of British statesman Thomas Babington Macaulay, was "incompatible with property . . . and consequently incompatible with civilisation" itself.

Arrayed against Macaulay were the working class and their burgeoning movement. The Labour Party, firmly committed to universal suffrage, agitated for political democracy and was able to wrest some concessions before World War I. In 1911, they pushed for an end to the House of Lords' veto over legislation.

Finally, on the heels of continent-wide war, universal male suffrage was established, and women won the vote in 1928.

The political order that, in Lenin's words, had entrapped the working masses in a "well-equipped system of flattery, lies, and fraud" was cracking open.

Fighters for Democracy

The early socialist parties showed an unflagging commitment to universal suffrage — a commitment unmatched by any other party.

Their dedication was at once ethical and practical. On the one hand, they were determined to overturn structures of domination and inequality wherever they existed. And in the political sphere, workers were vassals, subject to the decisions of officials they had no hand in choosing.

On a more practical level, the early socialists recognised the potency of the ballot. Their fight for universal suffrage joined the political and economic struggles, transforming the vote into an object of radical tactics and revolutionary élan. It tied together the different factions of the movement in the pursuit of a tool (the vote) that workers could use as part of the broader class struggle. Their aim was to create a "true democracy," from the bottom-up, in the tradition of Marx.

Today, socialists mustn't forget their historic role in struggling for political democracy. So many of even the liberal democratic parts of liberal democracy came about thanks to the battles socialists waged against the feudalistic leftovers of the Old Regime and the new capitalistic oligarchy.

We should reject faux-radical pronouncements that dismiss voting as inconsequential and, instead, meld the fight for universal suffrage with the fight for socialism and radical democracy. The vote was a historic conquest for the working class. It remains a "paper stone" in the hands of the disenfranchised.

About the Author

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