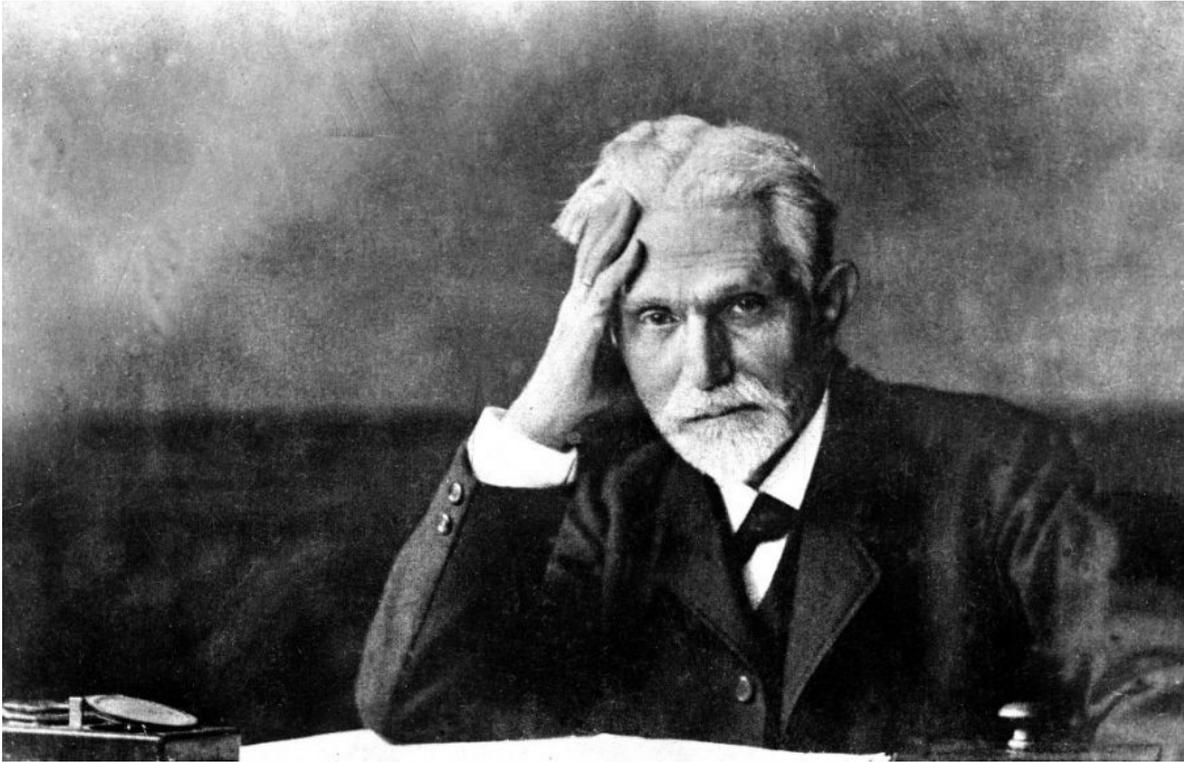


Socialists Have Long Fought for Women's Liberation

Socialist men can be important organizers in the struggle for both workers' rights and women's emancipation. Nowhere is that seen more clearly than in the life of German socialist August Bebel, who did more to win women's rights than any other nineteenth-century politician.



August Bebel in 1900. Jaime Abecasis Collection / Universal Images Group via Getty European left and liberal feminists have a long history of mutual animosity, dating back to the bourgeois-socialist conflicts of the nineteenth century. In North America, class-conscious women once found themselves torn between rival social movements, with many women feeling forced to choose between fighting for their class interests or ending gender oppression, rather than agitating for both.

Today, women's activists around the world experience similar dilemmas when faced with a choice between progressive male leaders and their sometimes more centrist female rivals. But history shows us that progressive men are essential allies in the struggle for both workers' rights and women's emancipation. And in the case of August Bebel, a mostly forgotten lion of German socialism, no nineteenth-century politician managed to do more for women.

“On a Par With Man and Mistress of Her Destiny”

Born on February 22, 1840, Bebel grew up in poverty after the early death of his father. As a young adolescent, his mother apprenticed him to become a woodturner and joiner. Upon finishing his vocational training, Bebel traveled as a journeyman carpenter, finding intermittent employment across Germany and Switzerland. As

industrialization accelerated across the Continent, Bebel saw for himself the abysmal working conditions of both men and women.

Eventually, he settled in Leipzig, where he built a successful knob-making factory from scratch. But rather than abandoning his humble roots, Bebel's financial success fueled his fight for labor rights. He cofounded the German Social Democratic Party with Wilhelm Liebknecht, a close associate and friend of Karl Marx.

Bebel maintained a lively correspondence with Friedrich Engels and was a socialist. According to [his biographer](#), Bebel fought for the name "Democratic Socialist Party of Germany" but settled for the social democratic nomenclature as a compromise with the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle.

By 1900, Bebel dominated German politics. Working-class families hung [his portrait](#) in their living rooms and sent their seasonal greetings on postcards featuring his image. They called him the "[king of the workers](#)." But Bebel was also a fierce champion of women's emancipation and published a book that would change the course of history. Written in prison, *Woman and Socialism* first appeared in 1879. By Bebel's death in 1913, it was reproduced through more than fifty editions and translated into more than twenty languages. The book arrived on American shores in 1904.

Unlike other men in the labor movement, who saw women workers as potential competitors, Bebel embraced women as natural allies. He imagined a future where women equally shared in the fruits of a more just economy, freed from the shackles of tradition that kept them dependent on men.

"The woman of the future society is socially and economically independent," Bebel wrote. "She is no longer subjected to even a vestige of domination or exploitation, she is free and on a par with man and mistress of her destiny."

He advocated for girls' education, women's suffrage, and their equal access to the unions and professions. Bebel also argued for the liberalization of divorce, for the socialization of domestic work, and for the abolition of [all calculation in marriage](#). Bebel was also a great-great-grandfather of sex positivity. In an era characterized by strict Victorian prudishness, he wrote that "The gratification of the sexual instinct is as much a private concern as the satisfaction of any other natural instinct."

He believed in the need to liberate women from the bourgeois social mores that suppressed their sexuality, and he dreamed of a time when women enjoyed complete freedom in their amorous affairs: "In choosing the object of her love, woman, like man, is free and unhampered. She woos or is wooed and enters into a union from no considerations other than her own inclinations."

And this liberal outlook extended beyond heterosexual relations. As a member of the German parliament in 1898, Bebel was the first politician in the world to [speak out publicly](#) in favor of gay rights.

Linking the Woman and the Worker Questions

As both a former worker and a man, Bebel enjoyed a unique platform from which to sway public opinion among Europe's toiling classes. He used his influence to ensure the inclusion of women's rights into the broader goals of the labor movement. "The

complete emancipation of woman, and her establishment of equal rights with man is one of the aims of our cultured development, whose realization no power on earth can prevent,” he wrote.

Bebel’s prescient book and tireless advocacy ensured that “the woman question” remained directly linked to working-class struggles, profoundly shaping the development of left women’s movements in the twentieth century.

By her own account, reading Bebel’s book *Woman and Socialism* radicalized a young [Alexandra Kollontai](#), who went on to become the first minister of social welfare in the Soviet Union. She put many of Bebel’s ideas into practice: liberalizing divorce, expanding educational opportunities, and attempting to socialize domestic work through the creation of public cafeterias, laundries, and childcare centers.

After World War II, policies based on Kollontai’s early experiments in the USSR infused progressive women’s organizations and movements around the world. Even in the United States, many influential feminists like [Betty Friedan](#) cut their political teeth as members of the labor movement, and African-American women activists like [Louise Thompson Patterson](#) and [Esther Cooper Jackson](#) were [members of the Communist Party USA](#).

Now, at the 180th anniversary of Bebel’s birth, we should remember that women’s emancipation was baked into socialist movements from their inception in the nineteenth century. This has not always been an easy alliance; leftist men have often betrayed us, including the Jacobins, who guillotined Olympe de Gouges for writing the [Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen](#) in 1791, and the Bolsheviks, who mobilized women workers for the revolution and then promptly [abandoned women’s cause](#) when it proved too expensive or disruptive.

But many contemporary feminists are also misguided in the belief that only female leaders can champion the cause of women’s rights. Socialist movements have a long history of building broad coalitions that include specific attention to gender and sexual equality. August Bebel’s story reminds us that progressive men can be both effective and inspirational leaders in the long struggle for more socially and economically just futures for all.