Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Social Democrats Discuss the State's Social Insurance Policy (1890)

Paul Göhre (1864-1928) was a Protestant pastor and social reformer who spent three months undercover as a factory worker in the industrial city of Chemnitz in order to study the experiences and attitudes of working-class men and women. He published his observations in the book *Three Months in a Workshop* [*Dreieinhalb Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche*]. In the section excerpted here, Göhre describes his workmates' reactions to Bismarck's social welfare policy. Many workers believed that only a small proportion of workers would benefit from old age and invalid insurance. Others were strongly supportive of the new scheme. In contrast to those who believed that Social Democracy was heretical and had to be snuffed out by force, Göhre notes that employer-employee relations were not always marked by conflict and that rank-and-file Social Democrats could discuss the pros and cons of state-supported assistance in a rational manner.

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From the great mass of average social democrats whom I have described I think one especially important group detaches itself, whose members, I have good reasons to believe, are everywhere steadily on the increase. This group was composed of practical, prudent, sensible, earnest and enlightened men in middle life who had intelligently studied the fundamental, economic and political problems of social democracy, and who gave their adherence to its teachings firmly if not unreservedly. But in the purely political labour agitation of the party, these men took little or no share, and as a consequence, energetic as they were, they threw themselves into work which lay close at hand and promised immediate practical result and satisfaction, in Trade Unions, in committees for the sick and liability insurance funds, in free benefit societies, and, above all, into active work in their local politics, naturally with the firm intention of acting in accordance with social-democratic principles, and in the interests of social democracy, that is, of the working men. Meanwhile, however much they meant to realise social-democratic ideas, they were compelled to deal with concrete facts, to learn to seek actual ends. These actual ends and facts begin to be interesting in themselves, they become more important than the theoretic and distant aims of the party, and they educate these men, who still remain sincere social democrats, into really practical, political, and social, activity. Thus there is created an effectual counter-agent to the Utopian dreams to which they gave themselves wholly over in first entering on politics, and thus, let us hope, will be averted all danger that social democracy may become a visionary and childish party, effecting no actual reforms and making itself a laughing-stock.

This result of my observations which I have just given, and to support which I could bring plenty of proof from an attentive study of the latest development of the social democratic movement, which aimed to bring about changes in the conditions of the mine operatives, was forced upon me in a very clear and convincing manner at one of the meetings of our Social-Democratic Electoral Association. On that evening we had a lecture, chiefly for the information of the members, from the editor* of the *Social-Democratic Press* in Chemnitz, upon the Old Age and Invalid Insurance Act, not yet in force. The subject was, on the whole, scientifically treated. Two conclusions were reached – that the new Act was in many respects insufficient, and by no means a panacea for the wage-earner's troubles, or a complete solution of the labour problem, and also that they must not take alarm at this, but must accept what was now offered to them, and at the same time work hard for gradual amendments to the Act. He ended by saying that there must be no more useless remonstrance and grumbling. In spite of everything there was a good sound kernel to the Labour Insurance Acts, and it must be their chief task to get rid of the shell. Thus he courageously expressed a feeling very general among the working men, but which rarely ventured into the light of day after the social-democratic party had pronounced its official dictum concerning the insurance legislation as it stood. To-day working men gratefully acknowledge the plainly evident benefits of these Acts, although they take them as matters of course. If they are complained of in any wise, so far as I could see, it was only in regard to particular defects, like the three days deduction from the beginning of every illness, or else on account of difficulties of administration, for which those entrusted with the details of execution were alone to blame. One case which came to my knowledge during a visit to a sick comrade had especially irritated him and his family. It was the case of a Bohemian girl, speaking but little German, who had lodged in this family during the preceding summer, at work – as it often happens in Chemnitz – on a building. She was taken ill, and the physician who was called, instead of treating her, made haste to send her home to her well-to-do parents as speedily as might be. This was very displeasing to her landlady, who had taken good care of her. She looked into the matter, and found that this girl, as well as a great number of other working women, had never been reported at the Sick Insurance Office. The builder, her employer, and the physician of the Sick Insurance Fund, shared equally in the blame and the – profit! so said my informant. But I cannot vouch for the truth of the story.

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Precisely the same friendly feeling towards the Insurance Acts was shown in a very gratifying way at a largely attended meeting of our Electoral Association. True, let me repeat, dissenting voices on the part of those who subscribed entirely to the official social-democratic opinion were not wanting; but the lecturer's point of view was that of the majority. The long discussion finally narrowed down to an obstinate controversy between the lecturer and his supporters who advocated the government insurance, and the few adherents of the social-democratically conducted free benefit societies. Among the advocates of these was one who defended them

* Editor no longer. [Footnote from Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop. A Practical Study*.]

ardently because he said it had been his experience in a small manufacturing town in the Erz mountains that the working men representatives on the Board of Directors of the Government Insurance sat in submissive silence before their employers in committee meetings, and allowed themselves to be used for the latter's profit and advantage, without a word of opposition, like so many dumb beasts. This was vehemently contradicted by some of the members who had served on such mixed committees ever since the acts had gone into operation. They protested that they had never allowed themselves to be so treated, but on the contrary, whenever it had been possible or necessary, that they had advocated the interests of the working men manfully and energetically, and in accordance with genuine social-democratic principles, and always with good results. "If we only approach the bosses in the right way, with reasons, they usually come to see into it, and go with us against their own mates." "Yes, that's it," broke in a clever speaker of long experience; "it has happened that we have voted against payment of damages in some cases, while the bosses have voted for it. But, of course, you have to look into the matter and stick to facts; don't try to get ahead, but be square. And that's what the bosses are, at least a great many of them. And that way the acts are a good thing, and you can get a great deal more by them than you can by the free benefit funds of the social democrats. Of course, we have got to try to improve them all the time, and to make them more favourable to us, and we must stick to social-democratic principles, and that we can do. But as things are now, it is only the Government and not the free funds that have any life in them, and they have the future before them; it would be foolishness not to stand by them to the end." Several others followed him in the same strain. The discussion became so animated that it was not ready to come to an end at midnight, and when the meeting finally broke up, it was renewed on the way home by those who had been especially involved in it, and for a good half-hour I heard it continued, when the disputants' ways lay no longer together, at the corner of the street where I lived. What I find particularly valuable in this circumstance is, first, the evidence of an actual relation of confidence in a given case between the workmen and their employers, and, second, that social democrats here discussed practical issues and stood for them.

Source of English translation: Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop. A Practical Study*. New York: Arno Press, 1972, pp. 132-36.

Original German text printed in Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*. Leipzig: Grunow, 1891, pp. 130-34.