

Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League

Marx, Karl

Engels, Friedrich
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Written in March of 1850, mere months before Marx gave up hope for an imminent revolution following the revolutions of 1848, the address describes the immediate tasks of the working class, first in tactical alliance with the bourgeois to destroy feudalism, then in outright class warfare with the bourgeoisie.

Brothers!

In the two revolutionary years of 1848-49 the League proved itself in two ways. First, its members everywhere involved themselves energetically in the movement and stood in the front ranks of the only decisively revolutionary class, the proletariat, in the press, on the barricades and on the battlefields. The League further proved itself in that its understanding of the movement, as expressed in the circulars issued by the Congresses and the Central Committee of 1847 and in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, has been shown to be the only correct one, and the expectations expressed in these documents have been completely fulfilled. This previously only propagated by the League in secret, is now on everyone's lips and is preached openly in the market place. At the same time, however, the formerly strong organization of the League has been considerably weakened. A large number of members who were directly involved in the movement thought that the time for secret societies was over and that public action alone was sufficient. The individual districts and communes allowed their connections with the Central Committee to weaken and gradually become dormant. So, while the democratic party, the party of the petty bourgeoisie, has become more and more organized in Germany, the workers' party has lost its only firm foothold, remaining organized at best in individual localities for local purposes; within the general movement it has consequently come under the complete domination and leadership of the petty-bourgeois democrats. This situation cannot be allowed to continue; the independence of the workers must be restored. The Central Committee recognized this necessity and it therefore sent an emissary, Joseph Moll, to Germany in the winter of 1848-9 to reorganize the League. Moll's mission, however, failed to produce any lasting effect, partly because the German workers at that time had not enough experience and partly because it was interrupted by the insurrection last May. Moll himself took up arms, joined the Baden-Palatinate army and fell on 29 June in the battle of the River Murg. The League lost in him one of the oldest, most active and most reliable members, who had been involved in all the Congresses and Central Committees and had earlier conducted a series of missions with great success. Since the defeat of the German and French revolutionary parties in July 1849, almost all the members of the Central Committee have reassembled in London: they have replenished their numbers with new revolutionary forces and set about reorganizing the League with renewed zeal.

This reorganization can only be achieved by an emissary, and the Central Committee considers it most important to dispatch the emissary at this very moment, when a new revolution is imminent, that is, when the workers' party must go into battle with the maximum degree of organization, unity and independence, so that it is not exploited and taken in tow by the bourgeoisie as in 1848.

We told you already in 1848, brothers, that the German liberal bourgeoisie would soon come to power and would immediately turn its newly won power against the workers. You have seen how this forecast came true. It was indeed the bourgeoisie which took possession of the state authority in the wake of the March movement of 1848 and used this power to drive the workers, its allies in the struggle, back into their former oppressed position. Although the bourgeoisie could accomplish this only by entering into an alliance with the feudal party, which had been defeated in March, and eventually even had to surrender power once more to this feudal absolutist party, it has nevertheless secured favourable conditions for itself. In view of the government's financial difficulties, these conditions would ensure that power would in the long run fall into its hands again and that all its interests would be secured, if it were possible for the revolutionary movement to assume from now on a so-called peaceful course of development. In order to guarantee its power the bourgeoisie would not even need to arouse hatred by taking violent measures against the people, as all of these violent measures have already been carried out by the feudal counter-revolution. But events will not take this peaceful course. On the contrary, the revolution which will accelerate the course of events, is imminent, whether it is initiated by an independent rising of the French proletariat or by an invasion of the revolutionary Babel by the Holy Alliance.

The treacherous role that the German liberal bourgeoisie played against the people in 1848 will be assumed in the coming revolution by the democratic petty bourgeoisie, which now occupies the same position in the opposition as the liberal bourgeoisie did before 1848. This democratic party, which is far more dangerous for the workers than were the liberals earlier, is composed of three elements:

1. The most progressive elements of the big bourgeoisie, who pursue the goal of the immediate and complete overthrow of feudalism and absolutism. This fraction is represented by the former Berlin Vereinbarer, the tax resisters;
2. The constitutional-democratic petty bourgeois, whose main aim during the previous movement was the formation of a more or less democratic federal state; this is what their representative, the Left in the Frankfurt Assembly and later the Stuttgart parliament, worked for, as they themselves did in the Reich Constitution Campaign;
3. The republican petty bourgeois, whose ideal is a German federal republic similar to that in Switzerland and who now call themselves 'red' and 'social-democratic' because they cherish the pious wish to abolish the pressure exerted by big capital on small capital, by the big bourgeoisie on the petty bourgeoisie. The representatives of this fraction were the members of the democratic congresses and committees, the leaders of the democratic associations and the editors of the democratic newspapers.

After their defeat all these fractions claim to be 'republicans' or 'reds', just as at the present time members of the republican petty bourgeoisie in France call themselves 'socialists'. Where, as in Wurtemberg, Bavaria, etc., they still find a chance to pursue their ends by constitutional means, they seize the opportunity to retain their old phrases and prove by their actions that they have not changed in the least. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the changed name of this party does not alter in the least its relationship to the workers but merely proves that it is now obliged to form a front against the bourgeoisie, which has united with absolutism, and to seek the support of the proletariat.

The petty-bourgeois democratic party in Germany is very powerful. It not only embraces the great majority of the urban middle class, the small industrial merchants and master craftsmen; it also includes among its followers the peasants and rural proletariat in so far as the latter has not yet found support among the independent proletariat of the towns.

The relationship of the revolutionary workers' party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it cooperates with them against the party which they aim to overthrow; it opposes them wherever they wish to secure their own position.

The democratic petty bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible. They therefore demand above all else a reduction in government spending through a restriction of the bureaucracy and the transference of the major tax burden into the large landowners and bourgeoisie. They further demand the removal of the pressure exerted by big capital on small capital through the establishment of public credit institutions and the passing of laws against usury, whereby it would be possible for themselves and the peasants to receive advances on favourable terms from the state instead of from capitalists; also, the introduction of bourgeois property relationships on land through the complete abolition of feudalism. In order to achieve all this they require a democratic form of government, either constitutional or republican, which would give them and their peasant allies the majority; they also require a democratic system of local government to give them direct control over municipal property and over a series of political offices at present in the hands of the bureaucrats.

The rule of capital and its rapid accumulation is to be further counteracted, partly by a curtailment of the right of inheritance, and partly by the transference of as much employment as possible to the state. As far as the workers are concerned one thing, above all, is definite: they are to remain wage labourers as before. However, the democratic petty bourgeois want better wages and security for the workers, and hope to achieve this by an extension of state employment and by welfare measures; in short, they hope to bribe the workers with a more or less disguised form of alms and to break their revolutionary strength by temporarily rendering their situation tolerable. The demands of petty-bourgeois democracy summarized here are not expressed by all sections of it at once, and in their totality they are the explicit goal of only a very few of its followers. The further particular individuals or fractions of the petty bourgeoisie advance, the more of these demands they will explicitly adopt, and the few who recognize their own programme in what has been mentioned above might well believe they have put forward the maximum that can be demanded from the revolution. But these demands can in no way satisfy the party of the proletariat. While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one. There is no doubt that during the further course of the revolution in Germany, the petty-bourgeois democrats will for the moment acquire a predominant influence. The question is, therefore, what is to be the attitude of the proletariat, and in particular of the League towards them:

1. While present conditions continue, in which the petty-bourgeois democrats are also oppressed;
2. In the coming revolutionary struggle, which will put them in a dominant position;
3. After this struggle, during the period of petty-bourgeois predominance over the classes which have been overthrown and over the proletariat.

1: At the moment, while the democratic petty bourgeois are everywhere oppressed, they preach to the proletariat general unity and reconciliation; they extend the hand of friendship, and seek to found a great opposition party which will embrace all shades of democratic opinion; that is, they seek to ensnare the workers in a party organization in which general social-democratic phrases prevail while their particular interests are kept hidden behind, and in which, for the sake of preserving the peace, the specific demands of the proletariat may not be presented. Such a unity would be to their advantage alone and to the complete disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose all its hard-won independent position and be reduced once more to a mere appendage of official bourgeois democracy. This unity must therefore be resisted in the most decisive manner. Instead of lowering themselves to the level of an applauding chorus, the workers, and above all the League, must work for the creation of an independent organization of the workers' party, both secret and open, and alongside the official democrats, and the League must aim to make every one of its communes a center and nucleus of workers' associations in which the position and interests of the proletariat can be discussed free from bourgeois influence. How serious the bourgeois democrats are about an alliance in which the proletariat has equal power and equal rights is demonstrated by the Breslau democrats, who are conducting a furious campaign in their organ, the *Neue Oder Zeitung*, against independently organized workers, whom they call 'socialists'. In the event of a struggle against a common enemy a special alliance is unnecessary. As soon as such an enemy has to be fought directly, the interests of both parties will coincide for the moment and an association of momentary expedience will arise spontaneously in the future, as it has in the past. It goes without saying that in the bloody conflicts to come, as in all others, it will be the workers, with their courage, resolution and self-sacrifice, who will be chiefly responsible for achieving victory. As in the past, so in the coming struggle also, the petty bourgeoisie, to a man, will hesitate as long as possible and remain fearful, irresolute and inactive; but when victory is certain it will claim it for itself and will call upon the workers to behave in an orderly fashion, to return to work and to prevent so-called excesses, and it will exclude the proletariat from the fruits of victory. It does not lie within the power of the workers to prevent the petty-bourgeois democrats from doing this; but it does lie within their power to make it as difficult as possible for the petty bourgeoisie to use its power against the armed proletariat, and to dictate such conditions to them that the rule of the bourgeois democrats, from the very first, will carry within it the seeds of its own destruction, and its subsequent displacement by the proletariat will be made considerably easier. Above all, during and immediately after the struggle the workers, as far as it is at all possible, must oppose bourgeois attempts at pacification and force the democrats to carry out their terroristic phrases. They must work to ensure that the immediate revolutionary excitement is not suddenly suppressed after the victory. On the contrary, it must be sustained as long as possible. Far from opposing the so-called excesses – instances of popular vengeance against hated individuals or against public buildings with which hateful memories are associated – the workers' party must not only tolerate these actions but must even give them direction. During and after the struggle the workers must at every opportunity put forward their own demands against those of the bourgeois democrats. They must demand guarantees for the workers as soon as the democratic bourgeoisie sets about taking over the government. They must achieve these guarantees by force if necessary, and generally make sure that the new rulers commit

themselves to all possible concessions and promises – the surest means of compromising them. They must check in every way and as far as is possible the victory euphoria and enthusiasm for the new situation which follow every successful street battle, with a cool and cold-blooded analysis of the situation and with undisguised mistrust of the new government. Alongside the new official governments they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, either in the form of local executive committees and councils or through workers' clubs or committees, so that the bourgeois-democratic governments not only immediately lost the support of the workers but find themselves from the very beginning supervised and threatened by authorities behind which stand the whole mass of the workers. In a word, from the very moment of victory the workers' suspicion must be directed no longer against the defeated reactionary party but against their former ally, against the party which intends to exploit the common victory for itself.

2: To be able forcefully and threateningly to oppose this party, whose betrayal of the workers will begin with the very first hour of victory, the workers must be armed and organized. The whole proletariat must be armed at once with muskets, rifles, cannon and ammunition, and the revival of the old-style citizens' militia, directed against the workers, must be opposed. Where the formation of this militia cannot be prevented, the workers must try to organize themselves independently as a proletarian guard, with elected leaders and with their own elected general staff; they must try to place themselves not under the orders of the state authority but of the revolutionary local councils set up by the workers. Where the workers are employed by the state, they must arm and organize themselves into special corps with elected leaders, or as a part of the proletarian guard. Under no pretext should arms and ammunition be surrendered; any attempt to disarm the workers must be frustrated, by force if necessary. The destruction of the bourgeois democrats' influence over the workers, and the enforcement of conditions which will compromise the rule of bourgeois democracy, which is for the moment inevitable, and make it as difficult as possible – these are the main points which the proletariat and therefore the League must keep in mind during and after the approaching uprising.

3: As soon as the new governments have established themselves, their struggle against the workers will begin. If the workers are to be able to forcibly oppose the democratic petty bourgeois it is essential above all for them to be independently organized and centralized in clubs. At the soonest possible moment after the overthrow of the present governments, the Central Committee will come to Germany and will immediately convene a Congress, submitting to it the necessary proposals for the centralization of the workers' clubs under a directorate established at the movement's center of operations. The speedy organization of at least provincial connections between the workers' clubs is one of the prime requirements for the strengthening and development of the workers' party; the immediate result of the overthrow of the existing governments will be the election of a national representative body. Here the proletariat must take care:

1. that by sharp practices local authorities and government commissioners do not, under any pretext whatsoever, exclude any section of workers;
2. that workers' candidates are nominated everywhere in opposition to bourgeois-democratic candidates. As far as possible they should be League members and their election should be pursued by all possible means. Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention. They must not be led astray by the empty phrases of the democrats, who will maintain that the workers' candidates will split the democratic party and offer the forces of reaction the chance of

victory. All such talk means, in the final analysis, that the proletariat is to be swindled. The progress which the proletarian party will make by operating independently in this way is infinitely more important than the disadvantages resulting from the presence of a few reactionaries in the representative body. If the forces of democracy take decisive, terroristic action against the reaction from the very beginning, the reactionary influence in the election will already have been destroyed.

The first point over which the bourgeois democrats will come into conflict with the workers will be the abolition of feudalism. As in the first French revolution, the petty bourgeoisie will want to give the feudal lands to the peasants as free property; that is, they will try to perpetrate the existence of the rural proletariat, and to form a petty-bourgeois peasant class which will be subject to the same cycle of impoverishment and debt which still afflicts the French peasant. The workers must oppose this plan both in the interest of the rural proletariat and in their own interest. They must demand that the confiscated feudal property remain state property and be used for workers' colonies, cultivated collectively by the rural proletariat with all the advantages of large-scale farming and where the principle of common property will immediately achieve a sound basis in the midst of the shaky system of bourgeois property relations. Just as the democrats ally themselves with the peasants, the workers must ally themselves with the rural proletariat.

The democrats will either work directly towards a federated republic, or at least, if they cannot avoid the one and indivisible republic they will attempt to paralyze the central government by granting the municipalities and provinces the greatest possible autonomy and independence. In opposition to this plan the workers must not only strive for one and indivisible German republic, but also, within this republic, for the most decisive centralization of power in the hands of the state authority. They should not let themselves be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government, etc. In a country like Germany, where so many remnants of the Middle Ages are still to be abolished, where so much local and provincial obstinacy has to be broken down, it cannot under any circumstances be tolerated that each village, each town and each province may put up new obstacles in the way of revolutionary activity, which can only be developed with full efficiency from a central point. A renewal of the present situation, in which the Germans have to wage a separate struggle in each town and province for the same degree of progress, can also not be tolerated. Least of all can a so-called free system of local government be allowed to perpetuate a form of property which is more backward than modern private property and which is everywhere and inevitably being transformed into private property; namely communal property, with its consequent disputes between poor and rich communities. Nor can this so-called free system of local government be allowed to perpetuate, side by side with the state civil law, the existence of communal civil law with its sharp practices directed against the workers. As in France in 1793, it is the task of the genuinely revolutionary party in Germany to carry through the strictest centralization. [It must be recalled today that this passage is based on a misunderstanding. At that time – thanks to the Bonapartist and liberal falsifiers of history – it was considered as established that the French centralised machine of administration had been introduced by the Great Revolution and in particular that it had been used by the Convention as an indispensable and decisive weapon for defeating the royalist and federalist reaction and the external enemy. It is now, however, a well-known fact that throughout the revolution up to the eighteenth Brumaire the whole administration of the départements, arrondissements and communes consisted of authorities elected by, the respective constituents themselves, and that these authorities acted with complete freedom within the general state laws; that precisely this provincial and local self-government, similar to the American, became the most powerful lever of the revolution and indeed to such an extent that Napoleon, immediately after his coup d'état of the eighteenth Brumaire, hastened to

replace it by the still existing administration by prefects, which, therefore, was a pure instrument of reaction from the beginning. But no more than local and provincial self-government is in contradiction to political, national centralisation, is it necessarily bound up with that narrow-minded cantonal or communal self-seeking which strikes us as so repulsive in Switzerland, and which all the South German federal republicans wanted to make the rule in Germany in 1849. – Note by Engels to the 1885 edition.]

We have seen how the next upsurge will bring the democrats to power and how they will be forced to propose more or less socialistic measures. It will be asked what measures the workers are to propose in reply. At the beginning, of course, the workers cannot propose any directly communist measures. But the following courses of action are possible:

1. They can force the democrats to make inroads into as many areas of the existing social order as possible, so as to disturb its regular functioning and so that the petty-bourgeois democrats compromise themselves; furthermore, the workers can force the concentration of as many productive forces as possible – means of transport, factories, railways, etc. – in the hands of the state.
2. They must drive the proposals of the democrats to their logical extreme (the democrats will in any case act in a reformist and not a revolutionary manner) and transform these proposals into direct attacks on private property. If, for instance, the petty bourgeoisie propose the purchase of the railways and factories, the workers must demand that these railways and factories simply be confiscated by the state without compensation as the property of reactionaries. If the democrats propose a proportional tax, then the workers must demand a progressive tax; if the democrats themselves propose a moderate progressive tax, then the workers must insist on a tax whose rates rise so steeply that big capital is ruined by it; if the democrats demand the regulation of the state debt, then the workers must demand national bankruptcy. The demands of the workers will thus have to be adjusted according to the measures and concessions of the democrats.

Although the German workers cannot come to power and achieve the realization of their class interests without passing through a protracted revolutionary development, this time they can at least be certain that the first act of the approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will thereby be accelerated. But they themselves must contribute most to their final victory, by informing themselves of their own class interests, by taking up their independent political position as soon as possible, by not allowing themselves to be misled by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie into doubting for one minute the necessity of an independently organized party of the proletariat. Their battle-cry must be: **The Permanent Revolution.**