

Karl Marx's Declaration of Principles

A hundred years ago this month four men met in the study of Marx's house in North London: Marx himself, Engels, Paul Lafargue (who was then still living in London) and Jules Guesde, who had come over specially from France.

Guesde (pronounced "Ged") had played a key role in persuading a conference of French political and trade union organisations in Marseilles in October 1879 to adopt 'the collective ownership of the soil, sub-soil, instruments of production, raw materials' as the aim of 'the Federation of the Party of Socialist Workers in France'. He was now in London to get Marx's help in drawing up a declaration of principles for this new party.

Marx dictated to Lafargue, who acted as secretary of the meeting, the following preamble to a list of immediate demands which had been prepared by Guesde for the elections of 1881. We have translated it ourselves from the version which was published on the front page of L 'Egalite of 30 June 1880 under the heading "Electoral Programme of the Socialist Workers":

Considering,

That the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race;

That the producers can be free only insofar as they are in possession of the means of production;

That there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them:

1. The individual form which has never existed generally and which is being more and more eliminated by the progress of industry;
2. The collective form whose material and intellectual elements are being formed by the very development of capitalist society;

Considering,

That this collective appropriation can only be the outcome of the revolutionary action of the productive class - or proletariat - organised in a separate political party;

That such organisation must be pursued by all the means which the proletariat has at its disposal, including universal suffrage, thus transformed from the instrument of trickery which it has been up till now into an instrument of emancipation;

The French socialist workers, in setting as the aim of their efforts in the economic field the return to the collectivity of all the means of production, have decided, as a means of organisation and struggle, to enter the elections with the following minimum programme.

Guesde's election programme which followed was a list of reforms such as full freedom of the press, assembly and organisation; separation of the Church and State; an eight-hour working day; a legal minimum wage and workmen's

compensation. Marx was not involved in drawing up this programme and was in fact critical of certain parts of it, especially the demand for a legal minimum wage, though he did not contest the desirability of the party adding such a programme of reforms to its socialist objective (one of the points on which we say he was in error).

It is quite clear that this excellent statement of basic socialist principles drawn up by Marx must have been one of the documents before those who drafted our Object and Declaration of Principles in 1904. Its first clause is incorporated, almost word for word, in our Clause 4 and the phrase "instrument of emancipation" appears in our Clause 6 as "agent of emancipation". According to Bracke, who was a close collaborator of Guesde before the first World War, the words "thus transformed from the instrument of trickery which it has been up till now into an instrument of emancipation" were suggested by Guesde (see his foreword to Programmes Socialistes de Gotha, Erfurt, Le Havre, Spartacus, Paris, 1947). Presumably his source for saying this would have been Guesde (who died in 1922), though Guesde himself is not on record as making this claim. But in any event, whoever suggested the phrase, it was accepted and endorsed by Marx and became part of the terminology of Marxian socialism inherited by the Socialist Party of Great Britain.

All the currently available French versions of this preamble differ from the version published in *L'Egalite* (and various other French journals) in June 1880. One of these differences is important and has long been a source of embarrassment to us: the inclusion, after "means of production" in the second clause of "(land, factories, ships, banks, credit, etc)". The Pelican translation does not contain this but Aaron Noland, in his *The Founding of the French Socialist Party* (p.7), quotes this phrase as if it had been in the draft dictated by Marx.

Now, if Marx really had included this phrase, it would have detracted from the value of the document as a very good statement of socialist principles as well as calling into question his own theoretical consistency. For how can there be common ownership of "banks" and "credit" when, as buying and selling institutions, these are features only of a society where private property exists? When there is common ownership of the means of production there will be no money, no buying and selling and hence no banks or other financial institutions, as Marx made quite clear in other of his writings. Besides, banks and other financial institutions are not "means of production" and Marx was always careful about the definition of economic terms.

There were thus two *prima facie* reasons for doubting that Marx had had a hand in including this phrase. Having looked up the issue of *L'Egalite* of 30 June 1880 we are now in a position to confirm that it was not inserted by Marx, since the phrase is nowhere to be found in the version published there. All the current French versions are therefore wrong, their publishers not having taken the elementary step of going back to the original source. We can only speculate why, but an important factor must have been that, being either Social Democrats or "Communists", they saw no contradiction in Marx seeming to suggest that banks and credit would continue to exist in socialism.

Where, then, did this addition come from and who inserted it? In July 1880 the preamble and election programme were adopted by the Centre region (which included Paris) of the French party. The version they adopted, as published in *L'Egalite* of 28 July, does not contain this phrase nor, more importantly, does the version adopted by the party as a whole at its national congress held in Le Havre in November (*Le Proletaire* No.114, 4 December 1880).

The offending phrase first appears, together with a couple of other changes, in a version adopted at a Congress held in Roanne in September and October 1882 (see *L'Egalite*, 8 October 1882). The mystery is now near to solution, since this was the congress at which Guesde and his supporters, who had been outvoted on the issue of maintaining a single national election programme, broke away from the Federation of the Party of Socialist Workers and set up the *Parti Ouvrier Francais* (French Workers' Party).

Because of its unwieldy name the Federation had been known popularly as the "parti ouvrier" but this was not its official title. It is thus inaccurate to describe, as has become customary, this document as the preamble or introduction to the programme of "the French Workers' Party". Marx did not draft it for this party since it did not exist as such in 1880 but for its predecessor, the Federation of the Party of Socialist Workers in France, to give it its full title. Naturally, as tends to happen when there are splits, the two organisations resulting from the 1882 split both claimed to be the inheritors of the original party and traced their origin back to it. In addition, Guesde, Lafargue and the others in the POF hoped to derive prestige from the fact that their declaration of principles had been drafted by Marx.

And in fact, from 1882 onwards, the POF was the recognised "Marxist" organisation in France and, like the Social Democratic Federation in Britain (formed about the same time), did carry out some useful work in introducing and spreading socialist ideas in France before finally getting bogged down in reformism. Consider, for instance, the following passage by Guesde, written in 1879, in an article "The Social Problem and its Solution" which was translated into English and published in the *Socialist Standard* in January and February 1905:

Commercial production of exchange values with an end to realising profit will disappear, and be replaced by the cooperative production of use values for consumption with a view to satisfying social wants.

In view of this recognition that there would be no buying and selling in socialism, it is strange that Guesde and Lafargue should have taken it upon themselves to "complete" Marx's draft in such a way as to suggest that banks and credit would exist in socialism. In doing so, they distorted Marx's meaning and blurred the distinction between state capitalism and socialism, the beginning of a process which led to the Social Democratic parties of Europe, in which Marx and particularly Engels had placed such hopes, coming to work in practice for state capitalism rather than socialism.

Guesde and Lafargue had no right to change Marx's draft and then claim that it had been dictated by him in the changed form in which they propagated it. A mark of their success - and damage - here is the fact that most people in France who are aware of the document think that Marx accepted the contradiction in the POF version, that is, the "common ownership of banks". It would be nice if Marx's famous remark "One thing is certain, I'm not a Marxist" (Engels' letter to Bernstein, 3 November 1882) had been occasioned by this change to his 1880 draft, but there is no evidence at all for this conclusion! It was, however, made in connection with the Guesdists.

We shouldn't be too hard on the Guesdists though, since they had some influence on the early thinking of the SPGB. Marx's preamble, for instance, would only have been known to our founder members in the form of the "considerants" to the programme of the Guesdist Party. The POF, after becoming "the Socialist Party of France" in 1901, joined the united Social Democratic party in France set up in 1905 under the auspices of the Second International. The Guesdists continued to exist as a group with their own publication *Le Socialisme*. The early Socialist Standards contain a number of articles translated from this journal. For instance, an article by Guesde on "Legality and Revolution" (February 1908), one by Lafargue on "The Law of Value and the Dearness of Commodities" (May 1908), two articles by Charles Rappoport, author of a number of books and later a leading theorist of the French "Communist" Party (September 1908 and April 1911) and a short, and not very consequential, article by the Bracke we have already mentioned (January 1910). There were others too. In addition, our traditional definition of the State as "the public power of coercion" comes from the early Guesdist (later an open reformist and top French diplomat) Gabriel Deville.

So, when our supporters in France are numerous enough, the declaration of principles of the party they will form will not be something totally alien to the French working class political tradition, but will include passages originally drafted by Marx for a French workers organisation. ALB