COMMUNIST MANIFESTO and Its Origins

(Continued from the last Issue)

On the 23rd May 1863 the "General German Working-men's Association" was formed by delegates from ten towns in Prussia, and the rules for it were drawn up by Lassalle in collaboration with a friend. Lassalle was appointed president, and the rules gave the president what was practically dictatorial power; he was elected for five years and had the power to appoint whomever he liked, whenever he liked, and for as long as he liked, as a vice-president. Lassalle threw all his energy into the movement, making lecture tours and engaging in voluminous correspondence, but the organisation grew with, contrary to his expectations, exasperating slowness. Three months after it commenced it only had about 900 members.

Disappointed in his extravagant hopes, and also injured in his vanity, Lassalle completely changed his tactics and began an association with Bismarck, with the object of inducing that statesman to introduce universal suffrage on the ground that he would thereby get the workers' backing for the mutual project of a united Germany led by Prussia. These compromising efforts took the energy and sincerity out of Lassalle's subsequent efforts, inducing a gloomy outlook on life, upsetting his nervous system, and predisposing him to the foolish actions, during his final love affair, that brought about his pitiable end. In a novel written by George Meredith about this love afair, "The Tragic Comedians," Meredith hits off compromise in a neat phrase:

> "Compromise is virtual death; it is a pact between
> cowardice and comfort under the title of expediency."

What was Lassalle's contribution to the Socialist movement? He insisted upon, and attempted to form, a really independent working class organisation, and he was instrumental in interesting large numbers of workers in some of the fundamental ideas of Socialism. That he could write clearly and interestingly on fundamental questions is shown by a good deal of his writings. A chapter from his hurriedly written book against Schulz-Delitzsche, translated and issued many years ago by the American "Socialist Labor Party" under the title "What is Capital," is an example of this, even though it is troubled with the "iron law of wages."

The General German Working-men's Association has become known as the Lassallian Association. This fits it well, because it was, in fact, the strongly centralised dictatorship of the President, Lassalle, who controlled and directed it as he wished. After he was killed his successors, without the ability and magnetism of Lassalle, were unable to take his place successfully, and the organization began to fall away. A subsequent president, Schweitzer, revived it a little for a time, partly by coquetting with trade union action in contradiction to the original policy of the Association.

The constitution of the Lasallian Association did not contain a clear expression of its ultimate aim. Its principles were stated as follows:

> "The General German Labour Union, starting from the conviction that adequate representation of the social interest of the German Working-classes and a genuine settlement of the antagonism between class and class can be effected only through universal, equal, and direct suffrage by peaceful and constitutional means, and especially by convincing public opinion."
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> (Economic Journal, December 1891. Page 687)

Lassalle was the interpreter of the aim of the new party; this aim he continually urged in his lectures and writings was the founding of productive co-operative societies with credit provided by the state. His opposition to trade unions was based upon his contention that the "iron law of wages" precluded the workers from gaining any permanent advantage from industrial combination. He explained the "iron law" as follows: The average of the workers in capitalist society, where competition prevails, is always reduced to the necessary means of subsistence requisite for the maintenance and propagation of life according to the prevailing national customs. Wages can never rise above or fall below this for any length of time, because if the conditions of the workers improve there follows an increase of marriages and thus an increase in the labouring population, which brings about an increasing competition for work and consequently a lowering of the general standard of wages. If wages fall too low emigration follows, a restriction in marriages, a reduction in the labouring population through destitution, and finally a restriction in the competition for work which results in a rise in the general standard of wages again.

Lassalle overlooked the fact that the standard of living is not, even in one country, the fixed thing he believed it was. The standard of living has risen considerably since his time, though the fundamental bondage and insecurity of living of the workers has at the same time increased instead of diminishing. Further the improvement in the standard of living has marched hand in hand with improved knowledge and understanding. Thus the rise in the standard of living has not resulted in larger families but on the contrary in a general limitation in the size of working class families. But the "iron law" continued to dominate the minds of the working class vanguard long after Lassalle's time, and was the reason for Marx's lecture that was published under the title "Value, Price and Profit."

While Lassalle's organisation was running its course another organisation came into existence in Germany under the influence of Wilhelm Leibknecht and August Bebel. Liebknecht was one of the refugees from the 1848 movement who escaped to England, and lived there for twelve years in close association with Marx. He returned to Germany in 1862 and worked for a time as a journalist on one of the democratic papers, later joining the Lassallian movement. Liebknecht, however, was aiming at something more than co-operative societies, and he infected August Bebel, a working man who was at that time a prominent member of the Progressist Party, with his views. Between them they were instrumental in inducing the Progressist Party to found the "Federation of German Labour Unions," which, in 1868, declared for the principal of the International. In 1869, at Eisenach, this party, in company with those people who had seceded from the Lassallian Association after the death of Lassalle, formed the Social Democratic Labour Party with a large and complicated reform programme. In 1874 the government commenced its attempt to suppress both the Lassallian and the Eisenach organizations, which were gathering a growing electoral vote. Old legal statutes against the affiliation of political societies were enforced against them, the result of which forced them to abandon their antagonism and unite for self preservation. This unity, the amalgamation of the Lassallians and the Eisenachers as they were called, was accomplished at the Gotha congress of the two parties in 1875, and the party that emerged dominated working class politics in Germany until the rise of the Hitler regime.

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(to be continued)

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