

# Choose: the working class or sect building! By Frederick Engels

Frederick Engels died 100 years ago, on 5 August 1895.

The friend and comrade of Karl Marx, and his closest associate in the development of a new socialist theory, Engels advised the new mass labour movements which emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, after Marx's death. His advice then speaks to socialists now too.

We print here some excerpts from his letters to American socialists.

OUR THEORY is a theory of evolution, not a dogma to be learnt by heart and to be repeated mechanically. The less it is drilled into the Americans from the outside and the more they test it through their own experience — with the help of the Germans — the deeper will it pass into their flesh and blood.

When we returned to Germany, in Spring 1848, we joined the Democratic Party as the only possible means of gaining the ear of the working class; we were the most advanced wing of that party, but still a wing of it. When Marx founded the International, he drew up the General Rules in such a way that all working-class socialists of that period could join it — Proudhonists, Pierre Lerouxists, and even the most advanced section of the English trade unions: and it was only through this latitude that the International became what it was, the means of gradually dissolving and absorbing all these minor sects, with the exception of the anarchists.

Had we from 1864 to 1873 insisted on working together only with those who openly adopted our platform, where should we be today? I think all our practice has shown that it is possible to work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organisation.

THE GREAT thing is to get the working class to move as a class; that once obtained, they will soon find the right direction, and all who resist, will be left out in the cold with small sects of their own. Therefore I think also the Knights of Labor a most important factor in the movement which ought not to be pooh-poohed from without but to be revolutionised from within, and I consider that many of the Germans there have made a grievous mistake when they tried, in the face of a mighty and glorious movement not of their own creation, to make of their imported and not always understood theory a kind of *alleinselig-machendes* [it alone bringing salvation]

dogma, and to keep aloof from any movement which did not accept that dogma.

Our theory is not a dogma but the exposition of a process of evolution, and that process involves successive phases. To expect that the Americans will start with the full consciousness of the theory worked out in older industrial countries is to expect the impossible. What the Germans ought to do is to act up to their own theory — if they understand it, as we did in 1845 and 1848 — to go in for any real general working-class movement, accept its actual starting point as such and work it gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out how every mistake made, every reverse suffered, was a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical ideas in the original programme; they ought, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, to represent the future of the movement in the movement of the present.



OVER HERE [in Great Britain] it is being proved that a great nation simply cannot be tutored in a doctrinaire and dogmatic fashion, even if one has the best of theories, evolved out of their own conditions of life. The movement is under way now at last and, I believe, for good. But it is not directly Socialist, and those among the English who have understood our theory best remain outside it: Hyndman because he is incurably jealous and intriguing, Bax because he is a bookworm. Formally, the movement [the new unions of unskilled labour] is first of all a trade-union movement, but utterly different from that of the old trade unions: the skilled labourers, the labour aristocracy.

The people are now putting their shoulders to the wheel in quite a different way, they are drawing far greater masses into the struggle, shaking up society far more profoundly, and putting forward much more far-reaching demands: the eight-hour day, a general federation of all organisations, and complete solidarity. Through Tussy

[Eleanor Marx], the Gas-Workers' and General Labourers' Union has women's branches *for the first time*. Moreover, the people look on their immediate demands themselves as only provisional, although they themselves do not yet know toward what final goal they are working. But this vague idea is strongly enough rooted in them to make them elect as leaders only openly declared Socialists. Like everyone else, they must learn from their own experiences by drawing the conclusions from their own mistakes.

IN A country with such an old political and labour movement there is always a colossal heap of traditionally transmitted rubbish which has to be got rid of by degrees. There are the prejudices of the skilled unions — Engineers, Bricklayers, Carpenters and Joiners, Type Compositors, etc. — all of which have to be broken down; the petty jealousies of the various trades, the clashing ambitions and intrigues of the leaders.

Among them the Socialist League, which looks down on everything that is not directly revolutionary (which, here in England, as with you, means: everything which does not confine itself to coining phrases and otherwise doing nothing); and the [Social Democratic] Federation, which still behaves as if everyone but itself were an ass and a bungler, although it is only the new progress of the movement that has enabled it itself to get some following again.

In short, anyone who sees only the surface would say it was all confusion and personal squabbles. But under the surface the movement is going on; it is seizing ever wider sections, and for the most part precisely among the hitherto stagnant lowest masses; and the day is no longer far off when this mass will suddenly find itself, when it dawns upon it that it is this colossal moving mass; and when that day comes short work will be made of all the rascality and squabbling. ■

The excerpts are from letters to Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky, 27 January 1887 and 28 December 1886, and to Adolph Sorge, 7 December 1889 and 19 April 1890.

**Spring 1848:** at the beginning of a wave of democratic revolutions across Europe.

**"The International":** the First International, an international association of socialists and trade unionists founded in 1864. It effectively collapsed in 1872.

**Knights of Labor:** a quasi-populist, quasi-trade union movement important in America at that time.

**Hyndman and Bax:** leaders of the Social Democratic Federation, the first Marxist group in Britain.

**Socialist League:** a split-off from the SDF. Its members included William Morris and Eleanor Marx.