

Autobiography of George Engel

According to your wishes I have written the story of my life, hoping that many workingmen may profit by reading it.

I, George Engel, was born on the 15th day of April in the year 1836, in the city of Cassel, Germany, at that time the capital of Kerkessen. My father, a mason and bricklayer, Conrad Engel, died when I was 18 months old and left my mother, a very poor widow, with four little children. When I was 12 years old my mother died and left me to the mercy of the cold and cruel world. Two of my brothers were taken to an orphan asylum, I and another child were given to two poor families, which took care of us for 20 thalers (15 dollars) a year. I already knew what hunger meant, more, I learned what starvation was. When I was 14 the city quit paying for my sustenance and I was told that it was now time for me to learn a trade. And so it was. In Germany, common school education is compulsory and every child must go to school from the age of 7 to 14, and that 12 months in the year, only interrupted by the usual vacation. At 14 years the boy begins to learn a trade and goes to the Sunday School. There he is further educated in reading, writing, and arithmetic, drawing, etc. Nobody caring for me, I went around

and found at last a shoemaker, who was willing to teach me the mysteries of shoe-making in four years, provided somebody would furnish me during that time with clothing and washing. Nobody was inclined to do me the favor, and having been apprenticed for two weeks, the shoemaker turned me out on the street. For some time I searched in vain for a master who was willing to have me for an apprentice, and then I gave it up. In explanation I will state that in Germany to a great extent, even up to the present day, an apprentice must pay to his master a certain sum for learning a trade, so that it is difficult for a poor lad to get apprenticed at all. I had lost all hope when I heard that certain of my school comrades had emigrated to America. I heard a good deal of the United States, which left on my mind the impression that there was a better chance for me in that country. But before I would leave the old country I must earn some money, and therefore I went to Frankfort-on-the-Main to try my luck there after having failed in Cassel.

As I had no money I had to travel on foot. Tired and footsore, after traveling several days, I finally reached Frankfort. Being without money I wandered during the day in the streets of the city, not knowing what to do. Night came. Hunger and cold drove me at last into a saloon. I asked the saloon-keeper for lodging and something to eat. I would work for it. But he arose angry and told me to get out as quick as I could. A citizen, who was in the room, pitied me, for I was then only 14 years old. He said he would learn me the trade of painting, if I was willing to go with him. Very thankful and glad, I said yes. I went with him, after taking a hearty meal, for which he paid. I was apprenticed according to the rules of the trade and I remember the years of my apprenticeship still with gratitude, for my master was a good and righteous man. After getting all the necessary information of the trade I went abroad, "traveled," for so is it by custom described to the mechanic. In the year 1863 I came to Bremen, after having worked in Mayence, Cologne and Duesseldorf. I read a good deal, but nothing of the socialistic literature. By and by I perceived something of the ways of the world and often thought about the difference between the rich and the

poor. Till then I had lived easy-going and careless.

The newspapers in Bremen had much to say about the oppression of the inhabitants of Schleswig-Holstein by Denmark. A movement was going on to free these German brethren from the yoke of the Danish King, as it was put. I considered the struggle of my countrymen for something great and joined a regiment of volunteers. We were drilled by officers of the city of Bremen in the Turner hall. Later we marched to Altona in Schleswig-Holstein. But when the regular militia of Prussia and Austria came there our volunteer regiment was dissolved. Then the war between the German federation and Denmark broke out. The German brethren were freed from the Danish yoke only to come under the Prussian yoke.⁵⁴

In those war times business was slow in Northern Germany and this brought me to Leipzig, which I left when the war of 1866 broke out.⁵⁵ I then worked in different cities. The year 1868 found me in Rehna, Mecklenburg-Schernerin, where I married. I started a business of my own. The development of the factory system in Germany swept most of the small manufacturers, without great means, out of existence. The struggle for life increased and it became hard to make a decent living. My intention to emigrate to America, which I had when a boy, came back. To make it short, the 8th day of January, of the year 1873, found me in Philadelphia. I took work in a sugar refinery. In May I worked again as a painter. In Philadelphia for the first time in my life, I heard something about serious labor troubles. The militia marched along the streets. They came from the coal mines, where they had "subjugated" some troublesome, starving miners. I watched them, when a bystander said to me: "Those scoundrels ought to be hung on the spot." That remark surprised me, for, at that time, being an "ignorant foreigner," I sang the praises of this "free and glorious" country. Scornfully looking at that man I asked him for the reason of his un-patriotic remark. He gave me reasons. Having been a manufacturer myself, although on a small scale, and knowing nothing of the labor question I was unable to comprehend him. I told him America was a free country, anybody could earn good wages if he wanted to, and save money

besides; in short, I reiterated the well-known trash of the capitalistic newspapers.

It is true, I earned what was called good wages by ten hours daily work and laid by a little money for a rainy day. Well, the rainy days came soon enough. I became sick, my eyes suffered. My savings were soon gone. Doctors and medicine were dear. I had to support a wife and little children. As the physician very quickly perceived that I was poor and helpless, and that there was nothing to gain by curing me, he sent me to the German Aid Society. This society helped me along for some time by paying for a physician. But that was all. My family was starving, and I often did not know where to get bread for them. After a year's sickness I was cured and able to work again.

As soon as I earned money enough, I came to Chicago. Chicago is the place where I heard something of socialism for the first time in my life. In the year 1874, I worked in the Tembruth's wagon factory. There I got acquainted with a socialist. One day he showed me a newspaper, *Der Vorbote*. It was a small socialistic weekly paper in the German language, edited by Conrad Conzett, a Swiss type-setter, who is now working for the cause in Switzerland. I found the paper very interesting and saw that it contained great truths. I was delighted. In it was an advertisement of a meeting to be held by the "International Workingmen's Association" at 130 Lake Street, in the basement. I went to the meeting. About fifteen or seventeen men were present, a small branch of the I.W.A. These men made great sacrifices to uphold their paper. It was at that time astonishing to me, that men could without the least compensation work so eagerly for the cause of humanity. It struck me what a gigantic work it was to educate and organize the masses who created everything, only to be cheated by their exploiters out of the fruits of their labor. My health was good. I had plenty of work and was therefore able to buy socialistic books to study the social question. The first books I read were written by Ferdinand Lassalle, the organizer of the German workmen. Very soon I became convinced and enlisted in the cause. Since then I continued to work for it and strengthened my belief.

In the year 1876 I started a toy store. My wife is still engaged in the business. As a storekeeper I had more time which I could devote to reading. The more I read the firmer grew my convictions. I was glad to see that the socialistic doctrine gained more and more followers in the United States as the years passed by. After the shooting at Lehmann at the German Emperor in May and June of 1878, the government of that country made special laws against the socialists and dissolved their organization.⁵⁶ That was the reason that the Chicago socialists, members of the I.W.A. were also disbanded. All our members now entered the different labor organizations of the city and in a very short time we were able to organize the "Socialistic Labor Party of North America." Next year (1879) we polled 12,000 votes for the labor candidates. This was a great success, but it brought a horde of corrupt politicians into our ranks, who cared little or nothing for principle. Dissensions broke out and reduced our numbers considerably.

At the time of the national Greenback convention of Chicago, some of our members proposed a fusion with the Greenbackers, others held that to be treason to the socialistic principles.⁵⁷ In Chicago the anti-Greenback fusion faction was in the lead. Numerous quarrels ensued, split after split occurred and at last nothing but two or three socialistic societies were left, very small in numbers. The only substantial remaining gain was the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, (daily), the *Vorbote* (weekly) and the *Fackel* (weekly), all three German newspapers. Of course there were thousands of socialists in the city, although unorganized. They still believed in the ballot box, but when Judge Gardener refused to punish two ballot-box stuffers on the pretence that they were drunk, and that it was a righteous thing to cheat a communist out of his vote; these workingmen got disgusted with voting and began to reason about other methods in order to spread socialistic ideas. In the year 1882 the socialists began to rally again and found clubs all over the city, which declared themselves for the International Working People's Association, the American branch of which was founded in October, 1883, in the city of Pittsburgh, Pa. The principles of the I.W.P.A. are set forth in the "Pitts-

burgh Manifesto". I soon became an active member of the International. I belonged to the North West-Side Group, the mother group of other groups in the same part of the city.

On Sunday May 2, and May 3, 1886, I was present in meetings in which it was proposed to give aid to any strikers if the police or the Pinkertons should attack said strikers. On May 4, the evening of the Haymarket tragedy, I was at home playing cards, when Waller entered my house and told us of the occurrence on the Haymarket. I told him to go home, and very soon after, I went to bed myself.

That is the story of my life, and now some words about voting. The workingmen are going to vote again, but will they be able to keep the professional politicians out of their ranks? I doubt it.

At the time when the socialists of this city believed in the ballot I worked for our ticket very hard, but I found that the workingman is too innocent and unsuspecting, and is very easy made a prey by the crafty politicians. The ruling classes as a class are far more intelligent, cunning and unprincipled than the oppressed and exploited workingmen. They get a fine education and have time and leisure to learn all that is necessary to keep up their tyranny and to defraud the working classes, no matter how earnest and honest they may be. And, after all, what is the gain in voting?

The development of machinery renders workingmen more and more superfluous, puts them on the road and degrades others from skilled laborers to mere machine hands. The solution of the labor question is in co-operation; or, in other words, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. There can be no question that the present owners of land and machinery never will give them up to the people without resistance. They guard their "proprietary rights" with great jealousy. The strikers and boycotters are met with the policeman's club, the rifle of the militia and the deadly bullets of the Pinkertons. These are straws which point out the direction which labor will have to go. The history of all times teaches us that oppressing classes always maintain their tyranny by force and violence. The American colonists did everything to gain their end peacefully but everything failed and they had to

resort to force. The right vote is in my opinion a double-edged sword, a most dangerous weapon. It makes the wage slave believe that he is a free man, while his enemies use that illusion most effectively to his deception and enslavement.

And now some few words about the bomb-throwing. It is my firm belief to-day, that if the bomb had not been thrown by the unknown, at least 300 workingmen would have been killed or wounded by the police. The police were used to put an end to the eight-hour movement, and thereby save the capitalists of this city millions of profits on labor. The police, led by Bonfield, wanted to pose as petted champions of millionaires. It came out different, and that is what the police are so enraged about. They intended to slaughter the workingmen, but were disappointed.

The bomb demonstrated that in the future street fights are an impossibility. Anybody can make and use bombs. Bombs only cost from 5 to 10 cents a piece. These are facts and I can't help that. But because they are facts and give in revolutionary times all the great cities into the hands of the people, arose the cry that somebody must hang for it. Of course they can hang seven men, but these facts are not put out of the world by such proceedings. I am not for war, but I realize that a violent revolution will come, must come, not brought about by the workingmen, but by the capitalists. Workingmen are made poorer day by day, the abuses grow more and more, and in the same ratio the masses will become discontented and organize against oppression. And then the law factories will be put into operation. They will dissolve all political societies of workingmen, then they will do the same thing with trades unions and workingmen societies of every description. They will fill the prisons with labor agitators, and hang them by the dozen. And when the people will get enraged degree by degree, deeds of violence done by workingmen against their oppressors will increase and the whole land will be divided into two classes—the capitalists and the *slum* of the country on the one side—the latter (the mercenaries) hired by the money power, and the *proletarians*—the workingmen—on the other side, and then the overthrow of the existing order of soci-

ety is at hand. Some day, not twenty-five years from now, the war will break out. There is no doubt about that in my mind. Therefore all workingmen should unite and prepare for the last war, whose outcome will be the end forever of all war, and will bring peace and happiness to all mankind.

George Engel.