
Hermann Schlüter: The Man and His Work

by Algernon Lee

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The great majority of our party members, even here in New York City, where he had worked among us for a quarter of a century, will not realize how great a man we have lost through the death of Herman Schlüter. His temper always inclined him to work steadily, quietly, in ways that did not bring him personal recognition; and, besides this, he had an excessive diffidence as to his mastery of English which held him back from writing or speaking publicly, except in the German language. Only a comparatively small number of the older party members, and very few of them outside the ranks of the German branches, can truly estimate his abilities or the value of the service which he rendered.

To make that estimate correctly, we must look back to the '90s and the first years of this century, when the main active strength of our movement still consisted in the German element. At that time it was chiefly a few hundred German carpenters, bricklayers, cigar makers, brewery workers, and men of various other trades here in New York, together with a handful of professional or business men of German origin — most of them refugees from the Bismarckian Exception laws, and also a few sons and daughters of the men of '48 — who could be relied on in every crisis, not only to give freely of their time and their money to carry on the party's work and maintain its press, but also to exercise sound Socialist judgment, to hold the party to its true course, against every kind of persecution on the one hand, and on the other hand against every temptation to seek some easy shortcut or follow some popular will-o'-the-wisp. And similar, though smaller, German groups were performing the same function in other cities and industrial centers throughout the land. No one regretted more than these Germans themselves the fact that the core and foundation of the party in this country was still chiefly German; but so it was, and they stood

up to their task, at the same time giving faithful support to the then weak English party press, looking forward to the time when the English-speaking party of the movement would become strong enough to take the lead. The debt which we of the present generation in the party owe to those sturdy, stolid, indomitably persistent pioneers it would hardly be possible to overstate.

And the nucleus of that body of German-speaking Socialists, its nervous center, through which all its activities were coordinated, in which all its experiences were recorded and examined, all its ideas and impulses tested, and from which a guiding intelligence rang out in turn to every near and distant member, was that very great little newspaper — the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. It was a newspaper and much more. It was a daily official bulletin for the party and for the then relatively important German element in the trade union movement. But, above all, it was an educator. It may well be questioned whether any paper in America has ever, through a long series of years, laid before its readers daily editorials of such uniformly high intellectual quality, so readable and at the same time so thorough and solid, so correctly and consistently interpreting history in its making, as did the *Volkszeitung*.

Those editorials, during the formative years of which I speak, were mostly written by two men — Alexander Jonas, who died in the harness some eight years ago, and Herman Schlüter, who laid down his pen only last week. The two men were different in birth and breeding, in temperament, in the nature of their intellectual attainments, tastes, and habits. It is not worthwhile to ask which was the greater; because they were so different, each a complement of the other.

Two things make Schlüter what he was, and enabled him to do his immense part in the guidance of the German-speaking Socialist movement and, through it, in the upbuilding of our present Socialist Party.

In the first place, he was a proletarian by birth, by experience, and by steadfast choice. It was as an ill-paid laborer, only 19 years of age, in the city of Chicago and in the year 1872, that he enlisted as a soldier in the revolution. And to the end of his life he remained a wage worker in spirit, with the loyal wage worker's contempt for those who wish to climb upon the shoulders of their fellows, with the class-conscious wage workers' ideal of "Each for all and all for each." He lived, let us not say, for his class, but with and in his class. And, being a genuine proletarian, he never fell into the cheap error of underrating intellec-

tual values, but aimed to appropriate for his class, to assimilate into its life, all the triumphs of science and philosophy and art.

But, in the second place, he either had a native instinct for historical thinking, or else early acquired it to a most extraordinary degree — perhaps he was born with a historical “gift,” as others are born with a talent for music or for mathematics, and also had the good luck to develop it under the best influences during his years in Germany, Switzerland, and England. And this, together with his through-and-through proletarian psychology, made him the best Marxist we have ever had in this country — not merely as one who knew the master’s writings, but as one who could put the master’s thought-method to daily use.

His books remain as a treasure easily available to the student — *The Beginnings of the German Labor Movement in the United States*, *The International in America*, and *The Chartist Movement: A Contribution to the Social-Political History of England* — these three in the German language, and two in English, *The Brewing Industry and the Brewery Workers’ Movement in America*, whose title gives no sufficient hint of its value to the student of economics and of the labor movement; and the little volume entitled *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery*, which deals with a chapter in American history that our academic historians had completely ignored.

The greater mass of his written work, and much of it not inferior to his books in historical-scientific value, consists of some ten or twelve thousand articles which can be found only in the old files of the paper he edited so long.

But the richest result of his tireless labor exists only in an intangible but imperishable form — it has become integrated in the minds and hearts of the thousands whom he taught and of the myriads to whom they have passed it on; in the minds and hearts of a multitude who never heard his name, and who could not by any effort trace it back to the source.

And, after all, this is fitting. He never courted fame. He did his work, and found joy in the doing. And the immortality he would have wished for is just this — that his achievement should be mixed and merged in the total achievement of a militant proletariat, of a triumphant proletariat, of an emancipated mankind.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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