

Rosa Luxemburg on Socialism

Published by The Socialist Party of Great Britain
52 Clapham High Street, London, SW4 7UN
www.worldsocialism.org/spgb
ISBN 978-1-909891-18-0

January 2019

Rosa Luxemburg



1871 - 1919

Preface

This pamphlet is derived from numerous articles that have appeared in The Socialist Party's publications over the decades, especially John Crump's *Rosa Luxemburg and the Collapse of Capitalism* from the January 1969 edition of the *Socialist Standard*.

Introduction

"Well done, 'red Rosa'; you have grandly expressed the sentiments of the class-conscious workers of the world and may you live to see the Social Revolution accomplished!" (1).

In January 1919 there began the hopeless Spartacist uprising against the Social Democrat Party (SPD) government of Germany. This led to the brutal murders of prominent activists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht when, on 15th January, soldiers responsible to the SPD Minister Gustav Noske smashed Rosa's skull with a rifle-butt, finished her off with a bullet to the head and then dumped her in the Landwehr Canal where it was four months before her body was found.

A number of political groups 'claim' Rosa Luxemburg and her work. Numerous tendencies try to say "she's ours". Luxemburg, who possessed a wide understanding of the global and democratic nature of socialism, had views on many subjects close to those of The Socialist Party of Great Britain. However, we have no intention of claiming her as one of our own as there were certain basic differences between our views and hers. For example, we hold that Luxemburg placed too much emphasis on the decline of capitalism and its collapse

due to her faulty understanding of economics. So The Socialist Party is not a Luxemburgist party, and we do not consider her, nor Karl Marx as infallible but we fully recognise that Rosa Luxemburg championed the cause of the working class. She was a woman of immense experience in the German and Polish social-democratic movements and was also one of the foremost Marxist scholars of her day. Her intransigence won her the admiration of the members of The Socialist Party.

Rosa Luxemburg was born on 5th March 1871 in the little Polish town of Zamosc not far from the Russian frontier, and was brought up in Warsaw. Rosa's comparatively well-to-do Jewish parents were in the timber trade and afforded her and their other four children an education above the average despite the hostility towards Jews in the schools which they attended. She later moved to Germany where she became involved in socialist politics.

The Social Democrat Party of Germany had over a million members and some 4½ million voters, along with numerous publications, affiliated social groups, etc. The SPD still talked of, and reckoned itself as being a radical socialist party, though over the years running up to the First World War it drifted further and further towards outright reformism, partly because it had become so institutionalised. Publishing its own papers and allied with the trade unions it was very much a part of the fabric of society. Despite this, a small section of revolutionary socialists remained within the SPD. The true colours of the SPD were shown during the war when nearly all of its members in the Reichstag openly backed the war, and the party spread propaganda to the effect that the war was necessary to stop the threat of tyranny from Tsarist Russia. This led to a three-way split in the SPD with the eventual formation of the Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD) within the parliamentary party and then more slowly within the membership itself. The 'far-left' contingent formed itself into the Spartakusbund (Spartacus League) remaining within the official ranks of the USPD with Karl Leibknecht and Rosa

Luxemburg as prominent members. Luxemburg spoke out against a war fought in the interests of the capitalist class which entailed the futile slaughter of workers by workers. She ended up a political prisoner for her pains.

After the war, speaking to the founding congress of the Communist Party of Germany on 30th December 1918, she outlined her analysis of the current situation:

"I need hardly say that no serious thinker has ever been inclined to fix upon a definite date for the collapse of capitalism; but after the failures of 1848, the day for that collapse seemed to lie in the distant future. We are now in a position to cost up the account, and we are able to see that the time has really been short in comparison with that occupied by the sequence of class struggles throughout history... what has the war left of bourgeois society beyond a gigantic rubbish heap? Formally, of course, all the means of production and most of the instruments of power, practically all the decisive instruments of power, are still in the hands of the dominant classes. We are under no illusions here. But what our rulers will be able to achieve with the powers they possess, over and above frantic attempts to re-establish their system of spoliation through blood and slaughter, will be nothing more than chaos. Matters have reached such a pitch that today mankind is faced with two alternatives: it may perish amid chaos, or it may find salvation in socialism... Socialism is inevitable, not merely because the proletarians are no longer willing to live under the conditions imposed by the capitalist class, but, further, because if the proletariat fail to fulfil its duties as a class, if it fails to realise socialism, we shall crash down together to a common doom" (2).

What distinguished Luxemburg from the other leaders of the Second International was her exceptional courage which caused her to pursue her ideas at whatever the risk to herself.

Economics - Rosa Luxemburg and her analysis

The implication that at some time capitalism would almost mechanically collapse ran like a thread through Rosa Luxemburg's writings. Some of today's political groups argue that capitalism since the First World War is in a state of economic collapse due to its inability to find new markets on which to sell its products at a profit. The basic theoretical assumption is that by 1914 capitalism had become 'decadent' as an economic system in the sense that it had become unable to develop the forces of production any further. This view is based on Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* written in 1912.

Luxemburg shared the common view amongst the social democrats of her day that capitalism would sooner or later collapse because of its inability to sell an ever-increasing surplus-product over and above what the workers could buy back. Her book is an attempt to prove this but its basic argument is fallacious.

Under 'pure' capitalism (an economy where there are only capitalists and wage workers) according to Luxemburg, market demand was determined by consumption (what both workers and capitalists spend on consumer goods). If the capitalists were to consume all their surplus value, so her argument ran, there would be no problem, but as soon as they re-invest a part of it – the accumulation of capital being the purpose of production under capitalism – market demand is no longer equal to what has been produced. And, according to Luxemburg, the consumption of the capitalists having been reduced it follows that so has market demand. The result, she concluded, was that there was nobody to buy the products in which the re-invested profits were embodied (new machinery,

raw materials and consumer goods for the extra workers taken on). As she wrote: “...as capital approaches the point where humanity only consists of capitalists and proletarians, further accumulation will become impossible” (3).

Rosa Luxemburg had the intellectual honesty to admit that this theory conflicted with the rough notes Marx had made at the end of Volume 2 of *Capital* which implied that long-term economic growth (accumulation) was possible even under ‘pure’ capitalism. She therefore tries to show where Marx went wrong in failing to recognise that a lack of purchasing power was built in to capitalism and that therefore it had to rely on external markets to expand, and once these had been exhausted then capitalism would enter a period of economic stagnation and breakdown. Luxemburg believed that as capitalism approached this point the growing economic instability would cause the working class to establish socialism before the point of collapse was actually reached. But she only succeeded in exposing her own confusion about economics.

It led to her conclusion that for capital accumulation to take place there must be non-capitalist areas to buy the part of the surplus-product not consumed by the capitalists. It followed then that capitalism would collapse at the point when there were no more non-capitalist areas left in the world. On this theory, the crisis of capitalism is a permanent one and is reflected in a global saturation of markets that can only be temporarily broken through world war and the reconstruction that would follow such a war.

Rosa Luxemburg’s mistake is assuming that the level of market demand was determined exclusively by consumption (the spending of workers and capitalists on consumer goods) whereas in fact it is determined by consumption plus investment (capitalist spending on new means of production). Thus, when a part of the surplus value is re-invested rather than consumed, market demand is not reduced; it is merely re-arranged: what the capitalists formerly spent on consumer

goods they now spend on means of production. Marx had made no error. Luxemburg's argument was based on a complete misreading of Marx's reproduction schemas for both 'simple' and 'extended' reproduction. Marx himself furnished the theoretical disproof of this view that growth in 'pure' capitalism would be impossible, in Chapter 49 of Volume 3 of *Capital*.

'Pure' capitalism has of course never existed and markets provided by non-capitalist areas have played an important part in the development of capitalism. Luxemburg was trying to prove more than this: that capitalism could not have come into being or have developed without these markets. External markets did play a key role in the birth and early growth of capitalism and to say that there is no permanent under-consumption built in to the capitalist system is not to say that there is therefore always a smooth crisis-free accumulation of capital. Accumulation under capitalism proceeds by fits and starts but these crises are caused by other reasons than under-consumption: by disproportions between the different branches of production leading to a fall in the rate of profit or, at times, to a temporary retraction of the market demand for consumer goods.

However, fundamentally, the disproof of this theory is practical rather than just theoretical based on the actuality of capitalist development this century. If growth in 'pure' capitalism or at least something near to 'pure' capitalism is impossible the system just wouldn't have been able to expand the forces of production in the way that it has been doing. If capitalism has been in a state of market saturation for many decades (as far back as 1914) its long-term growth in the years since would have been impossible. And, although its rate of expansion has slowed in recent years, it has still continued to enjoy considerable long-term growth ever since Luxemburg wrote, and to have achieved that without selling sizeable quantities of commodities to undeveloped non-capitalist areas of the planet.

At the time of the revisionist controversy, she had used this 'breakdown' theory as one of her main arguments against theorist Eduard Bernstein and his supporters. Bernstein had written that:

"...with the growing development of society a complete and almost general collapse of the present system of production becomes more and more improbable because capitalist development increases on the one hand the capacity of adaptation and, on the other—that is at the same time—the differentiation of industry" (4).

The development of the credit system, of employers' organisations, improved means of communication and information services were all tending to stabilise capitalism, suggested Bernstein. Quite apart from his other heresies Luxemburg was especially indignant about this because it seemed to her that the revisionists were undermining one of the fundamental supports of scientific socialism.

Hitting back in *Reform or Revolution* (1900), she put what she took to be the orthodox position:

"Socialist theory up to now declared that the point of departure for a transformation to socialism would be a general and catastrophic crisis.... The fundamental idea consists of the affirmation that capitalism, as a result of its own inner contradictions moves toward a point when it will be unbalanced, when it will simply become impossible (chapter 1) ... Bernstein began his revision of the Social Democracy by abandoning the theory of capitalist collapse. The latter, however, is the corner stone of scientific socialism. Rejecting it, Bernstein also rejects the whole doctrine of socialism... Without the collapse of capitalism the expropriation of the capitalist class is impossible" (5).

Luxemburg is overstating her case, since Bernstein was not disputing the theory that the capitalist system could collapse

but merely suggesting that in practice this possibility had been eliminated by the modifications which capitalism had undergone. However, the failure of a major crisis to develop during the years before the First World War served to make the left wing of the German SPD more adamant than ever that capitalism's breakdown was on the way. This was one of the main points which Luxemburg set out to demonstrate in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913). Here she argued that capital was undermining its own ability to accumulate by its inevitable tendency to eliminate the peasantry in the advanced countries and by also destroying the pre-capitalist economies of the colonies. Capital is ruthless in its drive to achieve this end, says Luxemburg, but at the same time it is producing an 'economic impasse', since capitalism is *"the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and soil"* (6).

In her view, capital strives to become universal and, indeed, on account of this tendency, it must break down — because it is immanently incapable of a universal form of production. In its living history it is a contradiction in itself, and its movement of accumulation provides a solution to the conflict and aggravates it at the same time. At a certain stage of development there will be no other way out than the application of socialist principles.



In stressing Luxemburg's emphasis on 'collapse' we must be careful not to attribute too crude a theory to her. Of course she also pointed out that the working class had a positive role to play in this process and even suggested that the workers might be able to seize power before the actual breakdown stage had been reached. But, while recognising this, it is even

more important not to underestimate the grip which the idea of collapse had on her. Luxemburg, then, had mistaken the economic dislocation following Germany's defeat in the First World War for the 'collapse' of the capitalist system and since to her the choice seemed one of a desperate gamble for socialism or else "crashing down to a common doom" (socialism or barbarism) she staked her life on the former.

Whatever may have been the merits of some of her political views Rosa Luxemburg was no great economic theorist. Even those who support her conclusions decline to defend her mistaken arguments. Her work is quite worthless as a contribution towards an understanding of how capitalism works. In fact, over the years, most prominent leaders of the social-democratic parties had at various times expounded the view that capitalism would crash down in some form of immense economic crisis. Karl Kautsky, as the principal theoretician of the German Social Democratic Party, deserves special attention in this respect. When the SPD congress adopted a new programme at Erfurt in 1891 this was taken as a model for the other parties of the Second International, and Kautsky's commentary on, and elaboration of, this document in *Das Erfurter Programme (The Class Struggle)* (1892) was accepted as one of the classic texts of social democracy. Here he predicted a very grim and uncertain future for world capitalism. The general tendencies he saw, or thought he saw, were a steady rise in the reserve army of the unemployed, a constant increase in "chronic over-production", and a virtually complete saturation of the markets. He conceded the point which Bernstein was later to make, that the credit system is a means of developing capitalist production but remarked that it also causes the ground on which the capitalists stand to be "ever more uncertain". His conclusion was that: "...in short, the moment seems to be near, when the market for European industry not only becomes incapable of expansion but begins to contract. But that would spell the bankruptcy of the entire capitalist society" (7).

By and large, Kautsky stuck to this position—and the revisionist controversy forced him to go even further. For example, in his *Krisentheorien* (*Neue Zeit*, 1901-2), he rejected the suggestions of Bernstein and economist Mikhail Tugan-Barnovsky that capitalism's periods of depression were becoming milder and maintained instead that they were becoming sharper and more prolonged. Again, he predicted that a period of chronic stagnation was approaching. Only much later was he to put forward a more sophisticated view. In *The High Cost of Living* (1913), he admitted that his earlier predictions of chronic overproduction had been wrong. Here he puts far greater stress on the role of the working class in the overthrowing of capitalism, although he still thinks that the business cycle is of vital importance. During boom periods, says Kautsky, the working class is best able to organise itself, but high wages and full employment make it less revolutionary. The subsequent crisis and slump increase the misery of the workers and this gives rise to an upsurge in class consciousness. This alternation of boom and slump would alternately organise and revolutionise the workers, each time leaving them better equipped to establish Socialism, and in the end, the working class would be “*compelled to cause the overthrow of the capitalist system on pain of its own destruction*” (8).

A particularly crude variant of the ‘collapse’ theory is that based on the idea of under-consumption - that is, the concept that since workers’ wages are insufficient to buy up all the commodities which they alone produce, this will eventually cause capitalist production to seize up. Although this train of thought suffers from the obvious weakness of completely overlooking the role of the capitalist class as consumers, it was widely accepted among the parties of the Second International. Alexander Bogdanov, the principal economist in the Russian social-democratic parties, referred in his *Short Course of Economic Science* to the “*relative shrinking of the market for articles of consumption*” which would set in motion “*the conditions which lead to the destruction of the whole*

system of capitalist production" (9). And Ernest Untermann of The Socialist Party of America makes the same point: *"the keeping of wages at the lowest level of subsistence threatens periodically to wreck the entire capitalist system because the working people are the principal consumers and they cannot begin to absorb the immense quantity of goods made by them"* (10).

Henry Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation was another leader who continually exaggerated the impact of crises. Echoing Kautsky, he predicted that they would follow one another at ever-shortening distances and that they would last longer each time that they come. He also shared the general belief in their magical properties, maintaining that if the workers failed to take conscious action to substitute *"organised co-operation for anarchical competition"* then this would be achieved anyway (*"unconsciously and forcibly"*) by the commercial crisis and its aftermath (11).

One could go on indefinitely quoting such examples but perhaps it is more important to spotlight those who criticised the theory of collapse. Louis Boudin in his *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx in the Light of Recent Criticism* more than once pointed out that the *"cataclysmic conception of the breakdown of capitalism is not part of the Marxian theory"* and that the *"theory of a final catastrophe which has been much exploited by Marx-critics is the result of their woeful ignorance of the Marxian philosophy"* (12). But, despite this, there are references to capitalism breaking down elsewhere in Boudin's book and presumably inconsistencies are due to the fact that he wrote it as a series of articles for the *International Socialist Review* over a relatively long period. Apart from Boudin, however, there were two distinct tendencies which consistently opposed the collapse theory.

Revisionists such as Bernstein, Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding did so because, in this way, they sought to justify and strengthen the reformist tendencies within the social-

democratic parties. This accounts for the gusto with which Bauer and Hilferding attempted to refute the arguments in Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*. To them it seemed that if it could be demonstrated that capitalism would not break down then this would be ample justification for abandoning revolution altogether and for simply concentrating on modifying the harsher injustices of capitalist society. Of course they did not put it as blatantly as this and still clung to the face-saving formula that gradually the expropriators would be expropriated. But, arguing theoretically, they were quite prepared to suggest that capitalism could maintain itself indefinitely by adopting what today we would call a state-capitalist form. Thus Hilferding wrote in his *Finance Capital (Der Kampf*. June 1910):

“The entire capitalistic society would be consciously controlled by a single tribunal, by which the extent of production in all departments would be determined, and by which, by means of a scale of prices, the product of labour would be divided between the cartel magnates on the one hand, and the whole mass of the other members of society on the other. The anarchy of production at present prevailing would thus be brought to an end: we should have a consciously regulated society in an antagonistic form” (13).

The most coherent opposition to the theory of capitalist collapse, however, came from us: The Socialist Party of Great Britain. This is not to imply that in the period before the First World War our early members disregarded the importance of the crises in capitalist production altogether. On the contrary they were naturally influenced by social-democratic ideas and as result tended to exaggerate the repercussions of the crisis more than we would today. But, despite this, The Socialist Party was clearly distinguished from all shades of social democrats by its emphasis on socialist understanding as the critical factor in any potentially revolutionary situation. Certainly some statements appearing in the *Socialist Standard* had similar mechanistic undertones but in 1907 the editorial

committee made our position quite clear in its reply to its critics:

"It is inevitable that economic development will bring things to a crisis, but whether from out of this crisis will arise the Socialist Commonwealth depends upon whether sufficient of the working-class have been made Socialists, and have been class consciously organised. Obviously, then, to 'wait until the crash comes' may be the policy of reform pedlars, but is decidedly not the policy of The Socialist Party of Great Britain" (14).

In other words, even conceding that a crisis might be the most opportune moment for stripping the capitalist class of its wealth and instituting socialism, The Socialist Party hammered home the simple point which it has since never failed to stress—that there can be no socialism without a majority of the working class understanding what needs to be done and prepared to take decisive action to establish the new society.

Rosa Luxemburg's theory on imperialism was based on an equally faulty analysis of capitalism: that it suffered from a chronic shortage of home purchasing power that drove capitalist countries to seek markets outside capitalism in the less developed parts of the world.

The reform–revolution issue

In his essay *Indifference to Politics*, written in 1873, Marx castigated those who looked upon workers' struggles against the constant encroachments of capital as contrary to revolutionary principles. However, there is a fine but an all-important line between practical everyday action that is consistent with socialist principles and goal, and reformism

which negates or contradicts those principles and obscures the goal, as Rosa Luxemburg wrote:

“But if we begin to chase after what is ‘possible’ according to the principles of opportunism, unconcerned with our own principles, and by means of statesmanlike barter, then we will soon find ourselves in the same situation as the hunter who has not only failed to slay the deer but has also lost his gun in the process” (15).

She observed: *“From the viewpoint of a movement for socialism, the trade union struggle and our parliamentary practice are vastly important in so far as they make socialistic the awareness, the consciousness of the proletariat and help to organise it as a class. But once they are considered as instruments of the direct socialisation of capitalist economy they lose not only their usual effectiveness but cease being means of preparing the working class for the conquest of power”* (16).

An important discussion took place in the German Social-Democratic Party when Eduard Bernstein, who enjoyed the prestige of being Engels’ literary executor, argued that reforms were all that should be aspired to: *“that which is generally called the ultimate aim of socialism is nothing, but the movement is everything”* (17). This was partly because Bernstein considered that some of the unpredictability of production under capitalism could be mitigated by the provision of credit and the founding of employers’ organisations (cartels and trusts). He also envisaged reformist politics and trade unions as gradually eliminating capitalist exploitation and ushering in socialism. One of Bernstein’s main critics at the time was Rosa Luxemburg. Damning his work as opportunist, she pointed out that trade unions could only limit exploitation, not abolish it, and claimed that his views were tantamount to abandoning socialism. Certainly, we can agree with her that reforming capitalism will not turn it into socialism.

Eduard Bernstein had written *Evolutionary Socialism* in 1899, presenting arguments which came to be known as 'revisionism'. He held that Marx's theories had to be modified on the grounds that capitalism had not developed along the lines that Marx had anticipated. He held, for example, that the 'middle class' and the capitalist class were not decreasing, but were increasing both in numbers and in the amount of wealth that they owned. He also argued that the theory of the recurring cycle of industrial crises was wrong. Bernstein produced statistics, based on income tax returns, to show that at one period there were more millionaires than at a slightly earlier period. This, he claimed, was a flat contradiction of the theory that wealth was becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. What he seemed unable to grasp was that in a period of rapid capitalist expansion the capitalist class could increase in number and wealth without affecting the concentration of wealth into fewer hands. Nor did he connect the fact of an increase in the number of millionaires with a possible decrease in the number of smaller capitalists. Similarly, what he mistook for a middle class growing in numbers and security was a growing army of relatively well-paid salaried workers and officials who were brought into existence by capitalism's development.

Bernstein's 'revisionism' was in the first place due to his failure to interpret modern tendencies in the light of Marxian teachings; and, secondly, to the anti-Marxist influences of the British labour movement. He was lavish in his praise for the Fabian Society and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and held the 'progressive reformism' of these organisations as being suitable for Germany. He advocated compensation for the capitalists, and stated that to expropriate the capitalist class without compensation was robbery.

Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution* appeared in 1900 with the aim to expose the weakness in the case of Eduard Bernstein which claimed that the German Social Democratic Party should abandon all idea of a revolutionary transformation of

society and aim to improve the status of the working class by means of the winning of reforms. Bernstein held the view that reforms themselves, if continuously enacted, would gradually make an inroad into capitalism, with the result that socialism would slowly arrive. Two factions formed themselves in the Social Democratic Party; one group, led by Rosa Luxemburg, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Karl Kautsky, still called itself Marxist; the other which gathered around Bernstein advocated gradualism or reformism.

The arguments of *Reform or Revolution*, though sound in the main, were not accepted by the majority of the German SDP. Bernstein's reformism was preferred. The question arises, "Why did a party which claimed to still be Marxist reject Rosa Luxemburg's teaching and adopt that of Bernstein?" The answer is that the SDP, while declaring socialism to be its aim, entered the political arena from the first with a programme of demands for immediate reforms. Consequently, despite the wishes of many of the founders, adherents were gained who were interested only in the reforms offered rather than in the socialist objective. The party became overwhelmed with reformists. As Liebknecht said in his *No Compromise – No Political Trading*, written around the same time as *Reform or Revolution*: "*When once the thin end of the opportunist wedge has forced itself into the policy of the party, the thick end soon follows*" (18).

The German capitalist class lost its terror of the SDP with a number of them joining it and thus the class basis of the party was gone. The unsound basis of the party was again revealed in 1914 when it supported its own national group of capitalists in the war just as the British Labour Party supported the British capitalists. Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution* had been powerless against the strong support for reformism within the SDP.

The lesson to be learned is clear: when organising for socialism, the policy of offering reforms on the party

programme spells ruin. Many may flock into the party but they are more interested in the reform of capitalism, not in its abolition, and these members swamp the socialist element. Here is a definite answer to the leftists who urge socialists to join the Labour Party. History has proved, in the case of the German SDP, that socialists inside a reformist organisation cannot convert it and bring it on to the socialist path. The only logical thing they can do is to break with the reformists and organise on the clear-cut programme of socialism. Says Liebknecht, *"Once... we have started upon the inclined plane of compromise, there is no stopping"* (19).

The basic question of the socialist movement has always been how to bring its immediate practical activity into agreement with its ultimate goal. The various schools of socialism are differentiated according to their various solutions to this problem. The Socialist Party limits its usage of the word 'reformist' to those who advocate that socialism can be established gradually by a long series of reform measures. But even these days this may be too narrow as reformist parties go on to suffer a further degeneration and drop even the pretence that socialism is the long-term goal, and end up just advocating reforms to capitalism as an end in itself. In other words, the link between 'reformism' and 'socialism' is completely broken. In practice, we've more or less accepted this evolution of the word 'reformism' and apply it to parties such as the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Greens which have never even claimed to be socialist.

But even Luxemburg did not oppose reforms. She never argued that a socialist party should not advocate reforms at all. In fact, she agreed with the SPD's tactic on reforms: that the working class should be encouraged to struggle for them or against specific capitalist measures in order to prepare itself for the eventual capture of political power for socialism. When, in the decade or so up to 1914, she came to realise how reformism in the SPD was not confined just to Bernstein and the revisionists but also permeated the thinking of the whole

leadership, she blamed it for concentrating on getting reforms through Parliament. She did not blame advocating reforms as such and, in fact, her answer to the danger of reformism was to involve the mass of the workers themselves instead of just a few MPs in the reform struggle by means of the 'mass strike'. This was a tactic she had picked up from the Russian Revolution of 1905:

"Can Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to Social-Democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal — the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. Between social reforms and revolution there exists for Social-Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means: the social revolution, its aim" (20).

And she made no real attempt to relate reformist policies to the final goal, other than in statements such as: *"...as a result of its trade union and parliamentary struggles, the proletariat becomes convinced of the impossibility of accomplishing a fundamental social change through such activity and arrives at the understanding that the conquest of power is unavoidable"* (21). This, however, offers no reason why a revolutionary organisation should advocate reforms.

When Luxemburg wrote her pamphlet the SPD had become reformist. Its voters and most of its members wanted social reforms and political democracy in Germany, not socialism. Her mistake was not to realise this and to assume that it was a mass socialist party. Rosa was still tied to the SPD's reform policy and did not fully appreciate the danger, in terms of attracting non-socialist support and becoming its prisoner, of a socialist party advocating reforms. In the long run, of course,

Luxemburg's strategic unity of reformism and revolution was destined to fracture.

A mass, genuinely socialist party would not neglect the position of workers under capitalism while this lasted. After all, even The Socialist Party can countenance its MPs and local councillors when they are a minority voting for reforms or other pro-worker measures under some circumstances. One thing we have to be clear upon and what Luxemburg explicitly explains - the SPD will only be the party of opposition. Her attitude to reforms was that the struggle for them cannot alter the slave position of the working class. Instead it ends by bringing indifference and disappointment to the workers who are looking to reforms for emancipation. Her view that *"social reforms can only offer an empty promise, the logical consequence of such a programme must necessarily be disillusionment"* (22) is one we can accept.

She explains and goes out of her way to emphasise that, although she stands for revolution - the capture of political power by the working class - she is not against the SPD or the working class struggling for reforms - measures aimed at bettering the condition of workers within capitalism - as well. In other words, she didn't take up the same position on this question as us, but she held the classic SPD position of a socialist party having a maximum (socialism) and a minimum (reforms under capitalism) programme. On the other hand, she put a powerful case against the idea that capitalism can be gradually reformed into socialism which is why some have been receptive to her *Reform or Revolution* pamphlet.

"The circumstance which divides socialist politics from bourgeois politics is that the socialists are opponents of the entire existing order and must function in a bourgeois parliament fundamentally as an opposition. The most important aim of socialist activity in a parliament, the education of the working class, is achieved by a systematic criticism of the ruling party and its politics. The socialists are too far

removed from the bourgeois order to be able to achieve practical and thorough-going reforms of a progressive character. Therefore, principled opposition to the ruling party becomes, for every minority party and above all for the socialists, the only feasible method with which to achieve practical results” (23).

The Trade Unions and the Mass Strike

Trade Unions are organisations aiming to increase the proportion of social wealth going to the working class, an aim which Rosa Luxemburg described as a “*sort of labour of Sisyphus*” (24). Sisyphus was a figure from Greek mythology condemned to perpetually push a large rock up a hill, only to find that each time he neared the summit it rolled back downhill again. Sisyphus, doomed to frustration, provides not such a bad analogy because reformists are forever fated to keep going back to what has been gained in the past to defend it against attack. She earned the continuing enmity of trade union leaders for this phrase, but she was surely right. In a capitalist economy trade union power can be used to make gains in pay and conditions within the wages system, but cannot be used to abolish the system itself. Trade unions in their functions cannot go beyond a certain critical level, to the point at which they obstruct and subvert the mechanisms of accumulation and investment, the very premise of union demands. When this critical level is reached unions either have to restrain their demands within what the system can afford or convert the economic struggle into a general political struggle aiming to change the economic and political system, at which point they cease to be trade unions. Luxemburg was, therefore, pointing to the limitations of trade unions as vehicles of change. However, this does not mean that Luxemburg and socialists considered trade unions unimportant.

The argument is that trade unions are not political or revolutionary organisations but organisations for the sale of labour power. This is true but is it not possible that, within the movement of the working class, they could be more than economic organisations? Marx himself entertained this notion, and we need to understand why. Marx realised that trade unions come too much to concentrate upon the economic struggle with capital whereas they should be looking to abolish capitalist relations; the wages struggle should be converted into the struggle for the abolition of the wages system. It is argued that trade unions cannot do this. For Marx, it is not the organisation, of any kind, that acts, but the working class which is the subject and creative agency. The working class itself converts its economic struggles and interests into the revolutionary socialist objective. The argument that trade unions are merely organisations for the sale of labour power can be considered as failing to appreciate the politics inherent in economics, the political potential of the wages struggle. It is akin to arguing that the working class exists permanently as the class of labour power and is incapable of becoming the revolutionary class challenging capitalist relations.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905 Luxemburg wrote a major text, *Mass Strike*, in which she emphasised and defended the direct action of the rank and file workers against the organisational bureaucratisation and consequent conservatism and inertia of the party and the trade unions. Despite her positive views on the effectiveness of such industrial strategies, Luxemburg asserted: "*In reality, the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike*" (25).

Co-ops

The argument put forward—and shown to be true—is that the working-class cannot hope for socialism from trade unions nor co-operatives.

Trade unions, Rosa Luxemburg shows, are a part of capitalism itself. They are the workers' weapons of defence against the capitalist class which aims at increasing its profits. They are useful in that they enable the workers to sell their labour power under more favourable conditions than would otherwise be the case. However, they are not able to take the offensive against capitalism, to overthrow it, because they are badly handicapped. They are handicapped because the continued increase in the use of machinery and technology makes for a greater productivity of labour, and therefore enables the capitalist class to employ fewer hands for the production of a given quantity of goods. Furthermore, trade unions cannot increase the share of wealth going to the working class. Owing to the development of capitalism and the greater productivity of labour this share is continually being reduced. When the workers produce more their wages do not rise in the same proportion.

Co-operative Societies are no more able than trade unions to end capitalism. As Luxemburg points out they can survive within the present system only if they become pure capitalist enterprises. They have to compete with capitalist firms, and to do so successfully they must adopt capitalist methods of production.

“Labour is intensified. The work day is lengthened or shortened according to the situation of the market. And, depending on the requirements of the market, labour is either employed or thrown



back into the street. In other words, use is made of all the methods that enable an enterprise to stand up against its competitors in the market. The workers forming a co-operative in the field of production... are obliged to take toward themselves the role of the capitalist entrepreneur—a contradiction that accounts for the usual failure of production co-operatives, which either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers' interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving" (26).

As Rosa Luxemburg stated, workers forming a cooperative are under pressure from competition in the market and must rule over *"themselves with the utmost absolutism"* (27) forcing them to either become fully capitalist organisations or fold if they hold on to their principles.

Those who hope to establish socialism by means of a long series of reforms are doomed to disappointment. Legislative reforms and a revolution are two completely different factors in the development of society. As Luxemburg says, *"A social transformation and a legislative reform do not differ according*

to their duration but according to their content” (28).

A revolution is the work of a class which has gained political power in order to transform society to suit its interests; a reform is carried out only within the framework of the social system created by the previous revolution. Hence reforms cannot end capitalism; they can modify it to some extent, but they leave its basis untouched. To establish socialism, a complete transformation of private property into social property is necessary.

“That is why people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform in place of and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society” (29).

Furthermore, the state is class-based, established by the capitalist class and run in its interests. It is the representative of capitalist society wherein capitalist interests dominate. Any social reforms that are passed, therefore, will not be injurious to capitalism. Says Rosa Luxemburg: *“The present state is, first of all, an organisation of the ruling class. It assumes functions favouring social development specifically because, and in the measure that, these interests and social development coincide, in a general fashion, with the interests of the dominant class. Labour legislation is enacted as much in the immediate interest of the capitalist class as in the interest of society in general” (30).*

Luxemburg insisted in *Reform or Revolution* that co-operatives were *“totally incapable of transforming the capitalist mode of production” (31).*

Creating or supporting co-operatives is not enough in itself to overcome capitalism as they adjust in order to survive within

capitalism. Those involved in the co-operative movement must define their limits so as to contain, if not prevent, disappointments, dashed expectations and false hopes. Many start-up worker co-operatives are founded on 'venture capital' of its members' sweat. Worker co-operatives are not free from the pressures of competition with 'conventional' capital. In fact, worker co-operatives are even more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of competition often due to their lack of access to resources with which to build competitive advantages to capitalist enterprises. Co-operatives sponsored by the state as was the case in the former Yugoslavia, while offering the possibility of start-up capital and relative protection from the market, engender dependency on the state and subject the co-operative's autonomy to the whims of state managers.

If trade unions, co-operatives and reform movements are unable to oust capitalism and usher in Socialism, what must we do to reach our goal? Rosa Luxemburg was not able to indicate comprehensively the right course of action.

Nationalism

Rosa Luxemburg presented the Marxist case in regards to nationalism. She believed that the right of nations to self-determination had become pure utopianism and national independence was no longer something worthy to strive for. Times had changed and history had moved on from the situation Marx and Engels faced. The truth of what Marx and Engels had written that "*the working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got*" (32) had been proven. Workers own no country, so why should we care which section of the class of robbers owns which national portion of the world? Workers have the world to win, not nations to fight for. National liberation revolutions were not proletarian

movements that led to socialism of any kind. We cannot separate abolishing capitalism from abolishing nation-states, which is not accomplished by national-liberation revolutions or socialism-in-one-country. We aim for the worldwide cooperative commonwealth where all of the world's people are able to fully flourish as individuals. National sovereignty is something socialists don't actually want because our aim is planetary cooperation. Nationalism is an ideology which conceals and distorts the exploitative social relationships of capitalism. As such, we in The Socialist Party are hostile to it and as socialists oppose it in the class interests of workers everywhere.

"To oppose imperialism demanded then a total rejection of all forms of nationalism, even that of the victims of imperialist aggression. Nationalism and imperialism were inseparable and had to be fought with equal fervor", as Paul Mattick would comment on Luxemburg's position (33).

Only socialism can resolve national antagonisms. Workers everywhere are beginning to rise from their knees to their feet again. We have unprecedented latent power, but there is a wide gap between our potential and the current level of class consciousness and action. Our struggles are diffuse and uncoordinated, with no world party, no mass movement to change society. Socialists have always understood that without international unity the creation of a worldwide party of the working class is not at all an abstract or unrealistic idea, as the World Socialist Movement demonstrates, but is still merely a work in progress. The internet and social media have made the present generation incomparably connected and informed. The world has drawn together and a new global consciousness has arisen. Unity and democracy depend upon each other, each is impossible without the other. Rosa Luxemburg understood that the problem of nationalism could not be solved as long as capitalism existed.

Is there some 'right of nations to self-determination' which

socialists should support? This was a question debated before the First World War, especially in Russia and Austria which were then both multi-national empires. The issue of whether or not Polish independence should be supported came up at the 1896 London Congress of the Second International to which the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) had submitted a resolution which declared *“that the independence of Poland represents an imperative political demand both for the Polish proletariat and for the international labour movement as a whole”* (34).

Rosa Luxemburg was resolutely opposed to this and wrote a series of articles in the international Social Democratic press arguing that workers should organise irrespective of nationality within the frontiers of the capitalist state in which they found themselves. She believed that workers should not seek to redraw these frontiers because the struggle to achieve this would merely be a diversion from the class struggle and Socialism. The PPS motion was not in fact voted on but was replaced by a vague general resolution which nevertheless still referred to *“the complete right of all nations to self-determination”*.

The issue of the ‘right of nations to self-determination’ came up again in 1903 when the Russian Social Democrats officially incorporated this demand into their programme. Luxemburg opposed this not only as politically wrong but as theoretically unsound:

“A ‘right of nations’ which is valid for all countries and all times is nothing more than a metaphysical cliché of the type of ‘rights of man’ and ‘rights of the citizen’. When we speak of the ‘right of nations to self-determination’, we are using the concept of the ‘nation’, as a homogeneous social and political entity... In a class society, ‘the nation’ as a homogeneous socio-political entity does not exist. Rather, there exist within each nation, classes with antagonistic interests and ‘rights’” (35).

A nation has been defined as a collection of people with their own culture in a specific territory. A nationalist then is someone who emphasises the distinctiveness of a nation, and usually strives for it to become a nation-state. The trouble with this, as Luxemburg pointed out, is that it presupposes a community of interests with the nation.

Nationalist movements arose with the development of capitalism and the state. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx supported some nationalist movements on the grounds that they were historically progressive because they served the class interests of the rising bourgeoisie in its opposition to the traditional aristocracy represented by the Slav nationalists. Marx, therefore, called for Polish independence from Tsarist Russia. In opposing an independent Poland, Luxemburg was going against Marx. She was well aware of this and did not hesitate to describe Marx's views on the Polish Question as obsolete and mistaken (36). Obsolete because no longer relevant, mistaken because the demands were never relevant to the working class. She pointed out that in 1848 western European democrats, amongst whom Marx must be included, wanted an independent Poland established to act as a buffer between Tsarist Russia and Western Europe so as to remove the threat of Tsarist intervention to halt the extension of political democracy there. This, she said, was a tenable position in 1848 but not in the 1890s and 1900s (nor even in 1880 when Marx made a further declaration in favour of Polish independence). For in the meantime, thanks to the spread of capitalism and with it an urban industrial proletariat, Russia was no longer the monolithic force for reaction it had been. As capitalism and the working class developed in Russia so had developed the possibility of overthrowing Tsarism and establishing a political democracy there too.

When the Social Democratic movement grew in Germany and Austria towards the end of the nineteenth century it also spread to the Polish-speaking areas of these countries. At first, Polish-speaking Social Democrats joined the German and

Austrian parties but in 1892 separate Polish parties were formed in both countries. Later that year these amalgamated to form the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) along with representatives from Russian Poland. The PPS made its principal demand the reconstitution of an independent Poland within the pre-1772 boundaries. The following year a number of young Polish exiles in Zurich, including Rosa Luxemburg, split off precisely on this point and set up the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP).

The choice of party name was deliberate, for the 'Kingdom of Poland' was the official name of Russian Poland. And when the Russian Social Democratic Party got off the ground the SDKP (or more precisely, after the adhesion of a Lithuanian group in 1899, the SDKPL) was its section in Poland and Lithuania. The party's name therefore proclaimed that it was a party operating only in that part of Poland. Because states are organised on a territorial basis each Social Democratic party had the task of getting political power in the country where it operated. Luxemburg was aware that this was an organisational convenience and that working class interests transcend national boundaries. She argued that the demand for an independent Poland was a demand for the establishment of another capitalist, and inevitably expansionist and oppressive, state.

She also argued that the introduction of capitalism had tied Russian Poland so close to Russia (because Polish industry served the Russian market) that the proposal to re-establish an independent Poland was, anyway, a utopian fantasy. But here, events proved her wrong. If she had confined herself to saying that an independent Polish state would continue to be dominated by Russia or some other big bloc such as the European Union she would have been right, but she was suggesting that even formal political independence for Poland was impossible. The fact that Poland got its independence in 1919 makes her arguments on this point quaint reading today, but it still remains true that Poland has never really been

independent of one or other imperialist power. Twenty years after being 'restored' Poland was again partitioned between Germany and Russia, and after the Second World War became a mere Russian satellite. As the collapse of the USSR approached, following Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union, pressure from the West and the independent trade union Solidarity's participation (and overwhelming victory) in the 1989 election, Poland made the transition to the Third Polish Republic, officially eliminating the previous 'socialist' order. By October 1991 Poland had completed its transition to a western-style liberal democratic political system, and in 2004 it joined the EU. Luxemburg's mistake here should be a warning to socialists not to be too dogmatic on issues such as this: capitalism can be very flexible in its political institutions.

Luxemburg went on to point out that the demand for an independent Poland was a demand for the establishment of another capitalist and inevitably expansionist and oppressive state. This, she said, was not the task of the workers; what concerned them at that time was winning various elementary democratic freedoms. She thus urged Polish-speaking workers in Russian Poland to struggle together with the workers of all other nationalities to be found within the borders of the Russian empire to overthrow Tsarism and establish political democracy in Russia. It followed that Polish-speaking workers in Germany and the Austrian empire should likewise be struggling with their fellow workers there to establish political democracy. Luxemburg advocated an end to discrimination on national or language grounds with full provision for the use of minority languages in all aspects of social and political life. This should be an integral part of the political democracy she was urging to be established under capitalism as a means of facilitating the struggle for socialism. In fact, she went further and argued in a series of articles published in 1908–9 that Poland should be given autonomy within any all-Russia democratic republic. Thus the SDKPL countered the PPS demand for the restoration of an independent Poland with a demand for home rule for Russian Poland within a democratic

Russia.

She also knew that a campaign to establish an independent Poland would unleash nationalist passions which would divert the working class in Russian Poland not just from the struggle to establish socialism but even from the struggle to win elementary democratic freedoms. She was proved right on this point: when Poland got independence in 1919 an authoritarian nationalist dictatorship under former PPS-leader Pilsudski soon came to power.

Rosa Luxemburg's contribution to the debate on imperialism was her opposition to the idea that imperialism could be opposed by supporting national liberation struggles. Her arguments based on the experience of the Polish working class in its struggle against 'its' poor oppressed national bourgeoisie have been largely forgotten, yet a significant section of the Bolsheviks supported her views against Lenin's 'right of nations to self-determination'.

Rosa Luxemburg went on to state: *"The Bolsheviks have supplied the ideology which has masked the campaign of counter-revolution; they have strengthened the position of the bourgeoisie and weakened that of the proletariat... With the phrase about the self-determination of nations, the Bolsheviks furnished water for the mills of counter-revolution and thus furnished an ideology not only for the strangling of the Russian Revolution itself, but for the planned counter-revolutionary liquidation of the entire World War"* (37).

She described how during the course of the Russian Revolution, *"contrary to what the Bolsheviks expected, one after another the liberated 'nations' took advantage of the freshly granted freedom to take a position of deadly enmity to the Russian Revolution, combining against it with German Imperialism... of course it is not the 'nations' by whom that reactionary policy is carried on, but only the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes... who have converted the national*

right of self-determination into an instrument of their counter-revolutionary class policy” (38).

“In a class society, ‘the nation’ as a homogeneous socio-political entity does not exist. Rather, there exist within each nation, classes with antagonistic interests and ‘rights’. There literally is not one social area, from the coarsest material relationships to the most subtle moral ones, in which the possessing class and the class-conscious proletariat hold the same attitude, and in which they appear as a consolidated ‘national’ entity...” (39).

“The historical mission of the bourgeoisie is the creation of a modern ‘national’ state; but the historical task of the proletariat is the abolition of this state as a political form of capitalism, in which they themselves, as a conscious class, come into existence to establish the socialist system... The interests of the proletariat on the nationality question are just the opposite of those of the bourgeoisie. The concern about guaranteeing an internal market for the industrialists of the ‘fatherland’, and of acquiring new markets by means of conquest, by colonial or military policies - all these, which are the intentions of the bourgeoisie in creating a ‘national’ state, cannot be the aims of a conscious proletariat... Therefore, considering the matter from this point of view, the ‘nation’-state, as an apparatus of the domination and conquest of foreign nationalities, while it is indispensable for the bourgeoisie, has no meaning for the class interests of the proletariat” (40).

In a statement from 1916 some members of the SDKPL (Luxemburg’s political party), in an obscure Polish-language journal showed a remarkable degree of understanding on the nationalism issue:

“The so-called right of self-determination is also used with the proviso that it will become a reality for the first time under socialism and is thus an expression of our striving for socialism. This proposition is open to the following objections.

We know that socialism will do away with all national oppression, because it removes the class interests that furnish the driving force of such oppression. We also have no reason to assume that the nation, in socialist society, will form a politico-economic unit. By all indications it will have the character of a cultural and linguistic unit; for the territorial division of the socialist cultural unit, insofar as this will survive at all, can only follow the needs of production, and this division would have to be determined, not by individual nations separately, from their own power (as the 'right of self-determination' demands) but through the joint action of all interested citizens. The carrying over of the formula of 'right of self-determination' into socialism arises from a complete misunderstanding of the nature of socialist society".

We could hardly express it better ourselves. Experience of later national liberation struggles fully confirm the accuracy of this statement. The 'right of nations to self-determination', i.e. to a separate state, is explicitly rejected by Luxemburg whose view was that in the era where capitalism dominates the world this doesn't make sense. Luxemburg's formulation was that the workers of Russian-Poland should struggle with the other workers in Russia for an all-Russia democratic republic that made no concession to nationalism; it appealed to them as workers not as Poles.

On the question of nationalism, with her criticism of Marx's position as obsolete and mistaken she made an important contribution to socialist theory. Her views on this issue will hopefully help towards debunking the slogan of 'the right of nations to self-determination'. Rosa Luxemburg gave a warning to leftists of the dangers of flirting with the petty-bourgeois nationalism of small nations. Alas, the modern European left is now completely imbued with the spirit of national sovereignty and cannot dare to openly say that the nationalism of minorities is no less damaging for the working class cause than any other nationalism.

War

The final bankruptcy of the SPD was exposed in Luxemburg's eyes by its notorious vote for war credits for the German government on 4th August 1914. Luxemburg began to call for a new Socialist International and eventually helped to form a new party, the Spartacus League. She herself was a determined opponent of the First World War and went to jail for her anti-war activities. Some of her best writings date from this period, especially the classic socialist statement against the war, *The Junius Pamphlet* (also called *The Crisis of Social Democracy*).

During the war, Luxemburg was one of the few open opponents of the party's and the trade unions' policy of support for the war effort of their ruling class. She strongly supported the anti-war internationalists. The 'radical left' tendency was then quite small, given the huge pressures from the state and the party apparatus in the context of the war.

Rosa recognised the futility of idealistic pacifism and called for the removal of the cause of modern war:

"All demands for complete or gradual disarmament, for the abolition of secret diplomacy, for the dissolution of the great powers into smaller nationalities and all similar propositions are absolutely Utopian so long as capitalist class rule remains in power. For capitalism, in its present imperialistic course, to dispense with present-day militarism, with secret diplomacy with the centralisation of many national states, is so impossible that these postulates might more consistently be united into the simple demand 'abolition of capitalist class society'" (41).

Social-Democracy v Bolshevism

Luxemburg's conception of the democratic self-organisation of the working class was an alternative to the Leninist notion of a vanguard of professional revolutionaries separate from the working class, and itself guided by a centralised body of experienced leaders. Only organisations that are democratic and give the power to make decisions to the workers themselves can help to organise a new society in which all decisions are made democratically, and in which power is in the hands of the many, not the few. She concluded that electoral activity was necessary: *"We wish to be prepared for all possibilities, including the utilising of the National Assembly for revolutionary purposes should the Assembly ever come into being"* (42).

Luxemburg rejected the notion of democracy in the bourgeois tradition – a passive populace choosing from a limited offering of competing elites. For her, democracy, real democracy, was active involvement of the masses in all aspects of society's operation:

"[Kautsky is in favour] of bourgeois democracy, precisely because he opposes it to the alternative of the socialist revolution. Lenin and Trotsky, on the other hand, decide in favor of dictatorship in contradistinction to democracy, and thereby, in favor of the dictatorship of a handful of persons, that is, in favor of dictatorship on the bourgeois model. They are two opposite poles, both alike being far removed from a genuine socialist policy... Socialist democracy is not something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created; it does not come as some sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyally supported a handful of socialist

dictators. Socialist democracy begins simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism. It begins at the very moment of the seizure of power by the socialist party. It is the same thing as the dictatorship of the proletariat. This dictatorship consists in the manner of applying democracy, not in its elimination; in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well-entrenched rights and economic relationships of capitalist society, without which a socialist transformation cannot be accomplished. But this dictatorship must be the work of the class and not of a little leading minority in the name of the class—that is, it must proceed step by step out of the active participation of the masses; it must be under their direct influence, subjected to the control of complete public activity; it must arise out of the growing political training of the mass of the people” (43).

For Luxemburg, the role of a socialist party is to provide a vehicle for the expression of the interests of the class itself. Luxemburg uses the expression of the party ‘speaking for’ the class in the sense of communicating the actions of the class, not as the active part in determining those actions. She sees the party as a vehicle for communicating different experiences and co-ordinating action of the class in general. The socialist party starts as a minority party with the goal of becoming a majority party and then merging with the class as a whole.



The socialist party, for Rosa Luxemburg, was to be neither a substitute for the working masses nor an electoral machine using the common people as passive ballot-fodder. It was to be a creative and evolving interaction between the party and the working class.

Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party wrote: *“Rosa Luxemburg’s conception of the structure of the revolutionary organisation — that they should be built from below up, on a consistently democratic basis — fits the needs of the workers’ movement in the advanced countries much more closely than Lenin’s conception of 1902–4 which was copied and given an added bureaucratic twist by Stalinists the world over”* (44).

A conception far removed indeed from the internal structure of the SWP, a hierarchical Leninist organisation which is dominated by a self-perpetuating Central Committee and which prides itself on ruthlessly banning all internal factions and organised dissension. For as Rosa Luxemburg wrote in *Leninism or Marxism?*: *“Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee”* as well as: *“The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn the dialectic of history”* (45).

The sharp differences between Luxemburg and Lenin were on the question of leadership. As Luxemburg’s 1918 pamphlet *What Does the Spartacus League Want?* put it: *“The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat’s conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of struggle of the Spartacus League”* (46).

Or, as Rosa Luxemburg herself explained to the National Assembly in November 1918: *“Without the conscious will and action of the majority of the proletariat, there can be no Socialism”* (47) and *“Lenin ... is completely mistaken in the*

methods he employs. Decrees, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconian penalties, rule by terror, all these things are but palliatives. The only way to rebirth is the school of public life itself, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by Terror which demoralises” (48).

“The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but institutions, because it does not enter the arena with naïve illusions whose disappointment it would seek to revenge. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mould the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfill a historic mission and to transform historical necessity into reality” (49).

In an article in the *Neue Zeit* (translated and published in the *International Review*, September-October, 1936) Luxemburg writes:

“Goethe’s ‘odious majority’, composed of several vigorous spell-binders, a few scoundrels ready to adapt themselves to any cause or programme, a number of weak souls ever-ready to be assimilated, and the great mass trotting behind without having the least idea what it wants—the characterisation that the bourgeois pen-pushers would like to fasten to the Socialist mass—is no more or less than the classic formula for ‘majorities’ of the parties of the bourgeoisie.

In all the class struggles of the past waged in the interest of minorities, and in which, as Marx said, “development was brought about in opposition to the great mass of the people,” an essential condition of action was the ignorance of the mass concerning the real aim, the material content and the limits of the movement. This difference between the ‘leaders’ and the ‘led’ was the specific historical basis underlying the ‘directing role’ assumed by the ‘educated bourgeoisie’. A natural complement to the role played by the bourgeois ‘leaders’ was the part of the ‘followers’ left to the mass.

But already, in 1845, Marx noted that, “with the increasing depth of historic action grows the volume of the mass engaged in this action.” The class struggle waged by the proletariat is the ‘deepest’ of all historic actions that have taken place up to now. It takes in all the lower sections of the people. For the first time since the beginning of class society it corresponds to the interests of the people itself.

That is why the understanding by the mass of its tasks and instruments is an indispensable condition for Socialist revolutionary action—just as formerly the ignorance of the mass was an indispensable condition for the revolutionary action of the ruling classes.

As a result, the difference between ‘leaders’ and the ‘majority trotting along behind’ is abolished (in the Socialist movement). The relation between the mass and the leaders is destroyed. The only function left to the supposed ‘guides’ of the social-democracy is that of explaining to the mass the historic mission of the latter. The authority and influence of such ‘leaders’ grows in proportion to the work of education of this kind accomplished by them. Their prestige and influence increases only in the measure that they, the so-called leaders, destroy the condition that was formerly the basis for every function of leaders: the blindness of the mass. Their influence grows in the measure that they strip themselves of their rôle as leaders, in the measure that they make the mass self-directing and they themselves become no more than the executive organs of the self-conscious action of the mass.

Undoubtedly, the transformation of the mass into a sure, conscious, lucid ‘self-leader’—the fusion of science and the working-class dreamt of by Lassalle—can only be a dialectic process, as the working-class movement absorbs uninterruptedly new proletarian elements as well as fugitives from other sections of society.

Nevertheless, such is and such will be the dominant tendency of the Socialist movement: the abolition of the relation that is the historic basis of all class domination” (50).

The Bolshevik state was the dictatorship of a party or a party

apparatus over the proletariat and the rest of the population. As Luxemburg wrote:

"In place of the representative bodies created by general, popular elections, Lenin and Trotsky have laid down the soviets as the only true representation of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously – at bottom, then, a clique affair – a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in the sense of the rule of the Jacobins ... Yes, we can go even further: such conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life: attempted assassinations, shooting of hostages, etc." (51).

Luxemburg wrote that democracy is indispensable to the working-class *"because it creates the political forms (autonomous administration, electoral rights, etc.) which will serve the proletariat as fulcrums in its task of transforming bourgeois society"* (52).

But democracy in itself cannot solve a single problem of the working class. Democracy for the working class can only be consolidated and extended to the extent that the working class adopts a socialist standpoint. To renounce socialism so that democracy may be defended, means ultimately the renunciation of both socialism and democracy. Luxemburg was

the social-democrat opposed to the essentially 'Jacobin' Lenin. As she stated: *"Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently"* (53).

'Democratic centralism', as developed by the Bolsheviks was a Russian product, adapted for Russian conditions, as the Bolsheviks themselves. Rosa Luxemburg described Lenin's conception of organisation thus: *"the Central Committee is everything whereas the real party is only its appendage, a mindless mass which moves mechanically on the orders of the leader like the army exercising on the parade ground"* (54). It can be added that although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong.

Democratic centralism poses as a form of inner party democracy, but it is really just a hierarchy by which each member of a party (ultimately of a society) is subordinate to a higher member until one reaches the all-powerful party central committee and its Chairman / General Secretary. This is a totally undemocratic procedure, which puts the leadership above criticism, even if it is not above reproach. It is a bankrupt, corrupt method of internal operations for a political organisation. You have no voice in such a party. The practice of Trotskyist-Leninist parties is that the Central Committee unilaterally sets policy for the entire organisation and their authority reigns.

The Socialist Party's strategy is to capture parliament to abolish capitalism, not to assume political office or to institute a policy of reforms. Therefore we can perhaps agree with Luxemburg when she says:

"Our participation in the elections is necessary not in order to collaborate with the bourgeoisie and its shield-bearers in making laws, but to cast out the bourgeoisie and its shield-

bearers from the temple, to storm the fortress of the counter-revolution, and to raise above it the victorious banner of the proletarian revolution. In order to do this, is a majority in the National Assembly necessary? Only those who subscribe to parliamentary cretinism, who would decide the revolution and socialism with parliamentary majorities, believe this. Not the parliamentary majority in the National Assembly, but the proletarian mass outside, in the factories and on the streets, will decide the fate of the National Assembly... It, the mass, shall decide on the fate and the outcome of the National Assembly. What happens in, what becomes of, the National Assembly depends upon its own revolutionary activity. The greatest importance therefore attaches to the action outside, which must batter furiously at the gates of the counter-revolutionary parliament. But even the elections themselves and the action of the revolutionary representatives of the mass inside parliament must serve the cause of the revolution. To denounce ruthlessly and loudly all the tricks and dodges of the esteemed assembly, to expose its counter-revolutionary work to the masses at every step, to call upon the masses to decide, to intervene – this is the task of the socialists' participation in the National Assembly" (55).

Luxemburg comments in *The Russian Revolution* concerning the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly:

"...All this shows that "the cumbersome mechanism of democratic institutions" possesses a powerful corrective – namely, the living movement of the masses, their unending pressure. And the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence – despite rigid party banners, outgrown tickets (electoral lists), etc. To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very

living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions..." (56).

Rosa Luxemburg died too early to see the poisoned fruits of Bolshevism yet there was already sufficient evidence of its policies for her to assume a critical position. A Leninist must of necessity take a position opposed to Luxemburg; he is her theoretical opponent. The Luxemburg position opposes Leninism, and therefore no one who appeals for authority to Lenin can at the same time lay claim to Rosa Luxemburg. It cannot be denied that many shared Luxemburg's initial support and enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, but on later mature reflection of events some Marxists such as Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter could re-evaluate the whole revolutionary period as a bourgeois revolution from the outset. How long would it have taken for Luxemburg to reach a similar conclusion? Who knows?

German Revolution

After the First World War, Luxemburg spoke out against attempts to establish socialism through insurrection. She recognised that it is impossible for there to be socialism without a majority of socialists to make it work. So for sincere and committed socialists to engage in bloody street-fighting in the name of socialist revolution was not only futile but likely to produce a reaction. In her case the reaction came in the form of her skull being smashed in, a bullet at close range and her body being unceremoniously dumped into the canal.

In late 1918, Luxemburg had been released from prison, and threw herself into political activity at the centre of Germany's discontent. In November 1918 the Kaiser and his government

were overthrown and political power passed into the hands of pro-war Social Democrats. They pursued the policy of establishing a bourgeois, democratic state in Germany, cementing stable capitalist rule through Parliament. The Spartacus League, including Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, urged the workers to oppose this and to set up rival workers' and soldiers' councils as the first step on the long road to the capture of political power for Socialism. For the Spartacus League (unlike the Bolsheviks) did not believe in a minority seizure of power.

Small groups of militant workers, mainly in the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) and Spartacists, took to arms in what is mis-called the Spartacist Uprising. The Spartacist / Revolutionary Shop Stewards uprising was actually provoked by the right wing and certainly not instigated by Luxemburg or Liebknecht; the revolt had begun without them. In January 1919 the government ordered the dismissal of all Independent Social Democrats from posts of authority, including Emil Eichhorn, Berlin chief of police. Eichhorn refused to resign and, although his own Independent party did not support him, the Spartacists did. They occupied police headquarters and the offices of a number of capitalists' newspapers on Sunday 5th January. Armed workers, supporting the Spartacists, marched into railway stations, food warehouses, the royal stables, the chancellery, and other large buildings. The Spartacists issued a call for the overthrow of the government and the setting up of a workers' republic. SPD Minister Gustav Noske called in the 'Free Corps'.

That the left wing did what was expected of them demonstrated the political immaturity of the times. Only a majority of socialist-minded workers could have made the revolution in Germany. The bloody defeat showed how violence, especially by a minority, is suicidal against an existing organised state. That Luxemburg was against proposing a revolutionary putsch is on record, strongly

advising against this reckless act. But what she did was what any honest representative of the working class could do when events actually began - she took the side of the workers against blood-thirsty mercenaries. She was altogether superior to the romantic and volatile Liebknecht and yet when it came to the crunch, she appeared as confused as him in her estimate of the situation. A week before her death she wrote *"the masses of the proletariat are swarming in increasingly large multitudes around the banner of the relentless revolutionary struggle"* (57). This, of course, was agitational sloganising. The working class in Germany had no clear idea of what socialism was or how it could be achieved. Not only was there no chance of overthrowing capitalism, but even the limited aim of unseating the government was hopeless—as J. P. Nettl in his sympathetic biography records: *"It was clear probably by the evening of the 6th [January 1919] certainly by the morning of the 7th that there was no chance of overturning the government, and troops were known to be moving steadily into Berlin"* (58).

Even had the insurrection been successful it could only have resulted in the Spartacists governing a capitalist Germany. The majority of German workers had no understanding of socialism and as little inclination for social revolutionary change. The Spartacists would have been in the same position as the Russian Bolsheviks—governing by force and terror—forced into administering capitalism. Their problem was that not enough proletarians wanted socialism. The Spartacists recognised that the mass support needed to establish socialism was lacking and that socialism was not on the agenda at that time, and so they resolved to oppose the calling of a constituent assembly which they felt would help consolidate the German state and instead to try and make socialists within the workers' councils.

Inevitably, this heroic but futile and chaotic attempt to seize power was drowned in blood. One of the tragedies of this was the death of Rosa Luxemburg, whose murder was a great loss

to the German working-class movement in particular, and to the international working class in general.

Conclusion

In September 1915, the *Socialist Standard* reprinted Rosa Luxemburg's *The Rebuilding of the International*. The drawback of this statement was its insistence that the reconstruction of the International could only be based on a recognition "*of our own indecision and weakness, of our own moral fall since 4th August*" (59). There was the dangerous illusion, later to be fostered by the Third International, that the outbreak of the First World War had represented a general volte-face when socialist principles, which had been in force until then, were suddenly abandoned. Naturally, The Socialist Party would have none of this. It explained that it was publishing Luxemburg's ideas because she was fighting "*the old policy of compromise*", but that "*we cannot endorse the writer's remarks as to rebuilding the International*" (60). In opposition to Luxemburg's talk of rebuilding the Second International, The Socialist Party was concerned above all that a new *Socialist International* should be formed which would organise such socialist parties as existed on a class-conscious basis. As Luxemburg had previously explained:

"Socialism will not and cannot be created by decrees; nor can it be established by any government, however socialistic. Socialism must be created by the masses, by every proletarian. Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there they must be broken. Only that is socialism, and only thus can socialism be created" (61).

And elsewhere she states: "*The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great labouring mass ceases to be*

a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free, and autonomous direction” (62).

A ‘socialist’ revolution that lacked this collective class agency may well be able to seize state control but political adventurers and intriguers would take over. Any ‘socialist’ state would simply be a counterfeit version of the capitalist state. The left’s acceptance that there is no alternative to Labour gradualism and reformism has over the years become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with less discussion of a real alternative in politics today. The Left bears a heavy responsibility for creating the situation they now bemoan. Eduard Bernstein’s so-called ‘evolutionary road to socialism’ has proved a dead end. Rosa Luxemburg was right all along.

Sadly, this indeed still remains the choice for our fellow-workers to make. But socialists are not pessimists and in Luxemburg’s words:

“...Socialism cannot be realised with lazy, careless, egotistic, thoughtless and shiftless men and women. A Socialist state of society needs people every one of whom is full of enthusiasm and fervor for the general welfare, full of a spirit of self-sacrifice and sympathy for his fellow men, full of courage and tenacity and the willingness to dare even against the greatest odds. But we need not wait centuries or decades until such a race of human beings shall grow up. The struggle, the Revolution will teach the proletarian masses idealism, has given them mental ripeness, courage and perseverance, clearness of purpose and a self-sacrificing spirit, if it is to lead to victory. While we are enlisting fighters for the revolution, we are creating Socialist workers for the future, workers who can become the basis of a new social state...” (63).

We leave the last words to ‘Red Rosa’: *“The mass of the proletariat must do more than stake out clearly the aims and direction of the revolution. It must also personally, by its own*

activity, bring socialism step by step into life" (64).

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Object and Declaration of Principles

Object

The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.

Declaration of Principles

The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds:

1. That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e. land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.
2. That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle between those who possess but do not produce and those who produce but do not possess.
3. That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.
4. That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind, without distinction of race or sex.
5. That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.
6. That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.
7. That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.
8. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or

avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.

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