

Reform or Revolution by Rosa Luxemburg

53 pp; 25 cents. Three Arrows Press, New York.

So far as we know, this is the first English translation of *Reform or Revolution*. Originally, it appeared in German in 1899, its aim being to show the weakness of the case of Eduard Bernstein and Konrad Schmidt, which stated 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 and Schmidt 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 groups formed themselves in the Social Democratic Party which hitherto had claimed to be Marxist; one group led by Rosa Luxemburg, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Karl Kautsky, which still called itself Marxist; the other which gathered around Bernstein and advocated gradualism or reformism.

The pamphlet under review, written in defence of scientific Socialism and to demonstrate the fallacies of gradualism, deserves to be widely read, and we recommend it especially to members of the Labour Party, trade unionists and Co-operators.

Before dealing with the pamphlet itself, there is one aspect of its history that is worthy of note. From it can be learned a lesson in party organisation.

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 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 in the reforms offered, rather than in the Socialist objective. Because of this unsound foundation, the party became overwhelmed with reformists. As Liebknecht said in his *No Compromise*, written in the same year 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 follow". Readers of Liebknecht's pamphlet will know that very soon the German capitalist class lost its terror of the SDP, many of them joined its ranks and 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 waves of reformism within the SDP.

The lesson to be learned from the above facts is obvious: when organising for Socialism, the offering of reforms on the party programme spells ruin. Thousands may flock into the party, but they are mostly interested in the reform of capitalism, not in its abolition, and these members swamp the Socialist element. Here is a definite answer to those who urge Socialists to join the Labour Party. History has proved, in the case of the German Social Democratic Party, 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".

And now let us turn to the pamphlet itself.

The argument put forward—and shown to be true—is that the working-class cannot hope for Socialism from trade unions, Co-operatives or from reform movements.

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 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 (pp. 16-18 and p. 37).

Co-operative Societies are no more able than trade unions to end capitalism. As Rosa Luxemburg points out (pp. 35-6) 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”.

How capitalist the co-operatives have become in England may be seen from the fact that their employees, like employees in any capitalist concern, have frequently had to strike against their conditions of work.

Those who hope to establish Socialism by means of a long series of reforms will find in this book an explanation of why they are doomed to disappointment.

A revolution and a legislative reform are two *completely different* factors in the development of society. “A social transformation and a legislative reform do not differ according to their duration but according to their content.” 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 revolution—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” (p; 43).

Furthermore, the State to-day is a class State, established by the capitalist class and carried on 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 (p. 21):

“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.”

Since the struggle for reforms cannot alter the slave position of the working class, it ends by bringing indifference and disillusionment to the workers who look to reforms for emancipation.

“Since the social reforms can only offer an empty promise, the logical consequence of such a programme must necessarily be disillusionment” (p. 26).

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 indicates the way.

“From the first appearance of class societies . . . the conquest of political power has been the aim of all rising classes” (p. 42). The workers, too, being an oppressed class, must aim at capturing political power. And they must make use of democracy for that end. Democracy is indispensable to the

working-class “because it creates the political forms which will serve the proletariat as fulcrums in its task of transforming bourgeois society” (p. 45). Democracy the working-class needs, and this can be best preserved, not by compromise, but by struggling for Socialism. Lovers of democracy should ponder carefully the following:

“Democracy does not acquire greater chances of life in the measure that the working-class renounces the struggle for its emancipation, but, on the contrary, democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the Socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics, and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy should want to strengthen and not weaken the Socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for Socialism renounces both the Labour movement and democracy” (p. 41).

Rosa Luxemburg puts forward certain points of view with which we do not agree. For example, we hold that she lays too much emphasis on the decline of capitalism and its collapse. Readers of *Reform or Revolution* would do well to study also our penny pamphlet *Why Capitalism Will Not Collapse*.

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