

di Holger Politt

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Rosa Luxemburg only rarely wrote about socialism as a future societal system that would replace the capitalist model. But for her what was far more important was the journey to this goal - the entire process of finding a way out of the irreconcilable contradictions of the existing social reality. In her view, a prerequisite for this was the social position of the working class and the modern labour movement it inspired, which, after its many years of searching and the loss of countless workers' lives in the 19th century, managed to free itself from the political pull of liberalism and set out a socialist future as a desirable goal. However, the social democrat-led labour movement in western Europe increasingly spread the idea that socialism could be introduced through achieving a parliamentary majority and that the heroic battles on the revolutionary barricades of the 1800s belonged to a bloody era that was now firmly in the past.

For Rosa Luxemburg too, the path to socialism was one that necessitated a clear majority. On a number of occasions, she repeatedly stressed that majority-less socialism was impossible, and that even the roadmap to find a way out of the old social order had to be one that had the unmistakable backing of a majority. Luxemburg, one of the greatest intellectuals of Europe's socialist movement, was also adamant that this path should be diverged from were an achieved majority to be lost. However, she was very suspicious of the idea of parliament being the sole means of pursuing the movement's goals, instead believing firmly in the revolutionary path. Here she drew on her experiences with the Polish labour movement during the days of the Russian Empire, which had equipped her with in-depth knowledge of the Russian socialist movement.

Toward the end of the 19th century, a dispute escalated in the Polish labour movement about the best, most promising approach to realising the new social order they desired: was it through national independence or closer collaboration with the labour movement in Russia's industrial heartlands? Some argued that creating their own national context - i.e. by separating from the overall Russian state apparatus - would deliver the ideal framework for them to pursue their ambitions of offering a socialist alternative; others highlighted Poland's two failed 19th-century nationalist uprisings and subsequently called for a close partnership with the Russian labour movement. They claimed it would be a key requirement to - firstly - liberating the country from tsarist rule and establishing a republic within the Russian Empire in order to - secondly - ignite the crucial spark that would set alight the western European labour movement.

In the final decades of the 19th century, the Polish territory became one of the largest industrial hubs of the Russian Empire. This was primarily because Russia's vast and inexhaustible market generated tremendous demand for industrial products. Rosa Luxemburg was in fact instrumental in the founding of the first social democratic party in the Russian Empire, which called for the Polish movement to form a close cooperation with the nascent Russian labour movement. The aim was to achieve political freedom for the entire empire - i.e. political revolution. Essentially, the desire was to create a republic with equal voting rights for all citizens that allowed the three fundamental political freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of organisation. On the one hand, the idea was thus to replicate those conditions which were already in place in

other parts of 19th-century Europe and that had been achieved through class struggles and revolutions. In this respect, the imminent Russian revolution simply marked the conclusion of Europe's 19th-century revolutionary cycle. On the other hand, Luxemburg argued, the nature of a workers' revolution was more crucial as it would give the impetus for the revolution as a whole, allowing it to evolve past simply the realisation of civil liberties. This would send a clear signal to the entire European labour movement, which aspired to achieving socialism.

The Russian Empire's 1905/06 revolution seemed to confirm Rosa Luxemburg's assumptions. The workers in Poland's industrial heartlands fought beneath the red flag - together with their comrades in Russia's own industrial hubs. In early 1906, Rosa Luxemburg was already convinced that the workers' revolution was merely months away from securing victory. Although she may have been wrong on this count - success for counterrevolutionary forces thwarted the plans of the workers' parties - her writings from this period form the backbone of a revolutionary and socialist critique that continues to provoke discussion to this day. It is difficult to imagine Luxemburg producing her famous Letters from Prison from the late summer of 1918 without her work on the 1905/06 revolution.

One crucial idea that was born in these tumultuous times concerned the continued push to open the political (i.e. bourgeois) revolution up to a more socialist agenda. The accusations levelled against them perfectly illustrate how established they had now become: for some they were too 'revolutionary', reaching far beyond the limits of the labour movement and, in so doing, creating chaos. For others, however, they remained too 'parliamentary', making far too many concessions to the old world order. But Rosa Luxemburg was convinced that for a brief period in history it was necessary to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat within the workers' revolution; this was needed, firstly, to be able to keep the counterrevolution in check and, secondly, to firmly set a course regarding the question of ownership - an issue that would be at the core of a future, post-capitalist society. However, according to Luxemburg, this phase should be kept as short as possible and should only be temporary; it was also important to ensure that freedom of expression, assembly and organisation were not relinquished in a dictatorship of the proletariat. And, most crucially, if no majority could be found during this process, it should - according to Luxemburg - be abandoned; the revolution would need to withdraw and try a new approach.

While Rosa Luxemburg was working hard to ensure the labour movement in the west did not give up hope of a worker-led revolution - as otherwise it would be impossible to escape the existing social model based on human exploitation - she also made it abundantly clear to the Russian labour movement that they should not embark on a path toward socialism alone as without the support of others, they would not be able to liberate Russian society from the firmly entrenched legacy of centuries of tsarist rule. Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary writings thus constantly seem to warn against tsarist rule returning under a different guise.

Rosa Luxemburg believed her socialism lay ahead - her vision of a new society gave her the strength to endure many months behind bars during the First World War. The outbreak of the revolution in Germany at the very end of the long war was, in her eyes, the hoped-for continuation of the developments that began in Russia in 1905/06 and 1917. She believed these events would have the desired impact on the overall shift across post-war Europe. She hoped there would be a move toward socialism in all of Europe's key industrialised countries and thought post-revolutionary Russia would

play a vital role in the struggle to create a new social order.

Our socialism is behind us. It did not prevail or shape our world as Luxemburg envisioned. In this respect - even if it is little consolation to us today - the socialism that Rosa Luxemburg anticipated, and which she fought for until her assassination, never really existed. Let us for a moment imagine that Rosa Luxemburg were brought back to life today, in the midst of our current struggles. Her first words would be: "Show me your labour movement!"

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