

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht - heroes of the revolution

Dave Stockton Sun, 14/01/2018 - 12:56

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Ninety nine years ago, on the night of 15 January 1919, two of the greatest revolutionary socialists in history, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were brutally murdered by right-wing soldiers acting on the incitement of a government headed by the leaders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the SPD, then, as now, the main party of the country's labour movement. Today, 'Karl and Rosa' are remembered every year by a demonstration thousands-strong, which honours them as heroes, still an inspiration to all those fighting injustice, exploitation, racism and the threat of war.

Leon Trotsky, a central organiser of the victorious October Revolution two years before and at the time organising the Red Army's fight against counterrevolution wrote, when he heard the terrible news from Berlin;

'To be sure reaction could not have chosen more illustrious victims. What a sure blow! And small wonder! Reaction and revolution knew each other well as in this case reaction was personified in the guise of the former leaders of the former party of the working class, Scheidemann and Ebert whose names will be for ever inscribed in the black book of history as the shameful names of the chief organizers of this treacherous murder.'

Indeed, Rosa and Karl had been leading members of the SPD for nearly twenty years but, at the time of their deaths, they had just founded a new organisation, the German Communist Party, KPD, though it was still more widely known as the Spartakists, the group which had been opposing the bloody carnage of the imperialist world war for over four years. That fight had started by opposing the SPD's historic betrayal of voting for war credits on August 4 1914 and acting as recruiting sergeants for the slaughter in the trenches thereafter. Now in 1919, they were fighting Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Noske, SPD leaders who were doing their best to strangle the German November 1918 revolution in alliance with the monarchist leaders of the army, the bankers and the great industrialists.

As in Russia after the February revolution of 1917, Germany was suddenly covered by a network of workers' and soldiers' councils (Räte in German, Soviets in Russian). Again, as in Russia, the majority of those councils supported the leaders of the established working class party, in Germany the SPD, in Russia the Social Democratic and Labour Party, RSDLP. In both countries, those leaders opposed a revolutionary overthrow of the existing state apparatus. But there the parallel ends; Luxemburg and Liebknecht certainly fought for such a revolution but, unlike in Russia, behind them there was no steeled and sizeable opposition to the reformist leaders, nothing like the Russian Bolsheviks.

Liebknecht and Luxemburg's fight against the traitors within the workers' movement had actually started long before the fateful events of January 1919. It began inside the SPD in the decades before the outbreak of the First World War. Following the repeal of Anti-Socialist Laws in 1890, the party operated on a legal

basis and had an enormous success in parliamentary elections. It was to become the most influential party of the Second International, founded in 1889, which linked the socialist parties of different countries together.

Founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht (Karl's father) and August Bebel, it embraced Marxist ideas; it was committed to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. At the same time, it worked for the reforms which workers urgently needed: shorter hours and better pay at work and decent living conditions in the towns, freedom of speech and the right to vote for men and women.

Following the advice of Marx and Engels, the early leaders of the socialist parties saw this struggle for reforms as a means of preparing the working class for a coming social revolution against capitalism, not as a substitute for it. They recognised that without such a revolution all reforms would prove, at best, temporary. Reforms could be snatched back by the bosses whenever the drive for profit demanded new attacks on the workers. Equally, they recognised that the bosses' state, its armed bodies of men dedicated to the defence of capitalist property, would never tolerate the 'gradual' reforming out of existence of the profit system. They would strike back viciously at any working class that threatened this system.

Marx and Engels had also argued that the capitalist system would inevitably run into crisis. Engels had warned that a European, even a world, war, of unparalleled destructiveness, was a real danger as the capitalist powers clashed over markets and resources. This, too, would provoke revolution. But in the early years of the twentieth century many of the leaders of the socialist parties increasingly questioned these tenets of Marxism.

The fight against Revisionism

In the 1890s and early 1900s, European and US capitalism was expanding worldwide and firms were making huge profits. Under pressure from the trade unions and the increasing number of the workers' representatives in parliament and local government, governments and employers conceded social and democratic reforms to the working class. Given these concrete circumstances, the reform of capitalism, rather than its revolutionary overthrow, began to appear as a real possibility to some members of the SPD and the Second International.

The first openly 'revisionist' wing in the SPD was led by Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein summed up his revision of Marxist theory in this way: 'The final aim of socialism, whatever it is, means nothing to me; it is the movement itself which is everything'.

Rosa Luxemburg, already well known as an innovative intellectual and talented speaker in the party, came to the fore in the struggle against Bernstein. She was born in 1871 in Poland, which was then part of the Russian Empire. From the age of 16, she had been involved in working class politics and was a founding member of the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania. In 1897, she moved to Germany to work in the SPD. She entered the debate with enthusiasm and became the sharpest critic of Bernstein's opportunist attack on the 'final goal'. She wrote a pamphlet, *Social Reform or Revolution* which remains today the classic statement of the revolutionary case against reformism.

Luxemburg argued that, despite the recent period of expansion, capitalism remained a crisis ridden system and that to strive solely for reforms meant adapting to capitalism itself. The Revisionist belief that reforms could overcome capitalism's contradictions was an illusion she argued. The trade union struggle, although vital, was a 'Labour of Sisyphus'. By this she meant that trade unions under capitalism had to wage a constant struggle to defend their members' wages and conditions, while capitalist measures such as expanding the labour market and introducing 'labour saving' machinery would always send the 'stone'

rolling down the hill again.

Her arguments infuriated the more conservative party and trade unions leaders. The trade union bureaucrats tried to caricature Luxemburg's argument as anti-trade union. But Luxemburg was clear: 'this labour of Sisyphus is indispensable if the worker is to obtain at all the wage rate due to him in the given situation of the labour market'. She argued, however, that the trade union struggle alone would never be enough to replace capitalism with its repeated crises and tendency to economic breakdown.

Bernstein had said the party should bring its theory and its programme into line with its actual practice of seeking gradual economic and social reforms. Those at the centre of the party, like its main theoretician, Karl Kautsky, initially opposed Bernstein and supported Luxemburg. It became an international debate drawing in Russian Marxists like George Plekhanov and Vladimir Lenin. But on one thing Bernstein was right. There was indeed a gap between the party's revolutionary rhetoric and theory and its reformist practice.

Rosa Luxemburg sensed this and sought for tactics which might bridge this gap. Around the same time, Karl Liebknecht also sought to transform the party's activities in an activist direction, urging it to undertake mass anti-militarist agitation amongst young men approaching the age for conscription and even new recruits in the barracks. He saw winning over the soldiers as vital to a revolution in a country like Germany with a huge standing army and a reactionary aristocratic officer caste.

By the first years of the new century, a ferocious arms race had developed and two rival alliances were developing; with Germany and Austria-Hungary squaring up to Britain and France. Tsarist Russia was soon to be brought in. Liebknecht saw that organising a revolutionary youth movement in Germany was key to combatting the war preparations of the ruling class and imbuing young workers with an internationalist class ethos. But to carry this out would certainly mean clashes with the semi-despotic regime of the Kaiser, Wilhelm II. This in turn would shake up the electoral routinism and complacency of the SPD.

Karl Kautsky, the 'Pope of Marxism' as he was called, increasingly rationalised and justified the leadership's reformist practice, whereas Luxemburg became one of the acknowledged leaders of the left wing of the party, together with her life long friend, Clara Zetkin. Zetkin's own work in mobilising working class women to fight for women's liberation and socialism, also brought her up against the conservatives in the party leadership. These two women were fearless in their attacks on the right wing and, after 1910, the 'Centre' around Kautsky, too. For this they suffered sexist attacks and hostility from the right. Karl Liebknecht likewise faced obstruction and abuse for his efforts in building a young socialist movement.

The 1905 Revolution and the mass strike

Proof of the growing divisions in the SPD came with the Russian Revolution of 1905. Luxemburg welcomed it and threw herself into it, both practically and in distilling its lessons for future struggles. She secretly returned to Russian Poland, where she was still wanted by the authorities. The Polish workers, inspired by events in St. Petersburg at the heart of the Russian Empire, were involved in a mass strike wave. Luxemburg threw herself into revolutionary activity, producing a clandestine party paper, *Czerwony Sztandar* (Red Standard).

As the revolutionary wave subsided, Luxemburg was arrested and imprisoned. After her release, she eventually returned to Germany. In the aftermath of 1905, Luxemburg concentrated on analysing the revolution and its implications internationally. In particular, she developed her ideas on the central importance of mass strikes which, for whole periods in 1905, had paralysed the Russian empire.

Luxemburg argued that such strikes were a vital part of the fight for workers' revolution. This brought her into a head-on collision with the German trade union leaders. These abject reformists regarded all talk of the mass strike as 'playing with fire'. In her pamphlet, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, she vigorously attacked these union leaders and the SPD leaders who were allied to them. Their opposition to the mass strike was, she said, proof of their opposition to the spontaneous revolutionary action of the working class. In practice, this would place them alongside the bosses and against the workers in any revolutionary crisis.

She was rapidly to be proved correct. In this period, her differences with Kautsky became ever fiercer. Kautsky defended the use of the mass strike, but consigned it to defensive battles such as if the Kaiser were to try to return the party to illegality or to restrict voting rights. This was a sign of his shift from the 'Centre' to the right in the SPD. In practice, Kautsky argued, the strength of militarism and the threat of a coup by the despotic Kaiser, meant that, in Germany, a policy of attrition was necessary.

By this, he meant avoiding a confrontation with the ruling class, therefore rejecting strikes and mass agitation for political objectives. Instead he argued for a purely electoral route to achieving greater democracy. Luxemburg saw exactly where this was leading, to reformism, and said so, even though revolutionaries, such as Lenin, defended Kautsky against a 'wrong interpretation' of his attrition strategy. Only later did Lenin realise and acknowledge that Luxemburg had been right in her insistence that Kautsky was accommodating to the right wing. Kautsky and the centre group in the SPD could still defend Marxist orthodoxy and acknowledge the necessity of revolution in the abstract, but in practice they vacillated and went along with a reformist practice.

Luxemburg also tackled the theoretical roots of opportunism. In her book *'The Accumulation of Capital'*, she argued that far from being able to continue its expansion, capitalism faced a looming crisis. Her analysis had weaknesses and was attacked by Lenin and others, but the task she set herself was a vital one. The capitalist world order was beginning to crumble. The Great Powers were marching inexorably towards war.

Defending internationalism

In this context, a key battle inside the SPD and the International was to maintain working class internationalism. The rivalry between the Great Powers had been obvious at the turn of the century, with the Boer War of 1899 confirming British imperialism's bloodthirsty appetites, and the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 showing that every part of the globe could become a site for inter-imperialist clashes. In 1904, Britain and France formed the so-called *Entente Cordiale*, a treaty clearly aimed against Germany. After 1907, Russia joined Britain and France in 'the Entente'. In each country, chauvinist and militarist propaganda was growing.

At the seventh world congress of the Second International, meeting in Stuttgart in 1907, the Left won a victory over Bernstein and his international supporters like the British Fabians. They were for reform of colonial policy, rather than outright support for the fight against colonial oppression. Right-wingers in the SPD, like Gustav Noske declared: 'The Social Democrats will not lag behind the bourgeois parties and will shoulder their rifles. We want Germany to be as well armed as possible.' This fitted in with trade union leaders in the arms and shipbuilding industries who saw the arms race simply as good for jobs. Such arguments are still with us today.

The resolution adopted at the Congress rejected the drive to war and spelt out clearly its roots in capitalist competition and imperialism and the enormous destruction a world war would mean. It also laid down the tactics that the socialist parties should use against militarism. These last key sections were drafted by Rosa Luxemburg working with Lenin, and Martov. They made a clear and unequivocal pledge by the

International and its parties;

?The Congress holds that it is the duty of the working classes, and especially their representatives in parliaments, recognising the class character of bourgeois society and the motive for the preservation of the opposition between nations, to fight with all their strength against naval and military armament and to refuse to supply the means for it, as well as to labour for the education of working class youth in the spirit of the brotherhood of nations and of socialism, and to see that it is filled with class consciousness.

"The Congress sees in the democratic organisation of the army, in the popular militia instead of the standing army, an essential guarantee for the prevention of aggressive wars, and for facilitating the removal of differences between nations."

Most decisively, if there was an outbreak of war, the parties of the International pledged themselves, ?to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule?.

But, it was one thing to win the resolution and quite another to hold the leaders like Noske to the internationalist position.

The campaign for a consistent anti-militarist policy, centred on the youth, was carried forward by Karl Liebknecht, in the teeth of opposition from SPD leaders. His pamphlet Militarism and Anti-Militarism led to his being arrested in 1907 and imprisoned for 18 months. In the next year, he was elected to the Prussian parliament, despite still being in prison. Later, he was elected to the Reichstag, the Imperial German parliament.

The revolutionary party

As the stranglehold of the bureaucracy and the poison of chauvinist ideas grew inside the SPD, the battle of the left to defend revolutionary principles and practice intensified. But this struggle was fought issue by issue. In hindsight, we can see that Luxemburg and Liebknecht should have launched the sort of factional struggle against the totality of the SPD's actual practice that Lenin waged in the Russian Social Democracy and which in 1912 led to the final emergence of Bolshevism as a party free of opportunism and compromise with the right. This meant that Bolsheviks were free to build up support in the working class for consistent revolutionary policies and to do so by combining legal and illegal means.

Luxemburg understood the importance of a revolutionary party, but her views of it fell short of the kind of combat party the Bolsheviks were building. Faced with the increasingly bureaucratized SPD, she stressed instead the importance of the spontaneous activity of the working class, of its capacity for forcing the pace in a revolutionary period, as against the critical role of party leadership as strategist and tactician in the revolutionary struggle.

Her experience of the dampening effect of the party and trade union bureaucracy in Germany makes her views understandable. But they were one sided, and ultimately had fatal consequences in the revolution of 1918/19 in which she perished. Luxemburg understood the way that reformist ideas gripped the working class on a day-to-day basis and the need to keep up constant propaganda against these ideas. But a revolutionary party needs to do more than just battle against wrong ideas. It needs to weld together the best, most revolutionary, elements of the working class around a programme that unites and guides the party?s theory with its practice so it can act decisively as a unit in a revolutionary crisis.

The masses can indeed propel events forward and overtake conservative leaders at key points. But, to simply rely on this bringing victory, to ignore the role of leadership in directing this spontaneous action

towards a consciously fought for goal, is disastrous. Militant spontaneity does indeed regularly take the class struggle to new heights, but each time it intensifies this struggle to boiling point, the question is posed; what next?

Then the role of the party is to match the energy and creativity of the masses with a programme that answers this question and an organisation capable of turning the answer into a practical course of action. A party like the SPD under Ebert, or the Independent Social Democrats, USPD, formed by Kautsky and the Centre in 1917, will either drive back the masses or confuse them so that eventually the opportunity for power is lost and the counterrevolution will take a bloody revenge.

War and Revolution

When war broke out in 1914, the true extent of the rot in the Second International was revealed. The long struggle of Liebknecht and Luxemburg against militarism in society and opportunism in the party could not prevent the collapse of the International.

One by one, the parties of the Second International fell in behind their own rulers, the most significant exception was the Russian party. On 4 August 1914, the German Social Democracy voted for war credits, pledging its support to the German imperialist war effort and calling on German workers to slaughter their brothers and sisters in other countries in the interests of the German bosses' profits.

Liebknecht, himself a Reichstag deputy, led the fight against voting for war credits inside the party caucus, but even he obeyed party discipline and voted with the rest in August. In the following months and years, Liebknecht, Luxemburg and Zetkin tried to rally the workers' movement against the war. Many of those who risked imprisonment by waging a fight against the imperialist war were the young workers trained by the youth organisation.

The women's organisations built by Zetkin also supplied many supporters for the true internationalists in the party, as did the youth organised by Liebknecht. Both had created international leagues within the Second International and they did not collapse like the 'parent' body but helped promote new international conferences against the war in Switzerland, at Zimmerwald in 1915 and Kienthal in 1916. In December 1914, Liebknecht was the lone voice and only vote in the Reichstag against a renewal of war credits. He used the platform of the Reichstag to appeal to workers to oppose the war. As the dreadful carnage moved into its first, then second, year, opposition began to grow.

In 1916, Liebknecht was the first to address a public demonstration of thousands against the war, on the Potsdamer Platz in the heart of Berlin. He shouted 'Down with the war! Down with the government!' At once, the police charged in to stop his speech and he was imprisoned. But his words carried across Germany and indeed across Europe. His slogan, 'The main enemy is in our own country', became the touchstone of revolutionary action against the war. Luxemburg, too, spent most of the war in prison where her health suffered badly. But, while her letters show she suffered periods of depression and exhaustion, publicly she maintained her revolutionary optimism and smuggled out her analysis of the war.

Both Luxemburg and Liebknecht realised that the old party and international were dead, Luxemburg called the German Social Democracy 'a stinking corpse'.

Her Junius Pamphlet recalled Engels' prediction that capitalist society presented the dilemma of an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism. The war was the living hell of workers slaughtering one another, to end it, the workers must raise the slogan 'Workers of all Countries Unite' and turn against their real enemy, the ruling class. As the war dragged on, opposition to it found increasing support. Luxemburg joined with Lenin in the call for a new International and, in 1917, she hailed the Russian

revolution.

To fight for this slogan, Luxemburg and Liebknecht drew together the fragments of the left into the International Group and then the Spartakusbund, named after the leader of the great slave revolt against Rome. Rosa's former companion, Leo Jogiches, shouldered the burden of leading the organisation through this desperately difficult period. She had differences with the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution. She did not agree with dissolving the Russian Constituent Assembly or the policy of distributing the land to the peasants. She thought Lenin and Trotsky's moves to found the Third International premature. Nonetheless, she saw immediately that the Bolshevik rising was not only the 'salvation of the honour of international socialism' but that it must be seen as the first of a series of workers' revolutions across Europe.

By 1918, this seemed a real possibility. A series of workers' protests and mutinies in the armed forces swept across Germany, culminating in November 1918 with the collapse of the war effort. Soldiers' and workers' councils were set up. Freed from prison, Liebknecht threw himself into the ferment, moving in secret from one meeting to the next. He was quickly co-opted onto the revolutionary shop stewards committee.

Rosa was also released and headed straight into the maelstrom of revolution, despite failing health. Mass strikes and demonstrations on 9 November forced the Kaiser to abdicate. The Russian revolution was a beacon to the working class and a terrible warning to the bourgeoisie. But, in Germany, right on hand, were the leaders of the SPD. With the words, 'I hate the revolution like mortal sin', SPD chief Friedrich Ebert took over the job of Chancellor. The SPD formed a government committed to protecting the bosses from the workers' revolution. During the following weeks, with dual power existing between an insurgent working class and a teetering bourgeois regime, the Spartakists worked tirelessly to win over the leadership of the working class and drive forward the socialist revolution.

The majority sections of the workers, however, still looked to their old leaders. The Spartakusbund was a new force that rallied the most militant vanguard but it was still small, too small. On 10 November, Friedrich Ebert was made head of the revolutionary government by the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council. On the very same day, he conspired with the army to restore order.

Luxemburg and Liebknecht launched the daily paper, Die Rote Fahne, The Red Flag, in which Luxemburg spelt out the tasks of the revolution and the choices facing the revolutionary workers: 'Either the continuation of capitalism, new wars and a very early decline into chaos and anarchy or the abolition of capitalist exploitation.'

The new German Communist Party, KPD, was formed around the nucleus of the Spartakusbund in December 1918. But, before it had time to consolidate itself and launch a renewed challenge to the social democratic traitors, those traitors drowned the revolution in blood. The right wing social democratic government put together a reactionary armed force made up of loyal troops and the Freikorps, a reactionary militia of ex-soldiers, many of whom went on to join Hitler's storm troopers, the SA.

The very same Gustav Noske, who had once declared his support for the fatherland in the pre-war congress hall, now took on the job of directing the Freikorps against the revolutionary workers. 'Someone has to be the bloodhound' was his infamous comment. The entire SPD launched an unprecedented propaganda war, accusing Luxemburg and Liebknecht of dragging workers into renewed bloodshed. Articles in the SPD papers and leaflets incited the murder of the revolutionary leaders.

The final days

In the face of a series of provocations, culminating in the removal of the USPD police chief in Berlin, Emil Eichhorn, the revolutionary workers' leaders, along with Karl Liebknecht, became convinced that to stop the victory of Noske's Freikorps it was necessary to overthrow the government. Luxemburg, however, was unconvinced that the revolutionary workers and the KPD were yet strong or well organised enough for such a decisive confrontation.

She understood that many workers still clung in hope to the SPD. But, when the revolutionary shop stewards in the Berlin factories and the rebel sailors who had come to Berlin went ahead and occupied buildings in central Berlin, she concluded that the communists had no alternative but to place themselves at the head of the rising, even if it was likely to fail. The small and ill-organised KPD was unable to do what Lenin and the Bolsheviks had been able to do in the July Days of 1917, effect a retreat that preserved the party, its morale and its leaders' lives.

Nevertheless, during their final few days, Rosa and Karl's brilliant articles for Rote Fahne concentrated first on the need for decisive action and, as the right wing tightened its grip, on assimilating the lessons of defeat and preparing for the next phase of struggle.

The Spartakists were indeed crushed; their rising was premature and ill prepared. But, compared to the reformist traitors and the miserable cowards grouped around the apologists for the right, including the centrist Karl Kautsky, the Spartakists were revolutionary giants, a pledge for the future. A pledge that new generations of young revolutionaries will honour in the century to come. Their defeat allowed the right to go on an all out offensive. Reformism unleashed its dogs of war, the Freikorps and they indulged in a bloody frenzy against the left.

And they ruthlessly hunted down Luxemburg and Liebknecht. On 15 January 1919, the two leaders were caught and dragged off for 'interrogation'. In fact, they were going straight to their deaths. Liebknecht was beaten and shot in the back so his captors could claim that he was 'shot while trying to escape'. Luxemburg's head was smashed in with a rifle butt, she was then shot in the head and her body thrown into a nearby canal.

On the eve of her capture, Rosa wrote her last article, 'Order Reigns in Berlin'. It not only analysed the reasons for the defeat but also spelt out her belief in final victory. It showed how the 'Order' boasted of by the treacherous social democratic leaders would be short lived:

"'Order reigns in Berlin!?' You stupid lackeys! Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rear its head once again and to your horror will proclaim, with trumpets blazing: 'I was, I am, I will be!'"

Luxemburg's last hours, like the whole of her life, are a lasting inspiration to workers everywhere. Her memory has been trampled on both by her opponents and by her supposed supporters. Today's inheritors of the traditions of international social democracy forget the bloodthirsty role of Ebert and Noske. And, lest anyone think such a crime was only possible for German 'socialists', it should be remembered that Arthur Henderson, then the leader of the Labour Party in the House of Commons, joined in the MP rabble cheering the announcement of the execution of the great Irish revolutionary socialist, James Connolly.

Karl Liebknecht's last article in Rote Fahne fittingly sums up the legacy of all the victims of counterrevolution. It breathes total defiance in the face of disaster and death;

'Spartacus, that means the fire and spirit, means the soul and heart, means the will and action of the proletarian revolution. Spartacus means all the suffering and longing for happiness, all fighting determination of the class-conscious proletariat. Because Spartacus means socialism and world revolution.

"The road to Golgotha for the German working class is not yet finished, but the day of salvation is approaching. A Day of Judgement for Ebert-Scheidemann-Noske and for the capitalist rulers who today are hiding behind them. The waves of events rise up to the sky, we are accustomed to being thrown from their summit into the depths. But our ship keeps its course firmly and proudly, straight towards its destination. And whether we will still be alive when it is reached, our programme will live; it will rule the world of redeemed humanity. In spite of everything!?"

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