



Social Democracy

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For ninety years social democracy has betrayed the working class. Yet still it lives. The task of the new generation of workers and anticapitalists is to deliver its death blow.

To do this we must first understand what social democracy is.

The working class movement is made up not only of unions but also of parties. These include the social democratic, socialist and Labour parties of Europe and Australasia. Most recently, we have seen the rise of the Workers' Party (PT) of Brazil.

Built and supported by the organisations of the working class, these parties remain committed to capitalism in policy and action. They are bourgeois workers' parties.

How is this possible? The answer lies in their history, structure and role.

At the outbreak of the First World War, the leaders of the major parties of the Second International, 'Marxist' or Labourist alike, declared loyalty to 'their own' imperialist fatherlands.

They abandoned the struggle for a classless society based on social ownership of the means of production. Instead they limited themselves to reforming capitalism. Since then they have never wavered in their loyalty to the exploiters, especially in times of war or crisis.

Parties once based on militant class struggle became entirely focused on parliament and winning elections as the only way to improve the workers' wages and conditions of life. Their message was simple: 'Limit election manifestos to whatever will win the maximum number of votes. Leave socialism and internationalism for speeches on May Day.'

At the same time, they retained their roots in the workers' organisations, with the purpose of incorporating them into capitalism. They maintained intimate links with the trade unions by direct affiliation, organising political fractions in the unions, or simply by ensuring a massive presence amongst their leaders and militants. To maintain these 'organic links' they had to promise to 'defend' unions, wage levels, social reforms and democratic rights 'always of course by legal and peaceful means.

They claimed to represent the independence of the workers' movement from the openly capitalist parties at parliamentary and municipal elections. Social reforms after the Second World War strengthened the illusions of millions of workers that these parties could either reform capitalism or even replace it with a new society.

Even now, in elections, they still dominate their national working class movements.

But over the last decades even the parliamentary deputies and the union bureaucrats have been pushed to the sidelines. Party membership shrank dramatically and the internal life of the parties withered away. The activist base was decimated; the left wings were silenced, expelled or abandoned the parties in droves. In some cases smaller reformist parties were formed by the disillusioned left.

With neo-liberalism's triumphant march in the 1990s, the journalists and academics predicted that social democracy was outmoded, would never win power again and would, in short, disappear. They were wrong.

The revival of trade union struggle and the growth of broader social movements in Europe in the 1990s led to election victories for social democratic and labour parties. But if workers hoped to see major social reforms, such as those of the post-war years, they were disappointed.

Social democracy accepts the dictates of neo-liberalism and globalisation. Blair's 'Third Way' and Schroeder's 'New Centre' promote market forces at the expense of the old Keynesian programme of social democracy. They argue that there is no alternative to privatisation of industries, infrastructure and telecommunications. Taxes on business have to be lowered, public expenditure cut, and workers' rights in the workplace diluted or scrapped. In preparation for privatisation they drag the social welfare system into partnership with the private sector. In some countries campaigning and militant action has been able to slow this process - making a confrontation between social democracy and the working class all but inevitable.

In preparation for this and under cover of the 'war against terrorism', social democratic governments have pursued a vicious attack on the civil liberties of their citizens. At the same time, alarmed by the rise of racist right-wing parties, the social democrats have tried to steal their colours with disgraceful attacks on the rights of immigrants and refugees.

In periods of radicalisation, these parties usually develop a left wing whose speciality is to 'lead' in order to behead the struggle. Just as in government these parties naturally expose themselves and disillusion their working class supporters, so in opposition, they renew these illusions.

Revolutionaries are currently a small minority in most countries. Our primary task is to break the illusions of the working class in reformist leaderships. But propaganda alone is not enough. We have to work patiently alongside reformist workers, demanding that social democratic and labour leaders fight for the workers' interests and so demonstrate in practice the betrayals of these leaders. Only in this way can the revolutionaries convince large sections of the working class movement to organise a new political party which is truly its own, and wrest leadership of the movement from social democracy and Labourism.

Only then will Rosa Luxemburg's description of social democracy's politics ring true also for its organisation: a rotten corpse.

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