

# Riot and Revolution

## Speech by Rosa Luxemburg on Trial for Inciting to Riot

On the twelfth of last month Rosa Luxemburg was tried at the Criminal Court at Weimar for “inciting to the use of physical force” by the speech she contributed to the discussion on the General Strike at the annual Congress of the German Socialist Party held in 1905 at Jena.

The court was densely crowded. Besides a great number of Socialists the audience included a good many “ladies of the highest Bourgeoisie”, the President of the Supreme Court, and, last but not least, a representative of the Ministry.

### Public Prosecutor’s Charge

The incriminating speech having been read the Public Prosecutor submitted his case as follows:

“After Bebel had spoken at the Party Congress in favour of the General Strike, other speakers, who took part in the discussion, expressed disapproval of such means, as the General Strike could lead to a physical force revolution, at which the workers may be defeated. Then followed the accused, who derided and sneered at these objections, more especially as they were living in the year of the ‘glorious Russian revolution’. She said: ‘we should be fools if that would be no lesson to us’, and she emphasised the fact that in Germany we had also arrived at that point where Evolution must give way to Revolution. Respecting her comrade, Heine, she stated he was not in touch with the masses who, as history proves, had always shed their blood for the exploiting class; and she thought they may once shed their blood for their own class. These are the main points of the speech, which dealt less with the General Strike than with the Revolution. In fact the accused mentioned only now and then the General Strike, in order to be able to talk about the principal point, viz., the Revolution. In that way the incitement to the use of physical force was thrown out to the masses who were confused already, and the sanguinary seriousness of the speech was crowned by a quotation from the Communist Manifesto that the workers have nothing to lose but their chains. The accused desires that the object of the Socialist Party should not be attained by parliamentary means or by means of the General Strike, but by a physical force revolution; and the speech was made to incite the masses to break their chains. It was to happen in our country just as in Russia. All this amounts to an incitement to the use of physical force. Her words were such as to create excitement among the masses and from the standpoint of law and order it is most significant that the accused occupies a prominent position in her Party and by virtue of her heedlessness has considerable influence and hence is exceptionally dangerous. I ask the Court to pass a sentence of four months’ imprisonment upon the accused.”

### Rosa Luxemburg’s Reply

Counsel for the defence, Kurt Rosenfeld, answered with a brilliant speech from the Socialist as well as the juridical standpoint, but the limited space of *The Standard* unfortunately does not permit our reproducing more than the speech of Rosa Luxemburg. She said:

“My defending Counsel having dealt with the juridical aspect I wish to explain my own conception and that generally held in my Party regarding the question of the General Strike and the use of physical force. But before doing so I must refer to the argument which the Public Prosecutor used a moment ago. I cannot help saying that I was really astonished at the carelessness with which an official representative of the law ascribes the responsibility for affairs like the Hamburg street riots to a Three Million Party, the Socialist Party.”

The presiding judge, interrupting the accused, warned her not to indulge in expressions such as “carelessness”, which he thought would not help her case.

Rosa Luxemburg (continuing):

“I think that it is particularly necessary for me to draw attention to—let me say—the complacency with which the Public Prosecutor, in face of an express decision by a Court of Law to the contrary, wants to make us responsible for the Hamburg riots, for this is on a par with the complacency with which in this case he ascribes to me the intention of inciting to the use of physical force by my Jena speech.

“Counsel for the prosecution holds that my excited tone deserved grave consideration. But surely the tone is a matter of individual temperament. Why, is it not possible that one may speak most excitedly, yet may present a strictly scientific conception, while, on the other hand, one may speak very quietly,

yet present a very crude, unscientific, and alarming conception? And as far as my conception in regard to the question of the General Strike is concerned, I hold the view that neither a revolution nor a great, serious General Strike can be produced or provoked in an artificial manner.

### **The General Strike**

“As the Public Prosecutor has referred to my speech at Mannheim, I may, perhaps, be permitted, for the purpose of making clear my conception, to quote here some passages from a pamphlet on the General Strike, a pamphlet I wrote purposely for this year’s Party Congress at Mannheim. In that pamphlet I say, for instance, on page 33:

‘It suffices to sum up what I have said in the foregoing, in order to obtain an explanation as to the question of the said leadership and initiative of the General Strike. If the General Strike does not mean one separate action but an entire period of the class struggle, and if that period is identical with a period of revolution, it must be clear that a General Strike could not be called forth at will, even if such resolve should emanate from the unanimous forces of the strongest Socialist Party. Seeing that the Socialist Party is really powerless as far as the setting on foot and the suppressing of revolutions according to its own sweet will are concerned, neither the greatest enthusiasm nor the uttermost impatience of the Socialist forces could provoke a real period of General Strikes that would culminate in a live, mighty movement of the masses.’

“And on page 50 of the pamphlet you will find the following statement:

‘While it is on the one hand difficult to predict with certainty whether the abolition of manhood suffrage in Germany will create a situation instantly calling forth a General Strike, there can on the other hand be no doubt that in the event of our entering a period of stormy action of the masses here in Germany the Socialist Party could not possibly confine their tactics to the merely parliamentary defensive. To determine beforehand the cause and the time of an outbreak of the General Strike in Germany is beyond the power of the Socialist Party, because it is beyond their power to create a historical situation by means of Party resolutions. But what the Party can and must do, is to indicate the political trend of these struggles, if they once take place, and to formulate a clear, determined policy for their pursuance. Historical events cannot be controlled by prescribing regulations, but by realising beforehand their probable, measurable consequences and by taking action accordingly.’

“That is my conception with regard to the General Strike and from that you will be able to gather that this conception is far removed from the views held by the Public Prosecutor.

### **The Lesson of Russian Revolution**

“It has been said that the most aggravating moment in my charge is the fact that in my speech I alluded so frequently to the Russian Revolution. But one cannot help observing that the Russian Revolution is the first great historical experiment with the weapon of the General Strike and that every serious-minded social student, even if he happens to be a bourgeois scholar, must turn to the Russian Revolution for the purpose of gaining practical knowledge.

“A further point mentioned was the composition of the audience, whom I am accused of having incited to the use of physical force. Why, I did not even speak at a public meeting, but at the Socialist Congress; I spoke therefore to an assembly of men, who comprised a selected number of the enlightened workers of Germany. Hence I think it a really enormous under-estimation of the political maturity and intelligence of the Socialist Propagandists to believe that they could by an inflammatory speech so easily be incited to the use of physical force. Such an aspersion amounts decidedly to a tremendous under-estimation of the enlightening and elevating intellectual influences which 40 years of Socialist propaganda have produced in the ranks of the German working class. And I say openly that I should and could have used the identical expressions even at a public meeting without having caused the remotest idea of using physical force in the minds of the workers. Why, has the German Proletariat not proved sufficiently during the last few decades how completely it has attained its political maturity, how capable it is to control its passions in face of the meanest of provocations to riot. And the workers are provoked to rebellion daily not only by words but by deeds.

### **Real Organisers of Riot**

“Do you believe that masses of people could be incited to use physical force against the ruling class merely by a few words on the Revolution, when you consider that these same masses kept their temper

admirably all the time the capitalist class enforced their anti-Socialist law, their penal servitude enactment directed against free speech and press, their measures for increasing working-class starvation and, last but not least, their Bill for smashing up the workers' economic organisation? I am surprised that the Public Prosecutor has not, instead of prosecuting me, brought to book the originators of those laws and Bills, for these deeds are apt to stir up immensely the propertyless masses and would most certainly lead to physical force excesses if—yes, if it were not for Socialism's enlightening and elevating influence.

“The Public Prosecutor opined that I completely repudiate the revolutionary character of my Jena speech. That is a great error. I have spoken in a revolutionary strain and I always speak in a revolutionary way, seeing that our entire Socialist propaganda is revolutionary; but not in the sense so peculiarly interpreted by the Public Prosecutor, who ascribes the Hamburg street riots to the revolutionary effect of Socialist agitation; but in the sense that we aim at a basic revolution of the present social order. And I do not even deny that in that process physical force may well become necessary.

### **Engels on the Bourgeoisie**

“But I, together with my Party, take up the standpoint that the initiative for using physical force proceeds always from the ruling class, a standpoint that was so ably made clear by our great teacher, Frederick Engels, who in 1892 wrote in the columns of the *Neue Zeit*:

‘The Bourgeois have very frequently suggested to us that *we should under any circumstances abandon the use of revolutionary methods and remain within the limits of the law* now that the exceptional Socialist law has been dropped and the common law has again been made accessible to all, even to Socialists! *We regret being unable to oblige the gentlemen of the bourgeoisie by taking that hint* and hasten to remind them that at this very moment it is not us who destroy ‘the legal means’. No, on the contrary, they—the bourgeois—are doing propaganda work for us so effectively that we should be fools were we to interfere with them *whilst they are making such wonderful progress*. There is evidently some justification for the question whether it will indeed not be the bourgeois and their government who will violate laws and rights, in order to demolish us by physical force. We are prepared to wait. In the meantime ‘kindly have the first shot, gentlemen of the bourgeoisie!’ They will no doubt fire the first shot. One fine morning the German bourgeois and their Government will grow tired of watching with folded arms the overflowing river of Socialism, and they will take recourse to lawlessness, to physical force. What will be the use of it? Physical force may repress a small section of the people in a limited district, but the power has still to be discovered that is capable of annihilating a Party of two or three million persons spread over a very large country. The counter-revolution, a momentary overpowering of the workers, may perhaps delay the triumph of Socialism for a few years, but only that it may finally prevail so much more completely and definitely.’

“This is our conception. And now in conclusion I ask you to acquit me; not because I am afraid of the imprisonment to which you may treat me. If it is a question of enduring the punishment meted out to us by the ruling class for our convictions, every Socialist submits to it with the greatest indifference. But I ask you to acquit me, because my conviction would be an injustice and would cause aggravation in Socialist circles.”

After an hour's deliberation Rosa was found guilty and sentenced to 2 months imprisonment.

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!

(January 1907)