

A historic document: our vindication

In the course of the last few years the German Social-Democratic Party has been dealt with more than once in these columns, and the exactness of our criticism finds striking confirmation in the article here reprinted from the *International Socialist Review*. The “unity”, the large membership, the huge voting strength, factors that would count for so much in a working-class movement born of and maintained by Socialist knowledge—these things, when brought about by desire for reform of the capitalist system are seen to be fleeting phenomena. Again, therefore, it is permissible to point out that on the way to working-class emancipation there are no short cuts whereby the necessity of Socialist education can be obviated. All this has been demonstrated time and time again, but this article of Rosa Luxemburg’s is something more than a repetition of an old warning. It shows that one of the most important lessons for the working-class movement is being learned, the errors of the past recognised. And that is why, although we cannot endorse the writer’s remarks as to rebuilding the International, we welcome the pronouncement. For if, in the conditions obtaining to-day, there are those in Germany who even now are engaged in combating the old policy of compromise, it is certain that this work and its results will increase greatly when normal conditions return.

The Rebuilding of the International By Rosa Luxemburg

(From the *International Socialist Review*)

[Note.—In April Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring published the first number of a magazine called *The International*. It proved to be also the last number, for the censor forbade its further publication. But many a journal has run on for years without printing as much interesting matter as was crowded between the covers of this one issue. Rosa Luxemburg’s article was left unfinished, for she was hustled into jail before *The International* went to press. Karl Liebknecht was prevented from making his contribution; the recruiting officer laid his hands on him and sent him to a military camp. But the two editors, Clara Zetkin, and other brilliant and earnest comrades managed to set into this single number of their journal a fairly complete statement of the position of Germany’s anti-war Socialists, and a thorough-going criticism of the actions and theories of the war “Socialists”. The following article is reprinted here because it shows what the real Socialists of Germany are thinking at the present time. There could be no better proof of the fundamental soundness of the international movement. Rosa Luxemburg and her fellow-workers are the very best evidence to show that she is not entirely right when she says, “The International has broken down” [The plain facts refute this ridiculous statement of “W.E.B.’s”—Eds., “S.S.”]—W. E. B.]

On August 4, 1914, the German Social Democracy handed in its political resignation, and on the same date the Socialist International went to pieces. All attempts to deny this fact or to conceal it merely serve to perpetuate the conditions which brought it about.

This breakdown is without parallel in history. Socialism or Imperialism—this is the alternative which summed up the political life of the various labour parties of the world during the past decade. In Germany especially it has formed the basis of countless programmes, discussions and publications. One of the chief purposes of the Social Democracy has been the correct formulation of thought and sentiment with regard to this alternative.

With the outbreak of the war the word became flesh; the alternative changed from a historical tendency to a political situation. Face to face with this alternative as a fact the Social Democracy, which had been the first to recognise it and bring it to the consciousness of the working class, struck its sails and without a struggle conceded the victory to imperialism. Never before, since there has been a class struggle, since there have been political parties, has there existed a party which after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after the attainment of a pre-eminent position of power, has thus by its own act within twenty-four hours wiped itself off the map.

The apologists for this act, Kautsky among them, maintain that the whole duty of Socialists in time of war is to remain silent. Socialism, they say in effect, is a power for peace, not against war. But there is a logic of events which none can elude. The moment Socialists cease to oppose war they become, by the stern logic of events, its supporters. The labour unionists who have discontinued their struggles for improved conditions, the women who have withdrawn from Socialist agitation in order to help minimize the horrors of war, and the Socialist party leaders who spend their time in the press and on the platform securing support for the government and suppressing every effort at criticism, all of these are not merely maintaining silence. They are supporting the war as heartily as any Conservative or Centrist. When or where was there ever a war which could exhibit a similar spectacle?

Where and when was the disregard of all constitutional rights accepted with such submissiveness? When was there ever such glorification by an opposition party of the strictest censorship of the Press? Never before did a political party sacrifice its all to a cause against which it had sworn again and again to sacrifice the last drop of its blood. The mighty organisation of the Social Democracy, its much praised discipline, gave the best proof of themselves in the fact that four millions of human beings allowed themselves to be hitched to the war chariot at the command of a handful of parliamentarians. The half-century of preparation on the part of the Socialist party comes to fruition in this war. All our education of the masses makes them now the obedient and effective servants of the imperialist state. Marx, Engels and Lassalle, Liebknecht, Bebel and Singer, trained the German proletariat in order that Hindenburg may lead it.

II

Our official theorists are not without an explanation of this phenomenon. They are perfectly willing to explain the slight disagreement between their actions of to-day and the words of yesterday. Their apology is that “although the Social Democracy has concerned itself much with the question as to what should be done to prevent war it has never concerned itself with the problem as to what should be done after the beginning of hostilities”. Ready to do everybody’s bidding, this theory assures us that the present practice of our party is in most beautiful harmony with our past theories.

The delightfully adaptable theory is likewise ready and willing to justify the present position of International Socialism in reference to the past. The International treated only the question of the prevention of war. But now, “war is a fact”, and, as it turns out, after the outbreak of war Socialists are to be guided by entirely new principles. After war has actually begun the great problem for each proletariat is: Victory or defeat? Or, as an “Austro-Marxist” explains, a nation, like any other organism, must preserve its existence. In plain language this means: The proletariat has not one fundamental principle as scientific Socialism hitherto maintained, but two, one for peace and another for war. In time of peace, we are to suppose, the workers are to take cognisance of the class-struggle within the nation and of international solidarity in relation to other countries; in time of war, on the other hand, class-solidarity becomes the dominant feature of internal affairs and the struggle against the workers of other countries dominates the proletarian view of foreign relations. To the great historic appeal of the Communist Manifesto is added an important amendment, and it reads now, according to Kautsky’s revision: “Workers of all lands unite in peace and cut one another’s throats in war!” To-day, “Down with the Russians and French!” to-morrow, “We are brothers all!” For, as Kautsky says in *Die Neue Zeit*, the International is “essentially an instrument of peace” but “no effective agent in war”,

This convenient theory introduces an entirely novel revision of the economic interpretation of history. Proletarian tactics before the outbreak of war and after must be based on exactly opposite principles. This presupposes that social conditions, the base of our tactics, are fundamentally different in war from what they are in peace. According to the economic interpretation of history as Marx established it, all history is the history of class struggles. According to Kautsky’s revision we must add: except in times of war. Now human development has been periodically marked by wars. Therefore, according to this new theory, social development has gone on according to the following formula: a period of class struggles, marked by class solidarity and conflicts between the nations; and then a period of national solidarity and international conflicts—and so on indefinitely. Periodically the foundations of social life as they exist in time of peace are reversed by the outbreak of war. And again, at the moment of the signing of a treaty of peace, they are restored. This is not, evidently, progress by means of successive “catastrophes”; it is rather progress by means of a series of somersaults. Society develops, we are to suppose, like an iceberg floating down a warm current; its lower portion is melted away, it turns over, and continues this process indefinitely.

Now all the known facts of human history run counter to this new theory. They show that there is a necessary and dialectic relation between class struggle and war. The class struggle develops into war and war develops into class struggle; and thus their essential unity is proved. It was so in the medieval cities, in the wars of the Reformation, in the Flemish wars of liberation, in the French Revolution, in the American Rebellion, and in the Russian uprising in 1905.

Moreover, theoretically, Kautsky’s idea leaves not one stone of the Marxian doctrine on another. If, as Marx supposes, neither war nor the class struggle fall from heaven, but both arise from deep social-economic causes, then they cannot disappear periodically unless their causes also go up in vapour. Now the proletarian class struggle is a necessary aspect of the wage system. But during war the wage system does not tend to disappear. On the contrary, the aspects of it which give rise to the

struggle of the classes become especially prominent. Speculation, the founding of new companies to carry on war industries, military dictatorship, all these and other influences tend to increase the class differences during time of war. And likewise the class rule of the bourgeoisie is not suspended; on the contrary, with the suspension of constitutional rights it becomes sheer class dictatorship. If, then, the causes of the class struggle are multiplied, strengthened, during war, how can the inevitable result be supposed to go out of existence? Conversely, wars are at the present time a result of the competition of various capitalist groups, and of the necessity for capitalist expansion. Now these two forces are not operative only while the cannon are booming; they are active in peace as well, and it is precisely in time of peace that they influence our life in such a way as to make the outbreak of war inevitable. For war is, as Kautsky loves to quote from Clausewitz, "the continuation of politics with other means". And the imperialist phase of capitalist rule, through competition in building armaments, has made peace illusory, for it has placed us regularly under military dictatorship, and has thereby made war permanent.

Therefore our revised economic interpretation of history leads to a dilemma. Our new revisionists are between the devil and the sea. Either the class struggle persists in war as the chief life condition of the proletariat and the declaration of class harmony by Socialist leaders is a crime against the working class; or carrying on the class struggle in time of peace is a crime against the "interests of the nation" and the "security of the fatherland". Either class struggle or class harmony is the fundamental factor in our social life, both in peace and war.

Either the International must remain a heap of ruins after the war or its resurrection will take place on the basis of the class struggle from which it took its rise in the first place. It will not appear by magic at the playing over of the old tunes which hypnotised the world before August 4. Only by definitely recognising and disowning our own weaknesses and failures since August 4, by giving up the tactics introduced since that time, can we begin the rebuilding of the International. And the first step in this direction is agitation for the ending of the war and the securing of peace on the basis of the common interests of the international proletariat.

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