

On Rosa Luxemburg and Russian Revolution

by Paresh Chattopadhyay

We read with considerable interest the short piece ‘Rosa Luxemburg: Future belongs to Bolshevism’. (*Mainstream*, vol. LIV, No. 46) We may be permitted to make a couple of comments on this piece. (In the following we use the shortened form RL for Rosa Luxemburg.)

RL’s longstanding critique of the Bolshevik leadership is well known. However, her rather positive estimate of the Bolshevik leadership, as it appears in this short piece (in fact it is part of a longer discourse with critical remarks), was a sharp reaction to the inertia of the German Social Democratic Party and, moreover, its collaboration with German imperialism in the World War in the name of patriotism. This we should keep in mind.

Our disagreement with RL’s position, as stated in this piece, concerns her affirmation that Russia on the morrow of the Revolution was under a proletarian dictatorship, a term which we take in the exact sense of Marx, that is, an absolute rule by the working class as an aftermath of the political victory over the capitalist class. By definition this is a *class* rule, a rule by a *whole* class. According to RL the Russian Revolution under the Bolsheviks resulted in the ‘first experiment of proletarian dictatorship’. However, we submit that the logic of facts goes against her position.. In fact even when we consider the fact that the Bolshevik Party had gained support of the great majority of the industrial workers on the eve of October (November), there is no evidence that workers themselves either initiated or led the Revolution. Far from being the work of the country’s ‘immense majority in the interest of the immense majority’—to use the words of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*—the decision to undertake this act was taken in a secret meeting by a very small group of radicalised intelligentsia constituting the leadership of a single party, far removed from the locus of material production and exploitation, having no mandate from the working people to seize power behind the back and over the head of the Second Congress of Soviets about to meet. So we cannot accept RL’s contention that the Bolshevik Revolution was the start of a (world) proletarian revolution.

Lenin’s utter disdain for the Soviets is strikingly shown in his confidential correspondence on the eve of the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets (naturally published only after Lenin’s death). While all the time mouthing in public ‘All power to the Soviets’, Lenin, in his correspondence with his half-reluctant comrades in the party’s Central Committee, in fact, spoke of the ‘idiocy’ and ‘treachery’ in waiting for the Soviets to meet in order to seize power, because, in his words, ‘the Congress will *give nothing and can give nothing*’. (emphasis in the original)

While deeply distrusting the Soviets, he used, to great effect, the slogan ‘All power to the Soviets’ to mobilise the masses. The great historian of the Russian Soviets, Oskar Anweiler, in his book (originally in German), *Council Movement in Russia 1905-1921*, shows that Lenin never attached much importance to the Soviets as the workers’ self-governing organs, and always regarded them as instruments to be used for seizing power.

That the dictatorship under the Bolsheviks in Russia was no proletarian (*class*) dictatorship, was in fact a single-party dictatorship, the party substituting for the class (standing Marx on his head), is clearly seen in Lenin's own pronouncements of the period. Thus in April 1918 Lenin discovered that the Russian was 'a bad worker in comparison with the workers of the advanced nations'. Therefore, instead of collectively administering the affairs of the workplace, through their own elected organs—a practice which earlier the Bolsheviks were the foremost to champion but now denounced as 'petty bourgeois spontaneity'—the masses must show the 'unquestioning obedience to the single will of the leaders of the labour process and must accept the unquestioning subordination during working time to the one-person decision of the Soviet directors, of the Soviet dictators, elected or nominated by the Soviet institutions'. Accordingly, a whole series of measures to discipline labour (besides one-person management) were adopted by the authorities: labour books, forced labour camps, piece wage...(See E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol.II 1963) In early 1919, at the Eighth Party Congress, Lenin again emphasised that in Russia 'we have so far not reached the stage at which the working people could participate in government'. Then at the Ninth Party Congress (1920), Lenin denounced the 'still surviving notorious democratism', and characterised 'the outcry against appointees' as 'pernicious trash (*vrednyikhlam*)'.

It is remarkable that RL's own political practice (along with that of the party which she led) was totally the exact opposite of the political practice of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Thus almost exactly one year after the Bolshevik seizure of power (December 14, 1918), RL, while elaborating on the programme of the Spartacus League, declared that the 'proletarian revolution has no need for terror. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to shape the world according to its own principles, but an act of the people, of millions who are on a historical mission to turn what is historically necessary into reality.... The Spartacus League is no party that wants to seize power on the back of the workers... The Spartacus League will only ever seize power if it has a clear, unambiguous mandate from the vast majority of Germany's proletarian masses; it will never seize power by other means than a conscious approval of its perspectives, goals and means of struggle.' What else we read in these lines if not a complete, conscious repudiation of the Bolshevik practice! The high — albeit critical—praise of the Bolsheviks by RL is quite understandable in view of the fact that she, like most of the West European revolutionaries, had little information about what was going on in Russia during this period. Anton Pannekoek, the outstanding astronomer-revolutionary, later testified that for about three years beginning with 1917 he and his comrades suffered from the paucity of information about what was going on in Russia. Pannekoek in 1921 was still full of praise for the Soviets in Russia compared with the bourgeois parliamentary system when in fact the Soviets in Russia had long ceased to exist as workers' independent organs of self-government. And, then, of course RL passed away long before she could have a chance to have first-hand knowledge of the events in Russia.

On the nature of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, let us conclude with some words from a great economist and socialist by conviction, Joseph Schumpeter (*Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*) :

The inevitable conflict that split the party (that is, the Social Democratic Party of Russia) into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (1903) meant something much more serious than a mere disagreement regarding tactics such as the names of the two groups suggest. At the time no observer, however experienced, could have realised fully the nature of the rift. By now the diagnosis should

be obvious. The Marxist phraseology which both groups retained obscured the fact that one of them had irrevocably broken away from the classical Marxism. Lenin had no illusion concerning the Russian situation. He saw that the Tsarist régime could be successfully attacked only when temporarily weakened by military defeat and that in the ensuing disorganisation a resolute and well-disciplined group could by ruthless terror overthrow whatever other régime might attempt to replace it... Such a group could only be recruited from the intellectual stratum, and the best material available was to be found within the party. His attempt to gain control of the latter therefore amounted to an attempt to destroy its very soul. The majority and their leader, Martov, must have felt that. He did not criticise Marx or advocate a new departure, He resisted Lenin in the name of Marx and stood for the Marxist doctrine of proletarian mass party. The novel note was struck by Lenin... Un-Marxian was not merely the idea of socialisation by *pronunciamiento* in an obviously immature situation; much more so was the idea that 'emancipation' was to be not the work of the proletariat itself but of a band of intellectuals officering the rabble.

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