

Rosa Luxemburg on the National Assembly Debate (December 1918)

Abstract

Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) emerged in the early 1900s as one of the leading thinkers in Europe’s socialist movement and, by 1914, as perhaps the most uncompromising anti-war voice on the left wing of Germany’s Socialist Democratic Party. Imprisoned by the military government in 1916 on account of her ongoing pacifist engagement, Luxemburg gained her release in early November 1918, just as revolutionary Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils were completely upending the country’s political landscape. Luxemburg immediately resumed her radical activism. Within a day of her release from prison, Luxemburg had taken the helm of the revolutionary newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* [The Red Flag], writing lead articles and crafting it into the official organ of Germany’s revolutionary left. Luxemburg similarly guided the foundation of the German Communist Party [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, or KPD] on New Year’s Day 1919. Just two weeks later, on January 15, 1919, a squad of right-wing assassins in Berlin abducted and killed Luxemburg in the aftermath of the failed Spartacus Uprising.

As the First World War broke out in 1914, Luxemburg began working more closely with her fellow revolutionary socialist Karl Liebknecht (whom the same squad also assassinated on January 15). Together, Luxemburg and Liebknecht had organized some of the more radical and disgruntled anti-war Social Democrats by 1916 into the far-left anti-war Spartacus Group, and the two figures subsequently worked closely with one another in late 1918—after their respective releases from political imprisonment—in launching *Die Rote Fahne* and the German Communist Party.

Despite their close and longstanding association, however, Luxemburg and Liebknecht diverged on certain questions of policy and tactics. This occurred, for example, at the KPD’s founding congress on January 1, 1919, as the party debated whether to run a slate of candidates in the upcoming elections to the National Assembly. Liebknecht strongly advocated against doing so, and he envisioned Germany’s revolutionary path following that which Lenin had just blazed with such apparent success in Russia—an armed uprising and seizure of power by force. Luxemburg favored a less violent path to power, and although she expressed deep and fundamental misgivings about the National Assembly in her December article, her position on the matter evolved during the closing weeks of 1918, and she grew increasingly to favor a vigorous KPD campaign for seats in that assembly. Written less than two weeks apart, these documents illustrate the extent of Luxemburg’s tactical evolution and the flexibility of her thinking.

Her December 17 article “National Assembly or Council Government?” appeared in *Die Rote Fahne* in the midst of a congress in Berlin of representatives from Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils throughout Germany. The central question facing that congress was whether those spontaneously formed local councils, which had been the engines of the November Revolution, would form the basis of a national government, or whether elections should take place for a National Assembly that would draft a constitution for the new republic. Luxemburg called forcefully for the former—a national government whose authority derived from the local revolutionary councils—and she clearly intended to sway the decisions of the representatives. Instead, the congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils voted overwhelmingly in support of elections for a National Assembly.

This lack of support for a council government based on the Soviet model moved Luxemburg to reconsider the revolution’s larger strategy, even as she harbored misgivings about the rushed nature of the congress’s vote. In Luxemburg’s speech before the KPD’s founding members on January 1, she now argued that revolutionary socialists should try to win election to as many seats in the National Assembly

as possible, from which vantage point they could then sow the seeds of revolution within the very halls of government itself. KPD members voted later that day against Luxemburg's position, however, and heavily in favor of boycotting the elections and pursuing an extra-parliamentary path to power.

A note on some references in the texts: In her December 17 article, Luxemburg alluded to the moderate Social Democrats as "Scheidemänner," a play on the last name of the prominent SPD politician Philipp Scheidemann, whom she disparaged along with his followers as "lackeys of the bourgeoisie" for already having backed away from the radical potential of the November Revolution. In her speech on January 1, "Comrade Rühle" referred to fellow KPD member Otto Rühle, who strongly supported a government based on councils and remained skeptical of a centralized party bureaucracy. "Comrade Levi" was Paul Levi, who strongly supported the party's taking part in the National Assembly elections. Levi became chair of the KPD just over two months later, and he steered the party toward a commitment to contest national, state, and local elections throughout Germany at the next party congress in October 1919.

Source

I. National Assembly or Government by Councils (December 17, 1918)

This is the second item on the agenda of the National Assembly of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, and this is in fact the cardinal question of the revolution at this moment. Either a National Assembly or all power to the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, either renunciation of socialism or the fiercest class struggle in the full armor of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie: that is the dilemma.

An idyllic plan this: to realize socialism by parliamentary means, by simple majority vote! It is a pity that this sky-blue fantasy from cloud-cuckoo land does not even reckon with the historical experience of the bourgeois revolution, let alone with the peculiarities of the proletarian revolution.

What was the situation in England? That was the cradle of bourgeois parliamentarism, where it developed earliest and most powerfully. When the hour of the first modern bourgeois revolution struck in England in 1649, the English parliament could already look back on a history of more than three hundred years. From the very first moment of the revolution, parliament became its center, its bulwark, its headquarters. The famous Long Parliament, which carried out all phases of the English Revolution, from the first skirmish between the opposition and royal power to the trial and execution of Charles Stuart, in its own bosom, this parliament was an unsurpassable, compliant tool in the hands of the rising bourgeoisie.

And what was the result? This same parliament had to create a special "parliamentary army" for itself, which parliamentary generals elected from its bosom led into the field in order to defeat feudalism, the army of royalist "cavaliers," in a long, tough, bloody civil war. The fate of the English Revolution was decided not in the debates in Westminster Abbey, no matter how much the intellectual center of the revolution was there, but on the battlefields of Marston Moor and Naseby, not by the brilliant parliamentary speeches, but by the peasant cavalry, by the "iron sides" of Cromwell. And its course led from parliament through civil war to two violent "cleansings" of parliament and finally to Cromwell's dictatorship.

And in France? That is where the idea of the National Assembly was first born. It was a brilliant world-historical intuition of class instinct when Mirabeau and others declared in 1789 that the three "estates," the nobility, the clergy and "the third estate," which had always been separate until then, would from now on have to meet together as the National Assembly. This assembly was a tool of the bourgeois class struggle precisely because of the joint meeting of the estates. Together with strong minorities of the two upper estates, the "third estate," i.e., the revolutionary bourgeoisie, had a compact majority in the National Assembly from the outset.

And what was the result? The Vendée, the emigration, the betrayal of the generals, the clergy's instigations, the insurrection of fifty departments, the coalition wars of feudal Europe, and finally, as the

only means of ensuring the victory of the revolution, the dictatorship and, as its conclusion, the Reign of Terror!

The parliamentary majority was of little use for fighting the bourgeois revolutions! And yet, what is the contrast between the bourgeoisie and feudalism compared to the yawning chasm that has opened up today between labor and capital! What is the class consciousness on both sides of the fighters who took up arms against each other in 1649 or 1789 compared with the deadly, unquenchable hatred that blazes between the proletariat and the capitalist class today! It was not for nothing that Karl Marx held his scientific lantern to the most hidden driving forces of the economic and political machinery of bourgeois society. It was not for nothing that he illuminated its own actions and behavior down to the finest vein of its feeling and thinking as an outgrowth of the great basic fact that it lives its life like the vampire of the blood of the proletariat.

It was not for nothing that August Bebel shouted at the end of his famous speech at the Dresden Party Congress: "I am and remain a mortal enemy of bourgeois society!"

It is the last great struggle in which it is a question of the existence or non-existence of exploitation, of a turning point in human history, a struggle in which there can be no evasion, no compromise, no mercy. And this final struggle, which surpasses everything that has gone before in the violence of the task, is to accomplish what no class struggle, no revolution has ever accomplished: to dissolve the death struggle between two worlds into a gentle whisper of parliamentary battles and majority resolutions!

Parliamentarianism was also an arena of class struggle for the proletariat as long as the quiet everyday life of bourgeois society lasted: it was the tribune from which the masses could be gathered around the banner of socialism and trained for the struggle. Today we are in the midst of the proletarian revolution, and it is time to lay the axe to the tree of capitalist exploitation itself. Bourgeois parliamentarism, like bourgeois class rule, whose most noble political goal it is, has forfeited its right to exist. Now the class struggle in its undisguised, naked form is coming into its own. Capital and labor have nothing more to say to each other, they have only to grasp each other in an iron embrace and decide in the final struggle who will be thrown to the ground.

Lassalle's words apply today more than ever: the revolutionary act is always to name what is going on. And this is what is going on: labor on one side – capital on the other! No hypocrisy of amicable negotiations where it is a matter of life and death, no victories of commonality where there is only one side versus another. Clear, open, honest and strong through clarity and honesty, the proletariat, constituted as a class, must gather all political power in its own hands.

"Political equality, democracy!" is what the great and small prophets of bourgeois class rule sang to us for decades.

And today the henchmen of the bourgeoisie, the Scheidemänner, are singing "political equality, democracy!" like an echo.

Yes, it is to be realized first. For the term "political equality" will only become flesh the moment economic exploitation is stamped out. And "democracy," the rule of the people, only begins when the working people seize political power.

The words that have been misused by the bourgeois classes for a century and a half must be criticized in practice by historical action. It is necessary to make "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*," proclaimed by the bourgeoisie in France in 1789, the truth for the first time – by abolishing the class rule of the bourgeoisie. And as the first act towards this saving deed, it must be put on record before the whole world and before the centuries of world history: What has hitherto been regarded as equality and democracy: parliament, national assembly, equal ballots, was a lie and a sham! All power in the hands of the working masses as a revolutionary weapon to smash capitalism – that alone is true equality, that alone is true democracy!

Source: Rosa Luxemburg, „Nationalversammlung oder Räteregierung“, *Die Rote Fahne*, Berlin, Nr. 32 vom 17. Dezember 1918. In *Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4., August 1914 bis Januar 1919, Berlin, pp. 460–63. Available online:

<https://www.rosalux.de/stiftung/historisches-zentrum/rosa-luxemburg/nationalversammlung-oder-raeteregerung>

II. Speech in Favor of KPD Participation in the Elections to the National Assembly (December 30, 1918)

Each of us, including comrade Levi, looks above all at the stormy contradiction and the mood that developed here during his speech, with inner joy at the source from which this contradiction comes. We all understand and greatly appreciate the revolutionary vigor and determination that speaks from all of you, and if comrade Rühle warned you all about our opportunism, we let this rebuke pass over us. We may not have worked in vain if we find such determined party comrades. The danger of our opportunism is not as great as Comrade Rühle has painted it here. I am convinced that it is our duty to speak to you loud and clear even when we must represent an opinion that contradicts yours. We would be sad representatives of the Spartacus League, which stands in defiance of the whole world, if we did not have the courage to confront our own comrades.

The joy I have just expressed at the mood you are so stormily expressing is not unmixed. I look at it with one laughing and one crying eye. I am convinced that you want to make your radicalism a little comfortable and quick, as evidenced by the shouts of "Vote quickly!". This does not reflect the maturity and seriousness that belong in this chamber. It is my firm conviction that this is a matter that must be considered and dealt with calmly. We are called to the greatest tasks in world history, and it cannot be considered maturely and thoroughly enough what steps we have before us so that we are sure of reaching our goal. Such important decisions cannot be made so quickly. I miss the thoughtfulness, the seriousness that does not exclude revolutionary vigor, but should be paired with it.

Let me give you a small example of how rashly you want to decide on things that require thorough consideration. One of the comrades who is making particularly vehement interjections here, driven by revolutionary impatience, is demanding that no time at all be wasted. A discussion about one of the most important questions is called a waste of time. This comrade referred to Russia, and this example can show you that people do not take the time to examine the validity of the arguments they put forward. In Russia, when the National Assembly was rejected, the situation was somewhat similar to that in Germany today. But have you forgotten that something else took place before the rejection of the National Assembly in November, the seizure of power by the revolutionary proletariat? Do you perhaps already have a socialist government today, a Trotsky-Lenin government? Russia had a long history of revolution before that, which Germany does not have. In Russia the revolution did not begin in March 1917, but as early as 1905. The last revolution is only the last chapter, behind it lies the whole period from 1905 onwards. The masses reached a completely different level of maturity than in Germany today. You have nothing behind you but the miserable half-revolution of November 9th. We must think very carefully about what is most important for the revolution now and what its next tactical tasks should be and how they should be formulated.

Don't be in such a hurry, be patient and listen to the end. You want to work with slogans in parliament. That is not the decisive factor. What is the surest way to educate the masses in Germany for the tasks they have? Your tactics are based on the assumption that in 14 days, when the people leave Berlin, a new government can be formed in Berlin. "We'll form a new government here in 14 days." I would be delighted if that were the case. But as a serious politician, I can't base my tactics on speculation. However, not all possibilities must be ruled out. I will have to develop for you the fact that the next phase will involve a very strong confrontation due to the new turn in government. But I am obliged to take the paths that arise from my view of the situation in Germany. The tasks are enormous, they lead to the world socialist revolution. But what we have seen so far in Germany is the immaturity of the masses. Our next task is to train the masses to fulfill these tasks. We want to achieve this through parliamentarism. The word must decide. I tell you, it is precisely thanks to the immaturity of the masses, who have not yet understood how to bring the council system to victory, that the counter-revolution has succeeded in erecting the National Assembly as a bulwark against us. Now our path leads through this bulwark. It is my duty to direct all reason against it, to fight against this bulwark, to move into the National Assembly, to bang my fist on the table there, the will of the people is the highest law. Here we must decide. When the masses are mature enough, the small group, the minority, will grow into the ruling power, they will give us the power to expel from within the temple those who have no business there, our opponents, the

bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, etc. They are not getting there.

You must be consistent. On the one hand, you speculate on such a maturity of conditions, on such revolutionary power and consciousness of the masses, that in a fortnight you promise to set up a socialist government in place of the National Assembly; on the other hand, you say that if the National Assembly comes into being, the pressure of the street will sweep it away. Don't imagine that if we suggest they don't cast their ballot, the elections will be different. Elections are a new instrument of revolutionary struggle. They are stuck in the old mold. For you, only the parliament of the German Reichstag exists. You cannot imagine using this instrument in a revolutionary sense. You understand: either machine guns or parliamentarism. We want a more refined radicalism. Not just this coarse-grained either-or. It is more convenient, simpler, but it is a simplification that does not serve to train and educate the masses.

From a purely practical point of view, if you decide to boycott, can you really say with a clear conscience that you are the best core of the German working class, and as representatives of the most revolutionary stratum you have the possibility of assuring with a clear conscience that the vast masses of the working class will really follow your boycott slogan and not participate? I am talking about the vast masses, not about the groups that belong to us. We are talking about millions, men, women, young people, soldiers. I am asking clearly whether you can say with a clear conscience that if we here decide to boycott the National Assembly, these masses will turn their backs on the elections or, better still, turn their fists against the National Assembly? You cannot say that with a clear conscience. We know how immature the masses are. The fact is that you are cutting us off from the possibility of wresting power from the counter-revolution. While we are in favor of activity in the revolutionary sense, you make yourselves comfortable, turn your backs on counter-revolutionary machinations, leave the masses to counter-revolutionary influences. You yourselves feel that you cannot do this.

In what way do you want to influence the elections if you declare from the outset that we consider the elections null and void? We must show the masses that there is no better answer to the counter-revolutionary decision against the council system than to bring about a tremendous rally of voters by electing people who are against the National Assembly and in favor of the council system. This is the active method of pointing the weapon used against us at the enemy's chest. You must understand that those who are voicing suspicions of opportunism against us have not taken the time, in the pressure of time and work, to calmly and thoroughly examine both their views and ours.

It can only be a question of which method is the more expedient for the common purpose of enlightening the masses. There is no question of opportunism in this hall, remember that, Comrade Rühle! There is a profound contradiction in your own argument when you say that you fear the detrimental effects of parliamentarism on the masses. On the one hand, you are so sure of the revolutionary maturity of the masses that you are counting on the establishment of a socialist government here in a fortnight's time, i.e., the final victory of socialism. On the other hand, you fear the dangerous consequences of voting for these same mature masses. I must tell you frankly, I am not afraid of anything at all. I am convinced that the masses are created and born from the outset by the whole situation so that they will correctly understand our tactics. We must educate the masses in line with our tactics, so that they understand how to use the instrument of voting not as a weapon of counter-revolution, but as class-conscious, revolutionary masses who know how to use the weapon [our enemies] have handed us to destroy them. I conclude by saying that there is no difference between us in purpose and intention, that we are all on the same side, that we are fighting the National Assembly as a counter-revolutionary bulwark, that we want to call up and educate the masses in order to destroy the National Assembly. It is a question of expediency and the better method. Yours is the simpler, the more convenient, ours is a little more complicated, and that is precisely why I appreciate it for deepening the spiritual revolutionization of the masses. Besides, your tactic is a speculation on the precipitating circumstances of the coming weeks, ours keeps in mind the still long road of educating the masses. Our tactics calculate the next tasks in connection with the tasks of the whole revolution that lies ahead of us, until the German proletarian masses are ripe enough to take the reins. You are tilting at windmills if you accuse me of such arguments. We will have to take to the streets after all; our tactics are based on developing the main action on the

streets. So this proves that you either want to use machine guns or get elected into the German Reichstag. It must be the other way around! The street should come to rule and triumph everywhere. We want to plant a victorious sign within the National Assembly, based on action from outside. We want to blow up this bulwark from within. We want the tribune of the National Assembly and also that of the voters' assemblies. Whether you decide one way or another, you stand on common ground with us, on the ground of the revolutionary struggle against the National Assembly.

Source: Rosa Luxemburg, „Rede für die Beteiligung der KPD an den Wahlen zur Nationalversammlung“, December 30, 1918. In *Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4., August 1914 bis Januar 1919, Berlin, pp. 479–83. Available online: <https://www.rosalux.de/stiftung/historisches-zentrum/rosa-luxemburg/rede-fuer-die-beteiligung-d-er-kpd-an-den-wahlen-zur-nationalversammlung>

Translation: GHI staff

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