

Rosa Luxemburg, “Our Program and the Political Situation” (December 30, 1918)

Abstract

Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), revolutionary and political theorist, had already led an eventful life before the November Revolution. Born in Congress Poland, she studied and received her PhD in Zurich before she came to Berlin in 1898 with the help of a marriage of convenience. There she joined the SPD and became active in the German worker movement. She was sentenced to prison several times because of her criticism of the imperial government and the First World War. Together with Karl Liebknecht, she formed the Spartacus League during the war to protest the SPD’s accommodation with the government, the so-called *Burgfrieden*. As a committed pacifist, she criticized bellicose nationalism and wartime capitalist business profits, hoping to establish a socialist international. Luxemburg switched to the USPD, but radical Spartacists remained a minority with little influence there too. She and Liebknecht then became founding members of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in January 1919. Luxemburg demanded a socialist soviet government following the Russian model instead of a parliamentary democracy like Social Democrats around Ebert sought. During the party’s founding congress on December 30/31, 1918, Luxemburg gave a speech outlining the party’s agenda, excerpts from which are reproduced here.

Source

Comrades! Our task today is to discuss and adopt a program. In undertaking this task we are not motivated solely by the formal consideration that yesterday we founded a new independent party and that a new party must formulate an official program. Great historical movements have been the determining causes of today’s deliberations. The time has come when the entire Social Democratic socialist program of the proletariat has to be placed on a new foundation. Comrades! In so doing, we connect ourselves to the threads which Marx and Engels spun precisely seventy years ago in the *Communist Manifesto*. As you know, the *Communist Manifesto* dealt with socialism, with the realization of the ultimate goals of socialism as the immediate task of the proletarian revolution. This was the conception advocated by Marx and Engels in the Revolution of 1848; and it was what they conceived as the basis for international proletarian action as well. In common with all the leading spirits in the proletarian movement, both Marx and Engels then believed that the immediate task was the introduction of socialism. All that was necessary, they thought, was to bring about a political revolution, to seize the political power of the state in order to make socialism immediately enter the realm of flesh and blood. Subsequently, as you are aware, Marx and Engels undertook a thoroughgoing revision of this standpoint. In their joint Preface to the republication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1872, they say:

No special stress is to be laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of section II. That passage would, in many respects, be differently worded today. In view of the gigantic strides of modern industry during the last twenty-five years and of the accompanying progress of the organization of the party of the working class: in view of the practical experience gained, first in the February revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, where the proletariat for the first time held political power for two months, this program has in some aspects been antiquated. One thing especially was proved by the Commune, namely, that the “working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.”

What is the actual wording of the passage which is said to be dated? It reads on page 23 of the

Communist Manifesto as follows:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to gradually wrest all capital from the bourgeoisie: to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning this can only be effected by means of despotic interference into property rights and into the conditions of bourgeois production; by measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, go beyond themselves, necessitate further inroads into the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of revolutionizing the whole mode of production.

The measures will, of course, be different in different countries.

Nevertheless, in the most advanced countries, the following will be generally applicable:

1. Abolition of landed property and application of all land rents to public purposes.
2. Heavy progressive taxes.
3. Abolition of the right of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralization of credit in the hands of the state by means of a national bank with state capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.
7. Increase in the number of factories and instruments of production owned by the state; the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally, in accordance with a social plan.
8. Equal obligation upon all to labor. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
9. Unification of agricultural and manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labor in its present form. Unification of education with industrial production, etc., etc.

As you see, with a few variations, these are the tasks that confront us today: the introduction, the realization of socialism. Between the time when the above program was formulated and the present moment, there have intervened seventy years of capitalist development, and the dialectical movement of history has brought us back to the conception which Marx and Engels had abandoned in 1848 as erroneous. At that time, there were good reasons for believing that their earlier views had been wrong. The further development of capital has, however, led to the fact that what was incorrect in 1848 has become truth today, so that our immediate task today is to fulfill what Marx and Engels thought they would have to accomplish in 1848. But between that point in the development, that beginning, and our own views and our immediate task, there lies the whole development not only of capitalism but also of the socialist labor movement, above all in Germany as the leading land of the modern proletariat. This development has taken a peculiar form.

When, after the disillusionments of the Revolution of 1848, Marx and Engels had given up the idea that the proletariat could immediately realize socialism, there came into existence in all countries Social Democratic socialist parties inspired with very different conceptions. The immediate task of these parties was declared to be detail work, the petty daily struggle in the political and economic realms, in order, by degrees, to form the armies of the proletariat which would be ready to realize socialism when capitalist development had matured. The socialist program was thereby established upon an utterly different foundation, and in Germany the change took a very typical form. Until the collapse of August 4, 1914, German Social Democracy took its stand upon the Erfurt Program, by which the so-called immediate minimal aims were placed in the forefront, while socialism was no more than a distant guiding star, the ultimate goal. Far more important, however, than what is written in a program is the way in which that program is interpreted in action. From this point of view, great importance must be attached to one of the historical documents of our labor movement, to the *Preface* written by Friedrich Engels to the 1895 republication of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*. It is not on mere historical grounds that I now reopen this question. The matter is one of extreme immediacy. It has become our historical duty today to replace our program upon the foundation laid by Marx and Engels in 1848. In view of the changes brought about by historical development, it is our duty to undertake a deliberate revision of the views that guided German Social Democracy until the collapse of August 4. This revision must be officially undertaken today.

[...]

Comrades! This first act, between November 9 and the present, has been filled with illusions on all sides. The first illusion of the workers and soldiers who made the revolution was: the illusion of unity under the banner of so-called socialism. What could be more characteristic of the internal weakness of the Revolution of November 9 than the fact that at the head of the movement appeared persons who a few hours before the revolution broke out had regarded it as their chief duty to agitate against it,

[Hear! Hear!]

to attempt to make revolution impossible: the Eberts, Scheidemanns and Haases. The motto of the Revolution of November 9 was the idea of the unity of the various socialist trends in the general exultation – an illusion which was to be bloodily avenged. The events of the last few days have brought a bitter awakening from our dreams. But the self-deception was universal, affecting the Ebert and Scheidemann groups and the bourgeoisie no less than ourselves. Another illusion was that of the bourgeoisie at the end of this stage, believing that by means of the Ebert-Haase combination, by means of the so-called socialist government, they would really be able to bridle the proletarian masses and to strangle the socialist revolution. Yet another illusion was that of the Ebert-Scheidemann government, that with the aid of the soldiers returned from the front, they would be able to hold down the working masses in their socialist class struggle.

Such were the multifarious illusions which explain recent events. One and all, they have now been dissipated into nothingness. It has been shown that the union between Haase and Ebert-Scheidemann under the banner of “socialism” serves merely as a fig leaf for the veiling of a counter-revolutionary policy. We ourselves have been cured of our self-deceptions, as happens in all revolutions. There is a definite revolutionary method by which the people can be cured of illusion, but unfortunately, the cure must be paid for with the blood of the people. In Germany, events have followed a course characteristic of earlier revolutions. The blood of the victims on the Chausseestrasse on December 6, the blood of the sailors on December 24, brought the truth home to the broad masses of the people. They came to realize that what has been pasted together and called a socialist government is nothing but a government representing the bourgeois counter-revolution, and that whoever continues to tolerate such a state of affairs is working against the proletariat and against socialism. [Applause]

[...]

Our motto is: In the beginning was the act. And the act must be that the workers' and soldiers' councils realize their mission and learn to become the sole public power of the whole nation. Only in this way can we mine the ground so that it will be ready for the revolution which will crown our work. This, comrades, is the reason, this is the clear calculation and clear consciousness which led some of us, and me in particular, to say yesterday, "Don't think that the struggle will continue to be so easy." Some comrades have interpreted me as saying that they wanted to boycott the National Assembly and simply to fold their arms. It is impossible in the time that remains, to discuss this matter fully, but let me say that I never dreamed of anything of the kind. My meaning was that history is not going to make our revolution an easy matter like the bourgeois revolutions in which it sufficed to overthrow that official power at the center and to replace a dozen or so persons in authority. We have to work from beneath, and this corresponds to the mass character of our revolution which aims at the foundation and base of the social constitution; it corresponds to the character of the present proletarian revolution that the conquest of political power must come not from above but from below. The 9th of November was an attempt, a weak, half-hearted, half-conscious, and chaotic attempt to overthrow the existing public power and to put an end to class rule. What now must be done is that with full consciousness all the forces of the proletariat should be concentrated in an attack on the very foundations of capitalist society. There, at the base, where the individual employer confronts his wage slaves; at the base, where all the executive organs of political class rule confront the object of this rule, the masses; there, step by step, we must seize the means of power from the rulers and take them into our own hands. In the form that I depict it, the process may seem rather more tedious than one had imagined it at first. It is healthy, I think, that we should be perfectly clear as to all the difficulties and complications of this revolution. For I hope that, as in my own case, so in yours also, the description of the difficulties of the accumulating tasks will paralyze neither your zeal nor your energy. On the contrary, the greater the task, the more will we gather all of our forces. And we must not forget that the revolution is able to do its work with extraordinary *speed*. I make no attempt to prophesy how much time will be needed for this process. Who among us cares about the time; who worries, so long only as our lives suffice to bring it to pass. It is only important that we know clearly and precisely what is to be done; and I hope that my feeble powers have shown you to some extent the broad outlines of that which is to be done.

[*tumultuous applause*]

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