



# Through fire and water for the cause of socialism

Rosa Luxemburg

Over eighty years after her death, a huge amount of Rosa Luxemburg's writings have yet to be translated into English. Here we attempt to remedy the situation a little with three previously untranslated articles dating from the German revolution.

Mutinies spread through the armed forces as it became clear that the German empire would lose the first world war and, on 9 November 1918, the Kaiser abdicated and a republic was established. Luxemburg herself was freed from prison, where she had been detained for most of the war. These three articles in *Die Rote Fahne*, paper of the newly-formed Communist Party of Germany, address the problems that arose in the course of the German revolution. On 15 January 1919, only days after the last of these articles was written, Luxemburg was murdered by counter-revolutionary officers.

## National Assembly or Government of Workers' Councils?

[17 December 1918]

Thus reads the second item on the agenda of the national conference of workers' and soldiers' councils,<sup>1</sup> and thus, truly, is the cardinal question of the revolution at the moment put. Either national assembly or all power to the workers' and soldiers' councils; either the renunciation of socialism or sharper class struggle, in full battle dress, by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. That is the dilemma.

An idyllic plan, indeed: to realise socialism in a parliamentary manner, by simple majority decision! What a shame that this sky-blue fantasy from cloud cuckoo land fails to reckon even with the historical experience of the bourgeois revolution, let alone the specific character of the proletarian revolution.

How do things stand in England? There is the cradle of bourgeois parliamentarism, there it developed earliest and to its fullest power. When the hour of the first modern bourgeois revolution struck in England in 1649, the English parliament already looked back on a history of over three hundred years. The parliament then became, from the first moment of the revolution, its centre and bulwark, its headquarters. The famous Long Parliament—in whose womb every phase of the English revolution, from the first skirmish between the opposition and the royal power to the trial and execution of Charles Stuart, was born—this parliament was an unsurpassed, flexible tool in the hands of the rising bourgeoisie.

And what resulted? This very parliament had to create a separate 'parliamentary army', commanded in the field by parliamentary generals chosen from its midst, in order to vanquish feudalism, the army of the loyal 'cavaliers', in long, tough, bloody civil war. It was not in the debates in Westminster Abbey,<sup>2</sup> however much the intellectual centre of the revolution it was, but on the battlefields of Marston Moor and Naseby; not by polished parliamentary speeches but by the peasant cavalry, by Cromwell's 'ironsides', that the fate of the English revolution was decided. And its course led from the parliament through the civil war to the forcible 'purging' of the parliament twice, and finally to Cromwell's dictatorship.

And in France? It was there that the idea of the national assembly was first born. It was a brilliant, world-historical inspiration of the class instinct expounded by Mirabeau and others in 1789: The three 'estates' up to then always isolated—nobility, clergy and 'the third estate'—must henceforth meet *in common* in national assembly. This assembly was, precisely by virtue of the common meeting of the estates, a tool of the bourgeois class struggle. Together with powerful minorities of the two higher estates, the 'third estate'—that is, the revolutionary middle class—had a compact majority in the national assembly from the beginning.

And, once again, what happened? The Vendée; the emigration; the generals' betrayal; the clergy's notes; the uprising in fifty départements; the allied war of feudal Europe; finally, as

the only means of securing the victory of the revolution, the dictatorship and, as its conclusion, the reign of terror!

That's how little use a parliamentary majority was in fighting out the *bourgeois* revolution! And of course, what is the antagonism between bourgeoisie and feudalism next to the gaping abyss that today yawns between labour and capital! What is the class consciousness on both sides of the contenders who took to the field against each other in 1649 or 1789 compared with the ineradicable mortal hatred that today burns between the proletariat and the capitalist class! Not for nothing did Karl Marx hold his scientific lantern up to the economic and political workings of bourgeois society. Not for nothing did he throw light upon their particular deeds and behaviour, down to the minutest change in their feelings and thoughts, as the emanation of the great basic fact that they draw their existence like a vampire from the blood of the proletariat.

Not for nothing did August Bebel cry out at the conclusion of his celebrated speech to the Dresden party congress: "I am and remain a mortal enemy of bourgeois society!"<sup>3</sup>

It is the last great battle, to decide whether exploitation shall exist or not, a turning point in human history, a battle in which there can be no evasion, no compromise, no mercy.

And this final battle, which in the magnitude of its task surpasses all that has come before, is to accomplish what no class struggle and no revolution has ever accomplished: to dissolve the death throes of two worlds in a gentle whisper of parliamentary wars of words and majority resolutions!

Of course parliamentarism was an arena of class struggle for the proletariat while the tranquil routine of bourgeois society lasted: It was the tribune around which the masses gathered around the flag of socialism could be trained for the battle. Today we stand in the midst of the proletarian revolution; today the task is to put the axe to the root of capitalist exploitation itself. Bourgeois parliamentarism, like the bourgeois class rule which is its principal aim, has forfeited its right to existence. Today the class struggle takes to the field in its undisguised, naked form. Capital and labour have no more to say to each other; they have only to seize each other in an iron grip and decide in a final struggle who will be thrown to the ground.

The words of Lassalle<sup>4</sup> apply now more than ever: The revolutionary deed is always to *tell it like it is*. And this is how it is: here labour—there capital! No hypocritical talk of amicable negotiation when it is a matter of life and death; no victories for common interest when people are forced to take one side or the other. Clearly, openly, honestly, and strong by virtue of clarity and honesty, must the proletariat, *constituted as a class*, gather all political power in its hands.

'Equal political rights, democracy!' the great and small prophets of bourgeois class rule have sung to us in chorus for decades.

And 'equal political rights, democracy!' the lackeys of the bourgeoisie, the Scheidemanns,<sup>5</sup> sing back to them like an echo.

Yes, and only now can they become a reality. The word 'equal political rights' only becomes flesh when economic exploitation is got rid of root and branch. And 'democracy', the rule of the people, can only begin when the working people seize political power.

The task is to put the words of practical criticism that have been abused by the bourgeois classes for a century and a half into historical practice. The task is to make true for the first time the 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité' proclaimed by the middle classes in France in 1789—by abolishing the class rule of the middle class. And the first act of this saving deed will be a matter of placing on the record before the whole world and the centuries of world history: What passed for equal rights and democracy up to now—parliament, national assembly, equal suffrage—was lies and deceit! All power in the hands of the working masses as a revolutionary weapon to smash capitalism—that alone is real equal rights, that alone is real democracy!

## Neglected Duties

[8 January 1919]

Since 9 November the revolutionary wave has periodically hit against the same wall: the Ebert-Scheidemann government.<sup>6</sup> The occasion, the form, the capacity of the collisions, in each of the revolutionary crises we have experienced for eight weeks now, have varied. But the call 'Down with Ebert-Scheidemann!' is the keynote of *all* crises up to now and the slogan in which they all end, the slogan which resounds ever louder, more unanimous, more emphatic from the masses.

This is, of course, only natural. The continued development of the revolution labours under the fundamental mistake of 9 November: that at the summit of the revolutionary government people were installed who, up to the last minute, had done all in their power to prevent the outbreak of the revolution, and who, after its outbreak, installed themselves at its summit with the clear intention of strangling it at the first available opportunity.

If the revolution is to travel further along its course, if it is to go on from stage to stage in its development, to fulfil its historic tasks—the abolition of bourgeois class rule and the realisation of socialism—then the wall that stands against it, the Ebert-Scheidemann government, must be removed.

This special task cannot be dodged by the revolution; all the experiences of the eight weeks of revolutionary history flow into this task. The specific provocations of the Ebert government—6 December, the swearing-in of the Troops of the Guard, 24 December, the latest plot against the police president<sup>7</sup>—they all drive the revolutionary masses to the hard, bare, inexorable alternative: Either the revolution should abandon its proletarian character, its socialist mission, or Ebert, Scheidemann and their hangers-on must be driven from power.

The brightest masses of the proletariat in Berlin and in the revolution's main centres in the country have grasped this. This clear, sharp realisation rings out in the impassioned, powerful call from hundreds of thousands of throats: Down with Ebert-Scheidemann! That is the gain, the maturity, the progress that the latest experiences have brought us.

But what is *not* clear, where the weakness and immaturity of the revolution still hold sway, is *how* to conduct the struggle to remove the Ebert government, *how* to translate the stage of inner maturity already reached by the revolution into actions and relations of power. Never have these weaknesses and shortcomings been so strikingly demonstrated than in the last three days.

Sweeping away the Ebert-Scheidemann government does not mean storming the imperial chancellor's palace and banishing or arresting a couple of people; it means above all seizing the actual positions of power, and *holding* and *using* them.

But what have we seen in these three days? All that has really been achieved is: the reappointment of the police president, the occupation of *Vorwärts*, the occupation of the WTB and the bourgeois newspaper offices, all of which were the spontaneous work of the masses.<sup>8</sup> What have the bodies that stood, or purported to stand, at the head of the masses in these days made of it: the revolutionary shop stewards and the Greater Berlin executive of the USP?<sup>9</sup> They have neglected the most elementary rules of revolutionary action, for instance:

1. When the masses occupied *Vorwärts*, it was the duty of the revolutionary shop stewards and of the Greater Berlin executive of the USP, who 'officially' purport to represent the workers of Berlin, to ensure immediately an editorial direction corresponding to the spirit of the revolutionary workers of Berlin. But what has become of the editors? What are Däumig, Ledebour—journalists and editors by reputation and calling<sup>10</sup>—doing, especially now when the left of the USP possesses no paper; why do they desert the masses? Was it a more pressing business to 'advise' instead of acting?

2. When the masses occupied Wolff's Telegraph Office, it was the immediate duty of the

workers' revolutionary organs to *utilise* the telegraph office for the revolution, to publicise to the masses of comrades in the country news of events and the prevailing situation in Berlin. Only in this way can an intellectual connection be made between the Berlin workers and the revolutionary movement in the whole country, without which the revolution cannot win either here or there.

3. When you stand up against the Ebert-Scheidemann government in the sharpest struggle, you cannot at the same time enter into 'negotiations' with that same government. Let Haase's crowd—Oskar Cohn, Zietz, Kautsky, Breitscheid and the like<sup>11</sup>—waver, seize every opportunity to hastily pick up the threads again with Ebert's crowd, from whom they have separated with heavy hearts. The revolutionary shop stewards, for their part, they, who are in touch with the masses, know very well that Ebert and Scheidemann are mortal enemies of the revolution. Do you negotiate with a mortal enemy? These negotiations of course can only lead to one of two things: either to a compromise or—more likely—simply to procrastination which Ebert's crowd will take advantage of to prepare the most brutal measures.

4. When the masses were called on to the street, to be at the ready, then they should have been told clearly and distinctly what they were to do, or at least what was going on, what both friend and foe were doing and planning. In times of revolutionary crisis it goes without saying that the masses belong on the street. They are the revolution's only protection, its only guarantee. When the revolution is in danger—*and it is now, to the highest degree!*—then it is the duty of the proletarian masses to be on guard where their power manifests itself: on the street! Their very presence, their contact with each other is a threat and a warning to all open and disguised enemies of the revolution: Watch out!

But the masses must not be simply called upon; they must be politically active. They must above all, whatever happens, be called upon to decide. Were the revolutionary shop stewards, were the Greater Berlin executive of the USP not forced to stick to the resolution to enter negotiations with Ebert and Scheidemann, in front of the masses gathered in the Siegesallee?<sup>12</sup> They heard such a resounding response that all desire for discussions deserted them!

The masses are prepared to support any revolutionary action, to go through fire and water for the cause of socialism. A clear watchword should be given to them, a consistent, determined attitude pointed out to them. The workers' idealism, the soldiers' loyalty to the revolution can only be strengthened by determination and clarity in their leading organs and their policy. And today that means a policy that knows no wavering, no half-measures, only the keynote: Down with Ebert-Scheidemann! One more lesson!

Germany was the classic land of organisation and even more of organisational fanaticism, indeed of organisational arrogance. For the sake of 'organisation', the spirit, the aims, the capacity for action of the movement has been let go. And what do we see today? In the most important moments of the revolution the famous 'talent for organisation' was the first to fail, in the most pathetic way. Organising revolutionary actions is obviously quite different to 'organising' elections to the Reichstag or the labour court according to the rules and regulations. The organisation of revolutionary actions must and can only be learnt in the revolution itself, just as swimming can only be learnt in the water. That is what historical experience is for! But experience also has to be *learnt from*.

The experience of the last three days calls upon the workers' leading organs in a louder voice: Don't talk! Don't advise! Don't negotiate! Act!

### **The Failure of the Leaders**

[11 January 1919]

Events in Berlin have taken a turn that demands the sharpest criticism and the most earnest consideration from the working masses.

We have in the course of recent days openly and distinctly declared that the leadership of Berlin's mass movement was extremely lacking in determination, energy and revolutionary spirit. We have clearly said that the leadership is way behind the activity and battle-readiness of the masses. Not only inside these leading bodies, by initiative and persuasion, but also outside—in the *Rote Fahne*—by criticism, we have done everything to drive the movement forward, to spur on the revolutionary shop stewards in the big factories to energetic steps.

However, all exertions and attempts have ultimately been frustrated by the faint-hearted and wavering conduct of those bodies. After four days of allowing the most splendid moral and fighting energy of the masses to fizzle out and be frittered away through sheer lack of direction, after shaking the prospects of the revolutionary struggle extremely heavily and strengthening the Ebert-Scheidemann government's position extremely effectively by twice entering negotiations with the government, the revolutionary shop stewards finally decided on the night of Wednesday to Thursday to break off the negotiations and initiate battle all along the line. The slogan *General strike* was restored along with the slogan *To arms!*

But this was also the only achievement to which the revolutionary shop stewards roused themselves.

It goes without saying that when you launch the slogan of general strike and arming of the masses, you have to do everything to ensure the energetic implementation of the slogan. The shop stewards have undertaken to do no such thing! They reassured themselves with the bare slogan and—decided immediately on Thursday evening to enter negotiations with Ebert and Scheidemann for the third time!

This time the unification movement that has got underway among the workers of the Schwarzkopf works and other big factories<sup>13</sup> provided the desired pretext to call off again the struggle that had only just been properly started. The workers of the Schwarzkopf works, of AEG, of Knorr Brakes belong to the elite troops of Berlin's revolutionary proletariat and there is no doubt that they have the best intentions. But in this case the workers are the object of a puppet show whose wirepullers are Haase's crowd: Oscar Cohn, Dittman and others.<sup>14</sup> While these people demagogically employ the popular catchphrases 'unity' and 'no bloodshed', they want to paralyse the fighting energy of the masses, sow confusion and resolve the decisive revolutionary crisis into a rotten compromise.

It is clear to everyone who does not want to be deceived that this unification racket engineered by the USP is the greatest conceivable service that could be rendered in the present situation to Ebert and Scheidemann. Hanging in the air by themselves, trembling before the daring trial of strength with the workers, only partially and reluctantly supported by the wavering troops, grumbled at suspiciously by the bourgeoisie, the traitors to socialism have in recent days gone through the most burdensome hours of their brief governmental glory. The powerful appearance of the masses on the street, the turn brought about by the government's particularly brutal provocation in the Eichhorn affair, have taken these adventurers to task. Already they had partially lost themselves, showing all the irresolution, the fumbling uncertainty of their counter-revolutionary measures in recent days.

Then came to them as a saving respite the negotiations and finally the unification movement. The USP here proved again to be the saving angel of the counter-revolution. Haase and Dittman have resigned from the Ebert government, but they advocate on the street the same policy that acted as a figleaf for the Scheidemanns.

And the left wing of the USP supports and participates in this policy! The conditions for the recently terminated negotiations, which the revolutionary shop stewards accepted, were formulated by *Ledebour*. This side demanded, as the price for the capitulation of the workers, among other things the withdrawal of the individuals Ebert, Scheidemann, Noske and Landsberg from the government.<sup>15</sup> As if this were a question of *individuals* and not a definite policy! As if it didn't amount merely to the masses being confused and led astray, to

pushing the typical and well-known representatives of the Scheidemanns' infamous policy away from centre stage and replacing them with some colourless extras, who remain the straw men for the same policy while the Eberts and Scheidemanns act as puppet masters behind the scenes and so avoid the judgement of the masses!

One way or another everything the USP has initiated, the whole policy of negotiation that the revolutionary shop stewards participated in, comes to a capitulation of the revolutionary workers, to a glossing over of the inner contradictions and inconsistencies. It is the policy of 9 November, that wants to rewind the situation and the political agreement of the masses that has matured over eight weeks!

It goes without saying that the Communist Party did not participate in this shameful policy and disclaimed all responsibility for it. We look upon it as our duty to drive forward the cause of the revolution, to stand with iron energy against all attempts to confuse the issue, and to warn the masses by ruthless criticism against the dangers of the revolutionary shop stewards' policy of delay and the USP's policy of the marsh.

The crisis of recent days shouted to the masses lessons of the highest importance and energy. The state of defective leadership up to now, the failed organisational centres of the Berlin workers, have become untenable. If the cause of the revolution is to go forward, if the victory of the proletariat, of socialism, is to be more than a dream, then the revolutionary workers must create leading organs for themselves that are equal to the task, that understand how to channel and utilise the fighting energy of the masses. But above all the immediate future must be dedicated to liquidating the USP, this rotten corpse poisoned by the decomposition of the revolution. The showdown with the capitalist class in Germany first of all takes the form of breaking with Scheidemann and Ebert, who are the protective cover of the bourgeoisie. And breaking with the Scheidemanns requires the liquidation of the USP, who act as the protective cover of Ebert and Scheidemann.

Clarity; sharper, more ruthless struggle against all attempts to confuse, to reconcile, to go into the marsh; concentration of the masses' revolutionary energy and creation of organs suitable to lead them in the battle—these are the burning tasks of the immediate period, these are the significant lessons from the last five days of more powerful charges by the masses and the most pathetic failures of the leaders.

*Red Banner 9*  
March 2001

#### Notes

- 1 Workers' and soldiers' councils spread across Germany in November 1918. Their first general congress was taking place in Berlin from 16-21 December.
- 2 Luxemburg has mistaken the Palace of Westminster here for Westminster Abbey.
- 3 Bebel (1840-1914), a pioneering leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), made this statement at the party's congress in 1903.
- 4 Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-64), a pioneering leader of the German workers' movement.
- 5 Philipp Scheidemann was an SPD minister in the government that took power on 9 November.
- 6 The SPD leader Friedrich Ebert was prime minister of the new republic.
- 7 On 6 December right-wing officers attempted a coup. The Troops of the Guard were a reactionary regiment sworn in on 10 December. On 24 December government troops launched an unsuccessful attack on the People's Naval Division in Berlin. On 4 January the government sacked Emil Eichhorn, a socialist who had taken command of the Berlin police since the revolution: thousands of workers demonstrated in his support.
- 8 On 6 January workers seized newspaper offices, including that of the SPD paper *Vorwärts*, as well as Wolff's Telegraph Office (WTB).
- 9 The revolutionary shop stewards' movement originated in strikes in Berlin in 1917 and 1918, and played an important part in the revolution. The Independent Social Democratic Party (USP) was set up in 1917: it was to the left of the SPD but not revolutionary. It had originally joined the SPD in the government in November, but its ministers resigned the following month.
- 10 Ernst Däumig and Georg Ledebour were leading figures on the left wing of the USP.

- 11 Leading USP members.
- 12 Berlin's mass demonstration against Eichhorn's dismissal marched to the Siegesallee.
- 13 The movement called for a united government of all left-wing parties.
- 14 Hugo Haase and Wilhelm Dittman had been USP ministers in November and December.
- 15 Gustav Noske and Otto Landsberg were also SPD ministers.