

# "Made to look silly and laughable"--the PDS in Germany reacts to the erection of a statue of Rosa Luxemburg

Stefan Steinberg  
27 January 1999

On 10 January Lothar Bisky, Gregor Gysi and other leading members of the German Party of Democratic Socialism marched to the resting place of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht and laid wreaths on their graves at the Lichtenberg cemetery in East Berlin. (The Party of Democratic Socialism [PDS] is the successor party to the ruling Stalinist party [the SED] in the former German Democratic Republic [East Germany]).

The annual commemoration of the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht on the first weekend in January was a tradition in the German Democratic Republic, and even today attracts up to 100,000 people.

Now, however, less than two weeks later a controversy has broken out within the PDS. The source of the dispute is the sudden appearance of a statue of Rosa Luxemburg in front of the headquarters of the PDS, the Karl Liebknecht house in Berlin Mitte.

Leading members of the organisation reacted angrily to the "overnight putsch" by artist members of the party, who cemented a statue of Rosa Luxemburg into the pavement in front of the party centre in the middle of the night. According to Harno Harnish, the press speaker of the PDS, the leadership has been "made to look silly and laughable". The chairman of the party, Lothar Bisky, has intervened and promised to personally find an alternative site for the erection of the statue.

The dispute over the statue goes back to 1995 when an artist member of the PDS, Ingeborg Hunzinger, began a collection at the annual PDS conference for a sculpture of Rosa Luxemburg. She declared that she hoped thereby to rectify the situation in the former German Democratic Republic where, despite the

readiness of the SED to erect statues and concrete monstrosities to all sorts of faithful Stalinist hacks, no monument was ever erected in honour of Rosa Luxemburg.

As the campaign and finances grew for such a project, leading layers in the party, so-called "Realos" (realists), expressed their growing misgivings about such a statue. They proposed a competition for a monument and emphasised that a place for its erection should be found other than in front of the party headquarters.

The misgivings and doubts on the part of leading members of the PDS regarding a monument to Rosa Luxemburg have a political pedigree. They are bound up with a long history of hostility on the part of the Stalinist SED to Luxemburg's internationalist outlook and uncompromising struggle against opportunism in the workers movement.

Based on the historical record there can be no doubt that had Luxemburg not been murdered in 1919, she would have thrown herself, with all her energy, into the struggle against Stalin. For his part, Stalin recognised that Luxemburg's political legacy posed an enormous threat.

In 1931, as part of an intensified campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition, Stalin wrote an open letter to the Soviet magazine *Proletskaja Revoljutsija*, in which he stated it would be entirely wrong to regard Trotsky and the Left Opposition as a fraction inside the Communist movement, and declared Luxemburg "guilty", alongside Trotsky, of developing the internationalist perspective of "Permanent Revolution."

Stalin's letter was quickly translated into German. Inside the German Communist Party, party leader Ernst

Thaelman began delivering salvo after salvo against the positions of Luxemburg and Trotsky. The principal Stalinist accusations against Luxemburg's so-called Menshevism and centrism were countered by Trotsky in his essay "Hands off Rosa Luxemburg" (available in Trotsky's *Writings on Germany: 1932*).

Stalin's critique of Luxemburg was taken over entirely by the leaders and theoreticians of the SED. In an official party biography of 1951, author Fred Ölsner repeats virtually word for word the assessment of Stalin:

"But while Rosa Luxemburg's services to the German workers movement were so considerable, and while we bow reverently to her life of struggle, while we love Rosa for her uncompromising struggle for the workers' cause, we must not forget: great were her mistakes and errors which diverted the German working class in the wrong direction. Above all we should not close our eyes to the fact that it was not just a question of a few mistakes, but rather an entire system of wrong positions ("Luxemburgism"). These positions were one of the decisive reasons for the defeat of the German Communist Party after its foundation, for the falsification of the role of the party by the Brandler group, for the underestimation of the national question and the peasant question, positions which could not be overcome despite the efforts of Ernst Thaelmann" (*Rosa Luxemburg*, by Fred Ölsner, Dietz Verlag, 1951, page 7).

Further on, he writes:

"Ernst Thaelmann's struggle for a party of the new type in Germany was a struggle against Social Democracy for the victory of Marxism-Leninism in the German workers movement. Part of this struggle was the fight against the remnants of Luxemburgism, which was nothing other than a variety of social democracy" (page 211).

The Stalinist bureaucracy in the East was always ready to use parts of Rosa Luxemburg's scathing critique of social democratic reformism in its polemics with the Social Democratic Party, but in general the SED's relationship to Luxemburg remained ambivalent. The main GDR publishing house was slow in compiling the *Collected Works of Luxemburg*, first published in 1970, and even then the *Works* were not complete. None of Luxemburg's valuable writings on the national question, which were mainly published in

the organs of the Polish Social Democratic movement, were ever translated and published.

On many occasions the PDS has stressed that it has reassessed its history and broken with its Stalinist past. The instinctively hostile reaction by leading members of the party to the erection of a statue of Rosa Luxemburg is, in its own way, a reminder that the Stalinist opposition to this great Marxist theoretician and revolutionary leader has deep roots inside the PDS.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**