Rosa Luxemburg speaks against capital punishment

7 April 1999

Below we reprint a statement from Rosa Luxemburg, one of the finest representatives of the international socialist movement. Born in Poland in 1871, she became active in revolutionary politics as a youth. She became a leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and of the Marxist movement internationally after being forced to leave tsarist-controlled Poland because of her political beliefs. Already a prominent opponent of right-wing opportunism in the SPD, Luxemburg concluded that the party had become a "stinking corpse" after the August 4, 1914 vote for war credits by the SPD parliamentary group.

Rosa worked with Karl Liebknecht to found the Spartakusbund and then the Communist Party of Germany, the KPD, as an alternative leadership for the working class. Imprisoned for their opposition to the First World War, both leaders were freed from jail as a result of a revolutionary uprising of German workers in November 1918.

The Social Democratic right wing joined the government in order to save German capitalism and crush the revolutionary movement of the working class. Both Luxemburg and Liebknecht were assassinated on the orders of SPD leaders on January 15, 1919.

This article was written in November 1918, not long after Luxemburg's release from prison. It was published in Rote Fahne *(Red Flag), the new journal of the Spartakusbund. Her condemnation of capital punishment and the inhumanity of capitalist "justice" is as pertinent today as when it was written.*

We did not wish for amnesty, not for pardon, in the case of the political prisoners, who had been the prey of the old order. We demanded the right to liberty, to agitation, to revolution for the hundreds of brave and loyal men who groaned in the jails and in the fortresses because, under the former dictatorship of imperialist criminals, they had fought for the people, for peace, and for socialism.

They are all free now.

We find ourselves again in the ranks, ready for the battle.

It was not the clique of Scheidemann [1] and his bourgeois allies, with Prince Max of Baden [2] at their head, that liberated us. It was the proletarian revolution that made the doors of our cells spring open.

But another class of unfortunate dwellers in those gloomy mansions has been completely forgotten. No one, at present, thinks of the pale and morbid figures which sigh behind prison walls because of offenses against ordinary law.

Nevertheless these are also the unfortunate victims of the infamous social order against which the revolution is directed--victims of the imperialistic war which pushed distress and misery to the very limit of intolerable torture, victims of that frightful butchery of men which let loose all the vilest instincts.

The justice of the bourgeois classes had again been like a net, which allowed the voracious sharks to escape, while the little sardines were caught. The profiteers who have realized millions during the war have been acquitted or let off with ridiculous penalties. The little thieves, men and women, have been punished with sentences of Draconian severity.

Worn out by hunger and cold, in cells which are hardly heated, these derelicts of society await mercy and pity.

They have waited in vain, for in his preoccupation with making the nations cut one another's throats and of distributing crowns, the last of the Hohenzollerns [3] forgot these miserable people, and since the conquest of the Liege there has been no amnesty, not even on the official holiday of German slaves, the Kaiser's birthday.

The proletarian revolution ought now, by a little ray of kindness, to illuminate the gloomy life of the prisons, shorten Draconian sentences, abolish barbarous punishments--the use of manacles and whippings--improve, as far as possible, the medical attention, the food allowance, and the conditions of labor.

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That is a duty of honor!

The existing disciplinary system, which is impregnated with brutal class spirit and with capitalist barbarism, should be radically altered.

But a complete reform, in harmony with the spirit of socialism, can be based only on a new economic and social order; for both crime and punishment have, in the last analysis, their roots deep in the organization of society. One radical measure, however, can be taken without any elaborate legal process. Capital punishment, the greatest shame of the ultra-reactionary German code, ought to be done away with at once. Why are there any hesitations on the part of this government of workers and soldiers? The noble Beccaria two hundred years ago, denounced the ignominy of the death penalty. Doesn't its ignominy exist for you, Ledebour, Barth, Daeumig? [4]

You have no time, you have a thousand cares, a thousand difficulties, a thousand tasks before you? That is true. But mark, watch in hand, how much time would be needed to say: "Capital punishment is abolished!" Would you argue that, on this question also, long discussions followed by votes are necessary? Would you thus lose yourselves in the complications of formalism, in considerations of jurisdiction, in questions of departmental red tape?

Ah! How German this German Revolution is! How argumentative and pedantic it is! How rigid, inflexible, lacking in grandeur!

The forgotten death penalty is only one little isolated detail. But how precisely the inner spirit, which governs the revolution, betrays itself in these little details!

Let one take up any ordinary history of the Great French Revolution. Let one take up the dry Mignet, for instance.

Can one read this book except with a beating heart and a burning brow? Can one, after having opened it, at no matter what page, put it aside before one has heard, with bated breath, the last chord of that formidable tragedy? It is like a symphony of Beethoven carried to the gigantic and the grotesque, a tempest thundering on the organ of time, great and superb in its errors as well as in its achievement, in victory as well as in defeat, in the first cry of naive joyfulness as well as in the final breath.

And now how is it with us in Germany?

Everywhere, in the small as in the great, one feels that these are still and always the old and sober citizens of the defunct social democracy, those for whom the badge of membership is everything and the man and the spirit are nothing.

Let us not forget this, however. The history of the world is not made without grandeur of spirit, without lofty morale, without noble gestures.

Liebknecht and I, on leaving the hospitable halls which we recently inhabited--he, among his pale companions in the penitentiary, I with my dear, poor thieves and women of the streets, with whom I have passed, under the same roof, three years and a half years of my life--we took this oath as they followed us with their sad eyes: "We shall not forget you!"

We demand of the executive committee of the Council of Workers and Soldiers an immediate amelioration of the lot of all the prisoners in the German jails!

We demand the excision of capital punishment from the German penal code!

During the four years of this slaughter of the peoples, blood has flowed in torrents. Today, each drop of that precious fluid ought to be preserved devotedly in crystal urns.

Revolutionary activity and profound humanitarianism--they alone are the true breath of socialism.

A world must be turned upside down. But each tear that flows, when it could have been spared, is an accusation, and he commits a crime who with brutal inadvertency crushes a poor earthworm.

Notes:

1. Philip Scheidemann (1865-1939)--Right-wing SPD leader in Germany who actively supported WWI. In 1918 worked to crush the revolutionary movement of workers.

2. Max of Baden--Briefly the chancellor of Germany prior to workers uprising in November 1918.

3. Hohenzollern Dynasty--Ruling family of Prussia and, from 1871, of Germany. Overthrown in 1919.

4.. George Ledebour, Emil Barth and Ernst Daeumig--leaders of the centrist Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) who joined a coalition government with the Social Democrats.

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