

Hands off Rosa Luxemburg!

# The historical falsification of Rosa Luxemburg's heritage by the German Left Party

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In an article for the January 3 edition of *Junge Welt* (Young World), Gesine Löttsch, chairperson of Germany's Left Party, attempts to reinterpret Rosa Luxemburg's political legacy so as to justify the opportunist and bourgeois politics of her party. Entitling her article "Ways to Communism," she presents the great Marxist and leader of the revolutionary wing of August Bebel's Social Democratic Party (SPD) as an admirer of liberalism and opponent of revolution.

Löttsch sets out to achieve two things with her article. First, she seeks to salvage the "leftist" image of her party. The role played by the Left Party in helping the Social Democratic Party (SPD) back into power—whether by working with it in coalition governments in Berlin and Brandenburg, or supporting a SPD-Green minority government in North Rhine-Westphalia—has been all too apparent.

Second, she seeks to draw some of the flak from her co-chairman, Klaus Ernst, whose position within the party is highly controversial. By tossing out a few left-wing phrases, she believes she can help unite the party behind the right-wing policies of Ernst, a long-time trade union bureaucrat.

At the same time, the political cynics at Karl Liebknecht House (the Left Party's Berlin headquarters) are intentionally encouraging anti-communist ravings from sections of the media. Adopting the motto "Many enemies, much honour," Löttsch and Ernst hope that they will more easily unite the party behind a policy of complete adaptation to the SPD if the party is described outside its ranks as "anti-capitalist" and "communist".

The same cynicism characterises Löttsch's references to Rosa Luxemburg. Falsification of Luxemburg's political views has become commonplace in the Left Party. Virtually all supposedly left tendencies try to exploit Luxemburg's heritage. The Left Party's endowment foundation was named after Luxemburg, as was the national daily newspaper *Junge Welt's* annual conference, which attracts numerous political tendencies in Berlin for chat and gossip once a year.

There is also the annual march of leading representatives of the Left Party to the grave of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Lichtenberger Cemetery in the eastern sector of Berlin. The ceremony has its origins in the Stalinist GDR (German Democratic Republic of East Germany), and can be seen only as an act of political desecration.

Löttsch's article in *Junge Welt* crowns all these shabby undertakings. She tries in all seriousness to place the Left Party's participation in bourgeois governments, including their brutal attacks on the working

class, in the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg's consistently revolutionary politics. Of course, such a task requires numerous brazen falsifications of the positions taken by Luxemburg at various times. To this end, Löttsch rips quotations out of context, distorts their content, and spreads grotesque untruths.

In doing so, she appears to assume she is writing for a public that either has never heard of Luxemburg's political heritage, or is completely indifferent to her historical significance. She is aided in her enterprise by the spadework of several like-minded thinkers. In 2009, for example, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation published a pseudo-scientific collection of texts in which various supporters of the Left Party devoted more than 150 pages to the task of finding quotations in Luxemburg's writings that could be taken out of context to justify their own opportunistic goals. Löttsch has manifestly borrowed her arguments from this work. However, this kind of argumentation has absolutely nothing to do with honest scientific endeavour.

Even before mentioning Luxemburg in her article, Löttsch disputes the very idea of a coherent theoretical and historical foundation as the basis for a party. She proclaims the most vulgar forms of political pragmatism, describing the participation of the Left Party in bourgeois governments as a legitimate experiment on the way to communism.

She writes: "We will be able to find the ways to communism only when we are in the actual process of doing so, trying them out whether in opposition or in government. It will certainly not be a matter of just one way, but many different ways that will lead us to our goal. We have spent too much time standing at forks in the road, squabbling over which is the right way, instead of trying the different ways".

Later Löttsch takes up this line of thought again and tries to ascribe it to Luxemburg:

"She (Luxemburg) had no master plan and no easy answers. In debating her position with others, she was trying—very impatiently and yet imploringly—to warn them against being carried away by the temptation to terrorism or sectarianism, and nevertheless to act decisively. For her, socialism was not some ready-made ideal, not an ingeniously designed plan, but something that would grow out of real struggles".

With this statement, Löttsch already reveals her irreconcilable opposition to Luxemburg, who throughout her life was a consistent follower of Marxism as a scientifically elaborated theory for guiding the activities of the working class and its vanguard in the revolutionary party. Whatever document of Luxemburg one chooses, it clearly shows that she developed all of her proposed courses of action from this basic perspective, constantly subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

A short excerpt from Luxemburg's writings on the occasion of the 20th

anniversary of Karl Marx's death should suffice to clearly demarcate her position from that of Löttsch:

"Above all, how can we choose the ways and means of conducting struggle while at the same time avoiding useless experiments and debilitating utopian sidesteps? It is the already identified direction of the economic and political processes of today's society that enables us to chart our political course, not only on a large scale but also down to the last detail" [Rosa Luxemburg, *Marxist Theory and the Proletariat* (1903)].

Under the subheading "Ongoing Struggle for Power," Löttsch explains that the Left Party could very soon be in demand because of the deepening crisis of capitalism, and that such a development requires an appropriate tactic. However, she again denies the possibility of responding to the crisis with a preconceived strategy based on a principled perspective:

"Let us suppose that the euro collapses as a currency in the next two years, the European Union falls apart, the US fails to emerge from the economic crisis and falls into the hands of radical fundamentalist Christians after the next presidential election. Furthermore, imagine that the climate undergoes a dramatic change, the temperature of the Gulf Stream drops, waves of refugees overrun 'Fortress Europe,' and we are asked if we have a solution to these cataclysmic problems.

"Anyone who claims that he has a strategy on hand for such a scenario must be a fraud. What we should be able to offer is a method of managing these mounting problems. We have no way of knowing whether our state mechanisms for distributing resources and effecting democracy will be appropriate for meeting and solving such complex tasks peacefully. Actually, I have doubts about that. The government is already working to spread illusions about its own competence. On the other hand, I see that the Left Party is also not really well prepared when it comes to dealing with social crises."

She continues: "Sometimes—although not always—a look at history helps you to ask yourself the question: How would you have reacted under the given conditions? Are we today really any smarter? Have we really learned from our mistakes?"

Having posed this question, which would be answered with a resounding "No!" in the case of Löttsch and the Left Party, Löttsch then presents an account of Luxemburg's role after the November revolution of 1918 that turns reality on its head.

Her presentation is built on the claim that a socialist Germany would not have been achievable in 1918-19 and an immediate seizure of power was out of the question. This notion is alleged to have made Luxemburg focus on ways of at least maintaining certain "left-wing policy options," as Löttsch's phrases it. At no point is any evidence offered for this claim.

Let us see what Luxemburg herself had to say about the matter in her speech at the founding congress of the Communist Party on December 31, 1918:

"The progress of large-scale capitalist development during 70 years has brought us so far that today we can seriously set about destroying capitalism once and for all. No, still more. Today we are not only in a position to perform this task, its performance is not only a duty toward the proletariat, but it offers the only means of saving human society from destruction... For us there is no minimal and no maximal program. Socialism is one and the same thing—this is the minimum we have to realize today" [Rosa Luxemburg, *Our Program and the Political Situation* (1918)].

Luxemburg also makes clear that she has absolutely no doubts about the imminence of revolution:

"But this, as an outcome of the previous development, by the mere logic of events and through the operation of the forces which control Ebert and Scheidemann, will imply that during the second act of the revolution a much more pronounced opposition of tendencies and a greatly accentuated class struggle will take place ... will lead to a declared hand-to-hand fight

between the revolution and the counterrevolution... Let us be clear: it is the very essence of this revolution that strikes will become more and more extensive, that they must become more and more the central focus, the key aspect of the revolution... It then becomes an economic revolution, and therewith a socialist revolution" [Rosa Luxemburg, *ibid.*].

There is no sign here of any defensive misgivings in Luxemburg's position. Nor does she concern herself at any stage with anything one could call "left-wing policy options." She saw herself as dealing with nothing less than the proletarian seizure of power. This is made absolutely clear as her speech continues:

"From this consideration follows what we have to do to insure the presuppositions of the success of the revolution. I would summarize our next tasks as follows: First and foremost, we have to extend in all directions the system of workers' and soldiers' councils, especially those of the workers... We have to seize power, and the problem of the seizure of power poses the question: what does each workers' and soldiers' council in all of Germany do, what can it do, and what must it do?... We must make the masses understand that the workers' and soldiers' council is in all senses the lever of the machinery of state, that it must take over all power and must unify the power in one stream—the socialist revolution" [Rosa Luxemburg, *ibid.*].

Löttsch is fully acquainted with Luxemburg's perspective and even quotes from Luxemburg's speech at the founding congress of the Communist Party in her article. Löttsch, however, is very selective, and quotes only the following from Luxemburg's speech: "Thus, the conquest of power will not be effected with one blow. It will be a progression; we shall progressively occupy all the positions of the capitalist state and defend them tooth and nail. In my view and in that of my most intimate associates in the Party, the economic struggle, likewise, will be carried on by the workers' councils."

If one were only aware of this statement, taken completely out of context, one could indeed conclude that Luxemburg was making the case for a peaceful takeover of the capitalist state by exclusively parliamentary means. This is exactly the impression Löttsch is trying to foster. However, it should be clear in the context of what we have already cited in the preceding paragraphs from Luxemburg's speech that exactly the opposite is the case, and Luxemburg is here speaking about the replacement of the institutions of parliamentary democracy by workers' and soldiers' councils. This would have been clear if Löttsch had quoted the entire paragraph which reads in its entirety as follows:

"Comrades, that is an extensive field to till. We must prepare from the base up; we must give the workers' and soldiers' councils so much strength that the overthrow of the Ebert-Scheidemann government or any similar government will merely be the final act in the drama. Thus, the conquest of power will not be effected with one blow. It will be a progression; we shall progressively occupy all of the positions of the capitalist state and defend them tooth and nail. In my view and in that of my most intimate associates in the Party, the economic struggle, likewise, will be carried on by the workers' councils. The direction of the economic struggle and the continued expansion of the area of this struggle must be in the hands of the workers' councils. The councils must have all power in the state. We must direct our activities in the immediate future to these ends, and it is obvious that, if we pursue this line and pursue these tasks, there cannot fail to be an enormous intensification of the struggle in the near future. It is a question of fighting step by step, hand-to-hand, in every province, in every city, in every village, in every municipality in order to take and transfer all the powers of the state bit by bit from the bourgeoisie to the workers and soldiers councils" [Rosa Luxemburg, *ibid.*].

However, the deliberate falsification of Luxemburg's assessment of the political situation and the consequences she draws constitutes for Löttsch only the scaffolding for her attack on Luxemburg's perspective. Thus she tells us in her article under the subheading "Revolutionary realpolitik":

“What was here formulated by Rosa Luxemburg in the concrete situation of an unfinished revolution and the foreseeable necessity of a defensive strategy is a policy which she herself called ‘revolutionary realpolitik’. Due to the urgent needs of the workers and large numbers of people, the task was to significantly improve the situation in ways that simultaneously led to a structural change in property and power relations. Solutions had to be found for threatening issues of the day, and capitalism and militarism had to be suppressed if these issues were eventually to be overcome. The way forward was above all to be characterised by the democratic undertakings of the workers, the people, during a learning process operating under conditions of ongoing change. It was to be less a policy for the workers, than through the workers. For me, the politics of the left as a whole and the politics of the Left Party stands in this defiant tradition of socially transformational, radical realpolitik.”

One would like to call out: Lie if you must, Ms. Löttsch, but don't overdo it! Such a brazen recasting of the great revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg, into a proponent of realpolitik demands decisive refutation. It may be that Ms. Löttsch and her Left Party consider it their task to confront issues of the day exclusively within the framework of the capitalist system, trying in that way to bring about “structural change in property and power relations”—whatever that is supposed to mean. But such a position has absolutely nothing at all to do with the revolutionary politics of someone like Rosa Luxemburg.

On the contrary, the realpolitik (i.e., practical, day-to-day politics) demanded by Löttsch involves precisely the sort of opportunism opposed by Luxemburg with all her strength throughout her life. It was this opportunism that was proven totally bankrupt in the catastrophe of German Social Democracy on August 4, 1914, when the SPD voted in the Reichstag (German parliament) for the release of war credits, thus giving their support to the waging of the First World War. Löttsch's ideas are by no means new or original. They were articulated most clearly by Eduard Bernstein in his book *The Preconditions for Socialism*, which Luxemburg countered so effectively in her famous essay “Social Reform or Revolution?”

Let us nevertheless look into Luxemburg's works for the origin of the phrase “revolutionary realpolitik”—watered down by Löttsch out of sheer fear of the word “revolutionary” into the term “radical realpolitik”. Although Löttsch presents this phrase as Luxemburg's own summary of her political perspective in the wake of the November revolution, it comes, in fact, from a text written in 1903—the introduction to the above-mentioned essay on the 20th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. There Luxemburg writes immediately following the passage previously cited: “Thanks to these guidelines it has been possible for the first time for the working class to translate the great final aims of socialism into everyday politics and transform the latter into a powerful tool for the realization of socialist ideals. Prior to Marx there was bourgeois politics conducted by workers, and there was revolutionary socialism. But only since Marx, and due to Marx, is there a socialist policy for the workers, which at the same time genuinely constitutes revolutionary realpolitik” [Rosa Luxemburg, *Marxist Theory and the Proletariat* (1903)].

Luxemburg goes on to distinguish this “revolutionary realpolitik” from any kind of realpolitik in conventional parlance: “If we recognise realpolitik as a policy that concentrates only on achievable aims and seeks to realise them in the shortest way and using the most expedient means, then proletarian class politics in a Marxist sense differs from bourgeois policy in that the latter proceeds from *immediate material* issues while socialist policy is based on *historical social* tendencies... Proletarian realpolitik, however, is also revolutionary because in all its partial undertakings it goes beyond the realm of the existing order in which it functions and consciously regards itself as the preparation of a policy aimed at the transformation of the proletariat into the ruling social force” [Rosa Luxemburg, *ibid.*].

Revolutionary politics is realistic for Luxemburg because it derives all its immediate policies from an analysis of the historical perspective of overcoming capitalism. This contrasts with Löttsch's notion of realpolitik, which is only realistic in the sense that it lies completely within the framework of existing conditions.

To put it more concretely, if Luxemburg were alive today and were to formulate a realistic response to the crisis of capitalism, she would start out from the reality that the working class will not be able to take a single step forward without breaking from the dictatorship of the banks and the influence of their stooges in governments, trade unions and social democratic parties. Löttsch and her Left Party, on the other hand, start by accepting that the dictatorship of the banks exists and they can operate only in that framework.

With unrestrained mendacity at the end of her article, Löttsch once again takes up the old Stalinist slander of Luxemburg, imputing to her a position of opposition to Bolshevism and to the notion that Lenin and Trotsky were the most important leaders of the October Revolution. To argue this, Löttsch cites (with her own omissions and additions) Luxemburg's criticism of the October Revolution: “The negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the building up, the positive, cannot. New Territory. A thousand problems. Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative new force...” [Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (1918)].

This is all Löttsch cites from Luxemburg regarding the issue. She would not have had any difficulty finding even sharper rhetoric from Luxemburg, who indeed was highly critical of certain specific measures undertaken by the Bolsheviks after their conquest of power. In her essay *The Russian Revolution*, the source of the quotation cited by Löttsch, she roundly criticised the Bolsheviks' policy on the agrarian question, the slogan of national self-determination, and the suspending of formal democracy. However, this critique in no way weakens her principled defence of the October Revolution, which she also declares with crystal clarity at the end of her article:

“What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the nonessential, the kernel from the accidental excrescences in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all of the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world. They are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: ‘I have dared!’”

Luxemburg continues:

“This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labour in the entire world. In Russia, the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved in Russia. And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to Bolshevism” [Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (1918)].

In their ignorance, Löttsch and the Left Party believe that no one knows or seriously studies the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. If they believed otherwise, their entire construct of lies and outrageous distortions would immediately collapse like a house of cards before their eyes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on everyone to study carefully the enormous wealth of theoretical works by Rosa Luxemburg and draw the appropriate lessons for the current political and economic crisis.



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