

On the 150th birthday of Karl Liebknecht

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There is no other socialist whose name is so inseparably connected with the struggle against militarism and war than Karl Liebknecht. The courage and decisiveness with which he rebelled against his own party, voted as the only Social Democratic deputy against war credits, and agitated against the First World War in spite of persecution and suppression earned him the respect and support of millions of workers.

He co-led the November 1918 revolution with Rosa Luxemburg against the betrayal of the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Social Democratic Party of Germany), which did everything it could to seize power from the workers and soldiers councils that had emerged on a mass scale and retain as much of the old regime as possible. On November 9, he proclaimed the “Free Socialist Republic of Germany” at a mass rally. He was a founder of the German Communist Party in late December and a leader of the Spartacus uprising in early January.

He paid for this with his life. On January 15, 1919, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered by a reactionary special forces unit of Freikorps soldiers deployed to the capital by the Social Democratic government of Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann to drown the revolution in blood. The killings took place with the approval of the Social Democrat Gustav Noske, the minister of the armed forces (Reichswehr).

Godchild of Marx and Engels

Socialism was to some extent introduced to Karl Liebknecht in the crib. He was born on August 13, 1871, in Leipzig as the second of the five sons of Wilhelm Liebknecht, who alongside August Bebel was the most important leader of the German Social Democracy. He was baptised in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Johann Sebastian Bach once performed as cantor and presented his masterworks. His godparents—who were not present but indicated their agreement in writing—were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Karl Liebknecht lived for several years during his childhood under the same roof as Bebel, who was banished from the city due to the anti-socialist laws and shared a house with his father in a suburb of Leipzig. Liebknecht only joined the SPD in 1900 at the age of 29. His father had insisted that he first learn a profession before engaging in politics. He studied law in Leipzig and Berlin, gained his doctorate in Würzburg in 1897 with magna cum laude and became a lawyer.

His legal and political activities increasingly became entangled with each other. In a country where the socialists always had one foot in prison even after the anti-socialist laws were abolished, the courtroom became a stage from which to agitate. Liebknecht demonstrated here the courage and intrepidity that would characterise his activity during the war and the November revolution.

He gained international notoriety in 1904 in the Königsberg secret league trial. He defended nine Social Democratic members, who were accused by the state prosecutor of smuggling revolutionary writings to Russia, “secretive organisational plotting,” and insulting the Russian Tsar.

Among the defendants was the later minister president of the state of Prussia, Otto Braun, who was arrested and held in investigative custody for five months.

Liebknecht and Hugo Haase, a Social Democratic parliamentary deputy, assumed responsibility for the legal defence in the courtroom; while Haase and August Bebel questioned Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow in parallel in the Reichstag. The result was that the trial, which concluded with three acquittals and six sentences each lasting several months, became a devastating indictment of Tsarist despotism and the cooperation of the Prussian authorities with the goons of the Tsar’s secret police, the Okhrana.

Liebknecht’s closing remarks were not a plea for the defence but an indictment. He said, “Mr. state prosecutor says: What could be more shameful than the writings here before us. I know something more shameful, the conditions in Russia upon which these writings are based...

“If we consider the Russian conditions, the absolute absence of any rights for the people, the corruption and bloody brutality of the bureaucracy, the horrendous legal system freed from all inhibitions, the ‘trial proceedings,’ the lashings, the slaughtering of peasants, Jews, and workers, we see that two words hang over modern Russian history: Siberia and Schlüsselburg, the two emblems of Russian royalty.”

(The Schlüsselburg fortress served as a prison, while Siberia was the place of exile for political prisoners.—PS)

Throughout his life, Karl Liebknecht maintained close ties to the revolutionary wing of Russian Social Democracy, with whom he was much closer than the sedate and increasingly conservative SPD leadership. His second wife, the art historian Sophie Ryss, was born in Russia. She became Rosa Luxemburg’s closest friend.

Leon Trotsky addressed this issue in a commemorative speech he gave to a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet three days after Liebknecht’s assassination, stating, “Liebknecht is not for us the German leader, and Rosa Luxemburg is not for us the Polish socialist who placed herself at the head of the German workers, they are both ours, they are our brethren, we are connected to them by unbreakable spiritual bonds...

“Liebknecht’s apartment was the best headquarters for any immigrant in Berlin, in Germany; whenever a voice had to be raised in the German parliament, in the German press against those services which the German imperialists provided to the Russian reaction, we turned to Karl Liebknecht, and he banged on every door, on every skull, including the skulls of Scheidemann and Ebert to force them to respond to the crimes of imperialism.”

Speaking trip in the United States

His unshakable internationalism, together with his firm anti-militarist stance and conviction that the principal task was to win the youth to socialism, were Karl Liebknecht’s most important political characteristics. Although he was heavily burdened by two parliamentary

mandates, one in the Prussian state parliament from 1908 and the other in the Reichstag from 1912, as well as his responsibilities as a lawyer, he participated in the Second International and the Socialist Youth International, of which he was a founding member and became chair of its correspondence bureau in 1907.

In 1910, Liebknecht accepted an invitation from the Socialist Party of America and undertook a speaking tour in the United States ahead of the congressional elections. In three weeks, he spoke at 25 meetings in the Northeast and Midwestern industrial centres, from New York to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago and St. Paul.

The *New Yorker Volks-Zeitung* reported on the enthusiastic welcome he received from 4,000 workers at the meeting launching the tour in a hall at Harlem River Park, "... the enthusiasm that accompanied the lively speech of our German comrade, which was saturated with fiery combativeness and revolutionary class consciousness, proved that they were not brought there out of general curiosity, and the hearty, stormy agreement shown by the repeated outbreaks of applause underscored and celebrated the countless points made in the wonderful speech lasting over one hour by Dr. Karl Liebknecht."

Liebknecht pleasantly surprised his audience, because he did not, as expected, give "a detailed description of German party relations." Instead, he provided "an outstanding analysis of the state of modern society, an incomparable characterisation of the internal essence of international Social Democracy, and at the same time an unquestionably clever comparison between the European and American workers' relations and movement."

America is not merely a sanctuary for exiled and persecuted Europeans and seen as "the promised land where milk and honey flows," it is "at the same time the country of high capitalism, the witch's caldron of high capital," wrote the *Volks-Zeitung* in summing up Liebknecht's central message.

Capitalist development had, Liebknecht continued, created the world economy and thus out of the entire cultural world merely one land for capital. But just as capital had emerged internationally, it also has an international impact, irresistibly producing its counterpart in the international proletariat. The proletariat must be united, must be organised internationally in order to challenge the power of the capitalists, he continued. They stand in the world market as rivals, as ravenous wolves, but when it is a question of combatting the organised workers, the capitalist class of the entire world is "a united people of brothers." (Applause)

Socialism today is no longer a utopia or a dream. Its basic concept is the class struggle, the recognition that the struggle of classes is the centre of all movements of the modern day, Liebknecht stated. The worker as an individual is a grain of sand that can be blown hither and thither by the sandstorm, but only as long as it isn't bound by mortar into stone, into cement. The cement of the working class is called solidarity. The 90 percent of workers, if united, can achieve anything against the 10 percent of capitalists.

Militarism and Anti-Militarism

Liebknecht published his most important book in 1907, *Militarism and Anti-Militarism*. Based on a speech he gave one year earlier at the first general assembly of the Association of Young Workers in Germany in Mannheim, its principal goal was to the socialist education of the youth.

The book was immediately banned, and Liebknecht was accused of high treason and sentenced to one-and-a-half years in prison. The trial, at which he defended himself, made him extremely popular among workers in

Berlin, who gave him a guard of honour as he began his sentence.

Liebknecht conceived of militarism not merely as an instrument of external aggression but also of internal repression: "But militarism is not merely a defence and weapon against the external enemy, it retains a second task, which comes ever more into the foreground as the class divisions sharpen and proletarian class consciousness grows, which increasingly determines the external form and internal character of militarism: the task of protecting the ruling social order, of being a bulwark of capitalist reaction against the working class' struggle for liberation."

He provides an overview of the historical emergence of militarism, its features in various capitalist countries, and the struggle of each social democratic party against it. He concludes by sharply distinguishing between the anti-militarism of Social Democracy from the petty-bourgeois anti-militarism of the anarchists.

"The end goal for the anarchist as for the social democratic anti-militarism ... is the same: the overcoming of militarism, both external and internal militarism. However, the Social Democracy, in accordance with its opinion on the essence of militarism, believes the overcoming of militarism alone to be impossible: only with capitalism—the last form of class society—will militarism simultaneously fall."

Anarchism operates with "... in the first place ethical enthusiasm, with the incentive of morals, with arguments about humanity, justice, in short with all manner of impulses of the will, which attempt to disguise anti-militarism's class struggle character and label it as the abstract exorcism of a generally applicable categorical imperative. It therefore turns, entirely justifiably, not only to the ranks but to the officers ...

"By contrast, social democratic anti-militarist propaganda is class struggle propaganda and therefore orients itself fundamentally and exclusively to those classes which are of necessity enemies of militarism in the class struggle. ... It clarifies in order to win, but it does not clarify categorical imperatives, humanitarian standpoints, ethical postulates about freedom and justice, but rather about the class struggle, the interests of the proletariat in the class struggle, the role of militarism in the class struggle, and the role that the proletariat plays and will have to play in the class struggle ...

"Gradual organic decomposition and fragmentation of the militarist spirit, this is the Social Democrats' weapon of struggle against militarism."

Liebknecht placed great emphasis on anti-militarist agitation among the youth. The German Empire at the time had compulsory military service, and the soldiers drawn from the working class and peasantry were bullied in the most despicable ways by the officers, who overwhelmingly came from aristocratic backgrounds. The book's last passage stated, "The proletarian youth belong to the Social Democracy, to Social Democratic anti-militarism. It will and must be won, if everyone fulfills their obligations. Whoever has the youth has the army."

Militarism and Anti-Militarism did not only result in Liebknecht being persecuted by the Prussian state, but also alienated him from the SPD leadership, which viewed his open challenge to militarism as madness. Grigory Zinoviev described this in his commemorative speech for Liebknecht, which he delivered at the same sitting of the Petrograd Soviet addressed by Trotsky, "Liebknecht belongs to the few bold men in the ranks of the German Social Democracy who ten years ago demanded, as one said in those days, 'anti-militarist' propaganda, i.e., revolutionary propaganda, among the soldiers.

"Comrades, one must imagine oneself in the atmosphere of those days in the smug and orderly Social Democracy at the Second International, which thought Liebknecht's demands were mad. Even Bebel, who had known Liebknecht since childhood and loved him like a son, assailed him with sharp expressions for what he took to be his 'adventurist' proposal. Why not just go to the soldiers and preach socialism! The German Social

Democracy thought that only an adventurer could make such a proposal! They feared that the Social Democracy would lose its legality, that the German bourgeoisie and ruling classes may come to think that the Social Democracy was no longer a party of government!"

An opponent of the war

Liebknicht was thus familiar with the conservative and opportunist character of the SPD leadership when the First World War broke out on July 28, 1914. Nonetheless, it was a bitter shock to him when the majority of the SPD backed German imperialism and voted for war credits on August 4. Over the preceding years, the SPD and Second International voted for numerous resolutions in which they ceremonially spoke out against war. They now sent their members into the trenches to slaughter each other.

Liebknicht bowed to party discipline and voted for the war credits on August 4, which party leader Hugo Haase (Bebel had died in 1913) justified with the infamous words, "In the hour of danger, we will not leave the fatherland in the lurch." But there was no doubt about Liebknicht's vehement opposition to the war. When on December 2 the war credits were voted on once again, he was the only deputy to vote against.

A close collaboration began with Rosa Luxemburg, who had already on August 5 founded the Gruppe Internationale (International Group), out of which the Spartacus League and Communist Party would later emerge. They both traveled across the country during the summer and autumn to convince other SPD deputies to oppose the war. Liebknicht also visited Belgium, where German troops had conducted vicious reprisals against the civilian population and destroyed invaluable cultural artifacts, to denounce the war together with the Belgian socialists. This not only provoked the accusation of "betraying the fatherland" from the government and the army but also from members of his own party.

Luxemburg, who as a woman could neither vote nor stand for election to the Reichstag, was the theoretical and political leader of the socialist opposition to the war, with the most important articles and pamphlets being authored by her. Liebknicht, who as a parliamentary deputy enjoyed a certain albeit extremely restricted immunity, was its public face and driving force.

Leon Trotsky, who knew Liebknicht personally, wrote of him in his autobiography, *My Life*, "Although he was an educated Marxist, Liebknicht was no theoretician. He was a man of action. An impulsive, passionate and self-sacrificing nature, he possessed political intuition and an instinct for the masses and the conditions and was pervaded by an incomparable courage to seize the initiative. He was a revolutionary. That was why he always remained a semi-foreigner in the house of German Social Democracy with its bureaucratic gradualness and constant readiness to retreat. How many philistines ironically looked down their noses at Liebknicht from above!"

Among the working class, Liebknicht enjoyed tremendous respect. Although many workers hesitated for a time, not least due to the vicious repression, to join the Spartacus League, they closely followed his actions and statements. Karl Retzlaw, a young metalworker in a large factory in Berlin who joined the Spartacus League and later the Trotskyist movement, described this in his recollections:

"During the first months, when one German victory followed another on the fronts, hardly anyone wanted to hear a word of criticism. The press was full of war reports, they reported nothing of Liebknicht's activities. At my workplace, colleagues would privately discuss what Liebknicht would do. As if it was self-evident, they expected from him activity

against the war without solidarising themselves with him."

The government and his political opponents did everything they could to silence Liebknicht. He was rarely allowed to speak in the Reichstag, and when he did, his remarks did not appear in the protocol. In February 1915, he was called for military service. He was thus subject to military law, which forbade any political activity outside the Reichstag.

Nonetheless, Liebknicht used every opportunity to agitate against the war. On May 1, 1916, the Spartacus Group in Berlin called an anti-war demonstration at Potsdamer Platz. The appeal, authored by Liebknicht, showed all his powers as an agitator: he savaged those responsible for the war in combative language and concluded with the declaration: "Let thousands of voices shout 'Down with the shameless extermination of nations! Down with those responsible for these crimes!' Our enemy is not the English, French nor Russian people but the great German landed proprietors, the German capitalists and their executive committee.

"Forward, let us fight the government; let us fight these mortal enemies of all freedom. Let us fight for everything which means the future triumph of the working classes, the future of humanity and civilization."

Liebknicht's passionate desire to take up the struggle led him at times to neglect taking the appropriate precautions for longer term work. He appeared at a demonstration in person as a speaker, and after declaring, "Down with the war! Down with the government!" he was surrounded by the police, arrested and charged with high treason.

The demonstration had a huge impact. On the first day of the trial against Liebknicht, 50,000 workers, organised by the Revolutionary Stewards, went on strike. It was the first mass strike against the war. But the working class was not yet strong enough to impose its will on the Kaiser's regime, let alone overthrow it. Liebknicht spent the rest of the war behind bars and lost both his parliamentary mandates. Both leaders of the Spartacus League—Luxemburg also spent almost the entire war in prison—were thereby extremely restricted in their influence.

The November Revolution

The war continued on for two-and-a-half years after Liebknicht's arrest. Young men were sent to a senseless death at the front while the population starved at home. Disillusionment and dissatisfaction grew. In April 1917, mass strikes erupted in Berlin due to food shortages, and there was a second strike wave during the war following the Liebknicht strikes.

A growing number of SPD deputies responded to the mounting dissatisfaction by refusing to support war credits. Expelled from the party by the majority, they founded, under duress more than at their own initiative, the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). The USPD, in whose ranks the Spartacus League operated as its own faction, was a centrist party that lacked any revolutionary impulse.

In October 1917, Liebknicht's friends and comrades in Russia, the Bolsheviks, led the working class to power and ended the war. The October Revolution had an electrifying impact on the working class and oppressed throughout the world.

In January 1918, a third strike wave involving over a million workers took place. The strikes were aimed directly against the war and were connected with mass demonstrations and the formation of workers' councils. The Spartacus League, USPD and Revolutionary Stewards, a conspiratorial network in the factories, played the leading role. The government ended the January strikes with the brutal deployment of the military and police.

When defeat in the war could no longer be averted, the Kaiser appointed a new government on October 3, 1918, headed by Prince Maximilian von Baden, which included two SPD members for the first time. Its aim was to

halt the impending revolution and negotiate a truce.

Liebkecht was released early from prison on October 23 as part of an amnesty. He immediately traveled to Berlin to reorganise the Spartacus League and, together with the Revolutionary Stewards and USPD members, prepare an uprising. The timetable was repeatedly delayed until the Kiel sailors beat them to it.

The sailors rose up on October 29 to prevent the departure of the German fleet for one last suicidal battle. In the days that followed, the revolution spread like wildfire across the entire country. Workers' and soldiers' councils emerged everywhere and effectively held power, which they formally seized in Bremen and Munich. The Kaiser was forced to abdicate on November 9. To avert a socialist revolution, the right-wing Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed a republic. He did so against the wishes of SPD leader Friedrich Ebert, who had replaced Prince von Baden as head of government and was working towards a constitutional monarchy. The new government called itself the Council of People's Commissioners. Alongside three SPD members, there were three USPD members, whose task consisted of protecting them from the pressure of the masses. In practice, they were powerless and had no influence.

Ebert and Scheidemann focused on suppressing the revolutionary uprising and saving the old ruling elites. The large landowners, aristocratic privileges and capitalist property remained untouched. State officials and officers, including those at the highest levels of the government, administration and army remained in power. Ebert aligned himself with the army high command and organised the Freikorps based on right-wing extremist soldiers to drown the revolutionary struggles that repeatedly flared up in blood.

The German revolution of 1918 was, as Leon Trotsky would later summarise, "no democratic completion of the bourgeois revolution, it was a proletarian revolution decapitated by the Social Democrats; more correctly, it was a bourgeois counter-revolution, which was compelled to preserve pseudo-democratic forms after its victory over the proletariat."

Liebkecht was the soul of the revolutionary movement of the working class. He was ever-present and enjoyed enormous respect. He fought, like the Bolsheviks a year earlier in Russia, for the taking of power by the working class. Immediately after Scheidemann proclaimed the bourgeois republic, he proclaimed before a jubilant mass audience the republic of workers' councils. A separate article would be required to detail the revolutionary struggles of those weeks and Liebkecht's role within them.

The Spartacus League now began to grow rapidly and broke decisively with the USPD. Together with Rosa Luxemburg, Liebkecht published the daily newspaper *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag). At the end of the year, they founded the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in Berlin.

The great disadvantage of the German workers compared to the Russian was the absence of a revolutionary party like the Bolsheviks, which was steeled in years-long struggle against opportunism and deeply rooted in the working class. The complete break by the German revolutionaries from the SPD and USPD took place only when the war and revolution were in full swing.

Only one week after the founding of the KPD, the Spartacist uprising erupted in Berlin. The Revolutionary Stewards responded to the replacement of the head of the Berlin police presidium, Emil Eichhorn from the USPD, by the SPD Ebert government with the launching of a general strike and occupations, including of the editorial offices of the SPD's newspaper *Vorwärts*. Liebkecht joined the strike leadership and called—against the advice of Rosa Luxemburg—for the arming of the people. But the rebels were too weak to defeat the forces of reaction. They suppressed the uprising and carried out a bloodbath.

Placards were then hung in Berlin's streets, "Strike the leaders dead." On January 15, Luxemburg and Liebkecht, who had concealed themselves in the city, were denounced, arrested and taken to the Hotel

Eden, the headquarters of the counter-revolutionary Garde-Kavallerie-Schützendivision, where they were interrogated, tortured and killed.

The KPD was robbed of its two leading figures, a blow from which it never recovered. In October 1923, it missed an extremely favourable revolutionary opportunity before falling in the years that followed under the influence of Stalin, whose disastrous "social fascism" policy politically disarmed the working class and facilitated Hitler's rise to power.

A century after Liebkecht's death, the central questions confronted by the Marxists of his generation are posed once again with renewed force. The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically intensified the social, economic and political crisis of the world capitalist system. The ruling elites are rearming for a third world war, trampling over the bodies of the pandemic's victims to protect corporate profits, and driving millions into poverty and unemployment. Opposition to this is growing in the working class. The revolutionary principles of the class struggle, the international unity of the workers and the struggle against war, for which Liebkecht fought throughout his life, are assuming decisive significance.

Liebkecht's life is both exemplary and inspirational. Everything now depends on building a party that combines his boldness and revolutionary enthusiasm with an historically and scientifically grounded socialist perspective. On the day of his death, the *Rote Fahne* published his article "In spite of everything" on the defeat of the Spartacus uprising. The words he contrived to pass to the editors are extremely contemporary:

The proletarian revolution, which the counter-revolutionaries hoped to drown in blood, will rise above them, with great numbers. Its first word will be: Down with the butchers of the workers, Ebert-Scheidemann-Noske!

The defeated of today, they will have learned. They will be cured of the delusion of being able to find their salvation in the help of masses of confused soldiers; cured of the delusion of being able to trust in leaders who prove themselves to be feeble and impotent; cured of the belief in independent social democracy, which disdainfully abandoned them. Left only to their own devices, they will fight their coming battles, gain their coming victories. And the watchword, that the liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself, will have gained for them—through the bitter lessons of this week—a new, deeper meaning.



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