Bernie Sanders falsifies the political legacy of Rosa Luxemburg

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In a statement that combines ignorance with historical falsification, US Senator Bernie Sanders on Thursday sought to misconstrue the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary murdered by the social democratic forebears of Sanders' "democratic socialism."

During a lengthy interview on Steven Bartlett's "Diary of a CEO" podcast, Sanders briefly addressed the question of "where my political views came from." The self-proclaimed socialist referred to growing up in a working-class household in Brooklyn and to the fact that his father's family in Poland was "wiped out by Hitler" during the Holocaust. "The racism, the insanity of that," Sanders said, "certainly had a big impact on my life."

Sanders then invoked, as a supposed inspiration for his own politics, the great Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, the outstanding figure in the German socialist movement until her death in 1919.

According to Sanders, Luxemburg "was murdered by what became the Nazis in, I'm guessing, mid-20s. I don't remember exactly. What she said is: 'either we will have socialism or barbarism.' Got it? Either people will in a sense learn to live together and work together, or else we're going to end up having- and that was before Hitler, got it? This is the late 20s when she was killed. And the struggle that we have is to bring out the better angels of people, rather than the worst parts of humanity."

Sanders is incapable of naming the decade of one of the seminal events in the history of the socialist movement: he is a man totally ignorant of the basic facts of the history of socialism.

But Sanders' ignorance is at least partially self-willed. The murder of Rosa Luxemburg was ordered by Social Democratic military chief Gustav Noske on behalf of the provisional government of Friedrich Ebert, Sanders' political godfather.

In other words, Luxemburg was murdered by the political ancestors of Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—the social-democratic enemies of Marxism and socialism who paved the way for fascism.

Worse, after displaying his ignorance of the decade of her murder and his falsification of those responsible for it, Sanders proceeds to lie about her political life and legacy.

Sanders seeks to transform Luxemburg into a bourgeois liberal like himself. Sanders strips Luxemburg's stark alternative—socialism or barbarism—of its revolutionary content, reducing it to a vague humanist appeal to "the better angels of people" so that everyone can set aside their differences and "learn to live together."

The 85-year-old senator has spent his entire career channeling working-class anger back into the Democratic Party and defending the profit system with a veneer of socialist rhetoric. Sanders' attempt to enlist Luxemburg in this enterprise is an affront to everything she stood for.

Luxemburg and her great comrade, Karl Liebknecht, were murdered, not in the mid or late 1920s but on January 15, 1919. Just two weeks earlier they had founded the German Communist Party (KPD) to lead the working class in the revolution that was erupting across the country to overthrow capitalism, the system responsible for the mass slaughter of the First World War.

Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, sailors in Kiel rose up on November 3, 1918, setting off uprisings across the country that forced the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the signing of the armistice on November 11. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) government responded to the upsurge with a campaign of incitement and violent repression, culminating in the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

The assassinations were carried out by members of the Freikorps, a paramilitary force made up of demobilised soldiers, supported and funded by the SPD government of Friedrich Ebert in order to crush the revolution. There is a historical connection between the Freikorps and the subsequent development of Nazism: these formations helped supply many of the leading personnel for Hitler's paramilitary SA. But Sanders' phrase that Luxemburg was killed by "what became the Nazis" glosses over the alliance between these counter-revolutionary military forces and the social democrats against the working class.

With these methods, the social democrats saved capitalism and established the Weimar Republic, paving the way for decades of economic and social crises and the growth of fascism during the 1920s and 30s.

Luxemburg represented the revolutionary alternative to the betrayals of the SPD. Luxemburg was not a weak-kneed liberal but an uncompromising advocate of class war and socialist revolution. Her most famous work is *Reform or Revolution* (1899), which is a devastating theoretical and political exposure of the reactionary idea that capitalism will evolve peacefully into socialism.

The book answered Eduard Bernstein's revisionist theory that the socialist movement should abandon the goal of overthrowing capitalism through a working-class revolution, and instead pursue gradual reform through parliament and the trade unions. What was at stake was the very existence of the socialist movement. In answer to Bernstein's statement that the "final goal" of a socialist society "is nothing; the movement is everything," Luxemburg wrote that this goal was the only factor that transformed the socialist movement "from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle against this order."

Bernstein spoke for a layer of party officials, trade union bureaucrats and petty bourgeois who tied their own personal fate to the success of

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German imperialism. Bernstein wrote that "the German nation" had borne, and was still bearing, "its fair share in the civilizing work of nations" and dismissed the danger posed by militarism, claiming that "we are increasingly becoming accustomed to settle political differences in ways other than by the use of firearms."

In response, Luxemburg warned that the growing contradictions of the capitalist economy were sharpening the rivalries between the major powers. Luxemburg wrote that "militarism has become indispensable" for the bourgeoisie to defend its interests "in competition against other 'national' groups," to expand its financial and industrial capital, and "as an instrument of class domination over the labouring population inside the country."

The breakdown of capitalism, which Bernstein had rejected as inconceivable, took the form in 1914 of the eruption of world war. The imperialist powers sought to overcome the contradiction between the division of the world into rival nation-states and the growing integration of the world economy, by violently redividing the world.

In Germany and across Europe virtually all the social-democratic parties of the Second International joined hands with the bourgeois state to defend their "national" interests in the war, at the cost of tens of millions of lives. The opposition to this historic betrayal of socialist internationalism was led by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolshevik Party in Russia, and by Luxemburg and Liebknecht's Spartacus League—later the KPD—in Germany.

This is the actual context for Luxemburg's statement that humanity confronted the alternatives of "socialism or barbarism." Luxemburg developed this alternative most fully in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, known as the Junius Pamphlet, which she wrote in prison between February and April 1915 in answer to the SPD's vote for war credits in August 1914:

> Friedrich Engels once said: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." What does "regression into barbarism" mean to our lofty European civilization? … This world war is a regression into barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. … Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration—a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat.

Luxemburg devoted her life to a relentless struggle against all those who advocated collaboration with capitalist political parties. Luxemburg despised the opportunists of her time, the reactionary forerunners of everything that Sanders represents today.

Yet Sanders stands far to the right of Bernstein and the social democrats of the Weimar Republic, while falling well short even of Bernstein's modest intellectual stature.

Against the backdrop of the economic boom that began in 1895, Bernstein sought to justify his repudiation of revolutionary Marxism by invoking the material concessions won through the struggles of the SPD's mass working-class movement. Sanders can point to no comparable gains, and personifies the bankruptcy of reformism in an epoch of historic capitalist crisis, when the ruling class is neither capable of, nor willing to grant meaningful social reforms.

During his interview with Bartlett, Sanders promoted the fantasy that the Democratic Party will use its majority in Congress next year to pass "strong popular legislation" to improve healthcare and wages. Trump might sign such measures, Sanders suggested: "I think that's a possibility on a lot of legislation because Trump has no ideology." Trump, Sanders said, "cares about his own well-being and being popular."

On NBC's *Meet the Press* on November 8, Sanders mused that Trump "might not be unsympathetic to raising the minimum wage to a living wage" and "would love, I think, to take credit for doing what every other major country does, guaranteeing healthcare to all people."

For Sanders and other "left" Democrats such as New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, to "learn to live together and work together" means reconciling the working class to the fascistic Trump administration.

Trump's priority is not "being popular." Trump is the representative of the American oligarchy, which is seeking to counter its historic decline by unleashing imperialist war against Iran, Russia and China. War abroad goes hand-in-hand with an all-out assault on the working class, including the destruction of what remains of social welfare and healthcare programs. To enforce this agenda, the Trump administration is marching towards dictatorial forms of rule.

Sanders and the DSA are seeking to prevent any effective opposition by chaining workers to the Democrats. Sanders' claim that the Democratic Party is being transformed into a "grassroots party" through a so-called "political revolution" is a fraud. The Democratic Party is an imperialist party, packed with representatives of the CIA and the military, representing the same rapacious oligarchy as the Republicans. The Democrats' main criticism of Trump is his perceived failure to be sufficiently aggressive against Russia and China.

More than a century after Rosa Luxemburg's death, her fight against opportunism and anti-Marxist revisionism retains burning relevance for workers and young people. Mass struggles are erupting internationally against war, austerity and dictatorship, which will pose sharply the necessity of socialist revolution. The task is to establish the political independence of the working class and build its revolutionary leadership—in opposition to Sanders and similar fake "socialists" in every country. This means building the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, including the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, which alone defend the Marxist and internationalist program for which Luxemburg fought.



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