

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > On the Left (Europe) > History of the Left (Europe, out of France and Britain) > Rosa Luxemburg > Rosa Luxemburg (obituary) > **Rosa Luxemburg and German Social Democracy**

Rosa Luxemburg and German Social Democracy

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Contents

- [“The Tried and Tested Tactic”](#)
- [The debate on the mass strike](#)
- [The unity of the work of \(...\)](#)

The real place of Rosa Luxemburg has still to be located precisely in the history of the revolutionary movement. The disintegration of the Stalinist monolith has meant that, while many have acknowledged her merits, they have hastened to add that “*she belongs to the pre-1914 epoch*”. [1]

Those writers who pigeon-hole her in this fashion create an impediment for themselves by approaching the history of the workers movement with essentially subjective criteria. In this way the merits of Rosa become - depending on the whim of the author in question - her uncompromising defence of Marxism against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, her deep attachment to the principles of mass action and spontaneity, or even her defence of workers democracy against Bolshevik “excesses”.

The difficulty disappears as soon as we approach the history of the workers movement with objective criteria and apply the golden rule of historical materialism to Marxism itself: in the final analysis it is material existence which determines consciousness and not the reverse. We must start from the changing social reality in order to interpret the modifications which have taken place in the thought of the international workers movement, including successive contributions which have enriched or impoverished Marxism itself. With this method, Rosa’s part in the evolution of the workers movement before 1914 (if not before 1919), instead of appearing atomised and fragmented, retains its unity. Only through such a method rather than the empirical approaches of narrative history and specialised research is the crucial importance of Rosa’s theoretical and practical activity fully revealed.

“The Tried and Tested Tactic” in Crisis

For thirty years the tactics of German Social Democracy, “*die alte bewährte Taktik*” (“the tried and tested tactic”), had completely dominated the international proletarian movement. In fact, apart from the splendid isolation of the Paris Commune and the experiences of certain, mainly anarchist, sections of the international workers movement, the history of the class struggle had borne the social democratic stamp for half a century. Its influence was so preponderant that even those like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had broken in practice with this tradition at a national level, continued to regard the German model religiously as a model which was universally applicable.

“The tried and tested tactic” had a first class pedigree. During the last fifteen years of his life,

despite significant vacillations, [2] Frederick Engels had become its champion even to the extent of making it a veritable deed in his “political testament”: the “Introduction” that he wrote in 1895 to the new German edition of Karl Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France 1848-50*. The most famous extracts from this “Introduction” were cited innumerable times in every European language between 1895 and 1914. And it was this path which social democracy followed from 1918 to 1929, when the world economic crisis and the crisis of social democracy itself combined to put an end to this sterile exercise:

*Everywhere the German example of utilising the suffrage, of winning all the posts accessible to us, has been imitated. Everywhere the spontaneous unleashing of the attack has retreated into the background... The two million voters whom it sends to the ballot box, together with the young men and women who stand behind...them as non-voters, form the most numerous, most compact mass, the decisive “shock force” of the international proletarian army. This mass already supplies over a fourth of the recorded votes...Its growth proceeds as spontaneously, as steadily, as irresistibly, and at the same time as tranquilly as a natural process. All government interventions have proved powerless against it. We can count even today on two and a quarter million voters. If it continues in this fashion, by the end of the century we shall conquer the greater part of the middle section of society, petty bourgeois and small peasants, and grow into the decisive power in the land, before which all other powers will have to bow, whether they like it or not. To keep this growth going without interruption until of itself it gets beyond the control of the ruling governmental system, not to fritter away this daily increasing shock force in advance guard fighting, but to keep it intact until the decisive day, that is our main task. (Engels: *Selected Writings*, edited by W. O. Henderson, pp 294-296. Our emphasis.)*

Of course, we now know that the German Social Democratic leaders had scandalously censored Engels’ text and had twisted its meaning, removing everything that remained fundamentally revolutionary in the words of this old fighter and lifelong companion of Marx. [3] But all that is by the way. The above quotation is authentic. It completely justifies “the tried and tested tactic”: recruit as many members as possible, educate as many workers as possible, gain as many votes as possible in elections, and put new social legislation on the statute book (above all the reduction of the working week) - everything else will follow automatically: “*All other powers will have (sic) to bow before us*”; our growth is “*irresistible*”; we must “*keep our shock force intact until the decisive day*” (sic)...

Even more convincing than the blessing of the venerable doyen of international socialism was the verdict of the facts. The facts gave credence to Bebel, Vandervelde, Victor Adler and the other pragmatists who were content to plod this path, thereafter elevated to the status of holy writ. At each election the votes grew. If sometimes there was an unexpected reversal (the “Hottentot elections” in Germany in 1907) it was followed by a particularly brilliant riposte: the Reichstag elections in 1912, when the German Social Democracy won a third of the votes. The workers’ organisations were continually gathering strength, extending into every sphere of social life and becoming bastions of what was truly a “counter society” stimulating a sustained development of class consciousness. There were wage rises, there was increasing legislation to protect the workers, and poverty was declining (even if it had not disappeared entirely). The tide seemed so irresistible that not only the faithful but even their adversaries were heady with it.

But, as always, consciousness lagged behind reality. All this “irresistible tide” amounted to was a reflection of the international capitalist boom, a secular reduction in the “industrial reserve army” in Europe, notably through emigration, and the increasing super-exploitation of the colonial and semi-colonial countries by imperialism. By the beginning of the 20th century the resources that had fueled this temporary easing of socio-economic contradictions in the West were beginning to run out. Thenceforth the aggravation and not the easing of social contradictions was on the agenda. Waiting

to take the stage was not an epoch of peaceful progress but an epoch of imperialist wars, national liberation struggles and civil war. The long period of amelioration would be followed by twenty years when real wages stagnated or even fell. The epoch of evolution was at an end; the epoch of revolutions was about to begin.

In this new epoch “the tried and tested tactic” lost all justification; from an organisational principle it was to be transformed into a death trap for the European working class. The vast majority of contemporaries did not grasp this before 4 August 1914. Even Lenin had not understood it for the countries which lay to the west of the Tsarist Empire; Trotsky was hesitant. Rosa’s merit was that she was the first to grasp clearly and systematically the necessity for a fundamental change in the strategy and tactics of the workers movement in the West, confronted by a changed objective situation: the dawning of the imperialist epoch. [4] The roots of Rosa’s fight against the “tried and tested tactic”

Of course, the new objective situation had been partially grasped by the most far-sighted Marxists at the end of the 19th century. The phenomenon of the extension of colonial empires and the beginnings of imperialism, insofar as it was the expression of the political expansion of big capital, had been analysed. Hilferding had erected that remarkable monument Finance Capital. He recorded the appearance of cartels, trusts and monopolies (used by the revisionists to claim that capitalism would become more and more organised and thus its contradictions less acute; there really is nothing new under the sun). After the International’s Stuttgart Conference the suspicions of Lenin, the Polish, Dutch, Belgian and Italian left regarding Kautsky’s concessions to the revisionists increased, especially on the question of the fight against imperialist war. Electoral opportunism and “tactical” blocs with the liberal bourgeoisie of this or that region or national group (such as the Baden group in Germany, the majority of the Belgian Workers Party, the followers of Jaures in France, etc.) came under heavy fire. However, all this criticism remained partial and fragmented and, above all, “the tried and tested tactic” was not scrapped in favour of a new system of strategy and tactics. On the contrary, it was treated with more reverence than ever before.

From 1900 to 1914 Rosa was the only socialist west of Russia to strike out in a new direction. This exceptional achievement was not just the result of her undeniable genius, her clarity of thought, and her unflinching devotion to the cause of socialism and the international working class. It can be explained above all by the historical and geographical, that is to say social, conditions in which her theory and practice were nurtured and developed.

Her unique position as a leader of two social democratic parties (the German and Polish parties) placed her at a vantage point for understanding the two contradictory tendencies in international social democracy. On the one hand there was the dangerous slide into bureaucratic routinism which was becoming ever more pronounced in Germany, and on the other hand there was the rise of new forms and methods of struggle in the Tsarist Empire. She was therefore able to perform for the tactics of the workers movement the same audacious operation that Trotsky had performed for revolutionary perspectives. No longer did the most “advanced” countries necessarily show the “backward” ones the image of their own future. On the contrary, the workers of the “backward” countries (Russia and Poland) were showing the Western countries the urgent tactical modifications that had to be adopted.

Naturally, this too had been foreseen by certain Marxists. As early as 1896, Parvus had published a long study in the *Neue Zeit* in which he envisaged the use of “a mass political strike” as a weapon against the threat of a coup to suppress universal suffrage. “This study was itself inspired by a resolution Kautsky had submitted to the 10th Session of the Socialist Congress in Zurich (1893) on the appropriate response to threats to universal suffrage. [