

Rosa Luxemburg on the Meaning of May Day

**"As long as the struggle of the workers against the ruling class continues, May Day will be the yearly expression of our demands."
Rosa Luxemburg on the meaning of International Workers' Day.**

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Rosa Luxemburg was one of the great theorists of the workers' movement in the twentieth century. Her political life began in the 1880s, when she was an organiser for the Polish Proletariat Party – before her activities in support of strikes forced her to flee the country in 1889.

In exile in Zurich, Luxemburg studied Marxism and organised with other Polish and Lithuanian émigrés to establish a newspaper, *Sprawa Robotnicza*, The Workers' Cause. But it was in Germany, in the late 1890s, where Luxemburg made her name as one of the leading intellectual figures in what was then the largest socialist party in the world – the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In the SPD, Luxemburg attacked what she saw as the 'revisionism' of leading party figures like Eduard Bernstein and established herself as a leader of the Left. A fierce critic of militarism and imperialism, she would become one of the most important opponents of the First World War, arguing with French socialist leader Jean Jaurès that the workers' movement should not fall in behind their national governments in their chauvinist bloodbath.

Together with Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin, Luxemburg broke from the SPD over the war and formed the Spartacist League, with whom she would be active in pushing for an anti-capitalist direction to the German Revolution of 1918-'19. When it became clear that the new SPD government did not intend to pursue a workers' state, Luxemburg led the Spartacist Uprising of January 1919 against them – eventually being put down by the proto-fascist Freikorps under the command of social democratic president Friedrich Ebert.

Here, in two articles – the first in *Sprawa Robotnicza* earlier in her life, the second in German newspaper *Liepziger Volkszeitung* while a member of the SPD – Luxemburg discusses the importance of May Day and her perspective on the international workers' movement.

What Are the Origins of May Day? (1894)

The happy idea of using a proletarian holiday celebration as a means to attain the eight-hour day was first born in Australia. The workers there decided in 1856 to organise a day of complete stoppage together with meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favor of the eight-hour day. The day of this celebration was to be April 21. At first, the Australian workers intended this only for the year 1856. But this first celebration had such a strong effect on the proletarian masses of Australia,

enlivening them and leading to new agitation, that it was decided to repeat the celebration every year.

In fact, what could give the workers greater courage and faith in their own strength than a mass work stoppage which they had decided themselves? What could give more courage to the eternal slaves of the factories and the workshops than the mustering of their own troops? Thus, the idea of a proletarian celebration was quickly accepted and, from Australia, began to spread to other countries until finally it had conquered the whole proletarian world.

The first to follow the example of the Australian workers were the Americans. In 1886 they decided that May 1 should be the day of universal work stoppage. On this day 200,000 of them left their work and demanded the eight-hour day. Later, police and legal harassment prevented the workers for many years from repeating this [size] demonstration. However in 1888 they renewed their decision and decided that the next celebration would be May 1, 1890.

In the meanwhile, the workers' movement in Europe had grown strong and animated. The most powerful expression of this movement occurred at the International Workers' Congress in 1889. At this Congress, attended by four hundred delegates, it was decided that the eight-hour day must be the first demand. Whereupon the delegate of the French unions, the worker Lavigne from Bordeaux, moved that this demand be expressed in all countries through a universal work stoppage. The delegate of the American workers called attention to the decision of his comrades to strike on May 1, 1890, and the Congress decided on this date for the universal proletarian celebration. In this case, as thirty years before in Australia, the workers really thought only of a one-time demonstration. The Congress decided that the workers of all lands would demonstrate together for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1890. No one spoke of a repetition of the holiday for the next years. Naturally no one could predict the lightning-like way in which this idea would succeed and how quickly it would be adopted by the working classes. However, it was enough to celebrate the May Day simply one time in order that everyone understand and feel that May Day must be a yearly and continuing institution.

The first of May demanded the introduction of the eight-hour day. But even after this goal was reached, May Day was not given up. As long as the struggle of the workers against the bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands. And, when better days dawn, when the working class of the world has won its deliverance then too humanity will probably celebrate May Day in honour of the bitter struggles and the many sufferings of the past.

The Idea of May Day on the March (1913)

In the middle of the wildest orgies of imperialism, the world holiday of the proletariat is repeating itself for the twenty-fourth time. What has taken place in the quarter of a century since the epoch-making decision to celebrate May Day is an immense part of the historical path. When the May demonstration made its debut, the vanguard of the International, the German working class, was breaking the chains of a shameful law of

exception and setting out on the path of a free, legal development. The period of the long depression on the world market since the crash of the 1870s had been overcome, and the capitalist economy had just begun a phase of splendid growth which would last nearly a decade. At the same time, after twenty years of unbroken peace, the world breathed a sigh of relief, remembering the period of war in which the modern European state system had received its bloody baptism.

The path seemed free for a peaceful cultural development; illusions, hopes of a reasonable, pacific discussion between labour and capital grew abundantly like green corn in the ranks of socialism. Propositions like “to hold out the open hand to the good will” marked the beginning of the 1890s; promises of an imperceptible “gradual move into socialism” marked its end. Crises, wars, and revolution were supposed to have been things of the past, the baby shoes of modern society; parliamentarism and unions, democracy in the state and democracy in the factory were supposed to open the doors of a new, better order.

The course of events have submitted all of these illusions to a fearful test. At the end of the 1890s, in place of the promised, smooth, social-reforming cultural development, began a period of the most violent and acute sharpening of the capitalistic contradictions – a storm and stress, a crashing and colliding, a wavering and quaking in the foundations of the society. In the following decade, the ten-year period of economic prosperity was paid for by two violent world crises. After two decades of world peace, in the last decade of the past century followed six bloody wars, and in the first decade of the new century four bloody revolutions.

Instead of the social reforms – conspiracy laws, penal laws, and penal praxis; instead of industrial democracy – the powerful concentration of capital in cartels and business associations, and the international practice of gigantic lock-outs. And instead of the new growth of democracy in the state – a miserable breakdown of the last remnants of bourgeois liberalism and bourgeois democracy. Specifically in the case of Germany the fate of the bourgeois parties since the 1890s has brought: the rise and immediate, hopeless dissolution of the National Socialists; the split of the “radical” opposition and the reunification of its splinters in the morass of the reaction; and finally the transformation of the “centre” from a radical peoples’ party to a conservative governmental party. The shifting in the development of the parties was similar in other capitalist countries. In general, the revolutionary working class sees itself today standing alone, opposed to a closed, hostile reaction of the ruling classes and their malicious tricks.

The sign under which this whole development, both economic and political, has been consummated, the formula back to which its results point, is imperialism. This is no new element, no unexpected turn in the general historical path of the capitalist society. Armaments and wars, international contradictions and colonial politics accompany the history of capitalism from its cradle. It is the most extreme intensification of these elements, a drawing together, a gigantic storming of these contradictions which has produced a new epoch in the course of modern society.

In a dialectical interaction, both cause and effect of the immense accumulation of capital and the heightening and sharpening of the contradictions which go with it

internally, between capital and labour; externally, between the capitalist states – imperialism has opened the final phase, the division of the world by the assault of capital. A chain of unending, exorbitant armaments on land and on sea in all capitalist countries because of rivalries; a chain of bloody wars which have spread from Africa to Europe and which at any moment could light the spark which would become a world fire; moreover, for years the uncheckable specter of inflation, of mass hunger in the whole capitalist world – all of these are the signs under which the world holiday of labour, after nearly a quarter of a century, approaches. And each of these signs is a flaming testimony of the living truth and the power of the idea of May Day.

The brilliant basic idea of May Day is the autonomous, immediate stepping forward of the proletarian masses, the political mass action of the millions of workers who otherwise are atomised by the barriers of the state in the day-to-day parliamentary affairs, who mostly can give expression to their own will only through the ballot, through the election of their representatives. The excellent proposal of the Frenchman Lavigne at the Paris Congress of the International added to this parliamentary, indirect manifestation of the will of the proletariat a direct, international mass manifestation: the strike as a demonstration and means of struggle for the eight-hour day, world peace, and socialism.

And in effect what an upswing this idea, this new form of struggle has taken on in the last decade! The mass strike has become an internationally recognised, indispensable weapon of the political struggle. As a demonstration, as a weapon in the struggle, it returns again in innumerable forms and gradations in all countries for nearly fifteen years. As a sign of the revolutionary reanimation of the proletariat in Russia, as a tenacious means of struggle in the hands of the Belgian proletariat, it has just now proved its living power. And the next, most burning question in Germany – the Prussian voting rights – obviously, because of its previous slipshod treatment, points to a rising mass action of the Prussian proletariat up to the mass strike as the only possible solution.

No wonder! The whole development, the whole tendency of imperialism in the last decade leads the international working class to see more clearly and more tangibly that only the personal stepping forward of the broadest masses, their personal political action, mass demonstrations, and mass strikes which must sooner or later open into a period of revolutionary struggles for the power in the state, can give the correct answer of the proletariat to the immense oppression of imperialistic policy.

In this moment of armament lunacy and war orgies, only the resolute will to struggle of the working masses, their capacity and readiness for powerful mass actions, can maintain world peace and push away the menacing world conflagration. And the more the idea of May Day, the idea of resolute mass actions as a manifestation of international unity, and as a means of struggle for peace and for socialism, takes root in the strongest troops of the International, the German working class, the greater is our guarantee that out of the world war which, sooner or later, is unavoidable, will come forth a definite and victorious struggle between the world of labour and that of capital.

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