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Lucien van der Walt
Rosa Luxemburg's Legacy
Libertarian, Revolutionary, Socialist
19 September 1997

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*Discussion for First International Workers Film Festival,
Ster-Moribo, Johannesburg, 19 September 1997.* All quotes from
Rosa Luxemburg, 1986, *The Mass Strike*, Bookmark and John
Molyneux, 1978, *Marxism and the Party*, The latter is
nonetheless an unconvincing attempt to assimilate Rosa to
Leninism and Trotskyism.

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Comrades, that was a very interesting film. Not just because of what it teaches us about the history of the revolutionary workers movement, and the struggle for socialism and freedom. But also, because it helps us to think about the road we must take to socialism and workers' power.

Often, we think of socialism as something that comes about through government, through electing leaders who will put in place the right policies. Of taking the land and factories and putting them under state control.

Rosa shows us a different vision of socialism. For Rosa socialism was not just something that took place through the State. It was not something which took place through a socialist party.

Socialism was a process of self-emancipation by the working class. Rosa placed great emphasis on workers mass action as the road to socialism:

At a time that the working class must educate, organise and lead itself in the course of the revolutionary struggle, when the revolution itself is directed not only against the established state

power but also against capitalist exploitation, mass strikes appear as the natural method to mobilise the broadest possible levels of the working class into action, to revolutionise and organise them. Simultaneously, [the mass strike] is a method by means of which to undermine and overthrow the established state power as well as curb capitalist exploitation.

... the working class must organise itself, ... above all it must obliterate the distinction between factories and workshops, mines and foundries which the daily yoke of capitalism condemns itself to.

The trade unions in particular would be crucial forums for organising these revolutionary mass strikes. But Rosa knew that the struggle would have to sweep aside the conservative union officials. “Leaders who hang back”, she wrote, “would be pushed aside by the storming masses”.

Nor could the struggle be reduced to the organised workers in the unions. The whole working class– the millions upon millions of working and poor people– would have to be drawn into the mass strike:

The plan of undertaking mass strikes as a serious political class action with organised workers only is absolutely hopeless. If the mass strike ... and the mass struggle are to be successful they must become a real people’s movement, that is the widest sections of the proletariat must be drawn into the fight.

She rejected the idea that there should be a neat distinction between political action, on the one hand, and mass economic action on the other:

There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and a political one, but only one class struggle, which aims at [both] the [struggle against] capitalist exploitation [in the here and now], and at the abolition of exploitation itself.

Rosa did not see socialism as coming about through parliament and a socialist party. capitalism. Yes, you do need a socialist party. but that party was mainly to educate and assist the workers to take power directly. Socialism could only come through a conscious struggle of the workers to end this capitalist system and its state. It could not come through a socialist party seizing state power, especially if that socialist party was highly centralised and undemocratic.

Let us speak plainly, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.

In particular, she criticised Lenin for his notion of a highly centralised vanguard party to make the revolution:

... [party democracy] cannot be based on the mechanical subordination and blind obedience of the party membership to the leading party centre.

She warned that Lenin's notion of the vanguard party would lay the basis for bureaucracy, and undermine the struggle for socialism.

Nothing will more surely enslave a young labour movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straitjacket, which will immobilise the movement and turn it into a [robot] manipulated by a central committee.

She rejected the notion of socialism from above, and criticised Lenin and Trotsky for restricting workers democracy in the Russia revolution:

The [idea] underlying the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the dictatorship is ... that the socialist transformation is something for which a ready-made formula lies completed in the pocket of the revolutionary party, and only needs to be carried out in practice. This cannot be the case the whole mass of the people must take part ...Otherwise socialism will be decreed from behind a few official desks by a dozen intellectuals.

When Rosa was talking about the whole mass of the people being involved in building socialism, she did not mean that the people should be mobilised by a radical government, organised and herded by a red bureaucracy. Rather, she saw socialism as based on the activity of the mass of the people, on grassroots democracy.

Rosa Luxemburg, as I said earlier, is a treasure because here ideas help us rethink what we mean by socialism, and how we get to socialism. She does not take the road of the middle class intellectual, sitting in an ivory tower, and claiming that the working class has disappeared, and that socialism is impossible.

She does not take the road of the conservative nationalist, who thinks that freedom is the freedom to compete in the dog-eat-dog capitalist system, who calls for “trade unionism to be suspended for three years.”¹ Instead, she sees the mass organisations of the working class as the key to socialism.

¹ The reference here is to a recent newspaper interview with Bishop Stanley Mogoba of the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania, in which he praised the repressive governments of East Asia and their sweatshop road to growth. He argued that unions should be “suspended” in the interest of growth.

She does not call for competitiveness, for free trade, for privatisation. No! She calls for mass action, workers solidarity, and the struggle to crush capitalism and build workers power.

As such, Rosa sits uneasily in the current mainstream socialist tradition, which has come to see socialism in terms of governments, political parties, elections. She fits into a broader anti-authoritarian and anti-statist socialist tradition, a tradition which goes back to the splits in the socialist movement in the 1870s, and includes the anarcho-syndicalist and revolutionary syndicalist traditions.

It is this tradition which held out the possibility of workers power and self-management in Spain in 1936–1939, a revolution so movingly shown in the recent Ken Loach film *Land and Freedom*.² It is this tradition – termed “libertarian socialism” by the American radical Noam Chomsky –³ which holds the seeds for the renewal of socialism as a process of mass struggle and self-emancipation by the dispossessed billions of humankind, by all the victims of the capitalist/ state system.

² ... although *Land and Freedom* downplays the role of the anarcho-syndicalists who led the revolution, in favour of the marginal POUM militia. This is like skipping the Bolsheviks in a film on the Russian Revolution.

³ Noam Chomsky, 1970, “Notes on Anarchism,” in “Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism: from Theory to Practice*, Monthly Review Press.