# The Significance of the Mass Strike during the German Revolution of 1918-1919

*William A. Pelz*

## ABSTRACT

In the early years of the twentieth century long before World War I, German labor fiercely debated the use of strikes, particularly the mass strike, as a weapon in the class struggle. Most famous is the radical position articulated by Rosa Luxemburg in The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions (1906). In the furnace of the First World War, the question of the strike as an anti-war, if not insurrectionary, weapon took on added urgency. Various anti-war and radical groups had different approaches, ranging on the left from that advocated by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards to the ideas of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht within the Spartakusbund. The role of the strike within the unfolding German Revolution of 1918-19 will be examined with an eye to evaluating both its potential and limitations as a revolutionary tactic.

## KEYWORDS

Mass Strike, German Revolution of 1918-1919, Rosa Luxemburg

By strikes, this article means, in agreement with Marcel van der Linden, "forms of struggle, coercion and power in which a group of workers collectively stops working to enforce economic, social and/or political demands that matter to those directly concerned and/or others."[1] This may seem obvious to most scholars, but in the popular media strikes are often confused or conflated with demonstrations, riots or other forms of public activity. Of course, all discussions of the working class can be subject to greatly nuanced discussion along with various ideological interpretations.[2]

Strikes, and most of all the general strike, have long been considered as having potential as an insurrectionary weapon. Georges Sorel, French syndicalist philosopher, went so far as to hold that the myth of the general strike was a major factor in the rise of the workers' movement.[3] Sorel notes that even a general political strike "might be peaceful and of short duration, its aim being to show the Government that it is on the wrong track."[4] On the other hand, there is the Syndicalist general strike where the "proletariat organizes itself for battle . . . it longs for the final contest in which it will give proof of the whole measure of its valour."[5] As the Industrial Workers of the World,[6] based mainly in the United States, were fond of saying "One Big Union, One Big Strike".[7] With less stress on union organization, anarchists have often seen strikes as weapons against the state.[8] In addition, various members of the Socialist International also would on occasion talk about the need to consider the general strike as a weapon in the arsenal of Social Democracy.[9] Karl Kautsky considered that mass strikes "may be used as an effective weapon" in the battle for suffrage.[10]

Rosa Luxemburg had a different conception of the nature of the mass strike than those cited above. In her famous work on the Russian Revolution of 1905, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions,* she criticized both anarchists on the left and Social Democrats on the right as having an essentially mechanical view of strikes. That is, they saw the strike as a weapon that can either be used or not used according to the taste of leaders. Both tendencies based themselves on the "assumption that the mass

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[1] van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History.* Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 182-183.

[2] For an enlightening discussion see van Voss, Lex Heerma and van der Linden, Marcel (eds.). *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labour History*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002.

[3] Sorel, Georges. *Reflections on Violence*. London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1925.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 132.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 146.

[6] For a wealth of primary material on this group, see Kornbluh, Joyce L. (ed.). *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011.

[7] For an excellent discussion on the IWW and other Syndicalist organizations and their relation with communism, consult Darlington, Ralph. *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative* Analysis. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008.

[8] On Russian anarchism, see the recent biography of one of its most famous advocates, Leir, Mark. *Bakunin*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

[9] Kautsky, Karl. *The Road to Power*. Chicago: Charles H, Kerr Co, 1909.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 86.

strike is a mere technical weapon that can be 'decided' or 'banned' at will . . . A kind of jack knife that is closed and ready, carried in the pocket 'just in case' and can be opened and used."[11] As the German Revolution of 1918-1919 was later to prove, neither commanding a strike wave, nor prohibiting it, would prove successful.

The mass strike, according to Luxemburg, was a more complex, historically based and even contradictory phenomena. She argued that if the Russian Revolution of 1905 "teaches us anything at all, then it is especially that the mass strike is not artificially 'made', not 'decided' haphazardly, not 'propagated,' but it is a historical phenomenon that results from social relations at a certain moment of time with historical necessity."[12] This means that the strike ceases ultimately to be a tactic and becomes a historically determined phenomenon. This clearly demonstrates Luxemburg's political differences with V.I. Lenin[13] especially as concerns both the mass strike and democracy.[14] Less than a decade after Luxemburg had published her critique,[15] Europe was plunged into the largest bloodbath hitherto known on the continent.

The events of the First World War are well known and need not be repeated here. The point does need to be emphasized that the battle field losses Germany suffered were mirrored in death and pain on the home front. As many as three quarters of a million German civilians may have died as a result of the food shortages caused by the British naval blockade. The lack of food combined with falling real wages as the government attempted "to develop substitutes for fat – an abiding deficiency – from rats, mice, hamsters, crows, cockroaches, snails and earthworms, even hair clippings and old leather boots, but none was very successful."[16] These experiments neither solved the food shortage crisis nor endeared the common people to the Imperial system. In fact, the "class peace" proclaimed by the leadership of the Majority Social Democratic Party (SPD) felt increasingly like a vain boast as workers struck against hunger, sometimes the war itself, and ultimately the entire system.

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[11] Luxemburg, Rosa. *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2: 1906-1911. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974, p. 98.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[13] For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Luban, Ottokar. *Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept*. Leipzig: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Sachsen, 2008.

[14] Note the brief English language publication, Schütrumpf, Jörn. *Rosa Luxemburg or: The Price of Freedom*. Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation/Karl Dietz Verlag, 2008.

[15] Luxemburg did not stop rethinking this questions as is shown in Luban, Ottokar. Rosa Luxemburg zum Massenstreik. Zwei unbekannte Rden vom Sommer 1913. In: Ito, Narihiko et. al., *Rosa Luxemburg. Ökonomische und historisch-politische Aspekte ihres Werkes*. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2010, pp. 80-85.

[16] Williams, John Williams. The Other Battlefield: The Home Fronts: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1918. Chicago: Henry Regency, 1972, p. 158.

**Table I**
**Strikes in Germany during World War One[17]**

| Time Period | Number of Strikes | Workers on Strike |
|---|---|---|
| January – July 1914 | 1199 | 94,014 |
| August, 1914 | 0 | 0 |
| September-December 1914 | 24 | 1,126 |
| 1915 | 141 | 12,866 |
| 1916 | 240 | 124,865 |
| 1917 | 562 | 651,461 |
| 1918 | 773 | 1,304,248 |

While local radical groups had influenced some, or even many, of these job actions, it seems that the overwhelming bulk were spontaneous reactions. Still, as the war ground on and particularly after the Bolshevik Revolution in autumn 1917, the strikes and the workers became more politicized. A vague, if intense, longing for peace among the workers "was transformed into an ardent sympathy with the Bolsheviks in the course of their negotiations with the German militarists."[18] In late January 1918, between 250,000 and 400,000 workers, particularly in Berlin, went on strike. Besides economic demands, the strikers asked for an end to the war without annexations or indemnities. By February, the strike was broken with great brutality with long sentences handed out freely by military courts that judged civilians accused of political crimes.[19] The left-wing Revolutionary Shop Stewards[20] were unable to turn this into a general strike against the war nor were the SPD officials able to prevent it from happening. Yet, by October 1918, General Ludendorff feared "There is no relying on the troops anymore . . . our western army will lose its last self-control and, in complete chaos, flee back across the Rhine and bring revolution to Germany."[21]

As fate would have it, when the red flags signaling the outbreak of what has gone down in history as the November Revolution first appeared, they emanated from neither factory nor front, but rather from the fleet. By October 1918, the common sailors looked increasingly forward to the end to a war that was less dangerous but as tedious, boring and degrading as army service. The Admirals thought differently. The Lords of the

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[17] Kuczynski, Jürgen. *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter in Deutschland von 1800 bis in die Gegenwart*. Berlin: Verlag die Freie Gewerkschaft, 1947, p. 249.

[18] Rosenberg, Arthur. *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 210.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 211-216.

[20] For more on this interesting, if short lived organization, consult the work of Müller, Richard. *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*, 2 vols. Vienna: Malik Verlag, 1925. And Barth, Emil. *Aus der Werkstatt der deutschen Revolution*. Berlin: A. Hoffman Verlag, 1918.

[21] Von Thaer, Albert. *Generalstabsdienst an der Front und in der OHL*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1958, p. 236.

German High Seas Fleet wanted to redeem their honor even at the risk of great losses. They planned a full scale assault against the superior British naval forces that had kept them bottled up near Germany's coast line throughout the war. Whether or not the naval leaders contemplated mass suicide, this was the way most sailors perceived matters.[22] When ordered to sea, sailors on two ships mutinied. The mutiny soon spread to other ships and even in face of mass arrests, the movement was too strong to be suppressed.[23] By the first days of November, the Imperial German high seas fleet was effectively out of the war and the sailors were heading for home and in many cases spreading word of the revolution.[24]

This led to frantic efforts on the part of some leftists to call for a mass strike and insurrection to be held on November 11.[25]At the other end of the labor movement, the moderate SPD leaders attempted to hold back the wave of radicalism. On November 4, the SPD issued a manifesto that warned of anonymous flyers and mouth-to-mouth agitation which were urging workers to strike and go out onto the streets. The SPD statement warned "rash acts may bring horrible disaster to the individual and to our party. Action that promises success must have the support of the entire working class. Yet for this action the moment is not ripe."[26] The plan for an uprising was upstaged by the masses taking action on November 9 without awaiting orders from the would-be revolutionaries while, at the same time, the pleas of the SPD moderates fell on largely deaf ears.[27]

Commenting on the revolutionary process, Rosa Luxemburg noted that: "there was nothing of the sort of a preconceived plan or an organized campaign since the parties' proclamations were hardly able to keep abreast with the spontaneous upheaval of the masses. The leaders had barely time to formulate the slogans of the forward rushing mass of proletarians."[28] Interestingly, those words were written over a decade earlier about the 1905 Russian Revolution, but they could just as well describe Germany in 1918.

In fact, the way strikes did, or did not, break out would seem to have proved Luxemburg's point. As one radical historian comments: "The revolution which exploded in Germany during the first days of November 1918 seems at first sight to confirm the

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[22] Horn, Daniel (ed. & trans.). *War, Mutiny and Revolution in the German Navy: The World War I Diaries of Seaman Richard Stumpf*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967, pp. 417-420.

[23] Horn, Daniel. *The German Naval Mutinies of World War I*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969, pp. 225-226.

[24] Most soldiers, like the sailors, wanted to get home as quickly as possible. See Stephenson, Scott. *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[25] Broué, Pierre. *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005, p. 136.

[26] "Aufruf des Vorstands der SPD vom 4. November 1918," Institut fur Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.), *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, Reihe II (1914-1945), Vol. 2: November 1917-Dezember 1918, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957, pp. 289-290.

[27] For a different view that stresses the conscious activity of a select number of revolutionaries see **Hoffrogge, Ralf.** *Richard Müller: Der Mann hinter der Novemberrevolution.* Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2008. For a more detailed appreciation of this author's viewpoint, see the current author's review of Hoffrogge in *Left History*, 16(1), Spring/Summer, pp. 138-139, 2012.

[28] Luxemburg, Op.Cit, p.110.

expectations and the opinions of Rosa Luxemburg. The working masses were finding their way to revolutionary action despite their leaders, and often against them, almost completely independently of the revolutionary organizations, which were overtaken by the event . . ."[29] Rosa Luxemburg knew that the strike wave that could be transformed into socialist revolution would be a product of history and not the creation of a mere decree. [30] Her fellow revolutionary Karl Liebknecht was not so sure.

Karl Liebknecht, who with Luxemburg founded the German Communist Party (KPD) at the end of 1918, was one of the most recognized voices of revolt. More moved by the power of the Bolshevik example than many German revolutionaries were, he combined this position with a type of inherent revolutionary optimism that annoyed Luxemburg.[31] All of these things came together and caused him to be reckless, particularly during the fatal days of January 1919 in Berlin.[32]

Provoked by the dismissal of the radical Berlin police chief, anger got the better of prudence for many. It was also alleged that there were police agents urging crowds on to occupy buildings, such as Alfred Roland, leader of the group that occupied the SPD's newspaper.[33]

Failing to understand the virtue of patience, Liebknecht rushed into premature action, dragging the KPD into an ill-considered pact with the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the left-wing of the Independent Social Democrats. When Luxemburg first heard of what Liebknecht had got them involved in, she exclaimed: "Karl, is that our program?"[34] This terrible overreach would give the counter-revolutionaries the opportunity to murder him and Luxemburg on January 15, 1919.[35] From there they went on to murder much of the far left leadership in Germany.

Part of the objective situation was that a massive increase in unemployment had made many workers desperate to the point of recklessness while at the same time undercutting the ease of organizing strikes since those remaining employed were more likely older and more moderate and fearful of losing their jobs. The irony is that those who were most willing to engage in strikes were often without jobs that they could withdraw their labor from.

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[29] Broue, Op.Cit., p. 129.

[30] This is the argument made for a consciousness that is neither separate nor distinct from the working class in Guérin, Daniel. *Rosa Luxemburg et la spontanéité révolutionnaire*. Paris: Flammarion, 1971.

[31] Fischer, Ruth. *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origin of the State Party*. Cambridge, MA,: Harvard University Press, 1948, pp. 73-74.

[32] For more on Liebknecht and Luxemburg during the revolution, see Laschitza, Annelies. Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht in den Wochen der Revolution. In: Ito, Narihiko Ito, et. al. *Rosa Luxemburg. Ökonomische und historisch-politische Aspekte ihres Werkes*. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2010, pp. 113-129.

[33] Frölich, Paul. *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action*. London: Pluto Press, 1972, pp. 288-289.

[34] *Ibid*., pp. 289-290.

[35] Hannover-Drück, Elisabeth and Hannover, Heinrich (eds.). Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht: Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967.

**Table II**
**Unemployed Relief Recipients, 1918-1919[36]**

| Date | Number |
|---|---|
| 1 December 1918 | 501,610 |
| 1 January 1919 | 905,137 |
| 1 February 1919 | 1,076,368 |
| 1 March 1919 | 1,053,854 |
| 1 April 1919 | 829,580 |
| 1 May 1919 | 700,000 |

Thus, it can be argued that the events of the German Revolution of 1918-19 reaffirmed Luxemburg's theory of the role of strikes in the revolutionary process. Yet, she wrote that "for the coming mass conflicts in Germany, the absolutely necessary unity of the unionized and social democratic worker movement actually exists. Unity is embodied in the broad masses that is the basis of both social democracy and of the unions and in the consciousness of both sides that they are merged into one spiritual entity."[37] This turned out to be wishful thinking, as the majority of the leaders of German labor dared little and feared the left more than the right.

When, during the heady days of early November 1918, Liebknecht went to give a speech proclaiming the Socialist Republic, SPD leader Scheidemann was warned and in haste gave a speech wherein he proclaimed the formation of a German republic with all socialist parties invited to participate.[38] This impromptu declaration undercut the left but Ebert, SPD leader and first President of the Weimar Republic, turned livid with rage as he lectured Scheidemann that he had no right to proclaim a republic.[39] Quickly reversing himself, Ebert supported the Kaiser's abdication, and finally even the Republic, but only out of fear of the alternative. Ebert said that if the Kaiser did not go "then social revolution is inevitable. But I will have nothing to do with it, I hate it like sin."[40] Of more importance,

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[36] Kuczynski, Jürgen. *Die Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*, Vol. 5. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966, p. 159.

[37] Luxemburg, Op.Cit., p. 163.

[38] Hanssen, Hans Peter. *Diary of a Dying Empire*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1955, pp. 351-352.

[39] Scheidemann, Philipp. *Memorien eines Sozialdemokraten*. Dresden: Carl Reissner, 1930, p. 313.

[40] Prinz Max von Baden. *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1927, p. 599.

was the fact that Army Headquarters asked their officers if the troops would fight for Kaiser Wilhelm II. The answer was overwhelmingly: Nein![41]

What tentative conclusions might one draw from this historical episode and what questions might be asked? (1) To be successful, a general or mass strike must have overwhelming support that can only be expected to occur in exceptional circumstances. (2) Mass unemployment undermines class unity by potentially pitting employed versus unemployed. As early as February 1906, Luxemburg recognized that the "Achilles heel" of the workers' movement "is the colossal unemployment, which is spreading like a terrible plague."[42] (3) Urban revolutionaries often take too little notice of the rural proletariat, let alone small landowning peasants. Unless these are drawn into the revolution, even successful strike action in cities is likely to be broken by forces from the countryside. [43] (4) The mass strike cannot, contrary to syndicalist, anarchist and Social Democratic theories, be willed into being. Neither can it be prevented. In 1910, Luxemburg belittled the SPD leadership's attempt "to forbid even a *discussion* about the mass strike! . . . The masses themselves ought to decide."[44] (5) Revolutionary organizations must be able to relate to strikes in the context of an unpredictable, complex and contradictory situation. This is, of course, extremely difficult to do in practice. (6) The mass strike always poses the question of power. How can the masses be moved from angry radicalism to conscious desire to re-organize society? (7) The strike weapon is often initiated as a defensive measure against some attack by either the employers or the state. One notable example is the general strike that helped defeat the Kapp Putsch against the Weimar Republic.[45] When and under what conditions can a defensive strike action transform itself into an offensive weapon? (8) Strikes should be understood less as weapons that can be used by leaders and more of as part of the historically determined class struggle.

Since one of the points of this article is that Rosa Luxemburg had a generally correct understanding of the strike as an insurrectionary development, it is fitting that she be given the last word. For further human progress, she urged "it is high time that the working masses learn how to express their wisdom and ability to act and demonstrate their ripeness for the time of great struggles and great tasks in which they, the masses, will be the actual chorus and the directing bodies will merely act the 'speaking parts,' that is be the interpreter of the will of the masses."[46]

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[41] *Neue Preussische Zeitung*, 27 July 1919, pp. 1-2.

[42] Letter to Luise and Karl Kautsky in Adler, Georg, Hudis, Peter and Laschitza, Annelies Laschitza (eds.). *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*. London: Verso, 2011, p. 227.

[43] This was recognized by the KPD at their founding convention, see: Protokoll des Gründungsparteitages der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschland (30. Dezember 1918 - 1. Januar 1919), Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1972.

[44] Letter to Konrad Haenisch in Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitza (eds.), Op. Cit., p. 288-289.

[45] Broué, Op.Cit., pp. 349-380.

[46] Luxemburg, Op.Cit., p. 170.