

# ROSA LUXEMBURG

## THE BELGIAN GENERAL STRIKE OF 1902



*first english translation by andrew hornung*

# introduction

The five short articles by Rosa Luxemburg which follow comprise about half her writing on Belgium and the General Strike of 1902. In our next edition we shall publish not only her continuation of the discussion of the defeat of the General Strike, Vandervelde's reply and her answer to him, but also some shorter reports of the period which appeared in 'Die Neue Zeit'.

In this way we hope to come to grips with a stage in the development of the theory of the general strike, seen in relation to the concrete events surrounding and making for this development.

Cut off to a large extent from the debates, discussions, and events which led to certain codifications and conceptions within the Marxist movement (e.g. general strike, workers' government, etc), the revolutionary movement today rarely avoids the pitfalls of dogmatism. Instead of starting out from an analysis of the situation at hand in all its richness, its movement, above all, its specificity, the starting point very often is a codification divorced from all the experience of which it was a summary. Into the limits of this summary, with all its necessary one-sidedness and aridity, the concrete is collapsed.

When five dockers were jailed last July, the operative conceptions held by most revolutionaries amounted to nothing more than the paralysing prejudices derived from a one-sided and mythologised version of the one national experience of a full-scale general strike, 1926. Thus the many organisations who bear, as if out of a sense of self-sarcasm, the title of "International" this or "International" that, peered through the rimmed spectacles of the single national experience, and arrived at conclusions of extreme conservatism.

The mantle of orthodoxy draped over these prejudices has been spun out of one tiny article by Trotsky (The ILP and the Fourth International: In the Middle of the Road - 1935), and this was inevitably mis-read and mis-placed.

The aim, therefore, in publishing these articles is to restore to the revolutionary movement a concept, a weapon, of great value. And further to do this in such a way as to be able to present it in terms of the experiences which contributed to its development. To a limited extent we attempted, in the pages of Workers' Fight, to do this prior to the jailing of the dockers, and to apply the understanding creatively to the problems at hand. Our publication, "The Left and the July Crisis", gives a brief outline of this by contrasting the positions of other left organisations.

# A Question of Tactics

A few years ago, at the time of a particularly heated debate on the question of alliances with bourgeois parties, those who defended political alliances tended to adduce the example of the Belgian Labour Party (1) in support of their position. Their alliance with the Liberals in the years of struggle for universal suffrage was supposed to serve to demonstrate the occasional necessity and the political inreproachability of alliances between the Social Democracy and bourgeois democracy.

Even then the proof was false. Because anyone who knew about the constant vacillations and repeated betrayals by the Belgian Liberals of their proletarian brothers-in-struggle would approach the idea of the bourgeois democracy's support of the working class, precisely because of the Belgian experience, with the utmost pessimism. The resolutions adopted at this latest Congress of the Belgian Socialist Party (2) are very instructive on this point.

It is common knowledge that the Belgian working class at present stands at the cross-roads which will determine the outcome of its tremendously tenacious fifteen year long struggle for universal suffrage (3). It is now preparing to storm the fortress of clericalism and abolish plural voting (4). The lily-livered liberal bourgeoisie prepares to take the full force of the workers' determined actions, and, at the same time, gets ready to act itself by offering the Social Democracy its hand in a joint campaign.

This time, however, the alliance is concluded like a simple piece of horse-trading. As their part of the bargain, the Liberals give up the plural voting system but agree to universal equal suffrage (one man, one vote). As its part of the bargain the Social Democracy gives up the demand for women's suffrage and agrees not to use any revolutionary methods in the struggle for the franchise. It also accepts as part of the package proportional representation as the electoral system to be enshrined constitutionally. (5) The Brussels Federation of the Socialist Party accepted the Liberals' conditions in the main, leaving it to the Easter Congress of the Belgian Social Democracy to approve the finishing touches of the deal.

This makes it clear - and there can be no arguing this away - that this alliance (or rather compromise!) with the Liberals has meant the Social Democrats reneging on one of the points in its programme. Naturally the Belgian comrades assure us that the demand for women's suffrage has only been dropped "for the time being" and will immediately be raised again after the victory of universal male suffrage. Firstly this is a new notion for the international Social Democracy: the programme seems to be a kind of menu whose individual dishes can

only be consumed in a certain order. While admitting that situations do from time to time arise which determine that the workers' parties of different countries put the main agitational weight on different demands, it is nevertheless the totality of our demands that is always the basis of our political struggle. The gulf between the occasional lessening of emphasis on some point in the programme and its express (albeit temporary) deletion in favour of some other point in the programme is the same great gulf as lies between the principled struggle of the Social Democracy and the political manipulations of the bourgeois parties.

And let us be quite clear on this: in Belgium it is a question of deleting the demand for women's suffrage. Of course the resolution adopted at the Brussels Congress avoids all detail stating that "the forthcoming revision of the constitution should be limited to that of universal male suffrage." The least we can expect now is that the Church in order to throw in a bone of contention for the Liberals and Social Democrats to fight over, will raise the question of women's suffrage in the course of events. The Brussels resolution calls on the representatives of the Labour Party "to frustrate this manoeuvre and maintain the alliance with the supporters of universal suffrage" in such an event. In simple language this means: vote against women's suffrage!

This playing fast and loose with principles is certainly harmful, though it would never occur to us to demand of a Socialist Party that it forgo certain immediate, tangible gains for the sake of the abstract full programme. Precisely in this case, as usual, what are exchanged for principles are not real, tangible gains, but merely illusions. Here as elsewhere it is pure fantasy to maintain that firm adherence to our basic positions prevents us from reaching the earthly paradise.

Consider! It is considered that if the Belgian Social Democracy sticks to its demand for women's suffrage there will be a break with the Liberals and the whole campaign will be endangered. The Labour Party shows, however, how little in the last resort it cares about the alliance and its conditions by accepting the Liberals' third point with a silent shrug of the shoulders. The Belgian Labour Party knew very well that it could not do without revolutionary methods of struggle and have its hands tied. Indeed in this it allowed itself to be guided by the perfectly correct belief that the real power in the struggle, the sure guarantee of victory, lay not in the support of knock-kneed Liberal mayors and senators, but in the masses' determination to fight. Not in parliament but in the streets.

It would in fact have been most odd if the Belgian Labour Party of all parties had entertained

the slightest doubt on this score. After all it has won all their victories to date - like the plural voting system - by means of that unforgettable mass strike and those threatening street demonstrations by the working class. And just as before the first bold steps of the proletariat will hit the Liberal bourgeoisie in Belgium like a thunder clap. And in the face of the advancing Social Democracy these "allies" will scurry off down the mouse-hole of parliamentary treachery with proven speed, leaving the conquest of universal suffrage to the fists of the working class. For the Belgian Labour Party this fair prospect is an open secret.

If after all the Party sweeps the third condition of its pact with the Liberals quietly under the carpet and openly prepares for whatever the struggle might bring, then it will be showing absolutely unambiguously that it accepts the support of the "Liberals" for just what it is: the kind of accidental and temporary assistance that might well be accepted for a certain stretch of a common path, for which however one would not move an inch from the road already decided on.

What this does prove though is that logically even the supposedly "tangible advantage" for which the principle of women's suffrage was sacrificed is complete twaddle. Once again we see here - as elsewhere including Germany - that every time ridiculous compromises at the cost of principles are made the "tangible gains" are quite beside the point. The point really is that of getting rid of the programme's demands. For our "practical politicians" these are in themselves just so much baggage to be dragged around and religiously referred to so long as they have no practical significance.

Not only has women's suffrage been a constantly and generally recognised part of the programme of the Belgian Social Democracy but the workers' deputies also voted unanimously for it in parliament in 1895. Of course, until now there has been no possibility of its realisation either in Belgium or elsewhere in Europe. Today for the first time it threatens to become a real possibility, and now, all of a sudden, it appears that there is no longer one single opinion in the ranks of the Labour Party on the matter. In fact we can go further, according to Dewinnes' (6) speech at the Brussels Congress "the party as a whole opposes women's suffrage!"

But the most astonishing spectacle was the explanation of the Belgian Social Democracy's position of opposing female suffrage. It is an argument no different from the one Russian Czarism (and before that the German monarchy

with its divine right of kings) uses to justify its political crimes. "The people are not yet mature enough to vote," they say. As if the people had some school of political maturity other than the exercise of political rights! As if the male working class had not also once had a period of learning - and still needs to learn - to use the ballot box as a weapon in its own class interests!

In fact any clear thinking person should realise that the involvement of working class women in political life whether in the short or long term is bound to lead to a powerful upsurge in the workers' movement. This perspective not only means a vast new field of agitational work for the Social Democracy. But the emancipation of women is bound to blow a strong fresh wind through the political and intellectual life of the class. It will dispel the foul air of today's barbaric family life, which leaves its unmistakable mark on our party members - workers and leaders alike.

Admittedly in the short term the granting of female suffrage could have quite disastrous political consequences. It could strengthen the domination of the Church. Also the whole organisational and agitational practice of the Labour Party would have to be rethought. In short, the political equality of women means a bold and important political experiment.

What is worth noting here is that all those who are full of great admiration for the "experiments" à la Millerand (7) and are never done with praising the audacity of these measures are silent now. They utter not one word of reproach against our Belgian comrades for recollecting in fear in the face of this experiment of women's suffrage. Indeed it was none other than the Belgian leader Anseele (8) himself who rushed to be the first to congratulate "comrade" Millerand on his "courageous" ministerial experiment. And this same Anseele is to-day the most determined opponent of every attempt to win votes for women in his own country. Here we have yet another proof of the type of "courage" our "practical politicians" recommend to us. It is nothing but the courage to experiment opportunistically at the expense of Social Democratic principles. When however it is a question of a bold application of our programmatic demands, then these same "practical leaders" show not the slightest enthusiasm to stand out for their courage. On the contrary, they look about everywhere for pretexts so that some particular point of the programme can "just for the time being" and "with considerable regret"... be ditched.

# Tactical Sommersaults

The Belgian Parliament will it appears begin its consideration of the franchise reforms next week. The government itself suggested this date yesterday, and Huysmans, the leader of the left-Liberals, has endorsed the Prime Minister's suggestion.

Judging by externals the Belgian movement for reform of the franchise seems to have stood everything on its head. It has meant the party which politically is the most reactionary, the Catholic Party, putting forward the demand for that most revolutionary of all constitutional reforms, the introduction of universal women's suffrage. While on the other hand the programmatically revolutionary party, the Labour Party, has refused to weigh in on the side of giving women the vote... for tactical reasons. And, just to complete the confusion, the socialist Republicans look to the monarchy for intervention. The socialist "People" quite openly tries to get King Leopold to line up with its supporters and against the government on the question of electoral law and expresses the hope - naturally after making certain reservations in keeping with the programme of republicanism - "that in contrast to the pig-headedness of the clerical government, the King for his part might speak the words of peace, wisdom and justice." "We are and we remain republicans, but it is certain that conciliatory words by the king will do more for the preservation of the monarchy than all the pious acts of our false patriots. We rate the importance of the reforms we are demanding for the people too highly to be worried about forms - even if it is the form of the government that is in question. There are conservative, reactionary and indeed imperialist republics that have been, and perhaps still are, nothing but financial or confessional tyrannies. Why in this period of development, of transition and readjustment is it impermissible to come to terms with a constitutional monarchy which has loyally pledged itself to honest as well as far-reaching democratic policies, and which in no way would try to halt the forward march of progress."

There is no doubt something in our Belgian comrades' reference to a period of transition and development. In particular there is the historical experience of parties quite often changing their roles in times of political upheaval. Conservative party leaders put through revolutionary programmes in order to remain capable of carrying on in power, while the oppositional parties set their faces like flint against this disguising of political principles. Arnold Ruge (9) long ago pointed out that in the great power struggle between the Whigs and the Tories in England, the Tories could only stay in power by adopting the programme of the Whigs.

Later Bismarck in Germany and Disraeli in England put forward similar policies almost at the same time. Bismarck resorted to universal, equal suffrage with the express purpose of playing off the mass of the German people, whom he considered fundamentally conservative, against the plutocratic elements of the bourgeoisie. And in England Disraeli made the extension of the franchise acceptable to his fellow Tories by claiming "he intended to dig down until he found another conservative layer."

The Belgian Clericals think they have come across an even deeper layer of conservatism in the population... women! And the Socialists oppose this extension of the franchise because they see it as a trick. This is as short-sighted as the Catholics' support of it.

The conservative revolutionaries have in the final analysis bought a pig in a poke. Bismarck would never grant universal suffrage if he were alive to-day. And who are the sworn enemies of the franchise but the most zealous guardians of his policies, the conservatives and the reactionary panic mongers?

The involvement of the monarchy as a political force standing "above parties" is also a move which is not only highly questionable in principle but also very dubious from a tactical point of view.

In Russia the crown may be said to represent a political force with a centre of gravity within itself. The abolition of serfdom was in its day essentially an act of despotism. But the "King of the Belgians" whose strictly constitutional powers are extremely modest and whose political power is, if anything, even less... he of all people is no political leader. Any of his actions would, for all their formal democracy, always be tainted with caesarism. All that such sommersaults can succeed in doing is unintentionally making King "Cleopold" "popular" for a short time.

Our Belgian comrades' appeal to the crown in the struggle for electoral rights is on a par with their giving up the fight for women's voting rights.

The latest news from the scene of the Belgium's constitutional struggle is as follows: Brussels, 8th April.

This evening after a meeting addressed by the Socialist deputy Vandervelde (10) a battle broke out between 1,500 socialists and the police. Two policemen and one socialist were wounded. A group of demonstrators marched to Prince Albert's residence. The police blocked off the streets and advanced with swords drawn. Three demonstrators were wounded.

Leipziger Volkszeitung No. 80 9th April 1902

# The Third Act

## I

On 14th January 1886 Jacques Kats (11) died in Brussels at the age of 82. The same dear Kats it was whom Karl Gruen (12) on a study-tour in Belgium way back in the 'forties got to know and admire as the founder of the workers' movement in Brussels. This most original perhaps of the international socialist pioneers, the founder of the first working men's clubs, the first writer of folk songs with a democratic message, founder of the first popular theatre in Flanders - this man dies deserted and forgotten by the younger generation, and, according to Caesar de Paepe, deeply dejected at the collapse of the workers' movement in Belgium.

No doubt about it, the Belgian working class in the middle 'eighties was really in the doldrums. All the fruits of Kats' twenty years of struggle through the 'forties and 'fifties had disappeared. Likewise all trace of that renewed upsurge under the International's influence in the 'sixties and early 'seventies. After the collapse of Marx's (13) organisation in England and its Belgian offshoot, Belgium became reknowned as the "Capitalists' Paradise". It was the object of the envy and desire of the exploiters of all of Europe.

That was indeed the golden age for the professional consumers of surplus value of every shape and size. The post-1831 period (14) saw the whole of political life governed by the sweetly hypnotic swing of the parliamentary pendulum from the Clericals to the Liberals and back again. Belgium knew nothing then of that base materialism that in later days was to break on to the scene announcing its claims with such a flourish. Only the loftier idealistic concerns disturbed the calm of the respectable citizen as he scanned his daily paper reading about the battles of his representatives. When the Clericals were in power all you heard was the Liberals jabbering about the violation of the freedom of conscience in the confessional schools. And when it was the Liberals turn in power the country reverberated to cries of pious alarm at the threats to the people's religious and moral fibre.

For the rest - all that concerns mortal flesh that is - the two parties performed in harmony and continuity. This Alfred Defuisseaux characterised in his celebrated "Catechisme du Peuple" (People's Catechism) as follows (15):

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All that can definitely be agreed upon is that it was "taken". The budget of this small state, supposedly free of militarism, grew from 1850 to 1870 and from then until 1882 in great leaps: 118 million francs, then 216 million, then 422 million! And the sole fruits of the ever increasing privations of the country were... the conquest of the Congo and the increasingly unscrupulous manipulation of the National Bank.

The destitution of the working class, especially in the mining areas was terrible. Working days of between fourteen and sixteen hours were not exceptional. Wages were at an all-time low and were usually paid out in kind. This served simply to complete the enslavement of the working class and vigorously to propagate above all, spiritualism.

Brandy and prayers! These were the sole source of consolation to the Belgian working class during the "paradise" of the 'seventies and 'eighties. Ignorance and illiteracy were the faithful handmaidens of liquor and Popery, as even the Liberals did not get round to introducing compulsory education their 1878-1884 period of office.

In blessed Belgium there was - and in the main still is - no trace of anything resembling social reforms or factory acts. The first ludicrously miserly reform limiting the working hours of women and children did not see the light of day until 1889 - and then not without the most violent disputes in parliament. The deputies of this parliament of property (16) - 42 francs and 32 centimes a year direct tax and not a penny less! - did not so much as dream of caring about the misery of the proletariat. Fair play, they did after all have their hands full attacking one another on questions concerning education and the Church!

Suddenly the "peace" was shattered! And it was just as Marx had predicted would happen all over. A return to industrial crisis that stirred up the spirits in that place of desolation. 1886 also saw one of the worst storms that Belgian capitalism had ever had to weather. One after another the factories were closed down. In the mines they were working a four day week. Wages were cut almost everywhere and unemployment grew to desperate proportions.

"A frightful misery sweeps the Borinage" wrote a bourgeois newspaper in January. "Coal is mined only three or four days a week and in

numerous pits it is forbidden to earn more than 2.50 francs a day." The official journal "Journal de Bruxelles" reported in March on the condition of the mine workers. "The destitution is beyond all imagination," it said, "It is terrible. The father, the only breadwinner in a family of eight, earns at most 12-13 francs a week. And that is the situation over all!"

The employers' attempt to cut these wages by a further 20-25% drove the desperation beyond control and constituted the immediate cause of outbreaks of rioting throughout the country.

The strikes that then broke out, the riots and the demonstrations, were all completely spontaneous and unplanned. This was only the first elemental explosion releasing the pent-up antagonisms of decades now that the mass of wage slaves had been driven to extremes. Machines were smashed, factories destroyed and the palatial villas of the capitalist magnates were burned to the ground. Belgium at the beginning of 1886 looked like the weaving areas of Silesia in 1844.

But in Belgium the explosion did not just peter out with no result, because there was already a force in the land capable of harnessing the hurricane of popular rage and giving it direction.

Old Kats, that ever vigilant fighter died in deepest pessimism on 14th February 1886. Exactly one month later the workers of the Borinage sent the workers of Flanders a manifesto which had been written by the socialists Anseele and Defuisseaux. In this they boldly summoned their brothers to do battle alongside them for universal suffrage.

It bears witness to the fantastic political maturity of the Belgian Labour Party which had only been founded a few months earlier, on 5th April 1885, by de Paepe, Volders and Anseele. It recognised right from the start that its battle cry should be that of universal suffrage. The complaints that the working class could make against the bourgeoisie were legion. Everywhere capital unleashed its unbridled tyranny over the working class, destroying their material and spiritual life. The lessons of fifty-five years were quite enough to show that there was no hope of any change so long as parliament only served to balance between the surplice and the city-suit. The whole miserable edifice had to be dynamited from below. Unlike every other constitutional state in Europe, the shattering of the political monopoly of the bourgeoisie, the winning of universal suffrage, became here the burning issue for the Labour Party. It became the central axis of socialist struggle, the banner under which the workers' party skillfully gathered and directed the forces of the masses from February 1885 up until the present.

1886 saw the first act in this struggle. Naturally the bourgeoisie sought to exploit this first unruly outbreak by the working class. The sad hero of the Mexican expedition, General van der Smissen (17) proclaimed a real reign of terror. Rifles and sabres did their work with eager en-

ergy. The bourgeois courts meted out their usual barbarities on the victims of this battle. The "ring-leaders" of the outbreak were given sentences of life, 20 years, and 12 years penal servitude.

But one thing was here to stay... the Belgian workers' movement. Raised in turbulence her banner bore the two historic initials "SU" (Suffrage universel = universal suffrage). Like the flaming writing on the wall these letters dazzled the eyes of that parliament of money-men.

## II

Since that memorable spring of 1886 the question of universal suffrage has become not only the focal point of the Belgian workers' movement, but it entirely dominates the political stage to-day. For sixteen years there has been a tremendous crisis shaking the country like a creeping fever breaking out now in powerful eruptions and now in periods of deep depression.

The first upsurge was followed by a longish pause. The ruling Clerical party tried to use this to make some cowardly and feeble attempts to appear friendly to the working class. They set up a commission of representatives of the various sections of the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals like Lavelye, de Molinari, senators, lawyers, engineers etc. to study the social question. In Liège there is a congress of catholic social reformers (18) attended by Belgian and foreign priests of various importance. And what was the outcome of all these initiatives? A measly law stabilising workers' wages (in 1887) and the law already mentioned limiting the working day for women and children (in 1889).

The discussions in parliament around these reforms finally served to confirm the working class in its belief that the only possible way to counter the concerted barbarism of the junkers and capitalists united in their class arrogance was to destroy the property-parliament.

After five years gathering strength there came the second act. This time, though, it was no longer a case of unorganised groups of desperate people giving vent to their hatred in unbridled and uncontrolled excess. The proletariat had used the period since the first explosion to absorb quite different lessons from those of the bourgeoisie. The determined presentation of universal suffrage as the battle cry of proletarian revolt in 1886 led quite quickly to a clarification and concentration of the ferment of the masses' dissatisfaction. As late as 1886 there were some remnants of the anarchist tendency (which had once paralysed the International in Belgium to the best of its ability) around Rutters, Billen and Wagener. Playing out its sad role in the general chaos it thundered against universal suffrage and called instead for dynamite. But the very first engagement in the political battle in 1886 was enough for the Belgian working class radically and decisively to transcend the anarchist confusion that for decades had drawn its life-blood from the pitiable desolation and spiritual despondency of the masses.

In the second principal engagement in the battle the young Labour Party stepped in as the leader of the movement right from the outset. And this time the second attack on the parliament of property early on in 1891 came as no surprise but as a direct result of the party's initiative. Now we saw in place of the unorganised revolt a cleverly prepared and directed mass strike. And whereas the first demonstration for universal suffrage called by the Labour Party on 15th August 1886 in Brussels drew the support of 30,000 workers, this time, in May 1891, 125,000 rushed to the banner.

This time there was no van der Smissen to save the day. The non-violent strike and the peaceful but impressive demonstrations gave no excuse for any reign of terror. The methods that had been effected five years before against the despondent, unstable and confused masses were out of place against these workers with their political development, maturity and self-confidence. Clericalism had to back down. The revision of the constitution took place in August.

That was the hard-won victory, or, rather, the first step to victory. The working class withdrew from the field of battle, but with their weapons still at the ready. They realised they might still have to look parliament straight in the eye and, perhaps, help it come to a decision. And in the event that is exactly what proved necessary. For two years the proletariat patiently watched the Clerical-Liberal parliament perform its farcical version of constitutional revision. Finally in April 1893 when it looked as if the charade would never end, there was another mass strike. This time 250,000 workers took part and on 18th April the capitalist Chamber of Deputies gave way. Universal suffrage with plural voting became constitutional in Belgium.

The Brussels paper "People" in a classic example of sublime wit born out of the headiness of victory commented on that memorable all-night session that decided on the first reform of the franchise by means of a satirical dialogue between President Beernaert and his own nose. His nose took him to task for the torture it had had to suffer during that epoch-making session and absolutely mercilessly made him remember the most humiliating details of that glorious scene. All that was really missing was a latter-day Frans Hals or van Dyck to paint the faces of the descendants of those worthy Flemish mayors and patricians with stiff white ruffs and their lively, self-important faces - these descendants as they sat in the gloom of that parliament surrounded by crowds muttering threats. These descendants dispersed in wailing groups, bathed in sweat, faces distorted, groaning through their chattering teeth, their bodies wracked in pain should have been painted as their shivering fingers signed the act that meant relinquishing their unmitigated class dominance.

The first test came in October 1894. The Social Democrats won 334,000 votes in the general election, bringing it 28 seats. With that

the second act was over for the time being. Still the slogan had not changed. It was still universal and equal suffrage. Even in relinquishing its monopoly of power the bourgeoisie had saved itself from utter defeat by means of a loophole... plural voting. With this system there were double and treble voting rights for heads of families and those with academic qualifications. The magnates of capital who gave working class breadwinners with seven children only 13 francs a week suddenly decided that heads of families were politically superior. At the same time the experts in mass misinformation suddenly remembered the spiritual prerogatives of learning. In this way the newly created right was instantly transformed into something that still ensured bourgeois privilege and disenfranchisement of the working class. Once again the domination of clericalism was saved by a hair's breadth.

And thus inexorably it had to come to this - to-day's third act, the final act in the mighty drama. The mass strike (19) began yesterday. We will soon see the momentous climax, the fruit of sixteen years of struggle and self-sacrifice, crowned with inevitable victory.

The seven years since the last attack in the Nineties had seen even more profound changes in the political situation in Belgium than that period of recovery between the first and second acts. The most important of these was the collapse of the Liberal Party.

As is so characteristic of bourgeois democracy, the process of the decomposition of Belgian Liberalism began during its last period in power, from 1878-1884. At that time it split into a dominant doctrinaire tendency (rather like our National Liberals) and the progressive or radical minority (something rather like our Richterite freethinkers (20)). As soon as the elections of 1884 had brought the Liberals their deserved set-back, their radical wing raised the slogan of... universal suffrage. Consequently there then began a series of alliances and blocks between the progressives and the Labour Party. And with this a series of betrayals of the latter by the former. At the very first demonstration for working class suffrage on 15th August 1886 the workers' brave comrades-in-arms backed out at the last moment. Ever since their actions have only underlined their devotion to the manoeuvre of supporting the movement so long as it is just a matter of initial skirmishes and disowning it the moment the decisive struggle arrives.

The Belgian bourgeoisie has found itself on the horns of a desperate dilemma now that the proletariat is politically aware. In order to appear an alternative to its ruling rival, the Clerical Party, it must gain the support of the working class. But the Liberals saw right from the off, when the struggle was still being waged on the basis of unequal general suffrage, where a "united front" victory over the clerical major-



ity might lead. The October 1894 election results astounded everybody. The party that until then had had 59 seats in parliament had simply... disappeared! Not a single "doctrinaire" got into parliament, and only some 15 Radicals kept their seats.

From that point on we witnessed an increasingly strong swing of the Liberals towards the Clericals for whose resolutions they voted, and increasingly bold oscillations between the proletariat and the national-bourgeois camp by the little group of Progressives.

On the other hand, because the Clericals felt their lofty political superiority threatened, they approached the Liberals. That eighty year old frog-and-mouse battle was forgotten. The congealing of all the bourgeois elements into one single "reactionary mass" became a fact. In 1899 the Clericals tried to rescue their majority and at the same time save that dying species, the Liberals, by pushing through a new change in the plural voting system... the proportional representation system. From that time on all the votes in a constituency went not to the party with the most votes, but were distributed between the majority and minority parties. In spite of this the Labour Party still held 33 seats in 1896 and 1898 while the Clerical majority went down to

85 seats. But now the Clericals had on their side the 21 seats of the "doctrinaire" Liberals whom they had rescued so that they could serve them in the Chamber. And with old-fashioned loyalty these now stuck to their former enemies in every reactionary villainy.

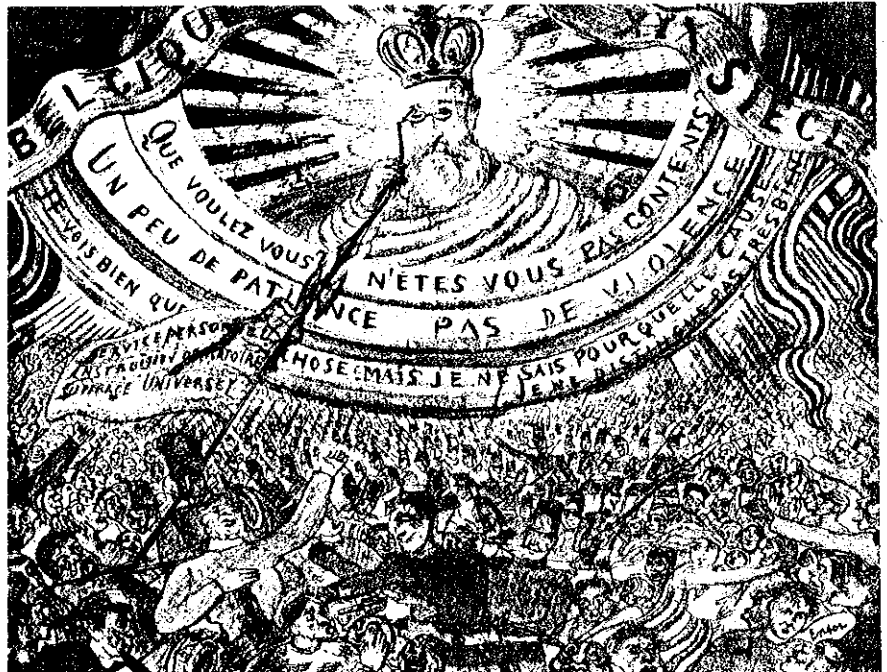
Thus the result to date of the great struggle for suffrage in Belgium is the most classical and clear-cut picture of social division that exists in any country in Europe. In addition, this present final struggle for universal, equal suffrage without any distortion whatsoever promises more important results than any of the comparable struggles in other countries. Victory could easily make the Labour Party with the support of the left-Liberals the ruling party in the parliament. It would be formally ruling, but not on account of the shrewdness of some individual prime minister, but on account of the historically determined political situation. The struggle for suffrage that lies immediately before us now is the cross-roads where the political future of the Belgian working class movement will be decided for a whole period to come.

To-day this movement stands at the ready - the most revolutionary force of a decaying capitalism. For what to-morrow may bring... all eyes turn to Philippi (21).

- I Leipziger Volkszeitung No 84, 14th April 1902  
II Leipziger Volkszeitung No 85, 15th April 1902

### King "Cleopold"

(a play on the name of the King, Leopold II, and Cleo, the muse of history) peers down on the struggles for Universal Suffrage and state education saying 'What do you want? Aren't you happy? A little patience. No violence...'



James Ensor, 'Belgium in the 19th Century'

## At Sea

The parliamentary phase of the struggle in Brussels is over. The revision of the constitution has been rejected! What now? This is the question on the lips of every class conscious worker the world over. On the lips of everyone whose blood runs faster with each hour that the news from Belgium is telegraphed to the papers.

We wrote in our last issue (22) that the hour of decision would strike on the afternoon of Friday 18th April 1902. This was the day on which parliament was to vote on the motion to revise the constitution. The situation was charged with tremendous tension, each minute promising some new turn of events. This was reflected in the behaviour of the Socialist deputies. They fought so desperately against the rejection of the revision the Clericals had wanted to push through last Thursday, and threatened that such dire consequences would follow any guillotine of the discussion of the bill, that everybody was sure the rejection of the motion would be followed by a really drastic decision by the Social Democrats to end the parliamentary phase of the struggle and open up a new phase.

And now? What conclusions did the Socialist leaders draw from Saturday's rejection of the constitutional revision? What decision have they taken to advance the struggle now? None at all! They waited for the outcome of the debate with such vehement threats and such heated cries. And all this was followed by silence! Nothing happened; no new turn in the struggle; not a step forwards! The masses of strikers wait outside; their hopes have always focussed on the continuous wrangling going on inside the Chamber; their attention was rivetted to the outcome of the parliamentary process. And now that that process has culminated in this long-expected conclusion, the same indecision and the same vagueness continues. But worse! Now the leaders are openly trying to get out of calling a general strike which apparently they neither expected nor wanted. All they want to do is get the 300,000 who are waiting for a decision to go home.

According to a report in the "Berlin Tageblatt" of 19th April, Vandervelde read out the following declaration of the Liberal allies at the huge meeting that took place in the House of the People after the parliamentary debate in question. "We Liberals salute the calm and disciplined behaviour of the strikers, but would call on them to go back to work so as not to suffer needlessly. The next elections will see the victory of the opposition." The Social Democratic leader praised this declaration in such a way that leads one to conclude it will be no time at all until the leadership of the Labour Party will themselves be demanding the very same thing from the workers. We hardly need

to tell our readers that after the parliamentary defeat a calling off of the general strike is tantamount to stifling the whole movement, to reducing the vast momentum it had built up - the noisy overture with which it started - "to a shy growl". If the leadership of the Labour Party goes ahead and urges the strikers to go back to work, then, for the present at least, the battle is lost. And indeed humiliatingly lost - before the decisive confrontation, without fighting the real battle. For all we have seen so far is nothing more than preliminaries, the preparations and training manoeuvres, the initial troop deployments and preparation of weapons. It never came to the point of using these forces; the sword had to be sheathed before it was used; the pent-up head of steam had to be blown off before it could be discharged properly.

It would be ridiculous to try to gauge the exact balance of forces in Belgium from Berlin or from Leipzig. Or to judge from there whether the time was right for street fighting. It is possible that if the people took on the troops now in an open confrontation they would be defeated. The last thing we would want to do is, say, to complain that the Belgian leaders did not call the workers to arms as soon as the parliamentary, constitutional process was exhausted.

But they should at least have given some leadership, they should have had some sort of clear and consistent strategy. And their actions show the exact opposite. All that can be observed here is a series of moves and counter-moves, a chaotic groping, an indecisive shilly-shallying.

If all the Belgian leaders wanted to do is restrict themselves to a purely parliamentary struggle then they should not have spent so much time and energy threatening "the most extreme means", revolutions, blood baths and killing. And they should not have brought the masses on to the streets.

If on the other hand they wanted to work through the masses, basing themselves on extra-parliamentary action, then their convulsive efforts are incomprehensible. For first they dragged out the parliamentary phase interminably, and, then, as soon as that was over, they rushed to stifle the action of the masses.

If in all seriousness they expect a Liberal-Socialist majority at some coming election or other - under the present system of plural votes at that! - as the quoted declaration of the Liberals would have it, then it is incomprehensible why they stayed silent in parliament and refrained from any statement of opinion when, as much as a week ago, the Liberals demanded the dissolution of parliament and new elections. And it is even harder to understand why they stirred up this tumult, this great movement with all its many sac-

rifices, seeing that there was in any case just a couple of years to wait until the elections came round again and the Clerical majority could be smashed.

If, however, the Belgian leaders (like ourselves) consider that a victory over the Clerical Party under the present voting system is out; in other words, if they consider the nice promise the Liberals gave to be just so much absurd chatter – indeed just a way of getting the roused up working class to give up the general strike – then it is incomprehensible why they are going along with these absurd illusions of the Liberals and in so doing disarming the workers by taking from them their only real weapon, independent mass action.

If from the outset the whole struggle was to be restricted to a constitutional framework, then we cannot see why there was ever any talk of a general strike. After all the lack of impact on the Clerical majority of this tactic the moment the threatening spectre of a possible revolution was

removed could never have been in doubt.

If, however, the decision was that it was necessary to exhaust all constitutional means before resorting to others, it is a riddle why the general strike should have been called off precisely at the point when its ineffectuality when confined to the limits of legality had become apparent.

It is vital to pose all these questions and to analyse moreover the internal logic of the developments in Belgium because – and how we wish it were otherwise! – It appears to us that this movement is now on the brink of its total collapse.

To subject the strategy of our Belgian comrades to a serious critical analysis seems to us of the utmost importance, given the tremendous significance of this affair for the international proletariat. And certainly more appropriate than cheering thoughtlessly or uttering noises of great approval at this event because we think that everything we and other socialists do is absolutely marvellous, wonderful and inspiring.

Leipziger Volkszeitung No. 90 21st April 1902



# The Cause of the Defeat

We all know that we have been defeated in Belgium. It is useless and pointless to cover it up. We Social Democrats are in the habit of claiming that there is no such thing as a defeat for us. And in a certain sense that is true. For there is no force in the world that can defeat the militant, class conscious proletariat. If the cause of Social Democracy does after all suffer a temporary set-back at the hands of an enemy with superior forces, then the very next moment sees it rise more mightily than ever before. And what the cheering bourgeois world believes in its frenzied triumphalism to be our defeat straight away proves itself to be our victory. This was the case with the butchering of the Commune and again with the anti-Socialist laws.

But if we do not submit to the superiority of the enemy, but rather say before the decisive battle and indeed without it ever coming to a trial of strength that we are beaten... then we are defeated in every possible meaning of the word. And that unfortunately is what we have just witnessed in the case of Belgium.

"We are beaten!" Vandervelde declared to the throng of workers gathered in the House of the People on the evening of Friday 18th April, when the constitutional revision had been rejected by the parliament.

"Not yet!" came a cry from the crowd.

"But what can be done?" asked the leader of the Belgian Socialists.

"Take to the streets for victory!" came the answer from the throng.

"It's either too early or too late" answered Vandervelde. "We Socialists must remember the words of the Bible: Thou shalt not kill!" "But" the leader went on "the struggle will continue - only more resolutely and on a grander scale than ever before. The struggle will, if we continue it, be decisively effective... Now it is up to the King... We wait with our arms at the ready."

Thus immediately after the parliamentary defeat the slogan of the Socialist leader was for a continuation of the general strike. On Friday it was still the unanimous decision of the leadership of the Labour Party. On Saturday the Brussels paper "People", the central organ of the Belgian Social Democracy was still writing:

"If the Belgian workers are firm in their resolve that come what may they will not accept the defeat so long as there is breath in their bodies and blood in their veins, then we say to them, Do not lay down your arms! Come death, the threat of poverty or whatever else, keep up

this sacred strike for universal suffrage! Keep it up so that at the very least the liberal bourgeoisie and all the official representatives of trade and industry can force the government to go to the country on the question of universal suffrage!

"Suffering, death and privation - these are the agonies we are prepared to suffer with you, for the magnificent blaze of solidarity shown by many classes in many countries takes all the sting out of these terrors!

"Comrades, do not yield! Continue the general strike and let your voices ring out with the demand for the dissolution of parliament!

"Dissolving parliament is, of course, not solving the problem! But it does mean that on 25th May the whole country will be able to decide on the revision of the constitution (23). And we are absolutely convinced that this would mean the ultimate victory of the cause of universal suffrage!

"Will we Belgian workers who were filled with admiration for the Boers fail to be their equals in courage and nobility of character?"

"The continuation of the general strike is the only thing that will save the cause of universal suffrage. That is the way we will hit back, the way we will win the rights of the people in the end no matter what forces march against us!

"Long live the general strike!

"Long live universal suffrage!

"Dissolve the Parliament!"

That was what was said. That was the watchword of the Brussels party organ as late as Saturday. And on Sunday morning the party leadership decides... to call the strike off, and tell the 350,000 workers who were standing by with arms at the ready to... go home!

A crasser contradiction could hardly be imagined! On the one hand we have the words of Vandervelde in the House of the People and the rousing article in "People" and on the other the resolution of the party leadership immediately afterwards. A more sudden switch from one day to another is quite without parallel in the history of the modern workers' movement.

Well, what happened? What new turn in the situation brought about this abrupt change of line and made the party leaders suddenly sound the retreat? Was it that the ranks of the strikers began to show signs of weakness and demoralisation? Or was it that the strike funds had

almost run out and that extreme privation forced them to yield?

Not in the least! And the King, who was begged time and again to dissolve parliament, is as silent as ever he was. The strikers, on the other hand, showed both on Saturday and on Sunday their enthusiasm, their heroic determination and a really fiery readiness to do battle. The little scene we took out of the report in "People" of Friday evening's impressive meeting presents us with a picture of a working class bristling with strength, quivering with impatience to enter the fray, and prepared for anything. And as far as funds were concerned, huge waves of contributions were flowing in. The spirit of self-sacrifice of the Belgian working class itself grew tremendously, while in Germany and everywhere else the same phenomenon meant that the Belgian comrades could count on the continuing support of the international proletariat.

What then was the reason for this inexplicable capitulation? The only clue lies in the declaration that was adopted by the Progressive-Liberals at their executive meeting. It says, "The Executive of the Progressive Federation... calls on the working class to answer the provocations of the Government with political wisdom, and, in order not to furnish it with any excuse for new

repressions and massacres, to call off the general strike, whose object has after all been achieved in that it is now apparent to everyone that the working class is prepared to fight determinedly for universal suffrage."

This was a clear case of a change of front by the Belgian party leaders. The masses wanted to go through with it. They were prepared for any sacrifice. The leaders themselves declared that the continuation of the general strike was absolutely necessary; but the bourgeoisie decided "Lay down your arms! And the Socialists halted at the decision of their "allies".

So the Belgian defeat is the work of the Liberals. From the moment the Socialists formed an "alliance" with the Liberals which rested on a compromise they became the latter's dumb instruments. Thanks to this alliance the Belgian Socialists were reduced to playing the part of a mere go-between, so ensuring that in the earth-shaking events of the past few weeks the Liberals could gain the leadership of the working class and lead it... to defeat.

It is a tragic outcome, but even this will not prove quite so tragic if it serves as a lesson and a warning to the Belgian comrades and ourselves!

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## NOTES

(1) The Belgian Labour Party, Le Parti Ouvrier Belge, was founded in 1885. It was not the first socialist party to have existed in Belgium. For instance, the Flemish Socialist Party, which Luxemburg does not mention was founded eight years before in 1877. The P.O.B. was the party of the Second International.

Its precedents were as follows: In 1870 Cesar de Paepe set up the Belgian section of the International Working Men's Association, whose main struggle was around the question of the ten-hour-day until 1873. In 1875 was the setting up of the Chambre du Travail in Brussels with Ghent and Antwerp following the next year. The Socialist Unity Congress at Ghent the year after achieved nothing. Instead of a united movement the Congress split into the Flemish Socialist Party (based in Ghent) and the Brabancon Socialist Party (based in Brussels).

(2) The Congress was held in Brussels on 30th and 31st March 1902. At the Congress it was decided to campaign under the slogan of "One Man One Vote". A decision was also taken to accept a system of proportional representation in Parliament and to drop the demand for women's rights.

The "Socialist" Party was not really the name of the organisation (see above) but Rosa Luxemburg refers to it either as the Workers Party or the Socialist Party or the Social-Democracy.

(3) Although as can be seen from the above note the party was not at this time advocating female suffrage, Rosa Luxemburg uses the term "universal suffrage" very loosely.

(4) The details of the "plural voting" are given in the article "The Third Act" (see later). It led to what Luxemburg called the "Zensusparliament".

(5) She is here referring to the constitution of 1831.

(6) A party leader.

(7) Millerand (1859 - 1943): a French politician who was one of the "leaders" of social-chauvinism and ministerial socialism. He was many times head of the Government in France.

(8) Edward Anseele (1856 - 1938) was not only a founder of the Labour Party, but later became the moving spirit of the closely allied co-operative movement, the "Vorruiet". Although his early career in the socialist movement had been most laudable (he had also been a founder of the Flemish Socialist Party) he drifted further and further to the right as time went on. He was, for instance a minister in the 1925 Catholic-Socialist coalition government.

(9) Arnold Ruge was born in Bergen (Ruegen) in 1803. He was a part of the young Hegelian movement and a prominent publicist. In 1838 he published the *Hallische Jahrbuecher*, in 1840 - 3 the *Deutsche Jahrbuecher*, and in Paris with Marx the *Deutsch-Franzoesische Jahrbuecher* in 1844. He was an important publicist thereafter of the First International. Ruge died in Brighton on new year's eve 1880.

(10) Emile Vandervelde was born in Ixelles in 1866. He was a prominent leader of the P.O.B. which he joined in 1889. Like Anseele he was a parliamentary deputy who, to quote the ingeniously honest understatement of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "on the outbreak of World War One ... devoted himself to the problems of national defense for the liberation of his invaded country and in August 1914 was summoned to join the government as minister of state, later becoming a member of the cabinet." - Another social-chauvinist traitor!

(11) Jacques (Jacob) Kats (1804 - 1886) was the son of a Dutch Republican officer who had taken refuge in Brussels after the revolution of 1830. In a very varied life as weaver, then schoolmaster, then tobacconist, Kats had time to make the most wide-ranging contributions to the Belgian, particularly the Flemish, working class. He was one of the first of all Belgian socialists preceding even Collins (Baron Jean Hippolyte de Collins, 1783 - 1859) in his major writings.

(12) Karl Gruen (1813 or 1817 - 1887 - Cole gives both dates) was a young Hegelian-com-Proudhonist. He was one of Marx's bitterest enemies during the latter's stay in Paris.

(13) At this point the text actually says "Mert-

ens" and not "Marx's", but this is obviously a misprint.

(14) Rosa Luxemburg uses this date as it marks the real establishment of the Kingdom of the Belgians with its own constitution.

(15) Alfred Defuisseaux (1823 - 1901) was the brother of Leon Defuisseaux (chairman of the 1891 P.O.B. Congress) and father of George Defuisseaux another leading light of the party. This Walloon leader wrote the "Catechisme" and was thus probably mainly responsible for sparking off the massive strikes in Charleroi and Liege, the area in which thousands and thousands of the pamphlet had been sold.

(16) The German here is "Zensusparlament". Literally this is a parliament made of deputies voted on the basis of plural voting, where a plurality is given according to whether the voter is the head of a family or according to his income - in this case it was both!

(17) General van der Smissen was in charge of the soldiers sent to crush the strikes mentioned above (15).

(18) This took place in Liege from 26th - 29th September 1886.

(19) The mass strike began on 14th April 1902 with a participation of 300,000 workers.

(20) Rosa Luxemburg is here referring to the *Freisinnige Volkspartei* under the leadership of Eugen Richter.

(21) Philipp - that is, the big battle, the decisive battle.

(22) "An Hour before the Decision" in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* no. 88, 18th April 1902.



*Miners going to work at the end of the century in the Borinaoe.*