

# How the party of Rosa Luxemburg approached political education

*We print here an article version of a talk given by Rida Vaquas in Liverpool on 23 September 2018 at a session of The World Transformed (TWT) concerned with 'popular education'. (TWT was run in parallel with the Labour Party Conference.)*

**T**he SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, was the object of admiration across Europe in its own time and even now. Since its adoption of the Erfurt programme in 1891, it was a revolutionary party committed to the emancipation of the entire human race by the hand of the working class. Before the war, it stood unparalleled as a Marxist mass party, having over one million members by 1912. Its press, in particular the theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit*, was read and corresponded with across Europe. Its chief theoretician, Karl Kautsky, earned the title of being 'the pope' of Marxism. There is much to say around various aspects of German Social Democracy's political thought and practice, but what I am going to focus on is its educational infrastructure, the way it aimed to train a party of the masses into active, thinking socialists. I want to highlight how the concept of political education in itself was contested. The question 'What do we need to know to change the world?' is a political debate, not a practical matter. It was a question fought out at party congresses and in debates in party presses. Moreover, we should understand how culture was related to education - how theatre, art and museum trips were integrated into a mass political movement, not simply existing parallel to it.

The SPD's infrastructure for political education was vast, dedicated and multipurpose. At a local level, there were reading groups and workers' libraries. The party published an enormous number of pamphlets and other educational material. By March 1913, the party's publishing house had a turnover of over 600,000 marks - amounting to well over a million items, excluding newspapers and periodicals. The main newspaper, *Vorwärts*, had 165,000 subscribers in 1912, and, owing to its presence in the party's pubs, readership was likely even higher. The protocols of party congresses would generally sell tens of thousands of copies. This highlights the scale of political discussion

available to working-class Social Democrats. In addition to this, in major cities, the party would run courses on themes as diverse as art, political economy, and sciences. By the start of the 20th century, there was a drive towards 'systematic' popular education, particularly in the form of reading groups, which were seen by Social Democrats such as Hermann Duncker as a method of having systematically structured learning without the resources of running schools. Guidance was published on how to run these reading groups, including suggestions for texts that lent themselves well to collective reading. These included pamphlets like the *Communist Manifesto* and Karl Kautsky's *Social Reform and Revolution*. These would be advertised in the party's daily papers. What we can draw out from this is the striving to make the politics of the organisation accessible to the rank-and-file, through cheap resources that could be bought for pennies, and through its presence in social spaces such as in pubs and reading groups.

But what we also witness is the turn towards an explicitly political form of education, less concerned with imparting skills for self-improvement, a turn from '*Volksbildung*' (people's education) to '*Arbeiterbildung*', workers' education. Preparation for class struggle was centred, in contrast to the arbitrary and random educational courses offered by philanthropic societies, and self-organisation was crucial. To this end, the Party formed an Educational Committee in 1906.

The flagship project of the SPD's educational work was undoubtedly the Party School, founded in 1906. We should observe its function first: it was designed to train up party functionaries, the people who would become the office staff, editors and union organisers across Imperial Germany; it was designed to produce the people who would run the organisation in the future. Students were nominated by their local party branches or unions, usually after a period of intensive campaigning work. The Party

School is striking as an institution the left of the party held considerable influence over. Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring were among its teaching staff, and in 1908 socialist history was added to the curriculum on the initiative of Luxemburg. Yet its remit and what it should teach was consistently contested over the years, laying bare the divisions between the revisionists and the left in the Party.

The Party's right, represented by Maurenbrecher, were scathing of the idea of teaching political economy to party activists, Maurenbrecher making the comment that, 'Whoever wants to talk about value theory has to be familiar with Thomas Aquinas, Ricardo and Karl Marx at least' - that is, workers lacked the necessary knowledge base for these courses to be worthwhile. Meanwhile, Eduard Bernstein accused the school of being doctrinaire. The Left responded sharply in response to these attacks, Rosa Luxemburg arguing that 'the proletariat knows the hard facts from its everyday life . . . What the masses lack is general enlightenment, the theory which gives us the possibility of systematising the hard facts and forging them into a deadly weapon to use against our opponents'.

But it is too easy to regard this as a dispute between the leading theoreticians of two wings of the party. What's more interesting is the response of those this education was designed for, working-class SPD activists. An article written by a painter, Franz Forster, in 1908 directly intervenes into this debate, under the headline 'A Worker on Workers Education'. He affirms the necessity of learning theory for the working classes. In his words: 'Maurenbrecher and his friends ought to know that serious struggles are not led by mere feeling and desire' and 'for us, socialist theories are not academic questions but questions of life'. Workers' education was constructed as a necessary weapon to be wielded in struggle, not an abstract set of knowledge items to be mastered.

As for the school's alleged doctrinaire character, perhaps the best piece of evidence I can offer is that Rosa Luxemburg taught both Friedrich Ebert, her future murderer, and future communists such as Rosi Wolfstein and Wilhelm Pieck.

What this brings out is that political education was inextricable from existence within a mass movement, and this is what distinguished it from other educational courses run by a variety of societies. It was an education based on a shared collective goal and what it would take to achieve it. In as much as the goal itself was contested in Social Democracy, the content of education was. After all, the skill sets needed for a revolutionary overthrow of the existing state are somewhat

different from the skills for gradual integration into it.

The requirement for political education to be rooted in a movement, in ongoing struggle, is something that also comes out in the SPD's more cultural sphere, which I can only briefly discuss. Too often an arbitrary dividing line is drawn between 'boring meetings' and 'cultural activities', but the experiences of German Social Democracy show us something different: that political struggle (frequently boring) facilitates and expands the cultural capacities of our movement. Most obviously, leisure time for activities is somewhat helped by an eight hour day. In the words of a contemporary: 'He who first becomes a member of a choral society is soon won over to trade union and political organisation'. Cultural activities deepened integration into a political struggle, and moreover provided social bases from which people could be mobilised - demonstrated when a workers' sports club in Berlin, with around 10,000 members, supported the radical left in the German Revolution. The fight for humanity's cultural heritage, through organising theatres, choirs, sports groups and excursions, was not a result of a conception of a parallel 'cultural movement' alongside 'the political movement'. Rather, these cultural institutions were imbued with political charge. They were seen as sharpening people's capacity to fight - whilst political struggle in itself expanded cultural horizons.

I'll conclude this with something from a pamphlet published in 1919 by the fledgling communist youth movement, written by Fritz Globig:

Yet, if you want to fight, you also have to know! Whoever wants to change the existing bad conditions must also know where they come from and how they can be abolished, and we must be capable of imagining different, better, conditions. You have to have a goal. In this way the proletarian youth also wants to be an educational movement. Each of us should become speakers and agitators for our own movement. Only the one who has inner fortitude will be able to go their own way, upright and unwavering, only the one who knows clearly and unerringly what they want.

This, more than anything, summarises what political education is: it is not peripheral, it is not an added extra. It is utterly necessary for our movement to win.

