Down With Reformist Illusions—
Hail The Revolutionary Class Struggle!

By ROSA LUXEMBURG

[The May Day article printed below was written by Rosa Luxemburg for May Day, 1913, a year before the outbreak of the World War. It shows the combination of sensitiveness to coming events and concern with the methods of meeting them which is characteristic of the highest kind of revolutionary leadership. Its scornful analysis of class collaboration illusions and portrayal of the nature of the imperialist epoch and the war danger lend its words a timely ring today.—Editor.]

W hen May Day demonstrations were held for the first time, the vanguard of the International, the German working class, was just at the point of breaking the chains of a disgraceful Exception Law and of entering upon the path of a free, legal development. The period of prolonged depression in the world market, since the crash of the seventies, had been overcome and capitalist economy had entered directly upon an era of resplendent development that was to last almost a decade. Likewise the world had recovered, after twenty years of uninterrupted peace, from recollections of that war period in which the modern European state system had received its bloody christening. The path appeared free for a quiet cultural development. Illusions, hopes for a peaceful settlement between capital and labor sprouted forth luxuriantly among the ranks of the Socialists. Proposals to hold out “the open hand to good will” marked the beginning of the nineties; promises of an imperceptible, “gradual evolution” into Socialism marked their end. Crises, wars, and revolutions were considered outworn theories, mere swaddling clothes of modern society; parliamentarism and trade unionism, democracy in the State and democracy in the industry were to open the gates to a new and better order.

The actual course of events played frightful havoc with all these illusions. In place of the promised mild social-reformist development of culture there has set in since the end of the nineties a period of the most violent, extreme sharpening of capitalist conflicts, a period of storm and stress, of crashes and turmoil, of tottering and trembling in the very foundations of society. The ten-year period of the economic upward curve of development was compensated for in the following decade by two world-convulsing crises. After two decades of world peace there followed
in the last decade of last century six bloody wars and in the first
decade of the new century four bloody revolutions. Instead of
social reforms—sedition bills, imprisonment bills and jailings;
instead of industrial democracy—the powerful concentration of
capital in cartels and employers' associations and the international
practice of giant lockouts. And instead of the new upward de­
velopment of democracy in the State a miserable collapse of the
last remnants of bourgeois liberalism and bourgeois democracy.
In Germany alone the destinies of the bourgeois parties since the
nineties have brought: the rise and immediate hopeless dissolution
of the National Social Party, the break-up of the liberal opposition
and the re-uniting of its fragments in the morass of reaction, and
finally the transformation of the Center from a radical people's
party to a conservative government party. And the shifting in
party development in other capitalist countries has been similar.
Everywhere the revolutionary working class today sees itself
alone confronted by the compact, hostile reaction of the ruling
classes and by their energetic attacks, which are aimed at them
alone.

The "sign" under which this whole development on the econom­
ic and political field has been carried out, the formula according
to which its results may be traced back is: IMPERIALISM.
This is not a new element, not an unexpected veering in the general
historical course of capitalist society. Military preparations and
wars, international conflicts and colonial policies have accompanied
the history of capital from its cradle. It is the extreme augmen­
tation of these elements, the concentration and gigantic outburst
of these conflicts, which have resulted in a new epoch in the de­
development of present-day society. In dialectic reciprocal action—
at the same time result and cause of the powerful accumulation
of capital and of the consequent sharpening and intensifying of
the contradiction between capital and labor within and between
the capitalist States without—has Imperialism entered upon its final
phase, the violent division of the world by the assault of capital. A
chain of continual, unprecedented competitive military prepar­
ations on land and sea in all capitalist countries, a chain of bloody
wars, which have spread from Africa to Europe and which any
moment may fan the glowing sparks to a world conflagration; in
addition, for years the phantom of the high cost of living, of mass
hunger throughout the whole capitalist world, which can no longer
be banished—these are the "signs" under which labor's world
holiday will soon celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its
existence. And each of these "signs" is a flaming testimonial to
the living truth and power of the ideas of the May Day celebration.

The brilliant main idea of the May Day celebration is the
independent action of the proletarian masses, is the political mass
action of the millions of workers, who otherwise can give expres­
sion to their own will only through petty parliamentary action,
separated by State boundaries and consisting for the most part only
in voting for representatives. The excellent proposal of the
Frenchman Lavigne at the international congress in Paris combi­
ined this indirect parliamentary manifestation of the will of the
proletariat with a direct international mass manifestation, the lay­
ing down of tools as a demonstration and fighting tactic for the
eight-hour day, world peace, and Socialism.

No wonder the whole development, the aggregate tendency
of imperialism in the last decade has been to bring ever plainer
and more tangibly before the eyes of the international working
class that only the independent action of the broadest masses, their
own political action, mass demonstrations, mass strikes. which must
sooner or later break forth into a period of revolutionary struggles
for State power, can give the correct answer of the proletariat to
the unprecedented pressure of imperialist politics. At this moment
of frenzied military preparations and of war orgies it is only the
resolute fighting stand of the working masses, their ability and
readiness for powerful mass action, which still maintains world
peace, which can still postpone the threatening world conflagration.
And the more the May Day idea, the idea of resolute mass action
as demonstrations of international solidarity and as a fighting tactic
for peace and for Socialism even in the strongest section of the
International, the German working class, strikes root, the greater
guaranty we shall have that from the world war, which will in­
evitably take place sooner or later, there will result an ultimately
victorious settlement between the world of labor and that of
capital.

Leipzig, April 30, 1913.
The Present Situation In The 
Labor Movement

By JAY LOVESTONE

Every acute economic depression has left an indelible mark on 
the American labor movement. No serious economic crisis has 
been weathered without being a force making for fundamental 
changes in the composition of the working class and in the organiza­
tional and ideological development of the American labor movement.

The American working class is today in the throes of a great 
crisis. Grave and significant events are in the process of develop­
ment. The present crisis is distinct in one sense from all the other 
moments of trial and struggle that our working class has gone 
through. This crisis is not only one growing out of the acute depres­
sion at hand, but is also a "prosperity" crisis. The difficulties and 
problems the workers are facing today in the United States are re­
flexes at least as much of the recent period of prosperity as of the 
present period of severe economic depression.

What are the employers planning to do with the remaining 
trade unions? What will be the policy of the present trade union 
bureaucracy? What can be done to beat back the smashing, open-shop 
offensive now being waged by the huge capitalist interests against 
every vestige of working-class organization?

These are all pertinent questions. The life and death crisis which 
the biggest trade union of the American Federation of Labor, the 
United Mine Workers of America, is now going through; the gath­
ering storms in the ranks of the railroad workers as a protest against 
the class collaboration schemes of the Brotherhood of Locomotive 
Engineers type; the dire effects of the Watson-Parker law on the 
great mass of railway workers; the destruction of the needle-trade 
union organizations by the Socialist Party bureaucracy of the Sigman 
type, working hand in glove with the Green-Woll clique; the rising 
wave of protest and strike movements in the textile regions; and 
the historical mass conference of progressive miners held in Pitts­
burgh on April 1, are all straws indicating that there are now blow­
ing winds which are shaking up the whole composition of the work­
ing class and uprooting and changing the prevailing structure and 
policies of our labor movement.

To answer the above questions; to understand which way, in which 
direction, we are now traveling, it is necessary to have an analysis 
of the composition of the working class and the relations within the 
working class, of the effects of the present economic crisis on the