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Mass Strikes and Class Feeling: Towards a Luxemburgian Conception of Working Class Formation¹

On 2 September 2016, a noteworthy event occurred in India that was not covered much by the media outside the country. What took place was probably the largest general strike in global history. Estimates of the number of participants, however imprecise, range from 150 to 200m. All the main union federations – with party political affiliations with the left, right and centre – supported the one-day strike. The main demands were that the Modi government increase the minimum wage to ₹18,000 a month (approx. \$277 at the time of writing), revoke plans to liberalise labour law and abandon the idea to further flexibilise labour markets – in a country where the vast majority of the labour force is already working in the informal sector. A year earlier, Indian workers had already staged a similar, albeit slightly smaller strike. The stoppages did not lead to an increase in the minimum wage, but still amounted to a partial success for organised labour: The government failed to change the labour law for the time being, at least at the national level.

Notably, the protests in India exhibit a pattern that is currently visible in many parts of the world: there are large-scale mobilisations for industrial action that are framed as political confrontations between working people and governments. For instance, there was a general strike on 14 November 2012 in Portugal and Spain, which was directed against the politics of austerity imposed by the Troika and the governments in the two countries as part of their efforts to address the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone. Again, this was a historical event insofar as it was based on a truly transnational mobilisation affecting the entire Iberian peninsula. Other examples are the ‘Fight for \$15 campaign’ in the US, which has been going on since 2012 and is based on low-paid workers across sectors walking out in order to demand the increase of the minimum wage; and the wave of strikes in the South African platinum belt in recent years that culminated in the Marikana massacre in 2012 and a five-month stoppage in 2014/15. This was not only the longest and most costly strike in South African history, but also represented a large-scale (and at times very violent) confrontation between the repressive state apparatuses and parts of organised labour. Furthermore, there was a strike wave in Germany in 2015 affecting the railway sector, public childcare facilities and the postal sector. This became a highly politically charged string of events, which led to highly controversial political debates over the right to strike and the social significance of public and infrastructure sector work.

What springs to mind, in this context, is Rosa Luxemburg’s famous pamphlet on *The Mass Strike* (1906). Luxemburg provides a nuanced account of the struggles of workers in the run-up to the first Russian Revolution in 1905 and discusses the strategic implications of the events for the labour movement in Germany and beyond. Obviously, it would be a mistake draw simplistic analogies between struggles that took place during a revolutionary situation in just one country in the early 1900s and those that occur all around the world in an age of a global crisis of capitalism. But there are also a number of similarities between the situation

¹ Der Aufsatz, der meinem Beitrag zu Grunde liegt, ist in englischer Sprache. Den Vortrag in Hallstatt kann ich wahlweise auf Deutsch oder auf Englisch halten.

then and now that are instantly recognisable and worth investigating: the struggles are based on mass mobilisations; they have a wide geographical spread; they are politically significant in the sense that they impact directly on the political scene; and they articulate different forms of protest – both spontaneous eruptions of discontent and planned interventions led by organised labour. Indeed, Luxemburg’s analysis has been used in contemporary strike research, usually to develop typologies of labour struggles or to identify the spatial and temporal patterns of worker mobilisation through strike waves (see, for example, Gorrosarri/Sauviat 2016; Nowak 2016 and Cottle 2017).

In my paper, I will pursue a different path. Luxemburg’s analysis is underpinned by some acute observations on the role of mass strikes in working class formation. My wager is that it is possible to draw out the implicit theoretical assumptions informing her tract and her other writings on labour struggles in order to theorise class formation and the role of the mass strike as a mode of struggle in the constitution of working classes. This in turn may help us grasp the significance of the mass strike for labour activism in the current conjuncture of crisis. In other words, I will discuss in my paper what a Luxemburgian approach to working class formation could look like it, and how it may help us understand the present conjuncture. I will take three steps. In the first section, I will discuss the historical context of *The Mass Strike* as a text, and how it is possible to make use of Luxemburg’s political writings if they are taken out of their historical context. In the second section, I will draw out the class theoretical implications of *The Mass Strike* and Luxemburg’s other analyses of labour struggles. In order to reveal the distinctiveness of Luxemburg’s approach, I will contrast it to the conception of one of her contemporaries, the Soviet scholar and revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin. In my view, Bukharin takes a teleological and evolutionist perspective. It is based on the distinction between ‘class-in-itself’ and ‘class-for-itself’ and assumes that there is a clearly defined end goal of capitalist development – the socialist revolution. In contrast, Luxemburg has a conjunctural, agency-centred understanding of class that emphasises class struggle and accounts for both working class formation and working class partition. Against this backdrop, section three will be about how a Luxemburgian conception may help us make sense of the global political situation in the present day and age, and what the strategic implications of these considerations are. I will include short case studies on recent mass strikes in Germany, India, South Africa and the US. In so doing, I aim to provide outlines of a global conjunctural analysis of mass strikes in an age of crisis.

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