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## **Mass Strikes and Class Feeling: Towards a Luxemburgian Conception of Working Class Formation**

**\*\*DRAFT. PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FROM THE PAPER\*\***

### **Introduction**

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 a 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 labour law, at least at the national level (Chattopadhyay/Marik 2016; Miyamura 2016, 1922; Hensman 2017, 173).

Notably, the Indian protests follow a pattern that is currently visible in many parts of the world: there are large-scale mobilisations for stoppages that are framed as political confrontations between working people and governments (see Nowak/Gallas 2014; Gallas/Nowak 2016). For instance, there was a general strike on 14 November 2012 in all of 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 was the longest and most costly strike in South African history, but it also represented a large-scale (and at times very violent) confrontation between the repressive state apparatuses and parts of organised labour.

What comes to mind, in this context, is Rosa Luxemburg’s famous pamphlet on *The Mass Strike* (1906). In it, she provides a conjunctural analysis of workers’ struggles in the run-up to the first Russian Revolution in 1905 and draws out 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 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 more than a century later – all the more since Russia was a country about to experience a revolutionary rupture, whereas in the present day and age, labour movements seem to be on

the defensive in most parts of world. But there are also a number of similarities between the struggles in revolutionary Russia and the struggles of today: they are based on mass mobilisations; they have a wide geographical spread; they impact directly on the political scene; and they articulate different forms of protest, which are both spontaneous as well as planned and led by organised labour. The similarities suggest that there are general conditions and patterns of the mass strike in capitalist surroundings, which may be relevant for understanding why it emerges in the current political conjuncture, and what its effects are.

Correspondingly, my wager in this chapter is that it is possible to draw out the implicit class theoretical assumptions informing Luxemburg's tract and her other writings on the topic; that these assumptions can be used for assessing the role of mass strikes in processes of working class formation; and that the insights thus produced help us explain the strategic significance of strike movements for labour in the current conjuncture. My chapter is divided into two parts: First, I discuss the class theoretical underpinnings of Luxemburg's concept of the 'mass strike', and second, I provide a brief analysis of the current conjuncture of global crisis with a focus on strike movements, which is formulated from a Luxemburgian perspective.

## **1. Working Class Formation from a Luxemburgian Perspective**

*Nikolai Bukharin: Class-In-Itself, Class-for-Itself, Revolution*

In my view, Luxemburg's observations on labour struggles are informed by a set of assumptions concerning class formation at the level of the capitalist mode of production. Put differently, it is possible to draw out, from her writings, a specific take on materialist class theory. This becomes clear when we contrast her observations with the class theoretical passages of a standard account of Marxist social theory from her day and age, Nikolai Bukharin's *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (1921). Bukharin was a leading Russian revolutionary, a fierce critic of Luxemburg's theory of imperialism and one of the scholars laying the foundations for Marxism-Leninism, the official justification doctrine of the Soviet Bloc. His text was highly influential for materialist class theory insofar as it approaches the question of class formation with the oft-discussed distinction between 'class-in-itself' and 'class-for-itself', which he derives from Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). Bukharin states:

[A] class discharging a definite function in the process of production may already exist as an aggregate of persons before it exists as a self-conscious class; we have a class, but no class consciousness. It exists as a factor in production, as a specific aggregate of production relations; it does not yet exist as a social, independent force that knows what it wants, that feels a mission, that is conscious of its peculiar position, of the hostility of its interests to those of the other classes. As designations for these different stages in the process of class evolution, Marx makes use of two expressions: he calls class 'an sich' (in itself), a class not yet conscious of itself as such; he calls class 'für sich' (for itself), a class already conscious of its social role.<sup>1</sup>

This framework is based on the assumption that under capitalist conditions, the formation of the working class is proceeding in three stages: "class-in-itself", where the working class is just an aggregate of people sharing the same place in the relations of production; "class-for-

itself”, where the working class becomes a self-aware collective actor that has recognised its interests; and revolution, where the working class overthrows the rule of the capitalist class. Importantly, in the passage from the first to the second stage, class struggle emerges as a mode of action:

[L]et us consider the example of a movement for higher wages among the wage workers of a factory. If all the other workers in the country remain calm, we have only the promise of a class struggle, for the class as yet is not kindled. Let us consider, however, the case of a ‘strike wave’. This is class struggle: one class stands opposed to the other. We are no longer dealing with the interests of the group impelling another group, but with the interests of a class impelling another class.

Following Bukharin, society is constant evolution thanks technological-economic development, which consists in the “growth of the productive forces” (1921). It is also the driver behind the transition between the three stages. Under capitalist conditions, technological-economic development simplifies the class structure and thus gives rise to conflicts in which workers learn about the nature of capitalism. In other words, the emergence of the working class as a unified and a revolutionary actor is a by-product of the evolution of capitalism, which has a clear direction:<sup>2</sup> It has a clearly defined end-goal, which is also the end-goal of working class formation: “We may also speak of the historical necessity of socialism, since without it human society cannot continue to develop. If society is to continue to develop, socialism will inevitably come.” (Bukharin 1921)

In conclusion, we are dealing with an evolutionist, technologist-economistic, deterministic, teleological and vanguardist account of working class formation: history is made thanks to a single driver (evolutionism), which is the development of the productive forces (technologism-economism); people’s individual and collective activities are fully determined by those mechanisms (determinism), which is why it has socialism as its clearly defined goal (teleology); and there is a clearly defined distinction, once a politics of the working class emerges, between the party as an organisation of leaders and the workers outside of the party who are in need of being led (vanguardism).<sup>3</sup>

There are at least five critical problems with Bukharin’s account. First of all, capitalist development across the globe is, by all we can say from today’s vantage point, not marked by a simplification of class structures into two main classes, quite the contrary. In the 1970s, materialist class theorists were grappling with the fact that new middle classes had emerged whose existence needed to be accounted for in theoretical terms (see Poulantzas 1974: 191-336; Wright 1978: 30-110). Furthermore, there has been a deepening of the transnational division of labour in recent decades, which was driven by the use of new technologies in processes of production and distribution. Arguably, the emergence of transnational production networks has contributed to a reconfiguration of the internal fractioning of working classes. In light of this, the assumption that the passage from working classes-in-themselves to working classes-for-themselves is the product of technological-economic development seems questionable, to say the least.

Second, there is what I would call, somewhat polemically, the Jehova’s Witnesses fallacy. It is fairly straightforward to argue that working classes-for-themselves, as defined by Bukharin, are hard to track down anywhere in the world today. Obviously, individuals and

organisations of the working class exist that have a mission and are aware of their class interests as well as their antagonism to capital. However, it is hard to argue that this type of consciousness extends to working classes in their entirety. Admittedly, one could respond that capitalism has not yet evolved sufficiently for this to occur. But this is where the fallacy is committed: It is always possible to find reasons why a predicted result has not emerged yet, and why it will still emerge – including the end of the world. Bukharin made his prediction roughly a century ago and working-classes-in-themselves have only emerged, so far, for a limited time and under very specific historical conditions. So it seems fair to say that there is little empirical evidence that his prediction is correct.

Third, and related to the second point, there is a danger of not taking seriously counterattacks by capital and setbacks experienced by workers in the class struggle if one assumes that the overall direction of class formation is clear from the outset. There have been, in recent decades, fierce attacks of capital on organised labour, for example the Thatcherite offensive in Britain and the attacks on unions in the US in the Reagan era (Cohen 2006, 53-74; Gallas 2015), which have contributed to undermining the organisational foundation of the working class and the capacity of workers to act in concert. In light of this, the assumption that the forward march of labour cannot be halted seems tenuous. Furthermore, there is an implication of Bukharin's account of the class struggle that appears to be questionable in this context: If class struggle only comes into existence when there are fully-fledged classes, what are attacks on, say, the remnants of the trade unions if they take place when organised labour has already been weakened considerably?

Fourth – and this a Luxemburgian point – the implication of seeing 'class consciousness' as a precondition for the emergence of classes as collective actors downplays the importance of spontaneous eruptions of protest and struggles that do not necessarily have a clear direction or goal from the outset. Luxemburg (1906: 148) underlines how important these kinds of struggles were in the process leading to the Russian Revolution, and how they can contribute to working class formation under the right circumstances by speeding up the revolutionary process: 'The element of spontaneity (...) plays a great part in all Russian mass strikes without exception, be it as a driving force or as a restraining influence. (...) [I]n Russia the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part not because the Russian proletariat is "uneducated," but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them.' Against this backdrop, Bukharin's vanguardism should be questioned. The three-stage model invites representatives of working class organisations such as trade unions and parties to look down on unorganised workers as being behind; it cannot envisage scenarios where the latter drive forward and even take the lead in movements against capital. Luxemburg, in contrast, acknowledges the stabilising and educational function of working class organisations and their usefulness for exercising leadership in situations of confrontation (1906: 122), but she also emphasises that spontaneity can have the positive effect of undermining rigidities and certainties blocking the advancement of the working class and triggering learning processes on the side of the organised workers (128).

Fifth, there appears to be no guarantee whatsoever that socialist revolutions will take place, and that they will be victorious. Obviously, it is possible to argue that there is no way for working classes to escape class domination if capitalist relations of production are not overthrown. From this, one could infer that workers as a class have an interest in abolishing

the capitalist mode of production. However, there are two important qualifications to be made to this statement: As long as there is no plausible alternative to the capitalist status quo, it does not make much sense for workers to pursue their collective interests; and interests emerging at the individual, sectional or national level may override collective global interests. There can be settlements that considerably improve the living standards of individual workers or groups of workers within capitalist class domination – in particular if strategies of inter-capitalist division emerge that are based on increasing productivity or what Marx calls the production of relative surplus value. As a result, there are numerous reasons for workers to arrange themselves with the capitalist status even if this goes against their class interest.

In conclusion, Bukharin's conception of working class formation is questionable, and much of the critique revolves around the fact that it is based on a deterministic, teleological narrative assuming that the three stages follow one after the other with iron necessity. This raises the question what an alternative conceptualisation would look like.

### *Rosa Luxemburg: Class Struggle, Class Formation and Class Partition*

Luxemburg is a precursor of theoretical-political project that I call 'Conjunctural Marxism'. It emerged in the late 1960s, and was shaped by Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas (Gallas 2017). I mention this line of thinking in this context because it is strictly anti-deterministic and anti-teleological: Revolutions are not the outcome of iron laws of history, but of conjunctures, that is, highly specific, situational articulations of contradictions (see Althusser 1965, 178-9). Obviously, such articulations are also conditioned by deep structures such as the capitalist mode of production, in particular the fact that it is characterised by class antagonism and domination, and that it is a crisis-prone system. But it is also necessary to ask whether the conflict-inducing effects of these structures are blocked or activated through factors emerging in more specific spatio-temporal contexts.

This can be demonstrated with reference to Luxemburg's account of the Mass Strike. She highlights the general importance of capitalist class domination as a factor in the production of revolutions, which is a key trait of the capitalist mode of production: in a situation of revolutionary rupture, workers experience "the chains of capitalism" as being no longer tolerable (1906: 129). Furthermore, she suggests that the Russian working class became a revolutionary in the run-up to the revolution in 1905 in confrontation with an absolutist state – and that things played out differently in the West where workers were encountering a capitalist state (162). This suggests that the institutions specific to a certain capitalist social formation matter – in this case, capitalism in Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, Luxemburg also discusses unpaid, "compulsory holidays", which employers in St Petersburg imposed on workers on the occasion of the coronation tsar Nicholas II in May 1896 (121). This decision triggered a general strike in the city, whose historical significance lies in setting a precedent for the later wave of mass strikes in the country. It follows that situational factors located at the level of the political conjuncture also matter greatly. Consequently, there is a degree of openness to history. Conjunctural factors can change all of a sudden, which is why revolutionary situations tend occur unexpectedly.

Importantly, a detailed theorisation of working class formation does not exist in the Conjunctural Marxist literature. Luxemburg also provides little in the way of class theoretical arguments, which is unsurprising given that her articles on labour struggles mostly focus on

questions of political strategy. But she offers something else, namely, detailed descriptions of labour struggles using class terminology. In my view, these can count as descriptions of working class formation even if they are not marked as such. Indeed, it is possible to close the gap in the literature with the help of Luxemburg's observations, which is what I will show in this section.

To this end, I will present passages in Luxemburg's writings that are relevant from a class theoretical perspective – and compare them with Bukharin's observations. My aim is to show that her theoretical assumptions, argumentative patterns and empirical observations are distinctive, and that they can be used to sketch out a theory of working class formation. Accordingly, I will not reconstruct, word for word, Luxemburg's lines of argument – in particular their political-strategic content. Much rather, I will treat her writings in an irreverent and creative manner.

A useful starting point is a passage where Luxemburg describes the strikes in Russia in the run-up to the revolution (1906: 128, emphases added):

The general strikes of January and February broke out as unified revolutionary actions to begin with under the direction of the social democrats; but this action soon fell into an unending series of local, partial, economic strikes in separate districts, towns, departments, and factories. The entire spring of 1905 and into the middle of the summer there fermented throughout the whole of the immense empire an uninterrupted economic strike of *almost the entire proletariat against capital* – a struggle that embraced, on the one hand, all the petty bourgeois and liberal professions, commercial employees, technicians, actors, and members of artistic professions, and on the other hand, penetrated to the domestic servants, the minor police officials, and even to the stratum of the lumpenproletariat, and simultaneously surged from the towns to the country districts and even knocked at the iron gates of the military barracks. *This is a gigantic, many-colored picture of a general arrangement of labor and capital that reflects all the complexity of social organization and of the political consciousness of every section and of every district*; and the whole long scale runs from the regular trade-union struggle of a tried and tested troop of the proletariat drawn from large-scale industry to the formless protest of a handful of rural proletarians, to the first slight stirrings of an agitated military garrison; from the well-educated and elegant revolt in cuffs and white collars in the counting house of a bank to the shy-bold murmurings of a clumsy meeting of dissatisfied policemen in a smoke-grimed dark and dirty guardroom.

In this passage, Luxemburg speaks of labour struggles of different types that culminate in “almost the entire proletariat” moving collectively in the spring and summer of 1905. The struggles take on differentiated but connected forms, and what emerges is a general confrontation between labour and capital that is also discernible as such for the individuals involved in the struggles. Based on the definition introduced in the above section on class theory, this can be seen as an almost prototypical process of class formation.

At the same time, it is striking how strongly Luxemburg's account diverges from Bukharin's theorisation. She moves against his narrative in five significant ways. The general gist that it is wrong to assume that economic-technological development simply translates into working class formation because the latter depends on institutional and, to a large degree, on conjunctural factors.

The most fundamental difference concerns the ways in which the two authors conceptualise the class struggle. For Bukharin (1921), class struggle only properly emerges

once the working class has become a class-for-itself; confrontations between workers and capitalists taking place before this point are only embryonic or “latent” forms of the class struggle. The implication is that class struggle has no role to play in class formation; the latter is a by-product of technological-economic development. Correspondingly, Bukharin is a committed determinist who denies the existence of a ‘free will’ (ibid.) and of agency as a capacity of individual and collective actors to actively make history.

In contrast, Luxemburg uses expressions in her treatise such as “the history of class struggle” (1906: 112), “the present phase of the class struggle” (117), “conditions of the class struggle” (118), “the stages of development of the class struggle” (170) and “the modern class struggle” (175). Her usage of the term suggests that class struggle is a constant occurrence in societies marked by class domination – and that it is a driver of history, which is in line with Marx and Engels’s claim in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) that ‘[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Luxemburg’s description of the struggles in 1905 quoted above shows that for her, class formation results from class struggle: The unity of labour visible in the “uninterrupted strike of almost the entire proletariat against capital” is the outcome of the various confrontations of workers with capital that took place over the preceding months. The argumentative pattern at work here is that capitalist relations of production entail permanent class conflict, which is visible in the fact that labour struggles are ubiquitous in capitalist societies, and that class conflict is the driver of class formation. In other words, workers make experiences in confrontations with capital that cause them to act in concert and to organise; they undergo learning processes that help them to develop unity and collective strength.

The second difference concern the factors facilitating class formation. In Bukharin’s framework, it is technological-economic development that simplifies class relations and makes workers understand the nature of their oppression. For Luxemburg, this is different. Of course, working class formation will not take place if there is no capitalist mode of production with its dynamic economic effects, most importantly capital accumulation. But capitalist development does not neatly translate into working class formation. Luxemburg highlights, for example, how economic and political development can be out of synch with each other: Whereas the revolutions in the West resulted, first of all, in the emergence of novel liberal-constitutional political systems and, in a second step, in capitalist industrialisation, the sequence was reversed in the Russian case. On the eve of the 1905 revolution, full-blown industrial capitalism already existed, but the political system was still absolutist (1906, 162). This also means that the conditions for working class formation were markedly different in Russia: liberalism as pro-capitalist political ideology was weak; this allowed organised labour to form as the leading collective actor at both the economic and political level with an oppositional, revolutionary agenda – despite the fact that the capitalist state had not developed yet. In other words, the working class was at the forefront of not just of the struggle against capital, but also against absolutism. It thus propelled forward a bourgeois revolution (ibid.) that resulted in the “erection of a bourgeois-parliamentary constitutional state” (160).

It follows that according to Luxemburg, working class formation is not a regular, evolutionary process with technological-economic development as its motor; much rather, it reflects specific articulations of economic and political processes of development and

stagnation with distinct temporalities. Correspondingly, she argues that the institutional specificities of the capitalist social formation in Russian played a key role in facilitating working class formation, in particular the presence of an absolutist state. Furthermore, conjunctural factors also matter greatly for class formation, which can be inferred from her account of the events in St Petersburg in 1896. The compulsory holidays imposed on workers fed into a general strike, which in turn paved the way for a long strike wave that culminated in a revolution. Put differently, a specific event triggered a process of working class formation.

The difference between a deterministic-teleological and a conjunctural understanding of working class formation is also visible when we look at the issue of geography and the question of the politicisation of struggles. In Bukharin's framework, there is a clearly defined pattern: the transformation of a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself also entails the transformation of local, economic struggles (or labour struggles) into national, political struggles (or class struggles) and the simplification of the class structure into two camps. Again, Luxemburg's account is vastly different. Following her description of the Russian Revolution, there is no clearly defined direction of working class formation because national struggles can disintegrate into localised struggles and political struggles can be transformed into economic struggles without interrupting the overall process. Following the above quote, class struggles move in both directions. Likewise, they do not entail a simplification of the class structure. In the Russian case, as is discussed in the quote, members of the Lumpenproletariat and milieus representing the middle classes joined forces with working class in its struggle. This suggests that class alliances are not necessarily an obstacle to class formation. Quite the contrary: if we follow Luxemburg, alliances appear to strengthen the hand of the working class vis-à-vis capital, at least as long as it is in the lead politically.

A third difference concerns the specific difference between the first and the second stage in Bukharin's framework. According to him, the key distinction between classes-in-themselves and classes-for-themselves is that while the latter possess class consciousness, the former do not. In other words, class consciousness is the medium through which class formation occurs. Again, Luxemburg's account of the Russian Revolution does not conform to Bukharin's script. The concept of class consciousness indicates that the awareness of the class character of capitalist societies is growing until there is a qualitative shift in its perception on the side of workers, which then leads them to embrace socialism as an alternative to capitalism and, in the end, to take revolutionary action. Luxemburg paints a very different picture: there are phases of spontaneity that are not so much marked by workers embracing a consistent world view and phases of organised action where workers act on the grounds of socialist ideas. Importantly, both phases can contribute, in their different ways, to the expansion of class agency and thus to class formation. What matters is not so much a fixed worldview, but the 'class feeling' on the side of workers, that is, an intuitive understanding that capital and labour are two sides in struggle, and that capital is 'on top' in this struggle and can only be countered efficiently through collective action. Luxemburg (1906: 129) describes 'class feeling' thus:

The sudden general rising of the proletariat in January under the powerful impetus of the St. Petersburg events was outwardly a political act of the revolutionary declaration of war on



absolutism. But this first general direct action reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock. And this awakening of class feeling expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian mass, counted by millions, quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was the social and economic existence that they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon, there began a spontaneous general shaking of and tugging at these chains. All the innumerable sufferings of the modern proletariat reminded them of the old bleeding wounds.

Admittedly, Luxemburg here speaks both of “class feeling” and “class consciousness” and uses the two terms interchangeably. But against Bukharin and other deterministic-teleological accounts of class formation, I propose to stick to using the former term. In my view, it captures something that is specific about Luxemburg’s observations: Class feeling is not an accumulation of experiences that results in a fixed, socialist world view – as Bukharin describes class consciousness. Much rather, it emerges as a sudden reaction to shifted social conditions in which frustrations about one’s living conditions crystallise in a political stance. This stance may be vague in terms of its political goal and justifications, but it is clear-cut in that it sees society as socially divided and rejects the domination of those ‘above’. In this sense, class feeling is not a stable by-product of class struggle or capitalist development; it emerges when there are profound shifts at the level of the conjuncture. By implication, class feeling can also evaporate again when conditions change. Luxemburg’s account is innovative insofar as she introduces a conjunctural concept when she refers to the ideational elements of class formation, which is in line with her description of the latter as a process that does not follow a clearly defined path.

This also suggests that class formation can be slow, gradual process, or that it can take place quite suddenly, and that can be halted and reversed. In other words, there are not just processes of class formation but also of class partition, which reflect changes in the conditions of struggle, active interventions of the other side or strategic and tactical choices of the movements representing the class-in-formation. If class formation consists in a process whereby workers increasingly act in concert and in line with their interests, class partition consists in a decrease in such joint activity and is a reflection of divisions that emerge between people similarly placed in the relations of production. Luxemburg’s account of labour struggles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is fully compatible with Beverly Silver’s view developed a century later. Silver captures the back-and-forth between class formation and class partition by speaking of a constant ‘making’ and ‘unmaking’ of classes (2014, 49).<sup>5</sup>

The fourth difference emerges when we look more closely at Bukharin’s assumption that there is an end goal of the process of class formation, which consist in a revolution instigated by the organisations of the working class against the rule of capital. His account is teleological insofar as there are laws in history that prescribe an outcome of historical development, which is socialism. In contrast, Luxemburg stresses class agency, that is, the capacity of class actors to actively make history. Accordingly, history is an open process to her whose outcome cannot be predicted. This is visible in the following, famous statement, which she made during the First World War (1915):

Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration – a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales.

It is clear from this statement that there is no necessity for socialism at all; in fact, without what she calls here “the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat”, there will be no socialism. This suggests that class formation consists in the expansion of class agency in an emphatic sense, that is, the capacity of workers to actively shape history through acting in concert and in line with their interests.

Importantly, Luxemburg’s statement should not read as being voluntarist in the sense that the working class as a collective is acting without any constraints. She highlights that the conjuncture is characterised by the existence of a critical historical juncture with broadly two options, which is only possible if there are social conditions that somehow influence and narrow down the choices of class actors. This conception of history and of agency brings to mind Marx’s dictum in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* (1852, translation amended) that ‘[h]uman beings make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.’ It follows that in Luxemburg’s framework, class formation is the process whereby class agency is expanded, and class partition the process whereby it is constrained. In this sense, Luxemburg breaks with deterministic-teleological view à la Bukharin and suggests that class agency – the capacity of people sharing class places to act collectively and transform the social conditions under which they operate – develops in struggles. In this sense, her account of class formation is not oriented towards an end-goal, but towards process.

What emerges is a position fundamentally different from Bukharin’s (see table one). What speaks for seeing class formation in a Luxemburgian fashion is that it addresses all five critical problems of his conception. First of all, Bukharin assumes that the class structure will simplify through technological-economic development – an assumption that is not line with empirical developments. It is no way necessary to defend this assumption in order to uphold a process-oriented view of class formation. The same is true of the second problem, which I called the Jehova’s witnesses fallacy. There is no need at all from a Luxemburgian standpoint to predict an end-goal of the process of class formation. Third, the Luxemburgian conception takes class partition seriously, which enables one to account for successful offensives of capital. Likewise and fourth, it emphasises the importance of spontaneous protests – and does not have buy into the principled privileging of organised class struggle that Bukharin stands for. Fifth, from a Luxemburgian standpoint, there are no iron laws of history. Socialism is a conjunctural possibility, not a historical necessity. All of this suggests that the Luxemburgian conception represents an important class theoretical advance over Bukharin’s conception.

TABLE 1: Conceptions of Working Class Formation

	<b>Bukharin</b>	<b>Luxemburg</b>
<b>Focus</b>	End-Goal	Process
<b>Mode of development</b>	Technological-economistic and evolutionist	Political-economic and conjunctural
<b>Theory of history</b>	Deterministic-teleological	Agency-centred
<b>Political strategy</b>	Vanguardist	Grassroots-oriented
<b>Driver</b>	Technological-economic development	Class struggle
<b>Medium</b>	Class consciousness	Class feeling
<b>Sequence</b>	Relations of production ↓ Class in itself ↓ Technological-economic development (simplification of class structure/economic conflicts) ↓ Class consciousness ↓ Class for itself ↓ Class struggle/political struggle (party/vanguard) ↓ Revolution	Relations of production (class places) ↓ Class struggle (class feeling) ↓ Class formation/partition (expansion/restriction of class agency) ⋮ Revolutionary conjunctures

### *The Role of the Mass Strike*

It should be clear by now that Luxemburg is advancing a process-oriented perspective on working class formation. In keeping with the introduction to this chapter, the question remains, however, what the role of the mass strike in the entire process is. In order to gain a better understanding of this role, it is necessary, first of all, to determine what the mass strike as a mode of labour struggle is, and how it differs from other modes. Against this backdrop, it then becomes possible to assess the nature of the political conjuncture in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia and discuss how the mass strike fits into the picture.

If we talk about mass strikes in the Luxemburgian vein, there are two obvious features that set them apart from other modes of labour struggle, for example, the sectoral economic strike for higher wages or the demonstration in defence of jobs in a certain workplace or industry. As the term indicates, the mass strike is characterised by mass participation. But as becomes clear when we look at Luxemburg's observations on the Russian Revolution, we are not looking at a singular, clearly defined instance of protest action, but at a wave of stoppages and other forms of protest that are connected because they all contribute to creating a thrust towards revolution:

Political and economic strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, demonstrative strikes and fighting strikes, general strikes of individual branches of industry and general strikes in individual towns, peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting – all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another – it is a ceaselessly moving, changing sea of phenomena. And the law of motion of these phenomena is clear: it does not lie in the mass strike itself nor in its technical details, but in the political and social proportions of the forces of the revolution. (Luxemburg 1906, 140-1)

It follows that the 'mass strike' in a Luxemburgian understanding is an umbrella term for a range of practices of protest connected through their common political goal or at least a general thrust, and the fact that they are carried out by workers and are somehow associated with their capacity to exercise power through refusing to work.

Following Jörg Nowak (2019), this description of the mass strike can be used to identify five distinct features that characterise it as a mode of struggle. This concerns, first of all, its aims, which are neither strictly economic nor strictly political but shift back and forth over time. Here, a distinct feature of mass strikes comes into view that shows why they are so important in revolutionary conjuncture: They question the separation between economic and political domination that plays a constitutive, stabilising role in capitalist social formation (see Poulantzas 1978: 54). In other words, the mass strike can be seen as a form of conducting class politics from below that represents an alternative to working through the official channels of political decision-making (Cortés-Chirino 2016, 379).

This suggests, second, that the mass strike has a disruptive effect on debates in the political scene. It directly impacts on political discourses and decision-making, and political decision-makers, in one way or another, will react to it.

Third, it has a mobilising effect on workers as a class, not just on specific sectors – and it results in a class confrontation that is discernible as such for the workers involved. In other words, the mass strike is a collective practice of workers that acts as catalyst of working class formation: through acting this way, they develop what Luxemburg calls 'class feeling'. They make the experience that they are connected to fellow workers, and that their collective interest is opposed to the interests of capital. Accordingly, Luxemburg (1906, 163) says:

Today, when the working classes are being enlightened in the course of the revolutionary struggle, when they must marshal their forces and lead themselves, and when the revolution is directed as much against the old state power as against capitalist exploitation, the mass strike appears as the natural means of recruiting the widest proletarian layers for the struggle, as well as being at the same time a means of undermining and overthrowing the old state power, and of stemming capitalist exploitation. The urban industrial proletariat is now the soul of the revolution in Russia.

But in order to carry through a direct political struggle as a mass, the proletariat must first be assembled as a mass, and for this purpose they must come out of the factory and workshop, mine and foundry, must overcome the levigation and the decay to which they are condemned under the daily yoke of capitalism. The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and the more highly developed the antagonism is between capital and labor, the more effective and decisive must mass strikes become.

Fourth, it expands beyond localised and isolated focal points and spreads out. Fifth, and most importantly, it takes place in the context of a revolutionary conjuncture and thus is a mode of struggle reflecting the revolutionary aspirations of the working class. All of this suggests that the mass strike is a highly specific mode of struggle, and that not every strike with mass participation qualifies as mass strike according to Luxemburg. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it makes sense to speak of a revolutionary mass strike, which is offensive and driven by a class politics from below that is fed by class feeling.

The implication of all this is that this mode of struggle was the adequate response of workers to historical tendencies at the level of the conjuncture in Luxemburg's day – adequate in the sense that it was most likely to bring results in line with workers' interests. This also suggests that it cannot be transferred easily to other times and places, which is in line with Luxemburg's critique of anarchist, voluntarist positions that simply want to 'switch on' the revolution by promoting the idea of a mass strike (115-6). In Luxemburg's words (1906: 147), 'the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike'. Luxemburg suggests here that conjunctural circumstances invite specific modes of struggle, not the other way round – and that any strategic reflection must start from assessing those circumstances and finding out how to best intervene in them. In other words, the mass strike as defined by Luxemburg may function as a driver of working class formation in revolutionary conjunctures, but it would be a grave mistake to simply call for it under other conjunctural circumstances and to facilitate class formation this way.

## **2. Strikes and Class Formation in the Global Crisis**

### *The Global Conjuncture: An On-Going Crisis*

Luxemburg's account of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe suggests that there are modes of struggle adequate to a specific conjuncture insofar as they generate favourable results for organised labour under the given conditions of struggle. The mass strikes in Russia exemplify this: they were successful insofar as they led to a revolution under the leadership of the working class. In fact, Luxemburg's optimism about the possibility of labour-led revolutionary insurrections in Europe seemed vindicated when the October revolution shook up the Russian political order in 1917. However, the failure of revolutionary movements across Europe in subsequent years – including the smashing of the Spartacus Revolt in Germany in January 1919 that culminated in the murder of Luxemburg herself and her comrade and friend Karl Liebknecht – and the rise of the far right in Italy and Germany signalled the end of the revolutionary conjuncture in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The working class was now on the defensive; what represented adequate modes of struggle had shifted.

In his book *Fascism and Dictatorship* (1970, 156-65), Nicos Poulantzas shows that the failure of leading representatives of party communism to understand this conjunctural shift and to fully embrace an adequate, defensive mode of struggle in the new conjuncture – the united front – paved the way for the victory of fascism. This suggests that asking for lessons of Luxemburg’s analysis for the struggles of today requires us, in the first place, to gain an understanding of the current political conjuncture and to inquire, in a second step, into the nature of the collective activities of workers against this backdrop.

When I speak of the current political conjuncture, this gives rise to the question of scale. Obviously, it is possible to conduct conjunctural analyses at the national level (see Hall et al. 1978; Ege/Gallas 2019) – in particular since many of the institutions heavily affecting working class formation such as trade unions, mechanisms of collective bargaining and labour law are, to a large degree, still national institutions. But in the light of the fact that there is a global crisis that has been affecting capitalism around the world in the last ten years, it makes sense to speak of a global political conjuncture.

It is beyond the scope of a chapter on Luxemburg’s political writings to provide a detailed conjunctural analysis of global capitalism. Accordingly, a number of short remarks will have to suffice. Methodologically, I circumnavigate the insurmountable challenge of producing a complete picture by briefly looking at the present state of labour struggles in two countries that represent the global north and south respectively and play a key role in global geo-politics: the US and India. If it is possible to discern common trends in these vastly different countries, it could be argued that these trends have a more general relevance.

But before I launch in a more detailed discussion of labour struggles, I would like to make three general, admittedly impressionistic remarks about the global political conjuncture. First of all, the conjuncture is still marked by a deep crisis of capitalism, which first came into view in 2007 in the form of a global banking crisis. Despite the fact that global GDP growth has picked up again after falling when the crisis first hit, it does not appear that the structural problems underpinning the crisis appear have been addressed. Scholars point out that attempts to re-regulate the financial sector have been limited (Rixen 2013; Christophers 2016); that the ‘too big to fail’ problem has not been addressed properly (Bell/Hindmoor 2018); that profitability in the banking sector remains weak (ibid.); and that attempts to act against financial crime have been lacklustre (Ryder 2016). In other words, there is a permanency to the conjuncture of crisis. Financial capital seems to have been able to defend its leading position in power blocs around the world and its deep integration across national boundaries. Correspondingly, finance-oriented accumulation strategies still dominate at the level of economic, fiscal and monetary policy (see Scherrer 2011; Palley 2016: 124-7). In light of this, it seems plausible to say that the room for manoeuvre for organised labour is constrained. Under the predominance of a financial sector in crisis, productivist arrangements with capital, which are characterised by relative surplus value production and the translation of productivity gains into increasing living standards, are difficult achieve.

Second, there is a realignment at the level of geopolitics – with a move from a uni-polar world characterised by US supremacy to a multi-polar world under US dominance. There are new contender states such as China and Germany playing a key geopolitical role in their region and beyond – and an old adversary of the US, Russia, that has gained weight again in recent years. The global predominance of the US is not seriously threatened due to

the US economy still being the largest in the world, the US-Dollar serving as world money and US military might (see Panitch/Gindin 2012). But there are various frontiers where it is tested and contested – not just in geopolitical conflict zones like Syria and the Ukraine, but also inside international organisations marked by US predominance, most importantly NATO. In the context of heightening geopolitical tensions, there is extra room for nationalist interpellations, which directly work against working class formation – across but also within national boundaries.

Third, concerning class politics, there are fierce attacks of power blocs across the world on labour – be it in the form of attacks on the right to strike, austerity agendas hitting public spending or direct attacks on organised labour involving repressive state apparatuses. Left organisations and parties have on the whole been unsuccessful in terms of thwarting these offensives, and there is a rightwards trend in politics in a great number of countries across the globe – authoritarian populist figures of the right like Rodrigo Duterte, Sebastian Kurz, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, Michel Temer and Donald Trump have become heads of state or government and can build on broad popular support, including the support of certain groups of workers and even of trade unionists.

All in all, it is pretty safe to say that in the wake of the crisis, governments across the globe are orchestrating attacks on organised labour, and that in such a situation, a defensive but political mode of labour struggle with mass participation is the adequate reaction. In other words, organised labour is on the defensive, and what is indeed emerging is not revolutionary mass strikes in Luxemburg's sense, but defensive mass strikes. Modifying Luxemburg's definition of the mass strike, these are politicised strike waves with a mobilising effect on the entire working class aimed at thwarting government interventions made on behalf of capital. As such, they build on mass participation and the disruption of official politics.

As Luxemburg (1906: 150) observed with reference to Russia, “[i]n a state in which every form and expression of the labor movement is forbidden, in which the simplest strike is a political crime, it must logically follow that every economic struggle will become a political one”. More generally speaking, one can say that any strike wave of a certain size becomes a political issue by default because it disrupts everyday life to a degree that political actors will feel compelled to comment on it, be it approvingly or disapprovingly. In a global conjuncture of crisis marked by government onslaughts on labour, strikes become politicised – either from the outside, that is, through other political actors, or by the workers themselves.

The neoliberal age is marked by a supremacy of capital, which is reflected in the neoliberal turns of social democratic parties; the erection of legal and institutional safeguards that shield the field of monetary and fiscal policy from political interventions not in line with neoliberal orthodoxy, for example through the existence of independent central banks and debt brakes that enshrined in constitutions; and, most importantly, through the absence of a forceful alternative project in the political scene that seriously threatens the status quo. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for workers to air political grievances through official political channels, which is why there is a strong incentive to use the strike weapon for political ends.

Despite the fact that strike incidence has been falling in the US and Europe for a long time, there have been memorable, politically charged strike waves in the global North with mass participation. Among them are the general strikes against austerity in Western Europe,

which took place in Belgium, Britain, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Portugal and Spain (see Nowak/Gallas 2014; Gallas/Nowak 2016); a strike wave in Germany in 2015 that mostly affected the railways, the postal service and childcare (Birke 2018) and triggered broad political debates on the right to strike and carework; the 2018 stoppage in France against Emmanuel Macron's decision to restructure labour relations in the railway sector and open it up to foreign companies competing with the state-owned railway service SNCF; the strikes by public sector workers in the US against legal encroachments on union rights and the decline of public education plus the campaign and strikes of precarious workers for a minimum wage of \$15, both of which I will discuss below.

Likewise, there have been huge strikes in the global South, and like the strikes in the north, they are often politically charged – either because they take place in countries controlled by authoritarian regimes where political participation is constrained and are organised by workers demanding rights, or because they are similar to the strikes listed in the North in the sense that they are directed against neoliberalisation and neoliberal crisis management. Mass strikes in the context of authoritarian regimes are visible, for example, in East and Southeast Asian countries that have been integrated in global production networks in recent decades. In Vietnam, there have been 6,000 illegal strikes since the country enacted a Labour Code in 1995 (Thi Thu 2017); in 2015, 90,000 workers in Ho Chi Minh City downed the tools in order to protest changes to social insurance (Bell 2017). Likewise, there have been several waves of strikes with mass participation of Cambodian garment workers against poor wages and working conditions, the right to unionise and authoritarian politics. In late 2013 and early 2014, 350,000 workers went on strike for two weeks protesting against what they saw as a rigged general election a few months earlier and for a significant increase in the minimum wage, in the course of which several workers got killed by armed forces (Reuters 2014; Thul 2014; Pratap/Bose 2015, 3). In China, there have been significant strikes as well, for example in the shoe industry. A well-known strike took place in 2010 at a Honda factory in Guangdong, which kickstarted a strike wave throughout the province, which resulted in significant wage increases for workers of up to 40 per cent. In Dongguan, a city in the Pearl River Delta, 40,000 workers in seven shoe factory run by a company called Yue Yen, a supplier of Nike and Adidas, went on a successful strike over pay and social security contributions (Pringle 2016, 139).

But the dynamics of labour struggles do not neatly map on the divide between authoritarian and formally democratic regimes: Arguably, there is an authoritarian convergence with formally democratic regimes curbing civil and labour rights in the name of security and economic prosperity, and authoritarian regime accommodating for the fact that class agency cannot be suppressed fully. Correspondingly, labour struggles in formally democratic countries in the global North and South are often about asserting the right of workers to organise and collectively fight for their interests.

In Indonesia – formally a democratic country, but one with a long history of repression against labour movements – there were general strikes in 2012 and 2013 with 2 and 3m participants respectively that demanded not just a hefty increase in the minimum wage and an end to outsourcing, but also the repeal of anti-labour laws. Likewise, the fierce struggle of recent years in India's automobile sector were also about the right to unionise and the repression of state apparatus against labour; and the huge general strikes in the country



were also against an onslaught on worker-friendly provision in the labour law that the government planned to attack in the name of flexibilisation (Pratap/Bose 2015, 4-10; Miyamura 2016: 1922, 1934-5; Hensman 2017: 172-3; Nowak 2016; 2017a; 2019). The Indian case will be discussed in greater detail below.

In the case of Egypt, strikes with mass participation played a crucial role in the emergence of a revolutionary movement in 2011 (McNally 2011; Schwartz 2011; Adbelrahman 2012; Alexander 2012; Zemni et al. 2013). As has been mentioned in the introduction, there have been strikes in the South African mining sector with a large of workers participating in 2012 and 2014-5. Last but not least, there have been demonstrative general strike in Argentina that took place in April and December 2017 and were directed against the restructuring of labour relations under the Macri government.

This impressionistic description of labour struggles in the global conjuncture of crisis is also backed up by data – insofar as they exist. Obviously, strike incidence at the global level is hard to measure. Based on a systematic examination of coverage in five key newspapers from the Anglophone world, Şahan Savaş Karataşlı et al. (2015) argue that there has been a global explosion of social protest from 1991 to 2011, and labour struggles played a key role in driving up numbers. Similarly, Fernando Cortés Chirino (2016) argues that political mass strikes have increased significantly between 1919 and 2014 across the world, and that they have been spreading out from Europe to the global semi-periphery and periphery. From a qualitative perspective, one may argue that there have been waves of political mass strikes across the globe against neoliberalism and neoliberal crisis management, and, in particular in the conjuncture of crisis, a politicisation from the inside, that is, of workers who have decided to use the strike weapon as a means of political protest. Correspondingly, these strikes are often linked, albeit in many cases in a rather weak manner, with other protest movements that have sprung up in the course of the crisis. From a Luxemburgian perspective, the questions that emerge against this backdrop are: What the patterns of labour struggles visible in the conjuncture of crisis, and how adequate are they to the conjuncture? And are they conducive to working class formation or partition?

### *The US: Rearguard Action and New Fronts*

In the US case, the claim that the working class has been on the defensive for a long time is hard to refute. Many important indicators point into this direction: Union density has decreased significantly in the last decades, falling from 20.1 in 1983 to 10.7 in 2017 per cent (BLS 2018a). Given the US tradition of business unionism (Hattam 1993; Eidlin 2009), the decline in union membership cannot, in the case of each and every organisation, be understood as a clear sign of class partition. However, strike incidence has also decreased significantly, which, under conditions of shrinking labour organisations and the weak wage development for workers in the US in the last 40 years (Palley 2016: 120), can be seen as a sign of class agency being curbed. In 1983, there were 83 strikes involving more than 1,000 workers and lasting for more than one shift; in 2017, the figure was 7, the second lowest number since records began in 1947 (BLS 2018b). For twenty odd years, labour scholars have been discussing strategies aimed at revitalising US labour (see, for example, Clawson/Clawson 1999; Voss/Sherman 2000; Milkman/Voss 2004; Milkman 2006), with a heavy emphasis on organising strategies.

From a Luxemburgian perspective, this debate should surely be welcomed. But following Luxemburg, tactics and strategies of labour cannot be chosen at will and always have to be discussed in conjunction with a conjunctural analysis. In light of this, it may be worth shifting the focus of these debates somewhat: One could identify patterns of labour struggles that are garnering mass support, examine their situatedness in a distinct conjuncture and assess their class effects – no matter whether they are taking place inside, on the periphery or outside unions.

In my view, there are three patterns worth mentioning in this context at the moment. First of all, there have been several waves of struggles in the public sector in recent years. These struggles are hugely relevant for organised labour in the US because today because union density in the public sector is far higher than in the private sector – 34.4 percent as opposed to 6.5 percent in 2017 (BLS 2018a). In 1954, union density in the private sector was still 39 per cent (Clawson/Clawson 1999: 97), and its decline can be attributed to the fact that the US power bloc orchestrated an offensive against labour from 1970s onwards (see *ibid.*, 102-3; Cohen 2006, 62-5). It was accompanied by financial market liberalisation, labour market flexibilisation, de-industrialisation and the proliferation of precarious work in the private sector, which all contributed to union decline. Importantly, in the global conjuncture of crisis, these trends have not subsided, quite the contrary.

Generally, the struggles in the US public sector are about defending the institutional supports of public sector trade unionism and improving working conditions of areas of work that have been starved of funds thanks to the predominance of an anti-statist, free-market ideas, enmity to public expenditure and practices of crisis management aiming to socialise the losses incurred when of the bubble in the financial sector burst in 2008.

In 2011, there was a wave of protests in Wisconsin against a ‘right to work’ bill joined by tens of thousands of public sector workers and their supporters. The bill was aimed at banning public sector unions from collecting fees from non-members who benefited from collective bargaining agreements and de facto abolished their right to bargain collectively. These included not so much traditional strikes, but ‘sick-ins’ where public sector workers took to staying away from work in order to join demonstrations by declaring themselves not well enough to turn up. The demonstrations attracted people not just from the public sector, but from a range of constituencies. In course of the protest, the state Capitol was occupied (Collins 2012, 6, 10, 11; Moody 2012). The protests were unsuccessful in terms of thwarting legislative drive against public sector unions. As a consequence of the new law coming into force 2015, union density at the state-level had dropped, by the end of 2016, by 3.5 percentage points (Manzo/Bruno 2017: 3). But the protesting workers still managed to influence the debate on the issue significantly and, in so doing, contributed to national debates on workers’ rights and the role of organised labour in US society.

In 2012, teachers in Chicago walked out; again this was not an economic strike in a narrow sense because they did not just protest against poor pay and working conditions, but also against the corporate influence over education and for better learning conditions for children and adolescents (see Cantor/Gutierrez 2012). In recent months, there have been strikes of teachers in Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia that are also connecting the economic issue of low pay with the political issue of poor learning conditions for students in public institutions.

Against this backdrop, a significant legal challenge to US public sector unions has emerged. Many of them feel seriously threatened in their existence by the ruling in a Supreme Court case, *Janus vs. AFSCME*. The case was decided in June 2018 and took up an issue already at stake in the Wisconsin protests: It prohibits public sector unions from collecting fees from people who are not members but still benefit from collective bargaining agreements (Scheiber/Vogel 2018; Richman 2018). The implications of the ruling are ambiguous: the abolition of “agency fees” could heavily dent union funding, but there is also a possibility that unions will start to reject no-strike deals (which are common today) and embrace more militant strategies (Richman 2018). After all, some of the recent actions by teachers were wildcat strikes, and they had a political dimension insofar as they highlighted the importance of public education, the threat of privatisation and lack of sufficient funding for schools. These recent public sector struggles can be said to contribute to restoring and consolidating class agency.

Second, there have been serious attempts to extend union coverage in the private sector by achieving recognition at production sites that have not been unionised so far, in particular in the US South. German telecommunications company T-Mobile, an enterprise known for using union-busting techniques in the US, has faced a sustained campaign carried by Communication Workers of America (CWA), which was supported by German public and service sector union *ver.di*, for union recognition (Scheytt 2012; Daley 2014; Compa 2015: 19-22). Likewise, the United Automobile Workers union (UAW) has campaigned in recent years, in cases that made headlines, for recognition at a Volkswagen plant in Tennessee and a Nissan plant in Mississippi, but lost the major votes after massive pressure was put on workers to reject it (Brooks 2017; 2018; Scheiber 2017). On paper, these drives have not been particularly successful so far, and critical questions can be asked about whether a legalistic orientation towards recognition is always the right approach (Richard 2017). But they have contributed to politicising the issue of poor working conditions and collective rights of workers (see Sanders 2017), thus preparing the ground for an expansion of class agency in the private sector.

Third, struggles of precarious workers have sprung up in recent years, and they take a distinct form. A campaign that has made headlines is ‘Fight for \$15’. The two main demands of the campaign are a living wage for workers of \$15 an hour and the right to unionise. It was launched in 2012 by fast food workers in New York with the support of community organisers and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and quickly spread to other sectors, in particular retail. The campaign involves demonstrations, strikes and other types of protest action. From a union perspective, it amounts to a shift in strategy. The primary target of interventions is not employers, but legislators; and activists aim to build broad coalitions that also involve organisations and platforms usually not seen as representing labour. On the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination in 2017, activists of ‘Fight for \$15’ and Black Lives Matter joined forces for demonstrations and teach-ins under the slogan ‘Fight Racism, Raise Pay’. The campaign has been pretty successful so far. It became an object of debate during the Democratic primaries in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, with Bernie Sanders endorsing the campaign and Hillary Clinton signalling sympathy for it. And it has produced tangible results: By the end of 2017, the states of California and New York and several cities (which can set minimum wage levels in some

states) – among them Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Francisco and Seattle – had passed legislation aimed at bringing up wages to \$15 an hour (Chen 2015, 43; Luce 2015, 72-5; Hannah, 2016; NELP 2017).

It has appears that in the US, the constituency of workers at the forefront of class struggle has shifted over the decades – in line with changes in the division of labour: there is a shift from the industrial to the public and service sector, from core workforces to precarious workers plus attempts to expand the remit of organised labour into new geographical areas. All in all, what we are mostly seeing is rearguard action and attempts to resist attacks by capital. In class theoretical terms, the conjuncture of crisis in the US is characterised by defensive mass strikes for the protection and restoration of class agency. They are not revolutionary mass strikes in Luxemburg's sense, but aim at defending and rebuilding organised labour as a collective actor. In so doing, they are politically charged and signal fundamental dissent to the neoliberal status quo, according to which rights at work are individual and not collective rights. In other words, the mode of struggle appears, on the whole, adequate to the conjuncture. But considering that the relations of forces are heavily favouring capital at the moment, the question remains how stronger links between different sites of struggles can be established so that it becomes possible to stop the barrage of onslaughts on labour orchestrated by the US power bloc. In all likelihood, attacks by capital will intensify in the next years because capital is emboldened by the Trump administration. And yet, the Trump era has already given rise to some of the biggest social mobilisations of US history, and it is not be expected that things will quieten down soon. If organised workers manage to build alliances with other actors that are part of the resistance to the Trump administration, it may be possible to shift the relations of forces somewhat in favour of labour.

#### *India: Mass Action and New Organisations of Labour*

After India shook off the yoke of colonialism and became an independent country in 1947, the socialist and nationalist Indian Congress Party dominated the political scene. The country's economic policy was dominated by a mixed economy approach that flanked the private sector with a large state-owned sector, and constrained markets with the help of state interventionism, quantitative restrictions and economic plans. In the mid-1980s, Congress took first steps towards liberalisation when it reduced corporate and import taxes, removed price controls, eased access to loans for large corporations and opened up the public sector for private investment. Foreshadowing the neoliberal turns of centre-left parties in the global North in the 1990s and 2000s, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, also representing Congress, triggered a full regime shift in 1991. He instigated the transition of India to a market economy. This created the political environment in which Hindu nationalism began to thrive. Between 1998 to 2004, during the first government led by the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), threats were made to directly attack workers' right, which did not come really to fruition. After another ten-year period of Congress rule, the BJP, now under the leadership of Modi, won an absolute majority for the first time in its history in 2014. Much like in other countries across the globe, the conjuncture of crisis has resulted in labour rights coming under attack. In 2016, the Modi government liberalised child labour; at the level of states, new bans on cattle slaughter and eating beef have come into force, which have thrown

hundreds of thousands of Muslim and Dalit workers in the meat and leather industries out of work. Likewise, the decision of the government to abolish ₹500 and ₹1,000 notes, allegedly in order to combat corruption and forgery, had the effect of stripping the poorest segments of the population of jobs, wages and savings (Hensman 2010: 112-3; Sarker 2014: 417-8; Hensman 2017: 173-4; Remesh 2017: 106). It follows that much like the US, workers in India are on the defensive.

What has remained in place throughout this whole period, however, were two deep divides in the Indian workforce that have been enshrined in law since independence, as Satoshi Miyamura observes: First of all, the divide between formal and informal employment, with the latter, as of 2011, accounting for 92 percent of the Indian workforce; and second, the divide between the “organised” and the “unorganised” sector of economy, that is, large and medium-sized as opposed to small business units. Notably, even in the organised sector, only 45 percent of workers were formally employed in 2012, down from 62 percent in 2000. Indeed, there appears to be a strategic pattern on the side of capitalists in India to respond to the existence of organisations forcefully representing the interests of workers by replacing formal with informal employment. This is also motivated by the fact that the collective rights, such as the right to be represented by a union that engages in collective bargaining, only apply to formal workers under the dominant understanding of Indian labour law (Miyamura 2016: 1923-5; Monaco 2017: 129). In other words, the fact that labour is on the defensive is also reflected in the on-going process of informalisation that is taking place in an economy already characterised by a huge informal sector.

These divides characterising the Indian working class are also visible in a much discussed strike wave, which has been taking place in the country’s automotive sector since the mid-2000s. The stoppages are of strategic relevance both for organised labour and for the power bloc because the sector is responsible for 7 percent of India’s GDP, and the country is the seventh biggest manufacturer of automobiles in the world (Remesh 2017: 105). In recent years, there have been strikes or slowdowns at plants of well-known corporations such as Ford, GM, Honda and Hyundai (Singha 2017: 214). Probably the most fiercely fought conflict, however, erupted in 2011 at a plant of Maruti Suzuki located in Manesar, which is close to New Delhi. Here, confrontations were triggered when management tried to block the establishment of an independent union at the plant, to which both formal and informal workers responded with strikes and protests. These culminated in 2012 in physical confrontations at the plant, in the course of which offices were set on fire and an HR manager was killed. The circumstances of his death are not entirely clear, and it is impossible from the existing literature to tell what exactly has happened. But the events had severe effects on the workers at the plant: more than 2,000 of them were sacked and 148 arrested. Whereas the big, party-affiliated trade unions were ambivalent about supporting the workers, smaller political groups, left-wing intellectuals and the grassroots-oriented, radical New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) did. The strike transformed itself into a political protest against the repression of organised labour through the authorities – and workers politicised themselves in the process, as Jörg Nowak’s detailed account of a protest march in January 2014 shows.

In 2017, 117 of the people arrested at the Manesar plant were acquitted – and 13 were sentenced to life for the murder of the HR manager, among 12 representatives of the union. The sentences led to a one hour strike in the region and protests in 35 cities across India

(Nowak 2014; 2016; 2017a: 370-4; 2017b; Miyamura 2016: 1933-4; Hensman 2017: 172-3; Monaco 2017, 132-3) Much like Luxemburg argues, a strike triggered an openly political struggle due to the repressive environment it took place in – and it involved both formal and informal workers from the plant plus mass support of other workers and activists. Furthermore, the types of interventions shifted over time and consisted in picketing, sit-in strikes, demonstrations and riots. The overall thrust of the action was to assert workers' rights in a political context where there is sustained attack of the power bloc on labour.

This can also be said about the general strikes that were mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter. In total, there have been 17 demonstrative general strikes in India in the last quarter of a century, culminating in the 2016 mass protest. What is remarkable about the last general strike is that all the main union confederation came together to support it – plus a number of smaller, grassroots initiatives (Chattopadhyay/Marik 2016; Hensman 2017: 173). For example, the Manesar union also participated in the strike effort (*ibid.*), which confirms that the strike at Maruti Suzuki had developed a political thrust.

What becomes clear from looking at strikes in India is that workers attempt to find collective political forms of action in response to the offensive of the power bloc, and that there are attempts to form new organisations. Similar to the US case, these can be seen as efforts to defend and restore class agency – and in this sense, they are adequate to the conjuncture. Importantly, labour in India remains divided – due to the deep divides inherent in the organisation of the economy; the fact that there numerous union umbrellas with hugely diverging political standpoints, among them a large Hindu nationalist organisation; and the fracturing of the left, which remains divided, at the party political level, into various centre-left, socialist and communist groupings. The general strikes have served to bring workers together, albeit for a very short period of time. The principal problem with this type of mobilisation is indeed its short duration. It is fairly easy for a government to ride out a defensive general strike limited to one or two days, even if a huge number of workers join forces.

Consequently, the challenge for labour in India remains, however, how to translate the impulses to resist attacks from the power bloc into more permanent and wide-ranging alliances. The Modi government is pursuing a right-wing authoritarian project that is serious about constraining the rights not just of workers, but of various groups and individuals in Indian civil society who do not fit into the Hindu nationalist agenda. In light of this, organised labour will have to find ways of connecting with other social movements voicing fundamental dissent (see Hensman 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Luxemburg's pamphlet on *The Mass Strike* and her other writing on labour struggles are informed by an implicit theorisation of working class formation that is highly useful for analysing present-day conjunctures. As is visible in the hugely different country cases of the US and India, governments are using the global crisis to deepen neoliberalisation and attack workers' rights. In other words, channels used by working classes to influence political decision-making have been closed; in this situation, defensive political mass strikes emerge that transport worker discontent with neoliberalism and the neoliberal and authoritarian political management of the on-going crisis. In class-analytical terms, they contribute to class

formation insofar as their general thrust is to defend forms of action that amount to the exercise of class agency or fight for legal recognition.

But the question of the age remains how these mass strikes can be amplified and extended to such a degree that they pose a real challenge to the power blocs around the globe. In the conjuncture of crisis, workers, activists and other groups of people discontent with the status quo have not managed to seriously threaten the existing modes of crisis management or even the existing structures of social domination. As Luxemburg made clear, it would be a serious mistake to resort to voluntarism in this situation and simply call for all-out resistance or even a revolution. Much rather, the task is to analyse the global conjuncture, identify cracks in the prevalent government strategies and to find narratives and forms of action, in an experimental fashion, that promise to expand class agency and the agency of any subaltern forces prepared to challenge the status quo. In this context, it would be important for workers to find effective ways of using the strike weapon politically.

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Marx does not use the exact terminology ascribed to him by Bukharin. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847: 79), he says: 'Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.'

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, Bukharin (1921) introduces a qualification to this account of working class formation by stressing that despite the simplification of the class structure, inequalities between workers continue to exist – first of all due to differences in their 'brain power and ability'; second because of sectoral differences; and third because people with different class backgrounds continue to be proletarianised. These differences, however, do not obstruct working class formation. This is because a vanguard party emerges, which 'best expresses the interests of the class' and serves as the 'head' of the class 'body'. The party is not a collection of free-willed individuals, which can take the class into different political directions. It serves as a catalyst of the evolution of capitalism through ensuring that the political leaders of the working class act in line with its interests. So despite the persisting internal differentiation of the working class, the overall direction of history is still set in stone: The party is facilitating working class formation, will lead the working class into revolution and will eventually end bourgeois rule.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, terms can be used in different ways, and there may be attempts to interpret the distinction between 'class-in-itself/class-for-itself' in a non-deterministic and non-teleological manner. Nevertheless, due to invoking a progression from a first to a second stage and to being derived from Hegel, who had a

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deterministic-teleological understanding of dialectics as a progression of the spirit in historical stages, this manner of speaking lends itself to a Hegelian understanding. Consequently, I am very much in favour of using an alternative terminology.

<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, this statement, as it stands, is based on a class reductionist understandings of history. But it can easily be rephrased to say that class struggle is one several modes of struggles over social domination driving human history, which would be a much less contentious statement.

<sup>5</sup> Importantly, strikes of very privileged groups of workers can also lead to class partition, in particular if they disregard or even override the interests of other workers when they act together. Put differently, a strike can contribute to class partition if the action is not expandable beyond a core constituency of workers in a specific sector.