

# The Paris Commune and the Proletarian Revolution

By MAURICE SPECTOR

"... the Franco-German War was the bloody prelude of the great world-holocaust... The French Commune was the lightning-like prophecy of the proletarian world revolution."

—L. D. Trotsky

Out of the last of the great national struggles of a western bourgeoisie for capitalist state unification sprang the first attempt of the modern working class to conquer political power.

Regardless of Bismark's diplomatic machinations and provocations, the Franco-Prussian struggle of 1870 was for Germany a war of national self-defence. The task of national unification which the middle and working classes had failed to solve in 1848 by revolutionary democratic means, history passed on to Bismark to achieve by means of Blood and Iron. The empire of Napoleon III, Marx considered "the only possible form of government in the epoch in which the bourgeoisie has already lost the power of governing the people while the working class has not yet acquired it". The war, he predicted, "would ring the death knell of the Second Empire; it will end as it began—in a parody". The little Napoleon could only maintain his regime on the basis of the continued feudal particularism and dismemberment of Germany.

The course of the war swiftly revealed the entire rottenness of the Empire. The French armies were outgeneralled and outnumbered; the military demoralization was the measure of the general state of political decay. Sedan was the logical culmination of a series of disastrous adventures in the Crimea, in Italy and Mexico.

On September 4th, the French bourgeoisie hastened to proclaim the Third Republic and to set up a "Government of National Defence". The war now entered on its second phase, the four months siege of Paris. It now ceased to be a war of national defence for the Germans, a "war not against the French people but the French emperor", and had definitely become the instrument of aggression, the "Prussian military camarilla" whom Marx, on behalf of the International, unreservedly denounced, warning that "the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine would drive France into the arms of Prussia." Paris capitulated on January 28, 1871. The National Assembly with its reactionary monarchist majority authorized Thiers to conclude peace with Bismark by the cession of Alsace-Lorraine and the agreement to an indemnity of five billion francs.

## The War and the Misery of the Workers

As usual, the masses had borne the brunt of the suffering and calamity of war; this peace now provoked their deepest resentment as savoring of national betrayal. While the big bourgeoisie, the landlords, the speculators and manufacturers had enriched themselves, the petty bourgeois artisans, peasants and shop-keepers had been ruined and the worker suffered from widespread unemployment. The bourgeois government was aware of the ferment among the people and proceeded to re-establish "law and order" by characteristic means. It pitilessly cancelled the moratorium on rents and other debts, thereby increasing the wholesale misery of the masses; but their cup was full to overflowing, when Thiers attempted to disarm the National Guard, that is to say, the 200,000 armed proletarians. The discontent of the masses broke out into open revolt and on March 18th, the Commune was proclaimed by the Central Committee of the National Guard which constituted itself as the Provisional Government until regular elections could be organized. Thiers and his ministers unfortunately were allowed to remove themselves with impunity to the reactionary Assembly with its headquarters in Versailles.

"France," wrote Engels, "is a country in which the historical struggle of the classes, more than in any other was carried each time to a decisive conclusion..." In the veins of the Parisian masses flowed the tradition of the Commune of 1793-4, of the revolutions of July, 1830 and 1848. Paris was now the scene of the first inde-

pendent proletarian struggle for power, and Versailles the armed camp of the bourgeois coalition supported by Bismark who returned 100,000 French prisoners to help Thiers crush the Commune. The proletarians of a number of other cities (Marseilles, Lyons, etc.) also proclaimed Communes but were smashed by the bourgeoisie before they could render assistance to Paris, which remained isolated.

## The Proletariat Struggles for Power

The Commune lasted for seventy-two days, from March 18 to May 29, 1871. The Central Committee of the National Guard, according to its pledge, proceeded to the communal elections on March 26 and transferred its authority to the elected council. These democratic elections on the basis of universal suffrage have rejoiced the heart of Kautsky. But the Commune is great despite and not because of its infirmities. Its democratic forms cannot obscure its real import as an "anticipation of the dictatorship of the proletariat". In that penetrating study of the Commune called the "Civil War in France", Marx writes with unerring genius that "the Commune was essentially the government of the working class, the result of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class; it was the political form discovered at last under which labor could work out its economic emancipation."

This was borne out in his view both by the structure of the Commune and the nature of its practical program of legislation. The Commune was the direct antithesis of the Empire. It was to have been not a parliamentary but a working corporation, legislative and executive at the same time. It should not be misinterpreted as the resurrection of the mediæval communes. The communal constitution would have brought the rural producers (peasantry) under the intellectual leadership of the towns. The unity of the nation was to be organized by means of the communal structure. The standing army and the police were abolished and their place taken by the people in arms. A blow was struck at the clerical power by the separation of church and state and the expropriation of church property. The judicial functionaries lost their sham independence and were to be chosen by popular mandate. A further blow was aimed at the bureaucracy by setting the maximum pay at 6,000 francs a year and introducing the right of re-call. The schools were thrown open to popular education. Night work was abolished in the bakeries; workshops that had been closed down were seized, with the aim of transferring them to groups of cooperative workers.

## The Shortcomings of the Commune

But the Commune was not destined to carry out its program. For a successful social revolution, at least two indispensable conditions are necessary, the sufficient development of the forces of production and the preparation of the proletariat. Unfortunately, both of these necessary pre-requisites were lacking.

To take the latter first. The great misfortune of the Commune was the absence of a centralized single-willed revolutionary Communist party, such as dominated the Russian situation in 1917. The Parisian proletariat was led by the most motley crowd of petty-bourgeois socialists—who did not seem to understand the mission of the Commune and who seemed as anxious as possible to shift responsibility. "They could not understand," wrote Lisagaray, an eye witness, "that the Commune was a barricade and not an administration." As a result, the history of the leadership of the Commune is an incredible series of strategic blunders that played right into the hands of the reactionary camp of Versailles.

The major task of the Commune, if it had been guided by a revolutionary party which understood the meaning of civil war, was to crush the National Assembly at Versailles. But instead of as-

suming the offensive, the Commune waited passively while the Versailles counter-revolution mobilized and organized its forces. Thiers and the rest of the bourgeois executive and bureaucrats were allowed to slip out of Paris under the very noses of the National Guard. The agents of the National Assembly were allowed to carry on their work of sabotage and conspiracy from within the walls of Paris. The Commune suffered from the precipitate transfer of power from the hands of the Central Committee of the Guard to the Council, and then from the lingering division of authority between them. The military work was in a state of confusion. While the bourgeoisie organized its calumny of the Commune on an international scale, the Commune did almost nothing to counteract this poisonous propaganda by popularizing its own true aims. Dissension and disunion prevailed. The Committee of Public Safety that was established, lacked a realization of its true function as an extraordinary commission to protect the revolution.

## The Triumph of the Bourgeoisie

The result was that the initiative passed over into the hands of the bourgeoisie, who now had a preponderance of forces. Thiers understood very well what the Commune signified and he suffered no "democratic" and humanitarian illusions in circumventing its destruction. The Versailles entered Paris on May 21st and eight days of fighting and white terror followed. *Vae victis!* In the course of that bloody week 30,000 communards were massacred and tens of thousands of others were deported or incarcerated. Altogether the Parisian proletariat was bled white of a generation of its elite. The Commune was crushed. France was made safe for the Third Republic, that monument to the fraud of bourgeois democracy, that regime of the Panama scandals, of Millerandism, of the Dreyfus affair, of Poincaré and the alliance with the Tsar, of the press subsidized by the Tsar's minister, Iavolsky, of the murder of Jaures, of Clemenceau and the Treaty of Versailles.

The fall of the Commune spelled the end of the first international also. The French government hounded the internationalists out of France. Bitter dissension

arose among the political emigrants. The anarchist opposition of Bakunin based on the Latin countries of small industry, brought about a split. But the real reason for the decline of the International was the same as for the fall of the Commune—the fact that capitalism had not as yet exhausted its latent possibilities. Stalin had not yet been invented and in the view of Marx, the social revolution could be proclaimed, but not solved, within the limits of national boundaries. Neither on the continent nor in Great Britain was the level of economic development ripe for the finish of capitalist production. The British manufacturers dominating the world market, took advantage of the industrial revival to bribe their labor aristocracy, and the desertion of British labor was another heavy blow to the International.

## The Lessons of the Commune

The center of gravity of the international labor movement, as Marx had foreseen, now passed to Germany, which experienced its era of great industrial expansion. In the epoch of the Second International and capitalist imperialism, "there could be no more talk of a premature revolution," wrote Kautsky. It was a period of the preparation of the proletariat. But if the First International disappeared in the glory of the Paris Commune, the Second crashed on the shameful betrayal of the social democracy.

The Lessons of the Commune, its essence as a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the necessary role of the revolutionary party as organizer of victory, only became the practical politics of the working class again with the development of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. It was Lenin who brought into brilliant relief the teachings that Marx had derived from the Commune and he made them the material for epoch-making theses in the struggle against the Provisional Government and menshevism. One of the foremost of these lessons he applied was that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes". The slogan—All Power to the Soviets—is the resurrection of the Paris Commune on a gigantic scale, in the epoch of the final struggle between the world proletariat and the imperialist bourgeoisie.

## AUTO INDUSTRY MOVES SOUTH

By ROBERT L. CRUDEN

DETROIT—Like all other industries, the auto industry is quietly moving south. This has been brought to light within the past week.

The Kelsey Wheel Co., makers of Ford wheels, have reopened their Memphis, Tenn., plant and are now planning extensive development. They are putting out Ford wheels more cheaply than Ford himself. As a result, the Ford wheel plant at Hamilton, Ohio is being shut down.

Southern workers in the Detroit Kelsey plants are being offered jobs "back home" at fair wages—but they fear that after a month or two their wages will be slashed to 35-40 cents per hour. That is the prevailing rate there at present. The Federated Press was warned, however, not to take these figures too seriously. "Just wait until they get the hill people and the southerners back from Detroit and wages will go down to 20-25 cents an hour," your correspondent was informed.

Fisher Body—General Motors unit—is also building in Memphis. It is intended to develop a real manufacturing center there while Detroit will remain merely as a center of distribution for the northern region. Many Fisher plants in Detroit have been permanently closed. "Integration of manufacture" is the reason given by officials. Movement to the low wage south is the real reason.

The notorious sweat shop, Briggs, has also gone south. Reports here tell of plants opening in Memphis and other southern centers. Workers here are being offered opportunities to go "back home" and teach

the "hill billies" at 60 cents an hour. "Yeah, and how long will it last?" is the cynical question which never produces a quite satisfactory reply.

Nevertheless, thousands of southerners have left the city. Penniless and destitute they have gone away, bitter, cynical. Perhaps the auto masters may yet meet their Waterloo, not in world-famed Detroit, but in the unknown towns of the sweated south.

## SACCO-VANZETTI CASE REOPENED IN BOSTON

BOSTON—(FP)—The best people in Boston are mortally affronted by a full page advertisement in their morning papers asking, in type two inches high, Were Sacco and Vanzetti Innocent or Guilty? This question solved by Pres. Lowell of Harvard, former Gov. Fuller and other leading dignitaries of the Bay State by sending the two labor men to the electric chair in Charlestown state prison, bobs up again to reopen the famous labor case in an advertisement sponsored by Liberty magazine.

Liberty is offering \$10,000 for the "best solution" to the Sacco-Vanzetti mystery, despite the judgement of the Lowell committee. Another \$10,000 is offered for the solution of the preparedness day bomb explosion for which Tom Mooney is wasting away his life in San Quentin.

The temerity of a leading national magazine, the pet of the reactionaries, in bringing up these labor cases is another source of amazement in Boston, still sullen and resentful because the rest of the world insists on believing in the innocence of Sacco, Vanzetti and Mooney.