

The Great Marxist Teachers on the Commune

Karl Marx

Workingmen's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators, history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them. (Civil War in France, 1871.)

On the dawn of the 18th of March, Paris arose to the thunder-burst of "Vive la Commune!" What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?

"The proletarians of Paris," said the Central Committee in its manifesto of March 18, "amidst the defeats and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the country by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs. . . They have understood that it is their duty and their absolute right to become the masters of their own destinies, by seizing in their own hands state power."

But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purposes. (Karl Marx: Civil War in France.)

If you look over the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire* you will find that, in my opinion, the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it. This is the necessary premise for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic comrades in Paris are attempting. What flexibility, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians! After six months of hunger and ruin, caused rather by internal treachery than by the external enemy, they rise, beneath the Prussian bayonets, as if there had never been a war be-

V. I. Lenin

Forty years have passed since the proclamation of the Paris Commune. According to their custom, the French proletariat are honoring the memory of the revolutionary workers of March 18, 1871, by meetings and demonstrations. At the end of May they will again bring wreaths to the tombs of the Communards who were shot, the victims of the fearful "May Week," and over their graves they will once more take the oath to fight untiringly until their ideas have been completely victorious.

Why do the proletariat, not only in France but throughout the entire world, honor the workers of the Paris Commune as their fore-runners? What was the heritage of the Commune?

The Commune broke out spontaneously. No one consciously prepared it in an organized way. The unsuccessful war with Germany, privations during the siege, unemployment among the proletariat and ruin among the petty-bourgeoisie; the indignation of the masses against the upper classes and against the authorities who had displayed their complete incapacity, an indelible fermentation among the working class, which was discontented with its lot and was striving towards a different social system; the reactionary make-up of the National Assembly, which roused fears as to the fate of the republic—all this and many other things combined to drive the population of Paris to revolution on March 18, which unexpectedly placed power in the hands of the National Guard, in the hands of the working class and the petty-bourgeoisie which had joined in with it.

First Time in History
This was an event unprecedented in history. Up to that time power had customarily been in the hands of landlords and capitalists, i.e., in the hands of their trusted agents who made up the so-called Government. After the revolution of March 18, when the Thiers Government fled from Paris with its troops, its police and its officials, the people remained masters of the situation and power passed into the hands of the proletariat. But in modern society, enslaved economically by capital, the proletariat cannot dominate politically unless it breaks the chains which fetter it to capital. This is why, the movement of the Commune inevitably had to take on a Socialist coloring, i.e., to begin striving for the overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie, the power of capital, to destroy the very foundations of the present social order.

At first this movement was extremely indefinite and confused. It was joined by patriots who hoped that the Commune would renew the war with the Germans and bring it to a successful conclusion. It was supported by the small shopkeepers who were threatened with ruin unless there was a postponement of payments on debts and rent

between France and Germany and the enemy were not at the gates of Paris. History has no like example of heroism. If they are defeated, only their "good-nature" will be to blame. They should have marched at once on Versailles after first Vinoy and then the reactionary section of the Parisian National Guard had quit Paris. The right moment was missed because of conscientious scruples. They did not want to start the civil war, as if that monstrous abortion Thiers had not already begun the civil war with his attempt to disarm Paris. Second mistake: the Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune. Again for a too "honorable" scrupulousness! Be that as it may, the present uprising in Paris—even if it is crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society—is the most glorious deed of our party since the June insurrection in Paris. Compare these Parisians ready to storm Heaven with the slaves to heaven of the German-Prussian, Holy Roman Empire, with its antediluvian masquerades, reeking of the barracks, the Church, cabbage-Junkerdom and, above all, of philistinism. (Extract from Marx's letter to Kugelmann, April 12, 1871.)

That after the most tremendous war of modern times, the conquering hosts should fraternize for the common massacre of the proletariat—this unparalleled event does indicate, not as Bismarck thinks, the final repression of a new society upheaving, but the crumbling into dust of bourgeois society. The highest heroic effort of which old society is still capable is national war: and this is now proved to be a mere government humbug, intended to defer the struggle of the classes, and to be thrown aside as soon as that class struggle bursts out in civil war. Class rule is no longer able to disguise itself in a national uniform; the national governments are one as against the proletariat! (Civil War in France, 1871.)

(the Government did not want to give them such a postponement but the Commune gave it). Finally, it had, at first, the sympathy of the bourgeois republicans, who feared that the reactionary National Assembly (the "backwoodsmen," ignorant landlords) would restore the monarchy. But the chief role in this movement was of course played by the workers (especially the artisans of Paris), among whom Socialist propaganda had been energetically carried on during the last years of the Second Empire and many of whom even belonged to the First International.

For a Better Future
Only the workers remained loyal to the Commune to the end. The bourgeois republicans and the petty-bourgeoisie soon broke away from it, the former afraid of the revolutionary Socialist proletarian character of the movement, and the others dropping out when they saw that it was doomed to inevitable defeat. Only the French proletariat supported their Government fearlessly and unflinchingly, they alone fought and died for it, for the cause of the emancipation of the working class, for a better future for all toilers.

Deserted by their allies of yesterday and supported by no one, the Commune was doomed to inevitable defeat. The entire bourgeoisie of France, all the landlords, the stockbrokers, the factory owners, all the great and small robbers, all the exploiters, combined against it. This bourgeois coalition, supported by Bismarck (who released a hundred thousand French soldiers who had been taken prisoner to put down revolutionary Paris), succeeded in rousing the backward peasants and the petty bourgeoisie of the provinces against the proletariat of Paris, and in surrounding half of Paris with a ring of steel (the other half was held by the German army). In some of the larger cities in France (Marseilles, Lyons, St. Etienne, Dijon, etc.) the workers also attempted to seize power, to proclaim the Commune, and come to the help of Paris, but these attempts soon failed. Paris, which had first raised the flag of proletarian revolt, was left to its own resources and doomed to certain destruction.

Conditions Unripe
For the victory of the social revolution, at least two conditions are necessary: a high development of productive forces and the preparedness of the proletariat. But in 1871 neither of these conditions was present. French capitalism was still only slightly developed, and France was at that time mainly a country of petty-bourgeoisie (artisans, peasants, shopkeepers, etc.). On the other hand there was no workers' party, the working class, which, in the mass was unprepared and untrained, did not even clearly visualize its tasks and the methods of fulfilling them. There were no serious political organizations of

The Tradition of the Communards

By MAURICE SPECTOR

"... Look at the Paris Commune. . . That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat"—Frederick Engels.

SINCE the end of the Franco-Prussian War, the proletariat has experienced great victories and great defeats, in widely-separated fields of parliamentary activity and of civil war. But so far from reducing it, our epoch has actually enhanced the significance of the Paris Commune.

The Paris Commune was the first attempt of the modern working class to seize political power. Like the great Russian Revolution, the French Commune arose on the ruins of the military defeat and social collapse of an Empire. Louis Bonaparte pretended to rule as an arbiter of conflicting class interests, to defend the workers from the rapacious capitalists and the bourgeoisie from the "exorbitant" demands of the workers. In reality, the State was a tool of financial buccaneers and its hall marks were corruption and exploitation. When Bonaparte realized that he could no longer alleviate the social contradictions, he unleashed chauvinism. But the newly-united Germany of Bismarck broke Napoleon's neck and the Empire crashed. On September 4, 1870 the workers of Paris proclaimed the Republic.

It soon became manifest that there were two governments, a dual power. The Government of National Defense headed by Thiers was the government of the propertied classes. Its principal objective became to disarm the Parisian proletariat, who were the majority of the National Guard and who had heroically carried out the defense of the starving city against the Prussian armies.

Realizing the national treachery and class aims of the bourgeoisie, the workers resisted. On the eighteenth of March, 1871 the Central Committee of the Paris Commune proclaimed the "absolute right of the proletarians of Paris amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing the governmental power."

The proclamation of the Commune was the negation of bourgeois authority and the bourgeois state. All the Labor governments since the war have not the slightest shred of reality compared to the fact that the Commune, short-lived though it was, realized the necessity of shattering the state machine of the bourgeoisie as the prerequisite of social reconstruction. The Commune was the anticipation of the Soviet.

If the social legislation of the Commune seems to us very modest, it was due to the theoretical shortcomings of the leadership and the exigencies of the military struggle. The city was beleaguered by the Versailles troops of Thiers and his virtual allies, the Prussian Junkers. But what the Commune did was nevertheless significant. The column of Victory on the Place Vendome, the symbol of chauvinism, was demolished. Plans were worked out to take

over factories shut down by the manufacturers and have them run by the workers on a cooperative basis. The Commune decreed the separation of Church and state and nationalized church property. Foreigners were declared eligible for election to the Commune—"the flag of the Commune is the flag of the world-republic."

That the Bank of France could escape nationalization reveals the state of confusion, the lack of a scientific program, and the dire lack of a far-seeing revolutionary leadership in the Commune. The economic ideas of the Commune were provided by the Proudhonists, socialists and the small craftsmen and peasants as their social ideal, and theories of "equitable exchange" as their panacea. The result was that the resources of the bourgeoisie which was making war on the Commune, were left intact. The immaturity of the Commune was further exhibited in the half measures characterizing the conduct of armed struggle against Versailles, which was permitted to consolidate its forces and take the offensive. The proletariat paid a bitter toll for its indecision. After the victory of the possessing classes came the White Terror and thousands of workers were cold-bloodedly butchered at the "Wall of the Federal" at the Pere Lachaise Cemetery.

The study of the lessons of the Commune enabled Marx to work out in more concrete fashion his theory of the State and it is not wrong to say that the Bolsheviks' insight into the Commune decisively influenced the struggle for the Soviets in 1917. Communism and Soviet are equally the antithesis of parliamentarism.

Lenin considered it the fatal error of the French Socialists that they combined the contradictory tasks of patriotism and socialism. "Let the bourgeoisie bear the responsibility of national humiliation—it is the business of the proletariat to fight for the socialist liberation of labor from the yoke of the bourgeoisie."

The Commune was defeated both by objective and subjective factors. European capitalism was on the eve of a period of expansion. The workers of Paris lacked an understanding of capitalist economics, they lacked a Marxist program, and above all they lacked the conception of the disciplined revolutionary party, that indispensable lever of power. Let us feel too superior to those workers of 1871, let us remember our vast advantages. We live in the epoch of imperialism, of the world crisis, of all the requisite conditions for the struggle for socialism. We have witnessed the debacle of the Second International, and have had the tragic experience of the degeneration of the Third International—and our task in America still remains the supreme one of building the powerful revolutionary party of the working class!

Towards that goal we shall march forward undaunted and the memory of that gallant generation of proletarian fighters of 1871 will remain an abiding inspiration.

the proletariat, no strong trade unions and co-operative societies.

But the chief thing which the Commune lacked was the time to think out and undertake the fulfillment of its program. It hardly had time to start working, when the Versailles government, supported by the entire bourgeoisie, opened military operations against Paris. The Commune had to think first of all of defense. Right up to the very end, May 31-28, it had no time to think seriously of anything else.

In spite of such unfavorable conditions, in spite of the brevity of its existence, the Commune found time to carry out some measures which sufficiently characterize its real significance and aims. The Commune replaced the standing army, that blind weapon in the hands of the ruling classes, by the armed people. It proclaimed the separation of church from State, abolished the State support of religious bodies (i.e., State salaries for priests), gave popular education a purely secular character, and in this way struck a severe blow at the gendarmes in priestly robes. In the purely social sphere the Commune could do very little, but this little nevertheless clearly shows its character as a popular, workers' Government. Night work in bakeries was forbidden, the system of fines, this system of legalized robbery of the workers, was abolished. Finally, the famous decree was issued according to which all factories, works and workshops which had been abandoned or stopped by their owners, were to be handed over to associations of workers in order to resume production. And, as if to emphasize its character as a truly democratic proletarian Government, the Commune decreed that the salaries of all ranks in the administration and the government should not exceed the normal wages of a worker, and in no case should exceed 6,000 francs per year.

Menace to Slavery
All these measures showed with sufficient clearness that the Commune was a deadly menace to the old world, founded on slavery and exploitation. Therefore bourgeois society could not sleep peacefully so long as the Red Flag of the proletariat waved over the Paris City Hall. When at last the organized force of the Government had managed to defeat the poorly organized forces of the revolution, the Bonapartist generals who had been beaten by the Germans and who were brave only when fighting their defeated countrymen, these French *Rennenkampfs* and Meller-Sakomelskys, organized such a slaughter as Paris had never known. About 30,000 Parisians were killed by the ferocious soldiery, about 45,000 were arrested and many of these were afterwards executed, thousands were imprisoned or exiled. In all, Paris lost about 100,000 of its sons, including the best workers of all trades.

The bourgeoisie were satisfied. "Now we have finished with Socialism for a long time" said their

leader, the bloodthirsty dwarf, Thiers, after the blood-bath which he and his generals had arranged for the proletariat of Paris. But these bourgeois crows cawed in vain. Six years after the suppression of the Commune, when many of the fighters were still pining in prison or in exile, a new workers' movement rose in France. A new Socialist generation, enriched by the experience of their predecessors and no whit discouraged by their defeat, picked up the flag which had dropped from the hands of the fighters of the Commune and bore it boldly and confidently forward, with cries of: "Long live the social revolution! Long live the Commune!" And a few years after that, the new workers' party and the agitation raised by it throughout the country, compelled the ruling classes to release the imprisoned Communards, who were still in the hands of the government.

The memory of the fighters of the Commune is not only honored by the workers of France but by the proletariat of the whole world, for the Commune did not fight for any local or narrow national aim, but for the freedom of tolling humanity, of all the downtrodden and oppressed. As the foremost fighter for the social revolution, the Commune has won sympathy wherever there is a proletariat struggling and suffering.

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Frederick Engels

The renunciation of the belief in a hereditary monarchy and the programmatic adoption of a democratic republic are often deemed an extraordinarily audacious step. In reality, however, the state is nothing other than an instrument of oppression of one class by another; this applies equally to a democratic republic and to a monarchy. In the best case, the State is an evil to which the proletariat will fall heir after emerging victorious from the struggle for class domination. Just as in the case of the Paris Commune, the proletariat will inevitably be compelled to lop off immediately, in so far as that is possible, the worst aspects of this evil, until a new generation, growing up in a new and a free social system, will have sufficient strength to do away with all this rubbish of all State institutions whatsoever.

The German philistine has recently been struck with wholesome fear again at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well, then, gentlemen, do you want to know

how this dictatorship looks? Then look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Engels' Introduction to Marx's Civil War in France.)

Revolution is undoubtedly the most authoritarian thing in the world. Revolution is an act in which one section of the population imposes its will upon the other by means of rifles, bayonets and guns, all of which are exceedingly authoritarian implements. The victorious party is necessarily compelled to maintain its rule by means of that fear which its arms inspire in the reactionaries. If the Paris Commune had not employed the authority of the armed people against the bourgeoisie, would it have maintained itself more than twenty-four hours? And are we not, on the contrary, justified in reproaching the Commune for having employed this authority too little? (Frederick Engels: Ueber das Autokratietprinzip.)

Leon Trotsky

Revolution has often followed war in history.

In ordinary times the working masses toil from day to day, docilely performing their slave labor, bowing to the great force of habit. Neither overseers, nor police, neither jail-keepers nor executioners could hold the masses in subjection were it not for this habit which does faithful service to capitalism.

The war which tortures and destroys the masses is dangerous to the rulers as well—precisely because with a single blow it tears the people from their habitual condition, awakens with its thunder the most backward and dark elements, and compels them to take stock of themselves, and to look around.

War and Revolution
Impelling millions of toilers into the flames, the rulers are obliged to resort to promises and lies in place of habit. The bourgeoisie paints up its war with all those traits which are dear to the magnanimous soul of the masses: the war is for "Liberty", for "Justice", for a "Better Life"! Stirring the masses to their nethermost depths, the war invariably ends by duping them: it brings them nothing except new wounds and chains. For this reason the tense condition of the duped masses produced by the war often leads to an explosion against the rulers; war gives birth to revolution.

This happened twelve years ago during the Russo-Japanese war: it immediately aggravated the dissatisfaction of the people and led to the revolution of 1905. This happened in France 46 years ago. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 led to the uprising of the workers and the creation of the Paris Commune.

The Commune
The Parisian workers were armed by the bourgeois government and organized into a National Guard for the defense of the capital against the German troops. But the French bourgeoisie stood in greater fear of its own proletarians than of the troops of Hohenzollern. After Paris had capitulated, the Republican Government attempted to disarm the workers. But the war had already awakened in them the spirit of rebellion. They did not want to return to their benches the self-same workers they had been prior to the war. The Parisian proletarians refused to let the weapons out of their hands. A clash took place between the armed workers and the regiments of the Government. This occurred on March 18, 1871. The workers were victorious; Paris was in their hands, and on March 28, they established, in the capital, a proletarian government, known as the Commune. The latter did not long maintain itself. After a heroic resistance, on May 28, the last defenders of the Commune fell before the onslaught of bourgeois cohorts. Then ensued weeks and months of bloody reprisals upon the participants of the proletarian revolution. But, despite its brief existence, the Commune has remained the greatest event in the history of the proletarian struggle. For the first time, on the basis of the experience of the Parisian workers, the world proletariat was able to see what the proletarian revolution is, what are its aims, and what paths it must pursue.

The Achievements of the Commune
The Commune began by confirming the election of all foreigners to the workers' government. It proclaimed that: "The banner of the Commune is the banner of a World Republic."
It purged the state and the school of religion, abolished capital punishment, pulled down the Column of Vendome, (the memorial to chauvinism), transferred all duties and posts to genuine servants of the people, setting their salary at a level not exceeding a workman's wage.
It began a census of factories and mills, closed by frightened capitalists, in order to initiate production

on a social basis. This was the first step towards the socialist organization of economic life.

The Commune did not achieve its proposed measures: it was crushed. The French bourgeoisie, with the co-operation of its "national enemy" Bismarck—who immediately became its class ally—drowned in blood the uprising of its real enemy: the working class. The plans and tasks of the Commune did not find their realization. But, instead, they found their way into the hearts of the best sons of the proletariat in the entire world, they became the revolutionary covenants of our struggle.

And today, on March 18, 1917, the image of the Commune appears before us more clearly than ever before; for, after a great lapse of time, we have once again entered into the epoch of great revolutionary battles.

The World War
The world war has torn tens of millions of toilers out of habitual conditions under which they labor and vegetate. Up to now this has been the case only in Europe, tomorrow we shall see the same thing in America as well. Never before have the working masses been given such promises. Never before have such rainbows been painted for them. Never have they been so flattered as during this war. Never before have the possessing classes dared to demand so much blood from the people in the name of defending the lie which goes by the name of "Defense of the Fatherland." And never before have the toilers been so duped, betrayed, and crucified as today.

In trenches filled with blood and mud, in starving cities and villages, millions of hearts are beating with exasperation, despair and anger. And these emotions, correlated with socialist ideas, are being transformed into revolutionary fervor. Tomorrow the flames will burst into the open in mighty uprisings of workers' masses.

The proletariat of Russia has already emerged onto the great road of Revolution, and under its onset are tumbling and crumbling the foundations of the most infamous despotism the world has seen. The revolution in Russia, however, is only the precursor of proletarian uprisings in the whole of Europe and in the entire world.

Remember the Commune!—we, Socialists, will say to the insurgent workers' masses. The bourgeoisie has armed you against an external enemy. Refuse to return your weapons, like the Parisian workers refused in 1871! Heed the appeal of Karl Liebknecht and turn these weapons against your real enemy, against capitalism! Tear the State machinery from their hands! Transform it from the instrument of bourgeois oppression into an apparatus of proletarian self-rule! Today, you are infinitely more powerful than were your forefathers in the epoch of the Commune. Tumble all the parasites from their thrones! Seize the land, the mines and the factories for your own use. Fraternity—in labor; equality in enjoying the fruits of labor!

The banner of the Commune is the banner of the World Republic of Labor!
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