

storming heaven: the paris commune of 1871

two articles on the world's first working-class revolution

- reproduction of *solidarity* reply to traditional left critiques of the paris commune

- 'the paris commune', an account of the revolt from karl marx's *civil war in france*

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the
commune

the commune: paris 1871

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I. THE COMMUNE... FROM MARX TO TROTSKY.

'Each time we study the history of the Commune we see something new in it, thanks to the experiences gained, in later revolutionary struggles...' Thus wrote Trotsky in 1921, in his preface to a book by Tales[1] which was to become basic reading for a whole generation of French revolutionaries.

The 'tricks of History', as Marx delighted to call them, have amply confirmed the correctness of Trotsky's statement. We can now examine the Paris Commune in a new light – in the light precisely of the rich experience of Bolshevism and of Trotskyism. We mean, more specifically, in the light of their failure. Stated more concretely, the proletarian revolution of 1871 must now be re-evaluated in the light of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and of the positive lessons of the revolutionary struggle of the Hungarian Workers' Councils in 1956 against a bureaucratic society in which the means of production were completely 'nationalised'.

Trotsky could hardly have foreseen these developments when he wrote his prophetic words in the heroic days of 1921. This however in no way detracts from their absolute correctness.

For both Trotsky and Tales the great defect of the Commune was the absence of a revolutionary leadership. 'The Commune', Trotsky emphasised, shows us 'the incapacity of the masses to choose their own path, their indecision in the leadership of the movement, their fatal inclination to stop after the first successes...' How can this be overcome? Trotsky is quite explicit! 'It is only through the help of the Party, basing itself on the whole history of the past theoretically foreseeing the paths of development and all its stages, and extracting from them the necessary formulas for action, that the proletariat frees itself from the need constantly to restart its own history...'. He summarises his views with his usual logic: 'We can look, page by page, through the history of the Commune. We will find in it only a single lesson: there must be a strong Party leadership' (our emphasis).

The present generation of revolutionaries have lived through or studied the history of the last 40 years, and have experienced all the ills that have flown from the hypertrophy and subsequent degeneration of such a 'leadership' – even when it has proved victorious in its struggle against the bourgeoisie. They have witnessed, its gradual separation from the masses and its steady conversion into a new ruling group, as fundamentally opposed to the basic wishes of the masses themselves to administer society as any previous ruling group in history. For revolutionaries in 1961 the Paris Commune of 1871 should be seen as an historical precursor of the essentially anti-bureaucratic mass movement that swept through Hungary in 1956. The measures taken by the Communards to prevent the emergence of a bureaucracy from within their own ranks were to be taken up again by the Budapest workers in 1956. Both revolutions posed the question of who was in reality to manage both production and society in no uncertain terms.



toppling the mighty: paris workers felled the vendome column, a monument to napoleon's military adventures

It is interesting to contrast the Bolshevik appreciation of the Commune with that of the Commune's great contemporaries, Marx and Engels. In his 'Civil War in France', written as the last Communards were being slaughtered by the forces of the victorious Versailles, Marx does not once attribute the defeat to the absence of a 'strong Party leadership'. He is vastly impressed by its great positive achievements. He describes the Commune as 'essentially a working class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form, at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of Labour'. He does not say that it was the Party who discovered this particular form, a form which neither he nor any other member of the First International had either foreseen or prepared for. The masses in struggle themselves created this form of organization, just as in 1905 they were themselves to create the Soviets, at first denounced by the Bolsheviks as 'sectarian organizations'. There is no question of the Party, or anyone else for that matter, 'theoretically foreseeing the paths of development and all its stages...'. Twenty years later, in 1891, Engels was to write 'what is still more wonderful is the correctness of much that was done by the Commune, composed as it was of Blanquists and Proudhonists'. [2] In other words the everyday experience of the masses impelled them to take measures of a class character. They generated their own socialist consciousness, assisted but not dictated to by conscious revolutionaries of various kinds.

The Commune was militarily crushed, having held power for just over two months. Its defeat was an extremely bloody one. It is scarcely surprising that Trotsky, president in October 1917 of the Revolutionary War Committee in Petrograd, brilliant military strategist and creator of the Red Army should have been exasperated by the Commune's lack of military success, by its vacillations, by the 'inefficiency' of a number of its leaders and by its total lack of a clearly thought out military policy, when confronted by a cynical bourgeoisie prepared ruthlessly to destroy it and 'to restore order for a generation'.

What is less permissible however is that the same Trotsky should have lent his military authority to Tales' effort systematically to denigrate the most creative and positive aspects of the Paris Commune. But the real culprit here is not even Tales. It is Bolshevism and Trotskyism themselves. If, as they tell us, 'the crisis of society is the crisis of the revolutionary leadership', it is easy to equate the history of the Commune with the history of its leadership. From this postulate everything flows quite logically... and in particular the defeat of the Commune! Or so they would, have us believe!

History, on this basis, becomes an easy subject. The social composition and the prevailing ideologies of the Central Committee of the National Guard[3] and of the Commune itself were extremely diverse. The predominating influence was that of the radical, patriotic, anticlerical petty-bourgeoisie. The members of the First International lacked ideological clarity. The Blanquists, the most determined revolutionaries and the ones most prepared to struggle, lacked any positive social conceptions. To those facts should be added the backward structure of the Parisian proletariat of the time. Industrial concentration, which had been achieved many years previously in the textile mills of Manchester and which was to be achieved some decades later by the Russian proletariat in the great Putilov works in Petrograd, was only just beginning in Paris.[4]

But such an emphasis on the leadership of the Commune immediately leads to an insoluble contradiction. If history is an account of the achievements or shortcomings of revolutionary leaderships, how can we explain that the Commune, with its petty-bourgeois leadership was capable of introducing to the modern world the most advanced conceptions of proletarian democracy? Why did Marx refer to it as 'the glorious harbinger of a new society'? Why did Engels state that the measures taken by the Communards would, in the last resort, have led 'to the abolition of class antagonism between capitalists and workers'? Why did he taunt the Social-Democratic philistines with his famous 'Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!'

The Commune introduced the eligibility and revocability of all officials and the payment to them of working men's salaries. Those are profoundly revolutionary measures. Their application will inevitably undermine and destroy any bourgeois (or bureaucratic) state machine. Those demands introduce complete popular domination of the civil administration, of the army and of the judiciary. They lead to the creation, from below, of a completely new kind of social organization. The October Revolution, in its early days, sought to implement these demands. The developing Stalinist bureaucracy sought ruthlessly to destroy them. Nearly a century after they were first

put forward by the Communards, they still form the basis of all genuinely revolutionary struggles.

Marx stated that the Communards had 'stormed heaven'. Tales explains that the story of the Commune is the story of the failure of a radical-anarchist-petty bourgeois leadership! His 'explanation' is also peddled today by the crudest of Stalinists. This is no accident. In March 1961, during the 90th anniversary celebrations in Paris, Garaudy, Stalinist senator for the Seine department and university pen-pusher in the cause of Stalinism (completely unknown in England... and rightly so) declared 'The great lesson of the Commune is that the working class can only overcome its enemies under the leadership of a revolutionary party. It is essential to grasp this fundamental precondition of revolutionary victories at a time when some people, under the protest of a creative development of marxism-leninism are leading us back to the worst illusions of pre-marxist socialism, to petty bourgeois anarchism to proudhonism, or to Blanquist adventurism...' Sundry Trotskyists and non-Trotskyist Leninists would agree with every word of this.[5] In so doing they reveal themselves worthy successors of those Marx castigated as 'mere bawlers, who by dint of repeating year after year the same set of stereotyped declamations...have sneaked, into the reputation of revolutionists of the first water'.

How did it come about, we would ask these gentlemen (or at least those of them who refuse to accept that Russia is in any sense a socialist society) that in the 20th Century all revolutionary movements, despite their repeated victories over and expropriations of the bourgeoisie, and despite the drastic changes they have introduced in the property relations, have failed to bring about socialism, that is a fundamental change in the relations of production, in the relation of man to man in his labour and in his social life?

To answer this question one needs a very different conception of history than that of Tales or of the Bolsheviks. A serious study of the Commune, which we cannot here undertake in full, will suggest some of the answers. The real history of the Commune is the history of the masses themselves, struggling for fundamentally different conditions of existence, and not primarily the history of its leadership. Seen in this light the history of the Commune has still to be written.

II. THE COMMUNE: A CREATION OF THE PEOPLE.

The workers, artisans and ordinary people of the period did not conceive of social life, least of all of their own, in terms of universal concepts but in terms of action. Nine workers out of ten still do so today. Action is their language. It is in fact the only language of which they have complete mastery. For intellectuals words are often a substitute for action. For workers, actions are a form of speech. To add to revolutionary theory in the course of revolutionary action is the essential task of the revolutionary proletariat.[6] This was the immortal contribution to revolutionary theory of the Parisian workers in 1871 and of their successors, the Hungarian workers of 1956. Such was the language of the Commune, which socialists must now attempt to decipher.

The decisive date in the history of the Commune is March 18, 1871. Thiers sees the armed workers of Paris as his main obstacle to the conclusion of a peace treaty with Bismarck, and as a potential danger for the whole of bourgeois France. He decides to send 'loyal' battalions to remove the cannons



workers in uniform: the national guard split and soldiers joined the revolution

held by the National Guard at Montmartre, Buttes Chaumont and Belleville, cannons bought by public subscription during the siege. The operation starts successfully in the early hours of the morning. After a little firing the guns at Montmartre are captured. But time passes. The operation has been bureaucratically and inefficiently planned. The necessary gun-carriages don't arrive to remove the captured guns. The crowd begins to grow. Women, children, old people mingle with the troops. The National Guard, hastily summoned, arrives. An extraordinary confusion reigns. Some soldiers of the 88th Regiment start talking to the Guard. When General Lecomete, losing his head, orders his troops to open fire, it is already too late. The soldiers refuse to fire, turn their rifle butts up, join with the people. The language of acts has been heard. Soldiers and civilians have fraternised.

But acts have a logic of their own. The soldiers have compromised themselves. They take General Lecomete as a hostage. A little later General Thomas, 'the butcher of 1848' is spotted in the crowd. Tempers mount. Both generals are shot by their own soldiers.[7]

Thiers orders the withdrawal from the town of the standing Army. There is a precipitous retreat, in complete confusion, to Versailles. The major part of the civilian administration; government officials, senior officials in charge of food supplies, of the post; of lighting, of sewerage, of public assistance, of public health and of the thousand and one other aspects of

life in a big city, leave Paris precipitously in the course of the next few days. An enormous social vacuum is created, everything has to be created anew, from next to nothing, from below. And a war has to be fought at the same time.

We must dispose of the myth, which has gained much credence in Bolshevik circles, that alone a revolutionary Party would, have had the 'correct answers' at such a moment. 'If there had been in Paris a Party leadership' Trotsky wrote 'it would have incorporated in the retreating armies... a few hundred or a few dozen devoted workers giving them the following directives: work up the discontent of the soldiers against their officers and take advantage of the first psychologically favourable moment to break the soldiers from their officers and bring them back to Paris to unite with the people'.

Trotsky speaks here with the wisdom of hindsight and somewhat distorts the real facts. Tales himself tells us that 'March 18... started by the collective and anonymous action of the masses and ended in acts of individual initiative, isolated militants rallying the support of (local) committees of the National Guard'. On March 19 leading Blanquists such as Eudes and Duval 'proposed an immediate march on Versailles' but their proposals encountered no echo on the Central Committee'. A far sighted minority had a fairly clear idea of what was required. That the majority were not at that stage prepared to follow their advice was a regrettable fact, but was also an

objective element in the real situation. To argue that 'if there had been a revolutionary Party, this or that would have followed' is like arguing that 'if my aunt had..... she would be my uncle'.

What of the creative activity of the Commune? What were its prevailing moods and the level of consciousness of its participants? These are clearly enumerated in Engels' 1891 introduction to Marx's *Civil War in France*. We don't apologise for reproducing the relevant passage, in full. 'On March 30 the Commune abolished conscription and the standing army, and declared the sole armed force to be the National Guard, in which all citizens capable of bearing arms were to be enrolled. It remitted all payments of rent for dwelling houses from October 1870 until April, the amounts already paid to be booked as future rent payments, and stopped all sales of articles pledged in the municipal loan office. On the same day the foreigners elected to the Commune were confirmed in office; because "the flag of the Commune is the flag of the World Republic". On April 1 it was decided that the highest salary to be received by any employee of the Commune; and therefore also by its members themselves, was not to exceed 6,000 francs (4,800 marks). On the following day the Commune decreed the separation of the church from the state, and the abolition of all state payments for religious purposes as well as the transformation of all church property into national property; as a result of which, on April 8, the exclusion from the schools of all religious symbols, pictures, dogmas, prayers – in a word, "of all that belongs to the sphere of the individual's conscience" – was ordered. and gradually put into effect. On the 5th, in reply to the shooting, day after day, of captured Commune fighters by the Versailles troops, a decree was issued for imprisonment of hostages, but it was never carried into execution. On the 6th, the guillotine was brought out by the 137th battalion of the National Guard and publicly burnt, amid great popular rejoicing. On the 12th, the Commune decided that the Victory Column on the Place Vendôme, which had been cast from captured guns by Napoleon after the war of 1809, should be demolished as a symbol of chauvinism and incitement to national hatred. This was carried out on May 16. On April 16 it ordered a statistical tabulation of factories which had been closed down by the manufacturers, and the working out of plans for the operation of these factories by the workers formerly employed in them, who were to be organized in co-operative societies, and also plans for the organization of those co-operatives in one great union. On the 20th it abolished night work for bakers, and also the employment offices, which since the Second Empire had been run as a monopoly by creatures appointed by police – labour exploiters of the first rank; these offices were transferred to the mayoralities of the twenty arrondissements of Paris. On April 30 it ordered the closing of the pawnshops, on the ground that they were a private exploitation of the workers, and were in contradiction with the right of the workers to their instruments of labour and to credit. On May 5 it organised the razing of the Chapel of Atonement, which had been built in expiation of the execution of Louis XVI.

'Thus from March 18 onwards the class character of the Paris movement, which had previously been pushed into the background by the fight against the foreign invaders, emerged sharply and clearly. As almost only workers, or recognized representatives of the workers, sat in the Commune, its decisions bore a decidedly proletarian character'.

The Commune was born of the exasperation provoked by the prolonged siege of Paris and of the disgust engendered by its capitulation without a fight. Nationalist or even chauvinist feeling might have been strong in the Paris of 1871. Yet the Commune 'admitted all foreigners to the honour of dying for an immortal cause' and made a German working man, Leo Frankel, its Minister of Labour. It 'honoured the heroic sons of Poland [8] by placing them at the head of the defenders of Paris'. (Marx).

Much has been made by the advocates of the 'hegemony of the Party' of the fact that few, if any, of the social measures taken by the Commune were consciously socialist ones. To accept that they would of course deny the exclusive function of the Party, that of bringing 'socialist consciousness' to the working class. What did the Communards think of their own activities? The very first proclamation of the Central Committee of the National Guard, on March 18, said: 'The proletarians of Paris, amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation, by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs... They have understood, that it is their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power'. We would suggest that this reveals an extremely high degree of political consciousness, a degree which was to be achieved again by the Hungarian workers in 1956. One of the essential reasons of the degeneration of the Russian revolution was that the Russian masses were unable to sustain this degree of revolutionary consciousness for more than a few months. Under the mistaken idea that they could 'leave it to the Party' which they themselves had created out of their flesh and blood, they retreated, from the historical arena. The bureaucratic degeneration set in, with the Party as its nucleus.

Marx himself was aware of the importance of self conscious activity. He refers to 'the new era of history' which the Commune 'was conscious of initiating'. The great positive achievements of the Commune were no isolated or artificial gestures, but were measures reflecting the popular will and determined by it. Tales, our 'bolshevik' historian, makes fun of the love of the masses, at the time for what he calls 'symbolic acts'. To illustrate his point he quotes the destruction of the monuments. This is because he has never understood this language of acts, through which ordinary people express themselves. When it pulled down the Vendôme column, which Marx referred to as a 'colossal symbol of martial glory', the crowd was expressing in actions the very notion which completes internationalism, namely anti-militarism.

III. THE MEANING OF THE COMMUNE.

Almost every measure taken by the Commune can be explained, through an understanding of the deepest daily experiences of the masses. Such was the decree limiting to 6,000 francs a year the top salary paid to any member of the revolutionary government (incidentally, such a salary was in practice never received by anyone). Such also was the decree stipulating that workshops abandoned by the employers should be taken over by working class organizations and run by them, for the workers themselves.

These two measures were among the most characteristic taken by the Commune. Bolsheviks have argued interminably



Paris, 29 mai 1871.
Lendemain de guerre
civile. Les pentes
d'exécution se font enco-
entendre, au sein
du Luxembourg, les
l'École militaire. Allées
ruines des bâtiments
incendiés et barricades
encore dressées.

29th may 1871: 'order' is restored. many on the left claim to have all the answers for how defeat could have been avoided.

on the compensation clause. Today we realise how academic such a discussion really is. What the workers felt at the time was the importance of themselves managing production and distribution. As long as they managed what mattered indemnity to the previous owners, an indemnity whose effects would be restricted in time anyway? Ninety years later the Chinese bureaucracy was to discover all this anew... and in its own interests. Having bureaucratically ensured to itself the effective management of industry, it allowed itself the luxury of compensating – and even at times even of employing – the previous owners as salaried executives!

Marx was quite conscious of these deep-going aspects of the Commune. 'When the Paris Commune took the management of the revolution in its own hands', he wrote, 'when plain working men for the first time dared, to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their "natural superiors" and under circumstances of unexampled difficulty performed their work modestly, conscientiously and efficiently... the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag, the symbol of the Republic of Labour, floating over the Hotel de Ville.' The distance separating this evaluation of the role of the Commune and that of Trotsky who saw the "only lesson" of the Commune to be the need for "a strong Party leadership" could hardly be greater!

As for the strivings of the Commune towards an equalisation of wages, and its demands for the eligibility and revocability of all representatives, they reflect a fundamental preoccupation with the question of destroying at its very roots the hierarchical organization of society.

Since then much has been written and said about 'soviets' and about 'workers councils'. But it would seem that the real nature of these new forms of social life has been forgotten by those who stand in admiration before their bureaucratic caricatures. Discussing the Commune, Marx wrote: 'Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business. And it is well known that companies, like individuals, in matters of real business generally know how to put the right man in the right place, and, if they for once make a mistake, to redress it promptly...Nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchic investiture.'

'Hierarchic investiture'! Here is the hub of the whole problem. How is the hierarchical structure of society to be destroyed and superseded? The Commune showed in its acts how this

was to be done. At all levels, all officials and functionaries were to be elected.. And all were to be revocable by those who had elected them!

Direct election and permanent revocability are clearly not panaceas for the solution of all problems. But in themselves they carry the seed of the most profound transformation of society. An officer or a magistrate whom one elects and whom one controls at all times is already no longer fully an officer or a magistrate. This is the yardstick by which one can begin to measure the 'withering away of the state'. The real content of this withering away is precisely the progressive elimination of hierarchical investiture and of hierarchical institutions.

Engels was quite emphatic on this question. Again referring to the Commune he stated 'the working class must... safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception (our emphasis) subject to recall at any moment'.

There has been much misunderstanding about the significance of the 'communal' regime, some of it patently dishonest. Thus Trotsky, correctly criticising some of the leaders of the Commune, could give vent to his sarcasm: 'Paris; you see, is but one commune among many others. Paris does no wish to impose anything upon anyone. Paris does not struggle for a dictatorship other than "the dictatorship of example".' But he continues quite wrongly: 'The Commune was but an attempt to replace the developing proletarian revolution by a petty-bourgeois reforms communal autonomy. This idealist chatter of the type indulged in by parlour anarchists, was in reality a cover for cowardice when confronted with revolutionary action which needed to be carried out ceaselessly and to the end...' [9] Marx had seen deeper than this. He pointed out that the Commune had (already in May 1871!) been subjected to a 'multiplicity of interpretations' but that its essential features were that it was 'a working class government' and 'a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive! '.

The most significant aspect, however, of the Paris Commune is that it created social forms which in a sense define socialism itself, social forms which serve as yardsticks for proletarian revolutions passed, present and to come. These forms provide criteria for analysing the social nature of any particular regime. Nearly a century later societies can still be looked at according to the categories established by the Paris Commune. And it is most revealing how clearly things fall into proper perspective when one confronts the Russian or Chinese realities of today with the first, short, hesitant experience in 1871 of a genuinely proletarian revolution and of genuine working class power.

IV. PARIS 1871 – HUNGARY 1956.

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 is seen in a completely new light when looked at with the proletarian experience of 1871 in mind.

There are both superficial and deep analogies. The central facts of the Hungarian revolution were firstly the active participation of the masses and secondly the anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical character of the most spontaneous and deepest-going demands of the working class, demands which emerged more and more clearly as the Workers Coun-



louise michel, french libertarian and communarde, embodied the tragedy of the defeat of the commune, condemned to exile at devil's island in the caribbean

cils became the sole revolutionary force, in the later stages of the struggle.

In the first stages of both revolutions one sees the civilian crowds, women, children, old people, massively erupt onto the scene. Their total participation paralyses for a while the intervention of the enemy. In both revolutions temporary conditions exist for genuine fraternisation.

The Hungarian workers in 1956 immediately put forward demands for workers' management of the factory, for a drastic reduction in the wage differential and for the abolition of piece-rate. Like the Parisians they get right down to essentials. Managers are elected and submitted to continuous, direct control. It matters less, in this respect, that a number of the previous managers were re-elected. What is essential is the radical transformation of all existing relations between men.

On a more tragic plane, the fate of both revolutions resemble one another. In both cases it is a desperate, bitter struggle, fought out street by street, to the last drop of blood, without compromise, without submission, as only men can fight who know what they are fighting for and who have themselves determined the objectives of their struggle. Despite military defeat, which the revolutionaries in both circumstances came to see as more or less inevitable, it was a timeless ideal they fought for; an ideal to be defended unconditionally, in a fight in which inevitable death was almost welcomed as a release.

In both revolutions the threatened classes resorted to bloody repression. This was done with the calculated ferocity which

ruling classes only resort to when their most fundamental prerogative is threatened, namely their right to rule. The iron fist then emerges from the velvet glove. Class society reveal itself in its true colours – as the perpetual, systematised, organization of violence by the minority against the immense majority. That Thiers was 'more liberal' than Napoleon III is about as relevant in this respect as the fact that Khrushchev was 'more liberal' than Stalin.

During both civil wars moreover, bystanders stood cynically on the side lines (Bismarck and Eisenhower) protesting at the use of so much violence, and forgetting that this class violence was but an image of their own.

The tragic defeat of the Hungarian revolution, like the tragic defeat of the Commune, both call for reflection. Their lessons are innumerable. The need for an efficient coordination and for an organization capable of encurring it should be obvious to all. But what kind of organization? How is it to be evolved? What are its relationships to the masses? This is the whole question. When we speak of organisation we mean an organization evolved through struggle by the communes, by the soviets, by the workers councils themselves.

In his preface to the book by Tales, mentioned in the beginning of this article, Trotsky wrote 'Before the broad masses of the soldiers can acquire the experience of well choosing and selecting commanders, the revolution will be beaten by the enemy, who is guided in the choice of his commanders by the experience of centuries. The methods of amorphous democracy (simple eligibility) must be supplemented and to a certain degree replaced by measures of selection from above. The revolution must create an organ composed of experienced, reliable organisers in which one[10] can have absolute confidence, and give it full powers to choose, designate and educate the command.'

In this last quotation from Trotsky two little words epitomise, in a way, the whole subsequent degeneration of the great proletarian revolution of 1917: the words 'from above'. No one denies the need for selection, particularly in so crucial a field as the field of armed struggle, to which the whole fate of the revolution is tied. Obviously the command must be selected. Training, aptitudes, experience vary enormously. The proletarian heritage is heterogenous in the extreme. But it is a question of selection from below.

Selection from above has a remarkable tendency to transform itself from the exception to the rule. It is carried over, by its own momentum, from wartime into peace time. It spreads from the regiment into the factory. From the barracks it invades the factories involved in war work and the workers councils themselves. From the military 'High Command' it takes a brisk step into the 'High Command' of the Party. It becomes systematised. It becomes the 'hierarchic investiture' of which Marx spoke and which is one of the essential features of all class society. And as the principle proceeds on its way the masses soon retreat from the historical arena, leaving it to others who 'are more efficient', who 'know better' to act' on their behalf. The degeneration has begun. The seeds of the Stalinist regime are sown: the cooption of bureaucracy by the bureaucracy itself. Engels was almost prophetic in his foresight when he insisted that 'all officials, without exception, must be subject to recall at any moment'.

A new generation of young revolutionaries must now seriously turn to the lessons of the Paris Commune and to the

lessons of its great contemporary analogue, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Scattered, misinterpreted, deliberately misused for ends that are not the ends of the Revolution, the basic documents of both are to be found[11] by those wishing to find them. They should be studied. Both revolutions are of fundamental importance to the socialist movement, and to an understanding of the class struggle in our epoch.

Footnotes:

[1]'La Commune de 1871' by C. Tales, Librairie du Travail, Paris 1924

[2]Introduction to K. Marx's Civil War in France. Marx-Engels Selected Works, vol. I, p. 481 (Moscow, 1958)

[3]A soldiers' council of elected and revocable representatives which took over the defence of Paris, first against the armies of Bismarck, then against those of Thiers, the most class conscious leader the French bourgeoisie has produced for generations.

[4]See P. Jellinek, The Paris Commune of 1871 (Gollancz, 1937). 'In 1866, at the apogee of Parisian expansion in this period, the total population was 1,825,274. There were 570,280 workshops (as against 64,816 in 1847 and 101,171 in 1860), owned by 65,987 masters, employing only 442,310 workers (besides 34,846 clerks and 23,251 servants). This meant that the average number of workers per shop was only 7.7 sinking from 13 in the building and metal trades to 1.4 in the food industry. By far the largest numbers were employed in the garment industries 306,567 (208,675 women); building, owing to Baron Haussmann's reconstruction of the capital, employed most men, 125,371 (63,675 women), and the various luxury industries, upon which the repute and prosperity of Paris mainly depended, employed 63,617 workers. In all, workers (468,337) and their dependants (286,670) made up about 40 per cent of the population of Paris.

[5]See, for instance, any article, in any issue of the Workers News Bulletin, any week, in the last 10 years.

[6]The idea that revolutionary theory is something static, enshrined once and for all in the writings of the four great teachers, something to be derived from the study of books, and the idea that socialist consciousness has to be brought to the proletariat 'from outside' (Lenin) by the bourgeois intelligentsia which is 'the vehicle of science' (Kautsky), are both profoundly reactionary and profoundly anti-dialectical, in the deepest sense of the form. We have touched on these subjects in issues No.4 and No.5 of AGITATOR and will develop them more fully in future issues.

[7]As Marx so clearly put it: 'the inveterate habits acquired by the soldiery, under the training of the enemies of the working class, are not of course likely to change the very moment those soldiers change sides'.

[8]Dombrowski and Wroblewski.

[9]Introduction to Tales' La Commune de 1871.

[10]Who is this anonymous and mysterious 'one'? Who is to bestow 'absolute confidence' in the revolutionary organ and the revolutionary organizers? Is it the masses? Is it the Party 'acting' in the interests of the masses? Is it the Party leaders 'acting' in the interests of the Party as a whole? Is Trotsky's ambiguity on this point entirely accidental?

[11]See Revolution from 1739 to 1906, R.W. Postgate. (Grant Richards, 1920) and Socialisme ou Barbarie vol. IV, No. 20 and No. 21

marx's civil war in france: 'the paris commune'

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

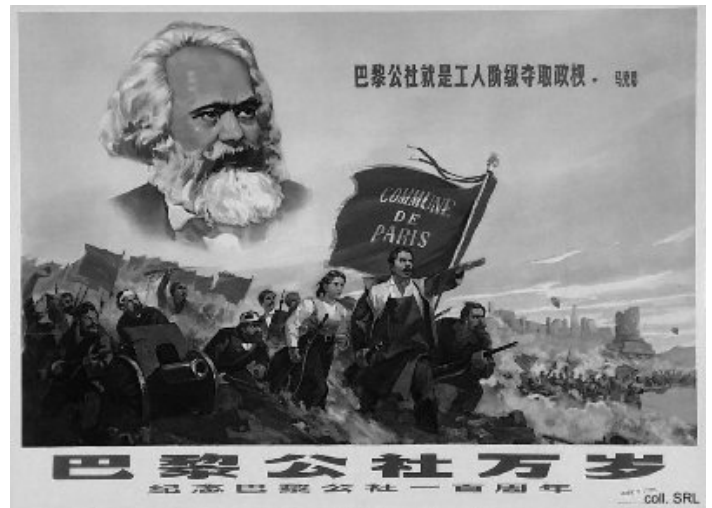
"The proletarians of Paris," said the Central Committee in its manifesto of March 18, "amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs.... They have understood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

But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.

The centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature – organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor – originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggle against feudalism. Still, its development remained clogged by all manner of medieval rubbish, seignorial rights, local privileges, municipal and guild monopolies, and provincial constitutions. The gigantic broom of the French Revolution of the 18th century swept away all these relics of bygone times, thus clearing simultaneously the social soil of its last hinderances to the superstructure of the modern state edifice raised under the First Empire, itself the offspring of the coalition wars of old semi-feudal Europe against modern France.

During the subsequent regimes, the government, placed under parliamentary control – that is, under the direct control of the propertied classes – became not only a hotbed of huge national debts and crushing taxes; with its irresistible allurements of place, pelf, and patronage, it became not only the bone of contention between the rival factions and adventurers of the ruling classes; but its political character changed simultaneously with the economic changes of society. At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labor, the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labor, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.

After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the state power stands out in bolder and bolder relief. The Revolution of 1830, resulting in the transfer of government from the landlords to the capitalists, transferred it from the more remote to the more direct antagonists of the working men. The bour-



maoist poster commemorating the paris commune: but marx's method was to learn from the workers' creativity, not to preside over their efforts in a leadership role

geois republicans, who, in the name of the February Revolution, took the state power, used it for the June [1848] massacres, in order to convince the working class that "social" republic means the republic entrusting their social subjection, and in order to convince the royalist bulk of the bourgeois and landlord class that they might safely leave the cares and emoluments of government to the bourgeois "republicans."

However, after their one heroic exploit of June, the bourgeois republicans had, from the front, to fall back to the rear of the "Party of Order" – a combination formed by all the rival factions and factions of the appropriating classes. The proper form of their joint-stock government was the parliamentary republic, with Louis Bonaparte for its president. Theirs was a regime of avowed class terrorism and deliberate insult towards the "vile multitude."

If the parliamentary republic, as M. Thiers said, "divided them [the different fractions of the ruling class] least", it opened an abyss between that class and the whole body of society outside their spare ranks. The restraints by which their own divisions had under former regimes still checked the state power, were removed by their union; and in view of the threatening upheaval of the proletariat, they now used that state power mercilessly and ostentatiously as the national war engine of capital against labor.

In their uninterrupted crusade against the producing masses, they were, however, bound not only to invest the executive with continually increased powers of repression, but at the same time to divest their own parliamentary stronghold – the National Assembly – one by one, of all its own means of defence against the Executive. The Executive, in the person of Louis Bonaparte, turned them out. The natural offspring of the "Party of Order" republic was the Second Empire.

The empire, with the coup d'état for its birth certificate, universal suffrage for its sanction, and the sword for its sceptre, professed to rest upon the peasantry, the large mass of producers not directly involved in the struggle of capital and labor. It professed to save the working class by breaking down parliamentarism, and, with it, the undisguised subserviency of government to the propertied classes. It professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class; and, finally, it professed to unite all classes by reviving for all the chimera of national glory.



'republican' statesman adolphe thiers, butcher of the paris commune

In reality, it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation. It was acclaimed throughout the world as the savior of society. Under its sway, bourgeois society, freed from political cares, attained a development unexpected even by itself. Its industry and commerce expanded to colossal dimensions; financial swindling celebrated cosmopolitan orgies; the misery of the masses was set off by a shameless display of gorgeous, meretricious and debased luxury. The state power, apparently soaring high above society and the very hotbed of all its corruptions. Its own rotteness, and the rotteness of the society it had saved, were laid bare by the bayonet of Prussia, herself eagerly bent upon transferring the supreme seat of that regime from Paris to Berlin. Imperialism is, at the same time, the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the state power which nascent middle class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labor by capital.

The direct antithesis to the empire was the Commune. The cry of "social republic," with which the February Revolution was ushered in by the Paris proletariat, did but express a vague aspiration after a republic that was not only to supercede the monarchical form of class rule, but class rule itself. The Commune was the positive form of that republic.

Paris, the central seat of the old governmental power, and, at the same time, the social stronghold of the French working class, had risen in arms against the attempt of Thiers and the

Rurals to restore and perpetuate that old governmental power bequeathed to them by the empire. Paris could resist only because, in consequence of the siege, it had got rid of the army, and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men. This fact was now to be transformed into an institution. The first decree of the Commune, therefore, was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.

Instead of continuing to be the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at *workman's wage*. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune.

Having once got rid of the standing army and the police – the physical force elements of the old government – the Commune was anxious to break the spiritual force of repression, the "parson-power", by the disestablishment and disendowment of all churches as proprietary bodies. The priests were sent back to the recesses of private life, there to feed upon the alms of the faithful in imitation of their predecessors, the apostles.

The whole of the educational institutions were opened to the people gratuitously, and at the same time cleared of all interference of church and state. Thus, not only was education made accessible to all, but science itself freed from the fetters which class prejudice and governmental force had imposed upon it.

The judicial functionaries were to be divested of that sham independence which had but served to mask their abject subservency to all succeeding governments to which, in turn, they had taken, and broken, the oaths of allegiance. Like the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible, and revocable.

The Paris Commune was, of course, to serve as a model to all the great industrial centres of France. The communal regime once established in Paris and the secondary centres, the old centralized government would in the provinces, too, have to give way to the self-government of the producers.

In a rough sketch of national organization, which the Commune had no time to develop, it states clearly that the Commune was to be the political form of even the smallest country hamlet, and that in the rural districts the standing army was to be replaced by a national militia, with an extremely short term of service. The rural communities of every district

were to administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents. The few but important functions which would still remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated, but were to be discharged by Communal and thereafter responsible agents.

The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the state power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence.

While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society. Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business. And it is well-known that companies, like individuals, in matters of real business generally know how to put the right man in the right place, and, if they for once make a mistake, to redress it promptly. On the other hand, nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchical investiture.

It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterparts of older, and even defunct, forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain likeness. Thus, this new Commune, which breaks with the modern state power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the medieval Communes, which first preceded, and afterward became the substratum of, that very state power. The Communal Constitution has been mistaken for an attempt to break up into the federation of small states, as dreamt of by Montesquieu and the Girondins, that unity of great nations which, if originally brought about by political force, has now become a powerful coefficient of social production. The antagonism of the Commune against the state power has been mistaken for an exaggerated form of the ancient struggle against over-centralization. Peculiar historical circumstances may have prevented the classical development, as in France, of the bourgeois form of government, and may have allowed, as in England, to complete the great central state organs by corrupt vestries, jobbing councillors, and ferocious poor-law guardians in the towns, and virtually hereditary magistrates in the counties.

The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society. By this one act, it would have initiated the regeneration of France.

The provincial French middle class saw in the Commune an attempt to restore the sway their order had held over the country under Louis Philippe, and which, under Louis Napoleon, was supplanted by the pretended rule of the country



otto von bismarck: the german empire's state machine was consolidated on the back of its defeat of france

over the towns. In reality, the Communal Constitution brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secured to them, in the working men, the natural trustees of their interests. The very existence of the Commune involved, as a matter of course, local municipal liberty, but no longer as a check upon the now superseded state power. It could only enter into the head of a Bismarck – who, when not engaged on his intrigues of blood and iron, always likes to resume his old trade, so befitting his mental calibre, of contributor to *Kladderadatsch* (the Berlin *Punch*) – it could only enter into such a head to ascribe to the Paris Commune aspirations after the caricature of the old French municipal organization of 1791, the Prussian municipal constitution which degrades the town governments to mere secondary wheels in the police machinery of the Prussian state. The Commune made that catchword of bourgeois revolutions – cheap government – a reality by destroying the two greatest sources of expenditure: the standing army and state functionarism. Its very existence presupposed the non-existence of monarchy, which, in Europe at least, is the normal incumbrance and indispensable cloak of class rule. It supplied the republic with the basis of really democratic institutions. But neither cheap government nor the “true republic” was its ultimate aim; they were its mere concomitants.

The multiplicity of interpretations to which the Commune has been subjected, and the multiplicity of interests which construed it in their favor, show that it was a thoroughly expansive political form, while all the previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. Its true secret was this:

It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.

Except on this last condition, the Communal Constitution would have been an impossibility and a delusion. The political rule of the producer cannot co-exist with the perpetuation of his social slavery. The Commune was therefore to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule. With labor emancipated, every man becomes a working man, and productive labor ceases to be a class attribute.

It is a strange fact. In spite of all the tall talk and all the immense literature, for the last 60 years, about emancipation of labor, no sooner do the working men anywhere take the subject into their own hands with a will, than uprises at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society with its two poles of capital and wages-slavery (the landlord now is but the sleeping partner of the capitalist), as if the capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonisms still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare. The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization!

Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor. But this is communism, "impossible" communism! Why, those members of the ruling classes who are intelligent enough to perceive the impossibility of continuing the present system – and they are many – have become the obtrusive and full-mouthed apostles of co-operative production. If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, "possible" communism?

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par decret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistably tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. In the full consciousness of their historic mission, and with the heroic resolve to act up to it, the working class can afford to smile at the coarse invective of the gentlemen's gentlemen with pen and inkhorn, and at the didactic patronage of well-wishing bourgeois-doctrinaires, pouring forth their ignorant platitudes and sectarian crotchets in the oracular tone of scientific infallibility.

When the Paris Commune took the management of the revolution in its own hands; when plain working men for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their "natural superiors," and, under circumstances of unexampled difficulty, performed it at salaries the highest of which

barely amounted to one-fifth what, according to high scientific authority[1] is the minimum required for a secretary to a certain metropolitan school-board – the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag, the symbol of the Republic of Labor, floating over the Hotel de Ville.

And yet, this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle class – shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants – the wealthy capitalist alone excepted. The Commune had saved them by a sagacious settlement of that ever recurring cause of dispute among the middle class themselves – the debtor and creditor accounts.

The same portion of the middle class, after they had assisted in putting down the working men's insurrection of June 1848, had been at once unceremoniously sacrificed to their creditors by the then Constituent Assembly. But this was not their only motive for now rallying around the working class. They felt there was but one alternative – the Commune, or the empire – under whatever name it might reappear. The empire had ruined them economically by the havoc it made of public wealth, by the wholesale financial swindling it fostered, by the props it lent to the artificially accelerated centralization of capital, and the concomitant expropriation of their own ranks. It had suppressed them politically, it had shocked them morally by its orgies, it had insulted their Voltairianism by handing over the education of their children to the *frères Ignorantins*, it had revolted their national feeling as Frenchmen by precipitating them headlong into a war which left only one equivalent for the ruins it made – the disappearance of the empire. In fact, after the exodus from Paris of the high Bonapartist and capitalist *bohème*, the true middle class Party of Order came out in the shape of the "Union Republicaine", enrolling themselves under the colors of the Commune and defending it against the wilful misconstructions of Thiers. Whether the gratitude of this great body of the middle class will stand the present severe trial, time must show.

The Commune was perfectly right in telling the peasants that "its victory was their only hope". Of all the lies hatched at Versailles and re-echoed by the glorious European penny-aliner, one of the most tremendous was that the Rurals represented the French peasantry. Think only of the love of the French peasant for the men to whom, after 1815, he had to pay the milliard indemnity. In the eyes of the French peasant, the very existence of a great landed proprietor is in itself an encroachment on his conquests of 1789. The bourgeois, in 1848, had burdened his plot of land with the additional tax of 45 cents, in the franc; but then he did so in the name of the revolution; while now he had fomented a civil war against revolution, to shift on to the peasant's shoulders the chief load of the 5 milliards of indemnity to be paid to the Prussian. The Commune, on the other hand, in one of its first proclamations, declared that the true originators of the war would be made to pay its cost. The Commune would have delivered the peasant of the blood tax – would have given him a cheap government – transformed his present blood-suckers, the notary, advocate, executor, and other judicial vampires, into salaried communal agents, elected by, and responsible to, himself. It would have freed him of the tyranny of the *garde champetre*, the gendarme, and the prefect; would have put enlightenment by the schoolmaster in the place of stultifica-

tion by the priest. And the French peasant is, above all, a man of reckoning. He would find it extremely reasonable that the pay of the priest, instead of being extorted by the tax-gatherer, should only depend upon the spontaneous action of the parishioners' religious instinct. Such were the great immediate boons which the rule of the Commune – and that rule alone – held out to the French peasantry. It is, therefore, quite superfluous here to expatiate upon the more complicated but vital problems which the Commune alone was able, and at the same time compelled, to solve in favor of the peasant – viz., the hypothecary debt, lying like an incubus upon his parcel of soil, the *prolétariat foncier* (the rural proletariat), daily growing upon it, and his expropriation from it enforced, at a more and more rapid rate, by the very development of modern agriculture and the competition of capitalist farming.

The French peasant had elected Louis Bonaparte president of the Republic; but the Party of Order created the empire. What the French peasant really wants he commenced to show in 1849 and 1850, by opposing his *maire* to the government's prefect, his school-master to the government's priest, and himself to the government's gendarme. All the laws made by the Party of Order in January and February 1850 were avowed measures of repression against the peasant. The peasant was a Bonapartist, because the Great Revolution, with all its benefits to him, was, in his eyes, personified in Napoleon. This delusion, rapidly breaking down under the Second Empire (and in its very nature hostile to the Rurals), this prejudice of the past, how could it have withstood the appeal of the Commune to the living interests and urgent wants of the peasantry?

The Rurals – this was, in fact, their chief apprehension – knew that three months' free communication of Communal Paris with the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants, and hence their anxiety to establish a police blockade around Paris, so as to stop the spread of the rinderpest [cattle pest – contagious disease].

If the Commune was thus the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national government, it was, at the same time, as a working men's government, as the bold champion of the emancipation of labor, emphatically international. Within sight of that Prussian army, that had annexed to Germany two French provinces, the Commune annexed to France the working people all over the world.

The Second Empire had been the jubilee of cosmopolitan blacklegism, the rakes of all countries rushing in at its call for a share in its orgies and in the plunder of the French people. Even at this moment, the right hand of Thiers is Gnessco, the foul Wallachian, and his left hand is Markovsky, the Russian spy. The Commune admitted all foreigners to the honor of dying for an immortal cause. Between the foreign war lost by their treason, and the civil war fomented by their conspiracy with the foreign invader, the bourgeoisie had found the time to display their patriotism by organizing police hunts upon the Germans in France. The Commune made a German working man [Leo Frankel] its Minister of Labor. Thiers, the bourgeoisie, the Second Empire, had continually deluded Poland by loud professions of sympathy, while in reality betraying her to, and doing the dirty work of, Russia.

The Commune honored the heroic sons of Poland [J. Dabrowski and W. Wróblewski] by placing them at the head of the defenders of Paris. And, to broadly mark the new era of history it was conscious of initiating, under the eyes of the conquering Prussians on one side, and the Bonapartist army, led by Bonapartist generals, on the other, the Commune pulled down that colossal symbol of martial glory, the Vendôme Column.

The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people. Such were the abolition of the nightwork of journeymen bakers; the prohibition, under penalty, of the employers' practice to reduce wages by levying upon their workpeople fines under manifold pretexts – a process in which the employer combines in his own person the parts of legislator, judge, and executor, and filches the money to boot. Another measure of this class was the surrender to associations of workmen, under reserve of compensation, of all closed workshops and factories, no matter whether the respective capitalists had absconded or preferred to strike work.

The financial measures of the Commune, remarkable for their sagacity and moderation, could only be such as were compatible with the state of a besieged town. Considering the colossal robberies committed upon the city of Paris by the great financial companies and contractors, under the protection of Haussman, the Commune would have had an incomparably better title to confiscate their property than Louis Napoleon had against the Orleans family. The Hohenzollern and the English oligarchs, who both have derived a good deal of their estates from church plunders, were, of course, greatly shocked at the Commune clearing but 8,000f out of secularization.

While the Versailles government, as soon as it had recovered some spirit and strength, used the most violent means against the Commune; while it put down the free expression of opinion all over France, even to the forbidding of meetings of delegates from the large towns; while it subjected Versailles and the rest of France to an espionage far surpassing that of the Second Empire; while it burned by its gendarme inquisitors all papers printed at Paris, and sifted all correspondence from and to Paris; while in the National Assembly the most timid attempts to put in a word for Paris were howled down in a manner unknown even to the *Chambre introuvable* of 1816; with the savage warfare of Versailles outside, and its attempts at corruption and conspiracy inside Paris – would the Commune not have shamefully betrayed its trust by affecting to keep all the decencies and appearances of liberalism as in a time of profound peace? Had the government of the Commune been akin to that of M. Thiers, there would have been no more occasion to suppress Party of Order papers at Paris that there was to suppress Communal papers at Versailles.

It was irritating indeed to the Rurals that at the very same time they declared the return to the church to be the only means of salvation for France, the infidel Commune unearthed the peculiar mysteries of the Picpus nunnery, and of the Church of St. Laurent. It was a satire upon M. Thiers that, while he showered grand crosses upon the Bonapartist generals in acknowledgment of their mastery in losing battles,



marx-lookalike worker proclaims 'vive la commune': a slogan which has reappeared throughout the last century

signing capitulations, and turning cigarettes at Wilhelmshöhe, the Commune dismissed and arrested its generals whenever they were suspected of neglecting their duties. The expulsion from, and arrest by, the Commune of one of its members [Blanchet] who had slipped in under a false name, and had undergone at Lyons six days' imprisonment for simple bankruptcy, was it not a deliberate insult hurled at the forger, Jules Favre, then still the foreign minister of France, still selling France to Bismarck, and still dictating his orders to that paragon government of Belgium? But indeed the Commune did not pretend to infallibility, the invariable attribute of all governments of the old stamp. It published its doings and sayings, it initiated the public into all its shortcomings.

In every revolution there intrude, at the side of its true agents, men of different stamp; some of them survivors of and devotees to past revolutions, without insight into the present movement, but preserving popular influence by their known honesty and courage, or by the sheer force of tradition; others mere brawlers who, by dint of repeating year after year the same set of stereotyped declarations against the government of the day, have sneaked into the reputation of revolutionists of the first water. After March 18, some such men did also turn up, and in some cases contrived to play pre-eminent parts. As far as their power went, they hampered the real action of the working class, exactly as men of that sort have hampered the full development of every previous revolution. They are an unavoidable evil: with time they are shaken off; but time was not allowed to the Commune.

Wonderful, indeed, was the change the Commune had wrought in Paris! No longer any trace of the meretricious Paris of the Second Empire! No longer was Paris the rendezvous of British landlords, Irish absentees, American ex-slaveholders and shoddy men, Russian ex-serfowners, and Wallachian boyards. No more corpses at the morgue, no nocturnal burglaries, scarcely any robberies; in fact, for the first time since the days of February 1848, the streets of Paris were safe, and that without any police of any kind.

"We," said a member of the Commune, "hear no longer of assassination, theft, and personal assault; it seems indeed as if the police had dragged along with it to Versailles all its Conservative friends."

The *cocottes* had refound the scent of their protectors – the

absconding men of family, religion, and, above all, of property. In their stead, the real women of Paris showed again at the surface – heroic, noble, and devoted, like the women of antiquity. Working, thinking fighting, bleeding Paris – almost forgetful, in its incubation of a new society, of the Cannibals at its gates – radiant in the enthusiasm of its historic initiative!

Opposed to this new world at Paris, behold the old world at Versailles – that assembly of the ghouls of all defunct regimes, Legitimists and Orleanists, eager to feed upon the carcass of the nation – with a tail of antediluvian republicans, sanctioning, by their presence in the Assembly, the slaveholders' rebellion, relying for the maintenance of their parliamentary republic upon the vanity of the senile mountebank at its head, and caricaturing 1789 by holding their ghastly meetings in the *Jeu de Paume*. [2] There it was, this Assembly, the representative of everything dead in France, propped up to the semblance of life by nothing but the swords of the generals of Louis Bonaparte. Paris all truth, Versailles all lie; and that lie vented through the mouth of Thiers.

Thiers tells a deputation of the mayors of the Seine-et-Oise – "You may rely upon my word, which I have never broken!"

He tells the Assembly itself that "it was the most freely elected and most liberal Assembly France ever possessed"; he tells his motley soldiery that it was "the admiration of the world, and the finest army France ever possessed"; he tells the provinces that the bombardment of Paris by him was a myth: "If some cannon-shots have been fired, it was not the deed of the army of Versailles, but of some insurgents trying to make believe that they are fighting, while they dare not show their faces." He again tells the provinces that "the artillery of Versailles does not bombard Paris, but only cannonades it". He tells the Archbishop of Paris that the pretended executions and reprisals (!) attributed to the Versailles troops were all moonshine. He tells Paris that he was only anxious "to free it from the hideous tyrants who oppress it," and that, in fact, the Paris of the Commune was "but a handful of criminals."

The Paris of M. Thiers was not the real Paris of the "vile multitude," but a phantom Paris, the Paris of the *francs-fileurs*, the Paris of the Boulevards, male and female – the rich, the capitalist, the gilded, the idle Paris, now thronging with its lackeys, its blacklegs, its literary *bonhome*, and its *cocottes* at Versailles, Saint-Denis, Rueil, and Saint-Germain; considering the civil war but an agreeable diversion, eyeing the battle going on through telescopes, counting the rounds of cannon, swearing by their own honor and that of their prostitutes, that the performance was far better got up than it used to be at the Porte St. Martin. The men who fell were really dead; the cries of the wounded were cries in good earnest; and, besides, the whole thing was so intensely historical.

This is the Paris of M. Thiers, as the emigration of Coblenz was the France of M. de Calonne.

Author's Notes

[1] Professor Huxley. [Note to the German addition of 1871.]

[2] The tennis court where the National Assembly of 1789 adopted its famous decisions. [Note to the German addition of 1871.]

what is the commune?

1. Our Politics

Our Platform is the political basis of our unity:

We are communists: we fight for a new self-managed society based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and an economy organised not for value production but for the well-being of humanity and in harmony with our natural environment. Communism will abolish the system of wage-labour so that our ability to work will cease to be a commodity to be sold to an employer; it will be a truly classless society; there will be no state, no managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we are opposed to all forms of oppression of nationalities.

We know that communism can only come from below, through the organisations of the workers themselves. This conception of communism has nothing in common with the fake "socialisms" of the Stalinist state planning of the former USSR, of the sweatshops of China, and social-democratic "humane" capitalism. No nation in the world today is communist, nowhere is the economy managed by the workers. These models of "socialism" have all proven to be complete failures, maintaining and in many cases aggravating the working class's lack of self-determination. There is no particular connection between socialism and nationalisation by the state, which merely replaces one set of managers with another; alongside fighting day-to-day battles we advocate a struggle for vestiges of workers' control in the here and now as preparatory steps towards real workers' self-management and collective ownership.

We are the most consistent advocates of social liberation in all its forms. We fight sexual repression, sexism and homophobia and advocate sexual liberation; we champion anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles; we oppose all limits to freedom of speech and free cultural expression. These struggles are not just some adjunct to working-class struggle but are the cornerstone of democracy and human freedom. We know that it is impossible for the working class to fight for and create a communist society if it is unable to control its own organisations: we support rank and file movements against the bureaucrats who lord it over the unions and parties of the left; we are for openness and democracy in the workers' movement.

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past. We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its abandonment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the

groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

2. Our Organisation

We are a network of communists committed to the self-emancipation of the working class, internationalism and opposition to imperialism and all forms of oppression. We reject statist and authoritarian visions of socialism and look instead to the tradition of 'socialism from below', which believes that emancipation can be achieved only through the activity, self-organisation and mobilisation of the working class and oppressed people themselves. Our goal is a communist society, which will abolish the system of wage-labour: a classless society with no state, managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

Communist revolutions cannot succeed without mass self-organisations of workers, and the leadership of organisations of revolutionary workers and the oppressed. We are a network whose aim is to contribute to the development of such a movement in this country and internationally. We agree to establish ourselves as an organising committee of individual supporters.

We shall function on the basis of consensus or if necessary majority vote: a motion is carried by a vote of more than half (50% plus one) of the people with voting rights in attendance.

3. Membership

We welcome the affiliation of any individual who accepts our platform as our basis of unity, supports our activities practically and financially, and accepts these principles of organisation. All members may speak, move motions and vote at meetings. Those who join us in these committees do so freely by an acceptance of these general principles. Others, who are not members, are free to contribute material for the paper and to participate in the discussions of the network.

4. A pluralist communist network

The Commune is a paper, a flow of pamphlets, and an organisation of activists with new ideas. Our purpose is to develop and extend these ideas, to promote their discussion and, wherever possible, to act upon them. Our aim is to create a pluralist organisation, a network of committees whose members come together to promote their ideas in an organised manner and to renew them in the practice of the class struggle. Any member or group of members has the right to form an open tendency (platform) to present their views at any time. We reject sectarian vanguardism and adhere to the principle that communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the working class as a whole.

To find out more about our events and our ideas, email us at uncaptiveminds@googlemail.com. Send postal correspondence (letters and articles; publications; donations) to The Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St John Street, London EC1V 4PY

thecommunism.co.uk