

In Defense of Marxism: The Paris Commune of 1871

The Paris Commune of 1871

By Greg Oxley

The Paris Commune of 1871 was one of the greatest and most inspiring episodes in the history of the working class. In a tremendous revolutionary movement, the working people of Paris replaced the capitalist state with their own organs of government and held political power from late March until their downfall in the last week of May. The Parisian workers strove, in extremely difficult circumstances, to put an end to exploitation and oppression, and to reorganize society on an entirely new foundation. The lessons of these events are of fundamental importance for socialists today.

Twenty years before the advent of the Commune, following the defeat of the workers uprising in June 1848, the military coup of 2nd December 1851 brought Emperor Napoleon III to power. Initially, the new Bonapartist regime seemed unshakable. The workers were defeated, their organizations outlawed. By the late 1860's, however, the exhaustion of the economic upswing, combined with the revival of the labor movement, had seriously weakened the regime. It was clear that only a new - and rapidly successful - war would allow it to survive for any length of time. In August 1870, the armies of Napoleon III marched against Prussia. The war, he claimed, would bring territorial gains, weaken France's rivals, and put an end to the crisis in finance and industry.

It often happens that war leads to revolution. This is not accidental. A war wrenches the working people out their daily routine. The actions of the state, of generals, of politicians, of the press, come under the scrutiny of the mass of the population to an infinitely higher degree than is normally the case in times of peace. This is particularly the case in the event of defeat. The attempted invasion of Germany by Napoleon III came to a rapid and inglorious end. On 2nd September, near Sedan on France's eastern border, the Emperor was captured by Bismarck's army together with 100,000

troops. In Paris, mass demonstrations poured through the streets of the capital, demanding the overthrow of the Empire and declaration of a new democratic republic.

The so-called republican opposition was terrified by this movement, but was nonetheless forced to inaugurate the republic on the 4th September. A new "Government of National Defense" was installed, in which the key figure was general Trochu. Jules Favre, also in the government and a typical representative of capitalist republicanism, proclaimed that "not one inch of territory, nor one stone of our fortresses" would be ceded to the Prussians. The German troops rapidly encircled Paris and placed the city under siege. The people initially supported the new government in the name of "unity" against the foreign enemy. But this unity would very soon break down.

In spite of its public declarations, the Government of National Defense did not believe it was possible to defend Paris. Besides the regular army, a 200,000-strong peoples militia, the National Guard, declared itself ready to defend Paris, but the armed workers within Paris were a far greater threat to class interests of the French capitalists than the foreign army at its gates. The government decided it would be best to capitulate to Bismarck as soon as possible. However, given the patriotic fervor of the Parisians and of the National Guard, it was impossible for the government to state this openly. Trochu had to gain time. He counted on the social and economic effects of the siege to dampen the resistance of the Parisian workers. In the meantime, the government opened secret negotiations with Bismarck.

As the weeks went by, hostility to the government grew. Rumors about negotiations with Bismarck were rife. On 8th October, the fall of the fort of Metz sparked off a new mass demonstration. On the 31st, several contingents of National Guards, led by the Blanquists [Followers of Louis Auguste Blanqui], attacked and temporarily occupied the Hôtel de Ville [City Hall]. At this stage, the mass of the workers was not yet ready to act against the government. The insurrection was therefore isolated. Blanqui fled into hiding and Flourens, the courageous

commander of the Belleville battalions, was imprisoned.

In Paris the famine and poverty brought on by the siege was having disastrous consequences, and the need to break the siege was felt all the more acutely. The sortie aimed at taking the village of Buzenval on 19th January ended in yet another defeat. Trochu resigned. He was replaced by Vinoy, who, in his first proclamation, wrote that Parisians should be "under no illusions" as to the possibility of defeating the Prussians. It was now clear that the government intended to capitulate. The political clubs and the Vigilance Committees called on the National Guards to arm themselves and march on the Hôtel de Ville. Other detachments went to the prisons to free Flourens. Under growing pressure from below, the middle class democrats of the Alliance Républicaine demanded a "popular government" to organize effective resistance against the Prussians. But when the National Guards arrived at the Hôtel de Ville, Chaudry, representing the government, shouted furiously at the delegates from the Alliance. This was enough to make the republicans agree to disperse immediately. Breton guards on the side of the government shot down national Guards and demonstrators who tried to oppose this betrayal. The National Guards returned fire, but were eventually forced to retreat.

This first armed clash with the government meant the collapse of the Alliance Républicaine. However, the movement against the government temporarily subsided. On the 27th January, the Government of National Defense was now able to go ahead with the capitulation it had planned since the beginning of the siege.

Rural France was in favor of peace, and the votes of the peasantry in the elections to the National Assembly in February gave a massive majority to the monarchist and conservative candidates. The Assembly nominated a hardened reactionary, Adolphe Thiers, as head of government. A clash between the Parisian urban proletariat, and the "rural" majority in the Assembly was inevitable. Open counter-revolution had raised its head, and acted as a spur to the

revolution. Prussian soldiers would soon enter the capital. The lull in the movement now gave way to a new and more powerful upsurge of protest. Armed demonstrations of the National Guard took place, massively supported by the workers and the poorer sections of the population, denounced Thiers and the monarchists as traitors and called for "a fight to the death" in defense of the republic. The events of 31st October and of 22nd January were but mild foretastes of the new movement underway. The Parisian working class as a whole was now in open revolt.

The reactionary National Assembly constantly provoked the Parisians, referring to them as cut-throats, criminals. It cancelled the already very low pay of the National Guards unless they could prove that they were "incapable of work". The siege had made many workers unemployed, and their small allowance for service in the National Guard was all that stood between them and starvation. Arrears in rents and all debts were declared to be payable within 48 hours. This threatened small businessmen with immediate bankruptcy. Paris was deprived of its status as capital city of France, which was transferred to Versailles. These measures, and many others, hit the poorest sections of society particularly hard, but also led to a radicalization of middle class Parisians, whose only real hope of salvation was now in the revolutionary overthrow of Thiers and the National Assembly.

The surrender to the Prussians and the threat of monarchist restoration led to a transformation in the National Guard. A "Central Committee of the Federation of National Guards" was elected, representing 215 battalions, equipped with 2000 canons and 450,000 firearms. New statutes were adopted, stipulating "the absolute right of the National Guards to elect their leaders and to revoke them as soon as they lose the confidence of their electors." Essentially, the Central Committee and the corresponding structures at battalion level were a forerunner of the soviets of workers and soldier's deputies, which arose in the course of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 in Russia.

The new leadership of the National Guard was to rapidly test its authority. When the Prussian army was to enter Paris, tens of thousands of armed Parisians gathered with the intention of attacking the invader. The Central Committee intervened to prevent an unequal struggle for which it was not yet prepared. The success of the Central

Committee firmly established its authority as the recognized leadership of the mass of the people. Clément Thomas, the commander nominated by the government, had no alternative but to resign. The Prussian forces occupied part of the city for two days, and then withdrew.

Thiers had promised the Rurals in the Assembly to restore the monarchy. His immediate task was had to put an end to the situation of "dual power" in Paris. The canons under the command of the National Guard - and particularly those on the heights of Montmartre overlooking the city - symbolized the threat to capitalist "law and order". At 3 o'clock in the morning, on March 18th, 20,000 regular soldiers were sent to seize these canons under the command of general Lecomte. The canons were seized without difficulty. However, the expedition had set off without thinking of the need for harnesses to haul the canons away. At 7 o'clock, still no harnesses had arrived. The troops now found themselves surrounded by a thickening crowd of workers, including women and children. National Guards now arrived on the scene. The unarmed crowd, the National Guards and Lecomte's men were pressed against one another in the dense gathering. Some of the soldiers openly fraternized with the guards. Lecomte ordered his men to fire on the crowd. Nobody fired. The soldiers and the National Guards threw up a cheer and embraced each other. Apart from a brief exchange of fire at Place Pigalle, the army collapsed without offering any resistance to the Guards. Lecomte and Clément Thomas, the former commander of the National Guard who had fired on workers back in 1848, were arrested. Angry soldiers executed them shortly afterwards.

Thiers had not foreseen the defection of the troops. Panic-stricken, he fled from Paris and ordered the army and the civil services to completely evacuate the city and the surrounding forts. Thiers wanted to save what he could of the army by taking them away from "contagion" by revolutionary Paris. The remnants of his forces, many of them openly insubordinate, chanting revolutionary songs and slogans, were marched off to Versailles.

With the old state apparatus out of the way, the National Guard took over all the strategic points in the city without meeting any significant resistance. The Central Committee had not played any role in the events of the day. And yet, on the evening of the 18th, it discovered, that in spite of itself

it was now in effect the government of a new revolutionary regime based on the armed power of the National Guard!

The first task that the Central Committee set itself was to relinquish the power that was in its hands. In their opinion, they had no "legal mandate" to govern! After much discussion, it was agreed to stay in the Hôtel de Ville for "a few days" during which municipal (communal) elections could be organized. With the cry of "Vive la Commune!", the members of the Central Committee were greatly relieved that they would not have to exercise power for any length of time! The problem immediately before them was that of Thiers and the army on its way to Versailles. Eudes and Duval proposed that the National Guard pursue them in order to shatter what remained of the forces in Thiers' hands. Their appeals fell on deaf ears. The Central Committee was composed for the most part of very moderate men, completely unprepared in temperament and in ideas for the tasks which history had placed upon them.

The Central Committee began long negotiations with the former Mayors and with various "conciliators" over the date of the elections. This absorbed its attention right up until the election finally took place on 26th March. Thiers put this valuable time to great use. A campaign of lies and vicious propaganda against Paris was conducted in the provinces, and, with the help of Bismarck, the numbers, the arms and the morale of the soldiers were strengthened in readiness for an attack against Paris.

The newly elected Commune replaced the leadership of the National Guard as the official government of revolutionary Paris. It was mainly composed of people associated with the revolutionary movement in one way or another. The majority might be described as "left republicans", steeped in idealized nostalgia for the Jacobin regime at the time of the French Revolution. Out of its 90 members, 25 were workers, and 13 were members of the Central Committee of the National Guard, and 15 or so were members of the International Workingmen's Association [Marx's 1st International]. Between them the Blanquists - energetic men always ready for dramatic and extreme measures but with only the vaguest political ideas - and the Internationalists made up about one quarter of the Commune. Blanqui himself was in a provincial prison. The few right-wing members who were elected resigned their positions on various pretexts.

Others were arrested on the discovery of their names in police files identifying them as former spies for the imperial regime.

Under the Commune, all privileges for state functionaries were abolished, rents were frozen, abandoned workshops were placed under the control of the workers, measures were taken to limit night-work, to guarantee subsistence to the poor and the sick. The Commune declared its aim as “ending the anarchic and ruinous competition between workers for the profit of the capitalists”, and the “dissemination of socialist ideals”. The National Guard was open to all able-bodied men, and organized, as we have seen, along strictly democratic lines. Standing armies “separate and apart from the people” were declared illegal. The Church was separated from the state. Religion was declared “a private matter”. Homes and public buildings were requisitioned for the homeless. Public education was opened to all, as were the theatres and places of culture and learning. Foreign workers were considered as brothers and sisters, as soldiers for the “universal republic of international labor”. Meetings took place day and night, were thousands of ordinary men and women debated how various aspects of social life should be organized in the interests of the “common good”.

The social and political character of the society that was gradually taking shape under the aegis of the National Guard and the Commune was unmistakably socialist. The lack of any historical precedent, the absence of clear, organized leadership, of a clear program, combined with the social and economic dislocation of a besieged city, necessarily meant that the workers fumbled cautiously forwards in dealing with the concrete requirements of organizing society in their own interests. A great deal has been written about the incoherence, the half-measures, the wasted time and energy and the mistaken priorities of the Parisian people during their ten weeks of power within the walls of a beleaguered city. All of this, and more, is true. The Communards made many mistakes. Marx and Engels were particularly critical of their failure to take control of the Bank of France, which continued to pay millions of francs to Thiers with which he was arming against Paris. However, fundamentally, all the most important initiatives taken by the workers pointed in the direction of complete social and economic emancipation of the wage-working population as a class. Above all, the Commune lacked time. The process in the

direction of socialism was cut short by the return of the Versailles army and the terrible bloodbath that put an end to the Commune.

The threat from Versailles was clearly underestimated by the Commune, which not only did not attempt to attack them, but did not even seriously prepare to defend itself. From the March 27th onwards, occasional exchanges of fire between the forward positions of the Versailles army and the ramparts around Paris had occurred. On April 2nd, a Communard detachment moving in the direction of Courbevoie, was attacked and pushed back. The prisoners taken by Thiers’ forces were summarily shot. The following day, under pressure from the National Guard, the Commune finally launched a three-pronged offensive against Versailles. However, in spite of the enthusiasm of the Communard battalions, lack of serious political and military preparation (clearly it was thought that, as on March 18th, the Versailles army would come over to the Commune at the sight of the National Guard) condemned this belated sortie to dismal failure.

This defeat cost not only the dead and wounded, who included Flourens and Duval, both slaughtered upon their capture by the Versailles army, but also the fainter-hearted elements within Paris. The fatalistic optimism of the first weeks gave way to a sense of the imminent danger of defeat, accentuating the divisions and rivalry at all levels of the military command.

Finally, the Versailles army entered Paris on 21st May 1871. At the Hôtel de Ville, having failed to organize any serious military strategy, now, at the decisive hour, the Commune simply ceased to exist, abdicating all responsibility to a completely ineffective “Committee of Public Safety”. The National Guards were left to fight “in their localities”, a decision which, together with the absence of any centralized command, prevented any serious concentration of Communard forces capable of holding out against the thrust of the Versailles troops. The Communards fought with tremendous courage, but were gradually pushed towards the east of the city and finally defeated on the 28th May. Thiers forces conducted a terrible slaughter of as many as 30,000 men, women and children, with perhaps another 20,000 killed in the following weeks. Firing squads were at work well into the month of June, killing anyone suspected of having cooperated in any way with the Commune. This is a graphic example of the “non-violent” attitude of the

ruling class - they will stop at nothing to preserve their power and privileges!

Marx and Engels followed the Commune closely and drew many lessons from this first attempt at the construction of a workers’ state. Their conclusions are contained in the writings published under the title “The Civil War in France”, with a particularly remarkable introduction by Engels. Before the 18th March, they had declared that, given the unfavorable circumstances, seizing power would be “a desperate folly”. Nevertheless, the events of March 18th left the workers with power thrust upon them, as it were. The working people of Paris saw themselves as fighting not only for immediate aims. They struggled, as they termed it, for a “universal social republic”, free of exploitation, of class divisions, of reactionary militarism and national antagonisms. In modern France, as in all the industrialized countries in the world, the material conditions for the realization of these great aims are incomparably more favorable now than they were in 1871. We must now establish on a firm foundation the society for which the men and women of the Commune fought and died.

Introduction to *The Civil War in France*

By Frederick Engels

Thanks to the economic and political development of France since [the French Revolution of] 1789, for 50 years the position of Paris has been such that no revolutions could break out there without assuming a proletarian character, that is to say, the proletariat, which had bought victory with its blood, would advance its own demands after victory. These demands were more or less unclear and even confused, corresponding to the state of evolution reached by the workers of Paris at the particular period, but in the last resort they all amounted to the abolition of the class antagonism between capitalist and workers. It is true that no one knew how this was to be brought about. But the demand itself, however indefinite it still was in its formulation, contained a threat to the existing order of society; the workers who put it forward were still armed; therefore the disarming of the workers was the first commandment for the bourgeois at the helm of the state. Hence, after every revolution won by the workers, a new struggle, ending with the defeat of the workers.

This happened for the first time in 1848. The liberal bourgeoisie of the parliamentary opposition held banquets for securing reform of the franchise, which was to ensure supremacy for their party. Forced more and more, in their struggle with the government, to appeal to the people, they had to allow the radical and republican strata of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie gradually to take the lead. But behind these stood the revolutionary workers, and since 1830,[1] these had acquired far more political independence than the bourgeoisie, and even the republicans, suspected. At the moment of the crisis between the government and the opposition, the workers opened battle on the streets; [King] Louis Philippe vanished, and with him the franchise reform; and in its place arose the republic, and indeed one which the victorious workers themselves designated as a "social" republic. No one, however, was clear as to what this social republic was to imply; not even the workers themselves. But they now had arms in their hands, and were a power in the state. Therefore, as soon as the bourgeois republicans in control felt something like firm ground under their feet, their first aim was to disarm the workers. This took place by driving them into the insurrection of June 1848 by direct breach of faith, by open defiance and the attempt to banish the unemployed to a distant province. The government had taken care to have an overwhelming superiority of force. After five days' heroic struggle, the workers were defeated. And then followed a blood-bath of the defenseless prisoners, the likes of which as not been seen since the days of the civil wars which ushered in the downfall of the Roman republic. It was the first time that the bourgeoisie showed to what insane cruelties of revenge it will be goaded the moment the proletariat dares to take its stand against them as a separate class, with its own interests and demands. And yet 1848 was only child's play compared with their frenzy in 1871.

Punishment followed hard at heel. If the proletariat was not yet able to rule France, the bourgeoisie could no longer do so. At least not at that period, when the greater part of it was still monarchically inclined, and it was divided into three dynastic parties [Legitimists, Orleanists and Bonapartists] and a fourth republican party. Its internal dissensions allowed the adventurer Louis Bonaparte to take possession of all the commanding points - army, police, administrative machinery - and, on December 2, 1851,[2] to explode the last stronghold of the bourgeoisie, the National Assembly. The Second Empire opened the exploitation of

France by a gang of political and financial adventurers, but at the same time also an industrial development such as had never been possible under the narrow-minded and timorous system of Louis Philippe, with its exclusive domination by only a small section of the big bourgeoisie. Louis Bonaparte took the political power from the capitalists under the pretext of protecting them, the bourgeoisie, from the workers, and on the other hand the workers from them; but in return his rule encouraged speculation and industrial activity - in a word the rise and enrichment of the whole bourgeoisie to an extent hitherto unknown. To an even greater extent, it is true, corruption and mass robbery developed, clustering around the imperial court, and drawing their heavy percentages from this enrichment.

But the Second Empire was the appeal to the French chauvinism, the demand for the restoration of the frontiers of the First Empire, which had been lost in 1814, or at least those of the First Republic.[3] A French empire within the frontiers of the old monarchy and, in fact, within the even more amputated frontiers of 1815 - such a thing was impossible for any long duration of time. Hence the necessity for brief wars and extension of frontiers. But no extension of frontiers was so dazzling to the imagination of the French chauvinists as the extension to the German left bank of the Rhine. One square mile on the Rhine was more to them than ten in the Alps or anywhere else. Given the Second Empire, the demand for the restoration to France of the left bank of the Rhine, either all at once or piecemeal, was merely a question of time. The time came with the Austro-Prussian War of 1866; cheated of the anticipated "territorial compensation" by Bismarck, and by his own over-cunning, hesitating policy, there was nothing left for Napoleon but war, which broke out in 1870 and drove him first to Sedan, and then to Wilhelmshohe [prison].

The inevitable result was the Paris Revolution of September 4, 1870. The empire collapsed like a house of cards, and the republic was again proclaimed. But the enemy was standing at the gates [of Paris]; the armies of the empire were either hopelessly beleaguered in Metz or held captive in Germany. In this emergency the people allowed the Paris Deputies to the former legislative body to constitute themselves into a "Government of National Defense". This was the more readily conceded, since, for the purpose of defense, all Parisians capable of bearing arms had enrolled in

the National Guard and were armed, so that now the workers constituted a great majority. But almost at once the antagonism between the almost completely bourgeois government and the armed proletariat broke into open conflict. On October 31, workers' battalions stormed the town hall, and captured some members of the government. Treachery, the government's direct breach of its undertakings, and the interventions of some petty-bourgeois battalions set them free again, and in order not to occasion the outbreak of civil war inside a city which was already beleaguered by a foreign power, the former government was left in office.

At last on January 28, 1871, Paris, almost starving, capitulated but with honors unprecedented in the history of war. The forts were surrendered, the outer wall disarmed, the weapons of the regiments of the line and of the Mobile Guard were handed over, and they themselves considered prisoners of war. But the National Guard kept its weapons and guns, and only entered into an armistice with the victors, who themselves did not dare enter Paris in triumph. They only dared to occupy a tiny corner of Paris, which, into the bargain, consisted partly of public parks, and even this they only occupied for a few days! And during this time they, who had maintained their encirclement of Paris for 131 days, were themselves encircled by the armed workers of Paris, who kept a sharp watch that no "Prussian" should overstep the narrow bounds of the corner ceded to the foreign conquerors. Such was the respect which the Paris workers inspired in the army before which all the armies of the empire had laid down their arms; and the Prussian Junkers, who had come to take revenge at the very center of the revolution, were compelled to stand by respectfully, and salute just precisely this armed revolution!

During the war the Paris workers had confined themselves to demanding the vigorous prosecution of the fight. But now, when peace had come after the capitulation of Paris,[4] now, Thiers, the new head of government, was compelled to realize that the supremacy of the propertied classes - large landowners and capitalists - was in constant danger so long as the workers of Paris had arms in their hands. His first action was to attempt to disarm them. On March 18, he sent troops of the line with orders to rob the National Guard of the artillery belonging to it, which had been constructed during the siege of Paris and had been paid for by public subscription. The attempt failed; Paris mobilized as one

man in defense of the guns, and war between Paris and the French government sitting at Versailles was declared. On March 26 the Paris Commune was elected and on March 28 it was proclaimed. The Central Committee of the National Guard, which up to then had carried on the government, handed in its resignation to the National Guard, after it had first decreed the abolition of the scandalous Paris "Morality Police". On March 30 the Commune abolished conscription and the standing army, and declared that the National Guard, in which all citizens capable of bearing arms were to be enrolled, was to be the sole armed force. It remitted all payments of rent for dwelling houses from October 1870 until April, the amounts already paid to be reckoned to a future rental period, and stopped all sales of articles pledged in the municipal pawnshops. 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 received by any employee of the Commune, and therefore also by its members themselves, might not exceed 6,000 francs. 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, a decree excluding from the schools all religious symbols, pictures, dogmas, prayers - in a word, "all that belongs to the sphere of the individual's conscience" - was ordered to be excluded from the schools, and this decree was gradually applied. On the 5th, day after day, in reply to the shooting of the Commune's fighters captured by the Versailles troops, a decree was issued for imprisonment of hostages, but it was never carried into effect. 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 guns captured by Napoleon after the war of 1809, should be demolished as a symbol of chauvinism and incitement to national hatred. This decree was carried out on May 16. On April 16 the Commune ordered a statistical tabulation of factories which had been closed down by the manufacturers, and the working out of plans for the carrying on of these factories by workers formerly employed in them, who were to be organized in co-operative

societies, and also plans for the organization of these co-operatives in one great union. On the 20th the Commune abolished night work for bakers, and also the workers' registration cards, which since the Second Empire had been run as a monopoly by police nominees - exploiters of the first rank; the issuing of these registration cards was transferred to the mayors of the 20 arrondissements of Paris. On April 30, the Commune ordered the closing of the pawnshops, on the ground that they were a private exploitation of labor, and were in contradiction with the right of the workers to their instruments of labor and to credit. On May 5 it ordered the demolition 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 without exception, workers, or recognized representatives of the workers, sat in the Commune, its decision bore a decidedly proletarian character. Either they decreed reforms which the republican bourgeoisie had failed to pass solely out of cowardice, but which provided a necessary basis for the free activity of the working class - such as the realization of the principle that in relation to the state, religion is a purely private matter - or they promulgated decrees which were in the direct interests of the working class and to some extent cut deeply into the old order of society. In a beleaguered city, however, it was possible at most to make a start in the realization of all these measures. And from the beginning of May onwards all their energies were taken up by the fight against the ever-growing armies assembled by the Versailles government.

On April 7, the Versailles troops had captured the Seine crossing at Neuilly, on the western front of Paris; on the other hand, in an attack on the southern front on the 11th they were repulsed with heavy losses by General Eudes. Paris was continually bombarded and, moreover, by the very people who had stigmatized as a sacrilege the bombardment of the same city by the Prussians. These same people now begged the Prussian government for the hasty return of the French soldiers taken prisoner at Sedan and Metz, in order that they might recapture Paris for them. From the beginning of May the gradual arrival of these troops gave the Versailles forces a decided ascendancy. This already became evident when, on April 23,

Thiers broke off the negotiations for the exchange, proposed by Commune, of the Archbishop of Paris [Georges Darboy] and a whole number of other priests held hostages in Paris, for only one man, Blanqui, who had twice been elected to the Commune but was a prisoner in Clairvaux. And even more in the changed language of Thiers; previously procrastinating and equivocal, he now suddenly became insolent, threatening, brutal. The Versailles forces took the redoubt of Moulin Saquet on the southern front, on May 3; on the 9th, Fort Issy, which had been completely reduced to ruins by gunfire; and on the 14th, Fort Vanves. On the western front they advanced gradually, capturing the numerous villages and buildings which extended up to the city wall, until they reached the main wall itself; on the 21st, thanks to treachery and the carelessness of the National Guards stationed there, they succeeded in forcing their way into the city. The Prussians who held the northern and eastern forts allowed the Versailles troops to advance across the land north of the city, which was forbidden ground to them under the armistice, and thus to march forward and attack on a long front, which the Parisians naturally thought covered by the armistice, and therefore held only with weak forces. As a result of this, only a weak resistance was put up in the western half of Paris, in the luxury city proper; it grew stronger and more tenacious the nearer the incoming troops approached the eastern half, the real working class city.

It was only after eight days' fighting that the last defenders of the Commune were overwhelmed on the heights of Belleville and Menilmontant; and then the massacre of defenseless men, women, and children, which had been raging all through the week on an increasing scale, reached its zenith. The breechloaders could no longer kill fast enough; the vanquished workers were shot down in hundred by mitrailleuse fire [over 30,000 citizens of Paris were massacred]. The "Wall of the Federals" [a.k.a. Wall of the Communards] at the Pere Lachaise cemetery, where the final mass murder was consummated, is still standing today, a mute but eloquent testimony to the savagery of which the ruling class is capable as soon as the working class dares to come out for its rights. Then came the mass arrests [38,000 workers arrested]; when the slaughter of them all proved to be impossible, the shooting of victims arbitrarily selected from the prisoners' ranks, and the removal of the rest to great camps where they awaited trial by courts-martial. The Prussian troops

surrounding the northern half of Paris had orders not to allow any fugitives to pass; but the officers often shut their eyes when the soldiers paid more obedience to the dictates of humanity than to those of the General Staff; particularly, honor is due to the Saxon army corps, which behaved very humanely and let through many workers who were obviously fighters for the Commune.

(London, on the 20th anniversary of the Paris Commune, March 18, 1891.)

Notes

1 - The revolution of July 1830 in France.

2 - The coup d'état, by Louis Bonaparte on December 2, 1851, which marked the beginning of the Bonapartist regime of the Second Empire.

3 - The first republic was proclaimed in 1792 and was replaced by the First Empire of Napoleon I (1804-14), which expanded the borders of France as far east as to include most of Northern Italy and stopped short of Denmark. Further, Napoleon established a series of satellite states that stretched throughout central and Eastern Europe, up through Poland. His attempt to spread his empire into Russia was met with bitter failure, by the hand of the extremely courageous and the bold resistance of the Russian land and peasantry.

4 - The preliminary peace treaty between France and Germany signed at Versailles on February 26, 1871 by Thiers and Jules Favre, on the one hand, and Bismarck, on the other. According to the terms of this treaty, France ceded Alsace and East Lorraine to Germany and paid it indemnities to the sum of 5 billion francs. The final peace treaty was signed in Frankfurt-on-Main on May 10, 1871.

Letters from Karl Marx to Dr. Kugelmann About the Paris Commune

... If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that 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, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting. What elasticity, 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 Prussian bayonets, as if there had never been a war between France and Germany and the enemy were not at the gates of Paris. History has no like example of a like greatness. 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 Paris National Guard had themselves retreated. The right moment was missed because of conscientious scruples. They did not want to start the civil war, as if that mischievous abortion Thiers had not already started 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 from a too "honorable" scrupulosity! However that may be, the present rising in Paris -- even if it be 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, storming heaven, with the slave to heaven of the German-Prussian Holy Roman Empire, with its posthumous masquerades reeking of the barracks, the Church, cabbage-junkerdom and above all, of the philistine.

A propos. In the official publication of the list of those receiving direct subsidies from Louis Bonaparte's treasury there is a note that Vogt received 40,000 francs in August 1859. I have informed Liebknecht of the fact, for further use. (London - April 12, 1871)

... How you can compare petty-bourgeois demonstrations a la 13 June, 1849, etc., with the present struggle in Paris is quite incomprehensible to me.

World history would indeed be very easy to make, if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favorable chances. It would, on the other hand, be a very mystical nature, if "accidents" played no part. These accidents themselves fall naturally into the general course of development and are compensated again by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very dependent upon such "accidents", which included the "accident" of the character of those who at first stand at the head of the movement.

The decisive, unfavorable "accident" this time is by no means to be found in the general conditions of French society, but in the presence of the Prussians in France and

their position right before Paris. Of this the Parisians were well aware. But of this, the bourgeois canaille of Versailles were also well aware. Precisely for that reason they presented the Parisians with the alternative of taking up the fight of succumbing without a struggle. In the latter case, the demoralization of the working class against the capitalist class and its state has entered upon a new phase with the struggle in Paris. Whatever the immediate results may be, a new point of departure of world-historic importance has been gained. (London - April 17, 1871)

Timeline of the Civil War in France

1870

January 10: About 100,000 people demonstrate against Bonaparte's Second Empire after the death of Victor Noir, a republican journalist killed by the Emperor's cousin, Pierre Bonaparte.

May 8: A national plebiscite votes confidence in the Empire with about 84% of votes in favor. On the eve of the plebiscite members of the Paris Federation were arrested on a charge of conspiring against Napoleon III. This pretext was further used by the government to launch a campaign of persecution of the members of the International throughout France.

July 19: After a diplomatic struggle over the Prussian attempt for the Spanish throne, Louis Bonaparte declares war on Prussia.

July 23: Marx completes what will become known as his "First Address."

July 26: The "First Address" is approved and internationally distributed by the General Council of the International Working Men's Association.

August 4-6: Crown Prince Frederick, commanding one of the three Prussian armies invading France, defeats French Marshal MacMahon at Worth and Weissenburg, pushes him out of Alsace (North Eastern France), surrounds Strasbourg, and drives on towards Nancy. The other two Prussian armies isolate Marshal Bazaine's forces in Metz.

August 16-18: French Commander Bazaine's efforts to break his soldiers through the German lines are bloodily defeated at Mars-la-Tour and Gravelotte. The Prussians

advance on Chalons.

September 1: Battle of Sedan. MacMahon and Bonaparte, attempting to relieve Bazaine at Metz and finding the road closed, enters battle and is defeated at Sedan.

September 2: Emperor Napoleon III and Marshal MacMahon capitulate at Sedan with over 83,000 soldiers.

September 4: At news of Sedan, Paris workers invade the Palais Bourbon and force the Legislative Assembly to proclaim the fall of the Empire. By evening, the Third Republic is proclaimed at the Hotel de Ville (the City Hall) in Paris. The provisional Government of National Defense (GND) is established to continue the war effort to remove Germany from France.

September 5: A series of meetings and demonstrations begin in London and other big cities, at which resolutions and petitions were passed demanding that the British Government immediately recognize the French Republic. The General Council of the First International took a direct part in the organization of this movement.

September 6: GND issues statement: blames war on Imperial government, it now wants peace, but “not an inch of our soil, not a stone of our fortresses, will we cede.” With Prussia occupying Alsace-Lorraine, the war does not stop.

September 19: Two German armies begin the long siege of Paris. Bismarck figures the “soft and decadent” French workers will quickly surrender. The GND sends a delegation to Tours, soon to be joined by Gambetta (who escapes from Paris in a balloon), to organize resistance in the provinces.

October 27: French army, led by Bazaine with 140,000-180,000 men at Metz, surrenders.

October 30: French National Guard defeated at Le Bourget.

October 31: Upon the receipt of news that the Government of National Defense had decided to start negotiations with the Prussians, Paris workers and revolutionary sections of the National Guard rise up in revolt, led by Blanqui. They seize the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) and set up their revolutionary government — the Committee of Public Safety, headed by Blanqui. On October 31, Flourens prevents any members of the Government of National Defense from

being shot, as had been demanded by one of the insurrectionists.

November 1: Under pressure from the workers the Government of National Defense promises to resign and schedule national elections to the Commune — promises it has no intention to deliver. With the workers pacified by their ‘legal’ charade, the government violently seizes the Hôtel de Ville and re-establishes its domination over the besieged city. Paris official Blanqui is arrested for treason.

1871

January 22: The Paris proletariat and the National Guards hold a revolutionary demonstration, initiated by the Blanquists. They demand the overthrow of the government and the establishment of a Commune. By order of the Government of National Defense, the Breton Mobile Guard, which was defending the Hôtel de Ville, opens fire on the demonstrators. After massacring the unarmed workers, the government begins preparations to surrender Paris to the Germans.

January 28: After four long months of workers struggle, Paris is surrendered to the Prussians. While all regular troops are disarmed, the National Guard is permitted to keep their arms — the populous of Paris remains armed and allows the occupying armies only a small section of the city.

February 8: Elections held in France, unknown to most of the nation’s population.

February 12: New National Assembly opens at Bordeaux; two-thirds of members are conservatives and wish the war to end.

February 16: The Assembly elects Adolphe Thiers chief executive.

February 26: The preliminary peace treaty between France and Germany signed at Versailles by Thiers and Jules Favre, on the one hand, and Bismarck, on the other. France surrenders Alsace and East Lorraine to Germany and paid it indemnities to the sum of 5 billion francs. German army of occupation to slowly withdraw as indemnity payments made. The final peace treaty was signed in Frankfurt-on-Main on May 10, 1871.

March 1-3: After months of struggle and suffering, Paris workers react angrily to the entry of German troops in the city, and the

ceaseless capitulation of the government. The National Guard defects and organizes a Central Committee.

March 10: The National Assembly passes a law on the deferred payment of overdue bills; under this law the payment of debts on obligations concluded between August 13 and November 12, 1870 could be deferred. Thus, the law leads to the bankruptcy of many petty bourgeoisie.

March 11: National Assembly adjourns. With trouble in Paris, it establishes its government at Versailles on March 20.

March 18: Adolphe Thiers attempts to disarm Paris and sends French troops (regular army), but, through fraternization with Paris workers, they refuse to carry out their orders. Generals Claude Martin Lecomte and Jacques Leonard Clement Thomas are killed by their own soldiers. Many troops peacefully withdraw, some remain in Paris. Thiers outraged, the Civil War begins.

March 26: A municipal council — the Paris Commune — is elected by the citizens of Paris. Commune consists of workers, among them members of the First International and followers of Proudhon and Blanqui.

March 28: The Central Committee of the National Guard, which up to then had carried on the government, resigns after it first decrees the permanent abolition of the “Morality Police”.

March 30: The Commune abolishes conscription and the standing army; the National Guard, in which all citizens capable of bearing arms were to be enrolled, was to be the sole armed force. The Commune remits all payments of rent for dwelling houses from October 1870 until April 1871. 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”.

April 1: The Commune declares that the highest salary received by any member of the Commune does not exceed 6,000 francs

April 2: In order to suppress the Paris Commune Thiers appeals to Bismarck for permission to supplement the Versailles Army with French prisoners of war, most of whom had been serving in the armies that surrendered at Sedan and Metz. In return for the 5 billion francs indemnity payment, Bismarck agrees. The French Army begins

siege of Paris. Paris is continually bombarded and, moreover, by the very people who had stigmatized as a sacrilege the bombardment of the same city by the Prussians.

The Commune decrees 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. Religion is declared a purely private matter.

April 5: Decree on hostages adopted by the Commune in an attempt to prevent Communards from being shot by the French Government. Under this decree, all persons found guilty of being in contact with the French Government were declared hostages. This was never carried out.

April 6: The guillotine was brought out by the 137th battalion of the National guard, and publicly burnt, amid great popular rejoicing.

April 7: On April 7, the French army captures the Seine crossing at Neuilly, on the western front of Paris.

Reacting to French government policy of shooting captured Communards, Commune issues an “eye-for-an-eye” policy statement, threatening retaliation. The bluff is quickly called; Paris workers execute no one.

April 8: A decree excluding from the schools all religious symbols, pictures, dogmas, prayers — in a word, “all that belongs to the sphere of the individual’s conscience” — is ordered to be excluded from the schools. The decree is gradually applied.

April 11: In an attack on southern Paris the French army is repulsed with heavy losses by General Eudes.

April 12: The Commune decides that the Victory Column on the Place Vendôme, which had been cast from guns captured by Napoleon after the war of 1809, should be demolished as a symbol of chauvinism and incitement to national hatred. This decree was carried out on May 16.

April 16: Commune announces the postponement of all debt obligations for three years and abolition of interest on them.

The Commune orders a statistical tabulation of factories which had been closed down by the manufacturers, and the working out of plans for the carrying on of these factories by workers formerly employed in them,

who were to be organized in co-operative societies, and also plans for the organization of these co-operatives in one great union.

April 20: The Commune abolishes night work for bakers, and also the workers’ registration cards, which since the Second Empire had been run as a monopoly by police nominees — exploiters of the first rank; the issuing of these registration cards was transferred to the mayors of the 20 arrondissements of Paris.

April 23: Thiers breaks off the negotiations for the exchange, proposed by Commune, of the Archbishop of Paris [Georges Darboy] and a whole number of other priests held hostages in Paris, for only one man, Blanqui, who had twice been elected to the Commune but was a prisoner in Clairvaux.

April 27: In sight of the impending municipal elections of April 30, Thiers enacted one of his great conciliation scenes. He exclaimed from the tribune of the Assembly: “There exists no conspiracy against the republic but that of Paris, which compels us to shed French blood. I repeat it again and again...”. Out of 700,000 municipal councilors, the united Legitimists, Orleanists, and Bonapartists (Party of Order) did not carry 8,000.

April 30: The Commune orders the closing of the pawnshops, on the ground that they were a private exploitation of labor, and were in contradiction with the right of the workers to their instruments of labor and to credit.

May 5: On May 5 it ordered the demolition of the Chapel of Atonement, which had been built in expiation of the execution of Louis XVI.

May 9: Fort Issy, which is completely reduced to ruins by gunfire and constant French bombardment, is captured by the French army.

May 10: The peace treaty concluded in February now signed, known as Treaty of Frankfurt. (Endorsed by National Assembly May 18.)

May 16: The Vendôme Column is pulled down. The Vendôme Column was erected between 1806 and 1810 in Paris in honor of the victories of Napoleonic France; it was made out of the bronze captured from enemy guns and was crowned by a statue of Napoleon.

May 21-28: Versailles troops enter Paris on May 21. The Prussians who held the northern

and eastern forts allowed the Versailles troops to advance across the land north of the city, which was forbidden ground to them under the armistice — Paris workers held the flank with only weak forces. As a result of this, only a weak resistance was put up in the western half of Paris, in the luxury city; while it grew stronger and more tenacious the nearer the Versailles troops approached the eastern half, the working class city.

The French army spent eight days massacring workers, shooting civilians on sight. The operation was led by Marshal MacMahon, who would later become president of France. Tens of thousands of Communards and workers were summarily executed (as many as 30,000); 38,000 others imprisoned and 7,000 are forcibly deported.

*Produced by Wellred Books and the
Workers International League*
www.socialistappeal.org