

Lessons of the 1977 New York rebellion

written by Sam Marcy
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Protest in the South Bronx after the 1977 rebellion. New York officials told residents they had to 'prove' they had not participated in the uprising before they could be hired for clean up.

On the evening of July 13, 2019, parts of Manhattan's Midtown and Upper West Side were plunged into darkness for several hours [by an electricity outage](#). The outage, whose cause is still being investigated, disrupted subway service throughout the city and shut down much of the Times Square tourist district on a busy Saturday night.

Corporate media drew comparisons to the much more serious power outage that happened exactly 42 years earlier, on July 13-14, 1977. That shutdown affected nearly all of New York City and sparked a rebellion by oppressed workers that has been slandered and demonized ever since. There is every reason to believe that a prolonged power outage could lead to a similar outbreak in today's conditions of growing poverty and austerity, homelessness and gentrification, and racist terror by police agencies like the New York Police Department and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The following article drawing the lessons of that rebellion, written by Marxist leader Sam Marcy, originally appeared in the July 22, 1977, edition of Workers World.

By Sam Marcy

The electricity blackout should not be permitted to obscure or diminish the very real importance and profound lesson of the mass rebellion which took place in New York. It should be kept in mind that it took place in widely separated areas of oppressed communities — Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East Harlem, the South Bronx, etc.

By no stretch of the imagination could it in any way be implied that there was coordination, planning or premeditation involved in the huge popular participation by the masses.

The police, the city officialdom, the bourgeois media and press would have been delighted to find some “small group of terrorists,” “arsonists” or “left adventurers” who “misled” the people. However, there simply was not the shadow of a possibility or time to concoct such convenient evidence in the present situation.

Wholly spontaneous uprising of oppressed

The uprising, and that is its right name, was of a wholly spontaneous, elemental and instinctive character. It was precisely this which invested the rebellion with a special significance. It is also what has caused the entire bourgeois establishment to become fanatically enraged and terrified.

Had the rebellion been initiated by a handful of people or had it been under the direction of some small grouping, it would surely have amounted to no more than scattered, sporadic activity and would have been doomed to sterility or died aborning. Under such circumstances it would have been justifiably condemned by the broad mass of the oppressed people.

As it developed, however, the mass character of the rebellion, and particularly its spontaneity, came out as plain as daylight and as clear as crystal. It was a popular rising — a collective coming out of the people.

The blackout merely masked the deep significance of this extraordinary event. The bourgeoisie speaks of it as an evil that happened as a result of the darkness. It was done, they say, and repeat ad nauseum, “in the dead of night.” Were it not for that, they continue, “it would not have happened.” So say all the learned bourgeois commentators with a unanimity worthy of their class interests.

But the fable that the darkness was the cause of it is a huge, unmitigated lie. It was not at all the darkness that occasioned the rising. The masses all over the world have lived in darkness over many, many centuries, and darkness has never been the

cause of the hundreds and thousands of rebellions in the long struggle against the possessing classes by the oppressed masses. There was no rebellion during the blackout of 1965, when a false war prosperity meant less unemployment.

It was not the absence of light that occasioned the rising. It was the absence of the repressive state forces during the critical period of midnight to 4 a.m., when the rebellion took on full momentum and when the largest amount of participants gathered and controlled the streets. The failure of the combined forces of the state and the city to mobilize the repressive forces in time is what made the rebellion possible.

What a great lesson in the relationship between the oppressive capitalist state and the oppressed masses! Between 12 midnight and 4 a.m. more than one-third of the police force in this city did not show up at all, according to the New York Times of July 15, notwithstanding frantic calls from police headquarters and the officialdom of the city, including the mayor.

Authorities feared broadening rebellion

The failure to show up was not due to vacation time, illness or assignment to different areas for duty. Those who were mobilized moved slowly by order of the city and state authorities. This order was by no means actuated by humanitarian sentiments for the rebellious masses. It was motivated by fear of the rebellion being converted into a general conflagration.

The heavy state apparatus and all its city subsidiaries were in constant turmoil. Happily, the city and state capitalist officialdom were temporarily divided by acute contradictory, immediate, conflicting clique interests. The internal wrangling between the mayor, facing an election in a few months, and a governor mindful of his larger interests on the statewide arena made them cautious in answering calls to mobilize the National Guard. The vulnerability of the Guard was clear from the

outset, as it is almost 90 percent white and from suburban areas.

Valuable time lost because of acute contradictions at the summits of the ruling capitalist establishment in the city and the state encouraged the masses to broaden the assault into the wee hours of the morning. Only when the state and city officialdom had arrived at an agreeable formula for assault on the masses did the repressive forces make their presence felt in the communities. Only then did the rebellion begin to subside.

What does this show?

That it is only by virtue of the unrestrained use of force and violence and terror that the masses in the oppressed communities are held in subjection.

This is the central element in understanding the uprising. The deeper causes, the hunger, unemployment and general poverty, are too well known to be dwelt upon here. But the uprising cannot be explained without reference to the absence, at a specific juncture in time, of the terrorist apparatus of the bourgeoisie.

All the previous rebellions, beginning with Watts, Detroit, New York and Newark, were all provoked, according to the police mind, by some “isolated incident with no racial overtones,” the usual description of a police provocation. Here, for the first time, no such development took place. It was a clear-cut massive assault against the whole oppressive system.

Small shops were only available target

The fact that small shopkeepers, the pawnbrokers and jewelers, the mini-markets and retail shops, the mainly white “settlers” in the Black and Latin ghettos, were the immediate object of the wrath of the masses is in the long view of history incidental. It was merely because these were in the immediate vicinity, were the only means for alleviating the hunger of the masses, providing small objects for human consumption

and the necessities of life that the attack was directed against them. The masses could find no other outlet for their pent-up anger and frustration.

When a historic opportunity presents itself, the masses instinctively follow that line of struggle which at the moment is of least resistance. It's a way of feeling out the situation, at first cautiously. Then, as it appears safer, the momentum accelerates. The mass grows in larger and larger numbers, gains strength and confidence by the sheer weight of numbers. Moving cautiously at first, incurring the least casualties, enabled the momentum to grow at an accelerated pace.

All movements of the oppressed, as distinguished from individual groupings, begin slowly by following that which is easiest, safest, that will incur the least casualties. Of course, the monopolist press and media are crying "anarchy," "destruction of property." That's not really true. It was not the destruction of property which motivated the masses. It was mass expropriation of property that urged the masses on. That is a qualitatively different matter.

Individual appropriation of objects of consumption by starving, hungry masses is understandable. But proletarian revolutionaries do not, as a rule, encourage or promote it. This is not at all in obedience to bourgeois legality or, even worse, bourgeois morality.

Individual appropriation must be distinguished from mass expropriation. The latter is in the nature of a class action, a movement of the class, in this case as representative of the oppressed nation or at least a viable part of it.

All who are progressive, all who are in real sympathy with the struggle for liberation, for an end to national oppression and class exploitation, must side with the class in this situation.

Which side are you on?

By the time this is written, all the bourgeois politicians will be saying that the anger and frustration of the masses because of unemployment and poverty is “entirely understandable.” But then they inevitably will add, “Lawlessness must not be condoned.” “That is not the way.” “It is a wrong tactic.” In one form or another, from extreme right to left, while the argument may vary in form, in essence they are all condemnatory of the rebellion.

What matters in a rebellion of the class or oppressed nation is not which argument is presented, however persuasive it may sound. The question really is: Which side are you on? Which class are you defending?

Those who, either because of ignorance or fraud or hypocrisy or downright fear, stand on the position of “not condoning” the tactics in the rebellion in reality stand on the exploiters’ side of the class barricades. All who are progressive, all who are class-conscious and truly devoted to the liberation struggle must stand on the other side.

There can never be a genuine, successful revolutionary upheaval of the masses without there being one of those elusive historic opportunities, without there being that rare combination of circumstances which is almost universally unforeseen, but which inevitably comes about in the course of historical development and which so frequently goes unrecognized even by authentic leaders. The opportunity then slips by and it takes time and not mere effort alone for it to occur again. Thus, the opportunity came on the evening of the 13th day of July. The opportunity was there because the guardians of bourgeois property could not make their presence felt in time. This alone puts in bold relief that which really holds down the masses.

It is true that a labyrinthine complex of social and political institutions of the bourgeoisie enslaves the masses and holds them in a vice. But in the final analysis, it is the gargantuan, swollen repressive apparatus of the state which keeps the masses at bay. This is the truly significant lesson that emerges from the extraordinary

development of the July 13 rebellion.

Of course, it was also an opportunity for leadership in a broader, less restricted orientation.

The rebellion came at a specific time. It must be viewed as a particular stage in the political evolution of the struggle. It must not be viewed from the standpoint of bourgeois legality or morality, which the ruling class does not abide by in any case.

But (it will be asked) was there no better way to go about the struggle? Here one must distinguish between what is possible and that which is inevitable. What inevitably happens as a result of the mass action of the class, of the oppressed nation, must be defended against the onslaught of the class enemies and the appropriate lessons must be learned. Failure to defend the class under attack because it could not follow conventional norms of revolutionary conduct under the circumstances is a renunciation of allegiance and loyalty in the struggle against national oppression and class exploitation.

The unrestrained orgy of racist vilification and denunciation of the rebellion which has saturated the mass media can best be understood by the fact that the rebellion infringed upon the holy of holies of bourgeois rule of conduct for the masses.

The rebellion was a massive invasion of bourgeois property rights. Marx brilliantly explained that a hundred years ago. He said the church hierarchy would be willing to forgive the masses for their violation of 38 out of the 39 articles of the ecclesiastical canons of conduct. But should the masses infringe upon 1/64th of the church's vast property, then it's a holy war for the suppression of the masses to the end.

Imperialism relies on control over white workers

The rebellion of the oppressed took place in the citadel of imperialism, the source of

strength of world imperialism. But this strength, this power of finance capital which seemingly is omnipotent over so many large areas of the world, is relative and in many respects superficial. Wherein lies its omnipotence? Wherein lies its real source of strength? It is not in the technological and scientific prowess of its military-industrial complex, although that, of course, is of formidable proportions. It does not lie wholly in the vast and intricate terrorist and repressive apparatus which at times seems omnipresent.

Its source of strength doesn't lie in the cruise missile or the neutron bomb or the MX missile. The true measure of its power lies in the social stranglehold it has over the white workers, which is vast, powerful, significant and numerous. It is this social stranglehold which enables monopoly capitalism to maintain such a vast portion of the globe in bondage. It is this stranglehold which must be broken.

The privileged position of the white workers, built over a century of capitalist expansion and monopolist domination, is rapidly coming to an end. The epoch of sharp decline in the fortunes of U.S. finance capital is not merely leveling the privileges of the white workers; it is ravaging, pillaging, and plundering its standard of living, and bringing about an inevitable insurgency.

It is this capitalist crisis that is creating objectively and stimulating subjectively a firmer, more genuine basis of class solidarity between Black and white, between the white workers and all the oppressed nationalities. At the same time, Black and Latin workers are bringing heightened militancy to all the most important industries.

Only this class solidarity, which differs like heaven from earth from the solidarity of the imperialist pirates, their allies and puppets, holds out the true promise of emancipation for all humanity from the ravages of moribund monopoly capital.

