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The Communist Manifesto: A clarion call full of ideas

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Illustration by German artist Herbert Sandberg for 1967 edition of The Communist Manifesto.

The Communist Manifesto was first published on Feb. 21, 1848. This appreciation was written on its 135th anniversary in 1983 by Sam Marcy, a leading Marxist thinker and fighter of the second half of the twentieth century.

Of all the great classics in the treasury of Marxism, [The Communist Manifesto](#) unquestionably stands out as the most popular and widely read throughout the world. Bourgeois ideologists, even the most virulent opponents of Marxism, never fail to be astonished by the persistent attraction the Manifesto has for each new generation of revolutionary militants.

The Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in 1848, is a creative revolutionary synthesis of propaganda and agitation, as these terms were originally defined by George Plekhanov when he was still a revolutionary Marxist.

“Propaganda” was then understood as the presentation of many complex ideas to a small group of people, while “agitation” was conceived as the presentation of a few ideas or a single idea to a large audience. Of course, there’s no wall between the two.

The Manifesto illuminates a great number of complex ideas.

It presents the materialist conception of history in clear, brilliant language. It traces the history of the class struggle from its earliest days to 1848. It analyzes the rise of the bourgeoisie, explains its revolutionary role — and not only analyzes the intermediate classes in bourgeois society, but also mercilessly exposes the nature of capitalist exploitation and oppression as it had never been done before.

The Manifesto’s diagnosis of capitalist society is at the same time a prognosis of the destruction of capitalism at the hands of what the Manifesto calls the “gravediggers” of capitalism — the revolutionary proletariat.

Not just a critique but a guide to action

Far from being merely a criticism of feudal and bourgeois society, the Manifesto thus unequivocally points the way to the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, the Manifesto subjects to critical analysis the nature of the capitalist state, as well as the role of the family, religion and culture.

Above all, in tracing the development of the proletariat from its earliest days in mere handicraft production to its role in large-scale industry by 1848, the Manifesto points to the “proletariat alone as the really revolutionary class” and the historic

agent for constituting a new social order, free of exploitation or oppression.

All of this is propaganda — irreplaceable working-class propaganda. Yet at the same time it is also revolutionary agitation of the highest order. It fans the flames of revolution.

On the one hand, the Manifesto directs itself toward presenting a succinct, coherent and lucid exposition of the basic principles of Marxism. To that extent, it directs itself to “the few” — not necessarily the middle class, but the advanced sections of the working class.

On the other hand, with its ringing call to overthrow the oppressors and exploiters, the Manifesto addresses itself directly to the broadest and widest sections of the working class.

It is this dialectical unity of opposites — propaganda and agitation — so skillfully blended together that makes the Manifesto such a monumental achievement.

Nothing could be a more crystal-clear call to the proletariat than the final paragraph of the Manifesto.

It ends with this ringing call to action:

“Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

“Workers of all countries, unite!”

Such a mighty clarion call for revolutionary worldwide action by the proletariat has yet to be surpassed.

Marx and Engels were not unaware that the working class was a narrow segment of society at the time the Manifesto was written. As Engels said in the 1890 preface to a Polish edition of the Manifesto, “Few voices responded to Workers of all countries, unite!’ when we proclaimed these words to the world ... on the eve of the first Paris revolution in which the proletariat came out with demands of its own.”

However, wrote Engels, “On Sept. 28, 1864, the proletarians of most of the Western European countries joined hands in the International Workingmen’s Association.” And even though that International — the first attempt at a world organization of the proletariat — lasted only a few years, said Engels, it left a glorious heritage.

National chauvinism vs. internationalism

Just prior to the start of World War I, the working-class movement in Europe, under the leadership of the Social Democratic parties, reached the zenith of its authority over the broadest masses on the continent. Immediately after the outbreak of the war, however, the movement was virtually smashed as a result of the betrayal by the Social Democratic leadership.

The adherents of revolutionary Marxism — in reality the adherents of the principles enunciated by the Manifesto — were temporarily reduced to a small minority. The majority had succumbed to chauvinism. They had forgotten one of the principal tenets in the Manifesto: that the workers in a capitalist country have no fatherland. “The workers have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.”

The Social Democratic leaders’ surrender to chauvinism cost the proletariat dearly in World War I: millions upon millions of lives lost and untold devastation and destruction.

Nothing so much arouses the prejudices of the bourgeois ideologists, nothing so much enrages them and exposes their deep-seated chauvinism, as the question of

“patriotism,” the “defense of the national interest.” Today, more than ever, this invariably means the defense of the capitalist state and giant finance capital.

Any lie, any falsification will do to corrupt, vulgarize and distort the real meaning and significance of the defense of one’s country, as it was understood both in Marx’s time and in the imperialist epoch.

Marx and Engels had written extensively about the autonomy and unity of each nation. It is well known that they had fought for the independence of Poland, Hungary, Ireland and Italy. Engels wrote in 1893 in a preface to the Italian edition of the Manifesto that the defeat of the 1848 revolutions resulted in “the fruits of the revolution being reaped by the capitalist class.”

“Through the impetus given to large-scale industry in all countries,” he wrote, “the bourgeois regime during the last 45 years has everywhere created a numerous, concentrated and powerful proletariat. It has thus raised, to use the language of the Manifesto, its own grave-diggers.”

Engels then added this remarkable thought, as pertinent today as it was then: “Without restoring autonomy and unity to each nation, it will be impossible to achieve the international union of the proletariat, or the peaceful and intelligent cooperation of these nations toward common aims.”

Fighting monopoly capitalism today

The progressive epoch of the bourgeoisie in the struggle against feudalism — especially the period when Marx was writing — demonstrated a trend toward diminishing national differences and antagonisms. It was due to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market.

The subsequent evolution into monopoly capitalism diverted this trend. Indeed, capitalism has not been able to carry out a single one of its economic trends to its

ultimate conclusion.

The classical example of this is the failure of the various trusts and combinations, through the process of competition, to be converted into total monopoly and become a worldwide trust or “super imperialism,” which Karl Kautsky thought would abolish the anarchy of capitalism.

As industrial and technological development grows by leaps and bounds, monopoly capitalism, rather than narrowing national differences and ameliorating national oppression, exacerbates them. It is no wonder that the bourgeois world is literally divided into oppressing and oppressed nations.

But this does not at all disqualify the class struggle. It merely imparts a greater urgency for the revolutionary cooperation and solidarity of all the workers in both the oppressing and oppressed nations — in a common struggle against imperialism, capitalism and all forms of bourgeois reaction and feudal rubbish left by centuries of oppression.

The revolutionary contribution of the bourgeoisie, as Marx explained, was in developing the world market, which has “given a cosmopolitan character to production.” This has greatly increased the strategic role of the working class in production and in relation to the class struggle.

Marx’s words are even more true today: “In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency,” the bourgeoisie has tremendously enhanced “intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.”

The bourgeoisie cannot create even the semblance of world unity, despite the obvious foundations laid by the gargantuan growth of the productive forces and the ensuing economic interdependence.

Only the proletariat in alliance with the oppressed peoples and the socialist

countries can lay the political and social foundations for worldwide solidarity. This is precisely because only socialism, which is based on planning and the common ownership of the means of production, can purge the worldwide market of its imperialist chaos, its unpredictable crises, and the reign of the arbitrary based on superprofits.

Indeed, the world market, as Marx said, “makes national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible.” It inevitably generates proletarian class solidarity — the truest basis for bringing about the solidarity of the human race.

