

Long live the Paris Commune!

written by Stephen Millies

March 20, 2021



Workers defend a barricade in the rue de Charonne during the Paris Commune.

One hundred fifty years ago, poor and working people in Paris took power into their own hands. The Paris Commune was born on March 18, 1871.

Karl Marx — the founder of scientific socialism, also known as communism — wrote that the workers in Paris “had stormed heaven.”

The world’s first working-class government lasted just 72 days before being drowned in blood. At least 30,000 of its supporters were killed by counter-revolutionary forces.

Yet the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and every socialist revolution that followed were inspired by the workers of Paris. The Bolshevik leader Lenin declared that “we all stand on the shoulders of the Commune.”

One reason revolutionaries raise clenched fists is because captured Communards did so as they were executed by firing squads. The revolutionary anthem “The Internationale” was composed by Eugène Pottier and Pierre De Geyter, who were both supporters of the Commune. The title refers to the First International workers’ party and declares that the international party will unite humanity (“shall be the human race”).

The title of Franz Fanon’s classic work on the African Revolution — “The Wretched of the Earth” — comes from the Internationale’s stirring words: “Arise, ye prisoners of starvation! Arise, ye wretched of the earth!”

The road to the Commune

The Commune arose as a result of France being invaded by German armies in 1870. The French leader at the time — Napoleon III — thought the Franco-Prussian war would prolong his dictatorship.

The so-called Emperor of the French surrendered his armies and was overthrown instead. Napoleon III was a nephew of the original Napoleon, whose armies conquered much of Europe but were driven out of Haiti.

Napoleon III could have been a model for Trump. Both were lying scoundrels and white supremacists. The French dictator killed tens of thousands of people in Algeria and invaded Vietnam.

Victor Hugo — who wrote “Les Misérables” — called the French imposter “Napoleon the little.” Karl Marx wrote [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,](#) showing how the class struggles in France allowed this faker to seize power. (The “18th Brumaire” refers to the date in the French revolutionary calendar when the original Napoleon seized power in 1799.)

It was the workers of Paris that overthrew King Louis Philippe in the February 1848 revolution. They wanted a social republic with full employment and an end to hunger.

They were betrayed by the capitalists. Thousands of workers were killed when they rose up in June of that year. The wealthy and powerful united in the “party of order” to crush them.

However, the ruling classes were divided, with some wanting a republic while the monarchists supported three different candidates. Louis Bonaparte was able to exploit the divisions to pose as the savior of capitalist society against the poor.

First elected as president, Louis Bonaparte seized power before his term ended in 1852. That’s what Trump wanted to do with his Jan. 6 coup attempt.

The coming to power of Louis Bonaparte, who declared himself Napoleon III, was the last act of the 1848 revolutions that swept through Europe. All were defeated. Karl Marx and his co-worker Frederick Engels fled to Britain.

A long period of reaction set in, like the period following the overthrow of the Soviet Union. Karl Marx dissolved the Communist League.

What turned things around was the U.S. Civil War. While landlords and capitalists supported the Confederacy, every progressive person wanted the slave masters defeated. Thousands immigrated to the United States to join the Union army.

“The Black Jacobins” by C.L.R. James showed how the people of Haiti helped defend the French Revolution against invasion. In the U.S., the Black troops in the Union army and a Black general strike in the Confederacy proved decisive in overthrowing slavery.

Strikes broke out and workers’ organizations were formed across Europe following the North’s victory. Helping to promote these struggles was the First International, which was guided by Karl Marx.

A wonderful, heroic legacy

The German armies overran northern France but couldn’t capture Paris. The people refused to surrender despite being starved.

Following Napoleon III’s downfall, all the Trumps in the French one percent formed a provisional government in Versailles. The former home of “let them eat cake” Marie Antoinette is about 15 miles from Paris.

The Versailles regime’s first act was to try to disarm the workers of Paris who had prevented the city’s capture. Capitalist leader Adolphe Thiers sought to crush the people who wanted a social republic.

To commit this crime, Thiers tried to seize artillery belonging to the worker-dominated National Guard in the city. Working women in the Montmartre neighborhood seized the cannon instead.

The Commune was declared the same day.

"The real women of Paris showed again at the surface," wrote Marx, "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."

Thiers was a cannibal whose mercenaries slaughtered the Commune's defenders. In the same decade thousands of Black people were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction's bloody overthrow.

While the working people of Paris in 1871 were trying to build a new society, the same year in Los Angeles — then a village of 5,000 — a racist mob lynched at least 17 Chinese people.

In contrast, the military leader of the Commune was the Polish immigrant Jaroslav Dombrowski, who died on the barricades. A thousand Poles fought alongside Parisians.

Most French workers and even many revolutionaries initially supported Napoleon III's reactionary war. They did so because of the memories of the French Revolution defending itself against the feudal armies of Europe.

But the struggle to build a new society helped defeat national hatreds, often called chauvinism, named after the French soldier Nicolas Chauvin. Another Chauvin is the Minneapolis pig that murdered George Floyd.

French workers repudiated the first Napoleon's bloody chauvinist record, which included restoring slavery. On May 16, 1871, they tore down the Vendôme column with its statue of Napoleon.

Meanwhile the German socialist leaders August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht were jailed on treason charges for demanding peace with France. This was internationalism in action.

A record to be proud of

The Commune accomplished so much in its too-short existence.

The existing state power was smashed. No more killer cops!

Elected officials had salaries not exceeding that of a skilled worker and could be immediately recalled by voters.

Closed workplaces were reopened as cooperatives. Nightwork in bakeries was abolished. Education was declared a right.

In its pioneering attempt to create a new society, the Commune made mistakes. It didn't take over the state bank.

Women weren't allowed to vote. That didn't stop women from being the Commune's staunchest defenders. [As Marx wrote](#), "The women of Paris joyfully gave up their lives on the barricades and on the place of execution."

A Women's Union was formed. Louise Michel fought on the barricades and was exiled to New Caledonia, which is still a French colony.

Forty-six years after the Commune, women textile workers in St. Petersburg, Russia, went on strike on International Women's Day and overthrew a tyrant called the tsar.

The Paris Commune lasted 72 days within the shrinking limits of a single city. The Soviet Commune defeated Hitler and lasted 73 years over one-sixth of the earth.

Our class still has China, Cuba, People's Korea, Laos and Vietnam. The peoples of Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Zimbabwe will not surrender to U.S. and European banksters.

Palestine and Yemen will be free. Iran will defend itself against the Pentagon.

Long live the Commune!

