

Under the Banner of the Commune

Leon Trotsky
16 March 2017

This article was published in the Russian-language New York newspaper Novy mir (New World) on March 17, 1917. It was published in Russian in Trotsky's 1923 Voina i Revoliutsiia (War and Revolution), Vol 2, pp. 422-424. Below is an original translation. (Translator: Fred Williams; Copyright: WSWs).

War and revolution often follow one another in history.

In ordinary times, the working masses submissively engage in punishing drudgery from day to day, submitting to the mighty force of habit. Neither the foremen, nor the police, nor the jailers, nor the executioners would be able to keep the masses in subjection if not for this habit—the true servant of capital.

War, which tears the masses to pieces and slaughters them, is also dangerous for the rulers—precisely because, with one blow, it jolts the people from their customary state, awakens with its thunder the most backward and benighted elements, and forces them to look at themselves and those around them.

While thrusting millions of toilers into the fire, the rulers must put promises and lies in the place of habit. The bourgeoisie embellishes its war with all the traits that are dear to the magnanimous hearts of the popular masses: war for “freedom,” for “justice,” for “a better life”! Stirring the masses to their very depths, the war inevitably ends by deceiving them: it brings them nothing but new wounds and chains. For this reason, the tension of the deceived masses provoked by the war frequently leads to an explosion against the rulers; war gives birth to revolution.

That's how it was twelve years ago, during the Russo-Japanese War: It immediately heightened the discontent of the people and led to the revolution of 1905.

That's how it was in France 46 years ago: the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 led to the uprising of the workers and the establishment of the Paris Commune.

The workers of Paris were armed by the bourgeois government, in the form of the National Guard, for defense of the capital against German troops. But the French bourgeoisie were more afraid of their own proletarians than the troops of Hohenzollern. After Paris capitulated, the republican government tried to disarm the workers. But the war had already awakened in them a spirit of indignation. They didn't want to return to the factory bench as the same workers they had been before the war. The Paris proletarians refused to hand over their weapons. A clash occurred between the armed workers and the government regiments. This was on 18 March 1871. The workers emerged victorious, became the masters of Paris and on 28 March—under the name of the Commune—established a workers' government in the capital. The Commune did not last long. On 28 May, its last defenders fell after heroic resistance against the onslaught of the bourgeois hordes. Then began weeks and months of bloody reprisals against the participants of the proletarian revolution. However, despite its brief existence, the Commune has remained the greatest event in the history of proletarian struggle. Based on the experience of the Parisian workers, the world proletariat has seen for the first time what a *proletarian revolution* is, what are its goals and pathways.

The Commune began by confirming all foreigners elected to the workers' government. It declared: “The banner of the Commune is the banner of the World Republic.”

It purged the state and schools of religion, abolished capital punishment, toppled the Vendome Column—a monument to chauvinism—and transferred all duties and posts to genuine servants of the people, setting their salary at no more than a worker's wage.

It set out to make a census of factories and mills that had been closed by frightened capitalists in order to begin production there at public expense. This was the

first step toward a socialist organization of the economy.

The Commune did not achieve all its plans: It was crushed. The French bourgeoisie, with the assistance of its “national enemy,” Bismarck, who had immediately become its class ally, drowned in blood the uprising of its true enemy, the working class. The plans and tasks of the Commune did not come to fruition. But they entered into the souls of the best sons of the proletariat in the entire world; they became the revolutionary legacy of our struggle.

And now, on 18 March 1917, the image of the Commune arises before us more clearly than ever before: for we, after a great interval of time, have once again entered into the epoch of great revolutionary battles.

The world war has torn tens of millions of toilers from their customary conditions of labor and vegetation. Until now, this has happened only in Europe; tomorrow it will happen in America as well. Never before have the working masses been given such promises; never before have they been drawn such radiant goals; never have they been so flattered as in this war. Never before have the propertied classes dared to demand so much blood from the people—in the name of that lie that is called “defense of the fatherland.” And never before have the toilers been so deceived, betrayed and crucified as now.

In the trenches overflowing with blood and mud, in the starving cities and villages, millions of hearts are filled with indignation, despair and rage. And these feelings, when combined with socialist thought, are turning into revolutionary enthusiasm. Tomorrow its flame will burst to the surface in powerful uprisings of the working masses.

The proletariat of Russia has already emerged onto the great highway of revolution, and, under its offensive, the strongholds of the most shameful of despotisms are falling and crashing down. The revolution in Russia, however, is only the precursor of proletarian uprisings throughout Europe and the entire world.

“Remember the Commune!”—we socialists will say to the insurgent working masses. The bourgeoisie has armed you against the foreign enemy? Refuse to return your arms to the bourgeoisie, just as the Parisian workers refused in 1871! Aim these weapons, as Karl

Liebknecht has called for you to do, against your true enemy, against capitalism! Tear from its hands the state machine, transform it from a weapon of bourgeois violence into the apparatus of proletarian self-rule. You are now incomparably stronger than your predecessors were in the epoch of the Commune. Tumble all the parasites from their thrones. Take the land, the mines and factories and manage them yourselves. Fraternity in labor, equality in sharing the fruits of labor!

The banner of the Commune is the banner of the World Republic of Labor!

Novy mir, 17 March 1917.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact