# 150 years since the Paris Commune

**Alex Lantier**
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One hundred and fifty years ago today, on March 18, 1871, the working class districts of Paris rose up to prevent the French army from stealing the cannons of the Paris National Guard. This insurrection, which would lead a week later to the formation of the Paris Commune, was of world historical significance. It was the first time in history that the working class took power and formed a workers' state.

As soldiers fraternized with Parisian workers, refusing their officers' orders to fire, the French government of Adolphe Thiers fled in panic from Paris to Versailles. With the population of Paris armed and the Thiers government having deserted the city, power passed into the hands of the workers.

On March 26, elections were held to the Commune. The Commune enacted policies to reduce the monstrous levels of social inequality created by the French capitalist regime and to rally the working people of France and Europe to its side.

The savagery of the Thiers government's response was in direct proportion to the mortal threat the financial aristocracy felt to its class rule. After preparing for two months, Thiers fielded an army to crush the Commune and drown Paris in blood. In the infamous Bloody Week of May 21-28, 1871, the Versailles army stormed Paris, using heavy artillery and indiscriminately murdering men, women and children suspected of having fought for or sympathized with the Commune.

An estimated 20,000 Parisians were summarily executed, and 40,000 more were marched to Versailles for imprisonment in France or deportation and forced labor in the penal colonies of French Guyana and New Caledonia.

At an enormous cost in blood, the Commune gave the international working class a priceless experience of the struggle for power. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, tirelessly worked over these lessons as they prepared the October 1917 revolution and the taking of power by the working class in Russia. Today, amid the grotesque social inequality, police state militarism and debauched financial speculation of contemporary capitalism, these lessons are more relevant than ever.

The lessons were drawn, above all, by Karl Marx. His addresses to the world proletariat, written for the International Workingmen's Association as the Commune unfolded, defended the Commune which he praised for "storming heaven." Published across Europe and gathered in *The Civil War in France*, they won Marx the lasting support of workers in France and internationally.

### The class struggle in France and the materialist conception of history

The analysis of the Commune by Marx and his great co-thinker, Friedrich Engels, was the product of three decades of theoretical anticipation bound up with the elaboration of the materialist conception of history. In 1844, Marx pointed to the leading role of proletarian revolution in the emancipation of humanity, writing: "The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* the *proletariat*." The 1847 *Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels began with the famous statement:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another. … Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

The *Communist Manifesto* was published on the eve of the first great social eruption of 19th century Europe: the 1848 revolution, which spread across Germany, Austria, France and beyond. Insurrection in Paris that year toppled the last in the line of kings restored to power by France's defeat in the Napoleonic Wars after the French Revolution. For the first time since the 18th century and the 1789 French Revolution, the Republic was again declared in France.

A Marxist analysis alone explained why the 1848 revolution unfolded so differently from its great 18th century predecessor. The Jacobins who came to power after the 1789 revolution—as they expropriated feudal property, abolished the absolute monarchy and founded the First Republic—based themselves on the independent artisans, the *sans-culottes*. The liberal bourgeoisie that took power in the Second Republic in 1848 came into mortal conflict with the new industrial proletariat.

When in June 1848 the Second Republic shut down the National Workshops built to give jobs to the unemployed, the Paris workers revolted against a policy that meant poverty and starvation. General Eugène Cavaignac led the army and security forces in the bloody repression of the June Days, killing over 3,000 workers, arresting 25,000 and condemning 11,000 to prison or deportation. The Second Republic became so discredited that in 1851 Napoleon's nephew, Louis Bonaparte, was able to take power in a coup—founding the Second Empire and taking the name Napoleon III.

Marx, who wrote works of genius analyzing the revolutions of 1848-1851 as they unfolded, drew the key conclusion of this great struggle. In a letter to Louis Kugelmann, Marx wrote:

> If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire [of Louis Bonaparte]*, 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.

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**The Paris Commune and the Bloody Week**

The Commune, the next great revolutionary attempt in France, arose out of the war Napoleon III launched in July 1870 against Prussia. This war was a criminal adventure, aimed at maintaining French imperialism's world position by blocking Prussia's moves to unify Germany, while suppressing mounting class struggles at home. Indeed, just six months earlier, in January 1870, after Prince Pierre Bonaparte shot and killed left-wing journalist Victor Noir, a protest by over 100,000 people at Noir's funeral turned into an attempted insurrection in Paris.

The Franco-Prussian war brought down the Second Empire. Outnumbered, outclassed in artillery and logistics and led by an incompetent, the French army suffered a humiliating defeat. Napoleon III was captured on September 2 at Sedan, and the Prussian army occupied northern France. On September 4, amid mass protests in Paris, the Third Republic was proclaimed. A Government of National Defense was formed, led by liberals and Bonapartist bourgeois figures like Thiers, Jules Favre and General Louis-Jules Trochu. On September 17, the Prussian army laid siege to Paris.

The bourgeoisie yet again proved hostile both to democracy and the defense of the people. On October 28, the commander of French armies in the east, General François-Achille Bazaine, surrendered his troops to a smaller Prussian army after a brief siege at Metz. Bazaine, whose hatred of republicanism and democratic principles was well known, was widely accused of treason. The situation in Paris, the besieged capital of the new Republic, grew increasingly desperate.

The population of Paris, armed and formed into National Guard units, held out amid widespread starvation until a ceasefire was signed on January 26, 1871. Victor Hugo, the celebrated novelist and author of *Les Misérables*, who had returned to Paris when the Republic was formed and who had lived through the siege, gave voice to widespread anger at the ruling elite when he wrote: "Paris was the victim of its defenders as much as of its attackers."

Class conflict proved far more powerful and fundamental than national conflict between the French and German bourgeoisies. Thiers, as he negotiated an armistice with Prussia, was like Bazaine mainly focused on averting revolution. As for the Prussian army, apart from a brief, three-day occupation of Champs-Elysées Avenue, it studiously kept outside the Paris city limits, avoiding in particular the densely populated, armed working class districts of eastern Paris. The French and Prussian ruling classes were both desperate, above all, to disarm the Parisian workers.

The March 18, 1871 uprising was the spontaneous response of the Parisian working class to Thiers' first attempt to disarm it by seizing the National Guard's cannons. The workers fraternized with the soldiers. Two generals who had unsuccessfully ordered soldiers to fire on the workers—Clément Thomas and Claude Lecomte, who had helped lead the repression in June 1848—were arrested and shot. That same day, Thiers fled Paris to Versailles.

Elections to the Commune and the Central Committee of the National Guard were held by district and gave an overwhelming majority to working class areas. These bodies emerged as organs of workers' power. Members of the Commune and the National Guard Central Committee who were elected by wealthy western districts did not bother to attend meetings of either body. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx explained the nature of the new workers' state:

> The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at any time. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. … The police, which until then had been the instrument of the Government, was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen's wages. The privileges and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves.

While surrounded by French and Prussian armies, the Commune advanced socialist and democratic policies. It fixed a minimum wage, set up municipal canteens for the workers and gave vacant apartments to poor families. It granted debt forgiveness to small businesses and renters bankrupted by the siege, at the banks' and landlords' expense, and let workers take back valuables from pawnshops. It guaranteed freedom of the press, established civil partnerships, secularized education, and advocated that men and women receive equal pay for equal work.

The Commune made no distinctions of nationality and stood openly for the international unity of the working class. As Marx wrote:

> The Commune admitted all foreigners to the honor of dying for an immortal cause. Between the foreign war lost by their treason, and the civil war fomented by the conspiracy with the foreign invader, the bourgeoisie had found the time to display their patriotism by organizing police hunts upon the Germans in France. The Commune made a German working man [Leo Frankel] its Minister of Labor. … The Commune honored the heroic sons of Poland [Generals J. Dabrowski and W. Wróblewski] by placing them at the head of the defenders of Paris.

A cataclysmic conflict emerged between the proletarian Commune, fighting for equality, and the Third Republic, defending capitalist privilege. Thiers, negotiating with Prussia, worked feverishly to free enough captured French soldiers to form an army, recruited mainly from the rural areas, to crush the Commune. This force, given double rations of alcohol and reinforced by youth from wealthy families who had fled Paris to Versailles, was finally ready to launch its assault in May.

After seizing a poorly defended part of the city wall on May 21, the Versailles army massacred the Commune in the course of a week of horrific slaughter. Bombarding Paris with heavy artillery, it moved eastwards into the working class districts, smashing barricades the Communards set up in streets across Paris. Thiers himself left no doubt about the policy of the Third Republic, publicly declaring in a May 24 speech to the National Assembly, "I shed torrents of blood."

Communard fighters were shot as they were captured, or, if there were too many, sent elsewhere for execution. Streets ran red with blood around open air spaces used for mass killings, including well-known tourist destinations like the Monceau and Luxembourg Gardens, Italy Square, the Military School and the Père Lachaise Cemetery. Firing squads or machine guns worked round the clock. Some prisoners were forced to dig their own graves and then shot. Others, male and female, were shot or bayoneted, stripped naked and dumped in the streets to terrorize the public.

A murderous frenzy seized the wealthy. *Le Figaro* wrote: "Never has such an opportunity presented itself to cure Paris of the moral gangrene which has eaten away at it for the last 20 years. … Let's go, good people! Help us finish with the democratic and socialist vermin."

For the financial aristocracy, it was open season on the workers. As wild

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rumors circulated in the press that female Communards were setting fire to houses with petrol, any working class woman found with oil was in danger. Women trying to cremate dead husbands, or caught after purchasing olive oil for cooking, were murdered. Well-to-do crowds beat Communards held by the army before they were shot or gave money to soldiers who boasted of killing Communard women and children. In his 2014 book on the Paris Commune, *Massacre*, historian John Merriman wrote:

> People were disrobed and their shoulders checked for marks left by a recoiling rifle. If any were found, the bearers were immediately shot. Men who looked "ragged," were poorly dressed, and could not instantaneously justify their time or did not work in a "proper" trade had little chance of surviving the brief audience before a prevotal court.

After 20,000 Parisians had been shot at the whim of the French army, another 40,000 were marched to Versailles, without food or water, for judgment. On the way, officers and guards shot stragglers or other prisoners at will. Around 11,000 were deported to forced labor camps.

Looking back on the Bloody Week in his diary, the well-known literary critic Edmond de Goncourt laid out the murderous calculations of the ruling elite, writing on May 31, 1871:

> It is good that there was neither conciliation nor bargain. The solution was brutal. It was achieved by pure force. … The solution has restored confidence to the army, which learned in the blood of the Communards that it was still able to fight; such a purge, by killing off the combative part of the population, defers the next revolution by a whole generation. The old regime now has 20 years of peace and quiet ahead of it, if the state continues to dare everything it dares to do now.

This devastating experience was worked over most profoundly by the great Marxists from the standpoint of the interests of the working class. It was an unforgettable lesson in the horrific consequences of defeat in revolution. It demonstrated the ferocity of the bourgeoisie's response to any threat to its rule—against which it is willing to destroy cities, entire countries or even the world. The necessity for the working class to suppress the counterrevolutionary violence of the privileged minority required ruthlessly determined action to take and hold state power.

**The Paris Commune in history**

The central question the Commune poses to the working class in every country is the building of its revolutionary leadership. Writing a century ago, as he led the struggle of the young Soviet republic against imperialist intervention in the Russian Civil War, Trotsky noted that one can "thumb the whole history of the Commune, page by page, and we will find in it one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed." Trotsky posed the alternative of what would have happened if the working class, not the Third Republic, had taken power when Napoleon III fell:

> If the centralized party of revolutionary action had been found at the head of the proletariat in France in September 1870, the whole history of France and with it the whole history of humanity would have taken another direction. If power was found in the hands of the proletariat of Paris on March 18, it was not because it had been deliberately seized, but because its enemies had quitted Paris. … But it understood this fact only on the morrow. The revolution fell upon it unexpectedly.

The Commune provided the crucial experience on which the Marxist movement elaborated the political and theoretical foundation of a firm revolutionary leadership.

This found its highest expression in the thorough reworking of the experience of the Commune by the Bolshevik Party as it prepared the seizure of power in October 1917. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin masterfully reviewed the writings of Marx and Engels on the issue of the state and the brief experience of workers' power provided by the Paris Commune.

Marx and Engels, Lenin explained, had concluded that the state is not a tool to reconcile the classes but the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. They examined both anthropological data on primitive societies where no state exists and the conflict between the capitalist state and the armed population of Paris in 1871. The state, Engels wrote, establishes "a public power which no longer directly coincides with the population organizing itself as an armed force." He continued:

> This special, public power is necessary because a self-acting armed organization of the population has become impossible since the split into classes. ... This public power exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men, but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds. … It grows stronger, however, in proportion as class antagonisms within the state become more acute.

The experience of the Paris Commune and this analysis of the state by the great Marxists had far-reaching implications. A reformist perspective, which hoped to use the capitalist state to lessen class antagonisms and provide lasting peace and prosperity, was false and hopelessly utopian. So was an anarchist perspective that called for the immediate dissolution of all forms of state power—thus opposing the formation of a workers' state in opposition to the counterrevolutionary violence of the ruling class.

Lenin stressed Marx's conclusion that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes." Instead, the working class had to build its own state, as the Parisian workers did in 1871. This meant, first of all, building a party to saturate the working class with political and historical consciousness and the need for a revolutionary policy.

This perspective underlay the October 1917 revolution and the transfer of state power, led by the Bolshevik Party, from the Tsarist autocracy to the organs of workers' power, the Soviets. Writing amid the carnage of World War I as he rallied the Bolshevik Party to the struggle for power, Lenin insisted that the fight to establish a workers' state had to be a world policy. Addressing Marx's remark that the working class had to smash "the bureaucratic-military machine" in order to carry out a genuine revolution on the European continent, Lenin wrote:

> Today, in 1917, at the time of the first great imperialist war, this restriction [to the European continent] made by Marx is no longer valid. Both Britain and America, the biggest and the last

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> representatives—in the whole world—of Anglo-Saxon "liberty," in the sense that they had no militarist cliques and bureaucracy, have completely sunk into the all-European filthy, bloody morass of bureaucratic-military institutions which subordinate everything to themselves, and suppress everything.

In the 150 years since the Paris Commune, there has been no shortage of opportunities for the working class to take power as it did in October 1917. In May 1968, a general strike by over 10 million workers in France defeated the riot police and brought the de Gaulle government to its knees, showing that the working class had lost none of its revolutionary capacities. More recently, in 2011, a revolutionary mobilization and general strike of the Egyptian working class brought down the military dictator and stooge of imperialism, President Hosni Mubarak.

The critical questions of political perspective and leadership raised by the Paris Commune remain, however. In 1968, the French Communist Party prevented revolution. As a Stalinist party, it rejected the internationalist perspective of the October Revolution, agreeing to an accommodation with imperialism justified by Stalin's nationalist perspective of "socialism in one country" in the Soviet Union. On this basis, during May 1968, it tied the working class, through the Grenelle Accords, to the French capitalist state.

The questions of revolutionary leadership and workers' power are posed with particular acuteness by the endless imperialist wars, social austerity and enrichment of the financial aristocracy in the decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the capitalist system. Hundreds of thousands have been allowed to die, even in the world's wealthiest countries, based on claims that there is no money for social distancing and other measures to contain the virus, while trillions of dollars and euros have been handed out in bank bailouts to the rich. The bourgeois parasites of today have proved no less ruthless than those of the French Second Empire, only more decrepit.

Recent years have, on the other hand, seen an explosion of class struggle on every continent. In a recent report surveying the global explosion of social protest now underway, the US imperialist think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote:

> We are living in an age of global mass protests that are historically unprecedented in frequency, scope, and size. … [They] are in fact part of a decade-long trend line affecting every major populated region of the world, the frequency of which has increased by an annual average of 11.5 percent between 2009 and 2019. The size and frequency of recent protests eclipse historical examples of eras of mass protest, such as the late-1960s, late-1980s, and early-1990s.

The social problems driving the international resurgence of class struggle cannot be solved without a socialist struggle of the working class for power, raising afresh all the issues posed by the experience of the Paris Commune. The COVID-19 pandemic is but one especially devastating reminder that capitalism is dominated by a financial aristocracy utterly impervious to calls for reform. The alternative posed today, as it was to the French workers in 1871, is not reform or revolution, but socialist revolution or capitalist counterrevolution.

The living standards, health and very lives of humanity depend on the struggle to transfer state power to the working class in every country. Against the dictatorship of the banks, the workers, who produce the wealth of humanity, must take control of their own fate, and to do this they need an international revolutionary leadership.

There will no doubt be those who oppose and reject the workers' struggle for power as an attempt to install the "dictatorship of the proletariat." It has become commonplace to falsely associate this term with the crimes of the Stalinist regime, which, in fact, dissolved the Soviet Union and restored capitalist rule 30 years ago, in 1991. To these opponents of the struggle for workers' power, one can reply, with Engels:

> Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

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