

The historic and contemporary significance of the 1871 Paris Commune

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On Saturday, the *World Socialist Web Site* marked the 150th anniversary of the 1871 Paris Commune, the first time in world history that the working class took state power, with an international online meeting. WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North moderated and introduced the discussion, which featured *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* National Secretary Alex Lantier, WSWs writer Thérèse Leclerc, and WSWs US National Editor Barry Grey.

Over the past year, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the WSWs have published a series of essays and held critical events marking a number of significant anniversaries, including the 80th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Engels, the 150th anniversary of the birth of Lenin, and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rosa Luxemburg.

For the ICFI, the commemoration of historic events is always bound up with the clarification of the present tasks facing the working class. Historical experience is the essential foundation for the education of workers and youth, providing them with an orientation and a direction, allowing them to see their current struggles in a broader context. In a period of enormous crisis, such as ours, historical lessons always acquire an enormous contemporary relevance. This is certainly true of the Paris Commune.

During the meeting, which was just over two hours, the panelists discussed a series of critical issues. They reviewed the historical background that gave rise to the Commune, including the response of different classes to the revolutions of 1848. They discussed the way in which the Commune powerfully confirmed the theoretical and historical work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in elaborating scientific socialism and historical materialism beginning in the mid-1840s. They evaluated the political and social forces involved in the Commune and the errors made that left the Communards vulnerable to counterrevolutionary violence. And they examined the lessons drawn by Marxists, including Lenin and Trotsky, from the staggering violence directed against the Communards from the capitalist state.

In introducing the discussion, North explained that the Commune came into existence on March 18, 1871, when the working class of Paris rose up against the attempt by the French government of Adolphe Thiers to disarm the working class by removing artillery that was vital to the defense of the city. The leaders of the bourgeois government fled the city, established their headquarters in Versailles, and initiated a civil war against the workers of Paris.

“Seventy-one days later,” North explained, “on Sunday, May 28, 1871, the Commune was suppressed by the army of the Versailles government, which regained control over Paris by carrying out a

horrific massacre of the city’s working-class population.” He added:

In just the last seven days of the Commune’s existence—the “Bloody Week” of May 21–28—the Versailles army slaughtered more than 20,000 working people. Violence on this scale had not been seen in a European city in hundreds of years. Nothing comparable to this massacre would be seen again until the rampages of the Nazis between 1939 and 1945.

The Commune, North explained, was not only a story of destruction and tragedy. “The achievements of the Commune, during the 71 days of its existence, were of monumental historical significance. The form of this government, and the measures it took, heralded a new epoch in human history. The fact that the Paris Commune demonstrated the possibility of an alternative to the bourgeois state accounts, in the final analysis, for the bloody retribution meted out by the Versailles regime.”

Leclerc reviewed Marx’s contemporaneous analysis, in *The Civil War in France*, of the forms of government and policies implemented by the Commune, which created the basis for an entirely new society free of inequality and class exploitation. She noted that the Commune’s policies, coming after poverty and starvation had beset the city during its siege by the Prussian army, “really bore the stamp of the working class.”

Critically, the Commune rejected the militarism and nationalism of the failed regime of Napoleon III. With 100,000 immigrant workers and political refugees from across Europe living in Paris, Leclerc noted, the Commune took “a stand for internationalism and welcomed those immigrants, giving them equal rights and positions of authority in the running of the Commune.”

Grey discussed the work of Lenin, who thoroughly worked over the writings of Marx and Engels on the Commune. In August 1917, while in hiding in Finland and fighting to win the Bolshevik Party to a fight to seize power, Lenin prepared his great work *The State and Revolution*. Among the central lessons Lenin drew was that the working class could not simply take over the existing bourgeois state. A workers’ revolution was not possible, Lenin concluded, “without the destruction of the apparatus of state power, which was created by the ruling class.”

Grey also pointed to conclusions Marxist leaders drew from the weaknesses of the Paris Commune. It failed to act to arrest Thiers and bring down his government after his criminal plot on March 18, and it also failed to seize the Bank of France, which was financing the

capitalist government's plots.

One of the most important lessons that the Commune provided, which was discussed throughout the meeting, is the ruthless violence of the capitalist class in the defense of its domination over society. The capitalist Thiers government, working with the Prussian government, fielded an army to drown the Commune in blood.

On May 21, the Third Republic's troops seized part of the Paris city wall, thanks to both an act of treachery by an opponent of the Commune and the carelessness of the Commune's military units. Storming across the city in one week, the Thiers government's forces murdered some 20,000 workers, the vast majority after they had surrendered. North cited historian John Merriman's account in his book on the Paris Commune, *Massacre*:

After destroying the gates to the Père Lachaise cemetery on Saturday evening, Versailles troops stormed in. Many of the Communard fighters there fell, some in hand-to-hand bayonet combat amid the tombs. Soldiers captured the rest and executed hundreds en masse, lining *fédéré* [Communard] prisoners two against a wall next to a very deep ditch. Machine guns did the rest. Many prisoners fell or were thrown into a mass grave.

Elaborating on the level of violence directed at Parisian workers, Lantier stated:

It was a general offensive against anyone who represented the working class politically. Anyone caught wearing [Paris] National Guard pants, anyone caught manning a barricade, they were not given trial according to the laws of war. Tens of thousands were shot on the spot. What are today known as the best places to have a walk and see Paris—the gardens near the Military School and the Eiffel Tower, the Monceau park, the Luxembourg park, the Père Lachaise cemetery—were turned into mass killing grounds.

This slaughter, North emphasized, took place in a country considered to be a center of European culture, and at the hands of a government claiming to be a democratic Republic. Such are the methods of the capitalist state when it comes to defending its class rule.

Every generation of Marxists has learned from the experience of the Paris Commune. North noted that the period of time separating the Paris Commune from the Russian Revolution of 1917 was less than 50 years, approximately equal to the period of time between today and the horrors of Chile in 1973, when a military junta seized power and carried out a massacre of socialist workers and youth.

The Paris Commune emerged at an early stage in the development of the socialist movement. However, it anticipated in its basic elements the dynamic of revolution and counterrevolution in the 20th century. From both the defeats and the successes of this history a central lesson emerges, which is perhaps the greatest lesson of the Paris Commune: The colossal role of revolutionary leadership.

Trotsky, in his essay, "Lessons of the Paris Commune," written in February 1921, emphasized this point. "We can thus 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's words resonate powerfully today:

The workers' party—the real one—is not a machine for parliamentary maneuvers, it is the accumulated and organized experience of the proletariat. It is only with the aid of the party, which rests upon the whole history of its past, which foresees theoretically the paths of development, all its stages, and which extracts from it the necessary formula of action, that the proletariat frees itself from the need of always recommencing its history: its hesitations, its lack of decision, its mistakes.

The meeting concluded, connecting the past with the present, with a discussion on the relationship between the Paris of Thiers and the Paris of Emmanuel Macron, the current president of France.

Lantier explained that, in responding to the pandemic, Macron's subordination of all considerations, including those of life itself, to the profit interests of the capitalist financial aristocracy has murderous consequences. In the coming weeks, with French hospitals flooded with severely ill patients, more people could die in France than died in Paris the Bloody Week of 150 years ago.

Amid the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unmasking of bourgeois democracy resonates powerfully. This is true not only of France. The governments of all the major capitalist countries have not yet gone so far as to directly shoot down the citizenry. However, the staggering indifference to the loss of human life due to the ruling elite's "herd immunity" policy distinctly echoes the barbarism of Thiers.

Today, the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, war and the obscene inequality of capitalist society requires a struggle to end the capitalist order. As workers turn to this struggle, the Paris Commune and the heroism of the Communards will inspire new generations. It will also inspire workers to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International, the revolutionary socialist movement of today.



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