An interview with Mark Kruger, author of *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*

Douglas Lyons
28 January 2022

The World Socialist Web Site *recently spoke with Mark Kruger about his new book,* The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland. *The interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.*

Douglas Lyons: Mark, could you tell us something about your background and how you became interested in this little-known yet extraordinary and revolutionary event in American history?

Mark Kruger: Thanks very much for inviting me. I went to college at the University of Wisconsin in Madison during the late 60s and that was a life changing event, just being on that campus then. After that I went to law school at Washington University in St. Louis and then later received a PhD from Saint Louis University.

Through the years in reading labor history, I kept coming across these short remarks about how during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 workers seized power in St. Louis. I had to wait until my retirement when I had time to sit down and look at it to begin to try to piece together the answers to some of those questions. So, the subject was on my mind for a number of years but it was really about four years ago that I began to really research it and delve into it.

DL: Were you involved in left-wing, working class politics?

MK: I formed a group that would go after individual kinds of problems, political, environmental, that sort of thing. For a while I was involved with the Workers League [forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party]. They came down from New York and sponsored a talk on campus on the Vietnam War. And also, the YSA [the youth organization of the Socialist Workers Party]. I always liked the Black Panther Party because they had that class analysis, so I began selling their newspapers on the Washington University campus.

DL: What's so important about your book is that you put the St. Louis Commune in the international context of the First International, the Paris Commune of 1871 and the 1848 revolutionaries. I was wondering if you can explain more about this influence on the American working class.

MK: As I got into it, I realized that this was almost more of a European event than it was an American event, because the roots of the St. Louis Commune were in Europe and that you had to look at those events to understand the Commune. So, for example, you had the 1848 revolutions throughout Europe but especially in the German-speaking states and after that was suppressed those people moved to the United States and many of them settled in St. Louis because the city had a very long history of German immigration. It was very attractive to German immigrants to come here because there were a lot of people who spoke their language and had their culture. All of those things were present.

You had all these revolutionaries from the German-speaking areas coming to St. Louis, as well as Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Chicago and other places. Then, in 1871, the Paris Commune was suppressed. A lot of those people also came to the United States, many of them settling in St. Louis because it was originally a very French city.

Marx formed the First International in 1864, and that moved headquarters to the United States in 1872. So, you had a thread between all these revolutionaries where they were all members, or mostly members, of the First International. And it came together in the city. St. Louis had a very strong section of the International with German, French, Bohemian, and British or English-speaking sections. You had all of these European influences that ultimately resulted in the St. Louis general strike that grew out of the Railroad Strike of 1877.

DL: What was the city itself like? Could you compare it to others such as Chicago or Pittsburgh?

MK: It was the fourth-largest city in the country and growing by leaps and bounds. There were even efforts to move the nation's capital to St. Louis. The city was big in manufacturing. It had large iron ore deposits in the Carondelet area of the city. It rivaled Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Birmingham, Alabama in steel production. There was massive trade going through the city into the West and South. Hence, it's claimed today to be the Gateway to the West.

St. Louis is sort of a mix between a northern and southern city and some people have joked that it combined the best of northern hospitality with southern efficiency. It was a racist city, but at the time it was a very racist country so that was not unusual. But before the Civil War, because of the German immigrants, there was a very strong anti-slavery feeling to the city and as a result there was strong support for the Republican Party and strong support for Abraham Lincoln.

The state of Missouri on the other hand was very conservative, very Confederate in the southern and western parts of the state. St. Louis was kind of an island in this sea of Confederacy. The governor of Missouri during the Civil War was Claiborne Jackson who was a Confederate sympathizer, trying to get Missouri to join the Confederacy. St. Louis residents resisted, especially the Germans, many of whom became Union generals and very strong Unionists.

DL: Your book does a fantastic job covering Joseph Weydemeyer, a German revolutionary and friend of Karl Marx. Were there other prominent 1848ers in St. Louis?

MK: In St. Louis, the big hero was Franz Sigel. There is still a statue to him in Forest Park. He had been in the Prussian army and then took part in the 1848 revolutions and at one time considered going to Italy to fight in the revolution there, but instead came to the United States and fought for the Union during the Civil War. To this day he is still a hero among the German-descent citizens here.

DL: Why did these German revolutionaries support Lincoln?

MK: Lincoln kind of fit into the Marxist perspective of the capitalists taking control from feudalists in the South. Marx would support that as part of the progressive movement toward socialism. So, Lincoln was a

very progressive figure and was supported by a lot of these German revolutionaries.

DL: You mentioned racism in St. Louis and Missouri, but, during the strike, white and black workers united along class lines, as did different nationalities.

MK: It's always hard to put your yourself in the place of people 150 years ago. You get bits and pieces, like a puzzle, and you try to give an idea of what something looked like. But 1877 was a very racist time and you had a young working class in the United States. Slaves were only recently freed, and as a result, a lot of the early unions were racist in nature. Most unions did not allow blacks. Blacks formed their own unions in many cases. Only later did we overcome that. The Knights of Labor and the National Labor Union (NLU) were two unions that went out and specifically attempted to organize women and black people, which was very unusual 150 years ago. The NLU was immense in its membership, having about 800,000 members. They were two unions that tried to organize on the basis of class rather than race.

What emerged in St. Louis in 1877 was a coming together of black and white people in the general strike. You had black workers on the bargaining committee that met with the railroad owners. You had white workers supporting black steamship workers and helped them get a 50 percent raise in wages. You had blacks marching with whites through the streets. The newspapers at the time were full of descriptions of black hordes marching with white people and taking over society, so the Commune actually brought together black and white workers in a class focus.

DL: One episode which definitely showed the evolution of American society was when two former Union and Confederate generals united and took orders from the government to squash the revolutionaries.

MK: When I saw that a Union general and a Confederate general were both chosen to lead the forces against the St. Louis community, against the workers, I thought how symbolic is that: Two former enemies that were killing each other came together now to suppress the workers. In the antebellum South, the generals supported the southern plantation owners, the feudal interests. In the North, the capitalist class was emerging, and they controlled their own forces, so when the North won the Civil War and the northern capitalists took control of the American government, the army then was going to follow the orders and support the interests of that ruling class. The new enemy was not slaveowners in the South; the new enemy of those capitalists was the working class.

DL: Can you talk more about the labor movement after the Civil War and how it coalesced around the international trends you study?

MK: At that time, what was happening in Europe and in the United States was a big change in the working class with the industrial revolution and new machinery in the factories. A lot of the skilled workers were being forced into factories as wage earners. Before they were earning a pretty good wage and they controlled their own lives and working conditions. But now their skills were not valued, and as a result their higher wages were lowered because they were just running the machines like any unskilled worker.

Low wages and bad working conditions were ubiquitous all through American industry. This is a very young working class that really is searching for its consciousness. At the same time, you have all these German and French revolutionaries coming to the United States and joining the working class and trying to instill this class consciousness in the workers and unite them.

DL: Why do you think the Great Railroad Strike followed a spontaneous course, and why did it draw in skilled and unskilled workers, white and black workers, and the unemployed?

MK: Conditions were so bad for the working class at that time. The railroad industry plays a big part in the book because the working conditions were so dangerous and with the three pay cuts in 1877. But the whole working class was really suffering. There was no social safety net. If you could not buy coal to heat your house, then you would freeze to death. If you could not buy food, you would starve to death, and that was a pretty general situation. All it took was one spark and then everybody who was in the same boat began to react. These strikes began happening in Martinsburg, West Virginia and Baltimore, Maryland, and then spreading west from there. It was all spontaneous and within a week it had reached California. That is how fast it was moving.

DL: But in St. Louis the Workingmen's Party (WP) harnessed this eruption.

MK: Workers did form, out of the First International, the Workingmen's Party of the United States, but in 1877 it was only a year old. You have got a young party that is watching this, and they are taken by surprise. In the eastern states it happened too fast—they could not react to it— but in St. Louis it took a few days to reach the city and the party tried to provide some leadership. They organized a general strike, and when the city was abandoned, they took it over. But they were not ready to take leadership and make it a national movement, rather than individual movements in different localities.

DL: The demands of the WP, such as nationalization of the railroads and telegraph industries under the control of the working class, underscore the influence of the First International.

MK: The 1848 revolutionaries that came to St. Louis provided the philosophy of class consciousness that was otherwise lacking among workers in the city. You had with the WP a radical leadership. James Cope was one of the leaders and he was a member of the London, England trades council before he came to the city. Albert Currlin was a member of the First International and a founder of the party. Twenty percent of the WP lived in St. Louis, so you had a lot of revolutionaries and radicals, and that had the effect of changing what was a strike over wages and working conditions into something broader. These were Marxists that recognized this was a struggle between classes that was emerging, and they tried to provide that leadership and that philosophy to educate the workers.

The WP held these mass meetings where a number of speakers were talking about not just wages and working conditions such as the eight-hour day and the end to child labor, but also planned out the takeover of these different industries to be run for the benefit of the working class rather than a few rich capitalists. They infused the philosophy of socialism.

DL: This era was termed the Gilded Age, and today the term "the Second Gilded Age" is being used to describe the state of society. What similarities do you see between 1877 and today and what do you think will happen when another working class uprising happens in the United States?

MK: There were so many things about the Gilded Age that are similar to today. The expansion of capitalism, the control of the government by the capitalists, the suppression of working class organizations. And today unions are at their weakest point they have been in many years. You have voter suppression and a tremendous gap in wealth between the capitalists and the workers. A lot of the conditions are there for a struggle to emerge.

When I was a kid, I grew up in a very working class town just north of Chicago which has become infamous in recent days— Kenosha, Wisconsin, the city of [fascist killer] Kyle Rittenhouse. The town was extremely working class. American Motors was headquartered there and so was Simmons Mattress. Everyone it seemed belonged to a union and all of my friends—all of their fathers belonged to unions, and they all lived in middle-class neighborhoods, a very middle-class life. That was the post-war period when the economy was good, and the unions were strong.

When I was a sophomore in Madison in 1968, I thought there was going to be a revolution before I graduated college. People were talking about what are you going to do after the revolution. But today is similar to 1877, nobody expected it to break out when it did and so that could happen at

any time.

I think that what was lacking in St. Louis in 1877, which is lacking today, is a leadership that was socialist, was Marxist. There was a Workers Party there, which attempted to lead this uprising. But it was young and inexperienced. I think a socialist leadership is necessary if something is going to happen now.

DL: We saw the immense power of the youth and workers after the horrendous murder of George Floyd. That was a huge spontaneous uprising sending shockwaves throughout the entire world. But I would have to disagree with you on the leadership, because we have the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.

I would also have to argue that the trade unions have not done anything for workers. They are going along with the capitalist class to keep workers in COVID-infested workplaces and schools for profit. We are calling on the working class to create new organizations of struggle based on internationalism and socialism, rank-and-file committees. This will not come through the corporatist and nationalist AFL-CIO and other unions.

MK: I think you are right. When we talked about the earlier movements, leadership is so important. When the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged, one of the things that they stressed was a lack of leadership. And they were proud of that. The first thing that entered my mind was the Students for a Democratic Society meetings in the 1960s, where there was no leadership in those meetings. It went on for hours and hours and hours, and accomplished very little. The leadership of a socialist organization like yours I think is crucial to any kind of working class movement.

Marx talked about building up workers' organizations and then a workers party, and he said that if workers supported any of the mainstream parties, the capitalist parties, they would be exploited by those parties for their votes but they would not get anything in return. And that seems to me to be exactly what has happened in this country. It is going to take some real leadership, I think, in order to point the working class in the direction of class interests rather than just a few more dollars or one hour less of a workday.

That is totally related to my biggest fear right now and that is the emergence of fascism in the United States. This is being fed by the Republican Party today. The threat is a lot stronger than I think a lot of people realize.

DL: This brings me to the other capitalist party that divides the working class through identity politics, the Democratic Party, which, through its main organ, the *New York Times*, has waged a falsification of history in the 1619 Project. What are your thoughts on this?

MK: I did read a number of those articles and interviews that are in your book, and to me it is so simplistic and wrong to say that race is the one factor that has defined all of history. History is so complicated, and there are so many different things going on at the same time. It takes a great deal of thinking and research to try to understand what forces are at work and what effect they were having.

To me, the 1619 Project is the logical consequence of identity politics. I do not say that looking at certain groups or focusing on them to understand those groups is not important, for example, the Black Power movement. I think it serves some ends in understanding what has happened to that particular group. Courses on women's history helps women understand why they have been repressed in the society. But it is not the answer to the ultimate question.

The claim that the American Revolution was primarily in order to preserve slavery in the United States, is, to me, ridiculous. It totally ignores the Enlightenment. All the leaders of the American Revolution were students of the Enlightenment, children of the Enlightenment. The 1619 Project does not touch the issue that the purpose of colonies was to exploit them and provide profits for the mother country. You had the fledgling capitalist corporations in England setting up colonies, and the whole idea was to take as much from them as possible and line your pockets with that exploitation.

There are a number of factors that go into the American Revolution. A lot of the colonists were slaveowners. But we are talking about the 1700s, and there were slaves all over the world at the time, not just in what was to become the United States. So to say that a country's entire history is based on its treatment of black people I think is very simplistic, very one dimensional. And what it has is the effect of dividing the working class into a number of different groups, each with their own interest, each with their own complaints, and failing to see the common denominator.

I just read a book by Les Payne called *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X*. No one was more race conscious in his earlier years than Malcolm X. He attributed all the problems of black people to the blonde-haired blue-eyed devil, white people. An extremely racist-focused interpretation of history. But then he began to change in his later years. There were a couple of things in the book that caught my attention: Malcolm told [civil rights leader and later Congressman] John Lewis in Nairobi, Kenya, to shift focus from race to class. Malcolm came to a certain understanding that class and capitalism lead to racism, rather than it being some kind of natural thing, a natural conflict between white people and black people. I think that is where the 1619 Project goes wrong. It just focuses on one thing, tries to draw conclusions based on one element in American history, and that is much too narrow and much too simplistic to explain anything.

DL: Martin Luther King Jr. moved towards a class analysis of society as well, which the 1619 Project completely ignores.

MK: Right, they went from marches in the South for black civil rights to the Poor People's Campaign, trying to unite black and white workers. It may be a coincidence, but that raises the question of his assassination, when he started this campaign. This raises a point with the Workingmen's Party. For them the problem of racism and the repression of women would all be solved when capitalism was ended, the basic problem that led to both of those problems was capitalism.

DL: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this important book and subject.

MK: Thank you for having me. It's not everybody that is interested in a weeklong event that occurred in St. Louis 150 years ago. But I always thought that the first general strike in American history, and the only time an American city was being run by communists, was pretty interesting.