

The class struggle against Macron and the lessons of the Paris Commune

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In the famous cemetery of *Père Lachaise* in Paris, there is located what is known as the Communards Wall. There, on May 28, 1871, 147 members of the Commune were executed by the French Army and buried in a mass grave. The executions were the culmination of a massacre of unimaginable brutality, the “Bloody Week,” during which the French ruling class suppressed the Paris Commune, killing as many as 20,000 workers.

The history and lessons of the Commune are of immense contemporary relevance, as French President Emmanuel Macron, backed by the state apparatus, moves to impose pension cuts in defiance of overwhelming popular opposition, without even a vote in parliament.

With his dictatorial actions, Macron is once again tearing off the democratic mask from the capitalist state, exposing it as a naked instrument of class rule.

Macron said a vote was an intolerable threat to the stability of the financial markets, which would not tolerate a “no” outcome. He said: “My political interest and my political will were to go to a vote (in the National Assembly on the cuts)... But I consider that in the current situation, the financial and economic risks were too great.”

Macron thrust aside the opposition of three-quarters of the French people to his cuts, and of millions of workers on strike against them. Using arcane provisions of the French constitution, he is imposing them by decree unless parliament votes to bring down his government. And he is sending tens of thousands of heavily armed riot police to assault protests erupting across France.

A decisive confrontation between the working class and the capitalist state is emerging, as negotiations break down and the room for “democratic” rule disappears. The calculations of the banks are not hard to explain. There is overwhelming opposition among working people to slashing living standards in order to spend hundreds of billions of euros on bank bailouts and the NATO war on Russia.

Since the people oppose the policies demanded by the banks, the capitalist state will dispense with the trappings of democracy and forcibly impose its will on the people. Paris

has been turned into a virtual armed camp, with heavily armed paramilitary police deployed to smother any sign of protest.

Macron is taking these actions on the anniversary of the establishment of the Paris Commune, which took power in Paris 152 years ago this weekend, amid the bloodshed of the Franco-Prussian war, on March 18, 1871. It was the first time in history that the working class had built its own state. The achievements of the Commune but also its horrific massacre are great experiences of the international class struggle.

Karl Marx and his great co-thinker Friedrich Engels, and later Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolsheviks drew imperishable lessons from the Commune on the state. In his 1891 introduction to Marx’s classic work on the Commune, *The Civil War in France*, Engels wrote:

What had been the characteristic attribute of the former state [overthrown by the Commune]? Society had created its own organs to look after its common interests, originally through simple division of labor. But these organs, at whose head was the state power, had in the course of time, in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society, as can be seen, for example, not only in the hereditary monarchy, but equally also in the democratic republic.

Amid the imperialist carnage of World War I, as Lenin worked to elaborate the basis for the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, he studied the works of Marx and Engels on the Commune.

At the center of Lenin’s perspective was Engels’ definition of the state as the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms, and a tool of the ruling class to impose its diktat over society. Lenin called for the transfer of state

power to the *soviets* (councils) built by the workers, which would suppress the counterrevolutionary violence of the ruling class, and, by implementing socialist policies to create social equality, overcome the division of society into classes from which the state emerges. He wrote:

Engels elucidates the concept of the ‘power’ which is called the state, a power which arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it. What does this power mainly consist of? It consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command. ...

A state arises, a special power is created, special bodies of armed men, and every revolution, by destroying the state apparatus, shows us the naked class struggle, clearly shows us how the ruling class strives to restore the special bodies of armed men which serve it, and how the oppressed class strives to create a new organization of this kind, capable of serving the exploited instead of the exploiters.

The developments in France confirm what the great Marxists explained: The state, even in parliamentary-democratic form, is a mechanism for the dictatorship of a ruling class. The way forward for the working class against the capitalist state is a struggle to build its own organs of workers power, and transfer state power to these bodies in a socialist revolution.

Macron is responding to an escalating series of crises, including the expanding US-NATO war against Russia, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a deepening economic and financial crisis of the world capitalist system and, above all, the resurgence of the class struggle. Strikes and social anger over war and social inequality are reaching unprecedented intensity.

In response, Macron is turning to rule by decree. The critical question facing the working class is to draw the political and strategic conclusions imposed by this historic crisis. It testifies to one essential political reality: Socialist revolution remains on the agenda.

There is no parliamentary way forward to defend social and democratic rights. Workers can give no credibility to the French union bureaucracies or to pseudo-left politicians such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon. They all peddle illusions that protest strikes will change Macron’s mind or convince parliament to vote French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne’s government out of office.

But Macron has no intention of backing down. And even if a new capitalist government were installed tomorrow in

France, it would still try to plunder the workers to fund NATO’s war and the EU bank bailouts, which have the support of all the establishment parties. It would soon find itself again in frontal opposition to the working class.

Those who deny that the situation is revolutionary, or who say that workers first need more experiences with bourgeois democracy, are reactionaries trying to derail the movement. Workers do not need more experience with “bourgeois democracy;” they are having the experience of bourgeois dictatorship. They are experiencing the fact that genuine democracy is not compatible with the bourgeoisie.

This is not peculiar to France, but is unfolding internationally. Capitalist states the world over, facing mounting anger in the working class, grant themselves ever more dictatorial powers. In Sri Lanka, where a mass uprising of the working class brought down President Gotabhaya Rajapakse last year, the capitalist state is taking on the form of an emergency regime claiming special powers to ban strikes, outlaw protests, and imprison political oppositionists. Last year, the Democrats and Republicans in the US joined forces to outlaw a strike by railroad workers and impose a contract that had been rejected.

Throughout the developing struggle in France, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its French section, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES), have called for the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to organize and coordinate the struggle against Macron. Only such bodies can unify strikes and protests, defend workers and youth from police attack, and break the diktat over the class struggle of organizations committed to “social dialog,” that is, subordinating the masses to the capitalist state.

At the same time, the development of workers’ organizations in every factory, workplace and neighborhood is the foundation for establishing the basis for a new form of power—not the capitalist state and its bodies of armed men, but a workers’ state.

To play this role, however, the working class must be saturated with consciousness that its task is not to find a parliamentary road, but to take power and build a socialist society. It must go into the class struggle conscious of the fact that it is continuing the historical and international struggle initiated, over 150 years ago, by the heroic fighters of the Commune.



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