

Bastille Day 1789—Bastille Day 2023

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14 July 2023

Friday, July 14 marked the 234th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the fortress in Paris that had come to symbolize the injustice and oppressive power of the French *Ancien Régime*—the Old Regime of feudal property relations upon which the rule of the monarchy and aristocracy was based. In the months and weeks preceding the eruption of the Parisian masses, the protracted political crisis had been steadily building. State bankruptcy and scandals had undermined the prestige and authority of the government. The deep divisions in the social structure of France, organized in different “Estates,” were breaking onto the surface of political life. The “Third Estate”—consisting of the vast majority of the population and led by the emerging bourgeoisie—had begun to organize itself independently of and in opposition to the two estates of the aristocracy.

The mass demonstrations outside the walls of the Bastille were met by cannonfire from within the fortress. But the masses obtained arms and won to their side a section of the city’s military guard. The walls of the fortress were breached by the masses, who took bloody vengeance against its defenders. In his *Socialist History of the French Revolution*, written between 1901 and 1904, Jean Jaurès wrote:

The impact of the taking of the Bastille was immense. It seemed to all the world’s peoples that humanity’s jail had fallen. This was more than the Declaration of the Rights of Man; it was the declaration of the people’s might in the service to human right. It was not only light that reached the oppressed of the universe from Paris. And in the millions upon millions of hearts imprisoned in servitude’s dark night, liberty’s first dawning rose at exactly the same moment.

King Louis XVI, ensconced in his palace in Versailles 20 miles south of Paris, did not hear of the uprising until late in the evening, when he was roused from his slumber and given a report by the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. “But is it therefore a revolt?” asked the nervous monarch. “No, sire,” replied the duke. “It is a revolution!”

The revolution in France, coming only six years after the Treaty of Paris, which codified the victory of the American colonists over Britain, marked the beginning of a new epoch in world history. In its vast scale and political dynamism, it embodied what Trotsky would later refer to as the “forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.”

The revolution was a political culmination of a period of immense social, economic and cultural ferment. It was anticipated by the intellectual revolution known as the Enlightenment, which upheld the power of reason to solve the problems of mankind. The great materialist philosophers of the age provided a powerful intellectual impulse to the scientific study of human society and, therefore, to a critique of an archaic economic, social and political order that justified its injustices and the divine right of kings with religious mythology.

At its most radical, the Enlightenment thinkers focused their critique on social inequality and the privileges of the rich.

“Are not all the advantages of society for the powerful and rich?” Jean-Jacques Rousseau asked in 1755, in words that resonate today. “Are not all lucrative positions filled by them alone? Are not all privileges and exemptions reserved for them? And is not public authority completely in their favor? When a man of high standing robs his creditors or cheats in other ways, is he not always certain of impunity?”

Rousseau’s most famous work, *The Social Contract*, written in 1762, began with the words, “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.”

The social critique of the great thinkers of that era did not translate itself immediately into revolution. It required decades for the implications of their intellectual labors to find expression in the action of the masses. But the French Revolution, as it gathered momentum, brought broader layers of the population into political activity and acquired ever more radical dimensions. What could hardly have been imagined in 1785—the end of monarchy, the abolition of feudal privileges and property relations, the establishment of a republic and the execution of the king—had become a reality by the end of the decade that followed.

“It seemed as though the very foundation of society, trampled underfoot by the cultured bourgeoisie, was stirring and coming to life,” Leon Trotsky wrote of the events in France in his *History of the Russian Revolution*. “Human heads lifted themselves above the solid mass, calloused hands stretched aloft, hoarse but courageous voices shouted! The districts of Paris, bastions of the revolution, began to live a life of their own. They were recognized—it was impossible not to recognize them!—and transformed into sections. But they kept continually breaking the boundaries of legality and receiving a current of fresh blood from below, opening their ranks in spite of the law to those with no rights, the destitute sans-culottes.”

The Revolution was met with furious hatred by reactionaries. Conservatives and moderates condemned the “excesses” of the revolution. But the most progressive thinkers rallied to its defense.

Answering those who condemned the execution of Louis XVI and the terror unleashed in defense of the revolution, Thomas Jefferson said that he would prefer to see “half the world desolated” than witness the revolution’s defeat. “Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free,” he wrote, “it would be better than as it now is.”

What is the relevance of the French Revolution for today? Of course, we are not in the age of bourgeois democratic, but of socialist, revolution. However, the essence of the revolutionary critique of inequality, of property and the established order, acquires immense force under conditions of capitalist decay and crisis.

This is evident first of all in the fact that Paris this year has seen mass protests and strikes, along the same streets and avenues. If the workers of France have not yet consigned capitalism to the guillotine, the content of their struggles directly raises the need for a political fight against the “president of the rich,” Emmanuel Macron, and the overthrow of the existing social, political and economic order. Fresh from his brutal crackdown against protests over pension cuts and police violence, Macron rolled out the carpet yesterday for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the fascist butcher of Gujarat who rules over a society of immense poverty and destitution.

Intolerable conditions of life are producing an upsurge of social struggle around the globe. This year has seen strikes and other struggles by postal workers, healthcare workers, teachers, rail workers and other sections of the working class in the UK; mass protests in Israel against the assault on democratic rights; the strike by 1,400 National Steel Car workers and 7,400 dockworkers in Canada, with the latter shut down this week through the intervention of the government; and continued strikes and protests involving hundreds of thousands of workers in Sri Lanka against austerity, to cite just a few.

In the United States, the strike by tens of thousands of actors, coming amidst the ongoing strike of 11,000 writers, initiates the largest strike in the history of US film and television production and follows strikes by academic workers and Clarios and CNH manufacturing workers. It will give enormous impetus to the developing struggles of UPS workers, autoworkers, and dockworkers which threaten to erupt outside of the control of the union apparatus in the second half of this year.

Inevitably, the consciousness of the working class is initially dominated by the immediate conditions and issues that workers face. The logic of all of these struggles, however, raises not only urgent organizational issues—the necessity for developing independent rank-and-file committees to break free from the stranglehold of the union apparatus—but the irrationality of social relations and their incompatibility with the needs of society.

Capitalism has lost its right to existence and the ruling elite its “right” to rule. When Disney CEO Bob Iger, who received more than \$200 million in compensation over the past five years, denounces striking actors and writers for having “a level of expectation... that is just not realistic,” the comparisons with Louis XVI and the French aristocracy are inevitable. Compared to contemporary corporate and financial overlords, Marie Antoinette seems almost philanthropic. The French queen said of the masses,

“Let them eat cake.” Today’s corporate bosses would, if they could get away with it, allow a substantial portion of the population to starve.

Over the past three-and-a-half years, a global pandemic has killed more than 20 million people, due to the deliberate and criminal refusal of capitalist governments to take the necessary measures to save lives, as such measures would negatively impact the stock market. Capitalist governments stand by and do nothing as climate change produces catastrophic consequences, from record heat waves and flooding in the United States, to monsoons that have killed hundreds in India over the past two weeks.

The absolute priority of the Biden administration and its allies in NATO is to escalate a war against Russia for “as long as it takes,” which the WSWS noted yesterday means, in reality, no matter how many die—in Ukraine, Russia, throughout Europe and beyond. All the NATO powers pledged a massive increase in military spending, which will inevitably come from the destruction of whatever remains of social programs.

Underlying everything are levels of social inequality that might make the French aristocracy blush. The 2,460 richest individuals added \$852 billion to their fortunes in the first half of 2023, while nearly half of the world’s population lives on less than \$6.25 a day and has been crushed by the soaring cost of basic necessities over the past year.

Revolutions, Marx explained, drawing on the experiences in France, arise when the further development of society is blocked by the existing social relations. “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”

Mankind is approaching the terminal stage of the era of socialist revolution, which began with the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the overthrow of Russian capitalism in the October Revolution in 1917. The growth of mass opposition is being driven by the deep-rooted and insoluble contradictions of the obsolete world capitalist system.

The task that confronts the world Trotskyist movement, represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International, is to develop within the growing mass movement of the working class a political understanding and direction, to turn it into a conscious movement for socialism that will sweep away the capitalist order and establish the basis for genuine social equality.



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