The Great Lessons of the Paris Commune

— In Commemoration of its 95th Anniversary

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The Proletariat Which Has Seized Power Must Prevent The Transformation of Its State Organs From Servants of Society Into Masters of Society. High Salaries and Multiple Salaries for Concurrently-Held Posts Must Be Abolished Among All Cadres Working in Proletarian State Organs, and These Cadres Must Not Enjoy Any Special Privileges

How to prevent degeneration of the state organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat? The Paris Commune took a number of exploratory steps in this matter, and adopted a number of measures which, tentative as they were, had most profound and far-reaching significance. These measures provide us with important revelations.

Engels said: “Against this transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society—a inevitable transformation in all previous states—the Commune made use of two infallible means. In the first place, it filled all posts—administrative, judicial and educational—by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, subject to the right of recall at any time by the same electors. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers. The highest salary paid by the Commune to anyone was 6,000 francs. In this way an effective barrier to place-hunting and careerism was set up, even apart from the binding mandates to delegates to representative bodies which were added besides.”25

The masses were the real masters in the Paris Commune. While the Commune was in being the masses were organized on a wide scale and they discussed im-

portant state matters within their respective organizations. Each day around 20,000 activists attended club meetings where they made proposals or advanced critical opinions on social and political matters great and small. They also made their wishes and demands known through articles and letters to the revolutionary newspapers and journals. This revolutionary enthusiasm and initiative of the masses was the source of the Commune’s strength.

Members of the Commune paid much attention to the views of the masses, attending their various meetings and studying their letters. The general secretary of the Commune’s Executive Committee, writing to the secretary of the Commune, said: “We receive many proposals every day, both orally and in writing: some are from individuals and some are sent in by the clubs or sections of the International. These are often excellent proposals and they should be considered by the Commune.”26 The Commune, in fact, seriously studied and adopted proposals from the masses. Many great decrees of the Commune were based on proposals by the masses, such as abolishing the system of high salaries for state functionaries, cancelling arrears of rent, instituting secular education, abolishing night work for bakers, and so on and so forth.

The masses also carefully checked up on the work of the Commune and its members. One resolution of the Communal club of the third arrondissement said: The people are the masters ... if men you have elected show signs of vacillation or stalling, please give them a push forward to facilitate the realization of our aims—that is, the struggle for our rights, the consolidation of the Republic, so that the cause of righteousness shall triumph. The masses criticized the Commune for not taking resolute measures against the counter-revolutionaries, deserters and renegades, for not carrying out immediately the decrees it passed, and for disunity among its members. For example, a letter from a reader appeared in the April 27 issue of Le Pere Duchene saying: “Please give members of the Commune a jolt from

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time to time, ask them not to fall asleep, not to procrastinate in carrying out their own decrees. Let them make an end to their private bickering because only by unanimity of view can they, with greater power, defend the Commune.\footnote{2}

The provisions for the replacing and recalling of elected representatives who betrayed the interests of the people were not empty words. The Commune did, in fact, deprive Blanchet of his position as a member of the Commune because he had been a member of the clergy, a merchant and a secret agent. He had smuggled himself into the ranks of the National Guard during the siege of Paris and had sneaked into the Commune under a false name. The Commune deprived Cluseret of his position as a military delegate in view of the fact that "carelessness and negligence on the part of the military delegate nearly led to the loss of Fort Issy." Earlier, the traitor Lullier had also been dismissed and arrested by the Central Committee of the National Guard.

The Paris Commune also resolutely did away with all the privileges of state functionaries, and in the matter of salaries it made an important reform of historic significance.

We know that states ruled by the exploiting classes invariably offer their officials choice conditions and many privileges so as to turn them into overlords riding roughshod over the people. Sitting in their high positions, enjoying lucrative salaries and bullying the people—such is the picture of officials of the exploiting classes. Take the period of the French Second Empire: the annual salaries of officials were 30,000 francs for a deputy to the National Assembly; 50,000 francs for a minister; 100,000 francs for a member of the Privy Council; 130,000 francs for a Councillor of State. If someone held several official posts at the same time, he received multiple salaries. Rouher, for instance, a favourite of Napoleon III, was at once a deputy to the National Assembly, a member of the Privy Council and a Councillor of State. His yearly salary amounted to 280,000 francs. A skilled Parisian worker would have to work 150 years to earn this amount. As for Napoleon III himself, the state treasury gave him 23 million francs a year; with other state subventions, he had a yearly income of 30 million.

The French proletariat detested this order of things. Even before the founding of the Paris Commune, it demanded on many occasions that the system of high salaries for officials be abolished. With the founding of the Commune, this long-time wish of the working people was realized. On April 1, the famous decree was issued that the highest annual salary paid to any functionary should not exceed 6,000 francs. The decree stated: Before, “the higher posts in public institutions, thanks to the high salaries attached to them, were the object of solicitation and given out as a matter of patronage.” But “there should be no place for either sinecures or high salaries in a truly democratic republic.” This sum of 6,000 francs was equivalent to the wage of a skilled French worker at the time. According to the eminent scientist Huxley, it was just a little less than a fifth of what a secretary to the London metropolitan school board received.

The Paris Commune forbade its functionaries from getting paid for multiple posts, and the decision of May 19 said: “Considering that under the system of the Commune, the remuneration attached to each official post must be sufficient to maintain the well-being and dignity of the one who carries out its functions... the Commune resolves: It is forbidden to give any extra remuneration for functioning in more than one post; officials of the Commune, who are called upon to serve in other capacities in addition to their usual one, have no right to any new remuneration.”\footnote{28}

At the same time as the Commune abolished high salaries and forbade salaries for multiple posts, it also raised the lower salaries so as to narrow the gap in the salary scale. Take the post office for example: the wages of the low-salaried employees were raised from 800 francs to 1,200 francs a year, an increase of 50 per cent, while the high salaries of an annual 12,000 francs were cut by half, to 6,000. In order to ensure the livelihood of low-salaried personnel, the Commune also forbade by express provision all monetary deductions and fines.
Members of the Commune were models in carrying out its regulations regarding the abolition of privileges, high salaries and multiple salaries for those occupying several posts. Theisz, a member of the Commune in charge of the post office, should have received a monthly salary of 500 francs according to regulations, but he would agree to take only 450. General Wroblewski of the Commune voluntarily gave up his officer's pay and refused to move to the apartment offered him at the Elysee Palace. He declared: “A general's place is with the troops.”

The Executive Committee of the Paris Commune also passed a resolution abolishing the rank of general. In its April 6 resolution, the committee said: “In view of the fact that the rank of general is incompatible with the principles of democratic organization of the National Guard... it is decided: the rank of general is abolished.”

It is a pity that this decision failed to be carried out in practice.

The leaders of the state received wages which were equivalent to that of a skilled worker: they had the obligation to do more work but no right to receive more pay, still less to enjoy any privileges. This was an unprecedented thing. It truly translated into reality the catchword of “cheap government”; it removed the aura of “mystery” and “particularity” from the so-called conduct of state affairs — a means employed by the exploiting classes to fool the people. It turned the conduct of state affairs simply into one of a worker’s duties and transformed functionaries into workers operating “special tools.” But its great significance lay not only in this. In the matter of material rewards, it created conditions for preventing the degeneration of functionaries. Lenin said, “This, combined with the principle of elective office and displacability of all public officers, with payment for their work according to proletarian, not ‘master-class’ bourgeois standards, is the ideal of the working class.”

He added, “The abolition of all representation allowances, and of all monetary privileges to officials, the reduction of the remuneration of all servants of the state to the level of ‘workmen’s wages.’ This shows more clearly than anything else the turn from bourgeois to proletarian democracy, from the democracy of the oppressors to that of the oppressed classes, from the state as a ‘special force’ for the suppression of a particular class to the suppression of the oppressors by the general force of the majority of the people — the workers and the peasants. And it is on this particularly striking point, perhaps the most important as far as the problem of the state is concerned, that the ideas of Marx have been most completely ignored!... The thing done is to keep silent about it as if it were a piece of old-fashioned ‘naïveté.’”

And this is exactly what the leading clique of Khrushchov revisionists has done: They have completely ignored this important experience of the Paris Commune. They chase after privileges, make use of their privileged status, turn public activities into opportunities for personal gain, appropriate the fruits of the people’s labour and receive incomes that are tens of times, or even over a hundred times, greater than the wages of ordinary workers and peasants. From political standpoint to mode of living, these people have turned their backs on the working people and imitated what the bourgeoisie and the bureaucrat-capitalists do. In an attempt to strengthen the social basis of their rule they also use high salaries, high awards, high fees and stipends and other diverse methods of making money to raise up a highly paid and privileged stratum. In an attempt to corrode with money the revolutionary will of the people, they talk wildly about “material incentives,” saying that rubles are “powerful locomotives,” and that they should “use rubles to educate people.” Compare the Khrushchov revisionists’ activities with the “naïveté,” as they see it, of the Paris Commune and one can see clearly what is meant by servants of the people and masters of the people, what is meant by state organs being turned from servants of society into masters of society. “... Do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like?” Engels wrote. “Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

Similarly, we can say: Do you want to know what a degenerated dictatorship of the proletariat looks like? Then look at the “state of the whole people” of the Soviet Union under the rule of the Khrushchov revisionist clique.

The Proletariat Should Be on Guard Against the Enemy’s Phoney Peace Negotiations While He Is Really Preparing for War, and Employ Revolutionary Dual Tactics to Deal With Counter-Revolutionary Dual Tactics

The Paris Commune bequeathed us great and inspiring lessons. Many are positively valuable; others offer the lessons of bitter experience.

Leadership of the Commune was shared by the Blanquists and Proudhonists, neither were revolutionary parties of the proletariat. Neither understood Marxism or had experience in leading the proletarian revolution. Impelled forward by the proletariat, they did certain things correctly, but because of their lack of political consciousness, they also committed many mistakes. One of the chief of these was that they fell victim to the enemy’s peace negotiations fraud while he was really preparing for war. They had the enemy pinned to the wall but they failed to press home their victorious attack and wipe him out. They let the enemy gain a breathing space under cover of his sham peace negotiations and in that time he was able to reorganize his forces for a counter-attack. They had the chance to expand their revolutionary victory, but they let it slip through their fingers.

All exploiting classes in history employ the counter-revolutionary dual tactics of violent suppression and deceitful talk of peace either alternately or simultaneously. While their preparations to attack the
people are not yet complete, or when they themselves are under attack by the revolutionary forces, they frequently resort to a "peace" intrigue to deceive the people. Once they think themselves strong enough to defeat the revolutionary people, they raise their butcher's knife and start a bloody slaughter. These were exactly the dual tactics Thiers used against the Paris Commune.

After Thiers' hasty flight to Versailles, he had only some 15,000-16,000 troops and police left. These remnant forces, few in number and low in morale, were no match for the armed forces of the workers of Paris who had the advantage both in numbers and morale. In addition, Paris was only 18 kilometres from Versailles, and the Parisian workers' armed forces could easily have covered that distance in one day. Speaking of the situation at the time, Thiers himself had to admit: "Those were the worst days of my life. The view spread around Paris was: 'Versailles is finished; as soon as we get there the soldiers will refuse to fight.' I was certainly it would not be this way, but meanwhile, if we had been attacked by 70,000 or 80,000 men, I would not have wished to answer for the firmness of the army, riddled as it was by a feeling of overwhelming numerical inferiority." In this situation, in order to maintain his foothold in Versailles and gain time to reorganize his counter-revolutionary forces, Thiers, crafty as he was, vigorously pressed ahead with his deceitful "negotiations" and laid down a smokescreen of "peace."

First of all, he instructed the various mayors of the Paris arrondissements to hold talks with the Central Committee of the National Guard on the question of the Commune elections. They were to complicate matters as much as possible during the talks so as to drag them out and absorb the Central Committee's attention till such time as Versailles was ready to attack. The National Assembly, colluding with the mayors of the arrondissements in their phone "talks," also agreed to hold municipal elections in Paris. As a result, the talks dragged on for eight days, but the date of the Commune elections was put off again and again. This gave Versailles a breathing space, while the Commune lost its opportunity to strike at this counter-revolutionary lair and clear it out. Later, the mayors disclosed the truth about these fake negotiations which covered preparations for war. Tirard confessed: "The main aim that we pursued by this opposition was to prevent the Federalists from marching on Versailles... our resistance for several days gave the government a chance to organize its defence."

Secondly, Thiers loudly harped on his "peace" theme of "not interfering in Paris" and professed he was resolved to "maintain the Republic." As Marx pointed out, Thiers was, from the very beginning, anxious to accompany his banditti-warfare against Paris with "a little by-play of conciliation.... On the 21st of March, when still without an army, he had declared to the Assembly: 'Come what may, I will not send an army to Paris.' On the 27th March he rose again: 'I have found the Republic an accomplished fact, and I am firmly resolved to maintain it.' With this talk, Thiers was trying to rally the old Republicans around him and prettify his reactionary regime; to dupe the provinces and inveigle the middle class; to throw Paris off its guard and isolate the proletariat. His "non-interference" cloaked an insatiable lust for slaughter; his words about "maintaining the Republic" were another way of saying that he was going to strangle the proletarian republic.

While pushing his fake "negotiations" and laying down a smokescreen of "peace," Thiers was also feverishly preparing for armed suppression of the Commune. He collected a motley crew of soldiery and begged Bismarck to release French war prisoners; he sent his agents among the prisoners to incite them against the Commune and to give them training; he formed groups of gendarmes, cavalry and bombardiresses needed for his attack on Paris. He sent a large number of secret agents into Paris to collect military intelligence. To blockade Paris he ringed it with fortifications and artillery positions; he started a propaganda campaign and launched a barrage of calumnies against the Paris Commune to prepare public opinion for suppression of the uprising. After two weeks or so of many-sided preparations Versailles began its armed assault on Paris in early April.

From the beginning of April to the beginning of May, Thiers' forces were still relatively weak. As the Prussians had not released many prisoners, his military offensive was not able to develop rapidly and the possibility of victory over Paris was not great. So in this period, Thiers carried on his armed attacks as well as his comedy of conciliation. On the one hand, he continued his butchering of Communards and implored the Prussians to release more French prisoners; on the other hand, he used the Ligue d'Union Republicaine
des Droits de Paris and other such bourgeois organizations for “mediation,” to deceive and induce the Commune to lay down its arms, hand over its power, and so win in that way what he could not win on the battlefield. On April 27, for example, he said to the Assembly: “I repeat it again and again. Let those impious arms fall from the hands which hold them, and chastisement will be arrested at once by an act of peace excluding only the small number of criminals.” On May 8, he replied to a deputation of middle-class conciliators: “Whenever the insurgents will make up their minds for capitulation, the gates of Paris shall be flung wide open during a week for all except the murderers of Generals Clement Thomas and Lecomte.”

But about two weeks later, after the Prussians had released a great many prisoners and Versailles had got together a force of 130,000, and MacMahon had assured him that he could shortly enter Paris, Thiers discarded all such pretences of “peace,” “negotiations” and “non-interference.” He immediately declared to the Assembly that he would “enter Paris with the laws in his hands, and demand a full expiation from the wretches who had sacrificed the lives of soldiers and destroyed public monuments.” He said, “I shall be pitiless! The expiation will be complete, and justice will be stern!” He told his Bonapartist banditti that they had state licence to wreak vengeance upon Paris to their hearts’ content.

The members of the Paris Commune were not at one as regards Thiers’ counter-revolutionary dual tactics. Most of them had a muddled understanding of the nature of the reactionary classes and entertained illusions of peace. After the victory of the Paris uprising, some representatives of the middle and petty bourgeoisie proclaimed the idea of realizing internal peace through elections, saying that “better vote, than kill . . . only a unanimous, imposing, overwhelming vote can prevent conflict and preserve Labour.” They said that “only elections can calm down minds, pacify the streets, restore trust, secure order, create a regular administration and, finally, stop the hated struggle in which the Republic will perish in torrents of blood.”

The Central Committee of the National Guard also called for “benevolence” and “magnanimity” and that they should make “that one glorious word: Fraternity” their slogan for their actions. They wrongly believed that setting up the Commune through elections would avert civil war. They ordered the removal of barricades from the streets and at the same time made preparations for elections, several times entering into negotiations with the mayors of the arrondissements of Paris over the date, process, method and technical matters of the elections.

But votes did not have the magic power to turn weapons of war into silk and jade. They did not “pacify the streets” nor “preserve Labour.” On the contrary, Paris, busily engaged in elections and negotiations, missed the opportunity to strengthen the revolutionary forces and neglected to take the necessary steps to extend the revolution’s victory. She failed to close her gates or take control of communications. The reactionaries were left to come and go as they pleased. She failed to suppress counter-revolutionary activities thoroughly. She did not take over the Bank of France. She failed, among other things, to attack Versailles. Versailles, however, got the chance to strengthen the counter-revolutionary forces and complete preparations to attack Paris.

Some members of the Commune did see through Thiers’ counter-revolutionary dual tactics; they exposed the sham peace he was peddling and also sharply criticized the illusion, which the bourgeois organizations disseminated, that conciliation could be achieved through compromise. They likewise censured the false sense of peace that prevailed in the Commune. For example, at the May 4 meeting of the members of the Commune, Grousset Paschal, a member, said: “Citizens, the situation is serious . . . because it is several weeks now since the reaction put on the mask of conciliation and this mask has not yet been torn away.” “To continue to talk about conciliation after the repeated declarations of the Versailles government; to talk about conciliation when the cannons are thundering, when our brothers are falling under the bullets of the Versailles murderers—that means to commit treachery, that means to weaken the defence of Paris, that means to prompt citizens to show weakness and incline them to desertion; that means in fact to talk about capitulation and defeat.” Revolutionary journals and mass organizations also exposed the counter-revolutionary plot of “peace negotiations” and criticized the illusion that there could be conciliation. The Manifesto of the Central Committee of the Women’s Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded solemnly pointed out: “No, it is not peace, but rather war to the end that the working women of Paris come to proclaim! Today, conciliation would be treason! . . . This would be to deny . . . the enfranchisement of the worker by himself!” The clubs all along resolutely opposed compromise and refused to allow its advocates to attend their meetings. Some of them even sent delegations to the Commune to declare that those who advocated cessation of the war with Versailles should be branded as traitors. What a pity it was that these correct views were not wholly accepted, and that right up to the time the Versailles banditti started to attack Paris, there were still many who were not awake to the facts and were still engrossed in the work of election of members to the Commune. At that time Lissagaray, an eyewitness of what was happening, wrote: “All Paris listened to the wild cannon fire. No one had thought that there would be an attack of this kind. Since the 28th, people have been living in blind trust—undoubtedly the guns are firing salutes and at worst it is a misunderstanding.” But when it was ascertained that it was not a misunderstanding but a deliberate, long-premeditated attack, because of inade-

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Paris Commune Exhibition

An exhibition commemorating the 95th anniversary of the Paris Commune attracted an unending stream of visitors during its two weeks showing in Peking. The nearly 400 exhibits, relics, documents, and other material, were collected by Mr. and Mrs. S.G. Hutchins, British friends, who came to China at the invitation of the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, sponsor of the exhibition.

The display, arranged in five parts, begins with the events of March 18, 1871, the day of the armed uprising of the heroic Paris proletariat. An old print shows the scene 95 years ago when the insurgents, weapons in hand, cheered the founding of the world's first proletarian state power. The other four parts are entitled "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," "Heroic Struggle," "Spirit of Internationalism" and "Long Live the Principles of the Revolution!"

Among the relics on display are a medallion in bronze struck to commemorate the Commune and a sword used by a Communard. Among copies of decrees and orders issued by the Commune on display are the decrees on the establishment of the National Guard, on the abolition of high salaries, and on improvement of working conditions for bakers.

Several reproductions of paintings recall the heroism of the Communards while defending the Commune. A large photo of the famous "Wall of the Communards" concludes part three of the exhibition. It was under this wall in the Pere Lachaise cemetery that the last group of Commune heroes fell steadfast to the end. In another painting, a fallen hero's wife stands before the wall telling her two children never to forget the lessons of the Commune.

There is a facsimile of the original verse and music of the Internationale, and photos of its composers Eugene Pottier and Pierre Degeyter. And finally a facsimile of the minutes of the General Council Meeting of the International Working Men's Association held on May 23, 1871. It records the prophetic words of Marx: "The principles of the Commune are eternal. . . ."
Commemorating the 21st anniversary of the Paris Commune, Engels wrote: "Let the bourgeoisie celebrate their 14th of July or their 22nd of September. The festival of the proletariat everywhere will always be March 18." 47

Today, as we mark the festival of the proletariat—the 95th anniversary of the Paris Commune uprising—a look at the world shows a great revolutionary situation where "The Four Seas are rising, clouds and waters raging; The Five Continents are rocking, wind and thunder roaring." History has fully borne out the prediction Marx made 95 years ago when he said: "But even if the Commune is crushed, the struggle will only be postponed. The principles of the Commune are eternal and cannot be destroyed; they will declare themselves again and again until the working class achieves its liberation." 48 "The Paris Commune may fall, but the Social Revolution it has initiated, will triumph. Its birth-stead is everywhere." 49

NOTES


5 Marx, "The Civil War in France (First Draft)," ibid., p. 324.

6 Marx, "The Civil War in France (Second Draft)," ibid., p. 324.

7 Kerzhentsev, op. cit., p. 51.

8 ibid., p. 74.

9 ibid., p. 74.


11 ibid., p. 44.

12 ibid., p. 109.

13 ibid., p. 109.


17 Marx, "The Civil War in France (First Draft)," op. cit., p. 398.


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29 Journal officiel de la Republique francaise, April 8, 1871.


33 Adamov, op. cit., p. 211.

34 Kerzhentsev, op. cit., p. 208.


37 ibid., p. 533.

38 ibid., p. 535.

39 ibid., p. 535.

40 ibid., p. 538.

41 Kerzhentsev, op. cit., p. 214.


46 Lissagaray, op. cit.


49 Marx, "The Civil War in France (Second Draft)," op. cit., p. 428.