1848 ? The Year of European Upheaval

Owen Zavadsky and Simon Hardy Tue, 23/06/2009 - 18:41
Owen Zavadsky and Simon Hardy

1848 was a year of fire across Europe and revolutions gripped the nations. It was a formative event in the development of Marxism, as Simon Hardy and Owen Zavadsky explain

The year 1848 was a turning point in European history. Fifty years after the French revolution Europe was still in a state of transition from one form of society to another. The old feudal system, which had dominated Europe, was passing away, but in fits and starts? in very few places had it been accomplished thoroughly and completely. Even France, famous for the violent revolution that had beheaded the king and ushered in the modern age, was still a majority peasant country. Despite a revolution in 1830 which drove out the Bourbons who had bee restored to the throne in 1815, France still had a constitutional monarch, Louis Phillipe. His ministers ruled for the highest echelons of the financial bourgeoisie, the bankers.

Alexis de Tocqueville described Europe as being like a ?volcano?. This was due to the growing contradictions between the still surviving remnants of the old society, the absolutist monarchs, and the newer classes, which were destined to make up the capitalist age that we know today. These were the middle classes, growing richer and demanding more power and say in how society was run, and the working class? which had expanded massively since the turn of the century. The young working class was concentrated in a few key cities, like Paris, London, Vienna and Milan. Their living conditions were appalling (effectively slum dwelling) as the infrastructure of the cities had not been able to catch up with the massive growth of the population. The working class was over worked and badly paid, apart from sections of it that were still closer to the artisan method of production, for instance in Paris, but even there was a growing level of class consciousness.

Between 1845-47 a serious economic crisis hit the continent. A banking crisis in England caused by the collapse of the railway boom and a steep decline in the price of cereals in France reverberated across the economy, causing growing unemployment. Ireland suffered a devastating potato famine. In many countries serious class struggle broke out amongst the working class, massive strikes and pickets were organised outside of factories. All the while the monarchs sat in their palaces, surrounded by their armed guards and counting their money.

On January 12, 1848 the volcano erupted ? to start with on the island of Sicily. The population rose up against the Bourbon king, not the first time they had done so? but this time they successfully established an independent state for 16 months, launching a constitution which called for the uniting of Italy into a confederation of states. This was in direct opposition to the the interests of the various feudal monarchs who ruled over various parts of what would become Italy. Sicily was an important break through for the struggle for modernity. But the next revolutions would strike at the heart of Europe itself? first Paris and then across the German states.

France
The February revolution in France, a mass, popular movement composed of the various disenfranchised classes, rose up and overthrew Louis Phillipe and his band of corrupt financiers that had been bleeding France dry. The second republic was born. The newly installed provisional government was dominated by bourgeois Republicans (capitalists and various middle class leaders), along with a minority of reformist socialists from the working class, led by Louis Blanc. It organised elections for a constituent assembly in April. However the provisional government was weak, divided between the different classes and unwilling to rule in the interests of the working class which had been such a crucial force in bringing it to power. Marx described it thus: “The Provisional Government which emerged from the February barricades necessarily mirrored in its composition the different parties which shared in the victory. It could not be anything but a compromise between the different classes which together had overturned the July throne, but whose interests were mutually antagonistic. The great majority of its members consisted of representatives of the bourgeoisie.”

The provisional government made the cardinal error of trying to appease the financier sections of the capitalist class by refusing to cancel the enormous and growing debt of the now departed king. To pay this debt they imposed a new tax on the peasants, who made up the majority of the French population. This was to be the undoing of the semi-progressive phase of the revolution, which saw the creation of the National Workshops. The working class who had made the revolution, demanded from the Constituent Assembly and the right to work. Indeed, under their pressure it was included in the first draft of the constitution. Louis Blanc, the most influential “socialist” of the period wrote a book, ‘The Organisation of Labour’ had advocated the creation of nationally owned factories to absorb the unemployed and begin a gradual replacement of private capital by social production. But all the provisional government would provide funds for was a network of National Workshops. Meanwhile it fobbed off Louis Blanc and the workers by creating a Commission which met in the Luxembourg Place to “consider solutions to the social question.”

Karl Marx called the right to work (le droit du travail), “the first clumsy formula wherein the revolutionary demands of the proletariat are summarized. It was transformed into the droit à l’assistance, the right to public relief, and what modern state does not feed its paupers in some form or other? The right to work is, in the bourgeois sense, an absurdity, a miserable, pious wish. But behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class, and therefore the abolition of wage labour, of capital, and of their mutual relations. Behind the ‘right to work’ stood the June insurrection.” (Class Struggles in France 1848-1850). Here Marx sees in the right to work in the way that the workers took it up, what socialists call a transitional demand, one that calls into question capitalist ownership of the means of production.

By May, 1848 the National Workshops were employing 100,000 workers. They were basically public work schemes “aimed at providing an income for the unemployed whilst beginning the task of modernising the medieval cities. The Conservatives, the party of order, attacked the workshops as places where idlers were paid for doing nothing of real value and where they listened to seditious speeches by revolutionaries and communists. They rallied support amongst the newly enfranchised male peasants by claiming they were paying for these idlers in Paris and the other large cities. Not for the first time in history a revolution would generate a counter-revolutionary reaction which would soon make a bid for power.

The Party of Order expelled the socialist deputies from the government and within months moved to attack the working class in Paris by closing the National Workshops. The working class, politicised and radicalised by its experiences in February, was not prepared to meekly accept these attacks. On June 22nd 1848 they set up barricades in the working class districts? 50,000 workers, an army of rebellion, began to move on the centre of Paris. Never before had such a mass of workers taken up arms to defend
themselves and their rights. This was truly a momentous event in the history of the struggle of the working class.

The Assembly appointed General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac as dictator. Fresh from bloody victories in colonising Algeria, he organised a mixed force of regular soldiers and press-ganged criminals into a 130,000 strong army. The workers uprising was drowned in blood, after three days of ferocious barricade fighting. Never had the working class organised such a sustained battle. They fought heroically under the red flag in defence of the Social Republic. A historic chasm opened between the workers movement and the bourgeois republicans. Around 1,500 workers were killed and 15,000 political prisoners deported to the colonies.

Marx called it the tremendous insurrection in which the first great battle was fought between the two classes that split modern society. He contrasted it with the February Revolution: "The February revolution was the nice revolution, the revolution of universal sympathies, because the contradictions which erupted in it against the monarchy were still undeveloped and peacefully dormant, because the social struggle which formed their background had only achieved an ephemeral existence, an existence in phrases, in words. The June revolution is the ugly revolution, the nasty revolution, because the phrases have given place to the real thing."

He drew out the class politics implicit in the events from February to June.

In place of the demands, exuberant in form but still limited and even bourgeois in content, whose concession the proletariat wanted to wring from the February Republic, there appeared the bold slogan of revolutionary struggle: Overthrow of the bourgeoisie! Dictatorship of the Working class!?

The June Days in Paris proved also to be a turning point in the 1848 revolutions right across Europe. After this the forces of reaction, hitherto on the defensive and making concessions in the form of Constituent Assemblies, began a steady counter-attack.

In France the Party of Order now gained total control of the Constituent Assembly and severely cut back on universal (male) franchise. By December new elections were held and Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was elected as the president of the republic. He posed as a friend of the workers against the bourgeois republicans, promising to restore universal suffrage, but he also pledged to the peasants that he would keep taxes low and the Parisian Reds in order too. By 1851 Bonaparte consolidated his power and pushed through a referendum to secure power as Emperor. Again the peasantry voted to support him, a vote against the hated tax collectors and rich capitalists that they despised. The Catholic church too supported him because he had sent French troops to restore the Pope to power in Rome against the Italian Republicans led by Giuseppe Garibaldi. The peasantry had become a conservative force, with its small farms secured by the Great French Revolution, its outlook narrowed to the village, with the parish priest the main source of opinions about the outside world. Still a large majority of the population, using universal suffrage, the bourgeois class could use them as an electoral steamroller for reaction. The army too was mostly made up of peasants and could be sent into the cities to shoot workers, especially when their heads had been filled with tales of the 'red workers betraying the nation'.

It was this event from which Marx theorised the phenomenon of Bonapartism, when society is so divided and convulsed by open class warfare, with neither class able to completely take power securely and rule in its interest, that a 'strong man' must appear. Only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent. The state machinery has so strengthened itself vis-à-vis civil society that the Chief of the Society of December 10 suffices for its head? an adventurer dropped in from abroad, raised on the shoulders of a drunken soldiery which he bought with whisky and sausages and to which he has to keep throwing more sausages...As the executive authority which has made itself
independent, Bonaparte feels it to be his task to safeguard 'bourgeois order.' But the strength of this bourgeois order lies in the middle class. He poses, therefore, as the representative of the middle class and issues decrees in this sense. Nevertheless, he is somebody solely because he has broken the power of that middle class, and keeps on breaking it daily?.

Louis Napoléon was able to do this by mobilising the peasantry against the capitalist republicans. The peasants marched to the polls under the slogans, said Marx, ?No more taxes, down with the rich, down with the republic, long live the emperor! Behind the emperor was hidden the peasant war. The republic that they voted down was the republic of the rich?. But once in power the emperor defended the capitalists against the workers and indeed the bankers against the peasantry.

Bonapartism is a political phenomenon that capitalism would see again and again, as the working class struggle makes society unstable, but instead of overthrowing the capitalists, a lack of a revolutionary leadership leads to a dictatorship, usually by an officer in the army (Chiang Kai Shek in China, Franco in Spain, Suharto in Indonesia, Pinochet in Chile, etc).

Germany and Austria

Germany was much less industrially developed than France, which left the industrial capitalist class much weaker. When the popular struggle broke out, it was a result of two key issues. The middle classes and sections of the capitalist class were propelled into action against the current political order? Germany was divided into 39 states, united in a loose confederation. The 39 states each represented a German monarch - a King, a Prince, an Archduke, etc. The newly developed bourgeois class demanded universal suffrage (for men!) the right to bare arms and for a national parliament for all Germans to be represented in a parliament.

A mass insurrections in Berlin and other German cities brought together the Frankfurt National Assembly. It revealed the key role that the radical intelligentsia had played in the revolution when the parliament met, packed as it was with professors, teachers and well-educated men with degrees (quite rare for 1848). However, it took no serious measures to seize power and was eventually dispersed in May 1849 by Prussian soldiers. The power of the Prussian aristocracy and the military was re-established.

In Austria, when news broke of the revolution in Paris, an uprising occurred Vienna. University students, threw up barricades, took over the inner city, and opened the gates to columns of workers from the suburbs. The Emperor Ferdinand?s chief minister, the arch reactionary Prince Metternich was forced to flee to England. Austria too awaited the deliberations of the constituent assembly in Frankfurt. After the revolt of the Hungarians against the Habsburgs regime, in October 6 a new uprising occurred in Vienna. As in Paris it took three days for general Windischgrätz to repress it brutally. Eventually there was return to power of the conservative monarchy.

Results and Lessons Learned

The struggles in the German speaking lands are notable for the introduction to the political scene of Karl Marx, editor of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung? an organ that he used as a platform for his radical communist views.

Engels described the scene: ?On the outbreak of the February Revolution, the German Communist Party, as we called it, consisted only of a small core, the Communist League, which was organised as a secret propaganda society. The League was secret only because at that time no freedom of association or assembly existed in Germany. Besides the workers? associations abroad, from which it obtained recruits, it had about thirty communities, or sections, in the country itself and, in addition, individual members in many places. This inconsiderable fighting force, however, possessed a leader, Marx, to whom all willingly
Engels himself spent much of 1848-49 involved in the revolutionary struggles in Baden, taking part in the insurrection at Elberfeld. By the time that the counter revolution had regained control, the Neue Rheinische Zeitung was suppressed, but its final headlines carried a ringing call from Marx to carry on the struggle. In bidding you farewell, the editors of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung thank you for the sympathy you have shown them. Their last word everywhere and always will be: emancipation of the working class!? All across Europe the absolutist monarchies had been shaken to their core, either overthrown or kicked off of their thrones for a brief period of democratic rule. Although many of the monarchs had returned, they knew that their power was no longer absolute. The class forces welling up beneath them were set on their defeat and it was only a matter of time. The task now was for the revolutionaries to understand what had happened in the revolution and begin the political preparations for the revolutionary struggles they knew were coming.

Marx and Engels found themselves exiled in Britain. Marx addressed the central committee of the Communist League with an analysis of the failures of the revolutions, caused by a mixture of the fear that the capitalists felt for their own workers and the brutal bloodshed by the generals and monarchs. Marx outlined a strategy that would see the working class, instead of simply letting the capitalists take power, fight for power themselves. While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far - not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world - that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one.

It was this strategy which Trotsky was to later elaborate as the strategy of ‘permanent revolution’, taking the phrase from the address to the Communist League. Against the Stalinists who believed in forging alliances with the ‘progressive bourgeoisie’ Trotsky drew on the lessons of Marx and Engels after 1848 to argue that the working class needed to look to its own strength and resourcefulness to achieve its goals. The fight for real democracy and greater equality would now take place in opposition to the capitalist class, and not with them.

The experience of the revolutionary struggles across Europe was essential for the development of revolutionary socialist politics. The capitalist class was by 1848 a shadow of its previous revolutionary self, too afraid of the working class to fight for serious change, easily defeated by monarchies, their progressive role had been played out. Now the working class would have to emerge onto the political scene, with its own banner, its own programme and its own parties to fight for power and an end to all forms of exploitation.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/1848-%E2%80%93-year-european-upheaval