150 years ago, on 18 March 1871, after France had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian war, the French army planned to disarm the National Guard of Paris and seize 227 artillery pieces that the people of Paris had financed and saved from the invading Germans. The so-called government of national defence was more afraid of the armed masses of the people than of the Prussians besieging Paris. As a result, there was a popular uprising in the city and so began the first attempt to "expropriate the expropriators", as Marx put it.

Marx and Engels followed events in France very closely for two reasons. First, since the 1830s, the country had been a laboratory of class struggles, a testing place for the world's most class-conscious proletariat on the political terrain of two bourgeois political revolutions: that of 1830 and especially that of 1848. Their analysis of the political action of the French working class in the revolution of 1848 and the subsequent counter-revolution allowed them to go beyond the formulations in the "Communist Manifesto" and the "Class Struggles in France" regarding the future state of the proletariat (achievement of full democracy, dictatorship of the proletariat).

Secondly, the "Fathers of Marxism" were by no means neutral towards the war between Prussia and France. Even a victory of the hated Prussia, they argued, would be a step forward because it would unify Germany, even if from above. Overcoming the patchwork of small states in Germany would encourage the growth of the productive forces and the size of the working class. This in turn would advance the possibilities of strengthening workers' organisations.

Nonetheless, the actions of the Paris Commune were of much more direct significance for the strategy and tactics of the communists as well as the Marxist doctrine of the state. Marx and Engels did not hesitate but immediately took sides with the Commune. The insurgent Parisian workers showed the world proletariat the shape of its future form of rule. Those who fell deserve eternal thanks for this!

Seizure of power by the Commune

The Central Committee of the National Guard, heavily proletarianised in the course of the siege of the city and increasingly assuming the role of a political organisation, seized power in Paris and instigated the occupation of the strategically important points of the city as well as the public buildings. Barracks, the police prefecture, the Ministry of Justice and the city hall were occupied within a few hours. Meanwhile, it quickly prepared elections on 26 March for the "Municipal Council of Paris". This elected council formed the Paris Commune of 1871.

The Commune immediately set about overturning social conditions in France. The aim was no longer just to defend the city but, above all, to eliminate the old oppression and secure the rule of the proletariat. For
this goal, the Commune decided on various revolutionary measures including: the replacement of the standing army by the general arming of the people; the handing over of abandoned or disused factories to workers' co-operatives; the remuneration of administrative and government officials at the normal working wage; the election of factory managements directly by the workers; the reduction of working hours; the abolition of the separation of the executive and legislative branches; the immediate recallability of all administrative, judicial and teaching posts and the separation of church and state.

Furthermore, for all services, high and low, it paid only the wages that other workers received. In order to improve the living conditions of the population, which had been severely hammered by the war and the siege, decrees on the retroactive remission of rent due on flats, the halting of sales and the return of pawned objects, as well as the abolition of night work for bakers' assistants, a ban on the termination of tenancy agreements and the abolition of pawnshops, were proclaimed.

The municipality's important achievements also included equality between men and women. Women were given the right to work and equal pay with men for the first time and won other rights such as the equality of legitimate and illegitimate children and the secularisation of educational and nursing institutions. Women and orphans of National Guardsmen who had died in the defence of Paris were now entitled to a pension, regardless of whether they were legitimate or illegitimate. The birth of the Commune was also the birth of the Women's League for the Defence of Paris. The League's programme was one of struggle, urging women, among other things to, "Support the government commissions by serving in nursing, laying mines and building barricades".

Revolution halfway

The commune was made up of a majority of Blanquists who recognised the need to seize political power but, if necessary, this was to be done by a determined minority "which could carry the masses along by its insight and activity and keep power in its hands by strict centralisation" (Anton Pannekoek: "The New Blanquism") until the mass of the population followed it into revolution. They also held the correct view that the bourgeois guards had to be disarmed and the workers armed and organised into a workers' militia.

The minority in the council of the Commune were Proudhonists, most of whom were members of the International Workers' Association (later called the First International) who wanted to subvert capitalism by the peaceful construction of the cooperative system. Thus, they clung to the illusion that they could overcome capitalism peacefully, even though capitalism's army was standing at the gates and had no intention of vying peacefully with the proletariat for power.

Unfortunately, in the weeks that followed, this group was essentially responsible for the economic decrees that led to serious political mistakes and resulted in the bloody suppression of the first workers' government after only 72 days. A decisive mistake was the failure to occupy the main post office and, above all, the Bank of France. The Bank's cash balance on 20 March was 2.2 billion francs. What a sum! Particularly when the National Assembly, which had fled to Versailles, left just 4.6 million francs to the Commune, which had to guarantee the work of the public services and the salaries of the 170,000-strong National Guard!

Another mistake was that the bourgeois press, which was not only reactionary but openly propagated the overthrow of the Commune, was allowed to work unmolested even after 18 March. Only in the last days of the Commune were all bourgeois papers gradually banned. Too late, however, came the realisation that war had to be waged on all fronts.

In this respect, the counter-revolution was more purposeful: the newspapers of the Commune were
banned in Versailles. The poison of bourgeois propaganda in the newspapers had a particular effect on the petty bourgeoisie, most of whom turned their backs on the Commune or were reluctant and reticent to support the defence of Paris.

Elsewhere, too, the commune was to dig its own grave through a hesitant attitude or, better, through a misunderstanding of the political situation. Immediately after 18 March, the situation was favourable, since the national government in Versailles had only 12,000 exhausted and demoralised soldiers, and they were on the brink of defecting to the National Guard and could have dealt the counterrevolution a death blow with a military offensive against Versailles. In the event, Versailles was given enough time to reorganise militarily and to ally itself with the Prussians, with whom it had shortly before fought a bloody war, in order to facilitate the return of prisoners of war.

The week of blood

The offensive of the counter-revolution was not long in coming. From 20 May onwards, some 20,000 well-equipped soldiers marched into Paris, forcing the workers and the National Guard to retreat. The bourgeoisie's bloodbath cost the lives of 30,000 workers and condemned 40,000 prisoners, exiles and deportees to forced labour. That is why the period between 21 and 28 May became known as "Blood Week" in the memory of the international workers' movement, one of the biggest massacres in its history.

The last meeting of the Commune took place on 25 May 1871. The last barricade was captured on 28 May. Although the Commune was drowned in blood, it has since become an indelible model and challenge for the worldwide socialist movement. Because of its valuable experience, the worldwide organisation of workers advanced both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Above all, the alliance of France and Prussia, united by the fear of a proletariat claiming power, showed the need to organise the working class worldwide. Marx drew an even more important lesson from the experience: "The Commune has given proof that the working class cannot simply take possession of the ready-made state machine and set it in motion for its own purposes." This provided an answer, a positive content, to the proposition he had put forward in the "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in 1851/52, namely that the proletariat must not be content with merely taking possession of the existing state power, the bourgeois state machinery must be smashed and replaced by a new, proletarian state power. The Paris Commune was the first dictatorship of the proletariat in the capital of France and the first counter-government in an entire country.

With the Paris Commune, the form of such a proletarian state, was seen for the first time. Unlike the bureaucratic and military state of the bourgeoisie which, whether with a parliamentary façade or not, is inextricably linked to the rule of capital through thousands of links, the Commune is a form of state and rule that secures the power of the working population. It is also a form that makes possible the transition to a new, ultimately classless, society. It is a state that can and will die off, wither away, in the course of the development of a new socialist mode of production and finally disappear with the development of the classless society itself.

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