

REVOLUTIONS REVISITED

PARTY and COMMUNE

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The first state the workers tried to build was the Paris commune of 1871.

The commune made its own laws and also carried them out. The members were elected by the people of the different wards of Paris, and it was in permanent session.

- The commune attempted to abolish taxes and meet the expenses of administration by levies on the rich. Houses and buildings were requisitioned for the homeless, care of the poor and the sick was assured.
- The abandoned factories were to be placed under workers' control, for revival, if possible. Night-work was to be restricted and the collection of fines stopped. Large-scale industry and manufacture was to be organized through workers' associations at the factory, and one of the aims of industrial policy was the formation of a federation of associations.
- The debts arising from hypothecation of land were cancelled, a measure greatly beneficial to the peasantry. War indemnity, another burden on the peasantry, was not accepted.
- Rents and debts were frozen and only the principal declared returnable over three years (a great benefit for the small businesses and the middle classes).
- The commune declared the standing army to be disbanded, and replaced it with the newly recruited National Guard (mainly workers with an extra allowance) in Paris and a National Militia in the rural departments.. The National Guard was to preserve the arms they carried, choose their own officers, and avail of the right to recall if they lost confidence in the officers. The police was converted into paid employees of the commune. Judges, too, were elected and paid by the commune. No official or member of the commune could be paid a salary higher than workers' emoluments. The right to recall applied to everybody.
- Public education was to be open to all. The Church was delinked from education and all other lay matters, and was not to be supported by taxation of the public.

Of the 90 members of the commune, 25 were workers, 13 were members of the central committee of the National Guard, —15 were members of the International Workingmen's Association (in which Marx was corresponding secretary for Germany, Engels for Belgium).

Apart from the members of this Association (in the commune they were mainly Proudhonists, upholders of a 'socialism' of petty production, and opponents of associations of workers in factories and federations of associations), there were Blanquists (highly disciplined, organised secretly, almost conspiratorially, for direct action against the state). The Internationalists and Blanquists made up ~25% of the members of the commune, the majority of members being under the influence of the idealism of the Jacobins of the French revolution. Thousands of men and women debated politics and economics day and night in one meeting after another. Municipal elections were held in the midst of the civil war. It was found that all over France there still existed 35,000 communes, returning 700,000 councillors, of whom only 8000 belonged to the reactionary coalition of Legitimists, Orleanists and Bonapartists.

Apart from the numerical weakness and unpreparedness of the workers at that point of history and the general untidiness of thought and inconsistency characteristic of petty-bourgeois influence, the defeat of the commune was compounded by a lack of correct understanding of the nature of the state and underestimation of the strength of the forces of reaction which had grouped around Thiers at Versailles to act as cat's paw for the Prussian army.

1. When Thiers fled with the army, they were not pursued. The commune did not prepare adequately for the return of the reactionary forces or a siege.
Then, and later, the commune and the National Guard failed to smash the regrouping of the bourgeois state at Versailles. This was, of course, a difficult task because of the presence of the Prussian army, which declared war on the commune when it seemed that Thiers might not be able to defeat the commune.
2. The Bank of France was not taken over.
3. There was no co-ordination with the poor peasants, at least three months would have been required to talk with them and network with the communes set up in rural areas and towns (Lyons and Marseilles set up communes, which were crushed by Thiers' army).

While the commune did make political mistakes, the alignment and relative strength of class forces was not in favour of revolution at the time. For the commune to win, the old state had to be smashed completely and a new proletarian state set up. Backed as it was by the victorious Prussian army, Versailles couldn't be crushed by Paris alone. Before the Paris commune could win over the peasants and consolidate itself as a state in confederation with communes all over France, it was destroyed by the alliance of Prussian junkers, the French bourgeoisie and the French monarchists.

On the positive side, the Paris Commune demonstrated the capability of the workers to organise themselves in locally elected committees with regional committees at different levels formed by delegation, right up to the national level, the committees combining legislative and executive functions, and protected by the armed people, organised as a workers' army with democratic internal functioning through elected committees and elected officers, all subject to recall.

The main point was control of the commune-state, including the workers' army, by the worker masses through the grassroots level elected committees, members being subject to recall.

And all this had been achieved without a communist party, which, however, neither proves the 'This was fortunate' type of comment, nor the 'This is why such serious political mistakes were made' type. But, one thing is true. The level, scale and quality of the critical comments handled by the commune could never have been allowed in the communist parties the world has seen, nor would any such party have accepted the degree of control of the working masses over the commune. The commune was not only a workers' dictatorship, it was a workers' democracy, too, and a pluralistic one to boot.

THE SOVIETS

The next attempt by workers to build a state occurred in Russia in 1917. Once again, the workers organised themselves in commune-like structures. Only now they were called Soviets. The first Soviets were called Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' deputies. Soviets of Peasants' deputies were soon set up but didn't have too much influence. At the first Congress of Peasants, in May, 537 out of 1115 delegates belonged to the SR. Only 14 were Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were in a minority in the 1st all-Russia Congress of Soviets, but had a majority among the workers' sections in August. The all-Russia Conference of factory committees of Petrograd elected a central council with a Bolshevik majority. Just before the revolution, this central council had among its 167 delegates 96 Bolsheviks, 24 SRs, 13 Anarchists, 7 Mensheviks. The Petrograd Soviet was the most powerful of the Soviets between February and November, 1917, and the power of the Kerensky government depended to some extent on the partial support extended to it by the Petrograd Soviet.

Deputies to the Soviets were locally elected and Soviet power was based on the armed masses. Lenin expected the Soviets to replace the police by the people's militia, the standing army by the armed people, and the bureaucracy by elected officials, subject to recall and paid at the rate of the workers' wages.

The Soviets were set up by the people. The Bolshevik party saw and seized on their significance and supported the slogan 'All power to the Soviets'. But the Soviets had not been set up by the Bolsheviks, overtly or covertly. In fact, the Bolsheviks were a minority in the Soviets at first, and, at one stage when power stagnated in the hands of the revisionists and SRs, withdrew the slogan 'All power to the Soviets'. As their slogan of land and peace caught the attention of the masses, the idea of revolution accepted by the workers and soldiers, and the seriousness with which the Bolsheviks carried out organisational work led to an effective influence on the masses and their activity far beyond their numbers, the balance of power within the Soviets shifted from the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries to the Bolsheviks. The Soviets held two All-Russia Congress of Soviets between February and November. The political affiliation of the deputies makes interesting reading.

The Second Congress of Soviets elected finally a central executive committee with 62 Bolsheviks, 29 Left SRs and 10 other Socialists (the Right SRs and Mensheviks walked out in protest against the insurrection).

The revolution occurred while the Second Congress was in session. The Bolsheviks had restored the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets.' Bolshevik Red Guards, the workers and soldiers of Petrograd and Kronstadt, and the armed masses occupied building after building till the Winter Palace of the Romanov kings of Russia fell early in the morning. Most of the Mensheviks and SRs had withdrawn from the Congress of Soviets, which, composed mostly of Bolsheviks, assumed state power. To carry out the tasks of government, the Congress elected a Council of People's Commissars.

The facts show how the Bolsheviks, the party of revolution, won the support of the people in the industrial centres and the garrisons. A temporary alliance with the Left SRs extended the support base to the villages. The Bolsheviks had well-thought-out definite goals, political, social and economic, an objective assessment of the situation in Russia, an appropriate programme, and a call to rally the people, a disciplined organisation to carry out specific tasks, an experienced, trusted, and democratic leadership, cool-headed, yet audacious enough to prepare meticulously for insurrection when that was the task of the day. The Soviets united the people against the enemy, gave them the confidence to fight and chose their leaders. As the Kerensky government dithered, the Soviets had to shoulder some administrative tasks, too—a dual state power. The party brought the Soviets behind the banner of revolution, but the actual preparation for revolution and the execution of the insurrection could not be taken up by the Congress of Soviets. It required a party committed to revolution and preparing for it from day one. In Petrograd the Bolsheviks acted through the Military Revolutionary committee of the Petrograd Soviet.

After the revolution, an increase in inner-Party democracy and a significant and increasing role in the administration for the Soviets might have been expected. This did not happen. The central EC of the congress of Soviets was supposed to promulgate decrees, orders and instructions. The Congress of Soviets was to be the supreme authority and the EC would stand in when the Congress was not in session. In practice, the Council of People's Commissars gave itself the power to make laws and took administrative decisions, side-lining the EC. The EC was supposed to be in continuous session, but actually it elected a Presidium which discharged its functions. In 1921 the EC did not meet more than thrice. The Congress of Soviets was to meet every three months. From 1918 the period became one year. Administration and governance became the tasks of the Council of People's Commissars, and actually the Bolshevik party called all the shots, omnipresent as it was and obeyed by the toiling masses.

Immediately after victory, the party tried to delegate the responsibility of running the factories to the factory committees. But, these committees had factory-centric vision regarding what to produce, whom to sell to, and at what price. Even the existence of the All-Russia Council of Factory Committees could not induce a broader vision. For the task of organising nation-wide accounting and control, Councils of Workers' Control were created under the All-Russia Council of Workers' Control (in which there were only 5 workers from the factory committees and five from the EC of the Soviets, the two together

outnumbered by trades union representatives). Even then, the co-ordination of large-scale production into a centralised control by the workers over the country-wide production and distribution of goods could not be organised, and the councils of workers' control were subordinated to the economic councils under the supreme economic council, overseen directly by the council of commissars, these councils consisting of representatives of various people's commissariats and technical experts. Later came the State Planning Commission, the *Gosplan*, which partly replaced the supreme economic council.

The lack of organisers with the necessary political vision among the working class led to its relinquishing the power of directing the social organisation of production. Instead, experts, even bourgeois experts, enjoying high salaries were brought in and a bureaucratisation crept into social organisation of the productive forces. Factories were brought under one-man management enforcing strict discipline to show a profit. An army was set up with privileges for officers, including the salute and special forms for addressing 'superiors.' Officers' training schools were set up which inculcated what were practically bourgeois values. A political police was set up, the *Cheka*. The main characteristics of the Paris Commune were given up.

Lenin noted bureaucratic distortions creeping into the Soviets and the party. The Soviets had become institutions for the people, not of the people, by the people. In fact, they had been subordinated to and supplanted by the Ministries, the Council of People's Commissars. The party held real power, and there developed a one-way traffic, the party was to lead the people. Lenin was concerned also about the reverse traffic, rectification of the party, and was quite agreeable to involve the non-party masses in identifying time-servers and opportunists within the party, but the possibility of ordinary workers actually directing the policies of the 'workers' party' ended with his death. Stalin gave a theoretical justification for political domination by the party and practically identified party rule with the dictatorship of the proletariat.

THE SHANGHAI COMMUNE

The 1967 workers' upsurge in Shanghai took the name *Commune*, but actually it was an advanced people's committee of the great proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was launched almost single-handedly by Mao Zedong to defeat the bureaucratic veterans like Teng Hsiao Ping, who were following the capitalist road of Liu Shao Chi. The need to save the party from the Russian type of degeneration into a 'mutual profits club', serving as the political wing of the state bourgeoisie, was there, but the movement exploded into a class struggle against bureaucrat bourgeoisie everywhere. Mao had asked for a peaceful movement, but he had underestimated the pressure of muffled discontent which had built up in society, especially the young who had nothing to compare the present with, nothing compared to which the present was an improvement. The students and youth responded overwhelmingly to Mao's call of "Bombard the headquarters", and criticised bureaucratic veterans at school, the neighbourhood, and the town or village. There were armed, bloody clashes between the forces of vested interests and the Left, and between different factions of the Left. Mao had to bring in the Red army to preserve peace, although the army bureaucrats were capitalist-roaders, too, as shown after Mao's death when the army generals securitized Teng Hsiao Ping's ascent to the dragon throne.

Shanghai was the first major town whose workers accepted the GPCR (after an initial blank - not more than 1000-2000 workers turned out when Chang Chun Chiao, secretary of the Shanghai party committee, first met them regarding the GPCR) and started fighting the bourgeois politicians in power locally. A million workers gathered together in the city square at one stage. University students met the workers regularly at the docks and the station. The capitalist roaders tried to use a few misled workers to start a movement for material benefits, but the movement soon petered out, and they had to resign their posts.

The Shanghai Commune was, of course, not really a commune. The Red Army was directed to keep an eye on the protection of Chang Chun Chiao. So, the standing army remained standing by, it was very much there. The power of the Shanghai Commune was derived from the party-dominated state and not

the proletarian masses of Shanghai. The importance of the Shanghai Commune lay in that it had raised the matter of the commune-state, that is the question of transformation of a party-dominated polity to a proletarian mass - dominated one.

In any case, however, right from the start of the GPCR, people had taken up arms, and, in Shanghai they were used in bitter fights among different factions of the Left. The Red Army was supposed to protect Peking's own Left faction - the Workers' Headquarters, organised by a young textile worker Wang HongWen, and allied with other organisations supporting Chang Chun Chiao. Documents with less than 100% provenance but with much internal and mutual consistency suggest that Mao was strongly opposed to the more extreme Left groups who were raising slogans like, 'Doubt everything, overthrow everything', (Mao called this anarchist) "Do away with governmental heads of section/department" (Mao called it reactionary), in Shanghai, and "Everything about the present day dictatorship of the proletariat must be changed"(a reactionary slogan according to Mao) in Honan. Mao was worried at the protests against military seizure of the radio station and military occupation of the airfield.

Although the Paris commune had been referred to in the Sixteen Articles of the GPCR, Mao comes out critical of some ideas of the commune.

He thought the commune structure was weak in the matter of suppressing counter-revolutionaries, and expresses surprise that, in Shanghai, accused are said to walk into the bureau of public security through one door and walk out through another. He pinpoints the vagueness about the form and content of a country-wide structure of communes.

It is clear that Mao was surprised at the volume and ferocity of the people's attack on the party bureaucracy, though he had himself identified the latter as the headquarters of the bourgeoisie and the target of the class struggle. He didn't want the party to disintegrate. He emphasized the fact that 95% of the masses can be won over, after which 95% of the cadre will follow the revolutionaries. There appeared no answer to the way in which the new, young Left thrown up by the cultural revolution were to pursue and crystallize the new politics of class struggle in the period after the social revolution. The revolutionary students and youth were told to return to their schools and organise in cultural revolution groups at their schools. In general, cultural revolutionary work was sought to be restricted to local limits. It was back to the party, now that the headquarters of the capitalist roaders had been smashed and the capitalist-roaders were soundly defeated inside the party for the time being. This, as the future showed, was far from an accurate evaluation ; they were only waiting for Mao's death.

Mao had raised one important criticism of the commune: its weakness in suppressing the enemy. Indeed, Lenin ignored his own writings on the lessons from the commune and initiating the building of a Red Army (Trotsky was given charge of this) (This was the army which repulsed Hitler). Mao never wavered in his view that without a people's army the people have no power politically. The commune was clearly against standing armies and for an armed people. It is also to be noted that neither in Russia nor in China was there any general arming of the people.

It is interesting to see how, to save the idea of the party, while countering the Shanghai workers on the question of the commune and the party, Mao, the arch-revolutionary and anti-revisionist, questions the commune, considered to be one of the basic pillars of Marx's ideas :

"If everything were changed into commune, then what about the party? Where would we place the party? Among commune committee members are both party members and non-party members. Where would we place the party committee? There must be a party somehow! There must be a nucleus, no matter what we call it. Be it called the Communist party, or social democratic party, or Kuomintang, or I-kuan-tao, it must have a party. The commune must have a party, but can the commune replace the party?"

These are questions which the Chinese workers could not solve before Mao died and the bourgeoisie led by the capitalist-roaders inside the party defeated them and went on to change the colour of the Chinese state. These are questions which are founded in the basic dialectics of the workers and their party, and, as such, are important from day one, and should not be ignored as being relevant on a future date, after the revolution. The very nature of the revolution and its outcome and durability depend on the answers the workers find to these questions. □□□