

COMMENT

Marking 140th Anniversary

DESPITE THE SAD DEMISE OF Soviet socialism Paris Commune continues to inspire communists, socialists and all progressive humanity throughout the world. And they are justified in celebrating the 140th anniversary of Paris Commune this year as a milestone in revolutionary history. When toilers in their masses in their millions finally break free of the constraints that have kept them from rising up against their oppressors and tormentors, then whether or not their heroic struggle and sacrifice will really lead to a fundamental change, moving toward abolition of all exploitation and oppression depends on whether or not there is a proper leadership. And Paris Commune was defeated because of leadership crisis but its spirit is not dead.

17,000 communards-supporters of the Commune-were summarily executed. Many of these judicial murders took the form of workers, both men and women, being shot by firing squad in Pere Lachaise cemetery. The wall against which they were stood is still there, opposite the graves of successive leaders of the French Communist Party, and it remains a site of pilgrimage for revolutionaries and progressives from around the world.

By the time the last barricades had fallen, in the north-east of the city, working-class political power in Paris had been in place for some two and half months. There is a song which remains popular to this day among advanced French workers : *Les 72 Jours de la Commune [The Commune's 72 Days]*. The ferocity of the ruling class and its army in the final week was surely a measure of its tremendous fear.

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For generations now, the Commune has come to represent the possibility of a different society, one which is truly democratic and participative, one in which those who produce the wealth hold sway over the state and over an economy planned in the interests of human need rather than private greed.

It also came to represent the internationalism of the French workers, which elected a number of foreign workers to the Commune. And, while symbolically burning the guillotine in public on April 6, as a repudiation of the Terror, it went on to demolish the chapel built in memory of Louis XVI after his execution.

The weaknesses of the Commune in no way dim the bright vision held out in Paris during that spring of 1871, the vision of a revolutionary, socialist alternative to the exploitation of man by man.

Another French song ends with the declaration: *La Commune n'est pas morte! The Commune is not dead!*