

The March Past

By HENRY SARA.

"Past sorrows, let us moderately lament them;
For those to come, seek wisely to prevent them."
—John Webster.

IT is said of the month of March that it comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. The phrase could almost be applied to the Paris Commune of 1871. For in telling the story of the Commune one has to tell of the rise of the workers of Paris and of other parts of France; they rose like lions, but they were slaughtered like sheep.

In the heart of Leningrad stands the old Winter Palace of the Tsars. To-day its great halls, ante-rooms and dark passages are open to the sightseer. No aristocrats lounge about; no court flunkies, footmen, or servants are to be seen. No luxurious motor cars drive to, or away from, its gates with "ladies and gentlemen." Now it is an exhibition, not an Empire Exhibition, not a Russian Wembley, but a proletarian revolutionary history museum. Here is a space in the great throne room; the great hall which was used for the old State functions, Court Levees and grand balls; the Great Throne Hall of the "Tsars of all the Russias," now dedicated to the history of the Workers' International; here in this space are set relics of the Paris Commune of 1871. The tattered red flags which the Communards bore and defended so bravely; the manifestoes they placarded on the walls of "their" city; actual photographs of the men and women who so heroically put their words into actions.

It is fitting that the memory of the Communards is recorded in the International Section, for it is out of their struggles, defeat and suffering that one of the greatest lessons of working class history was learned. Did not their efforts uncover what had previously been hidden? And because they brought fresh guidance in the struggle of the workers against the capitalists, their deeds live in our memories, for they taught not only the workers of France but the workers of the world.

No one, of course, will pretend that the workers everywhere understand this. How could they? The schools of the capitalists have taught the workers' children little or nothing about the Commune. The cheap popular histories have distorted the facts of the conditions of Paris in 1871 in such a way that no-

thing but hatred can be expected for the Communards. The bourgeois historians have painted the whole series of incidents of those March days as something loathsome. Sensational hack writers or Liberal professors, their tales are very similar. For an example of this method of distorting the facts of the Paris Commune and Communards one can consult James Harvey Robinson's "History of Western Europe":

"Immediately after the surrender of Paris the new republican government had been called upon to subdue a terrible insurrection of the Parisian populace. The insurgents re-established the Commune of the Reign of Terror, and rather than let Paris come again into the hands of the national government, they proposed to burn the city. When, after two months of disorder, their forces were completely routed in a series of bloody street fights, the city was actually set on fire; but only two important buildings were destroyed—the Palace of the Tuileries and the city hall."

No explanation can be given for these statements on the grounds of brevity. They are not due to condensation, but class bias. And more than anything else it is the bourgeois class bias against the Paris Commune that we must combat. Unfortunately our literature is not rich regarding the real history of the Commune. True, there is the remarkable work of Marx, but not easily obtainable in English, with the important introduction of Engels. We have no complete translation of the correspondence of the International during the period, with the result that the Anarchists have circulated stupid charges against both Engels and Marx, which are not easily refuted. And the vital lessons of the Commune have frequently been lost sight of through the Social-Democratic method of the interpretation of Marxism. Happily Lenin's analysis and study of Marx, the March revolution and the November revolution of 1917, the operation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the positive proof of its success, the attacks upon that dictatorship by the Kautskys, MacDonalds, Longuets, the brilliant replies by Lenin, Trotsky, Radek and others, have all been factors in enabling us the better to appreciate the Commune. Now he who runs may read. No longer is it possible to treat the Commune as a rhetorical theme for a speech. It is something connected with our lives. It has its proper place as one of the greatest efforts to establish workers' power in working class history.

It is no longer possible for subtle writers to pen their theories in an annual effort to glorify the class struggle of 1871 the better to cover up the class struggle of to-day. To think of the Commune of '71 is to think of our struggles of the present, not merely nationally, but internationally.

Russia—and the Lesson.

Russia, at least, has learned the lessons of the Commune. The story of Russia's part in the war of 1914 is a story of in-

famy on the part of the government class of that formerly despotic land. Lord French in his book "1914," page 195, says:

"... We had never foreseen how unstable and unreliable a country must be whose ruler and government are absolutely despotic and in no way representative of the will of the people. Worse than this the governing classes in Russia were saturated with disloyalty and intrigue in the most corrupt form. But for the black treachery the war would have been ended successfully at the latest in the spring of 1917. How could such a people successfully withstand the strain of so mighty a clash of arms, especially when the immense foreign loans and the placing of enormous contracts brought grist to the mills of that corrupt mass of financiers whose business in life was only to fatten on the misfortunes of their fellow creatures?"

In March the middle class came into power. Attempts were made to carry on the war, with disastrous results to the workers and peasants. The workers smashed Tsardom—the middle class betrayed the workers. Similarly of the Commune of Paris, 1871, Lissagary writes:

"The revolutionists of the provinces showed themselves everywhere completely disorganised, without any faculty to wield power. Everywhere victorious at the outset, the workmen had only known how to pronounce for Paris. But at least they showed some vitality, generosity and pride. Eighty years of bourgeois domination had not been able to transform them into a nation of mercenaries; while the Radicals, who either combatted or held aloof from them, once more attested the decrepitude, the egotism of the middle class, always ready to betray the working men to the 'upper' classes."

Fortunately Lenin, the Marxist, brought to bear upon the workers' and peasants' problem the lessons of the Commune. He applied Marxism; aimed at putting power into the hands of the workers; disarmed the bourgeois, armed the proletariat; set up the dictatorship of the workers, and in place of wholesale massacre of the working class and a blood-drunk debauchery by the types of butchers that slaughtered the Communards, the proletariat of the U.S.S.R. are now happily free from the old despotism.

Yet in the face of these obvious facts we are told by Karl Kautsky in his volume on "The Labour Revolution": "We have merely to read what Marx has written, without being influenced by Lenin's interpretation." The advice was a little too late for Russia. Let us hope that it will be ignored everywhere else.

Great Britain—and the Lesson.

There are twelve men in prison for upholding the traditions of the Communards. That they have not been put against a wall and shot is not so much due to the fact that the British capitalist class has finer feelings than the old French bourgeois, but because of expediency. The twelve have a bitter enemy in the present Home Secretary, and his type is to be found in

the history of the Commune. He plays delightfully upon "mob" psychology and in doing so exposes most fully the hypocrisy of the "British" mind, which serves to cover the actions not only of his own class and the middle class, but that host of respectable "Labour leaders" with which the workers of this country are burdened and who are so splendidly portrayed in the paragraph from Lissagary quoted above.

For instance, "our" Home Secretary is a great defender of God, and objects strongly to the preaching of "hatred of our God."

On the other hand, however, he says: "I preach no gospel of content." "I would that every man in England should be discontented with his lot," and "do all that lies in his power to make his own condition, his wife's condition and his family's condition and the world's condition better rather than worse for his having lived in it."

"Liberty and Freedom are the watchwords of Great Britain. Where the flag of Great Britain waves no man can be sold into slavery."

That is for the consumption of one type of audience. For another he takes a different line as follows:

"We did not conquer India for the benefit of the Indians. I know it is said at missionary meetings that we conquered India to raise the level of the Indians. That is cant. We conquered India as the outlet for the goods of Great Britain. We conquered India by the sword and by the sword we shall hold it. (Shame.) Call shame if you like. I am stating facts. I am interested in missionary work in India, and have done much work of that kind, but I am not such a hypocrite as to say that we hold India for the Indians. We hold it as the finest outlet for British goods in general, and for Lancashire cotton goods in particular."

This man who can describe so vividly the brutality of the British governing class in conquering India by the sword and holding India down by the sword is indignant with the British section of the Communist International because it is engaged in activities in that part of the British Empire!

Why has such a man power?

Why are these phrases of constitutionalism repeated by the leaders of Labour?

The study of the Commune will help to answer such questions.

It is customary in certain quarters of the Labour movement to speak of the Communist Party of Great Britain as though its members were made up of ignorant boys and girls who have come under the spell of some foreign gang of con-

spirators. Nothing can better dispel such an absurdity than a brief reference to the little year book which used to be published by the Social-Democrats in this country. Take the 1914 issue and turn to the page for March. Under the heading "Things for the working class to remember," we read of trials for sedition, massacres of the workers, general strikes, convictions for complicity in riots and insurrections. We are even asked to remember assassinations! These at that time were judged as incidents in the class struggle to be taken notice of by the workers for their own guidance in the coming struggle. That was in 1914. We were asked to remember that: "Sunday, 15th March, 1913, Will Thorne declined to meet the King at Chingford."

But the Communist has also to remember that in 1917 the papers recorded the incidents in the life of the same William Thorne on quite different lines:

"Recent landmarks in Mr. Thorne's life are the zest with which he entered his country's service on the outbreak of war, his recruiting campaigns in all parts of the country, the earnestness of his patriotic efforts, his denunciations of the pacifist element in the Labour Party, his visit to Russia, and, what is historically the most memorable event of all, his notable interview with the King at Buckingham Palace."

In this paragraph we have the whole problem of the Labour movement summed up, the present great sore, **class collaboration**.

The lesson from the Paris Commune for Great Britain at this time is the danger of class collaboration; the need for a proletarian party; the closest possible International connections.

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Trotsky has told the story of his walks with Lenin in London. How Lenin said: "That is **their** Westminster Abbey." He thought of these "sights" as the possessions of the bourgeoisie. Lenin knew that though the workers had laboured on these treasures they belonged to the enemy.

In imagination we see Lenin in the cemetery of Père Lachaise, standing bareheaded in memory of those Communards who fell in the battle of the working class. He would say too, as we say, "Vive la Commune!"

And of the Wall of the Communards: "That is **our** Wall!"