

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7293>



Book review

The Paris Commune: an ode to emancipation

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Thursday 2 September 2021

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THE PARIS COMMUNE: An ode to emancipation

Resistance Books (London), IIRE (Amsterdam) 2021.

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RRP: £12, Euros15, \$18 (print)

Order from Resistance Books [here](#).

In this time of despair in South Africa and the world, where we are seeing xenophobia as a dominating factor in our society. In this time where over 2.8 million workers have lost their jobs, and the unemployment rate in South Africa is the highest in the world amongst emerging economies. In this time where over 10 million people in South Africa get to bed hungry every week and 3 million of these are children; where the producers of food (farm workers) cannot even afford to buy the food that they themselves produce. In this time where austerity policies and budget cuts are the order of the day, and society still more than ever relies on the unpaid work and exploitation of women. In this time, *The Paris Commune: An Ode to Emancipation* reminds us that there are a lot of lessons we can draw from the Paris Commune of 1871.

Unity in action

The book serves as a beginners guide to the Paris Commune. It clearly explains the Commune as a movement of self-emancipation, self-organisation and initiative from below. No party attempted to take the place of the popular classes; no vanguard wanted to "take power" in place of the workers. I guess this is also a warning against the vanguardist politics and opportunism that seem to rise and hijack working class organisations. The book further reminds us that the Commune of 1871 was a pluralist and unitary movement, in which the partisans of Proudhon or (more rarely) of Marx, libertarians and Jacobins, Blanquists and "social republicans" all participated.

There were arguments and different views, sometimes even ideological conflicts in the democratically elected bodies of the Commune. However, in practice they acted as one, respected each other, and focused their fire on the enemy and not on the comrade in struggle, with whom they may have had disagreements. The ideological dogmas of each mattered less than the common objectives: social emancipation, the abolition of class privileges. And this is the greatest lesson the fragmented Left in South Africa can learn from and draw on in the effort to unite the Left.

Internationalism and empowerment of women

While we are seeing narrow nationalism and xenophobia as scapegoats for socio-economic conditions in South Africa, the book reminds us that the commune was an authentically internationalist movement. Fighters from several countries participated. The Commune elected a Polish revolutionary (Dombrowicz) to the leadership of its militia; a Hungarian-German worker (Leo Frankel) was Commissar of Labour. Of course, resistance to the Prussian occupation played a decisive role in triggering the Commune, but the appeal of the French insurgents to the people and to German social democracy, inspired by the utopian vision of the "United States of Europe", testifies to this internationalist consciousness. So in building working class power, the working class need to think beyond narrow nationalism and xenophobia.

Regardless of the weight of patriarchy in popular culture, the book reminds us, the Commune was distinguished by the active and combative participation of women. The libertarian activist Louise Michel and the Russian revolutionary Elisabeth Dmitrieff are among the best known, but thousands of other women - designated with rage and hatred as pétroleuses (fire-raisers) by the Versailles reactionaries - took part in the fighting of April-May 1871.

Democracy

One of the most remarkable and significant aspects of the Commune was its profoundly democratic character. The Commune's elected officials were subject to immediate recall. No public official would be paid more than the average wages of a skilled worker. This tells us about the character and attitude one must present to win working class power. We need to disabuse ourselves from being absorbed by capital, and we need to go back to the tradition where union officials are paid no more than the highest paid worker in the factory.

Relations of production

In addition, workers had the right to establish cooperatives in workshops and factories deserted by their owners. In fact, many cooperatives were actually established. In this period today of high retrenchments and companies moving to other countries, the book reminds us of worker-controlled cooperatives.

It also notes that social and economic relations surrounding the lives of the Communards seemed to many craftsmen to mesh well with the vision of independent craftsmen and the project of worker cooperatives that Proudhon had promoted. Significantly, the French workers' movement was divided until at least the time of the Commune. On the one hand were "collectivists", favouring the abolition of private property. On the other hand were those seeing the solution to capitalist exploitation in the establishment of worker-owned cooperatives that would replace private capitalist ownership.

The state

The Commune's lesson regarding the state was that, as it takes power, the working class could not simply take hold of the state machinery of the old regime and wield it for its own purposes. That state must be smashed and a new one built on different foundations. This is exactly what the Commune did when it suppressed the standing (bourgeois) army and government and replaced them with a government and an armed force controlled by the producers themselves, in spite of all the contradictions between these measures and the ideological and programmatic convictions of most Communard leaders.

This leads us to an important discussion which the South African Left needs to have around a workers' party in South Africa. Should we contest elections with it now, within the current state, and sit in this bourgeois parliament? Or do we continue to build movements of the working class until we are able to abolish the state for working class power?

An unprecedented historical moment

The Paris Commune: an ode to emancipation

The book draws our attention, to Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky's criticism of certain political or strategic errors of the Commune: not taking the money from the Bank of France, not attacking Versailles, waiting for the enemy in the barricades of each neighbourhood. However, the book also reminds us that they [Marx et al] recognised in this event an unprecedented moment in modern history. This was the first attempt to "storm the heavens", the first experience of social and political emancipation of the oppressed classes.

This is a must read in this time of organisational fetishism and disunity of the Left as it serves as agitation and motivation to continue the struggle for working class power.

Source: August/September 2021 [Amandla 77](#).

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