

The Paris Commune 1871





against all the other individuals. Contrary to that authoritarian communist type of thinking—in my opinion completely erroneous—that a Social Revolution can be decreed and organized, whether by a dictatorship or whether by a constituent assembly resulting from some political revolution, our friends, the socialists of Paris, thought that it could not be made or brought to its full development except by the spontaneous and continuous action of the masses, the groups and the associations of the people.

Our friends in Paris were a thousand times right. For indeed, where is that head, however brilliant it may be, or if one wishes to speak of a collective dictatorship, were it formed by many hundreds of individuals endowed with superior faculties, where are those brains powerful enough and wide-ranging enough to embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real interests, aspirations, wishes and needs whose sum total constitutes the collective will of a people, and to invent a social organization which can satisfy everybody? This organization will never be anything but a Procrustean bed which the more or less obvious violence of the State will be able to force unhappy society to lie down on. That is what has always happened until now, and it is precisely this old system of organization by force that the Social Revolution must put an end to, by giving back their complete freedom to the masses, groups, communes, associations, individuals even, and by destroying once and for all the historic cause of all the violent acts, the power, and the very existence, of the State. The State must carry away in its fall all the injustices of the juridical law with all the lies of the various religions, this law and these religions never having been anything but the enforced consecration (as much ideological as actual) of all the violence represented, guaranteed and licensed by the State.

Michael Bakunin, June 1871

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the government and army of Versailles—that is, in order to combat monarchic and clerical reaction, they had to organize themselves in reactionary Jacobin fashion, forgetting or sacrificing what they themselves knew were the first conditions of revolutionary socialism.

Is it not natural that, in such circumstances, the Jacobins, who were the strongest because they constituted the majority in the Commune and who besides this possessed to an infinitely superior degree the political instinct and the tradition and practice of governmental organization, had immense advantages over the socialists? What one must surely find astounding is that they did not take more advantage than they did, that they did not give an exclusively Jacobin character to the Paris rising, and that they allowed themselves, on the contrary, to be carried on into a social revolution.

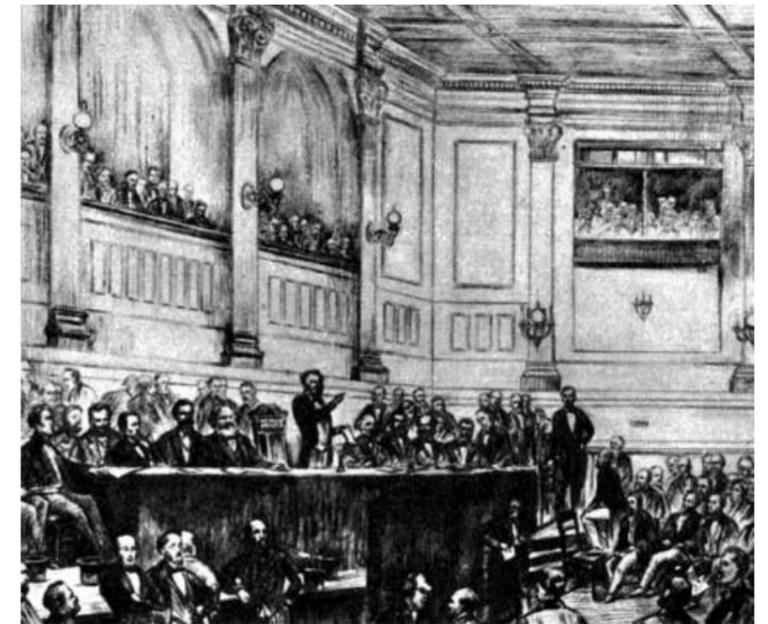
I know that many socialists, very consistent in their theoretical ideas, reproach our Paris friends for not showing themselves sufficiently socialist in their revolutionary practice, while all the loud-mouths of the bourgeois press accuse them on the contrary of having followed their socialist programme only too faithfully. Let us leave these ignominious denunciators from that section of the press on one side for the moment; I should like to make the point to the strict theoreticians of the emancipation of the proletariat that they are unjust to our Paris friends. For between the most precise theories and putting them into practice there is an immense distance which cannot be covered in a few days. Whoever had the good fortune to know Varlin, for instance, to name only one whose death is certain, knows how much the socialist convictions in him and his friends were passionate, considered and profound. These were men whose ardent enthusiasm, devotion and good faith could never have been doubted by any of those who came across them. But precisely because they were men of good faith, they were full of mistrust in themselves when faced with the immense work they had devoted their life and their thought to: they counted for so little!

They had moreover that conviction that in the Social Revolution—diametrically opposed in this as in everything else to the Political Revolution—the action of individuals counted for almost nothing and the spontaneous action of the masses should count for everything. All that individuals can do is to elaborate, clarify and propagate the ideas that correspond to the popular feeling, and, beyond this, to contribute by their ceaseless efforts to the revolutionary organization of the natural power of the masses, but nothing beyond that. And everything else should not and could not take place except by the action of the people themselves. Otherwise one would end with political dictatorship, that is to say, the reconstruction of the State, of the privileges, injustices and all oppressions of the State, and one would arrive by a devious but logical path at the re-establishment of the political, social and economic slavery of the popular masses.

Varlin and all his friends, like all sincere socialists, and in general like all workers born and bred among the people, shared to the highest degree this perfectly legitimate prejudice against the continual intervention of the same individuals, against the domination exerted by superior personages; and since they were fair-minded above all things, they turned this foresight, this mistrust just as much against themselves as



Eugene Varlin



Founding of the International

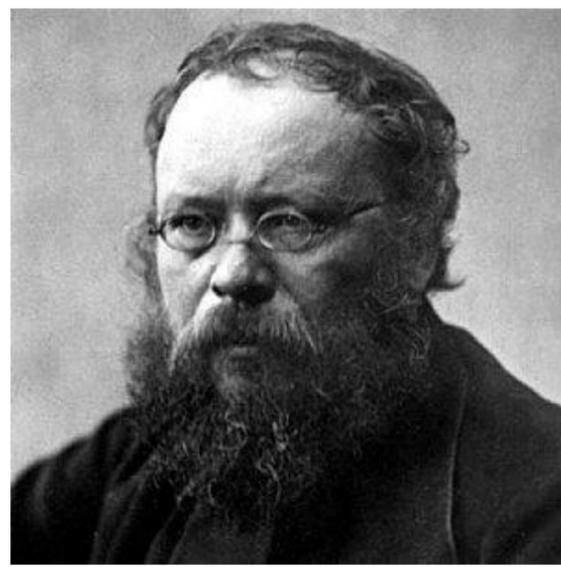
*In this pamphlet on the **Paris Commune**, I have consolidated various articles on the Franco-Prussian War, the First International (International Workingmen's Association), and the Paris Commune. Space limitations prevented me from including anything written by **Eugène Varlin** (1839-1871), an outstanding member of the Paris section, and later federation, of the International. He was a pioneer in the development of a revolutionary socialist current within the International which advocated the abolition of the capitalist state and the creation of an international federation of workers' collectives, a position he described as "collectivism" or "non-authoritarian communism," to distinguish it from the state socialism advocated by the Blanquists and Marxists within the International.*

Varlin was a bookbinder by trade, involved in the revived workers movement in France in the mid-1860s. In February 1864, a group of workers, including Varlin, published their "Manifesto of the Sixty," in which they argued that the workers were "in need of direct representation" from among their own number "in the precincts of the legislative body... the only place where workers could worthily and freely articulate their wishes and stake their own claim to the rights enjoyed by other citizens." The "Sixty" signatories made a point of distancing themselves from the earlier Proudhon, assuring the Manifesto's readers that they were not about to adopt Proudhon's battle cry from the 1848 French Revolution: "What is the worker? Nothing! What should he be? Everything!" For "it is not for us [the workers] to destroy the rights deservedly enjoyed by the middle classes, but rather to secure for ourselves the same freedom to act." Varlin subsequently adopted a more revolutionary position, seeking to achieve socialism through workers' self-management.

Varlin and Nathalie Lemel, who later helped convert Louise Michel to anarchism, participated in the bookbinders' strikes of 1864 and 1865 and were involved in the creation of workers' credit unions, cooperatives and other mutual aid societies. Both were also involved in creating the Paris section of the International in 1865.



Nathalie Lemel



Proudhon

Varlin was among the French delegates to the 1866 Geneva Congress of the First International. Varlin and Antoinette-Marie Bourdon, an engraver from Paris, advocated equal rights for women in opposition to the more conservative Proudhonists, who argued that a woman's place was in the home. Varlin and Bourdon also disputed the position of Proudhon and the majority of the French delegation that the patriarchal family should be primarily responsible for the education of children, arguing that education was a social responsibility. For them, access to education should not be limited by existing inequalities in the means of individual families, and the improvidence and caprice of the children's fathers. They proposed public funding of education, which was to be administered by "truly democratic" communes, because no father had the right to refuse his children an education, while a free and equal society required nothing less.

The growing activity of the International in working class struggles in France resulted in the persecution of the French Internationalists, with 10 members of the Parisian section, including Varlin, being fined 100 francs and sentenced to three months in jail in May 1868. Prior to his imprisonment, Varlin had helped collect funds to assist construction workers in Geneva during their successful strike in March-April 1868 for a 10 hour day and higher wages. He and Lemel had also begun organizing workers' cooperatives, such as the restaurant, La Marmite (the "Cooking Pot"). The statutes for La Marmite provided for the administration of the cooperative's daily affairs by a council of delegates elected by the general assembly of the cooperative's members. These delegates were to be elected for six month terms and subject to recall. The council was to have only administrative powers, with the general assembly making all policy decisions.

Varlin's position on participation in bourgeois politics changed over time. In May 1869, he was still in favour of participation in bourgeois elections, persuading the Paris section of the International to put forward a slate of working class candidates.

At that time, he referred to the advocates of abstention as "proudhoniens enragés" (prior to his death in 1865, Proudhon had advised the workers not to participate in French elections because "under the regime that has ruled over us since 1852, our ideas, if not our persons, have been, so to speak, placed outside of politics, outside of government, outside of the

things. And since there is no revolution without the popular masses, and since these masses today have pre-eminently a socialist instinct and can no longer make any other revolution but an economic and social one, the Jacobins of good faith, allowing themselves to be led on more and more by the logic of the revolutionary movement, will end by becoming socialists in spite of themselves. This was precisely the situation of the Jacobins who took part in the Paris Commune. Delescluze and many others with him signed programmes and proclamations of which the general line and promises were definitely socialist. But since, in spite of all their good faith and good intentions, they were only socialists more through external pressure than through internal conviction, and since they did not have the time or the capacity to overcome and suppress in themselves a mass of bourgeois prejudices which were in contradiction with their more recent socialist outlook, one can understand that, paralyzed by this internal conflict, they could never escape from generalities, nor take one of those decisive steps which would break forever their solidarity and all their connections with the bourgeois world.

This was a great misfortune for the Commune and for themselves; they were paralyzed by it, and they paralyzed the Commune; but it is not possible to reproach them for it, as though for a fault. Men do not change from day to day, nor do they change their own natures or habits at will. These men proved their sincerity, in letting themselves be killed for the Commune. Who will dare ask more of them? They are all the more excusable, because the people of Paris, under whose influence they thought and acted, were themselves socialist much more by instinct than by ideology or considered conviction. All their aspirations are to the highest degree and exclusively socialist; but their ideas, or rather the traditional representations of them, are still far from reaching that level.

There are still many Jacobin prejudices, many dictatorial and governmental conceptions, among the proletariat of the large cities of France and even among that of Paris. The cult of authority, a fatal product of religious education, that historic source of all the evils, all the depravities and all the servility among the people, has not yet been entirely eradicated from their minds. It is equally true that even the most intelligent children of the people, the most convinced socialists, have not yet succeeded in entirely delivering themselves of it. Rummage in their conscience and you will still find there the Jacobin, the governmentalist, pushed back into some murky corner and, it is true, become very modest, but he is not entirely dead.

Furthermore, the situation of the small number of convinced socialists who formed part of the Commune was extremely difficult. Not feeling themselves sufficiently supported by the great mass of the Parisian population (the organization of the International Association moreover being itself very imperfect, numbering scarcely a few thousand individuals), they had to keep up a daily struggle against the Jacobin majority. And in what circumstances indeed! They had to give bread and work to some hundreds of thousands of workers, organize them, arm them, and at the same time keep an eye on the reactionary manoeuvres going on in a huge city like Paris, under siege, threatened with starvation, and exposed to all the dirty tricks of the reactionary faction which had managed to set itself up and maintain itself at Versailles, with the permission and by the favour of the Prussians. They had to oppose a revolutionary government and army to

Paris, earning once more the curses of all the reactionary gangs of France and Europe! Paris, being buried in its ruins so as to pronounce a solemn contradiction to triumphant reaction; saving by its catastrophe the honour and future of France, and proving to a comforted mankind that, if life, intelligence and moral power have disappeared from the upper classes, they have remained energetic and full of potential in the proletariat! Paris, inaugurating the new era, that of the final and complete emancipation of the masses of the people and of their solidarity, henceforth a matter of fact, across and despite State frontiers. Paris, destroying patriotism and building on its ruins the religion of humanity! Paris, proclaiming itself humanist and atheist: and replacing the fictions of religion by the great realities of social life and faith in science, replacing the lies and injustices of religious, political and legal morality by the principles of freedom, justice, equality and fraternity, these eternal fundamentals of all human morality!

Heroic Paris, rational and faithful, confirming its energetic faith in the destinies of mankind even in its glorious downfall and destruction, and leaving that faith much more energetic and lively for the generations to come! Paris, soaked in the blood of its most generous-hearted children—there indeed is mankind crucified by the international and coordinated reaction of all Europe, under the immediate inspiration of all the Christian Churches and that high priest of iniquity, the Pope. But the next international and solidaristic revolution of the people will be the resurrection of Paris. Such is the true meaning, and such are the immense beneficial consequences, of the two months of the existence and the fall, forever memorable, of the Paris Commune. The Paris commune lasted for too short a time, and it was too much hindered in its internal development by the mortal struggle which it had to maintain against the Versailles reaction, for it to have been able, I do not say even to apply, but to elaborate its socialist programme in theory. Besides, it must be recognized that the majority of the members of the Commune were not strictly speaking socialists and that, if they appeared to be such, it was because they were irresistibly swept forward by the course of events, by the nature of their environment, and by the necessities of their position, and not by their own personal conviction.

The socialists, at the head of whom our friend Varlin naturally takes his place, formed in the Commune only a very small minority indeed; they were at the very most only some fourteen or fifteen members. The remainder was composed of Jacobins. But, let it be understood, there are Jacobins and Jacobins. There are the lawyer and doctrinaire Jacobins, like M. Gambetta, whose positivist republicanism, presumptuous, despotic and formalistic, having repudiated the old revolutionary faith and having conserved nothing from Jacobinism except the cult of unity and authority, has surrendered popular France to the Prussians, and later to indigenous forces of reaction; and there are those Jacobins who are openly revolutionary, the heroes and last sincere representatives of the democratic faith of 1793, capable of sacrificing their well-armed unity and authority to the necessities of the Revolution, rather than bow down their consciences before the insolence of reaction.

These great-hearted Jacobins, at the head of whom Delescluze naturally takes his place, a great spirit and a great character, wish for the triumph of the Revolution before all

law”). Varlin, however, argued that putting forward a slate of working class candidates would emphasize the division between “the people and the bourgeoisie.” Varlin believed that “it would be impossible to organize the social revolution while we live under a government as arbitrary” as that of Napoleon III. None of the working class candidates were elected, and the Varlin group had to throw its support behind radical candidates instead.

By the time of Napoleon III’s May 1870 plebiscite to legitimize his political “reforms,” Varlin joined other workers in advocating abstention, for the time had come, in Varlin’s words, for the workers “to disabuse themselves of the representative system” of Napoleon III, the position that Proudhon had advised Varlin and other French workers to take back in 1864. The Paris federation of the International, which Varlin had helped form in April 1870, issued a Manifesto calling for mass abstentions because this was the method of protest that Napoleon III feared the most. The Manifesto denounced the massacres of striking workers, conscription and the onerous tax burden being imposed on the workers to bankroll Napoleon III’s imperialist escapades abroad.

Varlin agreed with Bakunin that it was through the workers’ own trade union organizations and strike activity that they would create “the organization of the revolutionary forces” of labour necessary to abolish capitalism. This position was endorsed by most of the delegates to the 1869 Basle Congress of the International.



Bakunin at the Basle Congress



James Guillaume

At the Basle Congress, Varlin had supported Bakunin’s resolution in favour of the abolition of the right of inheritance, agreeing with Bakunin that, in current conditions, to maintain the right of inheritance was to sanction inequality. Some children would be well provided for from their fathers’ estates, while other children would remain deprived, through no fault of their own. Still less could one justify, from a collectivist perspective, the “right” of someone

to transfer “his” property to someone outside of his family, bestowing on them an unearned benefit.

Bakunin and Varlin were consistent in their rejection of patriarchal rights, whether to dispose of one’s “property” or to determine what sort of education should be provided to one’s children. Varlin had argued at the Geneva Congress that education was a social responsibility, a position shared by Bakunin and his associates. At the Basle Congress, Bakunin expressly tied the abolition of the right of inheritance to the need for an “integral” education freely available to all, arguing that “as soon as the right of inheritance is abolished, society will have to take responsibility for all costs of the physical, moral, and intellectual development of all children of both sexes.”

Toward the end of the Basle Congress, one of Bakunin’s associates, James Guillaume, met with Varlin and described to him the revolutionary socialist program being developed by Guillaume, Bakunin and their colleagues. Varlin told Guillaume that he shared their ideas, and the two agreed to maintain closer contacts. Varlin soon thereafter described the position adopted “almost unanimously” by the delegates at the Basle Congress as “collectivism, or non-authoritarian communism,” which was to be achieved by a “European social revolution.” Varlin supported the vision of the future free society proposed by his fellow Internationalist, Jean-Louis Pindy, at the Basle Congress, with dual federations, one comprising the workers’ trade and labour organizations, the other local and regional areas. As Pindy put it at the Basle Congress, association “on the basis of town or country... leads to the commune of the future, just as the other mode of [trade union] organization leads to the labour representation of the future.”

In December 1869, Bakunin, Guillaume and several other Internationalists met in Lyon, and again in March 1870, resulting in the establishment of a regional federation of Rhône workers affiliated with the International, with Varlin acting as honorary chairman at the founding congress.

In his report on the Basle Congress, Varlin expressed the views of many of the French Internationalists when he wrote that the workers’ own organizations, the trade unions and societies of resistance and solidarity, “form the natural elements of the social structure of the future.” Varlin saw strikes as a “school of struggle” that would unite the workers into a revolutionary force.

In March 1870, Varlin published an article expressing the views of the majority of the Paris Internationalists, in which he called for the authoritarian capitalist state to be replaced by workers’ self-management:

“At present our statesmen are trying to substitute a liberal-parliamentary government (Orleans style) for the regime of personal rule, and hope thereby to divert the advancing revolution that threatens their privileges. We socialists know from experience that all the old political forms are incapable of satisfying the demands of the people. Taking advantage of the mistakes and blunders of our adversaries, we must hasten the arrival of the hour of deliverance by actively preparing the bases for the future organization of society. This will make easier and more certain the task of social transformation which the revolution must carry out.

The Commune Against the State



Bakunin wrote *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State in June 1871*, within weeks of the Versailles government’s brutal suppression of the Commune, which resulted in the whole sale massacre of up to 30,000 Communards, and the imprisonment and exile of thousands of others, including leading members of the Association of Women for the Defence of Paris, such as André Léo, Natalie Lemel, Louise Michel, Paule Mink and Elizabeth Dmitrieff. Bakunin pays special tribute to Eugène Varlin, the French Internationalist who championed ideas very similar to those of Bakunin.

Bakunin: The Paris Commune

I am a supporter of the Paris Commune, which, because it was massacred and drowned in blood by the executioners of monarchic and clerical reaction, has therefore become all the more lively and powerful in the imagination and heart of the European proletariat. I am above all a supporter of it because it was a bold and outspoken negation of the State. It is a tremendously significant historical fact that this negation of the State should have been manifested particularly in France, which has been until now the country par excellence of political centralization, and that it should have been above all precisely Paris, the historic fountain-head of this great French civilization, which should have taken the initiative. Paris, taking off its own crown and proclaiming its own downfall with enthusiasm so as to give freedom and life to France, to Europe, to the whole world! Paris, affirming once more its historic ability to take the lead, and showing to all the enslaved peoples (and which popular masses indeed are not slaves?) the unique way of emancipation and salvation! Paris, striking a mortal blow at the political traditions of bourgeois radicalism and providing a real basis for revolutionary socialism!

(b) a reduction in working hours—physical exhaustion inevitably destroys man’s spiritual qualities.

(c) an end to all competition between male and female workers—their interests are identical and their solidarity is essential to the success of the final world-wide strike of labour against capital.

The Association therefore wants:

Equal pay for equal hours of work

A local and international federation of the various trade sections in order to ease the movement and exchange of goods by centralizing the international interests of the producers.

The general development of these producer associations requires:

Informing and organizing the working masses... The consequence of this will be that every association member will be expected to belong to the International Working Men’s Association.

State assistance in advancing the necessary credit for setting up these associations: loans repayable in yearly instalments at a rate of 5 per cent.

The reorganization of female labour is an extremely urgent matter, when one considers that in the society of the past it was the most exploited form of all.

Faced by the present events, with poverty increasing at an alarming rate, and seeing the unwarranted stoppage in all work, it is to be feared that the women of Paris, who have become momentarily revolutionary in spirit, may as a result of the state of continual privation, relapse into the more or less reactionary and passive position which the social order of the past marked out for them. That would be a disastrous step backwards which would endanger the revolutionary and international interests of the working class, thereby endangering the Commune.

For these reasons the Central Committee of the Association of Women requests the Commune’s Commission on Labour and Exchange to entrust it with the reorganization and allocation of work for the women of Paris, in the first instance providing the Association with production of military supplies. This work will naturally not be sufficient for the majority of working women, so in addition the Central Committee requests the commission to place at the disposal of the federated producer associations the sums of money necessary for the working of the factories and workshops abandoned by the bourgeois and comprising those crafts mainly practised by women...

For the Executive Commission

The Secretary-General

E. DIMITRIEFF

Up till now, governments have simply been an extension of authoritarian rule and subjugation of the masses — whether republican governments like Switzerland or the United States, constitutional oligarchies like Belgium or England, autocracies like Russia or personal regimes as in France since the Empire... all represent a political authority whose purpose is to keep the working classes in fear of laws that were created for the benefit of the few. This authority may be more or less strict, more or less arbitrary, but this does not in any way change the economic relations that are its foundation: the workers always remain at the mercy of those who hold capital.

Society can no longer permit the arbitrary distribution of public wealth on the basis of birth or success. Since [public wealth] is the collective sum of all productive labour, it should be employed only for the benefit of the collective. In other words, all members of human society have an equal right to the advantages stemming from that wealth.

However, this social wealth cannot provide for the well-being of humanity unless it is put to use by labour.

Consequently, if the industrial capitalist or businessman is no longer to dispose arbitrarily of collectively produced capital, who, then, can place this capital at the disposal of all? Who is to organize the production and distribution of goods?

Short of placing everything in the hands of a highly centralized, authoritarian state which would set up a hierarchical structure from top to bottom of the labour process... we must admit that the only alternative is for the workers themselves to have the free disposition and possession of the tools of production... through co-operative associations in various forms.

Newly formed labour groupings must join with the older ones, for it is only through the solidarity of workers in all occupations and in all countries that we will definitively achieve the abolition of all privileges, and equality for all.”

Varlin was among several prominent Internationalists sentenced to one year in prison in July 1870 for their activities. He escaped to Belgium, where he remained until the fall of Napoleon III’s regime in September 1870, after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. He was one of the most active Internationalists during the Commune. He was tortured and murdered during the massacre of up to 30,000 Communards in May 1871.

On the eve of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870, the Paris sections of the International issued a manifesto against war which was republished by other sections of the International in Belgium and Germany. In many ways it provided the model for subsequent anarchist proclamations against war, emphasizing that the working class knows no frontiers and that their real enemies are capitalism, imperialism and the state. In 1907 the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam passed a resolution against war, while Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Alexander Schapiro and numerous other anarchists signed a Manifesto against the First World War. When anarcho-syndicalists revived the International Workers’ Association (IWA/AIT) in 1922, they also passed a resolution against war and militarism.

MANIFESTO AGAINST WAR ISSUED BY THE PARIS SECTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL

To the Workers of All Countries:

Workers,

Once more, on the pretext of the European balance of power, of national honour, the peace of the world is threatened by political ambitions.

French, German, Spanish workers: let our voices unite in one cry of protest against war!

Today, societies can have no legitimate basis other than that of production and the equitable distribution of its fruits.

As the specialization of labour increases each day so the need for exchange brings together the common interests of all nations.

War over a question of authority or dynasty can, in the eyes of workers, be nothing but a criminal absurdity.

In answer to the war of those who exempt themselves from the blood-letting, or who find a fresh source for speculation in the misfortunes of the people, *we protest...*

We Who Want Only Peace, Labour and Liberty

We protest:

Against the systematic destruction of the human race;

Against the misuse of the people's wealth, which ought to be used to help agriculture and industrial development;

Against the spilling of blood for the satisfaction of vanity, pride and offended or frustrated monarchist ambitions.

Yes, with all our might, we protest, as men, as citizens, as workers, against war.

War represents the devious means by which governing powers stifle civil liberties.

War represents the destruction of the general wealth that has been produced by our daily labour.

Brothers of GERMANY!

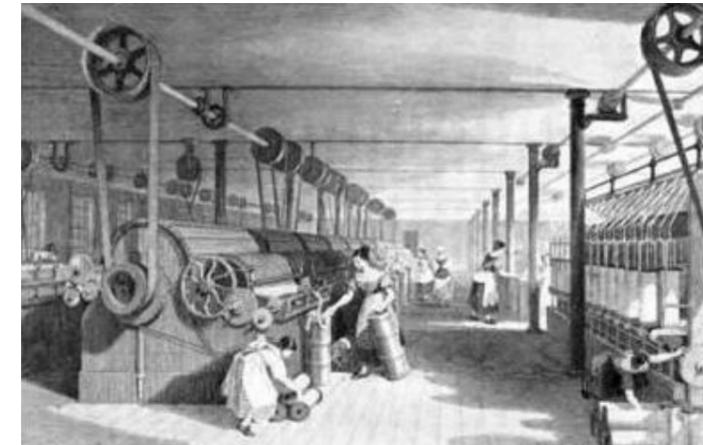


Women to the Barricades



Men and Women Defending the Commune

The Association of Women for the Defence of Paris was one of the most revolutionary groups during the Paris Commune (1871). In the following submission to the Commune's Commission on Labour and Exchange, the Association sets forth a revolutionary program similar to that of the anarchists. Capitalism was to be replaced by the free association of the producers by means of a worldwide strike of labour against capital.



Factory Women



Communal Kitchen

The Association of Women have considered the following:

There is only one way of reorganizing labour so that the producer is guaranteed the product of his own work, and that is by setting up free producer associations which will share out the profits from the various industries.

The establishment of these associations would put an end to the exploitation and enslavement of Labour by Capital, and would at last guarantee the workers the management of their own affairs. It would simultaneously facilitate urgently needed reforms, in both production and productive relationships, to include the following points:

(a) variety of work in each trade—a continually repetitive manual movement damages both mind and body.

In the following proclamation, the Association of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded directly draw the connection between sex discrimination and ruling class privilege. In subsequent publications, they called for capitalism to be replaced by workers' self-management.

Considering:

That it is the duty and the right of everyone to fight for the sacred cause of the people, that is, for the Revolution;

That danger is imminent and the enemy are at the gates of Paris;

That union makes strength; in time of danger all individual efforts must combine to form a collective, invincible resistance by the whole population;

That the Commune—representing the principle of the extinction of all privilege and all inequality—should therefore consider all legitimate grievances of any section of the population without discrimination of sex, such discrimination having been made and enforced as a means of maintaining the privileges of the ruling classes;

That the success of the present conflict, whose aim is to put an end to corruption, and ultimately to regenerate society by ensuring the rule of Labour and Justice, is of as much significance to women as it is to the men of Paris;

That many among them are determined that in the event of the enemy breaking into Paris, they will fight to the finish in defence of our common rights;

That effective organization of this revolutionary element into a vigorous force for the defence of Paris Commune can only be achieved with concrete aid from the government of the Commune itself;

Consequently, the delegates of the women citizens of Paris request the Executive Commission of the Commune:

1. To order all district town halls to make available in each district a room that can serve as headquarters of the committees;
2. To request that they provide large premises for meetings of women citizens;
3. To have the Commune subsidize the printing of circulars, posters and notices that these committees decide to distribute.

For the members of the Central Committee of Women

Long Live the Commune!

In the name of peace, do not listen to the mercenary or servile voices who would try to deceive you about the true state of mind in FRANCE.

Disregard the senseless provocations, for war between us would be a fratricidal war. Stay calm, in the manner of a strong and courageous people, without any loss of dignity.

Division between us would only bring about the complete triumph of despotism on both sides of the Rhine...

Workers of all countries: whatever may come of our joint efforts, we, members of the International Working Men's Association, who know no frontiers, we send you as a pledge of indissoluble solidarity, the good wishes and greetings of the workers of FRANCE.

Signed by 197 members of the Paris sections of the International, July 11th, 1870



“The Execution of Varlin” by M. Luce



Casualties of the Franco-Prussian War



The revolutionaries taking up arms and building barricades

From Imperialist War to Social Revolution

Following the defeat by the Prussians of the French army and the capture of Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan on September 2, 1870, Napoleon III's government collapsed. On September 4, 1870, a group of bourgeois republicans proclaimed the Third Republic and established a government of national defence. Several Internationalists who had been imprisoned by Napoleon III's regime for their labour organizing and agitation were released to a hero's welcome by the French working class, and Eugène Varlin returned from his temporary exile in Belgium.



Michael Bakunin, the Russian anarchist who had become active in the International in 1868, travelled to Lyon in the hope of turning the inter-imperialist war between Prussia and France into a far-reaching social revolution. Bakunin set forth his position in a pamphlet, Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis. His associate, James Guillaume, who had established contacts with Varlin and other French Internationalists, was in the process of publishing and distributing the pamphlet from Switzerland.

In Lyon, Bakunin met up with other members of the International who supported his revolutionary socialist approach, including Albert Richard from Lyon, and André Bastelica, from Marseilles. On September 24, 1870, following a popular demonstration that called for "a levy on the rich and the appointment of army officers by free election," Bakunin and his associates issued a proclamation, reproduced below, calling for a federation of revolutionary communes to replace the bourgeois state. The proclamation was enthusiastically received, but Bakunin's own associates were reluctant to put it into practice.



Lyon City Hall



From the Lyon Uprising to the Paris Commune

The Association of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded

The group came together in April 1871, soon after the declaration of the Paris Commune. Its members included André Léo, Natalie Lemel, Louise Michel, Paule Mink and Elizabeth Dmitrieff. All were socialists involved in the International Workers' Association. After the defeat of the Commune, Lemel helped persuade Michel to become a self-avowed anarchist. For a time, Léo was close to the anarchists, sharing their opposition to Marx's attempts to assert control over the International. Mink associated herself with the anarchist currents in the French socialist movement, but after the defeat of the Commune advocated revolutionary dictatorship. During the Commune, Dmitrieff appears to have shared the revolutionary socialist and anti-state views of other members of the Association, but remained close to Marx, who had sent her to the Commune at the end of March 1871.

On April 11, 1871, the Association published the following proclamation, calling for not only the abolition of exploitation but for no more bosses and freedom for all.



A CALL TO THE WOMEN CITIZENS OF PARIS

The fratricidal madness that has taken possession of France, this duel unto death, is the final act in the eternal antagonism between Right and Might, Labour and Exploitation, the People and their Tyrants!

The privileged classes of the present social order are our enemies; those who have lived by our labour, thriving on our want.

They have seen the people rise up, demanding: 'No obligations without rights! No rights without obligations! We want to work but we also want the product of our work. No more exploiters. No more bosses. Work and security for all—The People to govern themselves — We want the Commune; we want to live in freedom or to die fighting for it!'

Women of Paris, the decisive hour has come. The old world must come to an end! We want to be free! And France has not risen up alone. The civilized nations of the world have their eyes on Paris. They are waiting for our victory to free themselves in their turn.

A Group of Parisian Women, April 11, 1871

To The Farm Workers:

Brothers, you are being deceived. Our interests are the same: we only want what you also want. The liberation that we demand is your own as well. Whether in the city or in the countryside, the important point is that there is insufficient food, clothing, shelter or assistance for those who produce the world's wealth. An oppressor is an oppressor whether a big landowner or an industrialist. For you, as for us, a day's work is long and hard and barely provides enough to keep one's body going. Both you and we lack freedom, rest and recreation for mind and body. We have always been and still are—both of us—in the grip of poverty.

Don't you feel how unjust this is? You can easily see that you are being deceived; for if it were true that property ownership resulted from work, you, who have worked so hard, would be a property owner. You would own that little house with the garden and farmyard that you have longed for all your life and that you find impossible to acquire. Or, even if you have perhaps had the misfortune to purchase a house, it has been at the price of a mortgage that drains off your resources. And this mortgage will force your children to sell this very shelter that has cost you so much when you die—if not before. No, work doesn't lead to owning property. Property is inherited or is obtained by trickery. The rich lead a life of idleness while the workers are poor and stay poor. The few exceptions prove the rule.

This is clearly unjust. Vested interests have tricked you into accusing Paris of cheating you, but this injustice is precisely what has led Paris to rise up and demand a change in the laws that place all power over the workers in the hands of the wealthy. Paris wants the son of the farmer to be as educated as the son of the rich man, and at no cost.

So you see, farm workers—whether day labourer, mortgage-bound farmer, tenant farmer—all who sow, harvest and toil so that the best part of what you produce goes to someone who does nothing, what Paris wants, essentially, is that **LAND BELONG TO THE FARMER, THE TOOLS OF PRODUCTION TO THE WORKER, WORK FOR ALL.**

Yes, the products of farming should go to those who do the farming. To each his own; work for all. No more rich and poor. No more work without rest and no more rest without work. It is possible to achieve this... All that is needed are good laws. Such laws will be enacted when the workers decide to be manipulated no longer by the idle classes.

You can readily see—inhabitants of the countryside—that the objectives for which Paris is fighting are yours as well; that in striving to help the worker, it is striving to help you. The generals who are at this very moment attacking Paris are the very same ones who betrayed the defence of France. The representatives you elected without knowing them want to restore the monarchy under a Henry V. If Paris falls, then the yoke of poverty will remain around your necks and will also be placed around those of your children. So help Paris to win. No matter what happens, remember these objectives—for there will always be revolutions in the world until they are achieved:

THE LAND TO THE FARMER, THE TOOLS OF PRODUCTION TO THE WORKER, WORK FOR ALL.

THE WORKERS OF PARIS

THE REVOLUTIONARY FEDERATION OF COMMUNES

The disastrous plight of the country, the incapacity of official powers and the indifference of the privileged classes have placed the French nation on the verge of destruction.

If the people do not hasten to organize and act in a revolutionary manner, their future is doomed; the revolution will have been lost. Recognizing the seriousness of the danger and considering that urgent action by the people must not be delayed for a moment, the delegates of the Federated Committees for the Salvation of France and its Central Committee propose the immediate adoption of the following resolutions:

Article 1—The administrative and governmental machinery of the State, having become impotent, is abolished. The French people resume full possession of their destiny.

Article 2—All criminal and civil courts are suspended and replaced by the justice of the people.

Article 3—Payment of taxes and mortgages is suspended. Taxes are to be replaced by contributions from the federated communes levied upon the wealthy classes in proportion to what is necessary for the salvation of France.

Article 4—Since the State has been abolished, it can no longer intervene to secure the payment of private debts.

Article 5—All existing municipal organizations are hereby abolished, replaced in all the federated communes by committees for the salvation of France. All governmental powers will be exercised by these committees under the immediate supervision of the people.

Article 6—Each committee in the principal town of a Department will send two delegates to a revolutionary convention for the salvation of France.

Article 7—The Convention will meet immediately at the town hall of Lyons, since it is the second city of France and in the best position to provide energetically for the country's defence. This Convention, supported by the all the people, will save France.

TO ARMS!!!



In the summer of 1870, despite the imprisonment or forced exile of many of the most outstanding militants of the International in France, the Paris Sections continued to organize French workers in order to achieve the “Social Revolution,” a phrase coined by Proudhon, and adopted by Bakunin, to distinguish a socialist revolution, which transforms social and economic relationships by abolishing capitalism and the state, replacing them with a federation of workers’ associations and free communes, from the political revolutions of the past, which resulted in the substitution of one ruling class for another.



Proudhon

The ascendancy of these ideas of social liberation within the French sections of the International is demonstrated by the following excerpts from pamphlets published by Paris sections of the International around the summer of 1870. The Paris sections took to heart the admonition in the Preamble to the Statutes of the International that “the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves” (Anarchism, Volume One, Selection 19). They sought to abolish classes and to establish a libertarian socialism “based upon equality and justice,” the “mutualist organization” of society that Proudhon had long advocated. For the majority of Parisian Internationalists, this was “the Social Revolution.”

In April 1871, the **Paris Commune** issued a manifesto to the French people, seeking their support. The manifesto, which was mostly written by **Pierre Denis**, a Proudhonist member of the International, called for the “total autonomy of the Commune extended to every township in France,” with the “Commune’s autonomy to be restricted only by the right to an equal autonomy for all the other communes.” The Communards assured the people of France that the “political unity which Paris strives for is the voluntary union of all local initiative, the free and spontaneous cooperation of all individual energies towards a common goal: the well-being, freedom and security of all.” The Commune was to mark “the end of the old governmental and clerical world; of militarism, bureaucracy, exploitation, speculation, monopolies and privilege that have kept the proletariat in servitude and led the nation to disaster.”

One of the most serious problems facing the Paris Commune was the lack of support from the countryside. In September 1870, **Bakunin** had raised this issue in his Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis, in which he urged revolutionaries to encourage the peasants and farm workers to “take the land and throw out those landlords who live by the labour of others,” inciting them “to destroy, by direct action, every political, juridical, civil, and military institution,” establishing “anarchy through the whole countryside”. The need to win the peasants over to the cause of the social revolution was a theme that Bakunin returned to in The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution, published in April 1871. Bakunin again urged the Parisian revolutionaries to go to the countryside to provoke a peasant insurrection by offering the peasants the “immediately great material advantages” that would result from a social revolution, such as the land itself, and the abolition of debts. Bakunin argued that a “revolution that is imposed upon people—whether by official decree or by force of arms—is not a revolution but its opposite, for it necessarily provokes reaction.”



Andre Leo

In Paris, a committee composed mainly of Internationalists was struck to prepare an appeal to French peasants and farm workers. The appeal was written by André Léo (1824-1900), the pen name of the revolutionary feminist, **Victoire Léodile Béra**, a member of the International who was also involved with the **Association of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded**. The Appeal is similar in its approach to that advocated by Bakunin, with the exception that it suggests that it will be by legislative means that the land will be returned to the farm workers, rather than the farm workers seizing it themselves.

Wall Poster of the Communal Club of the Third Arrondissement

Citizens:

A great revolutionary act has just occurred: the population of the Third Arrondissement has at last taken possession—to serve the political education of the People—of a building that has until now served only the caste that is inherently hostile to any kind of progress.

The coming to power of the Commune has restored all their rights to the citizenry. It is for these citizens to exercise them both to serve the Commune and when necessary, to remind our delegates that their mandate is to save the Nation. This means that they should act energetically and temporarily leave aside much too great a respect for considerations of 'legality' — which in effect aids only the forces of reaction.

It is to you, citizens of all arrondissements, that we make this appeal.

Follow our example: open Communal clubs in all the churches. The priests can conduct services in the daytime and you can provide the people with political education in the evenings.

Govern Yourselves! Long Live the Commune!

The Communal Club, constituted at the beginning of May 1871, professes the following aims...

To fight the enemies of our communal rights, of our freedom and of the republic.

To uphold the rights of the people, to accomplish their political education, so that they may be able to govern themselves.

To recall our representatives to first principles, were they to stray from them, and to aid them in all their efforts to save the Republic.

But above all else, to insist on the sovereignty of the people; they must never renounce their right to supervise the actions of their representatives.

People, govern yourselves directly, through public meetings, through your press; bring pressure to bear on those who represent you; they will never go too far in the revolutionary direction.

If your representatives procrastinate or cease to move, push them forward, that we may reach the objective we are fighting for: the acquisition of our rights, the consolidation of the Republic and the victory of Justice.

Long live the Commune!

The International and the Social Revolution

All sincere socialists have a common aim: *to secure the highest possible well-being for all human beings through an equitable distribution of labour and of all it produces.*

However, they are far from agreeing on the means for attaining this objective.

Thanks to its organization and congresses, the socialism of the International is not like the older forms, that is, solely the result of the thinking of a few individuals. It is above all the synthesis of the aspirations of the proletariat of the entire world, and represents the considered expression of the will of organized workers.

It is this kind of socialism that has given rise to the only serious battle of the moment, namely, international resistance to the tyranny of capital. The ultimate result of this struggle will be the establishment of a new social order: the elimination of classes, the abolition of employers and of the proletariat, the establishment of universal co-operation based upon equality and justice.

It is this kind of socialism that has struck a mortal blow at the old principle of private property, whose existence will not last beyond the first day of the coming revolution...

Hence it is necessary, citizens, to eliminate wage labour, the last form of servitude.

The distribution of what is produced by labour, based upon the principles of the value of the work and a mutualist organization of services, will realize the principles of justice in social relationships...

Social and political emancipation depend upon achieving the united action of the workers.

Has it not always been evident that the art of governing peoples has been the art of exploiting them?

...Following the example of our fathers, who made the Revolution of '89, we must accomplish the *Democratic and Social Revolution*.

Château-Rouge section (Paris) of the International

By March 1871, German troops occupied France and what remained of the national government was dominated by rightwing, bourgeois and monarchist factions led by Adolphe Thiers, a notorious reactionary who had done battle with Proudhon during the 1848 French Revolution. On March 18, 1871, Thiers sent troops into Paris to seize artillery to prevent it from falling into the hands of the people. The attempt was quickly rebuffed, with the result that Thiers was forced to withdraw national government forces from Paris. This marked the beginning of the Paris Commune. The Central Committee of the National Guard, which was more of a popular militia than a government organization, quickly called for the election of a municipal government, the Commune of Paris. Many of the militants in the Paris sections of the International ran for office, issuing the following wall poster in support of their slate of working class candidates. But as the poster makes clear, the Paris Internationalists wanted the Commune to be an organ of popular self-management, not a conventional assembly of elected representatives.

Notions of worker self-management had originated among working class French mutual aid societies and cooperatives in the 1830s and '40s. Proudhon had helped articulate these concepts and tried to put them into practice during the French Revolution of 1848. Central to these conceptions of worker self-management is the concept of "worker democracy." In contrast to parliamentary or representative democracy, worker democracy was direct, with the workers themselves making policy decisions in their own general assemblies. When necessary, in order to coordinate action and to work for common goals, delegates from each functional group would meet with delegates from the other groups, carrying with them "imperative mandates" stipulating the policies and actions that the base group had endorsed. These delegates were also subject to immediate recall if they failed to carry out the mandates that had been given to them. Proudhon and other advocates of worker democracy considered this form of direct, functionally based democracy to be the antithesis of representative government and incompatible with state power. As can be seen below, the majority of the Paris Internationalists were also anti-authoritarians, regarding the "principle of authority" as being profoundly incapable of dealing with social crises or bringing about the emancipation of the working class.

When the poster speaks of a "freely discussed social contract" providing the basis of a classless, egalitarian society, the reference is not to the "hypothetical" social contract of Rousseau and the Jacobins, which was meant to provide a justification for political authority, but the revolutionary social contract long advocated by Proudhon. As Proudhon put it in **The Principle of Federation** (1863), the revolutionary social contract "is more than a fiction; it is a positive and effective compact, which has actually been proposed, discussed, voted upon, and adopted, and which can properly be amended at the contracting parties' will. Between the federal contract and that of Rousseau and 1793 [the Jacobin conception of the social contract] there is all the difference between a reality and a hypothesis"



Within the Paris Commune there were numerous groups which advocated and practiced direct action and direct democracy, pushing the Commune towards the social revolution. These sorts of ideas had been advocated by a variety of anarchists during the revolutions of 1848, such as Proudhon, Dejacques, Pisacane and Coeurderoy, and were championed within the International by people like Bakunin, Varlin and the revolutionary collectivists associated with them.

The following excerpts are taken from a wall poster and newspaper article by the "Communal Club of the Third Arrondissement," published at the beginning of April and May 1871 respectively. In the wall poster, the Club urges others to follow their example of taking direct action by using the churches as gathering places for the people. In the newspaper article, the Club emphasizes the need for the people to govern themselves directly, as had Proudhon and other anarchists. The idea that direct democracy is a kind of direct action was developed further by Murray Bookchin.

Citizens:

If you are able to make the Revolution's victory of March 18th definitive, it will remain one of the greatest moments in the history of humanity.

This date marks the achievement of political power by the proletariat just as the Revolution of '89 marked the acquisition of political power by the bourgeoisie.

It is the people, and only the people, who have achieved this revolution—and spontaneously like all great popular movements, rather than by some parliamentary intrigue. Demonstrating their ability and their strength, the people have been able to maintain their leadership of this revolution.

The Central Committee, which took power after March 18th, was composed solely of workers, of proletarians.

And by far the majority of the Commune is composed of workers, of proletarians, even though it also contains some bourgeois devoted to the people's cause, just as there were some nobles in the Constituent Assembly of 1789 devoted to bourgeois emancipation.

However, while they [the workers] continue to fight, they must lay the foundations for a stable government that will be the measure of what the future will hold, and that will demonstrate the superiority of their aspirations over those of the bourgeoisie.

The error of preceding governments must not be continued, that is to say there must not be a simple substitution of workers in the places occupied previously by bourgeois.

The entire governmental structure must be overthrown with the aim of reconstructing another one according to a new plan based upon the principles of justice and science.

All political measures taken from now on—even when exceptional and provisional—should embody this new character.

Pure and simple confiscation of wealth by the State is an expedient of questionable value, and in normal times this would, it must be said, be a deplorable act since it would necessarily revive State despotism and would run counter to the spirit of our revolution—which is to destroy despotism by means of communal freedom.

What is needed are restorative measures that conform to the principles of justice by transferring to worker-ownership the wealth that has hitherto been left idle or used wastefully, instead of being employed for the improvement of the general welfare of the population.

In a well-organized state, all labour ought to be remunerated equitably. Only labour would be remunerated since it is the sole source of wealth. No worker should be in poverty and those who do not work have no right to participate in the social benefits of production.

The above principles could seem quite general and vague at first glance but we should not stray from them if we wish to remain rooted in revolutionary justice—the true source of our strength.

These principles, moreover, govern the very existence of the Commune.

Auguste Vermorel

Workers:

A long series of setbacks and a catastrophe that could bring about the complete ruin of our country: this is the situation that France has been placed in by the governments which have dominated it.

Recent events [March 18, 1871] have demonstrated the strength of the people of Paris. We are convinced that a fraternal understanding will soon demonstrate their wisdom as well.

The principle of authority from hereon in is incapable of re-establishing order in the streets and getting factory work up and going again and this incapacity constitutes its negation.

The selfishness of vested interests has led to a state of general ruin and to social conflict. Liberty, equality and solidarity are needed if we are to achieve an order based on new foundations with the reorganization of labour being its first prerequisite.

Workers:

The independence of the Commune will mean a freely discussed social contract that will bring class conflict to an end and secure social equality.

We have demanded the emancipation of the working class and the elected Commune will ensure this, for it must provide all citizens with the means to defend their rights, to control effectively the actions of the representatives entrusted with the care of their interests, and to determine the gradual application of social reforms.

The autonomy of each Commune removes any trace of coercion from these demands and establishes the republic in its highest form.

Workers:

We have fought and have learned to suffer for our egalitarian principles. We cannot withdraw as long as we can help to lay the cornerstone of the new social structure.

What have we asked for?

The organization of credit, of exchange, and of production co-operatives in order to guarantee the worker the full value of his labour;

Free, lay, and complete education;

The rights to assemble, to organize and to a free press as well as the rights of the individual;

Municipal administration of police, armed forces, sanitation, statistics, etc.

We have been dupes of those who governed: allowing ourselves to be taken in while they slided, as required, from cajoling to suppressing the various factions whose mutual antagonism guaranteed their power.

Today the people of Paris are far-sighted. They reject this role of a child being directed by a preceptor, and in the municipal election [of March 26, 1871], resulting itself from the action of the people, they will remember that the principle that governs groups and associations is the same as that which should govern society. Therefore, just as they would reject any administration or president imposed by some power from without, they will reject any mayor or prefect imposed by a government that is foreign to their aspirations.

They will affirm their right—higher than the vote of an assembly—to remain masters in their own city and to constitute their municipal representation as they see fit, without seeking to impose it upon others.

We are convinced that on Sunday, March 26th, the people of Paris will consider it a matter of honour to vote for the Commune.

The Federated Council (Paris) of the International and the Federation of Trade Unions, March 23, 1871



Vermorel

*Auguste Vermorel (1841-1871) was a radical French journalist and critic of Napoleon III's Empire. He was also an advocate of "mutualism," the conception of socialism developed by Proudhon, which sought to replace capitalist exploitation with a form of workers' self-management. He was imprisoned several times for his political views and participated in the first attempt to establish a Paris Commune on October 31, 1870, after which he was again arrested. He was elected during the March 26, 1871 elections for the newly formed Paris Commune, and published a newspaper, **L'Ami du Peuple**. With Varlin and several other Internationalists, he was part of the minority opposed to the creation of a Committee of Public Safety, and disapproved of the execution of hostages. He was seriously wounded during the fighting and taken prisoner to Versailles, where he died on June 20, 1871. In the following article, written at the beginning of April 1871, Vermorel emphasizes some Proudhonian mutualist themes, including the view that control of the economy should pass from the capitalists to the workers' own organizations, rather than to a "socialist" state.*

