The first workers' government

The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first workers' government. Tom Willis looks at its significance 125 years on.

Collapse of the old order

OUR story starts with the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

The war was caused by the territorial rivalry between the French Second Empire and the Prussian-dominated North German Federation. The immediate spark was a dispute over Prussian support for the candidature of a Hohenzollern (member of the Prussian royal family) for the Spanish throne. The French overestimated their strength, and took the initiative in attacking, but were defeat at Sedan in September 1870. France lost Alsace and most of Lorraine. The Emperor was a prisoner of war.

The necessary consequence of military defeat was the Paris Revolution of 4 September 1870.

The Second Empire collapsed. Thus the undemocratic rule of Napoleon III which was built on the defeat of the democratic revolution of 1848 and which had ushered in the archetypal "Bonapartist Regime" — serving big capital but resting on the peasants and petit-bourgeois — passed into history to be replaced by the proclamation of the republic.

This republic was extremely weak and unstable. The Prussian Army was at the gates of Paris while the army of the Second Empire had been defeated or captured.

In these circumstances the people of Paris allowed the deputies in Napoleon's former tame legislature (a rag bag of monarchists and fake liberals) to declare themselves a "government of national defence." This "government's" powers were very weak because the defence of Paris was actually in the hands of the armed people.

All Parisians capable of bearing arms had been enrolled in the National Guard. The majority in this armed force was composed of workers.

A capitalist government and an armed working class cannot co-exist for long. One power or another must triumph. Conflict between the two is inevitable.

This antagonism broke out in open conflict on **31 October**. Workers' battalions of the National Guard stormed the Town Hall and captured some members of the government. But through double talk and false promises plus the armed intervention of some middle-class detachments of the National Guard they managed to get free.

Faced with the alternative of unleashing a full-scale civil war inside a besieged city the majority of the National Guard left the former government in office.

Then on **28 January 1871** the government of National Defence surrendered to the Prussians. Engels takes up the story:

Communards at the barricade

"...starved Paris capitulated. But with honours unprecedented in the history of the war. The forts were surrendered, the city wall stripped of guns, the weapons of the regiments of the line, and of the Mobile Guard were handed over, and they themselves considered prisoners of war. But the National Guard kept its weapons and guns, and only entered into an armistice with the victors. And these did not dare enter Paris in triumph. They only dared to occupy a tiny corner of Paris, which, into the bargain, consisted partly of public parks, and even this they only occupied for a few days! And during this time they, who had maintained their encirclement of Paris for 131 days, were themselves encircled by the armed workers of Paris, who kept a sharp watch that no "Prussian" should overstep the narrow bounds of the corner ceded to the foreign conqueror. Such was the respect which the Paris workers inspired in the army before which all the armies of the Empire had laid down their arms; the Prussian Junkers, who had come to take revenge at the home of the revolution, were compelled to stand by respectfully, and salute precisely this armed revolution!"

The emergence of the Commune

THE end of the war brought out into the open the conflicts that had been suppressed by the need to defend Paris.

Engels again:

"During the war the Paris workers had confined themselves to demanding the vigorous prosecution of the fight. But now, when peace had come after the capitulation of Paris, now Thiers, the new supreme head of the government, was compelled to realise that the rule of the propertied classes — big landowners and capitalists — was in constant danger so long as the workers of Paris had arms in their hands. His first action was an attempt to disarm them."

On **18 March**, Thiers sent regular troops to attempt to seize the artillery belonging to the National Guard. Those weapons had been built during the siege of Paris and paid for through taxes on the workers and middle class of the capital The regular troops failed. Paris mobilised for resistance and war was declared between Paris and Thiers government sitting at Versailles.

On **26 March** the Paris Commune was elected and on **28 March** it was officially proclaimed. The central committee of the National Guard which until then had carried out all the functions of government in Paris handed in its resignation to the Commune.

The first decree of the Commune, to be replaced by the armed people, was the abolition of the standing army and conscription on **30 March**.

The Commune was a local council, but of a new revolutionary type. As Marx explained in his classic 'The Civil War in France':

"The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class... Instead of continuing to be the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the Administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen's wages. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves..."

The Commune in action

THE abolition of the standing army was followed by the cancellation of all housing

rents for the period of the siege of Paris. If the rent had already been paid then the money was to be deducted from future rent payments.

Also on the **30 March**, the Commune confirmed in office all foreigners who had been elected to it announcing that "The flag of the Commune is the flag of the world republic." There then followed a month of revolutionary decrees.

On **1 April** wages for any member or employee of the Commune were pegged at a maximum of 6,000 francs (the average for a skilled worker).

On **2 April** the Commune decreed the separation of church from state and the abolition of all payments by the tax payer to the Catholic church. All church property was nationalised.

On **5 April** in response to the shooting of captured Communards by the Versailles troops an order was made allowing the imprisonment of hostages, but it was never carried out.

On **6 April** the guillotine was brought out by armed workers and publicly burnt to great rejoicing.

On **8 April** all religious symbols and practices were removed from the schools.

On **12 April** it was decided to demolish the Victory Column in the Place Vendôme, which celebrated Napoleon's wars because it was a symbol of chauvinism and nationalism. This was carried out on **16 May**.

On **16 April** the Commune began to drive forward a more revolutionary economic programme. It ordered a workers' enquiry into all factories that had been closed down by the bosses. Workers' plans were to be drawn up for their reopening.

The workers in such places were to be organised into co-operative societies to run the enterprise and it was projected that all the co-operatives should be brought together in one great union.

On **20 April** night work was abolished for bakers. Employment offices were taken out of private hands and put under local control. On **30 April** the pawnshops were closed down.

This programme was ambitious but limited. As Marx put it: "The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence." It was a workers' government even though it had not gone far down the road to directly socialist measures.

On **5 May** the Commune proudly asserted the revolutionary heritage of the Parisian working class and its allies by ordering the destruction of the Chapel of Atonement built as a public apology (to god?) for the execution of Louis XVI.

End of the Commune

FROM the beginning of May onwards the Commune was placed entirely on the defensive. The Versailles government started its moves against Paris in early April, capturing the Seine crossing at Neuilly to the west of Paris on **7 April**. But on **11 April** an attack on the southern front was successfully repulsed. The response of the Versailles government was to let lose their artillery in an indiscriminate bombardment of the Parisian workers.

Engels described the situation.

"Paris was continually bombarded and, moreover, by the very people who had stigmatised as a sacrilege the bombardment of the same city by the Prussians. These same people now begged the Prussian government for the hasty return of the French soldiers taken prisoner at Sedan and Metz in order that they might recapture Paris for them. From the beginning of May the gradual arrival of these troops gave the Versailles forces a decided superiority."

On **23 April** Thiers broke off the negotiations for the exchange of the Archbishop of Paris and a number of other priests for just one man: Louis Auguste Blanqui — the revolutionary leader of the left wing of the 1848 revolution — who at the time was imprisoned by the Versailles government.

The Versailles government made slow progress against the Communards and required the active collaboration of their real "mortal" enemies: the Prussians.

Engels tells the story:

"The Prussians, who held the northern and eastern forts, allowed the Versailles troops to advance across the land north of the city, which was forbidden ground to them under the armistice and thus to march forward, attacking on a wide front, which the Parisians naturally thought covered by the armistice and therefore held only weakly. As a result of this, only a weak resistance was put up in the western half of Paris, in the luxury city proper; it grew stronger and more tenacious the nearer the incoming troops approached the eastern half, the working-class city proper. It was only after eight days' fighting that the last defenders of the Commune succumbed on the heights of Belleville and Menilmontant; and then the massacre of defenceless men, women and children, which had been ragging all through the week on an increasing scale, reached its zenith. The breechloader could no longer kill fast enough; the vanquished were shot down in hundreds by *mitrailleuse* fire. The "Wall of the Federals" at the Père Lachaise cemetery, where the mass murder was consummated, is still standing today, a mute but eloquent testimony to the frenzy of which the ruling class is capable as soon as the working class dares to stand up for its rights."

The Commune in retrospect

IN their audacious will to fight even in highly unfavourable circumstances the Parisian workers had set an example for the whole international socialist movement, argued Karl Marx in letters to his friend Kugelmann.

Marx's comments on the bravery of the Communards taking on a struggle in unfavourable circumstances sheds light on how he would have replied to those socialists who in the name of "Marxism" argue that the Russian revolution of 1917 was "premature."

"What elasticity, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians! After six months of hunger and ruin, caused by internal treachery more even than by the external enemy, they rise, beneath Prussian bayonets, as if there had never been a war between France and Germany and the enemy were not still at the gates of Paris! History has no like of greatness! If they are defeated only their 'good nature' will be to blame. They should have marched at once on Versailles after first Vinoy and then the reactionary section of the Paris National Guard had themselves retreated. They missed their opportunity because of conscientious scruples. They did not want to start a civil war, as if that mischievous abortion Thiers had not already started the civil war with his attempt to disarm Paris! Second mistake: The Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune. Again from a too "honourable" scrupulosity! However that may be, the present rising in Paris — even if it be crushed by the wolves, swine, and vile curs of the old society — is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June insurrection in Paris [1848]. Compare these Parisians, storming heaven, with the slaves to heaven of the German-Prussian Holy Roman Empire, with its posthumous masquerades reeking of the barracks, the Church, cabbage-Junkerdom and, above all, of the philistine..."

It was ridiculous, argued Marx, to criticise the Communards for not holding back and waiting for more "favourable" circumstances.On the contrary, it was better to fight and lose than to be defeated without a fight.

"World history would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallible favourable chances. It would on the other hand be of a very mystical nature, if "accidents" played no part. These accidents naturally form part of the general course of development and are compensated by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very much dependent upon such "accidents", including the "accident" of the character of the people who first head the movement.

"The decisively unfavourable "accident" this time is by no means to be sought in the general conditions of French society, but in the presence of the Prussians in France and their position right before Paris. Of this the Parisians were well aware. But of this, the bourgeois rabble of Versailles were also aware. Precisely for that reason they presented the Parisians with the alternative of either taking up the fight or succumbing without a struggle. The demoralisation of the working class in the latter case would have been a far greater misfortune than the succumbing of any number of "leaders." With the struggle in Paris the struggle of the working class against the capitalist class and its state has entered upon a new phase. Whatever the immediate outcome may be, a new point of departure of world-wide importance has been gained."

The Commune and Marxist theory

THE Commune, like many previous revolutions, was the product of defeat in war; but it was also a new, far deeper and more thoroughgoing, kind of revolution.

It provided, in the words of Karl Marx, "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour."

This political form was not "discovered" by some act of pure philosophic abstraction. Nor was it deduced from the concepts "democracy", "working class" and "representation." It was discovered through the self-conscious, self-controlling activity of the working class itself.

A democratic revolution

IN setting up the Commune the workers of Paris and their allies carried out an heroic act of self-determination. Their revolution was first and foremost a democratic one.

The Commune was based on:

- Election of all Commune members by unlimited universal suffrage.
- All officials to be recallable at all times.
- All officials to be paid the equivalent of a worker's wage.
- Separation of church and state.
- The clearing out and purging of the police.
- All judges to be elected, recallable and removable at any time.
- Local municipal freedom.
- Abolition of the standing army and state bureaucracy.
- The abolition of the distinction between legislature (the law makers) and executive (those who carry out the laws) with both functions to be carried out simultaneously by the Commune.

The practical purpose of these revolutionary democratic measures was to shatter and destroy the existing state removing the diaphragm separating the working class from power. In doing so, the Commune broke out of the barriers and limits imposed on democracy by the bourgeois state.

Engels spelled this out very clearly:

"Against this transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society — an inevitable transformation in all previous states — the Commune made use of two infallible means.

"In the first place, it filled all posts — administrative, judicial and educational — by election on the basis of universal suffrage, subject to the right of recall at any time. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers... In this way an effective barrier to place hunting and careerism was set up, even apart from the binding mandates to delegates to representative bodies which were added besides."

Smashing the state

WHAT is essential for the workers' revolution is the removal of all barriers separating the majority from real self-government. Marx put this brilliantly. The Commune, he argued, had proved that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the existing state machine and wield it for its own purposes."

On the contrary, as Marx wrote to his friend Kugelmann at the time of the Commune:

"If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will find that I declare that the next attempt at the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it [Marx's italics] and this is the preliminary condition for every real people's revolution on the continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting."

The beginning of the end of the state

MARX believed that the Commune was "the positive form" of "a republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical forms of class rule, but class rule itself."

As the state is a product of and form of class rule then the Commune was a new and peculiar form of state: it was a republic whose basic purpose was the overcoming of the conditions that make the state itself necessary. It represented the beginning of the end of the state as a separate and special institution standing above society. It was a state and simultaneously an anti-state.

It was a state to the extent that it functioned as a lever to hold down the capitalist class in the interests of the working class. It was an anti-state to the extent that it functioned as an organ of the collective administration of society by the freely associated producers and consumers themselves.

What smashing the state means

LENIN discussed the significance of this new type of state in his classic *The State and Revolution*.

"The Commune appears to have replaced the smashed state machine "only" by fuller democracy: abolition of the standing army; all officials to be elected and subject to recall. But as a matter of fact this "only" signifies a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different order. This is exactly a case of 'quantity becoming transformed into quality': democracy, introduced as fully and consistently as is at all conceivable, is transformed from bourgeois democracy into proletarian democracy; from the state (= a special force for the suppression of a particular class) into something which is no longer, properly speaking, the state.

"It is still necessary to suppress the bourgeoisie and its resistance. This was particularly necessary for the Commune; and one of the reasons for its defeat was that it did not do this with sufficient determination. But the organ of suppression is here the majority of the population, and not a minority, as was always the case under slavery, serfdom and wage slavery. And since the majority of the people itself suppresses its oppressors, a "special force" for suppression is no longer necessary! In this sense the state begins to wither away. Instead of the special institutions of a privileged minority (privileged officialdom, the chiefs of the standing army), the majority itself can directly fulfil all these functions, and the more the functions of state power devolve upon the people as a whole the less need there is for the existence of this power."

Theory and practice

THE revolutionary significance of the Commune was soon forgotten. As it receded in time and capitalism developed through a new wave of expansion, theory decayed.

Before the Commune Marx had only been able to sketch a rough outline of Communist revolution. For instance he had this to say in the *Poverty of Philosophy*:

"The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil [capitalist] society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called."

But after the Commune the theoretical level of the movement receded in the main below that set by Marx before the Commune.

In the years after 1871 many people in the socialist movement returned to earlier, more elitist, pre-Commune notions of socialist transformation.

They believed that the existing state machine — or a reformed version of the existing state machine — could be used to introduce socialism from above.

Engels carried out a rearguard struggle against all this nonsense.

In 1890 he managed to get Marx's *"Critique of the Gotha Programme"* published — 15 years after it was first written.

The *Critique* was originally a circular letter — not a piece of private correspondence or a public article, but a discussion paper for a restricted audience. In it, Marx attacked the leaders of the "Marxist" faction in the German workers' movement for making impermissible intellectual concessions to the supporters of Ferdinand Lassalle in the party programme in order to create a united organisation. Engels used the fact that the party programme was once more up for discussion in order to get Marx's original views on the Gotha programme published.

Amongst many things that rattled Marx's cage was the nonsense the Gotha programme talked about the state and in particular the establishment of Lassalle's dream of a "Free State." No, said Marx. We

do not want to make the state free, but to put it under democratic control:

"Freedom consists in transforming the state from an organ set above society into one thoroughly subordinated to it, and today too the state forms are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the 'freedom of the state'."

Marx then went on to spell out an alternative:

"Between the capitalist and the communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. To this corresponds a political transition period whose state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."

This talk of "revolutionary dictatorship" caused great concern in the parliamentary caucus of the German Party. One leader of the caucus actually repudiated Marx on the floor of the Reichstag, whereas the Caucus as a whole wrote a reply to Marx — eight years after his death — and the *entire* party leadership boycotted Engels personally for daring to make Marx's views known to the party rank and file and to the public.

It is interesting to note that the parliamentary careerists and opportunists of the German Party showed exactly the same misunderstanding of the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" as the Stalinists. For both, dictatorship had to mean the opposite of democracy — but while the reformists opposed it, the Stalinists supported it!

Engels spelt out the rational meaning of the phrase:

"Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the phrase: dictatorship of the proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat."

In other words for Engels as for Marx the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" was synonymous with working class self-rule. Engels drove this point home in his critique of the new party programme.

"If anything is established, it is that our party and the working class can come to power only under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the great French Revolution (Paris Commune) has already shown."

But despite Engels best efforts it seems that all official "Marxists" were determined to misunderstand.

Karl Kautsky, the "Pope of Marxism", who asserted himself as the leading "theoretician" after Engels' death, could even write such stupid rubbish as:

"Only one who is politically blind can still maintain today that the representative system even under the sway of universal suffrage ensures the rule of the bourgeoisie, and that in order to overthrow the later one must get rid of the representative system. Now it is already beginning to become obvious that a truly parliamentary system can be just as good as instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat as it is an instrument of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."

Confusing representation in general and the Reichstag in particular, Kautsky failed to see that the essential point was to extend democracy beyond the limits imposed by the bourgeois state, to smash it.

Plekhanov, the pioneer Russian Marxist and, another leading figure in the pre-world war one international socialist movement, fared little better. Avoiding the worst excesses of Kautsky's rationalisations of parliamentary cretinism, he nevertheless maintained a lot of the pre-Marxist Jacobin notion of dictatorship meaning rule by an enlightened revolutionary elite. This is understandable given the backwardness of Russia, the ruthlessness of the Tsarist state and the fact that the working class was a tiny minority in society, but it was still a mistake. Before 1914 only Rosa Luxemburg kept Marx's original conception alive.

It took world war and the reappearance of mass working class self-activity in the form of the Russian revolution of 1917 for it to be once more possible to re-unite theory and practice at the level achieved at the time of the Commune.

Lenin's *State and Revolution* played a vital role in this. Written in 1917, it was part of his attempt to orientate the Bolshevik Party towards the seizure of power by the workers. In order to do this he had to rescue Marx and Engels' original assessment of the Commune from those official "Marxists" like Plekhanov and Kautsky who had gutted "Marxism" of its revolutionary communist content.

In July, 1917 at the height of the reactionary wave between the February and October revolutions, Lenin wrote this short note to his comrade Kamenev. It shows Lenin's growing awareness of how deep seated the misunderstanding of the Commune had been.

"Comrade Kamenev, in strict confidence, if I should be bumped off I beg you to publish a notebook with the title 'Marxism and the state.' (It has been left in safekeeping in Stockholm). Bound with a blue cover. There are collected all the quotations from Marx and Engels, as well as those of Kautsky's controversy with Pannekoek. Also a series of remarks and reviews. It has only to be edited. I think this work could be published within a week. I think it is very important, because it isn't only Kautsky and Plekhanov who have gone off the rails."

Lenin was obviously talking about himself and the other Bolshevik comrades. His writing of *State and Revolution* and with it his rediscovery of Marx's attitude to the state, went hand in hand with the practical reappearance of the Commune-type of state: the Russian soviets.

It you too want to avoid going "off the rails" or simply want to discover for the first time the real history of the Paris Commune, then there is no better place to start than where Lenin did, with a study of Karl Marx's *The Civil War in France,* which tells the heroic story of the Commune and explains its place in the struggle of the working class for a higher social order.

The ne

LAST December millions of French workers took to the streets in defence of welfare benefits, full health services and pensions. The workers used marches, protests and strike action to resist the plans of France's Tory government led by Jacques Chirac and Alain Juppé. The government was forced to back down on a number of issues but not completely defeated. Chirac has simply backed down for now, but further attacks are inevitable.

On the marches one slogan dominated: "Ouais, ouais, tous ensemble, tous ensemble" — All together, all together.

The workers were celebrating the re-discovery of working class solidarity.

And on the victory march some placards, like the one pictured on this page, even linked the mass mobilisations of 1995 with the Paris Commune of 1871 — when the workers took over the running of the capital and founded the first working class government in human history.

The fight for a workers' government

IT'S quite right to link the two.

The Commune — a state in which the majority of the population, the working class, are in the saddle — is not just a great, inspiring, historic event to be celebrated; it also provides a practical model for socialists today.

Quite simply there is no way to defend working class living standards, welfare services and free trade unions other than though a new commune.

The alternative not just in Britain, or France, but internationally, to the working

The Scholars

Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

All shuffle there; all cough in ink;
All wear the carpet with their shoes;
All think what other people think;
All know the man their neighbour knows.
Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk that way?

W.B. Yeats

xt Paris Commune

class taking over and reorganising society according to the dictates of human need, not capitalist profit, is a further collapse in the general level of human culture and a regression towards barbarism.

That's why *Workers' Liberty* advocates and fights for a workers' government. We want a government based on the working class and its organisation and accountable to them, a government which is prepared to take on the power of the bosses and their state.

Right now, the cutting edge of such a fight is the reassertion of what Marx called "the political economy of the working class" i.e. the struggle to assert the basic needs of human beings for free time, education, health services and decent housing against the profit-making, people-degrading rule of capital.

Today it is out of a battle for reforms — rebuilding the health service, a decent minimum wage, full employment, a shorter working week, free trade unions — that the revolutionary movement will be built.

That revolutionary movement will have exactly the same aim as the Paris Commune — the formation of a workers' government.

The Commune in the 20th century

THE soviets of 1905 and 1917 in Russia; the workers' councils of 1918 in Germany; the factory councils of 1919-20 in Italy; the juntas of the Spanish revolution in 1936; the central workers' council in Hungary in 1956; the Nantes/St Nazaire central strike committee in France, May 1968; the cordones in Chile, 1973; the neighbourhood commissions and workers' commissions in Portugal in 1975; the inter-factory strike committees in Poland in 1980-1, and the Alexandria Action Committee in South Africa in the mid-1980s: all to one extent or another represented developments of the basic form of working class self-government established first in Paris in 1871.

This is not to say that there are no differences within the Commune type.

In the majority of cases these 20th century organs of workers power developed as workplace-centred structures based on delegates from different factories, offices, depots, mines, railway stations etc. — rather as strictly territorially-based forms of organisation as the Commune was.

The experience of revolutionary movements in the 20th century also reveals a great flexibility of form.

In some cases entirely new improvised structures had to be built — and, in the case of the soviets, rebuilt — from the ground up in competition with the pre-existing organisation of the working class. In other cases existing structures were either transformed for new purposes (the factory councils in Italy) or new structures built out of re-organising the elements of the existing movement (the Spanish juntas).

The common thread is provided by the fact that working class organisation develops in order to answer particular immediate needs dictated by the actually existing conditions of struggle. The working class has to use whatever weapons are at hand. Thus differences within the Commune type usually reflect the different conditions out of which the emerging organs of workers' power developed.

This throws some light on the question of the relationship between Parliament and independent organs of workers' power in a socialist revolution in Britain, an issue that has been discussed in *Workers' Liberty*.

Parliament will play a bigger or lesser role dependent on what the situation is. Let's take two examples to illustrate the point. If a Tory or a Labour government viciously attacks the workers and provokes resistance on the scale of the General Strike of 1926 or the strike movement that freed the Pentonville dockers in 1972 then the development of organs of workers' power will necessarily run absolutely counter to the rule of Parliament. Elections would only be called in order to derail the movement.

Conversely, should a left-wing parliamentary majority find itself under threat from a conspiracy by the bosses, bankers, civil service and military chiefs, then the workers would undoubtedly rally to the defence of Parliament.

The decisive point is not to speculate about which scenario is most likely, but rather to understand that even if a revolution started off with the defence of a left-wing parliamentary majority it would have to break out of the limits imposed on democracy by the bourgeois state if it were not to be defeated. In all cases the power of the existing state machine — bureaucracy, army, police — would have to be destroyed by the armed people — a force that couldn't possibly be channelled through the narrow confines of the Palace of Westminster.

The Commune will return

IT is absolutely certain that there will be new versions of the Paris Commune in the future.

The working class knows no other way of struggling to re-order society, and while capitalism continues to exist that struggle is inevitable.

The basis for a new Paris Commune is being laid by the developing crisis of capitalism itself.

What Marx said of the original Commune and the International Working Men's Association which supported it is still true today.

Banner of the recent French strikes

"The soil out of which it grows is modern society itself. It cannot be stamped out by any amount of carnage. To stamp it out, the Generals would have to stamp out the despotism of capital over labour — the conditions of their own parasitical existence.

"Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that external pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."

The modern priests of the ruling class who pray that we have now reached the "end of history" are engaged in an equally fruitless task.

History has not ended — in fact, as the malign influence that Stalinism has exercised for most of this century fades, it is bound to accelerate through a new period of storm and stress.

The only question is not whether there will be another Commune, but where and when?

That's why *Workers' Liberty* celebrates the Paris Commune.