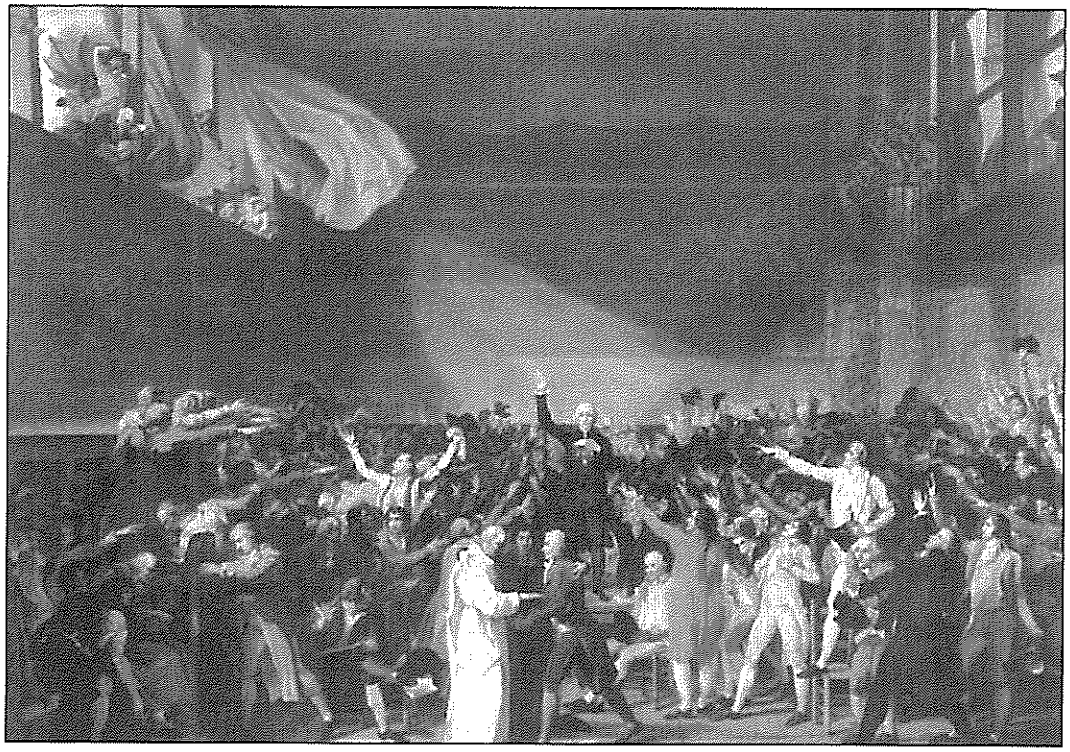
On 14 July 1789 a motley crew of ordinary Parisians and part-time soldiers stormed the most hated symbol of despotic rule in France, the Bastille prison in Paris. It was the first decisive act of the great French Revolution that was to transform the face of Europe, through revolutionary war, mobilising people in a way never seen before and in creating the roots of modern politics and socialism. Mark Sandell looks at the events,



14 July 1789: start of the French Revolution

The storming of the Bastille

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION was the classic example of a bourgeois revolution. As historian Albert Soboul put it "The French Revolution constitutes the crowning achievement of a long economic and social evolution that made the bourgeoisie the master of the world."

Understanding the French Revolution — and how a revolution built on mass support for the ideas of 'liberty, fraternity, and egality' could usher in the dictatorship of capital — can teach us a great deal about the modern world.

In 1789 France, like much of Europe, was ruled by a powerful centralised monarchy. It had evolved out of the feudal system of the Middle Ages. Feudalism was a system based on warlords taking tribute from peasants who held patches of land in their domain. The lord was not only the economic boss but also the political ruler and military leader over the peasants — serfs — who were tied to a small piece of land that they had to live off as well as providing the lord with a part of their crop or work on his lands.

Feudalism had been mutating for centuries before 1789. Class struggles had shaken it. A series of peasant revolts in the 14th century forced the aristocracy to abolish or reform full-blown serfdom in western (though not in eastern) Europe. In 18th century France the aristocracy (the lords) were still the ruling class, and the peasants owed them various feudal dues and obligations, yet only about 10% of peasants were serfs.

80% of people still worked the land, but the cities were growing stronger and richer. Production for sale was well-established, and a class of merchants well-developed. In Paris half the adult population were wage workers, though they did not yet form a class clearly distinct from the large numbers of self-employed "working petty bourgeoisie". Small workshops employed only one or two assistants alongside the master. Many workers depended on casual tasks as messengers, carriers, servants, gardeners, builders.

Politically things had changed too. The old feudal system of local warlords, in shifting alliances, ▸

had been replaced after a series of long wars by powerful centralising "absolutist" monarchies. The French kings were a outstanding example. The kings of France had huge power and wealth. They built vast palaces and demanded the attendance of huge numbers of aristocrats at their courts. They tended to balance between the aristocratic landlords and the increasingly wealthy capitalists and merchants.

The state still rested on bastardised feudal forms. Tax collectors and magistrates were not employed as in a capitalist state, but were aristocrats who bought their positions and creamed off money into their own pockets. This cut against the monarchy's drive to centralise power and left local anomalies in taxes, law and regulations. This was a brake on trade, and capitalist development.

Alongside the monarchist state were the hierarchy of the Catholic church who extracted their own tax from peasants and who were exempt from states taxes. The church and the state did sometimes clash but the clergy gave money gifts to the state in place of tax and many of the church leaders were big landlords too, i.e. part of the aristocracy.

Taxes were heavy on working people. For the peasant they added to the burden of the share of the crop the lord took. For the craft worker they cut into the little they made. The aristocracy paid relatively less tax, although the less well-off aristocracy, squeezed by inflation and stagnating agriculture, deeply resented taxation.

The corrupt old ruling classes based on the land were in conflict with new classes based in the cities, but at the time this was not obvious to either side. It took a conflict within the aristocratic ruling class to open the way for the decisive class conflict to be ignited.

From the mid 18th century the French state had faced economic crisis. The monarchy needed more money, and so from 1751 the King's ministers had tried to reform taxes. The financial crisis was made deeper when the French joined the USA in its War of Independence. Ironically, the Americans were fighting against the British crown, and with the slogan 'no taxation without representation'. The ideas of the American revolution had an effect on some young French officers who fought in America. The Marquis de Lafayette was but one example.

The aristocracy opposed tax reforms that would cut even further into their power and their pockets. Using the local councils of aristocrats and clergy, the "Parlements", and tapping into the modern ideas of the "Enlightenment", they challenged the King's right to levy new taxes without consent.

The new ideas they used to support their opposition to "despotic" royal rule were the ideas of thinkers who challenged the old theology of the divine right of kings — thinkers like Rousseau who were humanists stressing individual rights and freedom.

In their battle against the king, the aristocrats were most definitely playing with fire, but neither the monarchy nor the lords realised what they had started.

The tax reform planned for 1787 brought things to a head. The King wanted to force the aristocracy to pay more tax. The Parlements raged against this 'despotism'. Precisely because of the feudal nature of the state the aristocracy were able to refuse to carry out reforms. The Assembly of Notables called to agree new taxes threw out the proposals.

Frustrated by the blocking of the reforms the ministers tried a crackdown exiling the Paris Parlement and suspending all the Parlements. This led to an explosion of opposition.

Over 500 different pamphlets were published in only four months. The capitalist middle class and 'lower orders' joined the Parlements' cry against despotism on behalf of 'the nation'. Riots broke out in Bordeaux, Dijon, Grenoble, Pau, Rennes and Toulouse. In many places the army proved unreliable, with soldiers and young officers refusing to fire on the crowds.

"The corrupt old ruling classes based on the land were in conflict with new classes based in the cities, but at the time this was not obvious to either side."

The King's ministers decided to call the States General in May 1789. The States General, a sort of parliament, had not met since 1614. It consisted of three houses, one of the aristocracy, one of the clergy and one of the 'commoners' — the 'Third Estate'.

The Third Estate, which was meant to represent France's 24 million commoners, had previously sat separately to the other two houses, representing the 200,000 privileged classes. Each house had equal voting power, so the Third Estate could always be out-voted by the other two houses. The demand was raised that the Third Estate be "doubled" and that all the houses should meet together. This was opposed by the vast majority of the aristocracy. In September 1788 the Paris Parlement, leaders of the aristocratic revolt, insisted that the States General stick to the old 1614 model. The King doubled the size of the Third Estate but ordered it to meet separately.

A "patriot" party emerged, demanding a national assembly of all three houses. Most of its supporters were the urban bourgeoisie who dominated the Third Estate, but some radical aristocrats like the Marquis de Lafayette were also "patriots".

The States General met at the King's palace at Versailles, near Paris, on 5 May 1789. Bread in Paris was twice its normal price and riots and peasant revolt.

On 17 June the Third Estate met, joined by a few parish priests, and declared themselves the National Assembly. On 20 June, locked out of their usual meeting place, the Assembly took a solemn oath in an adjoining tennis court not to disperse until a new constitution had been established for France.

The King's attempt to force the Third Estate to meet separately was met by a mass protest. Soldiers refused to fire on the crowd of thousands of Parisians. The King backed down. On 27 June he ordered all the estates to join the National Assembly.

In Paris the revolution was growing. Pamphleteers and journalists established a permanent headquarters at the Palais Royal. Every night thousands of people met to discuss and learn the slogans and directives. The 407 'electors' of the Paris Third Estate (the elections for the Third Estate went through stages) began to meet regularly in the City Hall.

Agitation was carried out in the soldiers' barracks. By the end of June soldiers were marching in Paris shouting "Long live the Third Estate! We are the soldiers of the nation!"

The King began bringing loyal Swiss and German regiments to Versailles. On 11 July he exiled Necker, a minister who proposed acceptance of a National Assembly, and replaced him with a nominee of the Queen, the Baron de Breteuil.

In Paris four days' rioting burnt down the hated customs posts that collected tax on goods entering or leaving Paris.

All night on 12 and 13 of July the Palais Royal directed a search for arms in Paris. The whole population was arming itself, not just the middle classes but also the poor and the unemployed.

Worried by the 'dangerous classes', the Paris electors set about organising a militia. They specifically excluded all homeless people and even most wage-workers, but this did not stop such people arming themselves, and the City Hall was surrounded by crowds who forced the electors to give out weapons and powder.

As dawn broke on 14 July the search for arms found spectacular success in the Hotel des Invalides, with 30,000 muskets being taken by 8,000 citizens. The cry went up 'to the Bastille' — a hated prison of the old regime but also a likely place for arms to be found.

At the Bastille the crowd were able to force down the drawbridge. The Governor ordered his troops to fire, killing 98 besiegers. At 1.30 pm some soldiers

The Great Revolution's symbol of liberty

arrived with cannons. They threatened to fire, and the Governor surrendered. The anger of the crowd could not be contained, and the Governor and six of his troops were killed in the storming of the hated prison castle.

Over the following weeks, in every major French city or town, events echoed the storming of the Bastille, with militias being established and bourgeois city councils taking over.

The peasants' rumbling revolt, which had been sporadic since 1788, driven by poverty, flared up in 'the Great Fear' (late July and early August), as the belief spreading amongst peasants that the aristocracy had a secret plot to kill them all but the King and the National Assembly had abolished feudal dues.

The storming of the Bastille was of world historic importance. It was the first decisive act of the masses in the French Revolution. Drawn into a battle with the old ruling class, the bourgeois had mobilised the urban poor, especially in Paris.

The storming of the Bastille also shows up the tensions within the revolutionary forces. The bourgeois needed the masses, but the masses had their own wills and their own needs. The attempt by the Paris electors and the bourgeois in other towns and cities to create a exclusive Garde Nationale, a bourgeois militia, was the first sign of how most of the emerging new ruling class feared the masses.

The storming of the Bastille was only the first act of the revolution. As the revolution unfolded, crises led to increasing radicalisation, driven by the logic of class struggle and the continual revolutionary fervour of the Paris masses. Less revolutionary leaders were pushed aside for more committed revolutionaries. The counter-revolutionary aristocracy fled or were guillotined. The church's land and power were broken up. The bourgeois even had to "suffer" price controls and punitive raids for food and goods. Only after the bulk of the feudal system had been destroyed did the bourgeois fully reassert its domination in a bloody counter revolution against its own revolutionary allies, the working people of Paris.

For the first time in history on such a scale the mass of ordinary people had been drawn into political debate and action. At the height of the Revolution hundreds of discussions clubs existed in Paris. They would meet several times a week, Paris was covered in wall newspapers. Speakers spread the latest revolutionary demands. The ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality drove millions of French people to fight for a better world.

Tragically there was never a chance of the bourgeois French Revolution creating real liberty, equality and fraternity. Even the most radical party, the Jacobins, were committed to private property and capitalism. Only a small group of utopian communists, the Conspiracy of Equals led by Gracchus Babeuf, wanted to end material inequality, but they aimed to do it through an enlightened dictatorship.

"Despite continual resistance by the poor and the masses, the Revolution was to pave the way for capitalism in France."

Given France still had famine and shortage there was little material basis for social equality, and as the revolution showed the vital element for socialism was missing. Even in Paris there was no cohesive wage-working class. The political ideas of the Paris poor were confused: a republic of small traders with controls on big business and prices was as far as their experience could take them. The diversity and conflicting interests of the Paris masses denied them the unity of a mass working class forced to unite in unions to defend wages and conditions.

Despite continual resistance by the poor and the masses, the Revolution was to pave the way for capitalism in France, driving the citizens of the revolutionary nation into the hell holes of capitalist exploitation. Yet in the process the vast majority of the citizens of France have become part of a working class that produces, along with the world's working class, a plentiful supply of goods upon which a truly equal society, a socialist society, can be built. Another revolution will be needed to create that new society, but the modern world and the ideas of 'Liberty, Egality and Fraternity' would not have been possible without the smashing of the old feudal order. In the roll of honour of those who smashed fetters on humanity, the citizens who stormed the Bastille will always come first.

Vive la révolution!