

# The Anniversary of the Paris Commune and the Struggle Against Fascist Terror

By ANNA DAMON

SIXTY-FOUR years ago, on March 18, 1871, the working class of Paris, for the first time in the world's history, took power into its own hands. The workers had not been prepared and trained for this struggle. They had no experienced revolutionary party to guide and lead them. Paris was besieged by the forces of the counter-revolutionary Versailles government and isolated from the rest of the country. In the face of these tremendous odds against them, the workers of Paris for over two months fought fearlessly and tirelessly to maintain their government. Tens of thousands died fighting in its defense.

On the seventy-seventh day the workers were defeated and the Paris Commune was crushed. The superior forces of the Versailles army, augmented by thousands of French war prisoners released by Bismarck for the express purpose of suppressing the Commune, had penetrated into the city. But for days the workers continued to fight on the streets, behind barricades. Only on May 28, 1871, the Versailles succeeded in clearing the last barricades.

Not satisfied with the thousands of lives lost by the working class on the firing lines, the enraged bourgeoisie wreaked terrible vengeance on the proletariat of Paris. Thousands of workers were killed outright, about 45,000 were arrested and many of them later executed, thousands were imprisoned and exiled. It has been estimated that about 100,000 Parisians, including the flower of the working class, lost their lives as a result of this historic struggle.

The Paris Commune was defeated, but the Communards did not fight in vain. They not only left a glorious legacy of heroic struggle, of "storming the heavens", a tradition of indomitable courage in the face of overwhelming odds—they fought the first decisive battle in the war to end all exploitation and slavery the world over which brought invaluable lessons to the working class.

Marx said of the Paris Commune: "History has no such examples, no such greatness. . . ." Lenin, discussing the significance of the Paris Commune, wrote:

"The Commune did not fight for any local or narrow national

aim, but for the freedom of toiling humanity, of all the down-trodden and oppressed. As the foremost fighter for the social revolution, the Commune has won sympathy wherever there is a proletariat struggling and suffering. The picture of its life and death, the sight of a workers' government which seized the capital of the world and kept it in its hands for over two months, the spectacle of the heroic struggle of the proletariat and its sufferings after defeat—all this has raised the spirit of millions of workers, aroused their hopes and attracted their sympathies to the side of socialism. The thunder of the cannon in Paris awakened the most backward strata of the proletariat from deep slumber, and everywhere gave impetus to the growth of revolutionary Socialist propaganda. This is why the cause of the Commune did not die. It lives to the present day in every one of us.

"The cause of the Commune is the cause of the social revolution, the cause of the complete political and economic emancipation of the toilers. It is the cause of the proletariat of the whole world. And in this sense it is immortal."

The cause of the Commune did not die. The spirit of the Commune has lived on. The defeated Paris Commune has come to rich fruition in the victorious proletarian revolution in Russia in 1917. Led by Lenin and the Leninist party, which had studied the achievements and defeat of the Paris Commune, the Russian working class and toiling masses profited from the lessons of the Commune and irrevocably overthrew the yoke of the bourgeoisie over one-sixth of the earth's surface. They had learned the lesson of the Paris Commune, that the bourgeois State machinery cannot serve as an instrument of the proletarian revolution, that "the working class cannot simply take possession of the ready-made machinery of the State and set it going for its own ends", that they must break it up, shatter it, and establish in its place the dictatorship of the proletariat, Soviet Power. With a firmly entrenched proletarian dictatorship, under the guidance of the Communist Party, the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union have beaten back all attempts of the Russian and international bourgeoisie at the restoration of capitalist power. And they are now well on the way to the eradication of all vestiges of capitalism and the completion of a socialist, classless society.

The cause of October—the cause of the Paris Commune—marched onward, beyond the borders of Russia. A wave of revolutions and mighty revolutionary movements swept the capitalist world. Aroused by the ravages of the World War and the ensuing crisis of capitalism, and inspired by the October Revolution in Russia, the working class in Finland, in Hungary, Italy, Germany, came to grips with the capitalist class. But here, thanks to the absence of steeled mass revolutionary parties and the betrayals of the Social-Democratic leaders, the workers were defeated. And again, as in

Paris after the defeat of the Commune, the working class experienced the brutal vengeance of the triumphant bourgeoisie. Thousands of revolutionary workers were assassinated; scores of thousands were thrown into prisons and tortured.

It was at this time, when White terror was rampant in many of the capitalist countries, that, on the initiative of the Society of Old Bolsheviks, the International Red Aid was founded as a non-partisan organization with the aim of mobilizing the workers in united front action to defend and aid the victims of capitalist terror. In 1923, shortly after its foundation, the International Red Aid designated March 18, the anniversary of the Paris Commune, as I.R.A. day, calling upon its organizations in all countries to link up the commemoration of the Commune with the struggle against the capitalist terror and aid to its victims.

The years that passed since then have amply justified the foundation and existence of the International Red Aid (whose American section, the International Labor Defense, was founded in 1925 through the unification on a national scale of the existing local labor defense organizations). The I.R.A. sections have played an important role in developing mass defense actions, of national and international scope, against capitalist terror. It will suffice here to recall the mass demonstrations the world over in connection with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, the Scottsboro boys, the Reichstag fire frame-up.

The events of the past year, the onslaught of fascism in a number of European countries, the rapid advance of the fascist offensive in the U.S.A., lend greater significance than ever before to the commemorations of the Paris Commune this year. The fight against war and fascism, which threaten to engulf the entire capitalist world, against the increasing ruling class terror in the U.S.A., the ever-sharpening repression and violation of workers' rights, must be greatly strengthened. The struggle against new repressive legislation and for the repeal of the existing "criminal syndicalism" and similar repressive laws must be further stimulated and broadened. The struggle against the deportation terror and for the right of asylum for political refugees must be tremendously developed. The campaigns for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys, of Herndon, of Tom Mooney, of the Sacramento defendants, must be intensified. A revived and more vigorous drive for the freedom of Thaelmann, Rakosi, and the other victims of fascist terror are vital immediate tasks.

In the U.S.A., we face attacks against the working class that sharpen daily. Prosecutions under existing repressive laws, state and federal, multiply week by week. The deportation terror becomes

more savage. Four bills providing for a federal sedition law on the same order as the present state laws, but more drastic, and for creation of a federal Red squad, have already been introduced in Congress, with an administration bill being prepared. Fifteen laws directed at sharpening the terror against the foreign-born have been brought into the House, and an administration bill is announced which, among other things, would give any employee of the Department of Labor the right to arrest anyone, citizen or non-citizen, without warrant, on suspicion of "being an illegally-entered alien"—an unprecedented strike-breaking measure. All of this is part of the reactionary drive to suppress the working class organizations, to drive underground the Communist Party, to sweep the country with fascist terror.

This situation demands more than ever the development of a united broad defense movement and the defeat of all splitting attempts (Trotskyite "Non-Partisan Defense League"; Matteoti Fund, and the newly organized "Labor and Socialist National Defense Committee").

The role played by the I.L.D. in the labor movement, and in the national liberation movement of the Negro people in the past year, is an indication of the possibilities and huge tasks that lie before it.

In the San Francisco General Strike, it was through the leadership of our Party in the I.L.D. that the united front was forged that took up the struggle it is now leading in defense of workers' rights to organize and strike, and to beat back the terror that was unleashed by the reactionary administration, the employers, and their fascist bands.

Everywhere in the struggles of the unemployed, the I.L.D. has played an increasingly important role in organizing the defense of those who fell victims to the attacks upon the starving workers and the defense of the very right of the unemployed to organize and struggle (Hillsboro, Ill.; New York City; Pittsburgh, Pa.; etc.).

In every part of the country, the I.L.D. has played an important part in the development of the struggle against war and fascism. This has not only taken the form of active participation in the building of the League Against War and Fascism, and in its congresses, but in the active development of the struggle through its own organization and through its direct contact with the masses. This is a basic point in the program of the I.L.D.

The struggle led by the I.L.D. against special repressive laws and their applications, the struggle against the activity of the fascist lynch gangs—a major task of the I.L.D.—are most important phases of the struggle against developing fascism and against war prepara-

tions, as are the special I.L.D. campaigns for defense and relief to the victims of fascism in other countries, and its defense support to the struggles of the Negro and colonial peoples. These campaigns become very potent and direct stimulators of offensive struggles against developing fascism in the United States.

That around these campaigns the broadest united front can be built is quite clear. This becomes even more evident when we recall the struggle for the Scottsboro boys, a focal point in the whole fight for Negro rights and the national liberation of the Negro people. Millions of people in the United States and tens of millions all over the world have been drawn into participation in and support of the struggles of the Negro people through the fight for the lives and freedom of the Scottsboro boys, and Angelo Herndon. These include large masses of trade-unionists, of Negro and white people in every sort of organization brought together for the first time in united struggle, and great numbers never organized before. The fact that one of the very first acts of an I.L.D. branch recently organized among white textile workers in the South was to make a contribution for defense of the Scottsboro boys, is very significant in this respect.

The foregoing makes quite clear the importance of building the I.L.D. as an organization of and for the united front. The tasks of the Communists in relation to the I.L.D. grow out of this urgent necessity. In a speech at the Thirteenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I., Comrade Stassova, president of the I.R.A., said:

“Comrade Knorin referred to the Sacco and Vanzetti case and said that the reaction to events in Germany is not the same as it was at that time. Is this a mere chance? No, comrades. Only because the Parties underestimate the political role of the I.R.A. and because of the fact that we do not get any good forces for our work, is it possible to have so little attention paid to such a great cause as the struggle against fascism. I am not here to ask for favors. We have a right to demand of the Communist Parties that they give us good forces so that we can achieve our final aim: the world revolution which will open the doors of the prisons.”

The possibilities of involving large masses and developing real united front campaigns, through the I.L.D., by close attention, guidance, and leadership from the corresponding committees of our Party are illustrated by the experiences in San Francisco on a district scale, as well as on a national scale by the major campaigns of the I.L.D.

In order to effect the building of a powerful united front mass defense movement of the working class, under the leadership of the I.L.D., it is necessary that concrete and constant leadership, both

political and organizational, be given to the I.L.D. from top to bottom by the corresponding Party committees. Functioning fractions must be built in the I.L.D. which will establish collective leadership, drawing in non-Party forces and assuring the carrying out of the correct united front policies. For this purpose it is also necessary for the Party to assign good forces to the I.L.D., forces of the type which would really be able to develop the united front and to build up the organization.

To carry out these struggles, a real campaign of enlightenment within the Party is essential, so that every Party member should have a correct conception of what the I.L.D. is, and what its policies are. A year ago, in connection with the Ninth Anniversary of the I.L.D., the Agit-Prop Department of the Central Committee prepared an outline on the history and policies of the I.L.D., and the tasks of the Party in relation to it. A check-up shows that in many Districts this outline never reached the units, and in many units which it did reach, no discussion took place. A few quotations from this outline will help to clarify the tasks of the Party members in relation to the I.L.D. They are the tasks of the Party in a united front organization.

“The Party fractions in the I.L.D. must take responsibility for the improvement of the I.L.D. and its work. They must study its basic program and learn how to apply it. . . The Party fractions in the trade unions and other mass organizations have the task, in relation to the I.L.D., of correlating the activities of the I.L.D. with those of their own organizations.”

It goes without saying that these activities of the I.L.D. must be in line with the I.L.D. program, and not a duplication of the tasks of other organizations.

“The tasks of the I.L.D. as an independent organization are its primary responsibility, although the I.L.D. should be rallied by the fractions to support the Party campaigns *in its independent character*. Only by strictly maintaining its non-Party character and its independence, will the I.L.D. reach those broad masses whom it is its task to draw into the class struggle and those elements which such an organization as the I.L.D. can best neutralize. If the non-Party character of the I.L.D. is not recognized, the I.L.D. will also fail to perform its function as a bridge between the masses and the Party, over which new forces will constantly progress into the revolutionary movement. . . . The greatest care must be exercised in the withdrawal of forces from the I.L.D., so that sufficient forces will not only be left to insure the proper functioning of the organization, but to insure its constant rapid growth.”

By working in this manner, systematically and intensely, we will be preparing and developing the I.L.D. for its great tasks of

carrying through united front activities around the campaigns for repeal of the anti-labor criminal syndicalism and related laws, for the defense of the victims of the anti-labor drive in which these laws are an important weapon of the ruling class, for the right of asylum for working-class political refugees in the United States. We shall be able to develop to even greater heights the campaigns for the liberation of the Scottsboro boys, Tom Mooney and Warren K. Billings, Angelo Herndon, J. B. McNamara, Thaelmann, Rakosi and other class-war victims. In this way we shall be carrying out the great work begun by Karl Marx in 1848 and developed to even greater proportions by him after the fall of the Paris Commune, when he personally took charge of the task of organizing assistance, moral and material, for the victims of the Versailles terror and developed, in connection with this, a strong campaign for the right of asylum for the Paris Communards who were forced to flee to other countries.

In order to accomplish this, it becomes clearly necessary for the I.L.D. to be rooted in the shops and factories. The experiences of the I.L.D. in Germany, like those of the Communist Party itself, show that only where the organization has its base among the basic elements of the proletariat, can an effective struggle against fascism be developed.

As a means of fulfilling a part of this task, the I.L.D. has initiated a recruiting drive for 5,000 new members, of whom at least 50 per cent must be factory workers, 50 per cent Negroes, and 35 per cent women, to be inaugurated on March 18, anniversary of the Paris Commune, and to continue as a special drive until June 28, tenth anniversary of the founding of the I.L.D.

The direct tasks of the Communists in the United States in this special drive are those already given by Comrade Browder:

"The I.L.D. must be given capable leading forces from its supporting affiliated organization. . . . The I.L.D. must be really taken seriously and given all the help, political and organizational and material, needed to build the I.L.D. into a real broad mass organization, solidly based among the workers in the shops and capable of carrying our defense organization to new and higher achievements."