

***Stand Up and Be
Counted!***

By Robert Bills

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The following is the text of an address delivered at the SLP's Northern California Paris Commune Commemoration on March 13, 1994, by the Party's National Secretary, Robert Bills.



Comrades and Friends:

I am extremely pleased by the opportunity the two Northern California sections of the SLP have afforded me to address you this afternoon, for it provides me with the chance to speak on a matter I believe to be of extreme importance, though it is also one that is only rarely addressed from the SLP's public platform.

The reason for our being here this afternoon is, as you know, to commemorate the 123rd anniversary of the Paris Commune: the Commune of 1871, which will live forever in the memories of all progressive and forward-looking men and women as the first attempt on the part of our class—the working class—to establish and conduct a government of their own making.

However, it is not my purpose here to dwell on the history of the Commune, or on the fateful events that preceded it. Suffice to say that those events occurred, and that their occurrence proved—not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, but again—that there are in fact limits to human endurance.

Humanity is not quite the hopeless, hapless dupe of the unscrupulous it is sometimes made out to be. It is tolerant, often to a fault, and often to its own undoing. However, the capacity of the human race to endure tyranny and oppression, poverty and deprivation, exploitation and social degeneration, has its limits. In any event, it has reached limits on its endurance in the past, and if the past is any guide to the future, it will reach those limits again. The Communards of Paris proved this, as did the workers of Russia in 1917, the workers in Germany in 1918 and 1919, and the working classes of many other times and places that could be cited.

As to what followed the Commune—the brutal massacre of thousands of

working-class men, women and children by the vengeful and cowardly wretches who made up the bourgeois government and military of France—I have no plan to dwell on it. It is enough that you to know it happened, and to have some appreciation of the enormity of the crime, and of the inhuman depravity of such participants in that crime as the unscrupulous politician, Adolphe Thiers, president of the bourgeois government, and the militarist, Gaston Gallifet, who has been aptly described as the “butcher of the Communards.”

No one really knows how many people lost their lives outright during the seven weeks through which the Commune survived and fought for its life, or how many more were either victims of the butchery and mass executions that followed the battles, or lost their lives slowly in exile or in prisons. Lissagaray, the historian of the Commune, attempted to sum up the figures as best he could from the information he could gather:

“TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND men, women and children killed during the battle or after; THREE THOUSAND at least dead, in prisons, the pontoons, the forts, or in consequence of maladies contracted during their captivity; THIRTEEN THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED condemned, most of them for life; SEVENTY THOUSAND women, children and old men deprived of their natural supporters or thrown out of France; ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN THOUSAND victims at least;—that is the balance-sheet of the bourgeois vengeance for the solitary insurrection of the 18th March.”

The fact that anything of the kind took place would be reprehensible in itself, and a testament to the lawlessness of a ruling class crazed by fear. That it took place on such a scale is startling, even after two world wars and such incomprehensible outrages as the Nazi Holocaust. Paris, a city of perhaps 1,500,000 inhabitants when the Commune was established, lost at least 7 percent of its population in the struggle and its aftermath. If something similar were to happen today in, say, San Francisco, with its population of 730,000, the toll would be more than 50,000. If it were to happen on a national scale it would be beyond comprehension. However, it is not beyond the realm of possibility.

The sequence of events that led to the ultimate disaster and bloodbath in which the Commune met its end, and certain others related to them, were summed up in a special commemorative supplement published in the March

12 issue of *The People*, which is on display and available this afternoon for those who may not have seen or read it. There is no need to go over them again. It is not an event, or set of events, that I have on my mind. What I have in mind is that capacity—or incapacity—of humanity to endure unnecessary suffering and abuse indefinitely: that, and the moral obligation it places on those who understand this to work with all their might against a repetition of the disaster that befell the Communards.

There is no escaping the consequences of living in this world; no escaping the eventual consequences that must follow from the way in which society is organized, or where it is tending. In the end, whether in our generation or one to follow, all the social evils that fester as a direct consequence of the capitalist system will come to a head.

Socialists perhaps have a better realization of this than others—even those who are well aware that our society is headed for a disaster. Socialists have a better realization of this because they grasp the fundamental fact that the long list of social evils—whether we are speaking of the human consequences of unemployment and poverty, social breakdown, or the increasingly ominous possibilities for some enormous and irreversible environmental disaster—stem from the very nature of the capitalist system itself.

No, that is not quite right, for there are others, not Socialists, who know and understand this to be true. They differ from Socialists in one important respect: they have no faith in the working class—no faith in the working class' intelligence to perceive the nature of the problem, where it is taking us, or how they might be organized to exert their might and put an end to capitalism.

Socialists have faith in the working class to do these very things. If we didn't we would be fools to waste our time working within the Socialist Labor Party. But there is another side to the coin that, in the final analysis, may foreclose on any possibility that Socialists will ever succeed in their efforts to stimulate classconsciousness on a wide scale, and to assist the working class in bringing its potential for fundamental social change to fruition. That something else is capitalism's propensity for undermining the moral character of the working class.

Permit me to read something to you to illustrate my point. What I want

to read are a few passages from Lucien Sanial's introduction to the SLP's edition of *The Paris Commune*, by Karl Marx. The passages I have chosen were written in 1902 as an answer to Karl Kautsky, a man who once held the respect of every Socialist, but who lost sight of his socialist principles. At about this time Kautsky wrote something in which he argued that the socialist revolution could not take place without a "physical and moral regeneration of the laboring classes. . . ." He wrote this claiming that it reflected the views of Marx. In his response Sanial tries to answer as Marx might have answered.

"Supposing it was Kautsky's intention to thus 'corroborate' his great master in economics, . . . [Marx] might have turned . . . to him and asked: 'Where did you see it in any of my writings that I made the conquest of the political power by the proletariat—in other words, the Social Revolution—dependent upon "the physical and moral regeneration" of the workers? Is not the proletariat today strong enough, physically, to drive from power the degenerates who exploit it? Is it not, indeed, by its own strong arms that all the battles of those degenerates are fought, even against its own flesh and blood? What proportion of the total amount of human muscle and endurance, wasted in war or spent in industry, comes from the other classes? Again, is not the proletariat moral enough for all the immediate purposes of the Social Revolution, through which alone it can enter an era of higher morality and physical improvement? As a body is it not, in fact, the most moral of the classes into which the exploitation of the industrious by the idle—fundamental immorality, source of nearly all forms of private and public degradation—has divided the human race? Look at the proletarians of '71, or at those of '48, or at any of those who, in various countries and at different times before and since, suffered martyrdom in the cause of social justice; did they fail because they were physical wrecks and moral deformities?'"

Sanial continued with the answer:

"To these questions the answer is obvious," he wrote. "Manifestly, it is neither physical strength nor moral sense that is now wanting in the proletariat. And precisely because the natural tendency of capitalism is to stunt and demoralize a constantly growing number of wage-workers; precisely because, with its development, a condition must ultimately prevail that will be the very reverse of that improvement . . . ; it becomes more and more imperative to hasten the day when the proletariat can victoriously and securely proclaim itself forever the absolute master of its own destinies.

“How to accomplish this is the very problem which Marx has solved. He solved it theoretically by his masterly analysis of the class struggle, and practically by the synthesis of it which he carried out as far as he could with the undeveloped elements within his reach. . . .”

Capitalism “stunt[s] and demoralize[s] a constantly growing” proportion of the working class in many ways. Capitalism is, by its very nature, a system that makes the majority of the population beholden to a small minority for the opportunity to earn its livelihood—to feed, house and clothe itself. It does this by virtue of having concentrated ownership and control of all the means of wealth production in its own hands, and thereby depriving the vast majority of the economic independence without which physical deprivation is a constant threat. It is that threat—constantly present for the majority that must sell their capacity to perform productive labor simply in order to live—that works to “stunt and demoralize” workers in increasing numbers. And that threat is greater today, in this age of “high tech” automation and massive and permanent unemployment, than ever before.

This, I believe, is the greatest threat to the human race today—greater by far than all the other threats to our future that capitalism creates. It is the greatest because it is the one that does more to undermine the capacity of the working class to act up to its revolutionary potential than any other. And on this score things are bound to get worse before they get better.

At the outset I stated that there were limits to human endurance; that history is filled with examples of revolutionary courage and determination on the part of the oppressed, and the oppressed of the capitalist era—the working class—have added to that history with many desperate acts of their own. The Paris Commune stands as a testament to that fact. At the same time, however, the Paris Commune failed and thousands of Communards paid the ultimate price for daring to rise up against their oppressors. It failed for several reasons, but none more decisive than that the Communards did not have a clear understanding of where they were going, how to organize themselves to achieve their objectives, or to act decisively when decisive action was called for.

However, history also offers examples of a different kind, such as that of the proletariat of ancient Rome. Wholly deprived of all opportunity to earn its living, wholly dependent upon the charity of the Roman ruling class, the

proletariat of Rome was incapable of striking a blow in its own behalf. “Characterfulness is a distinctive mark of the proletarian revolution” of today, as De Leon expressed it in his *Two Pages From Roman History*. But the ancient proletariat were “reduced . . . to beggars,” and “beggars can only desert and compromise; they cannot carry out a revolution.”

The modern working class has not been reduced to that state, not yet. But the conditions for reducing it to that state and worse exist. When Socialists say that we are in a race with time it is not only a race against all the disasters that capitalism is bound to lead us into. It is also a race against the time when it may no longer be possible to arouse the modern proletariat—the working class—to its historic mission.

One of these two things is an absolute certainty: that, sooner or later, the American working class will reach the limits of its endurance and attempt to come to grips with the source of its problems; or it will permit itself to be reduced to the condition that characterized the Roman proletariat and disqualified it from striking a blow in its own behalf.

The SLP believes that there is a third possibility. “The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing,” said Marx, by which he meant that it will either stand up for itself or it will allow itself to be reduced to the beggar state. The working class has proven its capacity to act in its own behalf, but it has rarely acted with a clear-sighted appreciation of its goal or how to organize itself to achieve it.

Most of you here today know what the Socialist Labor Party stands for. You know something about the principles and the program the SLP promotes. Your presence is an indication that you agree with the Party in what it stands for and what it is trying to accomplish. It is an unusual SLP speech that does not lead up to and conclude with a summary and recitation of the Socialist Industrial Union program, and of the imperative need to bring that program to the attention of the working class. And that is as it should be, on most occasions.

Today, however, I wish to conclude on a somewhat different note. It isn’t the program, or the need to promote it, that I think most important this afternoon. The important thing before an audience of this kind is that all of us understand how vitally important we are—individually and collectively—to the SLP’s ultimate success in putting its message across.

The SLP is a small organization. It is a small voice in a big wilderness of uncertainty, confusion and even fear for the future. The uncertainty and confusion are due, in no small measure, to the fact that the SLP *is* a small organization. Perhaps it will always be small when measured against the vast numbers that go to make up the working class today.

But size alone is not always decisive in times of crisis. Clear-headedness and clear-sightedness have allowed many a David to fell many a Goliath.

Size is not always decisive. Indecisiveness, however, is almost always decisive. It decides who will win and who will lose many conflicts.

From time to time, all of us are faced with making important decisions. There is no decision those of us present in this room today could make that is more important than what we will do to prevent capitalism from undermining the moral character of the working class and snuffing out the spark of human dignity, working to fan that spark into a flame, and sharing our knowledge of the SLP's Socialist Industrial Union program so that no Commune disaster will ever again occur.

Those of us who are members of the SLP must work harder. Those of us who are not must examine why they are holding back from becoming members and, hopefully, take the decisive step.

If we all do our part there will be no more disasters such as the one that engulfed Paris 123 years ago, and our children will not be reduced to the beggar status of the Roman proletariat. As individuals we may not think our decision will matter for much in the end. That's a big mistake. Did you know, for example, that the wings of the huge airliners that carry hundreds of people safely to their destinations are held on by small bolts? Remove one of those bolts and the results would be catastrophic. Fail to install it and the plane would never get off the ground. No one who understands this—no one who understands and acknowledges the correctness of the SLP's message and the importance of its work—should make the mistake of underestimating what they can contribute, or how important their contribution can be.

Thank you.