

Review: Louise Michel — Rebel Lives Series

“If you are not cowards, kill me!”

Anarcho

May 10, 2005

Louise Michel, Nic Maclellan (ed.) Rebel Lives Series, Ocean Press (ISBN: 1876175761)

January 9th 2005 marked the 100th anniversary of Louise Michel’s death. Michel was simply amazing, revolution personified. Known as “*The Red Virgin*,” she played an important role in the creation of the Paris Commune by leading the people of Montmontre to stop the government seizing the guns of the National Guard. She fought on the barricades during the final days of revolt when not tending the wounded. Escaping the mass slaughter of 35,000 Parisians after the Commune was defeated, she was arrested, tried and exiled to New Caledonia along with thousands of other rebels. There, she supported the indigenous people in their revolt against French imperialism.

Finally returning to France when the government pardoned the remaining Communards, she took an active part in the anarchist movement. In 1883, she hoisted the Black Flag and led a protest against unemployment across Paris. This act ensured that this flag, previously associated with French labour struggles (“*the black flag is the flag of strikes and the flag of those who are hungry*,” as she put it), became the classic anarchist symbol. A participant in many struggles, she was arrested numerous times and always remained defiant of the authorities she so clearly held in utter contempt. Anarchist and feminist, Michel fought for equality for all and for women’s self-emancipation (“*we women must take our place without begging for it*”). She died at the age of 74 and, by a fitting co-incidence, she was buried before a crowd of 120,000 people the same day as the 1905 Russian Revolution started.

Given her life story it is good that this book exists. It will introduce this magnificent rebel to a new generation of radicals. However, the book has its flaws. On the positive side, it contains a selection of writings by Michel (including her defiant speech when on trial after the Commune — “*If you are not cowards, kill me!*”). These are by far the best thing about the book. It also has a couple of good selections from Emma Goldman who was profoundly influenced by Michel. The first is from “*Living My Life*” and the second is a letter about claims that Michel was a lesbian. It is nice to know that Goldman was not a homophobe and her anarchism extended to those of different sexuality’s. There is also a good account by Sheila Rowbotham of how the women in the Commune were radicalised by their struggles and, as a consequence, how they also had to fight the sexism of their male comrades. Howard Zinn, the American radical historian, has a short piece on the “New Left” which is concise and to the point (i.e. that history proved Bakunin,

not Marx, right). A tribute poem (*Viro Major*) by her friend Victor Hugo is also included, as are the words of “the Internationale” (written by anarchist Commune Eugene Pottier).

Unfortunately, rather than fill the book with as many first hand accounts of Michel’s life and struggles as possible, we get subjected to accounts of the Paris Commune by the likes of Marx and Lenin. This hardly seems appropriate, given that these people spent some time fighting anarchists and their ideas. In the case of Lenin, this is doubly objectionable for as well as repressing the Russian anarchists much more brutally than the French state did Michel he also presided over the slaughter of the Kronstadt Commune (ironically, nearly 50 years to the day Michel faced the troops in Paris). Lenin’s regime confirmed Michel’s prediction, uttered when she along with other anarchists were expelled from the Marxist Second International, that the Marxists “*will be worse than anyone he replaces [in power] because the Marxists claim infallibility and practice excommunication.*”

It is significant that while the editor is happy to account Michel’s actions, her politics are downplayed. Given that this series is meant to present both the rebel’s ideas along with their lives this is a serious flaw. The editor appears somewhat incredulously states that Michel’s “*emotional ties were with the anarchist movement*” but that is hardly surprising as (four pages previously) it is admitted that she “*adopted anarchist politics*” in exile. What anarchism actually stands for, however, goes unmentioned. This is surely a significant omission (although this may be a blessing in disguise given how ignorant Marxists generally are about our ideas!).

For example, it is mentioned in the introduction that Michel fully supported the statement by arrested anarchists made in 1883 and that she reproduced it in full in her memoirs. The editor fails to do likewise. Surely such a concise summary of what Michel believed in should warrant inclusion? Instead, we get two selections from Lenin! And given that Michel became an anarchist after the commune, it would make sense to reproduce, say, Kropotkin’s critique of that revolution than to include people whose analysis Michel obviously rejected or even extracts from her own work on that event. Sadly, the editor disagreed and we are subjected to Marx, Engels, Lenin and Paul Foot all praising the “workers’ government”! Given that Michel recognised the “*monstrous manner in which power transforms men*” and advocated ending the “*crimes that power commits*” by “*spreading power out to the entire human race,*” quoting defenders of the centralisation of power into the hands of a few party leaders is hardly doing her memory justice. That Bakunin and Kropotkin are included in this section is of little comfort given the shortness of their pieces.

This downplaying of anarchism is hardly unique to this book, though. Marxists habitually forget to mention that rebels were anarchists (while trying to squeeze in some link to Marxism). **Socialist Worker**, for example, reproduced an (edited) version of a 1979 talk by Paul Foot last year about Michel entitled “*The woman who built barricades*” (issue 1922, 9 October 2004) That she was an anarchist was somehow forgotten, although the fact that she “*joined the International Working Men’s Association, which was set up by Karl Marx and others*” was not. This falsehood is repeated by the editor, who makes the more modest claim that Marx “*helped found*” that organisation. It is true that Marx was present at the founding meeting of the International but he was not involved in organising of that meeting or involved in the process that lead to it. That honour goes to British and (especially) French trade unionists, both of whom Marx spent a lot of time fighting once he was a member of the General Council.

The editor goes out their way to present a Marxist spin to the Commune. They note that “*members of Marx’s First International*” were elected to the Commune’s Council (taking nearly a fifth of the seats) and then immediately adds “*while others were followers of the anarchist leader*

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.” This produces an utterly false impression that Marxists made up a fifth of the Commune while libertarians were not members of the International. The International in Paris was made up of libertarians in the main and many of these were elected to the Commune (indeed, the French trade unionists who helped found the organisation were followers of Proudhon!). The author’s comment can only be explained as a feeble attempt to imply a greater role of Marxists in the Commune than there actually was.

For the record, there wasn’t one and if there had been then the Commune would never have happened (Marx opposed uprisings in response to the Prussian victory as “*a desperate folly*”). If you are going to subject your readers to extracts by Marx, it may have been useful to mention this. Or the fact that Marx initially supported the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian war, arguing that the French needed a “*thrashing*” and that a German victory would “*shift the centre of gravity of West European labour movements from France to Germany*” which would “*mean likewise the dominance of our theory over that of Proudhon*” ! That Marx later considered the Commune as “*merely the rising of a town under exceptional conditions*” and that “*the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be*” could also be considered relevant by some.

And, just to state the obvious, it was not, as the editor states, “*Karl Marx’s communist International.*” Marx neither owned it (although he acted like he did most times!) nor did it expound his theories. When Marx finally succeeded in imposing his ideas onto it, to combat the rising influence of the anarchists around Bakunin, he only succeeded in killing it off. Perhaps we should be grateful, as this ensured that the First International did not share the ignominious fate of the Second International which did espouse and practice his theories on “political action” (and so proving Michel, and Bakunin, right). So while the editor is right to note that the 1881 international anarchist congress failed to produce a viable organisation, it was considered as a continuance of the First International rather than creating a “**Black International**” to “*match Karl Marx’s communist First International.*”

All this may come from a problem with the Marxist appropriation of the Commune, namely how it singularly fails to fit into that ideology’s paradigm. Perhaps this explains the editor’s apparent unwillingness to discuss anarchism and, consequently, why Michel embraced it so wholeheartedly? If the editor had bothered to include, say, the Commune’s declaration to the French people it would become pretty clear that the ideas that inspired much of the Commune were derived from Proudhon’s federalism. Similarly, while the editor showers praise on the Commune’s attempt to step up co-operatives in closed workplaces they fail to indicate that this also has clear links with Proudhon’s anarchism.

Proudhon, of course, popularised many of the ideas then held by French workers. The term “mutualism” he used to describe his ideas was derived, like many of those ideas themselves, from the workers in Lyon who had raised the Black Flag in insurrection in the 1830s. Which indicates another missed opportunity in the book. While the editor does include three declarations by Parisian workers in the section on women during the Commune, the book is sadly lacking in such voices from below. Rather than allow the Communards to speak for themselves, in terms of reproducing their key declarations and statements, the editor prefers to inflict Lenin onto the reader (although it is amusingly ironic to read Lenin singing the praises of “***the Internationale***”, “a “proletarian” anthem written by a Communard follower of Proudhon, i.e. a “petty bourgeois” anarchist!).

This, perhaps, is unsurprising. For if the Commune was allowed to speak for itself, it’s decentralised, federalist vision of a socialism based on self-managed workers’ associations would

show how alien mainstream Marxism is from it. That both Proudhon and Bakunin predicted key aspects of the Commune (such as its federalism, the mandating and instant recall of delegates, its self-managed workplaces, and so forth) should not come as a surprise. Nor should the fact that Marx had in 1866 dismissed the French workers as being “*corrupted*” by “*Proudhonist*” ideas, “*particularly those of Paris, who as workers in luxury trades are strongly attached, without knowing it, to the old rubbish.*”

I should stress that I am not suggesting that these comments by the editor are the produce of malice or sectarianism. I am sure they think they are being fair to their subject and celebrating a rebel life. They probably really do think of it as “*Marx’s First International.*” I would put it down to the ignorance that affects so many Marxists about anarchism and their own tradition as well as the usual bias in favour of history from above when it involves Marxist leaders. Thus Marx is considered more important than the Communards themselves or the working people who actually founded the First International just as the shenanigans of the Bolshevik leadership are the focus of their accounts of the Russian Revolution rather than what was happening in the streets and workplaces (particularly when the latter clashed with the former!).

The Marxist biases and its corresponding historical revisionism are annoying, but should not detract the reader from finding out about the life of this amazing woman. Until such time as her memoirs come back in print or an anarchist writes an equivalent book or short biography (or translates an existing one from the French!), we are dependent on this book. So while an interesting read, it must be considered a wasted opportunity as it does not do justice of this remarkable woman, her struggles and particularly her ideas.

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A review of a book on that remarkable anarchist activist, Louise Michel. Sadly marred by an obvious, and utterly unnecessary, bias for Marxism, it fails to do justice to her ideas and her life.

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