

Eugene Varlin (1839-1871)



A short biography of the Parisian worker Eugene Varlin, staunch member of the First International and martyr of the Paris Commune

Martyr of the Paris Commune

Eugene Varlin was born on 5th October 1839 near Clayes-Souilly in France into a poor family. His father an agricultural day labourer, also had a small piece of land to grow vegetables. His grandfather on his mother's side had supported the 1848 revolution and he suffered under Louis Napoleon . His stories had a big influence on Eugene.

Eugene's father hoped that his son would study and not be condemned to hard toil all his life like so many others in the neighbourhood. He attended school until 13 and then took an apprentice as a bookbinder with his uncle in Paris. He took evening courses at the same time, even learning Latin and distinguished himself in his studies.

Eugene became conscious of the need to organise and joined the Bookbinders Society at the age of 18. This society concerned itself with sickness benefits and retirement sums and he sought to make it more militant. In 1864, already on police files, he took part in his first strike and became a member of the strike committee. His agitation in the Society led to his expulsion from it and he now set up his own bookbinders' association which grew to 300 members by 1870. At the same time he organised a cooperative restaurant and a cooperative shop.

In an attempt to turn the workers' societies in a more militant direction he called for the creation of a Federation of Parisian Workers' Societies which was created in 1869. During the strike wave of 1869 he set up a strike fund, not devoted to one trade but for all workers on strike.

Eugene became a socialist, adopting the mutualist outlook of Proudhon, situating himself on the left of that current and acting among the anti-authoritarians within the First International which he joined in 1865. He advanced the ideas of federalism within it. He began writing for the weekly paper of the First International. *La Tribune Ouvriere*. He was one of the 4 French delegates at the London conference. He was unimpressed by the London leadership of the International, preferring the company of Marx's daughters to that of their father, and waltzing with them throughout the last evening ! However he felt the

need to continue to work within it. He was opposed to the Proudhonist position which said that women should stay at home and not work in the factories. He had meetings with Bakunin and James Guillaume, representing the libertarian current within the International. With the banning of the International in 1868 he was fined and served 3 months in prison. He developed a collectivist position, becoming coordinating secretary of the workers' societies. He believed the societies could be a place to train people for a future society.

At the end of 1870, after having set up sections of the international in Lyon, Lille and Creusot, he had to flee to Belgium.

With the fall of Napoleon III and the setting up of a government of national defence in Paris, he returned there and founded the vigilance committee of the 4th arrondissement. He became delegate to the central committee of twenty arrondissements, where he was in charge of finance. Head of a Garde Nationale battalion, Eugene, with his libertarian outlook, felt that this had to be aligned to the workers' movement and that its leaders be elected and subject to instant recall. However he resigned from the battalion when it failed to accept his suggestions. He saw that the new government was prepared to make a deal with the Prussians and to flee Paris for Versailles. When this government attempted to seize the cannons at Montmartre Eugene Varlin was among those who took part in the subsequent insurrection, with the battalions of the Batignolles district taking control of the area.

On the 26th March as a member of the International he was elected to the Council of the Commune, being the only delegate to be elected in 3 arrondissements. He served on the finance committee, finally passing to the committee for military supply.

With his experience of cooperatives he now set up clothing workshops, one of which was directed by Louise Michel. He also became secretary of the Council of the International, maintaining links between the Commune and the workers' societies.

As a libertarian he was opposed to the moves to set up a Committee of Public Safety to defend the Commune, reminding himself of the role of such an organisation in the 1789 Revolution. He saw in it the danger of a dictatorship in opposition to the grass roots organisations of the masses. He signed the declaration of the minority, flyposted throughout Paris protesting against these moves.

During the Bloody Week, with the advance of the troops of the Versailles government, he led the defence of the 6th and 10th arrondissements, fighting from barricade to barricade. The Versaillais troops began massacres, but Varlin denounced the attempts by some Communards to retaliate with similar massacres, and tried unsuccessfully to stop the execution of 50 hostages.

Recognised by a priest in the street on 28th MAY he was arrested. He had made no attempt to flee or to hide himself. He was tortured and beaten and then finally put up against a wall and shot, his body lying on the ground for several hours. In front of the firing squad he cried out Vive la Commune!

This article first appeared in Organise! No 77. Magazine of the Anarchist Federation www.afed.org.uk