

?Everything was possible??May ?68

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A quarter of a century after France was rocked by the biggest general strike in European history, Emile Gallet recalls the events and examines the actions of the left

Grainy black and white film of Parisian students hurling rocks at the police; crowds choking on clouds of tear-gas. The passing of time lends romance to the media view of May ?68; a student insurrection which came out of nowhere and was essentially libertarian in its politics. The romance is tinged with cynicism; the barricade fighters were rapidly incorporated into bourgeois society, becoming today?s newspaper magnates, ministers and TV personalities.

But there is another May ?68. One in which a student revolt against state repression lit the fuse of a massive explosion of workers? action, leading to a 10 million strong general strike, to President De Gaulle?s panicky flight to Germany, to a situation in which, for a few days ?everything was possible?. Then the bourgeoisie was saved from disaster by the French Communist Party (PCF) which did all it could to ensure that the general strike did not lead to a revolution, nor even to a ?left government?, but rather to the temporary strengthening of De Gaulle.

At the start of 1968 France had 550,000 students, with well over a third of them in Paris. Their numbers had nearly tripled since 1960. This spectacular growth was a re?ection of the changing needs of French capitalism which had undergone a feverish technological renewal in the ten years following de Gaulle?s seizure of power in 1958.

But campus facilities had barely expanded to accommodate this rapid growth. The lecture theatres were crammed to bursting and even the new universities built in the early 1960?s were already in a dreadful state. There was mass discontent with this as well as the petty restrictions imposed on the youth by the university authorities. Nanterre in the Paris suburbs was the centre of this disaffection.

Nanterre campus was built to house 7,000 students. Yet during 1967-68 there were 12,000 students, whilst the university cafeteria could only accommodate 100 people!

This explosion in student numbers occurred at the same time as unemployment began to take off. The long boom of the 1950s and 1960s had come to an end. There were 450,000 registered unemployed at the beginning of 1968, and the government?s 5th economic plan was based on the figure rapidly rising to 600,000. There was a sudden loss of confidence in the future and young people felt society to be closed and unresponsive to their needs.

Youth under 21 did not have the right to vote and there was stifling governmental control over the media?especially the TV and radio. This led to a dull, old fashioned conformity which increasingly chafed all layers of youth in a period when other imperialist countries?notably Britain and the USA?were experiencing an explosion of ?youth culture?. France seemed embodied in its ageing President : anachronistic, authoritarian and austere.

Prime Minister Georges Pompidou had proposed an educational 'reform' designed to get rid of 'bad' students. A system of degrees by credits was to be replaced all at once by one based on years of study. This was part of the student time bomb. However, probably the most important factor responsible for the politicisation of this new layer of youth was the Vietnam war.

US imperialism's murderous attempt to regain control over South-East Asia, and the courageous struggle led by the Vietnamese people, radicalised hundreds of thousands of youth all over the world. In the USA, Germany and Britain mass protests had turned to street fighting. The effect in France was particularly strong, partly due to the political links between the PCF and the North Vietnamese government. Solidarity actions abounded, especially following the launching of the Têt offensive by the North at the beginning of 1968. In the month of February 1968 alone, there was a major Paris demonstration every week.

Just as the student movement had clear and definite roots, so too the general strike of May-June was not a purely spontaneous event. From the spring of 1967 onwards, a series of strikes, occupations and violent confrontations with the police showed that the working class was becoming increasingly combative.

In 1966, wages and conditions of French workers were low as compared with those of other EEC countries. Their wages were the lowest, their hours the longest (up to 52 hours a week in some industries) and their tax levels the highest. As the post-war boom began to fizzle out, the Pompidou government prepared a wave of austerity attacks.

In March 1967, the government began to issue decrees 'without going through parliament' attacking the social security system and letting unemployment rip. The government needed to use the big stick to ensure that its policies were imposed upon a working class that was restless.

Probably the most significant of the pre-May strikes took place in Caen, in January. There, 4800 workers in the SAVIEM industrial vehicles plant went on strike over a long-running wage dispute. The work-force was predominantly young (average age 25), was largely rural in origin and had a very low level of unionisation (6%). And yet these workers, who the bosses no doubt thought would be easy meat, turned out to be extremely combative.

The unions' reaction to Pompidou's attacks was to try and channel workers' anger into easily controllable campaigns. On the 13 December 1967, millions of workers participated in a day of action against the attacks on the social security and health system. Yet despite the obvious willingness of the workers to fight, the unions merely set the date for another demonstration. The date was May 1968!

The final sign of what was to come can be found in the declining influence of the PCF, especially amongst the young. The PCF had no real voice amongst school and college students. It quaintly insisted on maintaining separate youth organisations for each sex! The Jeunesses Communistes de France was for the boys and the Union des Jeunes Filles De France was for the girls. They did have a joint newspaper, with the exciting title 'Nous les garçons et les filles' 'We boys and girls'. But the prudish Stalinist bureaucrats were utterly unable to attract a generation which was beginning to experience the pleasures of the 'sexual revolution'.

But even if we can trace the origins of May in the molecular processes which was taking place amongst workers and the youth, no one at the time foresaw the momentous, joyous, explosion of rebellion which was to come.

The bourgeoisie was indifferent to the malaise. In March Georges Pompidou complacently addressed the

Gaullist youth: ?Today, it is difficult to revolt, because there is nothing to revolt against.?

Indeed, up until May, the French antiwar movement was nowhere near as radical as the German SDS or the Italian movement. The anti-war demonstrations in Paris were not as militant as those in Berlin, Berkeley or London.

It is thus hardly surprising that in April 1968 Ernest Mandel, leader of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) polemicised against the catastrophism of the OCI and their Healyite British comrades in ringing terms:

?if we ignore the opinion of madmen, we quite clearly do not have, in the near future, the possibility of a revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie in France or Britain. There is not a pre-revolutionary situation in these countries.?(La Quatrième Internationale, April 1968, p8)

Paris was to be the centre of the May maelstrom: it had the largest concentration of students in the country. Of the 550,000 students, around 200,000 studied in the Paris region. On the Nanterre campus, the Trotskyists of the JCR and various semi-anarchist tendencies had organised protests against the university reforms (10,000 students had gone on strike in December 1967), against the Vietnam war and for the freedom to display political posters on the campus. These campaigns had regularly led to verbal confrontation with the University authorities and to several pitched battles with the police.

On 20 March a few hundred students protesting against the war attacked the American Express office in Paris. A JCR member was arrested, and two days later 142 students founded the ?Mouvement 22 mars? (22 March Movement) to fight to get him out of prison.

This group was to rapidly become the focus of a series of student struggles.

For example, the University authorities had forbidden students in the Halls of Residence to have overnight visitors of the opposite sex. The students quite rightly demanded to be treated like adults?which according to the law most of them were not! Focusing their mobilisation on the repressive nature of the University authorities, the ?22 mars? began to organise hundreds of students in regular discussion circles.

An anti-imperialist day of action, planned by the ?22 mars? for Friday 3 May was threatened by fascists. Fearing a large-scale confrontation, the Vice-Chancellor of Nanterre declared that the University would be closed until the exams, at the end of June. Faced with this arbitrary and anti-democratic decision, the ?22 mars? called a protest demonstration in the Sorbonne University, in the heart of the Latin Quarter.

As the demonstration assembled, the atmosphere was extremely tense. The police were everywhere and the students were expecting an attack by fascists. Some 400 stewards controlled access to the Sorbonne and the university authorities threatened to close the University if the students did not leave.

The students had no time to consider their reply, because almost straight away the riot police waded in with their batons. In the streets outside, groups of students started lifting paving stones and hurling them at the police. In a short space of time a mini-riot broke out as running battles between youth and students took place.

By the end of the battle the Sorbonne was occupied by the police, the night air was full of the acrid smell of tear gas and more than 600 students had been arrested.

One of the lecturer?s unions, the SNESup, called for a solidarity strike on Monday 6 May refusing to follow the legally obligatory ?cooling-off period? The UNEF student union at last roused itself from its stupor

enough to call on workers to join a solidarity demonstration in Paris on Monday 6 May.

Around 100,000 leaflets were given out at factory gates by mainly by Trotskyists and Maoists. Later, 30,000 demonstrators?still largely students, but also including worker youth?marched through Paris beating off two police charges.

Every day of the week, 6-10 May, witnessed a major demonstration. On most nights there were fierce confrontations with the police. The number regularly involved grew to 50-60,000. On Wednesday 8 May the PCF, which had initially denounced the demonstrators as ?petit-bourgeois trouble-makers?, tried to march at the head of the demonstration. The students stewards put the self appointed ?vanguard? firmly in their place.

10 May proved to be the key day?or rather night. Provoked by the refusal of the Minister of Education to reopen the Sorbonne and Nanterre, 30,000 students decided to try and take back the Sorbonne. They surrounded the university and faced repeated baton charges, tear gas grenades and brutal beatings. The students fought back with everything to hand. The streets were denuded of paving stones, trees were cut down and cars were pushed into the road to form barricades.

After this ?night of the barricades?, it was obvious that the government was going to have to give in. Shocked by the police violence, the public was clearly on the side of the students, and there was no guarantee that the police could hold their own. Quite the opposite, as more and more youth flooded into the Latin Quarter, it was certain that the police would eventually be beaten.

Pompidou, who had been on an official visit to Afghanistan, returned on Saturday 11 May. He immediately took stock of the situation and, like any sensible politician, caved in. All the Universities would be reopened and the reform would be shelved.

On Monday 13 May a massive victory celebration took place with between 600,000 and 1 million demonstrators thronging the streets. All over the country, millions of workers went on strike to express their solidarity with the students and to protest against police violence.

Both the government and the union leaders hoped that that was the end of the matter. But the movement, which until then had been limited to students, became transformed into a national and working class movement. At the Sud-Aviation aero plant in Nantes, the workers had been fighting for higher wages for some time. Inspired by the students victory, on 14 May they occupied the factory, locked the manager in his office and called for solidarity from other workers in the town.

The next day, the Renault plant at Cléon went on strike. Finally, on Thursday 16 May, the Renault Billancourt plant, the symbol of the French industrial working class, and a fortress of the PCF and the CGT trade union, went on strike. Significantly, it was young workers who began the movement, against the advice of the local union leaders.

Within a few days, and without a call from any union leaders, the vast majority of French workers were out on strike. Out of France?s 15 million workers, around two thirds took action. More than four million remained on strike for more than two weeks. Two million were on strike for more than a month. The demands raised by the strikers were many and varied: pay increases, the removal of authoritarian managers, ending the attacks on the social security system.

Every sector of French society was affected. The industrial working class took action on a scale never before seen. Companies like Peugeot, which had never known a major strike, were paralysed. The mines, the docks and public transport were all on strike. The media workers?especially the state-controlled ORTF

radio and TV station? fought for workers? control over what was said and shown.

Other sectors, less used to the class struggle, also went on strike or occupied their enterprises. Opera singers, actors, footballers, taxi drivers, all took action. The movement, without being called for or coordinated by any party or union bureaucracy had become the largest and longest general strike in European history. And like every general strike, May 1968 posed point blank the question, 'who rules?'

As the general strike grew, the trade unions? and especially the PCF-controlled CGT? did all they could to limit its scope and to turn its revolutionary force into the small change of ephemeral or petty reforms. The Stalinists? desperately struggled to limit the influence of the revolutionary groups on the workers.

L'Humanité, the PCF's daily paper, attacked the youth who had participated in the 'Night of the Barricades' as 'provocateurs' and 'scum'.

Following the occupation of Billancourt, demonstrations went from Paris to the huge Renault plant virtually every night. The CGT kept the factory gates firmly shut and put up posters warning the workers against 'people from outside the labour movement' who 'serve the ruling class'.

Where occupations had been launched, the unions systematically tried to weaken the independent organisation of the workers, sending them home and preventing the occupation becoming a living centre of political education. Where strike committees existed they were generally composed of local union leaders.

The CGT also did its best to keep the labour movement separate from the students. For example, on 24 May, two separate enormous demonstrations took place in Paris, one called by the CGT, the other by UNEF. In the provincial towns, this kind of tactic was more difficult, and the two movements tended to mix together, threatening the bureaucrats' influence and showing the possibility of forging a united attack on the government.

Deeply shaken by the demonstrations and by the abject failure of De Gaulle to restore order, Pompidou began a marathon set of negotiations with the union leaders who were nearly as frightened of the movement as he was. The agreement they reached? 7% increase in wages, shelving of certain attacks on social security, increase in the minimum wage? were a few stale crumbs from the capitalists' table.

As soon as they tried to sell this miserable deal to the workers, it became obvious that it was not enough. When Seguy, leader of the CGT went to Billancourt to explain the agreement on 27 May, he was booed and shouted down in the PCF's industrial stronghold! Throughout the country, it was the same story. The strikers would not go back to work, they would not accept the agreement. The sense of expectation of the need for some fundamental change had taken hold of the entire working class. Reeling from the shock of rejection, the PCF and the CGT tried had to raise their sights, to turn the movement into pressure for a change of government.

They called another demonstration, on 29 May. Again 600,000 people marched, this time under the slogan 'for a people's government'. The smell of 1936 and the Front Populaire was in the air. De Gaulle flew to Germany to a cabal of his closest military aides, whilst ministers began to burn their secret archives.

And yet, the next day, the tide began to turn. De Gaulle returned from Germany, having decided against the 'last and fatal choice' of using the army against the strikers. Instead, knowing the electoralist cretins who led the workers he called a general election and mobilised his supporters in a massive reactionary demonstration on the Champs-Élysées.

The PCF was only too willing to divert the flood into the parliamentary watermill. It called on workers to

return to work and to settle matters at the ballot-box. Pointing to the electoral victory of the Popular Front in 1936, the Stalinists assured the masses that the 'people's government' demanded on 29 May could be produced without bloodshed and suffering by the upcoming elections.

At first there was considerable resistance. But without any alternative objective, disappointed but not defeated, the workers slowly returned to work. But woe to those who abort a revolution. When the elections took place at the end of the month, the PCF's hopes were dashed.

To their astonishment the Gaullists won 55% of the vote and were swept back into office, whilst the Stalinists lost over half their seats, falling from 73 to 34 deputies. Even more staggering was the vote in the constituencies around the major factories. For example, around Flins, the PCF lost 25% of its votes as compared to a year before.

How could it end like this? First, it must be remembered that the electoral system was profoundly undemocratic. Youth under 21 did not have the right to vote, and an estimated 300,000 youth of voting age were not on the electoral roll because of the government's refusal to update it. Secondly, although the rump of the old SFIO stood, together with the tiny left reformist PSU, the PCF was really the only workers' party. And it had just dramatically betrayed the May general strike. Young workers and students were hardly inclined to vote for it or even to vote at all. 'Elections, piège à cons' (roughly translated 'Only fools vote') was a popular slogan in June and afterwards.

Despite this sad finalé, May 68 played a fundamental role in shaping today's French class struggle. De Gaulle lost the mystique of invincibility. In little more than a year he lost a referendum and resigned, returning to his village in Lorraine in a huff, there to live out his embittered old age. The Gaullist 'strong state' was scaled down and reformed by Pompidou.

The PCF began the decline which has continued unabated ever since. At the same time, a political space had been opened up on the left which the social-democratic reformists (Mitterrand and the new Socialist Party) occupied for two decades. To the left of the PCF a number of relatively large centrist groups were created.

Far from being an event which is only of interest to nostalgic 'forty-somethings', the great explosion of May '68 continues to reverberate in today's class struggle. Even more importantly, it carries a series of lessons which are of fundamental importance to a new generation of youth. For us the task is not to repeat May 68, but to surpass it.

The far left and the students

During May the Trotskyist groups played an important role in the early, student-dominated phase of the struggle.

They all argued for links between students and the working class and influenced tens of thousands of radicalised youth—students and workers. The massive wave of class struggle constituted a major test of their politics.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, the Parisian student milieu had been the focus of a series of thorough-going political struggles between different far left tendencies.

The main result of these debates was the weakening of the traditional student organisations, especially the Union National des Etudiants de France (UNEF, the students' union) and the Union des Etudiants Communistes (UEC), which organised the many student members of the PCF.

The victors in these struggles were mainly the small Trotskyist and Maoist groups. In 1966 major splits in the UEC led to the creation of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR?Revolutionary Communist Youth, around 400 members, linked to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International) and the Union des Jeunesses Communistes marxistes-léninistes (UJC-ml, a Maoist group of around 200 members).

Meanwhile the Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires (FER?Federation of Revolutionary Students; around 500 militants linked to the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste of Pierre Lambert) occupied the ?unionist? ground increasingly vacated by the UNEF.

The most conservative of the centrist groups in May was the FER. During the ?night of the barricades? on 10 May 1000 students of the FER came out of their meeting around midnight and marched in serried ranks to the barricades. But not to fight! Denouncing the ?petit-bourgeois? nature of the attempt to take the Sorbonne, they called instead for ?500,000 workers in the Latin Quarter on Monday 13 May? They then calmly marched away from the barricades, away from the burgeoning pitched battle, leaving tens thousands of students to fight the police to a dawn standstill.

A week later, Charles Berg, a leader of the OCI and of the FER, defended their political cowardice:

"20 or 30,000 students could not beat the thousands of riot police. I have no hesitation in saying that we were correct, having gone in orderly ranks to the barricades, to call on the students to break up their demonstration which was necessarily going to be transformed into a bloodbath."¹

Berg and the Lambertists were wrong. Firstly, there was no ?bloodbath? that night. Whilst the students did not retake the Sorbonne, they were not beaten. Fights with the police are not an end in themselves, and wherever revolutionaries are decisively outnumbered, they would do best to avoid them. But that was clearly not the case on 10 May. The students were already well-experienced in fighting the police, and there was no good reason not to participate.

This very unrevolutionary reflex by the Lambertists is explained by their position of always orienting to the ?official? organisations?UNEF and the trade unions, especially the anti-communist Force Ouvrière union. The Lambertists have a visceral distrust of organisations which are not under their control or that of the unions. Centering all their activity on their campaign for ?3500 youth to our central Paris meeting in June?, the FER and the OCI did not feel the need to participate in a battle involving 30,000 students!

As could have been expected, the FER?s refusal to participate in the night of the barricades did not impress the bulk of the students and youth. Despite their long-term work amongst students, they were rapidly left to one side by the JCR, the Maoists and VO.

For their part, the JCR had played a key role in setting up the ?22 mars?. Daniel Bensaïd, still today a leader of the USFI, was one of the founders of the movement. The JCR?s project was to try and repeat the success of the German SDS in mobilising school and college students and in setting up a kind of ?youth party?.

This marked an important break with the politics of its parent organisation, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, which had been carrying out ?deep entry? into the PCF since 1953.

Even at its foundation, in 1966, the JCR had agreed with the PCI?s perspective:

?We are not trying to create a new party?the political weight of the PCF and the CGT makes that an illusion for the moment. The building of the revolutionary party will have to go through the traditional organisations of the working class (PCF and CGT). The revolutionary party will only be created through the

building of a left tendency in the PCF."2

The JCR youth had, in practice, broken with this schema, but in the first two weeks of May their policy was essentially empirical and reactive, following the initiatives of the anarchist leader of the '22 mars', Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Although they pointed out the necessity of links between workers and students, this remained essentially a paper position: the real battles, according to the JCR, were to be fought on the streets of the Latin Quarter.

In a similar way, the third 'Trotskyist' organisation, Voix Ouvrière, had also made a 'turn' towards students. Having traditionally emphasised its highly propagandistic work-place orientation, VO was initially extremely disdainful of 'petty bourgeois' student struggles.

When the first protests against the University reform took place in Autumn 1967, VO explained that they had no chance of winning their demands and called on 'the best of the university youth to break with their social milieu and put themselves at the service of the workers and of socialism.'3

This truly petit-bourgeois moralism only attracted the most guilt-ridden middle-class students. The best of the youth carried on fighting as best they knew how.

After the foundation of the '22 mars', VO woke up to the fact that something important was happening. Their factory bulletins covered European student struggles regularly, and they began to realise that the best 'service' students could give to the working class was to fightback against the bosses government!

Although all three organisations called on the students to orient to the working class, none of them made any concrete proposals for how this could be done.

There was no consistent campaign for links with particular factories or for the speakers from the various union branches to come and speak to the students, and vice versa.

Even more surprisingly, demands centred on the students immediate struggles were largely absent.

The movement's spontaneity tended to hypnotise all the 'revolutionary' groups, sweeping them along through the rapids of the general strike. Despite this fantastic opportunity, their 'revolutionary politics' remained fundamentally abstract.

Above all they were unable to give to the young revolutionary workers or the students clear tactics to combat and defeat the reformist leadership of the labour movement, either because they ignored it (VO, JCR), or adapted to it (OCI). 1

1 Combat, 17.5.68

2 JCR leaflet, Caen 1966

3 VO, 29.11.67, p4

The far left and the workers

The 'Trotskyist' forces entered the May events very weak in numbers and with a weak implantation in the working class. They wanted but were unable to play a more important role in the factories and in the strikes. As two JCR leaders put it a short while later:

'The PCF refused, under any circumstances, to try and contest power, and the revolutionary current which

was forming on the left was not yet ready to take it. Those who could take the power would not; those who wanted to could not yet do so.¹

The JCR in fact strengthened itself amongst the students winning thousands over the next few years to subjectively revolutionary politics. A correct policy towards the mass workers' organisations could in addition have greatly strengthened the revolutionary nucleus in the working class.

For this it was necessary to combine immediate economic, democratic and transitional demands that pointed the vanguard in the direction of taking power. It was necessary to place demands on the reformist leaders, to offer the united front in a principled but non-sectarian way. The three major groupings were unable to do this, tied as they were to inherited wrong political methods and strategic conceptions.

For the Lambertists of the OCI-FER, the key questions were those of the attacks on Social Security, the 40 hour week, guaranteed jobs, a generalised wage increase and for the abrogation of the university reform and the government's economic Plan.²

This reformist programme was in fact that of the trade union leaderships. It failed to raise the key question of workers' control. It was a mere repetition of what was being said by local union leaders in thousands of factories up and down the country.

By putting its main emphasis on the fight for "the weapon of victory: a national strike committee"³ without focusing on the key question of rank and file control of the strike, the OCI-FER showed it was obsessed with maintaining at all costs its links with the established trade union bureaucracy, especially with Force Ouvrière, even where the bureaucrats were sabotaging the movement by opening negotiations with the government.

Voix Ouvrière was also heavily affected by tailism. Although at the height of the strike it declared "Long live the general strike! Down with the reactionary Gaullist police state!"⁴, VO had no idea of how to connect their maximum programme with the immediate struggles of the workers. For VO, the real objectives of the strike were very different :

"the occupiers will not go home, work will not begin again until the workers have at least obtained full satisfaction on the following demands:

1. No salary below 1000f
2. Return to the 40 hour week (or less, where possible) without loss of pay, with the work divided up between all workers
3. Payment of all strike days, without which the right to strike means nothing.
4. Full union and political rights in the enterprises: for the right to circulate newspapers and ideas, for the right to assembly in the enterprises.⁵

This series of demands, put forward at a time when 10 million workers were on strike, was repeated over and over again by VO. Yet again, these are nothing else than the demands the workers were already raising, with a bit of "orthodoxy" thrown in (sliding scale of hours). The incredible experience gained by workers through occupying their plants is ignored here. No attempts were made to make the fight for workers' control the key issue raised by the strike conscious and central.

Even if VO had had a better implantation, had been "the" revolutionary party, it would merely have formed the left wing of the spontaneous workers' movement.

The JCR, which was clearly undergoing a left centrist evolution, understood better than the other two organisations the importance of raising slogans which went beyond the current consciousness of the workers and students. They called for the nationalisation of occupied factories under workers' control based on factory committees. They also called for the opening of the books and warned workers against the trap of 'co-management'.⁶

There are, however, two yawning gaps in the programme of all three organisations. Firstly, none of them warned clearly that the reformists—and especially the trade union leaders—would try to sell out the strike, nor armed the workers politically and organisationally for how to prevent this.

After the sellout the PCF was an easy target, and all groups attacked its bailing out of the Gaullist regime. But the key question of fighting for elected strike committees as a way of preventing the union leaders from betraying was never raised.

Secondly, and even more surprisingly, the question of attacking the Vth republic and all its anti-democratic structures was not raised as a real alternative to parliamentary and antiparliamentary cretinism.

1 Bensaïd and Weber, p164

2 Informations Ouvrières 387, May 1968

3 Information Ouvrières 388, 23.5.68

4 Voix Ouvrière 20.5.68, p1

5 ibid

6 Avant-garde jeunesse 14, 27.5.68, p5

A revolutionary situation?

France did not experience a fully developed revolutionary situation in May 1968. But important elements of one erupted and almost as rapidly disappeared in a sharp reassertion of bourgeois power.

The general strike of May created a duality of power in certain factories. Managers and owners had been locked out, elements of workers' control over production were established in several centres.

This posed a real challenge to the rule of the bosses in these areas. They showed, however briefly, the power of the mobilised proletariat. Nevertheless, most factories did not even possess a strike committee, and those that did exist were not elected by the workers.

Dual power in society as a whole certainly did not exist even though the Nantes Strike Committee, exceptionally, took control of public transport, controlled the roads leading to the town and even issued food coupons to strikers which were honoured by the local traders.

More typically, the committees of action that the far left tried to establish amounted to little more than united front bodies embracing students and workers. They were mainly discussion forums rather than united front bodies for deciding action and they probably existed in fewer than a quarter of the workplaces on strike.

But the general strike by its amplitude and its duration certainly posed the question—?which class rules??—even if the armed insurrection and the seizure of power by the working class never became the

task of the day. The problem was that the parties and union federations of the working class, the PCF and the SFIO leaders, the CGT, CFDT and FO bureaucracies answered this question unambiguously; the bosses!

The immediate tasks during the second half of May were to elect and generalise truly democratic strike committees and build local and citywide councils of action which could link up all the exploited and oppressed and effectively challenge the legislative and executive powers of the government.

In this way the workers and their student allies could have prevented the political initiative from slipping away from them and back to De Gaulle. Instead the strike and the student mobilisations reached a dead end. The reformist leaders made it clear, not only to the working class but to the terrified reactionary petit-bourgeoisie, that they had no intention of leading the millions of mobilised workers and hundreds of thousands of mobilised youth into a direct struggle for power. The students and the far left had no solution to this crisis of leadership in the workers' movement.

Waldeck-Rochet, the Secretary-General of the PCF, justified his party's support for the Grenelle agreements which gave workers a few hundred francs pay increase by the following classical reformist logic:

In reality, there were the following alternatives in May. Take steps to ensure that the key demands were satisfied, whilst at the same time pursuing a policy of democratic changes by constitutional means? this was our Party's position. Or else provoke a trial of strength, in other words move towards an insurrection, including the use of armed struggle aimed at overthrowing the regime by force. This was the adventurist position of certain ultra-left groups.

What breathtaking cynicism and dishonesty! If all the workers wanted was a pay increase why did they launch a wave of factory occupations? Why did the workers of Nantes begin to take control of their city? Why did the Vitry workers try to set up direct trade relations with the local farmers? Why? Because the working class was spontaneously moving in the direction of taking control of its whole way of life.

The PCF claim that a revolution was not possible because a majority were not in favour of it, because the repressive apparatus remained intact. This conceals the fact that they did nothing to develop these conditions. They sought to reduce everything that was revolutionary in the situation back to the level of normal union negotiations and a normal election campaign.

The result was that the economic gains which were made proved ephemeral and the reformist parties suffered a serious parliamentary setback. The Stalinists hated the idea of revolution like the plague. They were totally reconciled to the Fifth Republic and its institutions. Worse, they even sought to preserve De Gaulle because of his anti-American, relatively pro-Soviet stance.

The real task in those weeks was to bridge the gap between the workers' legitimate desire for immediate improvements in wages and conditions, for more democracy, and the desire for a different class government, a different class power.

This bridge could have been built through a fight for transitional demands to strengthen the movement for workers' control in the factories and through repeated calls for a workers' government, exposing time and again the reformist leaders refusal to fight for power. The hold of these leaders had to be weakened and broken and this could not be done simply by denunciations.

These demands should have been linked to a massive unionisation drive; extending control over the determination of wage levels and hours of work, rather than just allowing the CGT bureaucracy to do it for

the workers; defence of the workplace occupations from the CRS by workers? self-defence.

In addition, it was vital to broaden the mass movement to other layers beyond the industrial working class. This could only have been done by agitation and propaganda, first of all directed at the mass of poorer farmers and, secondly, at the lower levels of the police and army.

The sizeable proportion of the French population which still lived in the countryside was largely untouched by May although peasant organisations in the west declared support for the struggles of the workers and students. Even more striking, the army?despite its 180,000 conscripts?remained solid. There was an appeal from the 15th Infantry Regiment calling for soldiers? committees to be set up and pledging not to fire on strikers, but this appears to have been unique.

The police (not the CRS) had suffered a blow to their morale by being blamed for the repression and felt increasingly alienated and disowned by the government. In the confusion in mid-May the Interfederal Police Union threatened a strike itself. All this was fertile ground for revolutionary agitation.

Last but not least there was an important place for far reaching democratic demands. Not only should De Gaulle have gone but so should the whole Bonapartist paraphernalia of the Fifth Republic too. Instead of parliamentary elections there should have been agitation for a constituent assembly, to be elected by universal suffrage of all over the age of 16.

Such a programme, combining immediate, democratic and transitional demands would have provided the French working class and radicalised youth with a platform for settling their accounts with the Gaullist ?strong state? and with the whole of French capitalism.

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