How the French Communist Party betrayed the 1948 miners’ strike

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We reprint here a 1949 article from Quatrième Internationale, the French language journal of the Fourth International (FI) on the 1948 French miners’ strike. During the strike the miners were subjected to murderous repression organised by Jules Moch, the Socialist Party Minister of the Interior. But responsibility for the strike’s defeat lay with the French Communist Party (PCF) led trade union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), which consistently refused to spread the action throughout the French working class. Troops and CRS riot police were sent into the pits, strikers were killed, a wave of strike action shook the whole of France, but still the CGT leadership refused to act. Battered and bloody, the miners were forced back to work after 56 days. This was to be the last national miners’ strike in France for 15 years, and marked a significant defeat for the French working class.

The article clearly shows the treacherous role of the CGT leadership in trying to limit the strike and prevent it from spreading throughout the working class. The reason for this lay in the PCF’s desire to pressurise French imperialism into adopting a ?friendly? attitude towards the USSR, a line which was pushed by Moscow in order to try and deal with the growing economic and military pressure from US imperialism.

The PCF had already shown their preparedness to curb workers’ struggles in order to act as intermediaries between the bourgeoisie and the Moscow bureaucracy. At the end of the Nazi occupation in 1944 they argued for armed resistance fighters to lay down their guns, under the slogan ?One state, one police, one army?! Faced with de Gaulle’s project to set himself up as a new Bonaparte, this policy was extremely dangerous. Although French imperialism was not to find de Gaulle’s services necessary until 1958, as the article shows, this threat was an important factor on the French political scene.

Between 1944 and April 1947, the PCF were in government together with the Socialist Party (SFIO) and the bourgeois MRP. Miraculously, during this same period there were no major strikes! Under their slogan ?Work hard first, then ask for concessions?, the PCF did their best to stop workers’ struggles in order to ?win the battle of production??for the ruling class!

In April 1947, a massive strike wave over wage levels, initiated by Trotskyists (or ?Gaullist-Trotskyite-anarchists? as the PCF called them!) in the Renault Billancourt car plant, swept the country. When the movement reached this scale the Stalinists were unable any longer to condemn it. Now the government had a pretext to get rid of the PCF ministers. In addition the cold war had just broken out. On 12 March Truman declared his doctrine of ?resistance to subversion? and CP ministers were expelled from the Italian, Belgian and French governments?the latter on 5 May 1947. Once free of government office, the Stalinists in their turn were able to adopt a more ?muscular? approach to the class struggle, in line with a new ?left? line from Moscow which coincided with the recreation of an organisation of CPs; the Cominform. However, as the FI article correctly argues, this ?left? turn did not contradict their treacherous role in the miners’ strike.
This period also saw the development of divisions within the French labour movement which still exist today. Following the ?Liberation? of France by the Allied imperialists, there was one major union federation, the CGT. Although this supposedly represented the fusion of the Stalinist and social democratic labour bureaucracies, the PCF increasingly got the upper hand inside the apparatus, controlling over 80% of regional unions by 1946.

Following the 1947 strikes, two important splits weakened the CGT. The teachers? federation, the FEN, split at the beginning of 1948. More damagingly, a group of right wing social democrats, with the support of US imperialism, split to form ?Force Ouvrière?, a new union federation which was to become an important rival to the CGT. The other major union formation at the time was the Christian union, the CFTC.

A split labour movement is a weakened labour movement. This is clearly revealed by the article when it perceptively discusses the likely effect of the defeat of the strike and the impact of different union federations on the French workers. The CGT suffered particularly badly. Its claimed membership (grossly inflated) slumped from nearly six million in 1946 to three million in 1950. This period thus lay the basis for the extremely weak levels of unionisation which exist in France today. The article raises the question of whether a mass union movement could really be said to exist in France after the miners? strike. The situation today is far worse, with only 10-15% of workers in a union. And yet, in the 1980s as in the 1940s, in the absence of an organised revolutionary alternative, the union leaders are still able to lead and betray strikes. Then as now, the question of dealing with the influence of the union leaders is crucial.

Finally, the article is a striking lesson in the importance of transitional demands in the class struggle: raising demands and forms of organisation which lead the working class from their current levels of consciousness to confront the question of power. The general strike is a vital weapon in the revolutionary arsenal, as this article shows. Faced with bloody state repression, the situation was clearly ripe for a general strike against the government?fs use of the force and against wage restraint. This demand, coupled with the argument for rank and file control of the strike, was at the centre of the activity of the French section of the Fourth International, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI). Their intervention shows clearly that whatever the later degeneration of the FI, at this stage they were clearly able to use the method of Lenin and Trotsky in mass struggles. For the MRCI, this is the revolutionary heritage we claim, this is the method we seek to apply in the class struggle today.

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Translation by Billy Cashman.

A general strike betrayed
The eight week struggle of the French miners

For eight weeks the French miners led a strike which constitutes one of the most heroic pages in the history of the proletariat of this country. They showed extraordinary combative and remarkable tenacity in the teeth of unbridled government opposition openly aided and abetted by reformist and Christian trade unions. This struggle of almost 400,000 workers, under a Stalinist leadership, which exploited their combative but led them into a cul-de-sac, can only really be understood within the general development of the class struggle in France.

The current decline of Western Europe?its loss of political and economic power?is most keenly felt in France. Since the events of 1934, which put an end to classic democracy, there have been a series of zigzags between far right and far left, without any long-term stability. Big capital has not been able to forge a reactionary fascist weapon in order to impose its ?strong state?, whilst the proletariat remains trapped
within the framework of capitalist society. At the time of the ?Liberation? in 1944-45 it was the Stalinists who, quite literally, set the capitalist state back on its feet. They also sent the workers who believed in ?their? ministers back to the factories to ?produce? . . . more surplus-value. The masses, whose standard of living was constantly falling, began to shake themselves free of the Stalinist yoke in the spring of 1947. Strikes multiplied from April onwards, reaching a peak in November/December. With the creation of the Cominform the Stalinists had meanwhile made a ?left? turn. They nevertheless brought about the failure of the movement by the slogans, the forms of organisation and the tactics they put forward.

1948 began with the ?Force Ouvrière? trade union split and with a combined government and bosses offensive on the living standards and working conditions of the workers. But the defeat of 1947 had not deeply affected the resilience of the proletariat and the ever-increasing difficulties of everyday life?rising prices stimulated the workers resistance. Initially there were small movements, with no apparent unity; then more massive resistance began. The government?s use of the CRS to eject strikers from the Bergougnan factory at Clermont-Ferrand immediately roused the whole town. This became the starting point for nationwide workers? resistance.

The workers? counter-offensive grew in strength. From the end of September it was clear that the masses were on the move. The previous year?s defeat and trade union divisions were objective factors which hindered the generalisation of the struggles and their development into an all-out confrontation. In these conditions, the role of the workers? leadership was crucial. A revolutionary leadership which had the support of a wide section of the working class would have used a massive campaign amongst the workers to popularise the common goals of all sectors, and would also have argued for the need to prepare for an all-out struggle as the only means of achieving these demands. On the one hand, such a policy would have won the support of the most backward layers, preparing them for battle. On the other hand it would also have to some extent inhibited premature actions in certain industries. The demand for a general strike would have been both necessary and appropriate when key industries had been drawn into struggle by the movement or following decisive events in the class struggle. The workers? defensive struggles could then have been transformed into a major offensive for workers? and peasants? power.

In France it is the Stalinist leadership which had, and still has, most authority over the working class and its key layers. This leadership had a completely different perspective and strategy. It never dreamed of a struggle for the conquest of power by the workers; its aim was to exert pressure on the bourgeoisie to accept a particular policy. The crux of this policy, as defined by the Central Committee of the PCF which met at Gennevilliers in May 1948, was to be a new foreign policy orientation on the part of French capitalism. The workers? movement was to be used by the Stalinists to obtain this. The rhythm of the class struggle was ignored: in order to exert the kind of pressure necessary, the Stalinist leaders needed a series of separate movements, one after the other or even simultaneously, but never co-ordinated in order to overthrow capitalist rule. Hence the tactic of ?accelerator strikes? with the Stalinist leadership putting the brakes on here, stepping on the gas there. The key part in this war of attrition with the bourgeoisie was to be played by the miners? strike.

Like any tactic of merely harassing an enemy who is squaring up for a decisive fight (as far as its own forces will permit), it was bound to achieve the opposite of what it intended.

**The beginning of the strike and its aims**

The authority the Stalinists enjoyed over the miners was particularly strong. During the ?Liberation? they had nationalised the mines (nonetheless, the former shareholders still drew an annual dividend of F1·5 billion) and had secured improved conditions for the miners compared to other categories of workers, because of the need to increase productivity. Thorez, demagogue that he was, played on his past as a
miner and went as often as possible to speak to the miners? often in their own dialect? in an effort to persuade them to produce, produce and produce? more coal. French coal output grew rapidly, but, as in all countries, productivity remained below 1938 levels. Despite receiving certain privileges the miners, like all workers, were underpaid. Their most important demands were for a minimum wage (fixed by the Stalinists at a laughable F15,000), guaranteed purchasing power and increased retirement pensions. Added to this were demands opposing the decrees of the Socialist minister, Lacoste, who had given the bosses? state a system of sanctions attacking the conditions which the miners had gained through years of struggle.

In order to give the movement a narrow sectional character, the Stalinists prioritised the demands against Lacoste?s decrees. The demands which the miners shared with the working class as a whole were relegated to points three and four. In a vote prior to the beginning of the movement, an overwhelming majority of miners came out in favour of the strike. The reformist and Christian leaders didn?t dare to openly oppose it at that time; they declared themselves in favour of a two-day strike and then left it to the workers in their unions to respond whatever way they wanted to. From the beginning of the movement?which embraced all the miners from every coalfield in France?the working class understood that this was their struggle. Even though the strike was launched without taking into account developments in other industries, its very existence and the hardships it underwent hastened the development of a class-wide movement of French workers.

The shootings

The strike began on 4 October and progressed with apparent calm for about ten days. But behind the scenes, government manoeuvres and preparations were going ahead. When they sent troops into mining areas, the Miners? Federation decided on a 24 hour withdrawal of safety cover. The government used this as a pretext for sending its forces of repression to clear pits occupied by the striking miners. So the Miners? Federation completely withdrew safety cover. Bloody clashes were predictable.

The government?s CRS could not simply go ahead with widespread attacks. They were concentrated at a few particular points, at first overlooking the principal coalfields of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais, because its forces were in fact limited, despite their efforts to use them to the maximum. It was in the Gard and more especially the Loire that the government sought to make its mark. This attack, concentrated on a few areas, began to arouse a vigorous response from the miners.

Miners who had been thrown out of the pits in turn chased out the CRS detachments. Elements of civil war were beginning to develop. The miners held on to their territory, taking hundreds of CRS prisoner, including, top of the list, a colonel. In several places the CRS fled, abandoning their equipment (trucks, etc). An arrest in Pas-de-Calais led to the occupation of the sub-prefect?s offices in Béthune. Despite his boasts, the Minister of the Interior, Jules Moch, great strategist that he was, had failed in his goal of ensuring safety? and ?the right to work? without using force. Faithful to the (social democratic) tradition of Noske, if not Jaurés, he had no hesitation in giving the order to open fire. Newspapers and radio spread lies to sow panic and, on 19 October, the shootings began. Miners were killed in the Loire and the Gard; there were many arrests and a regime of terror was mounted which banned meetings and attacked those who left their homes. Troops occupied important strategic points. The government?s campaign took on the character of a military operation: each day a communiqué indicated the number of square kilometres of ?liberated territory?.

Next we will examine separately the consequences of the wave of shootings for the working class as a whole and its effects upon the miners themselves.

The movement towards a general strike
The murder of strikers unleashed workers’ anger throughout the country. The idea of a general strike, which until then had only been gaining ground little by little, rapidly gripped broad layers of workers. Issuing from the factories, this call penetrated right to the top of the CGT apparatus. The union branches, the departmental unions and the federations received resolutions demanding a general strike, a few days after the 27th Congress of the CGT. The union leadership took pains to ensure that the proposal, presented by delegates of the revolutionary minority, was rejected. In the CGT Confederal Bureau, Frachon himself was forced to receive delegations which insisted that the CGT leadership took responsibility for issuing the order for the general strike.

The Stalinist leadership doggedly opposed this slogan, resorting to every and any kind of ?explanation?. To some, it said that it was the Gaullists who wanted the general strike. To others, that the working class was not ready for such a movement. To yet others it said that the miners were involved in a sectional movement and that to win they only needed material and financial support. Some were told that economic strikes could not culminate in a general strike, which being political, could only be launched on the basis of political slogans, etc. The document which best expresses this hostility was the ?Open Letter? from Benoit Frachon to the Chenard and Walker workers. The general secretary of the CGT intervened with the full weight of his authority at the moment when the desire for an all out struggle was being voiced from every quarter. This letter was intended not so much to convince people as to sow disarray among militants and thus prevent the leadership being swamped.

The Stalinist leaders could find only obstacles to the idea of a general strike. Even today, several weeks after the defeat of the miners, they are still forced to find responses to the doubts of their militants on this point. This is why the theoretical organ of the Stalinist party, Cahiers du Communisme, reprinted in its January 1949 issue a twenty year old article by Maurice Thorez on the political mass strike.

We do not intend to discuss all the Stalinist arguments here, but rather to make understood the place which the miners? strike has in the struggle of the French proletariat. To those who question whether the working class was ready for a generalised struggle, we offer the following, very incomplete table of workers? struggles during this period. The table is based on information gleaned from the pages of l’Humanité.

All this took place at a time when every union leader who voiced an opinion was against the general strike, and in a period when the Stalinists? policy was that the workers could achieve their demands by limited movements. There can be no doubt that propaganda which put to the fore the need for a general strike would have met with a tremendous response and would have prepared the way for a movement of formidable scope.

The decline of the miners? strike
The Stalinist leaders therefore refused to organise a general strike and the miners continued their strike, helped by material support of other workers (collections each pay day, evacuation and lodging for miners? children) but, under conditions where the war of attrition could only turn to their disadvantage.

Despite all the goodwill of the workers, the payments, the donations and the material help, was limited by their resources. It is one thing to support 5-10,000 strikers and their families, and quite another to support 400,000 strikers and their families. At F1000 per week?an inadequate sum anyway?F400 million would have had to be collected each week! In contrast the French government was receiving aid from the Americans who weren?t bothered by the price of coal.

But it wasn?t only material difficulties, hunger and the reign of terror which sapped the miners? resistance. In addition to all these difficulties, there were the tactics of the Stalinists.
On the question of withdrawing the safety crews, the move decided upon?for a 24 hour withdrawal?was prolonged indefinitely due to the way the struggle developed. But such a tactic, extremely rare for this section of workers even during the longest strikes, appears in complete disproportion to the goals of the strike as expressed by the Stalinists. In a decisive struggle for power, where the whole fate of society is in the balance, the most extreme and daring methods are justified and understood by the workers. However it is difficult to understand a leadership which proposes sectionally restricted goals, which refuses to call to a general strike and which yet calls for the most extreme means of struggle by an isolated section of workers.

The government and reformists of every hue exploited this imbalance between means and ends. The propaganda denouncing the Stalinists as having other aims than the interests of the miners was, in this case, based on something very real. Moreover in the absence of a revolutionary organisation able to show how a revolutionary outcome was possible, and in the face of the stifling of the movement for a general strike, a growing number of miners?whose families were starving and who could see no end to the strike?were drifting back to the pits.

But that wasn?t all. On the one hand the Stalinists? policy favoured a return to work by the least combative; on the other hand it bred feelings of anger and despair amongst the most combative, those still on strike, which in several instances turned into acts of terrorism against those who had returned to work. Violence against scabs is legitimate, but to resort to acts of violence (breaking windows, physical attacks, etc) towards those who, after several weeks of struggle, have gone back to work because they no longer have the strength to hold out and because the leadership, for reasons it cannot openly declare, refuses to pose the question of ending the strike, can in no way reverse the decline of the movement. On the contrary, this tactic (if it can be called that) can only aggravate the defeat by sowing feelings of hatred amongst the workers.

In the final period of the strike, not only were none of the small coalfields fighting, but even in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais there were hardly even one third of the miners still on strike. It was on 29 November, when a complete disintegration of the movement was looming, that the Miners? Federation gave the order to return to work?24 hours after having called for a fight to the finish and without even consulting those still on strike.

**The sequel to the defeat**

It was a very heavy defeat for the miners? union branches. Almost 2000 miners had been jailed, notably almost all of the safety delegates who were the mainstay of the union movement. The government also unleashed the most disgusting repression of immigrant workers who had fulfilled their class duty. As far as the ?internationalism? of Moch & Co was concerned, the latter were fit only to produce and keep their mouths shut. The reformist leaders of Force Ouvrière and the Christian unions didn?t benefit greatly from the defeat, in spite of, or because of, the shameful government aid they received and the vote by the National Assembly to pay F50 million to those who had suffered acts of violence by the strikers.

There are still few exact indicators of the miners? morale and the depth of their defeat. However, quite recently at Firminy, where a worker was murdered, there was an election for a miner delegate in which amongst almost 1000 workers, the CGT candidate roundly beat the Force Ouvrière and Christian union candidates, but in which almost half the miners abstained from voting.

As for the French working class as a whole, this defeat led to a new offensive against the living conditions of workers and, very importantly, to a further weakening of the union movement. The number of CGT cards taken up in 1949 was very small, but neither ?Force Ouvrière? nor the CFTC benefited much from this drop in membership. At the same time, independent unions proliferated in whose orientation was unclear and in which hidden Gaullist elements existed, ordered to remain concealed.
It could almost be said that there are no longer mass trade unions in France; there are several rival centres/leaderships which reflect somewhat the views of parties or political currents in the realm of workers? demands. In general the only people who joined them were the members and closest sympathisers of the political parties.

The French working class still has a large reservoir of combativity; entire industries (engineering and others) were undefeated in the battle. The most elementary needs of workers will push them forward to new battles in defence of their standard of living. The present defence, sporadic though it is, cannot but develop, though at the moment there is no way of foreseeing the rhythm of its development. But certainly an all-out struggle will be much more difficult to achieve. Entire sections of workers, whole factories, will either refuse to move at all or will not move while the struggle lacks an enormous breadth and the workers united front is unrealised. And this united front is so much more necessary because the Gaullist threat is deepening on the very basis of the workers? defeat.

By force of circumstance the Stalinist leaders have been very cautious since the end of the strike. Knowing they would not muster much support they have drawn in their horns, making the smallest demands not so much for the purpose of organising struggles right now, as to strengthen the CGT by agitating around such demands. More seriously, they have kept to their tactic of ?rotating? strikes which, at the service of Kremlin diplomacy, led the miners? strike to defeat and runs the risk of damaging a whole series of industries.

The activity of the PCI
With its small forces, almost non-existent amongst the miners, the French section of the FI concentrated its main effort on agitating for the general strike and on the need for the workers, faced with a wavering leadership, to themselves create a new leadership capable of organising and leading the movement.

The PCI?s politics found an echo amongst the workers. The proposal to send factory delegates to the CGT Confederal Bureau to demand that it give the order for a general strike was often well received and even carried in the Chenard and Walker factory by the leading members of the PCF cell and union section, in the absence of any organised Trotskyist. This delegation, which went with full confidence in the CGT chiefs, expressed the thoughts of all the Paris engineers?as is shown by the accounts given in La Vérité of a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Paris region engineers? union. It was this action which forced Benoît Frachon, the secretary of the CGT, and the Stalinist bureaucracy?s most accomplished union leader, to write his ?Open Letter? to the workers of Chenard and Walker. In this letter he clearly unmasked himself and showed the PCF leaders? hostility to the general strike. This letter has often been the starting point for important discussions amongst workers. Despite the material weaknesses of the PCI?s intervention, the leadership of the Stalinist party thought it necessary to re-issue an old anti-Trotskyist pamphlet, adding about forty lines denouncing Trotskyist activity in favour of the general strike. In the immediate aftermath of the end of the strike, in the climate of defeat, a Stalinist offensive was unleashed to remove Trotskyists from the CGT or from posts they held in the unions. But these bureaucratic measures can neither stop the activity of the Trotskyists, nor put an end to the deep crisis of the Stalinist party. The PCI has emerged strengthened from this tremendous struggle of the French proletariat. Workers?a small number admittedly?have joined its ranks, its roots in the working class are spreading, its campaign for the united front is growing. Its members, despite the dangers threatening the working class, have an increased confidence in the ability of their party in tomorrow?s battles.

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