

May '68: "Everything was possible"

Emile Gallet, Red Flag No 19, May 2018 Sat, 26/05/2018 - 10:39

Emile Gallet, Red Flag No 19, May 2018

Fifty years ago this month, France was rocked by the biggest general strike in European history.

Black and white film of Parisian students hurling rocks at riot police, building barricades with cars and street furniture; crowds choking on clouds of tear-gas; the media view of May '68 concentrates on a youth insurrection against 78 year-old authoritarian President, Charles de Gaulle.

But there is another side to May '68; one in which student revolt lit the fuse of a 10 million strong general strike. As in the great strike wave in 1936, this seemed a situation in which 'everything was possible?'. Then, to the surprise of many who took the party's class rhetoric seriously, the French Communist Party, PCF, saved de Gaulle and the bourgeoisie from disaster, ensuring the general strike did not lead to a revolution, nor even to a 'left government' as 1936 had, but to an election in which the reformist left was crushed and the General's rule restored, albeit temporarily.

France is bored

At the start of 1968, France had 550,000 students, twice as many as Britain, with well over a third of them in Paris. Their numbers had nearly tripled since 1960. This spectacular growth was a reflection 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 with the petty restrictions imposed on the student hostels 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 by 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 again with the long boom of the 1950s and 1960s coming to an end. There were 450,000 registered unemployed at the beginning of 1968, and the government's fifth 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 geriatric President: anachronistic and authoritarian.

Prime Minister Georges Pompidou had proposed an educational 'reform' designed to get rid of 'bad' students. Nearly three out of four students failed to complete their courses. 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 already turned to street fighting. The impact 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.

Workers' discontent

Just as the student movement had social and economic 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 per cent). 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 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.

However no one at the time foresaw the momentous, joyous, explosion of rebellion which was to come. In March, Georges Pompidou stated: 'Today, it is difficult to revolt, because there is nothing to revolt against.'

Even Ernest Mandel, leader of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) in April 1968 could state:

'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)

May

Paris was to be the centre of the May maelstrom. 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 led 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 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 March Movement began to organise hundreds of students in regular discussion circles.

An anti-imperialist day of action, planned by the 22 March Movement 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 - who had cut their teeth beating and massacring Algerian protesters in the preceding years - waded in with their batons. In the streets outside, groups of students started lifting cobblestones 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 lecturers' 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 the same day.

Around 100,000 leaflets were given out at factory gates by mainly by Trotskyists and Maoists. Later, 30,000 demonstrators, still largely students, but now including young workers, 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 to 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.

The workers move

On Monday 13 May a massive victory celebration took place with between 600,000 and one 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 close off this question in the minds of workers. They sought to channel the strike's revolutionary force into the narrow channel of limited and ephemeral reforms. Above all, the Stalinists' were appalled at the fact that the influence of the revolutionary groups might grow amongst the workers.

L'Humanité, the PCF's daily paper, attacked the youth who fought on 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 locked 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, wherever possible 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 bureaucrats move to close things down

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 he realised were nearly as frightened of the movement as he was. The agreement they reached, 7 per cent increase in wages, shelving of certain attacks on social security, an increase in the minimum wage, were mere 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 memories of 1936 and the Front Populaire were 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 arbitration', that is, using the army against the strikers. What if the troops would not be used? Instead, knowing the electoral 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 per cent 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 per cent of its votes

as compared to a year before.

Despite this sad finale, 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 'Trotskyist' groups were created.

Far from being an event which is only of interest to nostalgic 'children of '68', the great explosion of fifty years ago 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.

Revolution?

The general strike of May created what revolutionaries call dual 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 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 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 (the old name for today's Parti Socialiste) leaders, the CGT, CFDT and FO trade union bureaucracies answered this question unambiguously; 'the bosses!' The Stalinists hated the idea of revolution like the plague.

The PCF claimed that a revolution was not possible because a majority were not in favour of it, because the state's repressive apparatus remained intact. This conceals the fact that they did nothing to develop or alter 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. 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, based on the organisations of the working class.

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.

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.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/may-68-everything-was-possible>