

FRANCE: may 1968

WORKERS REBEL!

“We just wanted to force an opening. The whole wall caved in.”

—from an interview given to *Le Monde*
by a striking worker, May 1968.

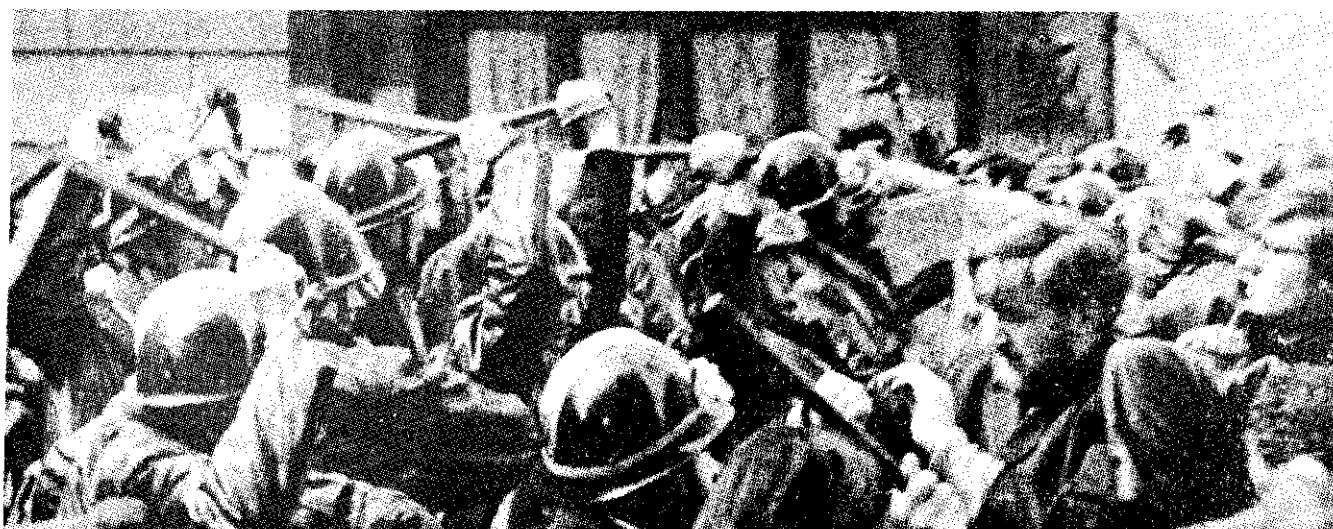
After the Revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels wrote that France appeared to be the country where the contradictions of capitalism were pushed to their limits first.

The events of May-June 1968—student revolts followed by a massive general strike that paralyzed the economy for a month—demonstrate that 100 years of capitalism since the Commune have done nothing to diminish the potential for revolutionary violence against the profit system in France.

However, the significance of “May” is not limited to the geographical particularity of the French nation. In 1968, France was in every sense a “modern” capitalist state. Despite the backwardness of its agricultural sector, the over-centralization of its bureaucracy (particularly in the nationally-run education system), and a number of Napoleonic anachronisms, France was a highly industrialized society whose ruling class was attempting to make a successful transition between colonialism and more modern forms of imperialism. Thus, the contradictions present in France in 1968 were and remain the same essential contradictions of all contemporary capitalist societies.

It is valuable for our party to study “May” because, although differences are inevitable, the French experience can give us a clear idea of the conditions that, in this general historical period, can create an objective situation favorable to armed insurrection.

The present paper will attempt a broad general sketch of events as they happened. It will try to draw key lessons from the struggle, including: the worker-student alliance, the need for a Marxist-Leninist party, the need for the party to train both workers and students for revolutionary armed insurrection, the need to procure arms in advance, the role of revisionism, the fundamental weakness of the bourgeoisie in the period of western imperialism’s decline, and the **absolute** inevitability of the revolutionary process.



Students Battle Cops, Paris.

The revolt of 1968, like all developments, involved a transformation of quantity into quality. As we know from history, the French working class has a long tradition of violent class struggle that runs from the "Jacquerie" (13th Century peasant rebellions) through the Revolution of 1789-93 through 1830 through 1848 through the Commune through the anti-Nazi Resistance.

Recent French trade union history (since World War II) reveals two tendencies: one, militant and violent, with fights against the police, mass arrests, many casualties on both sides, revolts beyond the factory gates, imprisonment by strikers of high administrative personnel, etc.; the other, a "symbolic" tendency encouraged by the "Communist" Party-controlled CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), that prefers one-hour slow-downs to walkouts and "limited strikes" to unconditional ones. Despite efforts by the CGT and its competitor the CFDT (a union comprising all factions on the official so-called "left" except the PCF), the French proletariat has always viewed violence as the meat and potatoes of the class struggle.

In 1955, only 13 years before "May," the western part of France was the scene of several warlike strikes that led to widespread rebellion. It was during the brutal repression of these strikes that the C.R.S. (the ironically-named "Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité," France's national equivalent of local T.P.F.s in the U.S.) earned its reputation as the storm-troop of the French bourgeoisie's police forces.

Closer to the events that concern us, the outbreak of 1968 was foreshadowed by a series of important strikes in the preceding 12-month period. A strike broke out in the iron and steel works of Lorraine (near Germany) in 1967. The CGT moved to take control of it, then broke it after three weeks. In one more week, the strike might have won.

In the spring of 1967, a strike against layoffs hit Rhodiacéta, a synthetic fibre subsidiary of

the chemical giant Rhône-Poulenc. Acting independently of both the CGT and the CFDT, workers on the morning shift at Besançon refused to work and occupied the factory canteen, starting an "unlimited" walkout that lasted for roughly one month. The CGT had more power in Lyon than in Besançon and was therefore able to water down the Lyon strike's unlimited character by declaring daily 24-hour strikes that didn't involve the occupation of the factory. As a result of the Besançon action, the bosses were eventually forced to grant certain concessions, including a 5% wage increase and the inclusion of certain bonuses in the regular salary package. Nonetheless, the unions had a difficult time persuading the rank and file to end the strike. Many shift-workers had unresolved grievances around working conditions; the unions promised these would be discussed "later."

The promise was not kept, and trouble broke out throughout the year. In December, the bosses announced layoffs, bonus reductions, cuts in family allowances, etc. The workers responded with a series of wildcats and the company countered with a C.R.S.-enforced lockout. After the return to work, 92 shiftworkers were fired, of whom nearly 80 were union members or known militants. The bosses had won a round at Rhodiacéta, but the workers were left with a smouldering bitterness that would soon erupt again.

The events at Le Mans that took place in the fall of 1967 are even more indicative of the mood that characterized the French working class prior to the 1968 outbreaks. The western part of France, with its large agricultural population, has always been one of the country's most oppressed sections. On October 2, a series of demonstrations by agricultural workers turned into a bloody confrontation with the cops. Young workers played a leading role. On October 26, after a CGT- and CFDT-sponsored Action Week, the two unions had called for a strike and demonstrations in

Le Mans. The prefect of police had banned all demonstrations downtown, but 15,000 strikers went to five assembly points on the outskirts. Early in the morning, 5,000 Renault workers and others set up a barricade and fought the cops with slings for two hours. That afternoon, other workers broke through a police barrier and from then on until late in the night, savage street fighting took place all over Le Mans. Twenty C.R.S. cops were injured. Many women were at the assembly points, and the fighting was led by young workers and students who had come to support them.

Clearly, although the French bourgeoisie and its loyal opposition in the PCF were too myopic and wishful-thinking to be objective, the events at Le Mans and Rhodiacéta were a taste of things to come. And they were not the only straws in the wind. SAVIEM, the Renault truck division in Caen (Normandy) was hit by a strike that dragged on with sporadic worker-student violence until a couple of months before May 1968.

As one writer on the subject has remarked, when the students of Nanterre lit the fuse of revolt on March 22, 1968, the powder all over France was very dry indeed.¹

THE STUDENTS

A combination of internal and external circumstances had ripened the French student movement for the revolt that first erupted at Nanterre. Despite a lot of the nonsense that has been written about "May," the student strike in France was directly related to the major class struggle taking place in the world at the time, notably the Vietnam war and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The French students were particularly suited to take up the banners of struggle against imperialism, because many thousands of their predecessors had participated in the fight against the French bourgeoisie's colonial war in Algeria.

The PCF had already shown its true colors in the beginning of the Algerian war, when it refused to lead actions against the draft, even though thousands of draftees had gone so far as to block troop trains. The PCF's rationale was that French workers were "too racist" against Arab people to actively oppose a colonial war.*

For many of the same reasons that led American students to oppose the Vietnam war (anti-imperialist aspirations, knowledge that a "rich

1. Gretton, p. 167.

*The PCF was one of the 'leaders' in turning the international communist movement into revisionists and betrayers of the working class. The PCF betrayed the general strike of 1936 and saved the day for the "Popular Front." During World War II, the PCF allied with a motley crew of bosses (led by DeGaulle) in a nationalist struggle against fascism. The slogan, "Fight for socialism," was never raised. After the war, the PCF ordered its members to surrender their weapons so that the PCF could enter the government. Once in power, the PCF proved its loyalty to the bosses by smashing strikes like those of the coal workers and the public employees. It was a 'communist' Minister of Defense who sent French troops to crush the Vietnamese in 1947!

man's war" was not in the class interests of most of them), very large numbers of French students began organizing militant opposition, first to atrocities committed by the colonialists in Algeria, then to the entire war. On October 27, 1960, the Union Nationale des Etudiants de France (UNEF, a student syndicalist organization that was to play an important role in 1968) organized a huge anti-war protest meeting. Within one year its membership had soared to 100,000—roughly one of every three French students.

A Marxist-Leninist party could have won many thousands within this mass movement to the concepts of revolution and proletarian dictatorship, but, as indicated above, the PCF had long since followed Khrushchev and Co. on the road to revisionism, and its conscious policy without exception was to prevent or divert the class struggle.

After the end of the Algerian war, the French student movement and, particularly, the UNEF became a battleground between various Trotskyite sects, the PCF's student organization (the Union des Etudiants Communistes—UEC), and pro-Chinese anti-revisionists who wanted to break away from the PCF and build a worker-student alliance. The Maoists, however, never succeeded in overcoming the contradiction between their stated aims and their slavish aping of the more and more right-wing Maoist line.

As larger numbers of students came into motion against the Vietnam war, the PCF (which followed Moscow's line of collusion with the U.S. imperialists) did everything it could to break the groundswell. Demonstrations of 20,000 that fought cops in front of the U.S. embassy were not uncommon by 1966—yet the PCF contented itself with fund-drives and pacifist nonsense.

Many students and "lycéens" (high school students) became disgusted with the PCF's laissez-faire attitude toward U.S. imperialism. The National Vietnam Committee (CVN) and High School Vietnam Committees (CVL) were formed by the end of 1966 to do what the PCF refused to do. These committees later led to High School Action Committees (CAL), which planned militant activities around the high school population's many grievances. These CAL caused the school administrators a great deal of grief, enough so that after one student was expelled from the famous Lycée Condorcet for organizing a picket line, the CAL put together a demonstration of several hundred students demanding free speech in the Lycées.

In addition to their willingness to fight imperialism, French university students had a vast backlog of grievances. They had opposed the French ruling class' move toward nuclear independence, demanding that the money be used instead to improve material conditions in the universities. The demand was naive; the conditions that prompted it were genuine; overcrowding, complete lack of library space except in the élite "Grandes Ecoles;" total authoritarianism on the part of the professors; a difficult, highly competitive curriculum that excluded a high per-



Students Hurl Bricks at Cops.

centage of degree candidates from the job market, etc.

In addition, despite the blatant treacheries of the PCF, there was a great deal of spontaneous pro-working class consciousness on French campuses. To be sure, the anti-Marxist and anti-proletarian theories of Marcuse had been widely circulated in France and even preceeded by a French Marcuse-ite named Gorz, but although a number of people were taken in by these glorifications of petty-bourgeois hippydom, tens of thousands of French students and intellectuals knew perfectly well that the working class existed, that it was exploited, and that they could and should unite with it.

Numerous documents, particularly from the sociology departments of different faculties, indicate that many students and young professors were fed up with being trained as the pollsters, psychologists, and court jesters of capitalism, and that they wanted to transform the "bourgeois university" into a "university in the service of the working class."

This is not the place to dwell on the essentially reactionary "counter-institutional" content of this demand. In our own party's work on campus during the anti-war movement, we had many occasions to struggle against this line of "shutting it down and opening it up again as a 'revolutionary' institution." Only a Marxist-Leninist party with a correct revolutionary approach to the question of state power can win people away from this illusion. As we will see below, the PCF wanted at all costs to prevent the worker-student alliance from materializing. The fact remains that, despite many errors and weaknesses, a large section of students in the UNEF and a large section of professors in the SNESup (the organization of college teachers) were vocally pro-working class and open to M-L leadership.

Agitation around these and other issues had characterized campus life throughout the fall of 1967-8. On March 22, a meeting at Nanterre (a

suburban campus near Paris) protested the arrest of some students after anti-war demonstrators had broken the windows of the Paris American Express office. On March 28, the Nanterre dean suspended all lectures, and on March 30, the Gaullist Minister of Education Peyrefitte gave a radio interview in which he referred to the demonstrators as "mad dogs."

The situation at Nanterre began to escalate. When a PCF Central Committee hack came to speak there on April 26, he barely escaped manhandling by the Maoists. On May 2, a history professor was scheduled to give a lecture when a number of militant students demanded he make his lecture hall available for a showing of a film about Che Guevara. When he refused, the lecture hall was seized.

On May 3, the Nanterre faculty was closed indefinitely by the administration. The burgeoning student revolt had become national news.

In the afternoon of the same day, 400 students (many from Nanterre) held a protest meeting against the Nanterre closing inside the Sorbonne (the main campus of the University of Paris). Some were armed in anticipation of an attack from **Occident** (the fascist student organization) that never materialized that day. It should be noted, however, that the entire pre-May period was characterized by frequent skirmishes with the fascists, bombings set off by them, etc. The police almost never arrested the **Occident** thugs—a situation we know well from the U.S. police's "most favorable treatment" of ROAR, the KKK, etc. The rector of the University tried to get the protestors to leave. When they refused, he called the cops, who hauled all 400 away in paddy-wagons.

This was the first time police had entered the Sorbonne. It was also the spark that led to the first "Barricades of May."

Once the fighting began, it lasted for nearly six hours until 10:30 PM. At the height of this initial battle in the Latin Quarter, 1500 policemen were up against barely more than 2000 students, and they had their hands full. French student demonstrations have a long history of confrontations with the police. However, until 1968, the fighting usually limited itself to a few small skirmishes, a handful of arrests, and then a quick retreat by the students across "no man's land."

From the opening round, "May" was different. Aside from the fact that no gunshots were fired on either side, the first battle set the tone for a near all-out war. The police had their lead-weighted capes, their billy-clubs, and their gas-guns (they claimed to use only tear-gas, but expert testimony later proved they used the same deadly CN gas employed by the U.S. imperialists in Vietnam and by U.S. police forces against the ghetto rebels). The students had plenty of courage and ingenuity. They tore up the streets and used the cobblestones both to build barricades and as missiles. They ripped iron railings out of the ground and turned them into makeshift spears. They manufactured crude Molotov cocktails. By the end of the first evening, two hundred arrests

had been made and although the students had suffered many casualties, for the first time in nearly 20 years of struggle against the ruling class, **they had inflicted nearly as many.**

The following week was a crescendo of violence against the state apparatus. On Monday the 6th, the Sorbonne, which had been closed since Friday, was under heavy police guard. At noon, a long student demonstration led the cops on a whirlwind tour of Paris. In order to confuse the police, the marchers often quickened their pace to double-time and assumed traffic-directing duties themselves. Fighting again broke out when the demonstrators returned to the Latin Quarter and found access to the Sorbonne blocked. The battle began at 3:30 PM and lasted until nearly the same time the next morning. Eyewitness accounts indicate the fighting was a good deal heavier than the previous Friday.

The next day 30,000 demonstrators outmaneuvered the police, crossed over to the right bank and marched up the Champs Elysées to the Arch of Triumph, where they sang the **Internationale**. After the march returned to the Latin Quarter 2-3,000 students remained to engage in sporadic fighting.

On May 8, the Ministry of National Education tried to negotiate with leaders from the UNEF and SNESup., but they held firm on their three demands: re-open the Sorbonne, free all imprisoned students, and withdraw the cops from the Latin Quarter. This was obviously not a radical program, but the government refused to budge. Twenty thousand demonstrators marched through the Latin Quarter that day, without major confrontations.

The final demonstration of this initial phase of May was by all accounts the most violent student action in modern French history. At 7:30 PM 10,000 demonstrators left the Place Denfert-Rochereau. After a short detour, 20,000 were up the Boulevard Saint Michel to the Luxembourg gardens, the only route left open to them by the police. When they arrived, the leadership of the march told them to disperse and to occupy the area surrounding the Sorbonne.

At 9:15 the first barricade went up. Another thirty were to be erected before the night was over. At 2:15 AM, the Prefect of Police gave the CRS the order to disperse the demonstrators. A pitched battle lasted for nearly three hours, and before the police mop-up had finished, it was well past dawn.

Virtually every available eyewitness account other than those of fascist groups, the police themselves, and the government praises the students for their courage, their skill, and their determination. By the same token, the police, who had previously committed many acts of great brutality, responded on this "night of the barricades" with hitherto unparalleled viciousness. They refused first-aid vehicles entrance to the battle area, beat up medical personnel, invaded neighboring houses and committed atrocities against the occupants. The residents were clearly on the students' side. At great risk to their

personal safety, many opened their doors to wounded students, threw missiles down on the cops from their windows, and even encouraged the students to take their cars to solidify the barricades. Dozens of wrecked automobiles were cleared off the streets on the morning of the 11.

During the same week, agitation began to grip the provincial campuses. There were several thousand students in the streets in nearly every university town, although major violence against the state broke out only in Toulouse.

Two important observations can be made from this initial period of the French uprising. First, the students showed themselves to be an important force for galvanizing mass struggle against the bourgeoisie. Their actions—and, particularly, the tenacity and militancy with which they pursued them—taught millions of French workers a positive lesson about how the road to victory lies outside the ruling class' regulations. Many workers who were initially led by the bosses' press to believe that the students were "crazy" later expressed great admiration for the discipline and seriousness with which they went about fighting the cops. The lesson about the limited value of "symbolic" protest activity that didn't get down to real fighting was soon to find its application in the factories.

However, at the same time, for all the admirable qualities shown by the mass of students during this week, there was a crucial weakness. **No serious political leadership existed.** Various forces in the UNEF and the SNESup., who may well have had their hearts in the right place, couldn't provide adequate direction because of their essentially reformist outlook. Even when they couched their aspirations in pseudo-Marxist rhetoric, their basic program boiled down to the



institutional restructuring of the university outlined above. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, about whom the French bosses' press made a great to-do, was little more than a wittier version of Mark Rudd. His politics were anarchist and openly anti-communist. After the "night of the barricades," his influence on the movement was negligible.

The Maoists were limited by their adulation of the Chairman and by the fact that they had little base among the students and no outlook to build one. Their relations with the working class were tenuous at best.

The main Trotskyite group (JCR) typically tailed the reformism of the movement's political demands and covered this with the actions of its marshalls, who did a lot of front-line fighting with the cops.

No existing "left" group in France could have played a role in moving the students in a significantly leftward direction (i.e. toward the working class and the d of the p) especially the PCF* To say with hindsight that this is what the PCF should have done would be an idealist error tantamount to asking Brezhnev to return to Leninism and then being disappointed when he refused.

The fact is that, despite the objective situation and despite the openness of masses to revolutionary ideas, there was no organization in France capable of seizing revolutionary leadership or of leading the fight for power.

A graphic example of how far the students were from the concept of power in the early days of their fighting is their 15-mile march through Paris on the rainy Tuesday of May 7, when they filed by the National Assembly without even glancing at it—although it was in session at the time, and although it would have been a far more advanced political act to set up barricades there than in the student section of town.

However, it would be an error of monumental arrogance and stupidity to blame the heroic mass of students for the craven treachery of the PCF or for the fact that capable, steeled new Marxist-Leninist parties do not arise overnight on the swamp of revisionism.

Just as the absence of a revolutionary party was a decisive limiting factor in the May revolt, so was the active sabotage carried out by the PCF. In the initial phase of the student revolt, the PCF line dovetailed remarkably with that of the government. The party clearly wanted to quash anything that resembled militant activity. From the onset of the Nanterre demonstrations, *L'Humanité* (the PCF daily) carried articles attacking the "ultra-leftism" of a handful of

* Many students and workers had the illusion that the PCF was a progressive party, only 'misled' in some of its policies. The PCF was a capitalist party, dedicated to maintaining capitalism and the exploitation of the workers. The PCF wanted different policies than those of DeGaulle (it wanted state capitalism and alliance with the Soviet imperialists), but the differences were secondary to the main aim they both shared: keeping the workers out of power. A PCF government in 1968 would have been no victory for the French working class.

"groupuscules" and "provocateurs." By the time the struggle had spread to the Sorbonne and bitter street fighting against the cops was a daily routine, the PCF started accusing the "provocateurs" of playing into the hands of the government and the police. Incidentally, very incidentally, it castigated the police for their "excesses."

This back-stabbing had a dual effect on the mass of rebellious students. In the first place, the PCF was more exposed than ever as a reactionary force. On the other hand, since there was no revolutionary alternative, the PCF's actions tended to build anti-communism among students. Many, who because of their class position, were naturally susceptible to anarchist ideas, fell prey to the "anti-stalinist" baits of Cohn-Bendit and other "leaders." True to form, the party did nothing to answer these baits in a principled way. On the contrary: Georges Séguy (the head of the CGT and a PCF Central Committee member) could find no better argument against Cohn-Bendit than an anti-German racist slur (Cohn-Bendit was a German citizen).

By the end of the week of May 12, however, the situation had gone way beyond the control of both the government and the PCF, although neither understood just how far at the time. Public revulsion against the police was at an all-time high because of the CRS tactics in the Latin Quarter, particularly on the "night of the barricades." The working class sections of Paris, which had been indifferent if not hostile to the students' grievances in April, were now openly sympathetic. The anti-police sentiment was more than symbolic: a good number of cops complained that they were afraid to walk alone in the streets at night. Attacks on solitary policemen were noted in various quarters of the city. One policeman was quoted as saying that he didn't dare take public transportation to and from work in his uniform.

The Paris student revolt had gone about as far as it could go by itself. It had dramatically revealed the profound dissatisfaction with the status quo of masses of students and intellectuals; it had raised—however unclearly—the issue of capitalist education vs. education for the people; it had exposed the vicious oppressive character of the government; it had set a shining example of militancy. However, if the revolt were to reach a qualitatively higher stage, two conditions were necessary. Secondarily, the student struggle had to spread beyond Paris (which it did). Primarily, the working class would have to join in and take the lead.

Which it did. Nothing gauges the weakness of the existing bourgeois institutions in France in 1968 (both the capitalist government and the PCF) more clearly than the degree to which they were unprepared for the working class tidal wave that was about to engulf them. They understood that the student uprising could be dismissed as a middle-level annoyance as long as the industrial workers kept quiet. They had no inkling of how absurd it was to expect this to be the case.

On May 8th, the CGT and CFDT had called a day of massive protest in Brittany and the Loire Valley region. The focus of this "one-day strike" was the threat to job security. Factories had been closing down and mass layoffs had been a fact of life in this part of France for several years. The government, which was beginning to get jittery, sent 10,000 "gendarmes" (national police) and CRS to back up the local cops.

Popular support for the strike was overwhelming. In Brest, 120,000 demonstrated; in Lorient, 15,000; in Quimper, 10,000. The day was mostly peaceful, but the size of the demonstrations was handwriting aplenty on the wall.

The PCF must have figured that something had to be done other than sideline sniping to keep things in tow. On May 9th, the CGT initiated an alliance with the CFDT. Together the two unions sought to contact the UNEF and to organize a joint protest against the police repression in Paris. The theory was that a large, orderly demonstration of workers would have a calming effect on the volatile Latin Quarter situation.

On May 10-11, the "night of the barricades" took place. Revulsion against the government was at its highest point.

On May 12th, after eight hours of almost farcical negotiations, the CGT, the CFDT, and the UNEF finally agreed on a plan for the next day's protest march.

The same evening, Prime Minister Pompidou returned from a trip to Iran and Afghanistan. (De Gaulle at the time was being squired around Rumania by the revisionists and treated as a conquering hero.) He went immediately to the government-run TV station, where he recorded a speech making the first governmental concessions to the student demonstrations since the onset of the fighting. He promised to re-open the Sorbonne the next day and to see that the Court of Appeals would hear the cases of the students still in jail.

Given the "hard line" pursued by the police and other government ministers in Pompidou's absence, the "official" left viewed this gesture as a major retreat.

Both the ruling class and the PCF were counting on these minor concessions and on the events of the 13th to end the whole nasty business. One imbecile close to the government made the following incredible statement: "A well-disciplined demonstration on the 13th will give the opposition a chance to end this fortnight of violent agitation with a flourish. We'll let the demonstrators have the streets for one day. After that, things will go back to normal."

THE WORKERS

In 1968, there were roughly 14,000,000 industrial workers in France out of a population of 50,000,000. Only 20% were paid union members. About 1,500,000 belonged to the CGT; 7-800,000 belonged to the CFDT; and 300,000 belonged to FO ("Force Ouvrière, an organization financed in part by the CIA through the ILGWU).

The French labor force was augmented by the presence of 2,000,000 immigrant workers, mostly from Algeria and Portugal.

The French working class had plenty to fight about. Its work week of 48 hours was the longest in the advanced European capitalist countries. Salaries were abysmally low: the income gap between the bourgeoisie and the working class is greater today in France than in any other major capitalist country. Job security was increasingly threatened. And to top it off, the government had just rescinded the social security act, thereby robbing workers of the considerable benefits they had won in the hard-fought battles of the 1930s.

The demonstration in Paris on the 13th was enormous. The government mouthpiece TV station estimated it at 171,000; the cops said 200,000; and a more objective journalistic source put the figure at 600,000. Regardless of the exact number, it proved that the masses were with the students against the ruling class, and that the workers themselves, at the very least, had plenty of grievances. Similar actions took place in the provinces: 50,000 in Marseille, 40,000 in Toulouse (the largest parade since the Liberation from the Nazis), 35,000 in Lyon, 20,000 in Nantes, 12,000 in Rennes, nearly 10,000 each in Caen, Limoges, and Aix-en-Provence.

The student movement gave no indication that day of returning to normalcy. As soon as the Sorbonne re-opened as Pompidou had promised, it was invaded and occupied. Fighting took place outside Paris between student demonstrators and police on the 13th. In Nantes, Le Mans and Clermont-Ferrand, students tried to seize police headquarters. Every major provincial university was occupied by students. In fact, the student revolt was broadening out—just the opposite of what both the government and the PCF had anticipated.

More significantly, however, the French working class was in no mood to be contented with a one-day symbolic protest.

The first assault was launched by the workers of Sud-Aviation in Nantes. They had been agitating for several weeks against a company plan to reduce the work week and to cut wages as well. (The return to the 40-hour week was an ongoing national union demand.)

The resumption of work on May 14 was a number of young workers leading their comrades off the job. Quickly, the wildcatters seized the administration's offices and imprisoned the director. That night, 2,000 workers ate in the factory and then prepared to spend the night there.

No one in either the PCF or the government worried too much about the events at Sud-Aviation. At this point, the bourgeoisie and the revisionists were still preoccupied with figuring out how to squash the students. They hadn't the slightest idea that the events of the next three weeks would make the student uprising seem like the proverbial tea-party.

* Rioux and Backmann, p. 245.



The second assault came from the Renault factory in Cléon. Five thousand workers manufactured gear-boxes and engines for the government-run automaker's R8, R10, and R16 models in this shop. Since the factory opened in 1958, a vast backlog of grievances had been piling up. The workers resented the arrogance of the supervisory personnel (imported in the main from Paris), the complicated system of exploitation that created situations in which two men could be doing exactly the same work on exactly the same machines for a 30% pay differential, and the fact that despite the high level of technical training received by most of the production personnel, promotions were virtually unobtainable.

Whatever the specifics, capitalism had the workers of Renault-Cléon hopping mad on the morning of May 15.

They had followed the student revolt with interest and sympathy. Only 30 or 40% of the factory had gone out on the demonstrations of the 13th. "We felt a bit ashamed," said one worker from Cléon. Everyone else was on the move; we'd hardly budged. We wanted to use the first available chance to make up for it."

That they did. Wednesday the 15th had been set by the unions in the west as a protest day against the rescinding of the social security act. Typically, the CGT and CFDT had called for a one-hour work-stoppage. On their own, the workers decided to add another half-hour. The stoppage was 100% successful at Cléon.

At noon, the workers learned about the sit-down at Sud-Aviation. The shop was abuzz with the news. Two hundred young workers (the average age at Cléon was under 30) formed a militant parade that marched up to the windows of the bosses' offices. The union officials, who were almost as panic-stricken as the administrators, were pushed by the rank and file to the front of the march and told to demand entry to the administration offices. The bosses refused. The head supervisors went berserk. They blockaded the

doors with crowbars. The workers refused to leave.

The union officials had a great deal of trouble getting themselves recognized as the leaders of the strike. Finally, four general demands were adopted:

1. Full freedom for the unions to organize. (French law and company practice placed fascist-like restrictions on the type of union activity that could take place on the job.)
2. Progressive return to the 40-hour week with no loss in pay.
3. Minimum wage of 1,000 Francs a month (about \$200 at the time).
4. Permanent contracts for 800 "temporary" workers.

At one AM the strikers bedded down for the night. The security had already been organized. At 5 AM, the morning shift arrived to find the locked factory gates patrolled by pickets.

Thus began the greatest strike in the history of France and one of the greatest in the history of the world.

THE TIDAL WAVE

From then on, strike fever gripped the four corners of France. At 8 AM on Thursday the 16th, 1,800 workers at the Beauvais Lockheed factory decided to maintain Wednesday's "one-day" walk-out. At the Orléans U.N.E.L.E.C. factory, 1,200 workers downed their tools. At 2 PM, Renault workers in Flins seized the factories there. At 4:15, the Renault plant at LeMans was occupied. At 5 PM, after a one-hour work stoppage, the main Renault plant at Billancourt fell. Within a matter of hours, the strike at Renault was solid throughout the country, as Sandouville and Orléans completed the picture.

By Thursday evening, 70,000 workers were on strike. Sixty thousand of them came from different divisions of Renault.

From the beginning, there was a move at the occupied Sorbonne to forge a worker-student alliance. The Maoists in the U.J.C. (M.-L.) were the main organizing force behind this. The UNEF and SNESup. later joined in. On Thursday night, a march of more than 1,000 students left the Sorbonne for Billancourt to support the strikers who had seized the plant only hours earlier.

After a two and a half hour march, they arrived at Billancourt. A student spokesman said: "We want to establish ties between workers and students who are in struggle, and we have come to support you."

A union delegate (almost certainly a "ce-gétiste") answered with the characteristic slimminess of the PCF: "We thank you for your solidarity. But we ask you not to come into the factory. If you do, you'll give the administration the excuse it needs to call in the police." The students waited a moment, then marched around the factory singing the *Internationale*. Afterwards, small groups of workers and students held impromptu discussions in the street until one A.M., when the Sorbonnards went back to Paris.

This first attempt to build unity between the

battles of the factory and those of the campus was to follow a similar pattern for the rest of the strike: groups of students—often sizable—would look to establish contact with workers, while the CGT functionaries would attempt to thwart this development at every turn.

On the morning of May 17, French President DeGaulle was still in Rumania. The day before, he had visited the industrial city of Craiova, where the revisionists had made the factory workers down their tools to greet him, in a gesture of friendship toward this capitalist butcher.

French workers had a different outlook that day. By 8 AM, 100,000 were on strike. From this point on, the numbers grew in quantum leaps. Each news bulletin brought information about fresh sit-down strikes. When Georges Séguy held a press conference at 4 PM, he estimated the number of strikers at 300,000. He hadn't counted the railroad workers (French railroads are nationalized) who had blocked the tracks at the important Lyon junction a half-hour earlier or the Paris transit workers who had just begun their walkout.

This was the situation at 8 PM: aeronautic construction was virtually paralyzed; the Renault strike continued; the movement had begun to hit the metal works in Paris and Normandie; the shipyards in the West and the South had been struck; all the Rhodiacéta factories had been seized. As the evening of the 17th drew to a close, the strikers numbered between 500,000 and 600,000.

By Saturday morning, the figure had swelled to a million. All the major railroad stations were closed; postal services were crippled; airline navigators went out and encouraged ground personnel to follow suit.

That afternoon, miners entered the picture along with a large number of miscellaneous workers.

From this point on, it became impossible to name all the individual factories that had been struck. News bulletins spoke now of entire sectors on strike, and the strikers began to be counted in the millions.

Between Saturday evening and Monday morning, the strikers leapt from 2,000,000 to 6,000,000, as non-industrial workers (department stores, insurance companies, banks, etc.) walked off the job.

On Thursday, May 24, at the high point of the movement, between nine and ten million French workers were on strike.

TREACHERY

Never since the World War II had the foundations of a modern capitalist society been so massively shaken.

However, in order for these foundations to be toppled, in order for a revolution to take place, the two classic Leninist conditions were necessary: first, the old ruling class had to be so gravely weakened that it could no longer continue to rule in the old way; second, the masses had to

understand the need for power and act upon that understanding, led by their party.

We will touch upon the weakness of the French ruling class shortly below. Since the internal is primary in all processes, the decisive factor in this situation was the second condition. There was, of course, enormous unevenness in the consciousness of the 10,000,000 strikers. However, eyewitness accounts and interviews recorded at the moment of the strike indicate that many workers—particularly those in heavy industry—wanted far more out of the strike than the economic demands outlined by the trade union leadership.

Here is a typical example. At the beginning of the Flins (Renault) sitdown, one worker made the following remarks to a large strike meeting:

The bosses' authority is absolute and arbitrary. We're still living under a company monarchy. Freedom—including freedom to organize—and democracy have got to be brought into the company.

... The students are saying (and this is the meaning they've given to their fight): we have to get rid of the society we're living in. Do we, the workers of Flins agree? (ovation). All right then. Let's continue our action. Join the union of your choice and let's build a society of proud, free men.

This text is not quoted for its value as a Marxist-Leninist document. Obviously, it contains many weaknesses and illusions. It is noteworthy, however, because despite its confusion and unclarity, the masses were fairly crying out for a new life, for revolutionary politics, for communist leadership. In the absence of this leadership, the workers could do little but stay in the factories and follow the only organizations they recognized as their own.

For its part, the PCF, which had originally tailed every phase of the movement, was now faced with the dilemma of leading ten million people back to work and capitalism.

The revisionists' first new task became to imprison the strike within narrowly defined trade union guidelines. This was the main reason Séguy and Co. did everything possible to head off all attempts to organize worker-student unity. Even without formal communist leadership, the students were interested in revolutionary politics. Many of them had read Marx and Lenin, and however tenuous their grasp of revolutionary theory might be, the idea that the slogan of proletarian dictatorship might "contaminate" the working class was too much for the revisionists to contemplate.

So the PCF mounted a major right-wing political offensive through the CGT. Séguy set the tone at a press conference on the 17th, as the strike was swelling by leaps and bounds:

We will not go beyond our vocation as trade-unionists. It's possible that the movement has started the disintegration of gaullism, but we're not the judges of that matter. Our job is not to lead such a movement to the downfall of the system. That's the job of political organizations:

they have their own responsibilities. Is the time ripe for a general strike? We don't know. Even if conditions were such that we could call for a general strike, we wouldn't do it. It's very important to us that workers in each enterprise decide democratically on their course of action. Our job isn't to give the workers directives or orders.

This from the most important trade union official in France, the immediate leader of one and a half million workers, a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party.

Having failed to prevent the student revolt and to restrain the working class, the PCF now had to sabotage the struggle from within. Its next move was to intensify Séguy's political attack in the name of "no politics." In every shop and factory, the CGT moved to take control of the situation by asserting that only pure economic demands could bring victory to the workers. As indicated above, this move was in direct contradiction to the aspirations of many strikers, but the CGT was able to take advantage of the fact that the revolutionary mood of the rank and file had no organizational form through which to channel its enormous energies.

The following interview with a CGT member critical of official PCF policy gives an idea of the contradictions between the "leadership" and the base:

In many shops, the lack of communication between the CGT and the base was so great that it was becoming impossible to speak in public of anything other than bread-and-butter demands. For instance, when you tried to explain that the situation was ripe to dump DeGaulle and his gang, the shop delegate would jump on you with the line: "No politics here!" and then guys would add: "Shut up, politico!"... You couldn't even begin to think of talking about the students. They'd shoot right back at you: "Everyone where they belong. The students on their campuses, the workers in their factories."

This, in general, was the overall picture at the beginning of the fourth week in May. Tens of thousands of students were holding workshops and conferences in occupied universities, debating about new "revolutionary" social forms and attempting periodically to establish some form of contact with neighboring workers. Millions of workers on strike were talking about changing the fundamental character of the boss-worker relationship and looking vainly for leadership that was not to materialize. The CGT, as the main trade union, had succeeded in taking control of the strike—at least to the point of stopping it from moving further to the left—and the PCF controlled the CGT.

Even with these advantages, however, the ultimate betrayal of this mass movement wasn't going to be a piece of cake. Not only were the workers not ready to pack it in, but contradictions were beginning to emerge within the PCF

itself. A number of dedicated party militants who had stuck with the movement through thick and thin now quit in disgust with the revisionists' line. One resignation in particular, that of André Barjonet, had considerable effect. Barjonet had joined the PCF student organization at the age of 17. He later joined the party and fought in the anti-Nazi Resistance. In 1946, he became secretary of the CGT's Center for Economic Studies. Since 1959, he had served on the party's economic council. Barjonet was a respected Marxist economist who could hardly be baited for "mad dogism."

On May 23, after 30 years in the PCF, Barjonet resigned, with the following statement. His remarks reflect not only the justifiable anger of many workers, intellectuals and militants at their betrayal by the party, but also an objective situation that, given the presence of a Marxist-Leninist organization, could conceivably have led to in-



The "Communist" Party's Line:
Profits Bring Socialism.

surrection and serious attempt to seize power: I am the last to underestimate... the advantages that the working class can win from the struggle over reform demands. But at the present time, when millions of workers, students and French people from all walks of life are participating in the most powerful popular movement that our country has ever known, I must state my conviction that it is possible to go much further, to advance toward socialism and, at the very least, to bring down the gaullist regime. By failing to respond to the deepest aspirations of the workers and students... the major trade unions and left-wing political organizations that claim to represent the working class bear a heavy historic responsibility, one with which I can no longer associate myself.

In a subsequent statement, Barjonet hit the nail on the head when he explained the reason for the party's actions during the struggle. The issue was

not individual treachery but rather the fact that the party had become "...integrated in the system, just like social-democracy. The party's own patriotism has killed its potential. The idea has become to protect the organization rather than risk it in action."

Barjonet's resignation and those that followed it didn't lead anywhere. In fact, Barjonet himself quickly enrolled in the PSU, Pierre Mendes-France's party. Every time Séguy launched one of his violent anti-student verbal attacks, he left a wake of torn-up PCF membership cards. But those who were lucid enough to leave the party, like the masses in the occupied factories and on the campuses, had no-where to go.

It seems reasonable to say that the situation was objectively revolutionary. But "objective" conditions include the subjective political development of the masses. In order for "May" to have developed into a full-scale insurrection, certain key conditions were necessary:

1. The masses, and particularly the workers in heavy industry, would have had to be organized around the concept of workers' state power over a period of years;

2. The party, having estimated the potential inherent in the May rebellion, would have had to supply the workers with weapons in order to launch armed struggle;

3. The party would have had to call for the seizure of power as the only logical course for the struggle to pursue;

4. The party would have had to stimulate and organize the worker-student alliance (and other parallel' alliances) around a revolutionary line.

Obviously, these conditions were not and could not be present. Revolutions aren't rabbits to be pulled out of hats. The fact remains, nonetheless, that in a total vacuum of left leadership, in a modern imperialist country less than ten years ago, millions of workers and students proved that the objective contradictions of the profit system inevitably lead to situations in which the move for state power can—and sooner or later will—become the order of the day.

THE BOURGEOISIE ON THE BRINK

Despite the fact that in the last analysis its state power was never seriously threatened, the French bourgeoisie's fundamental weakness was glaringly exposed by the May rebellion. Nowhere was this weakness more evident than in the various police forces and the army.

The French ruling class had the following police organizations:

—the **Police**: 83,100 members, divided into 14,700 civilian cops (judicial police, information, etc.) and 68,400 uniformed personnel, including 54,900 urban police and 13,500 mobile CRS.

—the **Gendarmerie**: 45,000 men in charge of maintaining order in the department or territory to which they were assigned and another 16,000 equipped with submachine guns and tanks, whose job was to reinforce local police when needed. As noted above, the unpopularity of the police

had reached an all-time high by the beginning of the third week in May, and this was beginning to undermine the cops' morale. There was talk of a police rebellion, which never materialized. In the long run, the government was always able to count on the cops, particularly the gendarmes, to carry out its orders. Nonetheless, two conclusions are inescapable. First, for all their viciousness, 145,000 professional strike-breakers are no match for 10,000,000 strikers. Second, the PCF, which had worked both openly and secretly in the police force since the days of World War II, could have used its influence to provoke a crisis inside the police. Clearly this would have benefitted the workers, but the party had no intention of doing such a thing.

The army was, if anything, far less reliable than the police. In the first place, many ranking members of the "elite" professional corps had long-standing grievances against DeGaulle. A good number of them were died-in-the-wool fascists who had participated in the OAS (Secret Army Organization) plan to establish military rule in France and pursue the Algerian war "to the end." The dominant section of the French bourgeoisie put a stop to this by bringing DeGaulle to power in 1958 and keeping him there despite the fascists' terror tactics, but DeGaulle remained extremely unpopular with his former adversaries—all the more so, since Raoul Salan and other OAS leaders had been sentenced to long prison terms in an appeasement gesture to the anti-colonialist sentiment of the mass movement.

Given the choice between defending DeGaulle and standing by while the working class revolt intensified, the officers would doubtless have stuck with the bourgeoisie, but the fact remains that this contradiction existed and that it hardly strengthened French capitalism in this time of crisis.

In addition to the "armée de métier" of career officers and soldiers, there was also a large corps of conscripts, who came, naturally, from the fields and factories. They had followed the events of May with great interest. At first they were hostile to the students, whose violent demonstrations had caused them to be confined to the barracks. Subsequent events, however, gave these men food for thought: when they began to hear about the peasant demonstrations and the workers' strikes, they realized that their friends and relatives were involved in this movement. Many of the junior officers had younger brothers and sisters among the militant students. Below is a sample of comments made on-the-spot by some of the conscripts:

The guys from the countryside took the longest time to make up their minds, but in the end, they agreed with us. If we were asked to march against the strikers, we wouldn't go (PL, student, soldier at Versailles).

I went to put out fires in the Latin Quarter and had cobblestones thrown at me, but in the long run, I understood the students.

In civilian life, I'm studying to be a phys. ed. teacher. (An army fireman from Paris.) We talked every day about what was happening and no one had a kind word for the cops. (A corporal in charge of a transport unit.)

A revolutionary party with a base inside the French army could have led a mutiny in May of 1968 and carried out the line: Turn the guns around. Even without such a party, certain units were already organizing to rebel in the event they were ordered to fight the strikers. The following letter to *Le Nouvel Observateur* (a social democratic weekly) from a leftist junior officer is typical of the army's instability as a defender of bourgeois state power:

If it will reassure you, I want to make it clear that there is not a single enlisted man (here) who wants to (fight the strikers). Just the opposite: committees have been organized to turn against the officers and also to sabotage all transport vehicles, armored or otherwise. For this reason, the Minister of the Armed Forces has rapidly moved to take security precautions against these measures (personnel transfers)³

When soldiers were called up to help the Paris sanitation department clean the streets after the battles of the Latin Quarter, they frequently fraternized with the students. Army trucks carrying draftees were even observed driving through the capital flying red flags.



Mass Rally of Workers and Students,
May 27, 1968.

3. All quotes from this page and the one preceding are from Rioux and Backman.

Numerically, the French armed forces were relatively small:

- 168,000 in the Army (of whom 120,000 were conscripts);
- 34,000 in the Navy (of whom 8,500 were conscripts);
- 59,000 in the Air Force (of whom 23,000 were conscripts).

The most stable right wing forces, as noted, were the career officers and the Gendarmerie. All the others were a liability or, at best, a question mark.

Both qualitatively and quantitatively, the French ruling class' repressive apparatus would have been in no shape to withstand a serious insurrectionary battle by millions of revolutionary-minded strikers. It appears that Lenin's first condition—the old ruling class must be unable to continue ruling in the old way—had developed sufficiently so that the immediate call for an uprising insurrection would have been absolutely correct.

It is useless to indulge in hypothetical ramblings that have no link to reality. However, we can learn an important lesson from speculating briefly about the possible international ramifications if the French strike had become a fullscale insurrection.*

The Vietnam war was still going on; therefore the U.S. ruling class—which would have had little maneuverability in this situation—would have had to choose between sending troops to France or to Vietnam. This contradiction would have further weakened U.S. imperialism and would have given an incalculable boost to the anti-war movement, the strike wave, and the ghetto rebellions here. The French bourgeoisie probably would have had to rely on NATO troops to prop up its own tottering army. There was speculation at the time that DeGaulle had gotten the Germans to agree to intervene if necessary. The irony of such a development, after the Kaiser's troops had massa-

* The bourgeoisie maintains its hold over the working class both through open repression and through deceiving workers—persuading them that “this is the best of all possible worlds,” “you can't fight city hall,” etc. Spread through TV, schools, and hundreds of other channels, bourgeois ideology has a strong effect on the working class. When millions of workers see through the bosses' lies, the bosses' old way of bolstering their rule falls apart. In France in May 1968, the ideological hold on the bourgeoisie was dissolving.

In times of revolutionary crisis, the bourgeoisie is often unsure how to act. Different fractions of the bourgeoisie fight over how to proceed, weakening the ability of the bourgeoisie as a whole to hold down the workers. For instance, in Russia in 1917, there were many different fractions—some supporting the Provisional Government, some wanting a return to Czarism, some wanting peace with Germany, some wanting independence from the Russian 'prisonhouse of nations.' These splits made it impossible for the ruling class to continue to rule in the old way; they made it easier for the Bolsheviks to seize power. One factor contributing to the defeat of the French working class in 1968 was DeGaulle's ability to rally the ruling class to a unified response to the revolt of the workers and students.

cred the Communards, after World War I and the Nazi occupation, should be apparent. This move would in turn have sharpened class contradictions in the countries whose soldiers were involved in such an operation. Finally, the right was winning out in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The Chinese leadership had taken a rotten line on the French situation: antagonistic criticism of the Soviet-allied PCF (which was obviously correct as far as it went) and a hands-off attitude toward the French ruling class (Mao and Co. wanted to maintain their new alliance with DeGaulle). However, an insurrection in France could only have weakened the Chinese right wingers, further exposed Mao, and helped the left, which was by now on the defensive.

Of course, none of the above happened. As internationalists, however, we must constantly think of the worldwide implications of particular class struggles. Given what was at stake, Waldeck Rochet (the head of the PCF at the time), Georges Marchais (its current head), and Séguy, take a historical back seat to no one as traitors to the international working class.

BOSSES FLOP AT BARGAINING TABLE

On May 24, DeGaulle, who had cut short his Rumanian junket, made a TV speech in which he called for major reforms in the university and in industry. He asked for a vote of confidence in a public election the following month. Given the situation, this was a feeble play, but it reflected only the weakness of the French ruling class.

The entire "loyal opposition" (PCF, Mitterand, Mendes-France) was unanimous in rejecting this maneuver. They wanted the electoral road to power—and were plotting daily schemes to take it, both with and against each other, like any bourgeois politician—but they wanted the elections to take place on terms more favorable to their particular interests.

The same day as the General's fiasco, large and violent peasant demonstrations took place in the West. In Nantes, demonstrators seized the famous "Place Royale" and renamed it "People's Square." They occupied the city of Rennes. Everywhere, they fraternized with students and striking workers. The movement was still on the upswing.

The government had only one trump left: negotiation. On May 25, Prime Minister Pompidou and the various trade union leaders, who were all too willing, began a marathon bargaining session at the rue de Grenelle in Paris. At the end of 25 hours of negotiations, Pompidou announced that they had reached an agreement.

To be sure, the bosses had made important concessions about the minimum wage, a 10% salary hike, the right to organize, the publication of contracts, etc. However, the key reform demands for which the workers were fighting remained untouched: the 40-hour work week, earlier retirement, the social security statutes, the payment in full of strike days (the bosses agreed to only 50%), etc.

Faithful to its vocation, the CGT capitulated

first on the all-important question of the work-week. One CGT delegate waxed poetic about his organization's sellout: "The 40 hour week is a sun on the far-off horizon."

The question now became whether or not the CGT could cram this rotten deal down the workers' throats. Séguy and Co. chose to make their stand at Renault-Billancourt, a factory in which they regularly won 80% of the delegate elections.

Benoit Frachon, an old warhorse of the PCF, who had earned his spurs during the Popular Front days of the 1930s, was picked to bamboozle the Renault strikers into returning to work. He prettified the minimal gains negotiated at Grenelle; he urged the workers to keep fighting after the strike was over; he made the by-now obligatory attack on the rebellious students. The 15,000 strikers in attendance at the meeting he addressed barely accorded him a polite smattering of applause.

Frachon was followed by André Jeanson, the head of the rival CFDT. Jeanson had figured out that the sellout wasn't working. He said: "You've decided to keep the strike going. I hope the same decision was unanimous this morning in all the factories and shops of France." He received a standing ovation.

Séguy followed. He saw the jig was up and concluded with characteristic opportunism: "The CGT never gave the order to strike. As I told the 'patronat,' (the bosses' bargaining organization) we can't take the place of the workers in deciding the resumption of work."

Within a few hours, news arrived that Citroën, Berliet (a major truck manufacturer), Sud-Aviation, and Rhodiacéta were continuing the strike.

At most, a few thousand strikers returned to work and stayed there. Some shops went back on the morning of the 27th only to walk out again that afternoon.

The electricians, who until now had kept the current flowing, began to cut it selectively.

On May 27th, France was paralyzed.

The Grenelle negotiations had failed.

The government appeared to be in a shambles.

Whoever wanted power and was prepared to fight for it could have seized it on the morning of May 27th, 1968.

THE TIDE TURNS

Nature and politics abhor a vacuum. The French bourgeoisie was ripe to be taken, but the working class had been stabbed in the back from within and was unable to advance toward socialism at the very moment when the capitalists' strength had all but disintegrated.

Inevitably, under the circumstances, the ruling class mounted a counter-offensive.

The PCF had given ample evidence that, no matter how far the rank and file wanted to go, it would do everything in its power to keep them shackled in the electoral prison. On May 29th, the party organized a demonstration of 3-400,000 people. The underlying purpose of this action was

to orient the masses in the direction of the ballot box. In preparation for the march, *Humanité* had run the following banner headline: "Workers' Demand: POPULAR GOVERNMENT OF DEMOCRATIC UNITY WITH COMMUNIST PARTICIPATION."

This demonstration had been called on the 28th. In less than 24 hours, the PCF was capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of workers in one city—yet it refused steadfastly to demand more than a few crumbs.

The police were nowhere in evidence at this march. They did not need to be. The PCF had promised the ruling class that it would "play fair," and in so doing, it gave the Gaullists the one opening they desperately needed.

The main section of the French bourgeoisie was by now openly worrying that an insurrection could result from the virtual collapse of the state apparatus between May 27 and 30. Pierre Vianson-Ponté of *Le Monde*, a French equivalent of C.L. Sulzberger, warned:

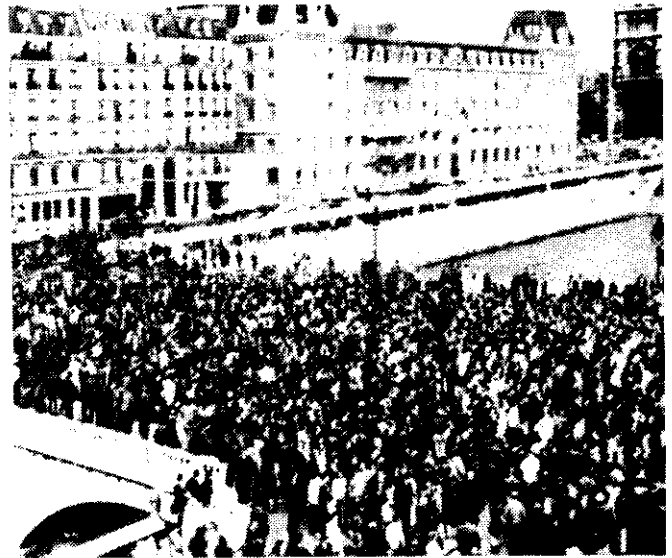
If the conclusion of negotiations between the government, the *patronat*, and the trade unions does not succeed in resolving the social conflict and if it is not accepted by the "base," then, in the present climate of violence and trouble, France risks going from a grave national crisis to a revolutionary situation... In every political and trade union grouping on the left today, there exist elements that are numerically in the minority... but are passionate, committed, and now organized as fractions. Their stated goal is the seizure of power.

Vianson-Ponté was referring doubtless to the "Revolutionary Action Committees" that were springing up everywhere. The Maoists and Trotskyites who participated in them did not have hegemony over them, and the ruling class had serious reason to fear that these committees could turn into French Soviets.

The PCF bailed out DeGaulle and Co. in two ways. First, it gave repeated assurances of its counter-revolutionary aims. Second, by calling for shared power instead of proletarian dictatorship, it gave the government an opportunity to organize a red-baiting campaign.

DeGaulle did not lose a moment. He flew to Germany, made his peace with the French generals there who had opposed him during the Algerian war, and obtained their guarantee that they would lead the army against the working class if necessary. Of course, no one knew if the troops would follow, but the ruling class had no choice other than to take the gamble. Under a cloak of secrecy, Greater Paris was surrounded by combat-ready divisions.

DeGaulle returned to Paris on the 30th. At 4:30 PM he spoke on national television. He dissolved the national assembly, called for new elections, and attempted to rally his old supporters to an orgy of anti-communism:



May 13, 1968: Workers and Students March in Paris.

France is indeed threatened with dictatorship. An attempt is being made to force her to submit to a power that would establish itself in the midst of the nation's despair, essentially a conqueror's power: that of totalitarian communism.

The PCF had given DeGaulle a chance to pull off a Houdini routine. Its own opportunism gave the ruling class the ideological weapon it needed to use against the workers.

DeGaulle called menacingly for the organization of "civic action." By this, he meant fascist vigilantes. Some came from *Occident*. Many others came from the right wing of the Resistance, the supporters of French colonialism, and the ranks of demobilized officers. These fascists were used to terrorize the masses, particularly during the June electoral campaign, when they committed more murders than the police had during the entire month of May. In France, as everywhere else, liberalism is the handmaiden of fascism.

DeGaulle's speech restored the morale of the bourgeoisie. The ruling class and all those who had the greatest interest in maintaining the status quo poured out of their elegant Right Bank homes and demonstrated for DeGaulle and "order" by the hundreds of thousands on the Champs Elysées. This march also included many petty bourgeois elements who had been frightened out of their wits by the working class.

It would take several weeks, including the heaviest fighting of all, but the tide had turned. The working class was now on the defensive.

On June 6, 6,000 CRS police were sent to rout the Renault strikers at Flins and enforce a back to work movement that the capitalists had been unable to stimulate politically. A number of students came to help the workers resist this attack. For their pains, Séguy and the PCF rewarded them with a far more violent criticism than it

reserved for the police:

...groups foreign to the working class and led by Geismar (the former head of the SNESup., the college teachers' union), who seems more and more like a specialist in provocation, ... (incite) the workers to seize back the factory. (l'Humanité)

Despite this Séguy harangue, the CRS onslaught was a failure. Most of those who returned to work under their "protection" downed tools and set up picket lines inside the factory. The CRS had to contend not only with the Renault workers and the students but also with a local population that had been roused to fury by their terrorism.

On June 11, the CRS left the factory. It was immediately reoccupied. Contrary to the disgusting lies of the PCF and its rag l'Humanité, the students were an invaluable help to the strikers during the course of this battle and others. The workers had had plenty of experience in conducting strikes and work stoppages but had never contended with the "riot" tactics of modern police forces. The students had gained much useful experience in this regard during the first two weeks of the revolt, and they taught the workers how to deal with tear gas and the other more noxious gases used by the CRS, how to retreat guerrilla-style, then regroup almost immediately. J.-Ph. Talbo's book *La Grève à Flins* contains numerous interviews with workers who express their gratitude to and solidarity with the students.

On June 10, the CRS had murdered Gilles Tautin, a Maoist high school student who had come to support the Flins strikers. The reaction in Paris was swift and violent. More barricades, more fights with the police. This time, however, the government was able to master the situation: the more open right-wing elements in Paris had been emboldened by DeGaulle's speech and by the pro-government demonstration of the 30th. Henceforth, the bourgeoisie could act with the confidence that its base would actively support it.

DeGaulle used the most recent student violence as excuse to enact a number of fascist-like measures. By order of the Council of Ministers, all demonstrations were prohibited in France for the duration of the electoral campaign (this did not include the armed raids organized by the "civic action committees..."), and a number of the more left-sounding groups, including the Maoists, were forcibly dissolved by virtue of a 1936 statute on "private militias" (these did not include the nazi *Occident*...).

Finally, to consummate his remarriage with the colonialist wing of the bourgeoisie, DeGaulle announced the imminent release from prison of General Salan and Colonel Lacheroy, the two main leaders of the OAS.

The government's wave of violence against the working class was not limited to Flins. On June 11, the CRS savagely attacked the Peugeot auto factory at Sochaux. A company-sponsored back-to-work vote had taken place on the 8th. Only 5,280 workers out of 26,000 voted. The company hadn't provided transportation for the majority of the

blue collar personnel, whom it knew to be favorable to the pursuit of the strike. Those who did vote were mainly the professional staff. They opted to end the strike.

The workers returned to the factory, but at 10 AM on the 10th, the strike began all over again.

When the CRS invaded on the morning of the 11th, the ensuing battle was ferocious. Barricades, offensive grenades, two workers murdered by the cops. Other workers and high school students from Sochaux and as far away as the town of Montbéliard fought on the side of the Flins strikers.

The battle lasted 18 hours. The CRS were ordered to leave because the government feared that their continued presence would provoke full-scale rebellion by the population of the area. Before they left, these guardians of "republican security" shot grenades at a group of children leaving church.

The same day, similar fighting took place in Saint-Nazaire, Toulouse, and Lyon, where students and young workers fought the police. Casualties numbered in the hundreds.

However, the decisive moment had passed. The working class had been fettered with sellout leadership too long for a general uprising to remain possible indefinitely. The turn of events in the bourgeoisie's favor was irreversible. Rioux and Backmann record the following interview with a trade union official:

Two weeks ago, the announcement of workers killed by the police would have brought the downfall of the regime. Even if we had wanted to, we wouldn't have been able to hold our guys back. Today, the public finds it unfortunate but almost normal: it is more impressed by a burned-up car than by the murder of a demonstrator.

The judgment perhaps reflects anti-working class bias by a piecard. It is nonetheless accurate for its estimate of the changing objective conditions.

From then on, the return to "normalcy" proceeded apace.

The Sorbonne and other universities were invaded by the police and re-opened.

The OAS leaders were set free, as promised.

Led by the CGT, the unions began a new round of bargaining, desperate to come up with a package they could submit to the rank and file. On June 13, Séguy made the most damning self-indictment yet uttered by a PCF official about the party's instrumental role in betraying the revolutionary aspirations of the working class:

In the sharpness of the class struggle, certain suspect elements—mostly renegades—have accused us insultingly of allowing the moment of the working class' seizure of power to slip by. The question of whether or not the time was ripe for insurrection never arose... If the workers were temporarily bothered by it, the mournful black flag of anarchy waved hysterically by the partisans of the so-called "revolutionary committees" soon

opened their eyes and put them on our side —on the side of those who have united the struggle of the red flags of the world's workers with the tricolor of our nation and the revolutionary history of our people.

By June 15, the **patronat** and the unions had come up with a package slightly better than the Grenelle agreements. This time, they were more confident of their ability to ram it down the workers' throats. The proposal included the following reforms:

- Wage hikes between 10 and 14%;
- Immediate reduction of the work week by one hour, with another half-hour to follow in September;
- 50% payment for strike days, with no obligation by the workers to make up for lost production time;
- Considerable broadening of the right to organize.

On June 18, SAVIEM, an automaker, ended its strike. Renault went back to work on the 19th. Berliet and Peugeot returned on the 20th. Citroën, the last major auto producer, the one with the most openly fascist on-the-job conditions, voted to resume production on June 24th.

By June 25th, the most important strike to take place in a capitalist country since World War II had come to a close.

The electoral results on the 23rd were predictable. The PCF had allowed DeGaulle to hoist it on its own petard. The revisionists, who had brayed so fatuously about the sanctity of the ballot box even while they claimed to be the official leaders of the mass movement, received only 20.3% of the total vote cast, as against 22.51% in 1967.

The epitaph of the May revolt had already been sounded by an anonymous 20-year-old worker quoted in *Le Monde* on June 2. "Too bad!" he said. It seems we came so close to something really new."

LESSONS

Much of what follows will be redundant. It is included here for the sake of summary.

1. The contradictions of capitalism are insoluble. As it develops into imperialism, they become sharper. Therefore, the revolt that shook France in 1968 was not a fluke or a once-in-a-lifetime event, as many pundits still pretend, but rather a harbinger of things to come. Differences are inevitable, but likeness seems to be the main aspect of comparison between France and the U.S. Every day our party's estimate about the current intensification of class struggle is borne out in life. We can't predict when a situation similar to "May" will arise in our country. We should, however, anticipate such a development. Our outlook in this event should be **to move for as much power as we can.**

The revolutionary process does not go forward in a straight line. Before 1917 there was 1905. Before the CCP took power in 1949, it had to take to the hills in 1927. We should assume that the first opportunity for insurrection will not

necessarily lead to the permanent consolidation of state power.

Even if the PCF had been a revolutionary organization with a revolutionary base in the working class and other sections of the population, even if it had moved for power, it would have had to prepare for the inevitable counter-attack. The French bourgeoisie, as noted, would not have hesitated to throw the army against the workers. If the army had mutinied, the U.S., Germany, and other imperialist countries, would have invaded. This would obviously have led to civil war and would probably have provoked sharper struggle, uprisings, etc. in the other countries involved.

Our attitude should be that this sort of struggle is a good thing—exactly the kind of thing we want to see happen everywhere in the world. Our party and the working class can learn to hold power only by learning to fight for it.

The working class of France will inevitably rise again. They are worse off now than ever. But the opportunity that was open in France between May 27 and 30, 1968, does not arise every day. It may take years before French workers will have another such chance. Missing the opportunity is a far more devastating blunder (or, in this case, betrayal) than seizing it and suffering temporary defeat at the hands of superior forces. In order for our class to win, it must first "storm heaven."

2. The western imperialist nations are weaker collectively now than they were in 1968. As soon as he felt it was feasible, DeGaulle banned all revisionist groups to the left of the PCF. If we pursued our line in a similar situation, we would be attacked much more severely. The ruling class here is already more than a few steps down the road to fascism. We would have to conduct our work illegally. This would involve a major transformation of our apparatus, and too many of us, starting with the leadership, are not yet ideologically prepared for it.

3. The history of "May" defines the contradiction between "Reform and Revolution" about as sharply as it can be defined. The present paper emphasizes the role of the PCF in order to show that the failure to build a base for proletarian dictatorship in the working class must lead to the complete, abject betrayal of Marxism and workers' struggles. You fight either for socialism or for the maintenance of the profit system. There is no middle ground.

Carrying out the essence of the line in **R and R** will determine whether in the long run our party can lead a workers' uprising to power.

4. The ability to undermine the enemy from within is decisive. Therefore, work inside the army, the police, fascist organizations, and other instruments of bourgeois repression is necessary.

5. Despite all obstacles, "May" proved both the possibility and the necessity of the worker-student alliance. This alliance, along with its corollaries (the worker-"professional" alliance, the student-parent-teacher alliance, etc.) form

the cornerstone of our strategy for revolution. In recent years, we have not pushed the WSA as hard as we once did. This is an error. The campaign against racism, which should remain the main focus of our campus work, is fundamentally a drive to unite students with the most oppressed section of the proletariat. We need to revive the WSA. Strike support, unity with campus workers, the resumption of a modified "Work-in" at key industrial concentrations, bringing aspects of the party's shop work to the campuses, etc. are all possibilities to consider.

6. One spark can trigger an enormous explosion, provided the "powder is dry." It was dry in France in 1968. If anything, it is drier in our country today. One strike, one major campus action against racism or imperialism, one rebellion can unleash a torrent of class struggle that can paralyze the bourgeoisie and create the opportunity for insurrection. The working class needs guns. It also needs a revolutionary outlook.

With the line of our party today, we can play a decisive role in stimulating and guiding the revolutionary process.

There will be casualties, but just as 10,000,000 French strikers could have overwhelmed a few hundred thousand gendarmes and vacillating police, tens of millions of workers in our country will wipe out any repressive force the ruling class throws at them.

Here as in France, the ultimate enemy is revisionism—the enemy within.

The heroic French workers and students of "May" proved once and for all that revolutions against modern capitalism are inevitable. As our party wrote in Road to Revolution III: "We have a world to learn and a world to win."

We can absorb valuable lessons vicariously through the rich experience of our French brothers and sisters. Sooner rather than later we will have a chance to deepen our understanding of Marxism-Leninism in the heat of mass struggle. We should welcome the opportunity.

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