



FRANCE

# Barricades streets but the way

*It started as a row over female access to male student bedrooms. Within a month student unrest led to barricades in Paris and 10 million workers on strike. The posters claimed 'everything is possible' but what was actually achieved? Christine Duval and Emile Gallet recall the momentous events of May 68 and the left's role*

THE POPULAR image of the events of May 68 in France is one of a libertarian, anti-authoritarian student struggle against all forms of power, symbolised by the famous "night of the barricades" of 10 May. This account presents May 68 as a confused and apolitical struggle against the old rigidities of French society, based on idealistic and surrealist slogans that encapsulated an unfocused rejection of all that was valued by post-war France.

This conveniently one-sided account of the crisis that shook French society 40 years ago is currently promoted by some of those who themselves took part in the student revolt, such as Bernard Kouchner, currently Nicolas Sarkozy's foreign secretary, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the fiery student leader who has since turned his back on the "anachronistic" events of May 68.

However, the real history of May 68 is one of an explosive convergence of student protest with workplace unrest. That month France experienced the biggest ever general strike in European history. At its height 10 million French workers were on strike, accompanied by widespread occupations of factories and other workplaces. Two million workers stayed out for a whole month; it is estimated that in total 150 million working days were lost.

# close show

Student organisations, which bore the brunt of the fighting with the police and CRS, made common cause with the strikers, despite hostility from the French Communist Party (PCF) and the trade union federation they led – the CGT. As the country entered into a state of paralysis, when two-thirds of the workforce withdrew its labour, President de Gaulle flew to Germany to consult with top military advisors. The strike threatened to bring down the government and France exhibited many of the characteristics of a revolutionary situation, save the existence of a revolutionary party.

It was a time when “everything was possible”; the energy and creativity of workers and youth offered a glimpse of an alternative society. However, the full potential and promise of May 68 did not come to fruition, due in no small part to the role played by the PCF. Unlike the other great general strike of 1936, the general strike of May 68 did not lead to a left government, let alone a revolution. The failure of the movement to develop into a struggle for power presents vital lessons for the revolutionary left, particularly with regards to the role of reformism in undermining the revolutionary potential of the working class.

## A movement in the making

May 68 was in many respects the culmination of a period of unrest amongst workers and students during the preceding years. Millions were disaffected with the institutions of the Fifth Republic – established in 1958 by President Charles de Gaulle, following a constitutional crisis brought about by the Algerian war of independence.

For youth – both students and young workers – the undemocratic and highly centralised Fifth Republic was particularly oppressive. All those under 21 were denied the right to vote. Culture was dominated by a state-controlled radio and television service that was increasingly at odds with a new generation eager to establish its own identity.

The conformity and rigidity of French society – personified by its ageing President – coexisted alongside the significant changes within French society. The explosion of the student numbers, in particular, was key to the student revolt. The student population had tripled since 1960 to more than half a million by 1968. Modern capitalism required a layer of skilled workers as well as increasing numbers of technological experts to manage the burgeoning technology-intensive workplaces.

However, the French bourgeoisie wanted this on the cheap and therefore failed to adequately invest in the infrastructure needed to support the growing number of students. Poor accommodation and the dire lack of campus facilities was one of the key grievances of students. Nanterre, a new modern university campus located amongst the bleak western suburbs of Paris, was bursting to capacity; built to accommodate 7,000 students, it had a student population of 12,000.

Just as this explosion in student numbers was taking place, France was beginning to experience a rise in unemployment. Students were losing confidence in the future that university education was supposed to offer them.

Unemployment first and foremost affected the French working class. Workers were also beginning to feel the effects of the looming economic crisis. French workers already had the lowest salary levels and longest working week out of all the countries that made up the CEE (the precursor to the EU). Salaries for blue-collar workers had been falling since the 1963 “stabilisation plan”, whilst working hours were increasing; in some sectors French workers were working a 52-hour week. Now the government was intent on making workers pay even more for capitalism’s problems by introducing a series of austerity attacks.

In particular, it was the proposed reform of the social security and health systems which provided a focus for workers’ anger, in addition to the numerous ongoing localised struggles around pay and working conditions. Students too had found a focus for their struggles. The Minister for Education, Fouchet, had introduced a package of reforms designed to ensure that university education was stringently controlled to meet the needs of the economy, by limiting the range of subjects to be studied and by establishing a more selective and stratified higher education system. This flew in the face of the rhetoric of equality around which the Republic was based.

Two years earlier the two key French unions, the CGT and the CFDT, took part in a united day of action to press for higher wages and shorter working hours. University and school students joined the workers' demonstrations, bringing with them not only their educational grievances but also their opposition to US imperialism's war against the North Vietnamese.

In spring 1967 the struggle intensified; students at Nanterre occupied the women's dormitories in protest against strict visiting regulations. Other struggles broke out in Rennes, Besançon and Saint-Etienne. The first serious fight-back against the Fouchet reforms erupted in autumn.

In February 1967, at the Rhodiaceta chemical factory in Besançon, 3,200 workers walked out against threatened job cuts. The strike quickly spread to other Rhodia factories. The CGT pressed the strikers to reach an agreement with the bosses. However, the majority of the strikers, organised by the CFDT, stayed out. The government responded by sending in crack squads of police to enforce an agreement with the bosses.

Strikes continued to break out throughout the autumn;

for example, workers in Le Mans and Mulhouse protested against the social security legislation and against unemployment, leading to violent confrontations with the CRS riot police.

One of the most important struggles in the run up to May 68 took place in Caen in January of that year, when 4,800 workers of the Saviem vehicle plant went on strike for better wages. Very quickly the strike developed into a factory occupation, propelled mainly by young workers who had recently left rural areas to join the growing urban working class.

These workers, unfettered by the political weight of the union bureaucrats, were more than willing to take on the forces of the Gaullist state; armed with batons and catapults, they had numerous violent confrontations with the CRS.

The unions, anxious to both control the various struggles and to pressurise the government into backing down from its social security reforms – reforms which would greatly reduce the influence of unions within the committees which co-managed these funds – organised a demonstration

### THE COMMUNIST PARTY

## At the service of the bourgeoisie

A WORKERS' revolution was of course the last thing that the PCF wanted. Calls on workers to intensify their confrontation against capital were met with, at best, derision, at worst, violent denunciations of ultra-leftism.

So was the situation in France ripe for revolution? Was the PCF correct in promoting the idea (late in the day it must be said) that a popular government was the best workers could hope for?

Waldeck-Rochet, secretary general of the PCF, summed up the strategy of his party:

"In reality, the choice we were faced with in May was the following: Agitate to make sure that the strike satisfied the basic demands of the workers, and at the same time work towards the necessary democratic changes, within the framework of legality. That was the position of our party.

"Or to throw ourselves into a trial of strength, in other words go towards the insurrection, including the armed struggle in order to overthrow the government by force. This was the adventurist position of certain ultra-left groups.

"But since the military and repressive forces were on the side of the established power and the vast majority of people were hostile to such an adventure, it was evident that to pursue this road would have led to the massacre of workers and the crushing of the working class and its vanguard: the Communist Party.

"So, no, we did not fall into this trap. Since this was the real aim of the Gaullist government."<sup>1</sup>

So the working class was taking part in the biggest general strike in history in order to satisfy their "basic demands", which for the PCF amounted to paltry salary increases as the Grenelle negotiations showed. On the contrary, the events of May demonstrated that the working class was not only interested in economic issues; the workers were pushing the boundaries of their struggle to questions of power and control in the workplace and in society.

Of course, revolution was not a certainty. Whilst there were elements of dual power, where bosses and managers were

hounded out of their factories, and workers' control was established, these examples were far and few between.<sup>2</sup> Most of the factory occupations failed to put democratic strike committees in place; those committees that did exist tended to be made up of local union leaders.

The PCF, whilst in some cases playing lip service to the idea of local strike committees, was well aware that vibrant, democratic accountable strike committees, bringing together unionised and non-unionised workers, would present a fundamental challenge to their CGT activists. The lack of strike committees meant that there was no systematic challenge to the traditional union bureaucracies.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Cited in *Pouvoir Ouvrier* 23 1993.
2. The strike committees in Nantes and at the nuclear plant in Saclay, where nearly 2,000 workers formed the Saclay Soviet, are the best known examples. In the CSF plant and Brest, electronic workers fabricated walky-talkies to be used as a means of communication for strikers.



in December 1967. Millions of workers responded to the call, indicating their willingness to resist government plans. However, rather than link up the various localised conflicts with the national issues, the unions proposed a further day of action – for 13 May 1968.

## From bedrooms to barricades

The immediate spark which ignited the May events began in the Paris region. The student population in Paris was a hotbed of radicalism – unsurprising given that of 550,000 students nationally, 200,000 were based in the Paris region. Parisian universities were also increasingly identified with left wing agitation, students being particularly active in organising solidarity with the Algerian struggle for independence.

Another key factor to take into account in order to understand the events of May 68 was the challenge left students posed to the Parti Communiste Française (PCF). The PCF, steeped in Stalinist orthodoxy, was unable to relate to the changes that young people in French society were experiencing. The party was particularly backward when it came to changes in sexual attitudes brought about by the availability of the contraceptive pill as well as the increasing numbers of women in the workforce and at university.

Whilst students were demanding the right to freely visit other students of the opposite sex in their dorms, including the right to stay overnight, the PCF had separate youth organisations for young men and young women. Its prudishness came across like a left wing version of de Gaulle's patronising and protective paternalism, which many students rejected.

Two far left organisations had effectively split the PCF's student organisation, the Union des Etudiants Communistes (UEC), in 1966: the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR – youth section of the Trotskyist USEC group in France) and the Union des Jeunes Communistes marxistes-léninistes (UJC-ml – a Maoist organisation). Additionally, the UEC had lost control of the student union, UNEF, to another Trotskyist organisation, the Comité de Liaison des Etudiants Révolutionnaires (CLER – a front for the Lambertist OCI, which shortly after became the Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires).

These organisations, along with semi-anarchist networks, were in the forefront of organising students around the key issues: political freedom on the campus, the Vietnam War and the Fouchet reforms. The Nanterre campus, where the JCR had a large presence, was at the heart of these struggles. It was a few hundred student activists from Nanterre who carried out an attack on American Express offices in Paris, which ended with the arrest of a member of the JCR. In response, the students set up a solidarity organisation with the aim of getting him released. The "mouvement 22 mars" (22 March Movement) soon became a focal point for a range of student demands and was to play a major role in the student struggles in May.

One of the first actions by the "22 mars" was to organise an anti-imperialist day of action at Nanterre. The vice-chancellor closed the campus on the pretext that he feared a confrontation between students and fascists. L'Occident, a

violent and well-organised fascist group, which had links to members of the government and a history of carrying out attacks on left organisations, had publicly threatened to attack the day of action.

In response to the vice-chancellor's action, the "22 mars" called a demonstration at the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter for 3 May. The atmosphere on the day was tense with the police out in force. Four hundred stewards were present to protect the demonstrators from fascist attacks. However, it was the police who repelled the fascists from the Sorbonne, but only in order to give themselves a clear run to attack the students.

The police waded in with batons. The students responded by using whatever missiles they could find to hurl at the police, cobblestones being easily to hand. The situation rapidly turned into a running battle with the police, who by the end of the evening had control of the Sorbonne after carting off 600 students to the cells.

In one account of the events of 3 May a participant said:

"The vast majority of those who stepped into the street to fight back on that day were not closely involved in any political organisations, nor did they share the political beliefs of those arrested. Their reaction was simply an angry outburst of 'we've had enough!', a spontaneous show of solidarity with other young people who they saw as victims of a brutal repression. Their anger was borne of every time an older person had treated them like children, every time a teacher had bullied them, every time a petty official had been rude to them, every time a bartender or shopkeeper had refused to serve them because of long hair or scruffy jeans, every time a flic had pushed them around, born of the thousands and one repressive ways of a society all too given to humiliating its youth."<sup>1</sup>

A week of daily demonstrations followed, drawing in more and more students and frequently ending in clashes with the police. University lecturers called for strike action against the brutality of the police, going against the advice of their Maoist union leader who claimed strike action without notice was "illegal"!

## The turning point

The 10 May proved the turning point. Some 30,000 students defied a ban on student demonstrations. Both Nanterre and the Sorbonne were still closed. The students marched on the Sorbonne with the aim of reclaiming their universities from the state. The state, for its part, was determined to make it clear who was in charge. Again, the students faced repeated baton charges. The violence unleashed on them surpassed previous clashes, but the students stood their ground, this time erecting barricades out of cars and anything else to hand.

The news of the events in the Sorbonne quickly spread. Public opinion had already been sympathetic to students, but now the brutality of the police galvanised opinion even more. The government was on the verge of a crisis that it was unprepared for. On 11 May, the Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, gave in to all the key student demands. The Fouchet reform was abandoned and Nanterre and the Sorbonne were reopened. The students had won!

### The workers take centre stage

The CGT-CFDT day of action planned for 13 May turned into a victory celebration. The students had shown that, by taking militant action and refusing to back down in the face of state repression, it was possible to defeat the government. Nearly one million people gathered in what was then the biggest ever demonstration seen in Paris. All over the country, millions of workers went on strike. The Paris anti-Gaullist student resistance was transformed into a nationwide working class movement.

For the union leaders, the 13 May demonstration was meant to press their case against the social security reforms. Whilst the workers were looking to emulate the militancy of the students, the union leaders were putting together a petition against the government's plans!

The workers followed their instincts. At Sud-Aviation in Nantes, the workers decided that there was now only one way to put an end to their long-running struggle with their bosses over wages – by following the example

of the students. On 14 May, they occupied their factory and locked the director in his office.

It wasn't long before strike fever gripped the country. At Renault-Billancourt – a bastion of working class militancy and a stronghold of the PCF and CGT – young workers took spontaneous strike action. The tensions between the traditional leaders of the working class and the younger workers were beginning to show, since it was young workers who led the action, against the wishes of the local union leaders.

This movement soon spread. A defining feature of May 68 was the way in which the strike deepened without any call from the unions. French workers were taking things into their own hands, rather than waiting for the union bureaucrats to say the word. Soon, 10 million workers had downed tools.

The demands of the strikers were varied. One of the problems of the strike was the localised nature of the struggles. Many of the strikers had local scores to settle as a result of the ongoing unrest around salaries and managerial power, in which management had proved

## Women in May 68: ripping up the rule books

IF YOU type women and the French general strike of May 68 into Google, you won't find much – apart from the occupation of women's dormitories in Nanterre. However, women were amongst the most militant strikers. Women made up a significant proportion of the OS (ouvriers spécialisés), whose anger at their working conditions – the endless repetitive nature of their work, the low pay – exploded in May 68.

Additionally, French society imposed strict conditions on women (who gained the vote only after 1944): a woman needed her husband's agreement to hold a bank account or mortgage and in many workplaces women were not even allowed to wear trousers. Despite

this, there was little in the way of specific demands for women workers during the actual strike. It was after May 1968, that the women's liberation movement took off and women began to take up issues around their oppression.

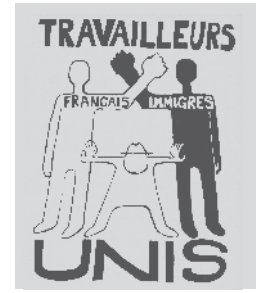
One of the most powerful films of May 68 is of women strikers at the Wonder battery factory refusing to go back to work. Women workers were becoming radicalised and by the time of the famous strike and occupation of the Lip watch factory in 1973, women strikers were denouncing patriarchy in the workplace and setting up women's groups.

The following is an eye-witness account of women strikers at a post office bank in Paris. It not only

illustrates the militancy and anger of these women against their managers, it also shows how women's oppression can serve to prevent working class women from taking part in class struggle and the need for specific forms of organisation for women flowing from this, alongside democratic class-wide organisations that can provide the sort of solidarity needed to bring all workers into strike action, regardless of their personal situation.

### Parisian post office bank workers join in the dance

DURING THIS time, in the strike committee, other activists raised the issue of how popular the movement was and how we should not make things difficult for the most vulnerable members of the population: for example, continue to pay pensions and disability allowances. We decided to keep the counter on the Rue des Favorites open to visitors. We would take turns to staff the counter so long as there were cash funds available. Every morning during the occupation, there would be a general assembly in the street until 8am. Every day there would be discussions on how best to proceed.



intransigent to workers' demands. The national strike wave gave workers the opportunity to overturn the balance of forces in their favour.

On the other hand, there were clearly issues around which national demands could be based, in particular the defence of the social security system. Additionally, the many of the specific, local demands could easily have been incorporated into unifying national slogans.

All of French society was affected by the general strike. Companies such as the paternalistic Peugeot, which had never experienced a strike, now had their factories occupied. Michelin workers, too, came out for the first time. Docks and mines were at a standstill and public transport workers paralysed the rail system. Small farmers organisations declared their support for the general strike, laying the basis for the today's Confédération Paysanne.

Strikers held daily general assemblies. In many factories it was not just wages and working hours that the strikers were fighting over. Managerial authority was a key concern. Workers known as OS, *ouvriers spécialisés* (semi-skilled workers), who despite their name were

unskilled assembly line labourers, were in regular dispute over pressurised line management. Such workers had swelled the ranks of the working class due to the technological innovations of the post-war years and the economic boom.

## The demands of the strikers were varied. One of the problems of the strike was the localised nature of the struggles. Many of the strikers had local scores to settle

Many were young workers who found the monotony of "scientific management" of the production process in stark contrast to the promise of pleasure and prosperity offered by the swinging Sixties. Debates also spilled over beyond the workplace concerns to issues about power

Some managers allowed some of the women to arrive at midday and signed them off soon after, so as to dissuade them from taking strike action. Their main concern was not account holders, but how to undermine the strike.

The women would come along and get involved, discussing things, looking and laughing at their favourite scab supervisors, squashing their noses against the shut gates. A few days later, we got organised, and had a change of guard at midday, otherwise known as the wall of shame: the non-strikers had to go past a line of activists and strikers who weren't very understanding.

The men were the most aggressive, some of them threw coins at the women as they went in. They never tried to discuss with the women. The reasons why some of the women were not going on strike was not necessarily to do with not wanting to lose money, or because they were against the strike. Some were forbidden by their husbands, who thought that strikes were not for women. For others, married to postmen, it was a kind of division of labour: "My husband is on strike at the sorting office at Paris-Brune, we can't both go on strike, so she had to work and face the picket line." Others were single mums and were

desperately unhappy, going to work even though they would rather have joined the strike . . .

By throwing money at the women going through the picket line the men were treating them like prostitutes. This shows that the picket line is a focus of tension, not only between strikers and non-strikers, but also between strikers with different outlooks.

Even though the union archives have not kept many traces of May 68 at the Post Office Bank, there are those who remember it well: how our managers and supervisors at the centre didn't think that a strike and occupation could happen to them, so used were they to seeing the women as irrelevant. They were extremely shocked at the attitudes of their little ladies, normally so nice.

At the entrance of the banking service, the head of the famous disciplinary section tried once too often to impose his habitual reign of terror: My girls will not walk out, he shouted in military tones. He had no idea of the rapid changes that were taking place. The women ran out, crying free the bank!, and for once it was the head of service who experienced an unpleasant 15 minutes. That day, the women who he had humiliated each day, who he put down on every occasion, who he

sometimes insulted, rushed at him, screaming how much they hated him: he didn't have the right to treat them as he did, he must get his just deserts! The union activists had to intervene to protect him from being lynched. Now he was the one who was scared, he was the one being browbeaten by the anger of the women that had put up with his punishments and humiliations every day, the women he had treated as incapable, as less than nothing. He got what he deserved, but they had to avoid any incident that could be exploited by those against the strike.

Some very determined women decided to occupy the site, they rightly thought that an occupation was vital to strengthen the strike. Some of the political activists were reticent, preferring to wait for De Gaulle's speech. A group of very determined women pushed the occupation through, with the agreement of CFDT members.

*Original text published on the website of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. [www.lcr-rouge.org/spip.php?article1461](http://www.lcr-rouge.org/spip.php?article1461)  
Translation: Permanent Revolution*

and authority in society. French workers were contesting the role that capitalism was forcing upon them – that of an alienated profit-producing wage slave. May 68 was, in this respect, about workers demanding their rightful place in society.

And it wasn't just the traditional working class that was affected by the strike contagion. Journalists and other media workers took action, going so far as to call for workers' control of the media. Opera singers refused to sing, actors refused to act, footballers refused to play. Theatres declared themselves soviets and became a space for debating the intersection between art and struggle. Some local church leaders even supported the strikes; in Angers the Bishop donated the mass collections to provide food for demonstrating workers and students.<sup>2</sup>

### Stalinism rescues the government

All general strikes pose the question of who rules society. In May 1968 in France the working class had withdrawn itself from capitalist production. There was no transport, no petrol and limited food distribution. How then to organise society and provide for basic needs? A minority of workers gave a revolutionary response to this question. Nantes, in particular, became known as the "Commune de Nantes". Workers and small farmers took on many aspects of the town's administration, demonstrating in action that society could function without the institutions of the capitalist state.

However, the traditional leaders of the working class, the PCF and the CGT, had a very different response. For them there was no question that the events of May 68 would lead to a struggle for working class power. The

goals of the PCF and the CGT leaders were timid and out of kilter with what was unfolding before their eyes. Having been caught off guard by the general strike, and having failed to prevent it, they were now determined to use it to further their own narrow strategy, that of maintaining their bureaucratic influence in society by negotiating a few reforms for the workers.

First, though, they had to respond to the growing influence of the far left organisations. And they did this in true Stalinist fashion; not by democratic debate but by hysterical accusations against the students who took part in the "night of the barricades", labeling them as "agent provocateurs" and "criminal scum". Whilst the Maoists did have some workers in the factories, the numbers were so small as to not represent a major threat to the influence of the PCF.

The real threat lay in the student milieu, which is why, rather than calling for the unity of workers and students, the PCF was determined to keep them apart. When the students organised solidarity demonstrations from the Sorbonne to Billancourt, the CGT put up posters around the factory, warning the workers to steer clear of "those elements on the fringes of the labour movement", whose ultimate aim was to "serve the ruling class".

One result of this sectarianism towards the students meant that on 24 May, two demonstrations took place in Paris, one organized by the UNEF, the other by the CGT. However, in some of the provincial towns, it was less easy to keep the movements apart. In Caen, for example, there were frequent united demonstrations of students and workers. Delegations of workers took part in debates at the universities, whilst young workers and students took part in joint actions against state symbols.

## May 68 timeline

**Friday 3 May:** 300 Sorbonne students meet to protest the closure of Nanterre University the day before. Police arrive and arrest male students. Students and residents fight the police for hours in the Latin Quarter. Police seal off the Sorbonne. 600 students arrested.

**Monday 6 May:** In the morning about 20,000 young people gather at Place Denfert-Rochereau to march to the Science Faculty, demanding release of those arrested. Near Sorbonne, police charge demonstrators. Huge fight takes place lasting all day and into the night.

**Tuesday 7 May:** 40,000 demonstrators take to the streets.

**Wednesday 8 May:** students meetings across Paris to discuss situation.

**Thursday, 9 May:** Sorbonne authorities agree to re-open university but government countermands decision. Students plan demo for next day.

**Friday 10 May:** 30,000 repeat Tuesday's march. Police block path in the Latin Quarter. Students decide to occupy the streets and erect barricades for the first time. Negotiations fail to get students released. Police charge crowds in early hours of Saturday to clear streets. Hundreds injured during four hour battle.

**Saturday 11 May:** Most trade unions call one day national general strike for Monday 13 May in solidarity with students and to protest at repression. Government announces release of students and opening of the university, but fails to defuse situation.

**Monday 13 May:** General strike. In Paris one million march peacefully to demand De Gaulle's resignation. Students declare a constituent assembly in the reopened Sorbonne, which becomes centre of debate, printing, organisation.

**Tuesday 14 – Friday 17th May:** Workers across France return to work, but many start occupying their factories. By end of week 200,000 workers on strike, more than 50 factories occupied.



In some mining communities CGT members were very angry when union officials said workers should avoid contact with students. They curtly reminded their leaders that students had stood by them during the 1963 miners' strike. Some even left the CGT in disgust at the anti-student rhetoric of the leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Worse still was the response of the CGT to the strike. It never put out an official call for a general strike around the key demands that workers were raising. It later justified this position by claiming that to have adopted a national call to action would have undermined workers' democracy at a local level. The cynicism of the CGT leaders was astounding. A national call need not have been counterposed to local democracy, since it would have been up to local union branches to decide whether to rally to the call, and, given the situation, the overwhelming majority would have done so. A national call would have given support to those branches where militants were isolated or workers hesitant.

Georges Séguy, leader of the CGT, used the tenth anniversary of May 68 to justify the failure to establish a centralised strike committee; better to ensure that the strike was controlled by the workers themselves than some central body through which different factions would fight for control.<sup>4</sup>

But it was precisely the lack of a centralised strike committee which disenfranchised the rank and file and kept control in the "faction" of bureaucratic leaders. It would have permitted every local strike to have representatives at a national level where tactics and key demands could have been elaborated; it could have prevented the sell-out, by ensuring that a democratic and accountable, organisation that united unionised and non-unionised workers,

was placed at the head of the movement. But this was the last thing that the Stalinists in the CGT and the PCF wanted.

### Everything was possible, but little was gained

De Gaulle's response to the "chaos" that the workers and students were unleashing was to announce plans for a referendum on "participation" – the extent to which "social partners", or more precisely the representatives of the workers, had a role in co-management in the workplace or in running the social security system, a role that the Fifth Republic had reduced.

If he lost, he would resign. Only the PCF responded positively to this proposition. The PCF preferred to see

### It was precisely the lack of a centralised strike committee which disenfranchised the rank and file and kept control in the 'faction' of bureaucratic leaders

De Gaulle fall from power by plebiscite rather than mass action. However, De Gaulle's withdrawal from this plan, fearing the outcome. This opened up a period of intense negotiations at Grenelle, through which the union leaders hoped they could squeeze some reforms from the government

**Saturday 18 May:** Fearing loss of control, union officials call general strike for better pay and conditions. By Wednesday 23 May, nine million on strike. Students all over France march to occupied factories.

**Thursday 24 May:** De Gaulle goes on TV to suggest a referendum on more workers' participation in running factories. Fails to make impression. Night of barricades in Paris after student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit refused re-entry into country. Stock exchange ransacked and burned. First protestor killed.

**Friday 25 May – Tuesday 28 May:** Strike committees spread to run key aspects of daily civic life; daily demonstrations throughout the country. On 27 May the left meet to discuss idea of alternative government but fail to agree.

**Wednesday 29 May:** De Gaulle flees Paris for discussion with military high command in West Germany. Government in chaos. Massive demonstration in Paris.

**Thursday 30 May:** Turning point. De Gaulle returns to France with military backing. Goes on TV to reaffirm prime minister and call an election for June; he demands a return to work or he will impose a state of emergency. In the evening nearly one million pro-government demonstrators pour into Paris.

**Friday 31 May – Thursday 6 June:** Drift back to work. Union leaders agree to "peace" during pre-election period. Police expel workers from public sector buildings. Much resistance by rank and file.

**Friday 7 – 11 June:** CRS turn on factory occupations and break them up with violence. Two Peugeot workers at Sochaux are shot and killed.

**Wednesday 12 June:** Government bans several student organisations and left groups. Student union leaders agree not to call more demonstrations.

**Sunday 16 June:** Police surround the Sorbonne and clear the occupation. A few clashes follow but no barricades.

**Sunday 23 June:** De Gaulle and the right win sizeable victory in the elections to the National Assembly. Crisis over.

and bosses and reclaim their role as mediator between the working class and the ruling class.

However, their schema didn't work. Séguy and Benoît Frachon – another of the CGT leaders – were so out of touch with the working class that they arrogantly presumed that a few crumbs from the bosses' table would end the strike. When they tried to sell the agreement to the workers – a miserly 7% increase in wages, the withdrawal of some of the attacks on the social security system – they were met with hostility. Séguy and Frachon made a symbolic visit to Billancourt to announce this great settlement – only to be jeered at by the young workers.

Everywhere it was the same story, the strikers rejected the agreement and stayed out. Fearing that things were sliding out of control, on 29 May the CGT and the PCF called for a further demonstration. Six hundred thousand people took to the streets, calling for a “popular government”. A shaken De Gaulle flew to Germany with his military advisors to discuss possible options. Government ministers began to burn governmental archives. Regime change was in the air.

However, it was not to be. De Gaulle returned to France

with a new tactic: a general election. His decision to dissolve the National Assembly chimed in well with the calls for a “popular government”. More importantly, the PCF was now focused on this outcome of the strike. The militancy of the working class had raised the aspirations of their leaders. No longer content with mediating over bread and butter issues via the CGT, the PCF now had a greater goal in sight and did everything in its power to convince the working class that to achieve the goal of a “popular government” they needed to go back to work. At the same time, De Gaulle mobilised his supporters in a 30,000 strong demonstration along the Champs de l'Élysée.

### The elections and after

The first part of the PCF strategy, getting the workers back, was successful. In the absence of a strong political leadership able to see beyond the electoralism of the PCF, the workers gradually went back to work, but not without some resistance. In some factories, workers refused to put an end to the occupations. Women workers at the

# How the far left failed the workers

▶ THE KEY element that was missing in May 68 was a revolutionary party which could systematically challenge the leadership of the PCF and CGT – not by abstract denunciation but by seeking out ways of demonstrating in practice how, armed with a coherent revolutionary programme, and with democratic and inclusive working class organisations, workers' revolution could become a reality.

Concretely this meant – in the first instance – ensuring that workers controlled their own movement in order to resist bureaucratic attempts to sell out the strike. To some extent and in different ways, all three Trotskyist organisations recognised this. Where they fell short, however, was over the programme they advanced. Instead of advancing a programme of transitional demands that could crystallise the revolutionary mood

of the workers won the day.

The demands advanced by the OCI-FER barely differed from the demands being raised by the unions, and fell far short of what could have been achieved by the working class. Their key demands were for an “end to the laws against the social security system, for the 40-hour working week, for guaranteed employment.”

Their key slogan was for the formation of a central strike committee. Whilst it sounded radical, and was certainly beyond what the union leaders were prepared to call for, this slogan was ambiguous. In a situation where only the best strike committees really represented the workers, a centralised strike committee that was based on democratic, accountable local committees, would end up being constituted of the leaders already in place – the very leaders that

were engaged in selling out the strike.

Similarly, Voix Ouvrière (VO) did not see the need to advance slogans capable of raising the struggle to a higher level. On 22 May, VO declared, “Long live the general strike! Down with the Gaullist reactionary police state!” However, what they then proposed was less bombastic:

“The occupiers will not return home, work will not resume until the workers have obtained full and entire satisfaction of the following demands:

1. No salary below 1000F;
2. Immediate return to the 40-hour working week (or less, where possible) with no loss of pay, with work distributed between all workers.
3. Payment for all strike days, without which the right to strike is meaningless.
4. Full rights to union and political expression in the workplace: the right to distribute newspapers and ideas, the right to assembly within the workplace.”

These demands were advanced at a time when the general strike was at its height, when 10 million workers were out and when the question of power was clearly posed. At a time when some



Wonder factory on the outskirts of Paris refused to talk to CGT officials and barricaded themselves in.

In some cases, the CRS was sent to re-establish a return to capitalist order in the factories, with fatal consequences. At Renault-Flins, Gilles Tautin, a young Maoist school student, perished during a police charge. The CGT's response was to violently denounce the far left groups "which were clearly acting in the service of the worst enemies of the working class".

Four days later, at Peugeot-Sochaux, workers went back on strike. Violent clashes with the CRS took place, and this time two workers were killed. In response, the CGT and UNEF organised demonstrations – separately. The UNEF demonstrations, infiltrated by agents provocateurs, quickly descended into violence. The government seized the occasion to ban the organisations of the far left, arresting known militants. This marked the end of the movement. The PCF breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward to victory at the ballot box.

But to their amazement, the right romped back to power. Yet again the PCF demonstrated its total lack of understanding of, and distance from, the workers it claimed to

represent. The PCF lost over half its seats in the National Assembly, down from 73 deputies to 34. Its defeat was even more crushing in constituencies which were home to the major factories.

## The reasons for the defeat of the left

One of the explanations given for the victory of the right is the profoundly anti-democratic electoral system. Youth under 21 could not vote. In addition, a failure to update the electoral register meant that around 300,000 youth who had just reached voting age were not on the electoral list. It is conceivable, however, that this would have made little difference, since young people were loath to support a party which had treated their struggles with such disdain and which had sold out the biggest strike in French history. Many workers and youth saw the elections for what they were – a snare for fools, or "piège à cons" as the popular slogan put it, due to the lack of a party that could truly represent the spirit of their struggle.

The PCF paid dearly for the role it played during the May

workers were establishing workers' control in their factories – an experience which needed to be extended to all the occupations – VO was silent on the question of power, preferring instead to start with the political consciousness of the majority of the workers . . . and stay there.

The call to bring down de Gaulle was not linked to the struggle in the factories. VO, despite its initial hesitation when confronted with the students' confrontations with the police, ended up viewing the street battles as the main way of carrying out the fight against the political institutions of de Gaulle: "It is only on the streets that we can really contest the power of de Gaulle because it is only there that the force that supports him can be challenged: the armed gangs of police."<sup>3</sup>

This was at a time when the real battle for power was above all in the occupied workplaces. The street battles with the police, impressive as they were, were not going to bring down the Republic. The factory occupations, the spreading of workers' control, strike committees, community-wide councils of actions – these were the forms of struggle from which a sustainable counter-power could

emerge, backed up by a workers' militias to repel the state forces. The state could only be defeated by laying down the foundations of a new, alternative society, creating a vision that could inspire the majority of the population.

The JCR, which was clearly an organisation that was moving to the left under the impact of the events of May, understood better the importance of raising demands that went further than the immediate consciousness of workers and students. The JCR called for the nationalisation of occupied factories under workers' control based on strike committees, and the opening of the books to workers' inspection.<sup>4</sup> They also warned against co-management – which was being raised in the factories as a means of moderating the power of the managers and which would ultimately commit the working class to the capitalist labour process. Co-management would not have been a qualitative change to the organisation of labour, instead it was an extension of the major reforms that the working class gained the last time there was a revolutionary situation in France, after the Liberation.

None of the Trotskyist organisations took the inevitable,

treacherous role of the reformist leadership seriously. They failed to warn workers of the inevitable betrayals of their leaders and failed to see the importance of organising the rank and file of the unions against this treachery, and to push for a revolutionary break with reformism. All of them assumed that the spontaneity of the movement absolved revolutionaries of this vital task.

Another criticism of all three Trotskyist organisations is that they did not propose any alternative to the anti-democratic structures of the Fifth Republic. In response to de Gaulle's dissolution of the National Assembly, revolutionaries should have called for a constituent assembly linked to the struggle to building workers' councils, and ultimately, a workers' government. Such a call would have had a clear resonance amongst workers reluctant to accept the crass electoralism of the PCF.

### ENDNOTES

1. Informations Ouvrières 387, mai 68
2. Voix Ouvrière 20.5.68, p1
3. Voix Ouvrière, 20.5.68, p1  
Ibidem.
4. Avant-garde jeunesse 14,27.5.68, p5

events. It had had the chance to put an end to the Fifth Republic, it chose instead to preserve it. Subsequently, the PCF's hegemony within the working class movement suffered a severe setback and was increasingly challenged over the next decade by the social democratic reformists who used the events of May 1968 to reestablish a united socialist force, which was to become the Parti Socialiste.

So what did the working class gain from May 1968? In terms of their demands, very little beyond an increase in wages and guaranteed representation in the workplace. Important reforms in and of themselves – the 30% increase in the minimum wage, 7% on average – they demonstrate how scared the bosses were of the power of the workers, but they were much less than what could have been gained.

The two other great moments of French workers' history of the twentieth century led to qualitative changes in the conditions of the working class; 1936 led to paid leave and the 40-hour working week; the struggles following the Liberation in 1944 brought in universal social

security and health insurance coverage. The same cannot be said for 1968. Key demands around the withdrawal of the social security reforms and working hours were not met. The lack of a national strike leadership meant that many of the demands of the strikers were negotiated at branch level.

On the other hand, the experience of May 68 was invaluable. French workers had a glimpse of what workers' power could achieve. For the youth, it was an unforgettable moment which shaped their entire outlook. For young workers, in particular, the experience of participating in the biggest ever general strike was to have a lasting effect on their subsequent union activity.

The general strike shook French society to its core and fundamentally weakened the strong Gaullist state. Yet, so much more was possible. May 68 could have – should have – been a revolution. So much was at stake, and so much was squandered by the political leadership of the working class.

In place of the PCF's readiness to negotiate away work-

### THE FAR LEFT AND THE STRIKE

## Blinded by the workers' spontaneity

THE FÉDÉRATION d'Etudiants Révolutionnaires (FER) was the student organisation of the Lambertist Organisation Communiste Internationalist (OCI), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It was by far the most conservative of the Trotskyist groups, demonstrated by its attitude to the "night of the barricades". Instead of joining the students on the barricades, they denounced the "petit bourgeois" nature of the demonstration and called on the students to disperse.

For the FER it was futile to think that 30,000 students could take on the forces of the state; a bloodbath would be the inevitable outcome. The politics of the FER were not so far from their *bête noire* – the PCF. The roots of the FER's politics, however, differed, based as they were on an orientation towards the socialists in the student and workers' unions.

The Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) was key player in the "mouvement 22 mars". As the youth section of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), prior to the

events of May its main strategy revolved around entryism inside the PCF, from which the revolutionary party would be built. The JCR, however, due no doubt to its experience of working alongside radical students, ended up breaking with this schematic approach to party building.

Voix Ouvrière (VO) was the forerunner to Lutte Ouvrière. VO was originally disdainful of students' struggles. In the autumn of 1967, when the first struggles over the Fouchet reform broke out, VO thundered:

"In and of themselves, the demands [of the students] have no chance of succeeding since they are attacking a concerted plan of the state which is not about to give in to a few 'hotheads' in the Latin Quarter . . . The real struggle lies elsewhere: in the factories, where the only revolutionary class, the proletariat . . . the best elements of the student youth must break with their social milieu by placing themselves at the service of the workers and of socialism."

With this petit bourgeois moralism, VO hoped to recruit students on the basis of guilt but

this soon proved useless as a way of intervening in the movement. Once the "22 mars" was established, VO finally realised that the student movement was more than a few "hotheads" taking on the police. At the beginning of April, their workplace bulletins began to praise the struggles of students throughout Europe, going so far as to say that the students' struggles could be an example for the workers.

All three organisations emphasised the centrality of the working class but none explained how to link the struggles of the students with those of the workers, beyond participating in each others' demonstrations.

Even worse, specific demands of the students were largely absent from their publications. The spontaneity of the movement tended to blind the far left groups from the tasks of the day.

#### BOX REFERENCES

1. Combat 17.5.68
2. Voix Ouvrière, 29.11.67, p4
3. Voix Ouvrière, 3.4.68, p4



ers' immediate demands, a revolutionary party could have armed the workers with a revolutionary programme, one based on transitional demands capable of directing the struggle for higher wages and increased control over the production process, into a struggle to establish workers' control over all aspects of society, culminating in the call for a workers' government.

This would necessarily have been linked to community-wide organisations that could have extended the movement to all layers of society, establishing links with isolated communities, particularly in rural areas. Such comprehensive structures of struggle could also have served to rally youth who had been conscripted into the army with the aim of further undermining the Gaullist state. This was not impossible.

Conscripts stationed at Mützig, near Strasbourg, distributed a leaflet calling on soldiers to refuse to carry out orders which would threaten the workers. Admittedly, this was the only example of revolutionary activity within the armed forces and due to the existence of a Trotskyist activist (member of the JCR – see box). However, had May 68 created extensive committees of action bringing in all workers and oppressed, dissent amongst the conscripted

youth would have been inevitable.

Such a vision of the potential of 1968 does not amount to a premature call for insurrection in May itself. Rather, it is a vision focused on the most effective political and organisational means of developing and deepening the workers' struggle to such an extent that it is in a position to smash the capitalist state with the minimum of bloodshed. At best, the outcome would have been a workers' revolution capable of sending shockwaves throughout Europe and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

The revolutionary potential of May 68 was encapsulated in the slogan "everything is possible". For the PCF, it was more a case of "not tonight, Josephine".

#### ENDNOTES

1. Marc Rohan, Paris '68, London 1988, p17
2. Boris Gobille (2008), Mai 68, La Découvert, Paris.
3. Ibid, p.47
4. Daniel Bensaïd and Alain Krivine (2008), Mai 68: Fins et Suites. La Brèche, Paris.
5. International solidarity was widespread. In Italy dockers refused to unload goods destined for France, so as not to break the strike of French workers and students.