

France: May-June 1968 and today

By Ulrich Rippert
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“Is this another May-June 1968?” This question has repeatedly been raised recently in the French and international media.

Even before last Saturday, when 1.5 million people participated in 160 demonstrations throughout France against the “First Job Contract” (Contrat Première Embauche—CPE) being introduced by the Gaullist government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac, the growing wave of protests was being compared to the events of nearly 40 years ago.

Some commentators have struck a reassuring note, arguing that the current situation cannot be compared with the late 1960s. Today, they say, the students are not calling for the transformation of society, as they were in the spring of 1968. The young people who have taken to the streets in recent days are, according to these pundits, merely looking to find a place within the framework of the existing social order.

Such commentaries generally avoid an obvious question: What happens when such “non-revolutionary” aspirations cannot be met by the capitalist system?

Another strain of media commentary gives the impression that the events of 1968 in France were dominated by radicalised middle-class youth.

This is a serious historical distortion. What began as a militant student protest became a watershed historical event when the French working class intervened, demonstrating its power and revolutionary potential by launching a general strike that paralysed the economy for more than two weeks. Workers, acting largely independently and often in opposition to the official trade unions, occupied key factories in basic industry and established what could be described as a state of economic “dual power” in France.

The government of Charles de Gaulle and the whole of the French capitalist state were shaken to their foundations, and for a period wondered, in disarray and panic, whether they would be swept away by socialist revolution.

If the current events in France have so widely revived the ghost of 1968, it is because the events of that spring raised in so fundamental a manner both the survival of the French ruling elite and the deepest aspirations of the working class.

Because the political lessons of that episode remain critical for the struggles of today, it is important to review the course of events of that fateful spring.

On May 3, 1968, when students at the Sorbonne occupied the university, major struggles had already occurred. The previous day, the University of Nanterre, an industrial suburb of Paris, was closed down. Students there had been boycotting lectures for weeks, in protest against their reactionary content and against the deployment of plain-clothed police on campus.

The police, using batons and tear gas, attacked the students occupying the Sorbonne and carried out mass arrests. This provocation led to days of street fighting in Paris’s Latin Quarter and a wave of university occupations throughout France.

The students denounced not only police brutality and repression, but also the Vietnam War and the imperialist policies of the US and French

governments.

The French Communist Party (PCF) and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the union that was politically dominated by the Stalinist PCF, derided the students as adventurers and hooligans. They even organised counter-demonstrations and sent representatives of the Stalinist youth movement to politically derail student meetings.

Despite this, the call among the students for “workers’ and students’ solidarity” became ever more popular. Groups of students met with workers in the factories to write joint leaflets and plan joint actions.

On May 13, all of the trade unions except the CGT called a one-day general strike to protest the police actions. On that day, the first large workers’ and students’ joint demonstration took place.

A group of Renault workers had produced a flyer that proclaimed: “If we want our wage increases and our demands on working conditions to be successful, if we do not want to be constantly threatened, then we must fight for a fundamental change in society.... As workers, we should strive to control the course of our enterprises. Our demands are similar to those of the students. The administrations of both industry and the university should be democratically controlled by those who work there.”

On the evening of May 14, workers at the aircraft factory Aviation Sud began a sit-down strike. Students came to the picket lines to demonstrate their solidarity. On May 16, Renault workers began to occupy their factory, locking management in their offices. Workers at the *Paris Press* organised an independent strike.

The spontaneous strike movement spread to more factories, at first in Paris, then increasingly in other cities. A statement by the students occupying the Sorbonne read: “Comrades, the Sud Aviation factory in Nantes has been occupied for two days by workers and students from the city. Today the movement spread to several factories (NMPP Paris, Renault-Cleon, etc.). Therefore, the occupation committee of the Sorbonne calls for the immediate occupation of all factories and for the establishment of workers’ councils. Comrades, reproduce and disseminate this statement as quickly as possible!”

Leaflets published jointly by workers and students in many cities contained the demands, “Occupy the factories! All power to the workers’ councils! Abolish class society!”

The Stalinist PCF and the CGT reacted with fright and did everything they could to oppose this movement. In several factories, the CGT put up notices that read: “Young workers, students and revolutionary elements are trying to sow divisions in our ranks in order to weaken us. These extremists are only the stooges of the bourgeoisie, who are being paid generously by the employers.”

Party functionaries in the Union of Communist Students (UEC) tried to revoke the call for factory occupations and seized the public address system at the Sorbonne, which led to physical confrontations.

Despite the resistance of the PCF, the factory occupations rapidly spread. By May 16, some 50 factories had been occupied. On May 17, 200,000 workers went on strike, and in the following days, the movement expanded with the first “wildcat general strike” in French history, in which 11 million workers were involved and which lasted for more than two weeks.

Having failed to prevent the strike movement, the CGT used all of the means at its disposal to limit the workers' demands to economic issues of wages and working conditions. But the strikers' demands for the government to resign and for political changes continued to escalate.

On May 24, President Charles de Gaulle announced the government would carry out the education reforms demanded by the students and grant the striking workers a significant wage increase. The PCF and CGT celebrated this as a massive victory and demanded that the demonstrations be temporarily suspended—i.e., until a final agreement was struck with the government.

Three days later, the CGT negotiated with representatives of the government and the employers and agreed to a deal, later to become known as the “Grenelle agreement.” According to press reports, the CGT entered the negotiations with a demand to increase the minimum wage by 30 percent, but the employers offered 35 percent if the CGT would end the occupations and strikes. One of the mediators between the government and the CGT was a young undersecretary at the ministry of social affairs named Jacques Chirac.

The next day, when CGT Secretary-General Georges Séguy outlined the compromise to Renault workers at the main plant in Boulogne Billancourt and called on them to resume working, he was shouted down by the strikers. At other enterprises, too, the strike was maintained, leading by the end of May to bottlenecks in fuel supplies.

The infrastructure of the country was largely paralysed or under workers' control. In Paris, for example, requests for electricity supplies had to be lodged with a workers' committee at the state-owned energy company.

In utmost secrecy, President de Gaulle flew by helicopter to Baden-Baden in Germany, where French troops were stationed. It was later reported that officials at some ministries had begun to shred sensitive documents.

On May 27, the PCF central committee issued a statement that expressly denounced those who described the situation as “revolutionary.” The declaration called for sober-mindedness and advised that law and order could best be reestablished if the National Assembly (parliament) were dissolved and new elections held.

After de Gaulle was persuaded that the Communist Party was opposed to a revolution, he returned to France. In a radio speech, he seized upon the PCF demand for new elections and announced the dissolution of the National Assembly, calling the poll for June 23. At the same time, he stressed his authority as the bearer of state power. He demanded that workers return to work and threatened to impose a state of emergency, which would give him the authority to deploy the armed forces against the strikers.

At the same time, an intensive media campaign was launched against the strikers and students. On May 30, some 1 million conservative opponents of the general strike marched through Paris. The Communist Party, by blocking a struggle to bring down the Gaullist government and opposing the political mobilisation of the working class for a workers' government, had handed the initiative to the forces of the right.

One occupation after another was ended, and where workers refused to end their action, they were forcibly removed by the police. Similar action was taken against most of the university occupations. However, it was not until June 18—the day the Renault workers returned to work—that the strike was definitively ended.

Subsequently, both the universities and factories faced intensified state repression. A number of left-wing and socialist political organisations that had played an active role in the strike, including the then-Trotskyist Organisation Communist Internationalist (OCI), were banned.

The Stalinist leadership of the PCF boasted of its role in defending bourgeois society in France. “I stress that it was above all the calm and decisive attitude of the Communist Party that prevented a bloody

adventure in our country,” declared Waldeck Rochet, who had taken over as head of the PCF in 1964 following the death of Maurice Thorez.

In the ensuing parliamentary elections, the Gaullists were able to increase their majority, controlling 358 of the 487 seats. The influence of the PCF in the factories decreased as many workers turned their backs on the party—a process that accelerated when Soviet tanks invaded Czechoslovakia that summer.

The weeks-long general strike and the wave of factory occupations meant that key elements of society were in the hands of the workers. The establishment of a workers' government and a revolutionary transformation of society were within reach.

The extent of the revolutionary dynamic became clear from the fact that the general strike had consequences far beyond the borders of France. It marked the beginning of seven years of social upheaval throughout Europe.

One year later, in Germany, a massive wildcat strike movement developed and a Social Democrat, Willy Brandt, was elected chancellor for the first time. Fascist governments collapsed in Portugal and Spain, along with the military dictatorship in Greece. In Great Britain, a miners' strike brought down the Tory government of Edward Heath, and in the US, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign.

In France, the general strike signaled an end to the rule of General de Gaulle. In April 1969, the French president stepped down following the failure of a referendum.

In the 1970s, François Mitterrand created a new political mechanism to stabilise capitalist rule and replace the Gaullists, when necessary, with a “left” bourgeois government. Called the Union of the Left, it was an electoral alliance between the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the bourgeois Radical Party.

Following the election of Mitterrand to the post of president in 1981, the Communist Party entered the Socialist Party-led government of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, taking on three ministries (Public Service, Transport and Health) and thereby sharing responsibility for the ensuing social cuts and austerity measures.

It is impossible to understand the present attacks being carried out by the Gaullist government without comprehending the role played by the PCF and the CGT. All the attacks on social standards, working conditions and wages, which have once again forced millions to take to the streets, have been conducted in close co-operation with the CGT and the other French trade unions.

The trade unions' protest in the current situation is directed above all at the fact that the CPE is being pushed through by the de Villepin government without consulting them. Their demand is that the government consult the unions on questions of social policy, so that working class opposition can be kept under control.

After the 1968 general strike, the French ruling elite was forced to make social concessions. Today, however, in the face of the globalisation of production and the worldwide competition for cheap labour, bourgeois governments everywhere are driven to claw back past concessions and radically reduce working class living standards.

The claim that the situation is less revolutionary today than in 1968 because the students are not calling for social revolution is based on a highly superficial and one-sided appreciation of events. It is undeniable that on a mass scale, there has, in the intervening period, been a decline in social and political consciousness, chiefly as a consequence of decades of betrayals by the old bureaucratic workers' parties and trade unions. But in a more fundamental, objective sense, the crisis of bourgeois society in France, Europe and internationally, is far deeper than in 1968.

Capitalism today is dominated openly by the naked drive of a privileged elite for profit and self-enrichment. It has no place for the vast majority of the youth, except as objects of extreme exploitation or reservists in the armies of the unemployed. The system has far less ability than it did 40

years ago to meet even the most elementary demands of youth and workers. Thus even “reformist” demands carry revolutionary implications.

A few political commentators sense the revolutionary potential of the current crisis. Serge Faubert, for example, wrote March 20 in *France Soir* : “Make no mistake. What started as an imitation of May ‘68 looks like being a thousand times more revolutionary. In fact, the current crisis is an exact reversal. In ‘68 everything was possible in a France where there was full employment but nothing was permitted. Today everything is permitted for those with money, a good job, but nothing is possible for the vast majority of our fellow citizens.”

It is impossible, however, to discuss the revolutionary potential of the current situation in France, Europe or elsewhere apart from the crucial question of the “subjective” factor—i.e., the leadership of the working class and the political perspective that guides the struggles of the class. The absence of a revolutionary socialist party rooted in the working class gives the French ruling elite an immense political advantage, despite the courage and militancy of workers and young people. Working above all through its Socialist Party, Communist Party and trade union agencies—crucially supplemented by their allies on the so-called “far left” such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Lutte Ouvrière—the bourgeoisie has multiple means for politically disarming and disorienting the masses.

The critical question raised by the events in France today, as by those of 1968, is the need to build a socialist and internationalist party of the working class. That is the struggle conducted by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its international publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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