

French students – who in the 1960s were more heavily working class than ever in the country’s history -- were radicalized by the Vietnam War and by student movements around the globe. They were quick to oppose top-down curriculum design, gender segregation and patronizing government bureaucrats.

French workers in the 1960s, on the other hand, found themselves facing a variety of obstacles including weak and divided labor unions and government attacks on social security. Workers’ response to these challenges was not strong at first, but their actions gained strength as they were galvanized by the student movements.

The movement was fueled by a colorful variety of artistic, political and cultural traditions. Immigrant workers, especially from North Africa, played strong role in drawing connections between workers rights in France and anti-imperialism. Students, many influenced by anarchism, and artists, particularly those of the “situationist movement,” which deployed pranks to disrupt everyday life under capitalism, used graffiti and art to communicate their messages to a broader public. All in all, it was a time of enormous experimentation, not only politically, but terms of art, spirituality and the conduct of every day life.

As the movement spread, the more conservative union leadership scrambled to seize control of the strikes, attempting to take power away from the more democratically elected “action committees” which carried out practical tasks related to the strikes.

But even as the more conservative elements on the left struggled for control, the strikes were able to seize the hearts and minds of those who, in quieter times, would’ve identified as professional or middle class. Immigrant workers, young people, industrial workers and women came together to build barricades and fight the repressive government forces.

-- Chloe T

~~From page~~ Ian Birchall

in committees countered the lies of the official media by producing newspapers to be posted in streets and tube stations.⁷⁸ Striking television journalists and technicians produced films to be shown at political meetings. Art students established 'Popular Workshops', which turned out over 100,000 copies of 350 different posters.⁷⁹ A more individual creativity, but one typical of May 1968, was shown by the slogans which covered the walls of the Paris universities,⁸⁰ some neatly encapsulating the spirit of the movement ('it is forbidden to forbid'), others giving an ironic twist to political orthodoxy ('I am a Marxist of the Groucho tendency').⁸¹ Many slogans came from surrealist poets such as André Breton, or from the writings of those cultural revolutionaries of the 1960s, the Situationists.

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The State under Threat

Society was in deep ferment, but Capital still ruled. Hierarchies of power were being challenged in the workplaces and on the streets, but the state machine was as yet untouched. By the last week of May the movement had reached a critical juncture; if it was to continue to go forward, it would have to confront the whole apparatus of class rule. As prime minister Pompidou noted in his memoirs, the stakes were very high:

The crisis was infinitely more serious and more profound; the regime would stand or be overthrown, but it could not be saved by a mere cabinet reshuffle. It was not my position that was in question. It was General de Gaulle, the Fifth Republic, and, to a considerable extent, Republican rule itself.⁸²

Economically the system was in deep trouble. People were crossing the borders to Belgium and Switzerland with suitcases filled with currency; commercial banks throughout the world were refusing to deal in the French franc; and 'nobody was quite certain who would be answering the telephone at the Bank of France'.⁸³ Over the weekend of 25-26 May the government had concluded extensive negotiations with the union leaders; substantial concessions had been made in the hope of ending the strike. But on Monday 27 May workers first at Renault, then at other big plants, rejected the offers as inadequate. The union leaders had no alternative but to continue the strike.

On 24 May de Gaulle had resorted to a device he had used more than once since 1958 to maintain his authority: the calling of a referendum. A rather vague and anodyne set of promises for educational, social and economic reform, including the notorious Gaullist panacea of 'participation', were to be offered to the people; de Gaulle

made it clear that the whole exercise was a vote of confidence in himself, and that he would resign if defeated.⁸⁴

The unions did not propose a formal boycott of the referendum, although they made it clear that they saw it as no solution; Séguy of the CGT declared that 'the workers are not demanding a referendum but better living and working conditions.'⁸⁵ However in practice the referendum proved impossible. Not a single printshop in France would print the ballot papers needed, and when an attempt was made to get them printed in Belgium, the Belgian printers refused in solidarity.⁸⁶ In a broadcast on 30 May de Gaulle had to admit that the situation was 'materially preventing' the holding of the referendum and that it would have to be postponed.⁸⁷

The government's options were narrowing; a head-on confrontation between the workers and the forces of state repression seemed ever more likely. Here too there would be problems for the regime. Certainly the government had a substantial array of 'armed bodies of men'. There were some 144,000 police (armed) of various categories, including 13,500 of the notorious CRS riot police, and some 261,000 soldiers stationed in France or West Germany. This was apparently an imposing force, but it could hardly do the jobs of nine million workers, nor yet compel them all to work at gun-point. Moreover, the army consisted largely of conscripts, most of whom would have strikers in their own families, and who would be reluctant to be used as strike-breakers. Only when the movement was going down and becoming fragmented would it be possible to use armed force to smash particular workplace occupations.

Moreover, there were throughout May indications of considerable discontent in the ranks of the police and armed forces. During the second and third weeks of May representatives of police unions made a number of statements critical of the government's handling of the situation.⁸⁸ There was particular dissatisfaction at Pompidou's statement of 11 May. Many police felt that by climbing down the government was repudiating those whom it had ordered to go into action. On 13 May a police union body representing 80 per cent of uniformed personnel issued a declaration that it

... considers the prime minister's statement to be a recognition that the students were in the right, and as a total disavowal of the actions by the police force which the government itself had ordered. In these circumstances, it is surprised that an effective dialogue with the students was not sought before these regrettable confrontations took place.⁸⁹

Later the same week one of the leaders of the Paris police union told listeners to Radio Luxembourg that he had 'been almost instructed by a general meeting to launch a police strike against the prime

minister's attitude.⁹⁰ The police also had their own sectional claims to make, and *The Times* reported that 'the branch dealing with intelligence about student activity has been deliberately depriving the government of information about student leaders in support of an expenses claim.'⁹¹

Of course there can be no suggestion that the Paris police were on the point of going over to the revolution. Many would doubtless have liked nothing better than authorisation to make completely uninhibited use of armed force against the students. But a discontented and demoralised police force was hardly likely to prove a reliable support for the government in a policy of strike-breaking.

Discontent in the armed forces, where there were no trade union rights, is harder to document, but it seems clear that the spirit of May did not leave the armed forces untouched. There are reports of a mutiny on the aircraft carrier *Clemenceau*, which at the end of May was bound for the French nuclear test in the Pacific but was brought back to Toulon. Three families were informed that their sons had been 'lost at sea'.⁹² There were some moves to form action committees in the army (forerunners of the soldiers' committees of the mid-1970s), as is shown by a leaflet issued by members of the 153rd RIMECA (mechanised infantry regiment) stationed at Mutzig, near Strassburg, part of which read:

Military instruction must be an equal right for all. Military instruction and sex education must be administratively, geographically and chronologically integrated into the whole system of National Education from the earliest age, and controlled according to the same principles now demanded in Universities and schools: dialogue and joint management . . .

Like all conscripts, we are confined to barracks. We are being prepared to intervene as repressive forces. The workers and youth must know that the soldiers of the contingent WILL NEVER SHOOT ON WORKERS. We Action Committees are opposed at all costs to the surrounding of factories by soldiers.

Tomorrow or the day after we are expected to surround an armaments factory which three hundred workers who work there want to occupy. WE SHALL FRATERNISE.

Soldiers of the contingent, form your committees!⁹³

It would be wrong to underestimate either the strength of the bourgeois state, or the ruthlessness of those who command and deploy that strength. No socialist revolution can succeed without taking these on. But likewise, no socialist revolution can succeed that succumbs to the blackmail of the threat of civil war. If we wait for the bourgeois state to disarm itself we shall wait for ever. The French state was in relative disarray at the end of May 1968; a movement bold

enough to go forward in unity could have confronted it without fear.

The recognition of the weak position of the state penetrated the highest levels of government. It was an open secret that during May and June there was considerable friction between president de Gaulle and prime minister Pompidou. (Pompidou's memoirs, published by his wife on the basis of notes written before his death in 1974, give a clear account of this, though obviously recounted in such a way as to show Pompidou in the best light.)⁹⁴

Symptomatic of the government disarray in this period is the strange story of de Gaulle's disappearance on 29 May. In the morning of that day de Gaulle and his wife left Paris by air, supposedly heading for their country home at Colombey. Later that day it became clear that they had not gone to Colombey, and no one — not even the prime minister — knew where they were. Soon it was learnt that de Gaulle had gone to Baden-Baden in West Germany, where he had a meeting with General Massu, notorious for his use of brutality and torture during the Algerian War, especially in the famous 'Battle of Algiers'. According to Pompidou, de Gaulle had been the victim of an 'attack of demoralisation' and had intended to withdraw from political life and stay in West Germany. Had he done so, of course, the impact on the situation would have been overwhelming; if the students and strikers had believed they had dislodged de Gaulle, their confidence would have grown to such an extent that the government would have found it impossible to stop them.

According to Pompidou,⁹⁵ Massu succeeded in persuading de Gaulle to return to Paris and take a tough line. Massu has confirmed the main lines of Pompidou's account,⁹⁶ though others closely associated with de Gaulle have challenged it.⁹⁷ Since everyone concerned is defending their own reputation or that of their political faction, it is unlikely that the full truth will ever be known. The alternative scenario is that de Gaulle's disappearance was a calculated move to show his government colleagues and the whole people just how indispensable he was. Even if this were true, it would have been a risky manoeuvre and an indication of just how difficult the regime's situation had become.

For three or four days in the last week of May 1968 there was a power vacuum in France. The government had lost effective control of the situation and had no quick way to regain it. The possibilities open to a movement with an audacious leadership were immense. This is not, however, to suggest that there was an immediately revolutionary situation in existence. The idea that the Communist Party was on the verge of establishing a 'People's Democracy' belonged only to the fantasy world of right-wing journalists.⁹⁸

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In fact the Communist Party later boasted that it had not attempted the revolutionary road; but it too distorted the nature of the alternatives that existed. According to Waldeck-Rochet, the party's general secretary:

In reality the choice to be made in May was the following:

— Either to act in such a way that the strike would permit the essential demands of the workers to be satisfied, and to pursue at the same time, on the political level, a policy aimed at making necessary democratic changes by constitutional means. This was our party's position.

— Or else quite simply to provoke a trial of strength, in other words move towards an insurrection: this would include a recourse to armed struggle aimed at overthrowing the regime by force. This was the adventurist position of certain ultra-left groups.⁹⁹

This was a false alternative. Certainly there was no question of storming the Elysée Palace on 29 May. And although there were indeed some genuine ultra-lefts among the students, few of them believed that this was the option. After all one of the students' favourite slogans — 'It's only a beginning; let's continue the fight' — precisely posed the perspective of a prolonged struggle.

The real option was whether the movement should go forward or go back. The crucial question in the last week of May was not insurrection. It was how to establish genuine strike committees based on the rank and file in every workplace, and link these up into local, regional and national councils of workers' representatives. This would have raised further questions — in particular, the physical defence of the workplaces and the attempt to resume production under workers' control.

Class consciousness is not static. It is undoubtedly true that most workers saw the general strike in terms of higher wages and better conditions, and not in terms of state power. But there is no rigid dividing line between the economic and the political. A whole range of issues — such as union rights and limitations on the power of management — link the two. As long as the movement went on rising, more and more workers were learning from their own experience that the stakes were much higher than pure trade-union demands.

Of course, it can be no more than speculation to ask what might have happened if the strike had continued to develop. Even if a compromise had had to be made a few weeks later, it would have been on immeasurably better terms for the workers — bigger economic gains, much stronger workplace organisation and the departure of de Gaulle. At best, a process could have begun which in a period of months could have put insurrection on the agenda.

But none of this was to be. For while the state was in disarray the

workers too lacked decisive leadership. The gap was filled by reformist leaders who were almost as frightened of workers' power as was the ruling class.

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The bureaucrats duck out

The strongest organisation on the French left in 1968 was without doubt the Communist Party (PCF). The PCF had been excluded from the government in 1947, and over the intervening twenty-one years had played no part in any of the governmental alliances that were formed. It had maintained its strength as a result of its powerful implantation in the CGT, which gave its members access to many positions of responsibility in trade union and welfare organisations in the workplaces; moreover, its control of a number of working-class municipalities made it a significant dispenser of jobs.

The PCF in 1968 was still much more resolutely pro-Russian than its counterpart in Italy (its first major break with Russia would come in August 1968, when it opposed the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia). Central to its political strategy was the aim of returning to parliamentary power. This it could achieve only through electoral alliances with the non-Communist left (grouped in the Left Federation, the FGDS), with a view to eventual participation in a coalition government. This in turn meant that the PCF had to prove itself to be a party committed to parliamentary methods and to respect for constitutional procedures.¹⁰⁰

The rise of a revolutionary current within the student movement was therefore a matter of considerable concern to the PCF leadership. Firstly, it wished to preserve its claim to be the only Marxist party and the only legitimate representative of the working class in France. Secondly, if French politics moved on to the path of violence, the PCF would risk either losing its reputation for legality, or being outflanked on its left.

As a result, from the very beginning of May, the PCF leadership was anxious to draw a clear line between itself and the leftist students. On 3 May 1968 Georges Marchais — soon to become the party leader — published an article vigorously denouncing the leftist *groupuscules* (little groups):

Not content with the agitation they are carrying on in student circles — agitation which goes counter to the interests of the mass of students and favours fascist provocations — these pseudo-revolutionaries are now claiming to give lessons to the working-class movement. More and more they are to be found at the factory gates or in immigrant workers' centres giving out leaflets and other propaganda material.

These false revolutionaries must be vigorously unmasked, for objectively they are serving the interests of the Gaullist government and of the big capitalist monopolies.

. . . The ideas and activities of these 'revolutionaries' are laughable. All the more so because in general they are the sons of the upper bourgeoisie — contemptuous towards students of working-class origin — who will soon damp down their 'revolutionary flame' to go and manage Daddy's company and exploit the workers there in the best traditions of capitalism. However, it would be wrong to underestimate their pernicious activity which tries to sow confusion, doubt and scepticism among workers and especially among youth . . . By developing anticommunism, the leftist *groupuscules* are serving the interests of the bourgeoisie and of big capital.¹⁰¹

The PCF preserved this line of attack against the revolutionary students in its press, and, even more viciously, by word of mouth. At the same time, it had to ensure that it was not outflanked on its left. After the mass demonstrations of 13 May the PCF had to recognise that the students had won considerable sympathy by their courage in resisting the police, and that to attack them too blatantly would mean isolating itself. There was a certain shift of tone.

The general strike certainly began outside the control of the PCF. The first day of the Sud-Aviation occupation earned just seven lines in the PCF's daily paper, tucked away on page nine.¹⁰² By Thursday 16 May the CGT felt itself obliged to respond to the growing wave of strikes, while scrupulously refraining from actually giving a militant lead, let alone launching a general strike call:

The CGT salutes the workers, especially those of the National Renault Company who, in response to its call, have decided to strike and occupy.

It calls on all workers to hold workplace meetings, and to determine, with their union officials, on what conditions they will join the struggle and what demands to fight for.

It calls on all its militants to immediately take any initiative necessary to raise the level of struggle on the basis of broad consultation of workers and in trade union unity.¹⁰³

This carefully worded statement hedged the CGT's (and the PCF's) bets. While carefully avoiding 'adventurism' it warned its militants to make sure the movement was under their control. On the ground the CGT's tactics were to appoint strike committees of loyal members, to demobilise the rank and file and to exclude revolutionary students from the workplaces. Fine words about unity often covered up a sectarian practice on the ground. In at least one case CGT members occupied a factory telephone switchboard so as to cut the CFDT representatives off from contact with their departmental office.¹⁰⁴

By the end of May the PCF was forced to confront the question of power. On 29 May its daily paper bore a banner headline: 'The workers demand: A popular government of democratic union with Communist participation.'¹⁰⁵ This was much more modest than calling for the revolution; unfortunately it was much more ambitious than what was actually achieved. Once again the PCF proved that 'realists' are often the greatest utopians.

The constant concern of the PCF was to avoid 'provocations'. One critic compared it to a woman deciding to thwart a rapist by consenting to his advances, thus making the act no longer 'rape'.¹⁰⁶ Often the police returned the compliment by letting the large PCF demonstrations pass off peacefully, reserving violent attacks for the leftists. It suited the authorities to keep the PCF firmly inside the constitutional fold.¹⁰⁷

In its own terms the PCF did not do badly out of May 1968. Its claim that it signed up 15,000 new members in the month after 13 May may not be hopelessly exaggerated, since in many places it did seem to be leading the movement.¹⁰⁸ Its conduct in the general strike demonstrated both its massive industrial power and its commitment to legality. In order to make such a demonstration, of course, it had to stifle one of the greatest spontaneous mass movements in history; but in the eyes of its leaders this was doubtless a cheap price to pay.

The political weight of the social-democratic left was far smaller than that of the PCF. The Socialist Party (SFIO), under its treacherous leader Guy Mollet, had been widely discredited by its support for the Algerian War and for the accession of de Gaulle. When the 13 May demonstration passed by the SFIO headquarters there were chants of 'Guy Mollet to the museum'.¹⁰⁹ Mollet and his party made no significant intervention during May 1968.

However two reformist politicians who did have some impact were former ministers from the Fourth Republic, François Mitterrand and Pierre Mendès-France (who as prime minister had ended the Indochina war in 1954). Both had opposed de Gaulle from the beginning, and Mitterrand had put up a good fight in the 1965 presidential election.

Unlike the PCF, they did not have a mass base to worry about and could therefore take rather more risks in expressing sympathy with the students. At the same time they knew that, while in a straight electoral context between de Gaulle and the PCF the former would always win, a left centre figure could cobble up a majority by winning support from both PCF and disgruntled or leftist Gaullists. This was the logic behind Mitterrand's announcement on 28 May that he was a candidate for the presidency, and that Mendès-France should be asked to form a provisional government.¹¹⁰

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Mitterrand's campaign was purely opportunist. When de Gaulle spoke of a 'third way' between capitalism and communism, Mitterrand responded that the only political force offering the third way was the Left Federation which combined socialism and liberty.¹¹¹ Yet he was able to appeal to leftist students in a way that the PCF dared not. Even the anarchist Cohn-Bendit went so far as to say: 'François Mitterrand isn't an ally, but if necessary he can simply be of use to us.'¹¹²

Mitterrand's account of why he wanted Mendès-France to head a provisional government likewise shows the policy of co-option and collaboration pursued by both men:

He had real prestige with the protesting students through the medium of the United Socialist Party and the National Union of French Students, a prestige increased by his presence at the Charléty rally. His financial orthodoxy reassured moderate circles. Monsieur Abelin, leader of the Democratic Centre, had expressed this tendency by asking General de Gaulle to entrust him with the task of resolving the crisis. *A priori*, then, he had more chance than anyone else of pulling together a broad range of public opinion and of working for the reconciliation of French people which I had been appealing for.¹¹³

During May Mendès-France worked with a small committee of academics and lawyers which maintained contact on the one hand with the government and police authorities, and on the other with the student leaders, in an effort to prevent any escalation of violence.¹¹⁴ But on Monday 27 May Mendès-France attended a rally of some 50,000 people at the Charléty stadium (sitting on the platform, but without speaking). This was an attempt to regroup the currents to the left of the Communist Party, and the various revolutionary *groupuscules* were present and active. Mendès-France was clearly there to prevent the emergence of a non-parliamentary left leadership; as he is reported to have commented afterwards: 'We can't cut ourselves off from those who represent the youth.'¹¹⁵

Mendès-France was able to retain his credibility with the leftists, though he had little in common with their politics, by the fact of his membership of the United Socialist Party (PSU). The PSU had originated from a split with the SFIO by those who could not stomach its position on the Algerian War. In many ways the PSU was a classically centrist organisation, containing within its not very well disciplined ranks both advocates of revolutionary socialism and left reformists. It veered from Marxist rhetoric to orientation on technocrats and the production of counterplans. The PSU swung sharply to the left during May and Mendès-France resigned from it the following month.

Neither Mitterrand nor Mendès-France achieved anything significant in May (though Mitterrand doubtless acquired a little credit

for later use). But, like the PCF, they helped to maintain the movement within constitutional channels and thus impeded the emergence of an independent revolutionary leadership.

The Fragmented Vanguard

A massive social movement can begin spontaneously; but for it to realise its full potential is quite another matter. The absence of a revolutionary party able to lead a challenge to the centralised power of the state was one of the main reasons why the enormous creativity and militancy developed in May 1968 was largely frittered away in June.

It would be both easy and futile to indulge in a circular argument about the missing party (why was there no revolutionary party? Because the class struggle had not reached a high enough level to produce one. Why had the class struggle not reached a high enough level? Because there was no revolutionary party). The answer to both questions can be found only in a detailed account of subjective and objective factors stretching right back to 1917.

But without such futile speculation it can be argued quite simply that throughout May 1968 the working class never broke away from reformist leadership, and that because it did not, it was led to make a compromise within the framework of the existing system. A revolutionary party rooted in the working class would have drawn on the spontaneous wave of militancy and tried to generalise from it; it would have communicated experience with the aim of raising every struggle to the level of the most developed; it would have produced a centralised newspaper that could respond immediately to the lies and distortions of the bourgeois media; it would have at once called the bluff of the authorities when they threatened armed force or civil war.

The revolutionary current that did exist showed great courage and initiative, but it was simply not in a position to take on these tasks. Not only was it small, but it had suffered years of isolation from the mainstream of the labour movement; it was largely, if not exclusively, confined to the student milieu; and it was deeply divided along political and organisational lines.

Among the myriad small and very small *groupuscules* it is possible to identify three main currents — anarchists, Maoists and Trotskyists.¹¹⁶ The anarchists of one brand and another made an enormous contribution to the spirit of May; their libertarianism and contempt for the old order were a vital element in the upsurge. But their very volatility prevented them from playing a consistent role, and their politics was marked by a rejection of the very idea of a revolutionary party. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the most conspicuous of the anarchists,

often seemed to regard 'Bolshevism' in its various manifestations as a greater danger than the Gaullist regime.¹¹⁷ Not only did this make it easy for the PCF to pin the 'anti-communist' label on him, but it disqualified him from the crucial task of trying to build a revolutionary organisation.

The Maoists, some of whom had split from the PCF as it moved towards an ever more parliamentary orientation, also made their specific contribution to the spirit of May. They had taken from the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to industrialise by its own bootstraps a voluntarist approach to politics which contrasted healthily with the jaded 'realism' of the reformists. But they had also inherited a profound ambiguity to the whole tradition of Stalinism. As a result they drew slogans rather haphazardly from the past, veering from 'Third Period' sectarianism to Popular Frontism.¹¹⁸ They contributed a great deal of dedication but little in the way of strategy.

Within the Trotskyist segment of the spectrum there were three main groupings. The most visible were probably the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist Youth). The JCR had originated from a split in the PCF student organisation in 1966; their leadership were closely linked to the PCI, the French section of the Fourth International. The JCR played a key role in the street fighting and mass demonstrations, but tended to accommodate overmuch to the moods and attitudes of the student milieu. Also active were the OCI, often known as 'Lambertists' after their main leader. Their student front, the FER, was subjected to some derision for refusing to join the barricade fighting on 10 May;¹¹⁹ but it was OCI militants who initiated the Sud-Aviation occupation at Nantes.¹²⁰ A third grouping, around the paper **Voix Ouvrière**, had the most systematic approach to workplace organisation, but its ultra-Bolshevik and semi-clandestine style made it somewhat unfitted to mass work.

The achievements of the revolutionary left in May 1968 should not be underestimated. In many cases it was individual revolutionary militants from one tendency or another who successfully pushed for occupations after 13 May, often reaping the benefit of long periods of thankless revolutionary agitation and propaganda.¹²¹ For example, at Renault Billancourt it was members of **Voix Ouvrière** and the FER who succeeded in defeating opposition from the CGT to win support for occupation.¹²²

But the revolutionary left had two grave weaknesses that could not be overcome in the short time at its disposal. Firstly, despite the non-sectarian spirit shown by many (if not all) militants in the day-to-day struggle, it was not possible to overcome the deep divisions within the revolutionary left.¹²³ No one group had the size to

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establish itself as a credible alternative pole of attraction to the reformists.

Secondly, much of the revolutionary left showed a serious tendency towards ultra-leftism. The contempt for reformism among the *groupuscules* was refreshing, but reformism will not disappear simply by being denounced. To break the grip of the PCF and the other reformists, a serious application of the united front strategy would have been necessary, with the revolutionaries proposing joint action against the government to the reformist leaders, hoping thus to win the support of the reformist rank and file. But the divided and strategically uncertain far left was incapable of this.¹²⁴ So the revolutionaries were unable to resist the right-wing backlash when it came.

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The Right regroup

On the afternoon of Thursday 30 May, de Gaulle broadcast to the nation. It was a short message, four and half minutes in duration,¹²⁵ and de Gaulle's continuing weakness was shown by the fact that his speech could not be televised due to strike action at French Television.¹²⁶ But de Gaulle's tone was confident and defiant. The proposed referendum was to be dropped, and parliamentary elections were to be held. De Gaulle threatened that if the PCF ('a party which is a totalitarian enterprise') obstructed the election, 'other means' would be used to preserve the Republic, and he appealed for the immediate organisation of 'civic action'. Behind the cryptic language de Gaulle was threatening the use of armed force (there were reports of troop movements around Paris and tanks were seen in the countryside)¹²⁷ and was calling on his supporters to use extra-parliamentary measures against the left.

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De Gaulle's strategy was shrewd. The PCF and reformists had been able to denounce the referendum as a typical authoritarian device which de Gaulle had used before to reinforce his personal power; but they could not reject parliamentary elections without abandoning wholesale the entire logic of their political strategy. Since that was inconceivable, they were now obliged to play the game on de Gaulle's terms.

The same evening a million people demonstrated through the streets of Paris in support of the government. The extreme right, dormant for the last couple of weeks, now crept out of the woodwork. Car horns sounded the rhythm that meant 'Keep Algeria French' (the theme tune of the far right), and sections of the demonstration chanted 'Cohn-Bendit to Dachau'.¹²⁸ To further ingratiate himself with the extreme right de Gaulle released from jail General Salan and other

leaders of the notorious Secret Army Organisation (OAS), which had run a murderous campaign to keep Algeria French; he also imposed a legal ban on all the main revolutionary *groupuscules*. The PCF and other reformists were so anxious to prove their constitutional credentials that they raised scarcely a cheep of protest.

Meanwhile the Gaullist 'civic action' began to develop. In the course of the election PCF offices and left militants were attacked by Gaullist thugs with iron bars and even guns,¹²⁹ and in Arras a young PCF militant was murdered while flyposting.¹³⁰ Yet the reformists were so concerned with their parliamentary image that they kept on whining that it was leftist violence that was losing them votes; as a result the Gaullists were able to combine thuggery on the streets with the projection of a 'law and order' image.

The strike was now an embarrassment to both the government and the bureaucrats of the labour movement. The government began to use force to break occupations; on the early morning of 31 May armed police repossessed the occupied post office at Rouen.¹³¹ Further attacks on occupations by the CRS riot police followed; on 10 June a student was killed at Flins and on 11 June a young worker at Sochaux.¹³²

At the same time economic concessions were made. Settlements were made separately in different workplaces, but in general there were wage rises of 10 per cent or more, cuts of an hour in the working week, and extensions of trade union rights in the workplace.¹³³ Obviously these were real gains and showed that revolutionary action is the most effective way of winning reforms. Yet certain qualifications must be made. The wage increases were at a level that could easily be borne by the system, or at least by its stronger sections. Some of the bigger employers welcomed the wage increases on the grounds that they would drive small employers out of business and accelerate industrial concentration.¹³⁴ The permanent value of the wage rises was in any case doubtful since the government made it clear that there would be no effective price control.¹³⁵ Citroën simply waited until the elections were safely over and then sacked some 925 employees.¹³⁶

In the light of all this the PCF daily paper was somewhat rash in its claim on 6 June in a banner headline: 'Victorious return to work in unity'.¹³⁷ In fact it was the strategy of the PCF and the CGT which made the return far less victorious than it need have been. The policy of allowing each sector of workers to settle separately broke the unity and solidarity of the movement and ensured that some groups won less than they might have done if the movement had stayed united. There were still enormous reserves of militancy, and some workers stayed out until almost the end of June; but the CGT's policy pushed even the most combative workers into isolation. Bourgeois leaders

CGT & 'the return'

made their usual cries for secret ballots,¹³⁸ but the CGT showed consummate skill in manipulating the votes on the return to work, as the following account shows:

The role of the CGT in these votes was at best confusing and at worst criminal. At Citroën, on the occasion of the first vote, organised by the management by secret ballot outside the factory, the CGT took no action but simply declared 'people are free to vote.' At the second vote, different coloured ballot papers were used, and CGT observers carefully scrutinised how workers voted. At Polymécanique (Pantin) the CGT confused the issue by announcing that the vote was not for or against a return, but for or against the management proposals. At Crédit Lyonnais Paris, there was no supervision of the ballot so one could vote several times. At Thomson-Gennevilliers, before the ballot took place, the CGT distributed a leaflet and sold *L'Humanité*, both declaring that Thomson had returned to work having gained great advantages. To make sure their declarations would be proved correct, they allowed non-strikers to vote. At Sev-Marchal, Issy-les-Moulineaux, not only non-strikers but also foremen and supervisors and even management were allowed to participate in the vote on the return.

In this situation of fragmented return, the role of information was crucial, for obviously the decision whether or not to return was dependent on decisions elsewhere. The bourgeois state and press combined its efforts with the CGT. Teachers first learnt that they were to return to work by a radio announcement. A standard technique of the CGT was to announce in one factory that other factories had decided to return. In Paris transport — underground and buses — the trade union representatives were the only ones who went from one depot to another. To the workers of each depot they said: 'You are against the return to work, but you are on your own. Everybody else wants to return to work.' Thus, while the depot at *rue* Lebrun had voted to carry on the strike, other depots had been told that it had voted for a return. After talking to the union officials, the elected strike committee at Lebrun, hearing that all the other depots were back at work, ordered a return, ignoring the vote already taken. At last, as a result of this method, after four weeks of strike, the transport workers were demoralised enough to vote for a return to work.¹³⁹

The elections held at the end of June were a triumph for de Gaulle's strategy. The Gaullists and their close allies increased their parliamentary representation from 240 to 358 (out of 487); the PCF fell from 73 deputies to 34 and the Left Federation from 118 to 57. The PCF's vote fell by around 600,000 and the Left Federation's by some 570,000. The one bright spot was the fact that the PSU, the only party which had clearly identified with the students and the action commit-

tees, got an extra 379,000 votes, 75 per cent more than its score in the 1967 elections, although it lost all its three deputies. The revolutionary left did not present candidates and in general opposed participation in the elections.¹⁴⁰

At first sight it seems incomprehensible that a social movement as profound as that of May 1968 could be followed so rapidly by a landslide electoral victory for the right. Certainly it is true that various factors mean that the simple figures are deceptive. The result in terms of parliamentary seats grossly overstated the actual trend of voting: there was a Gaullist deputy for every 27,000 Gaullist voters, but 135,000 Communist voters were needed for each PCF deputy.¹⁴¹ The most militant elements in May had been students and young workers, but there were no votes for those under twenty-one. One can only speculate how five million young people between sixteen and twenty-one might have voted if they had had the chance. Two million immigrant workers also had no votes. Communists who tried to give election material to servicemen were arrested, while Gaullist propaganda was circulated inside a naval base.¹⁴²

But while these facts clarify the picture, we are still left with the indisputable reality that the left did very badly in the elections. A major part of the explanation must lie in the fact that the reformist leadership of the workers' movement was still in full retreat by the time of the elections. Many of those who had been frightened by the May events, but who had dared do nothing but keep their heads down while the movement was advancing, now flocked to the polls to vote for law and order. The extreme right-wing tone of de Gaulle's campaign and his gestures to the ex-OAS leaders undoubtedly won him some extreme right-wing votes he had not had in previous elections. Meanwhile some Communist voters abandoned their party in disgust at its opportunist role during the strike. Some turned to the PSU; others simply did not bother to vote. The left also paid for its failure to involve non-working women, many of whom probably swelled the total of right-wing votes.¹⁴³

The most basic lesson of all, however, is that the working class was wrong to take on de Gaulle on the terrain of elections. Workers' unique strength lies in the workplaces, not in the ballot-box. Not only the particular disadvantages listed above, but the whole context of electoral politics necessarily favours the right. The electoral catastrophe was merely the confirmation of a defeat that had in fact taken place in the first days of June as the return to work began.

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The Legacy

May 1968 in France remains a crucial date in the history of the international working class. It is an experience from which a number of simple but vital lessons can be learnt.

Firstly, it showed that even in a highly sophisticated advanced capitalist country the working class has the power and the potential to call the whole system into question.

Secondly, it showed how a mass strike penetrates into every sector of society, and raises demands that go far beyond the confines of trade unionism to make questions of control central to the struggle.

Thirdly, it showed that, in the absence of a revolutionary leadership, reformism can regain control of even the most radical movement and pull it back into the framework of the existing order.

Moreover, May 1968 opened up a period of struggle between reformism and revolutionary politics that is still not completed. It redrew the map of the French left.

The first casualty of the events was the Left Federation which broke up in November 1968. Initially the PCF seemed much more resilient, regaining its lost electorate in the 1969 presidential election; indeed its membership continued to grow until the mid-1970s. But in fact 1968 saw the beginning of a long-term decline for the PCF. After 1968 it could no longer make any claim to be a revolutionary organisation; it had firmly declared itself to be a constitutional and parliamentary party. Yet the more the PCF tried to look like a social democratic party, the more the electors preferred the real social democrats — better a real sheep than a wolf in sheep's clothing. François Mitterrand's newly regrouped Socialist Party remorselessly outflanked and overtook the PCF during the 1970s. Mitterrand's record of openness to the left in 1968 clearly stood him in good stead with the younger generation of activists and voters.

When Mitterrand was elected president in 1981 many observers compared the scenes of public celebration to the events of 1968. But if Mitterrand had co-opted many of the militants of 1968, he had also picked up some of their enemies. His first government contained as industry minister Pierre Dreyfus, who had been managing director of Renault during the 1968 strike, and a senior position in the ministry of the interior went to Maurice Grimaud, head of the Paris police during 1968.

The revolutionary left derived a major impetus from May 1968. Ideas which had previously been the property of tiny groups now gained a wider credibility and influence. The modest but significant scores since obtained by revolutionary electoral candidates