

Part 1: A revolutionary situation develops

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Peter Schwarz
27 May 2008

[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#) | [Part 6](#) | [Part 7](#) | [Part 8](#)

There is barely another historical event that has commanded so much public attention as the 40th anniversary of the uprisings of 1968. In recent weeks, hundreds of articles, interviews, documentaries and television films have been published on the student protests and labour disputes that took place in that year—with certainly more coverage in Germany than for any other comparable anniversary.

How is this interest in the events of 1968 to be explained?

The answer has less to do with the past than with the present and the future. The year 1968 was characterised not merely by “student revolts,” which shook the US, Germany and France as well as Italy, Japan, Mexico and many other countries. It was the prelude to the biggest offensive by the international working class since the end of the Second World War. This offensive lasted seven years, assumed on a number of occasions revolutionary forms, forced the resignation of governments, brought down dictatorships and rocked the system of bourgeois rule to its foundations.

This was most apparent in France when in May 1968 10 million workers took part in a general strike, occupied factories and brought the government of General Charles de Gaulle to its knees. In 1969 the so-called September strikes took place in Germany, and Italy underwent a “hot autumn” of industrial confrontations. The US saw mass antiwar demonstrations by the civil rights movement and rebellions in inner-city ghettos. In Poland and Czechoslovakia—the Prague Spring—workers revolted against the Stalinist dictatorship. In the 1970s, right-wing dictatorships were toppled in Greece, Spain and Portugal. During the same period, the US army suffered a humiliating defeat in Vietnam.

The background to these events was the first profound crisis of the capitalist economy since the Second World War. In 1966 a recession shook the world economy. In 1971 the US government severed the link between gold and the dollar and in so doing stripped away the foundation of the world monetary system set up in Bretton Woods in 1944, which had formed the framework for the postwar boom. In 1973 the world economy sank even further into recession.

The wave of international protests, strikes and rebellions left their mark. In a series of countries, wages and working conditions improved—often to a considerable extent. The ’68 movement also left traces in the spheres of culture and broader social life. It swept away the cloying and claustrophobic atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, bringing considerable improvements in the rights of women and minorities. Universities were expanded and opened up to broader layers of society. But capitalist rule and property relations remained intact. The bourgeoisie was forced to make political and social concessions, but it was able to hold on to power.

At the end of the 1970s the counteroffensive began. Margaret Thatcher came to power in Great Britain, Ronald Reagan in the US and Helmut Kohl in Germany. Social concessions were reversed and attacks on the

working class intensified.

Today storm clouds are on the horizon again, and social divisions are more profound than ever. Millions are unemployed or work in precarious jobs. In Eastern Europe and Asia an enormous army of workers is being exploited for rock-bottom wages. The recent financial crisis demonstrates that a collapse of the international banking system is increasingly probable. Tensions between the great powers are increasing and imperialist wars—such as that in Iraq—are once again on the agenda. The inevitable result will be new conflicts and class struggles.

This is the principal reason for the current interest in the events of 1968. They could repeat themselves in another form. As the ruling class tries to prepare itself, workers and young people must also prepare by drawing the lessons from the experiences of 1968.

This series of articles concentrates on the events in France. Here, class conflicts erupted to the surface with explosive power in May and thoroughly disproved the thesis of the New Left that the working class had been successfully integrated into capitalism via consumption and the domination of the media. What appeared in January to be a relatively harmless dispute between students and the government turned, within the space of a few weeks, into a revolutionary situation. The country was paralysed, the government powerless, and the trade unions had lost control of the situation. At the end of May the working class was not only in a position to force the resignation of the government led by President de Gaulle, but also to overthrow the capitalist system and establish its own power. This would have fundamentally changed the course of political events throughout Europe—both east and west.

Such a development was prevented by the French Communist Party (PCF) and its trade union ally, the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), which strictly refused to take power and used all of its influence to strangle the mass movement. The Communist Party received additional backing from the Pabloite United Secretariat led by Ernest Mandel and its French branches—the Parti communiste internationaliste (PCI) led by Pierre Frank and the Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire (JCR) led by Alain Krivine. For 15 years the Pabloites had systematically attacked the Marxist traditions of the Trotskyist movement. Now they disorientated and misdirected students seeking an alternative to Stalinism by putting forward Che Guevara and anarchistic-type activism as role models.

The first part of this series deals with the development of the student revolt and the general strike up to their high point at the end of May. The second part examines the way in which the Communist Party and the CGT helped General de Gaulle regain control of the situation. The third part will deal with the role of the Pabloites and the fourth with the Organisation communiste internationaliste (OCI) led by Pierre Lambert. The OCI, still the official French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International at the time, adopted a centrist position in 1968

and soon after ended up trailing behind the Socialist Party.

France before 1968

France in the 1960s is characterised by a profound contradiction. The political regime is authoritarian and deeply reactionary. Its personification is General de Gaulle, who appears to come from a different era and who models the Fifth Republic entirely on his person. De Gaulle is 68 years-old when on his election as president in 1958, and 78 when he resigns in 1969. However, under the ossified regime of the old general, a rapid economic modernisation is taking place, fundamentally altering the social composition of French society.

At the end of the Second World War, large parts of France are based on agriculture, with 37 percent of the population still making a living from the land. In the subsequent 20 years, two-thirds of French farmers leave the land and move into the cities, where they—together with immigrant workers—add to the ranks of the working class a young and militant social layer, difficult for the trade union bureaucracy to control.

After the end of the Algerian War in 1962, the French economy grows rapidly. The loss of its colonies forces the French bourgeoisie to orient its economy more strongly towards Europe. In 1957 France had already signed the Rome Treaty, the founding document of the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the European Union. The economic integration of Europe favours the construction of new branches of industry, which more than compensate for the decline of the coal mines and other old industries. In the areas of automobiles, aircraft, aerospace, arms and nuclear power, new companies and new factories open up with the support of the government. They are often situated outside of the old industrial centres and are among the strongholds of the general strike in 1968.

The city of Caen in Normandy is typical in this regard. The number of inhabitants increases between 1954 and 1968 from 90,000 to 150,000, of which half are under the age of 30. Saviem, an offshoot of the carmaker Renault, employs around 3,000 workers. They are on strike in January, four months before the general strike, temporarily occupying the factory and engaging in fierce fighting with the police.

A radicalization is also noticeable within the trade unions. The old, Catholic union, the CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens), breaks apart, and the majority of members reorganizes on a secular basis in the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), which acknowledges the “class struggle” and at the start of 1966 agrees to a unity of action with the CGT.

The establishment of new industries brings with it a feverish expansion of the education sector. New engineers, technicians and skilled workers are urgently required. Between 1962 and 1968 alone, the number of students doubles. The universities are overcrowded, poorly equipped and—like the factories—controlled by a patriarchal management with antiquated attitudes.

The opposition to the poor educational conditions and the authoritarian university regime—among other things, the prohibition of members from student residence halls visiting student accommodation of the opposite sex—is an important factor in the radicalization of students, who soon combine such issues with political questions. In May 1966 the first demonstration against the Vietnam War takes place. One year later, on 2 June 1967, student Benno Ohnesorg is shot dead by police in Berlin, and the German student protests find an echo in France.

In the same year the effects of the worldwide recession are being felt and have a radicalizing impact on workers. For years, living standards and working conditions had fallen behind the pace of economic development.

Wages are low, working hours long, and inside the factories workers have no rights. Now unemployment and the workload are increasing. The mining, steel, textile and construction industries stagnate.

The leadership of the unions arranges protests from above in order not to lose control. But local protests from below build up and are brutally suppressed by the police. In February 1967 workers at the textile manufacturer Rhodiacéta in the city of Besançon are the first to occupy their factory, protesting against job cuts and demanding better working conditions.

Farmers also demonstrate against falling incomes. In 1967 in the west of France, several demonstrations by farmers develop into street battles. According to a police report at the time, the farmers are “numerous, aggressive, organized and armed with various projectiles: bolts, cobblestones, metal splinters, bottles and pebbles.”

At the beginning of 1968, France appears relatively quiet on the surface, but underneath social tensions are fermenting. The entire country resembles a powder keg. All that is needed to cause an explosion is a random spark. This spark is provided by the student protests.

Students revolt and general strike

The University of Nanterre is among the colleges constructed in the 1960s. Built on land previously belonging to the armed forces, just five kilometers outside of Paris, it is opened in 1964. It is surrounded by poverty-stricken neighborhoods, so-called “bidonvilles,” and factories. On January 8, 1968, protesting students clash with Youth Minister François Missoffe, who is in the region to open a new swimming pool.

Although the incident itself is relatively insignificant, the disciplinary measures instigated against the students, as well as the repeated interventions by police, escalate the conflict and make Nanterre the starting point of a movement that quickly spreads to universities and high schools throughout the country. At its center are demands for better learning conditions, free access to university, more personal and political freedoms, the release of arrested students, as well as opposition to the US war against Vietnam, where at the end of January the Tet Offensive begins.

In some cities, such as Caen and Bordeaux, workers, students and high school pupils jointly take to the streets. On April 12, a solidarity demonstration takes place in Paris in support of the German student Rudi Dutschke, who has been gunned down on the street in Berlin by an enraged right-winger.

On March 22, 142 students occupy the administration building at the University of Nanterre. The administration reacts by closing the university completely for an entire month. The conflict then shifts to the Sorbonne, the oldest university in France, located in the Latin Quarter in Paris. On May 3, representatives from various student organizations meet to discuss how the campaign should proceed. Meanwhile, extreme right-wing groups are demonstrating outside. The university dean calls the police who proceed to clear the campus. A huge, spontaneous demonstration erupts. The police react with extreme brutality, and students respond by erecting barricades. By the end of the night, around a hundred are left injured and hundreds more arrested. On the day after the arrests, a court hands out harsh sentences to 13 students based exclusively on the testimony of police officers.

The government and media strive to portray the street battles in the Latin Quarter as the work of radical groups and troublemakers. The Communist Party also joins the chorus against the students. Its number two figure, Georges Marchais, who later becomes the party’s general secretary, fires a broadside against the student “pseudo-revolutionaries”

on the front page of the party's newspaper *l'Humanité*. He accuses them of abetting the "fascist provocateurs." Marchais is above all unsettled by the fact that the students "distribute leaflets and other propaganda material in increasing numbers at factory gates and in the districts of immigrant workers." He bellows: "These false revolutionaries must be exposed, for they are objectively serving the interests of the Gaullist regime and the big capitalist monopolies."

Such baiting has no effect, however. The country is shocked by the brutal actions of the police, which are broadcast by radio stations. Events now take on a momentum of their own. The demonstrations in Paris become bigger and bigger with each passing day, and spread to other cities. They are directed against police repression and demand the release of those the students arrested. High school pupils also participate in the strike. On May 8 a first one-day general strike takes place in western France.

From May 10-11 the Latin Quarter is engulfed by the "Night of the Barricades." Tens of thousands barricade themselves in the university district, which is then stormed by police at two o'clock in the morning using tear gas. Hundreds are injured.

The following day, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, who has just returned from a state visit to Iran, announces the reopening of the Sorbonne University and the release of students in custody. However, his actions can no longer control the situation. The unions, including the Communist Party-dominated CGT, call a general strike for May 13 against police repression. The unions fear losing control over the militant workers if they act otherwise.

The strike call meets with a huge response. Numerous cities experience the biggest mass demonstrations since the Second World War. In Paris alone 800,000 take to the streets. Political demands come to the forefront. Many demand the toppling of the government. During the evening, the Sorbonne and other universities are re-occupied by the students.

The plan of the trade unions to limit the general strike to one day fails to materialize. On the following day, May 14, workers occupy the Sud-Aviation factory in Nantes. The plant remains under control of the workers for one month, with red flags flying over the administration building. The regional director, Duvochel, is held captive by the occupiers for 16 days. The general manager of Sud-Aviation at this time is Maurice Papon, a Nazi collaborator, war criminal and head of the Paris police in 1961, when he was responsible for the killing of demonstrators protesting against the Algeria war.

Workers at other factories follow the example at Sud-Aviation, and a wave of occupations spreads across the country from May 15 through May 20. Everywhere red flags are hoisted, and in many factories the management is held captive. The actions affect hundreds of factories and offices including the country's biggest factory, the main Renault plant in Billancourt, which had played a central role in the strike wave of 1947.

Initially the workers raise immediate demands, which differ from place to place: fairer remuneration pay, a shortening of working times, no dismissals, more rights for workers in the factory. Workers' and action committees spring up in the occupied factories and surrounding areas drawing in local residents, students and pupils alongside the striking workers and technical and administrative staff. The committees take responsibility for the organization of the strikes and develop into forums of intensive political debate. The same is true for the universities, which are to a large extent occupied by students.

On May 20 the whole country is at a standstill—hit by a general strike, although neither the trade unions nor any other organizations have issued a call for such a strike. Factories, offices, universities and schools are occupied, production and the transport system paralyzed. Artists, journalists and even soccer players join the movement. Ten million of France's 15 million-strong workforce are involved in the action. Later studies have revised this figure down somewhat to 7-9 million, but it still

remains the most massive general strike in French history. "Only" 3 million workers had taken part in the general strike in 1936, while 2.5 million workers participated in the general strike of 1947.

The strike wave reaches its peak between May 22 and 30, but lasts long into July. More than 4 million workers remain on strike for longer than three weeks and 2 million longer than four weeks. According to the French Labor Ministry, a total of 150 million working days are lost in 1968 because of strikes. In comparison the strike by miners in Great Britain in 1974, which brought down the Conservative government led by Edward Heath, resulted in a total of 14 million lost working days.

By May 20 the government has largely lost control of the country. The demand for the resignation of de Gaulle and his government—"ten years are enough"—is pervasive. On May 24, de Gaulle attempts to regain control over the situation with a televised speech to the nation. He promises a referendum giving students and workers more rights in universities and companies. But his appearance only demonstrates his impotence. His speech has no impact whatsoever.

In the first three weeks of May, a revolutionary situation has developed in France that has few precedents in history. With a determined leadership, the movement could have sealed the political fate of de Gaulle and his Fifth Republic. The security forces still stood behind the regime, but they would hardly have withstood a systematic political offensive. The sheer size of the movement would have had a corrosive impact on their ranks.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact