Part 5: The centrist line of the OCI (I)

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Peter Schwarz
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The Organization Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) officially broke with the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1971, but the political course it pursued in 1968 was already far removed from the revolutionary perspective it had defended, along with other ICFI sections, against Pabloite revisionism at the beginning of the 1950s.

The program advanced by the OCI in 1968 had much more in common with the traditions of centrism and French syndicalism than with the revolutionary program of the Fourth International. Together with the French supporters of the Pabloite United Secretariat, the Revolutionary Communist Youth (Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire—JCR) led by Alain Krivine and the International Communist Party (Parti Communiste Internationaliste—PCI) headed by Pierre Frank, the OCI bears a large degree of responsibility for the fact that the Stalinist leadership of the Communist Party of France (PCF) and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) was able to suffocate the May general strike and save the Gaullist regime.

The main axis of the political line of the OCI was the demand for a central strike committee. This was accompanied by an all pervasive call for "unity," or, according to the formula favoured by the OCI, the "united class front of workers and their organizations." In the crucial months of 1968, these were the main slogans to be found in all the statements and political appeals produced by the OCI and its associated organizations.

The OCI summed up its general orientation at that time in a 300-page book published one year after the general strike. The OCI concluded: "The strategy and tactics of the proletariat in the struggle for power ... consisted in the struggle for the united class front of workers and their organizations, a struggle which in May 1968 took the specific form of the slogan for a national general strike committee."

The author of this book, which was published as a special issue of the OCI newspaper *Information Ouvrières*, is François de Massot, a prominent member of the organization since 1950. De Massot gives a detailed description of daily developments and the book provides detailed material on the intervention of the OCI, including the reproduction of political appeals and leaflets. The book makes it possible to accurately chart the OCI's political line. [1]

The "united class front"

Leon Trotsky, who had founded the Fourth International in a protracted political struggle against centrism, summed up his attitude to the united front demand with the words: "The centrist swears by the policy of the united front as he empties it of its revolutionary content and transforms it from a tactical method into a highest principle." In 1932, he wrote of the centrist German Socialist Workers Party (SAP): "In any case, the policy of the united front cannot serve as a program for a revolutionary party. And in the meantime, the entire activity of the SAP is now being built on it." [2]

This reproach applies equally to the activity of the OCI in 1968. It transformed the policy of the united front from a tactical method into its primary programmatic principle. In the name of the united front, by which it understood the unity of all trade unions, it evaded any form of genuinely revolutionary initiative.

This was the significance of the strange formula for the "united class front of workers and their organizations," which ritually appeared in all of its appeals and statements. While the OCI quite correctly accused the Pabloites and petty-bourgeois student leaders of ignoring existing mass organizations, it adopted a fetishistic attitude toward those very organisations and insisted that they constituted the sole framework for any struggle undertaken by the workers.

Already in the summer of 1967, a large meeting organized by the OCI had adopted a resolution which stated: "We solemnly declare that it is not our intention, in the place of the workers' organizations and their headquarters, to realise action in unity—a task which is naturally incumbent on the trade unions."

De Massot quotes this resolution in his book and goes on to justify it with the argument that irrespective of the policy of their leadership, the unions embody the interests of the working class. He writes: "The workers become a class through the organizations which they have developed in the struggle against exploitation and which serve as the means of uniting them against the class enemy. Due to their objective position in the struggle—*i.e., independently of the policy of their leadership at any given time*—these organizations embody positions of the working class in its constant struggle against exploitation. The united workers' front can be realised only by means of the class organizations of the proletariat" (emphasis added).

Proceeding from this assessment, the OCI refrained in 1968 from criticizing the bourgeois-reformist program of the trade unions. The only reproach they raised against the union leaderships was that they impeded the unity of workers. The OCI's own political initiatives were limited to calling for cooperation at all levels between the different unions. This was the basic substance of their demand for a central strike committee, as we shall later see.

In its widely distributed leaflets and appeals, the OCI also abstained from any open criticism of the Stalinist and social democratic parties. While the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and social democracy was dealt with in theoretical articles and analyses intended for a small

circle of readers, in its leaflets directed at the masses the OCI simply appealed to the reformist and Stalinist union leaders to unite.

The OCI's interpretation of the united front had nothing in common with the tactic developed by the Marxist movement. In 1922, Leon Trotsky explained the necessity of the united front, speaking of "the urgent need to guarantee to the working class the possibility of a united front in its struggle against capitalism, notwithstanding the inevitable split, in a given period, between the political organizations which lean upon the working class." [3]

One year previously, the Third Congress of the Communist International had insisted that the German Communist Party (KPD) take up the policy of the united front. The Comintern drew the lessons from the so-called "March Movement," an uprising by the KPD that remained isolated and collapsed. It concluded from this defeat that the KPD must first "conquer" the allegiance of the masses before it could conquer power. It combined the policy of the united front directly with the demand for a workers' government, intervention in the reformist trade unions and a number of transitional demands, because, as Trotsky argued, "the mass continues to live its daily life in a revolutionary epoch, even if in a somewhat different manner." [4]

Ten years later, Trotsky once again called for the adoption of the united front tactic in Germany. Now the issue was preventing Hitler from taking power. Trotsky urged the Communists and Social Democrats to form a united front against the looming threat of National Socialism (Nazism). The leaders of both parties adamantly rejected such a course. The refusal by the Stalinist KPD leaders to cooperate with what they termed the "social fascists" of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) divided and paralysed the working class, making Hitler's victory possible.

In both cases—the early 1920s and the early 1930s—the united front was advanced as a tactic and not a substitute for a revolutionary strategy. It was limited to cooperation on practical issues and did not mean that the KPD would obscure its own program or refrain from criticism of the SPD.

Trotsky never gave himself over to the illusion that the social democratic leaders could be transformed into revolutionaries on the basis of a united front. Rather, the united front was aimed at breaking the masses from the influence of the social democratic leaders.

To the extent that the communists demonstrated to the social democratic workers that they were willing, without any conditions attached, to defend their daily interests and form a block with the SPD against the fascists, this could only serve to weaken the SPD leadership, which preferred to collaborate with the bourgeois state. The SPD members could then, based on their own experience, judge the value of their organization and its leadership.

Under no circumstances did the united front mean the renunciation of an independent revolutionary policy. Trotsky stressed in 1932: "In the event that the reformists begin applying the brake to the struggle, to the evident detriment of the movement and in counter-position to the situation and the state of mind of the masses, we, as an independent organization, always reserve the right to lead the struggle to its conclusion without our temporary semi-allies**.**"[5]

Syndicalism instead of Marxism

The OCI transformed the united front policy from a revolutionary tactic into an opportunist justification for its own subordination to the trade unions. It insisted that the struggle conducted by workers and students had to be limited to the frameworks of these organizations, and refrained from any political initiatives which could have intensified the conflict between the workers and the trade union apparatuses.

In fact, only a minority of workers were organized in the unions. At that time, just under 30 percent of the workforce was unionised. (Today this figure is down to 7 percent.) Two thirds of all workers and the overwhelming majority of youth were not organised and were quite rightly distrustful of the unions. The OCI was unable to offer a perspective for these layers outside of directing them to the unions.

Students were directed toward the student federation UNEF, which at that time was dominated by the social democratic United Socialist Party (Parti socialiste unifié—PSU), led by Michel Rocard. De Massot writes: "For organizing resistance the students had *a trade union*, the Union National des Étudiants de France.... With the beginning of the real struggle, the UNEF recovers its full significance despite the hesitation and weaknesses of its leadership. With its responsible intervention in its role as a student trade union organisation, it makes the struggle against repression an issue for the masses of students and confronts the worker organizations with their own responsibility. It is the means for the mobilization of students and simultaneously makes possible a genuine struggle for the united front" (emphasis in the original).

In an attack directed against the Pabloites, de Massot writes: "Whoever rejects the struggle for the united front of workers and their organizations in favour of a so-called united front from below which simply ignores the organizations established by the working class over one-and-a-half centuries of struggle and sacrifice—the organizations by which it constituted itself as a class, conscious of itself and its struggle against capital, and in the ranks of which it necessarily comes together in order to lead this struggle—whoever confuses the mass organizations with their bureaucratic leadership, whoever screams 'CGT betrayal' and simply sweeps, with a brush of the hand, the trade unions and political parties from the map of the class struggle, retreats from the struggle against the bureaucracies and the capitalist state."

This glorification of the trade unions as organizations in which the working class "constituted itself as a class, conscious of itself and its struggle against capital" has nothing to do with the tradition of Marxism, but comes rather from the tradition of syndicalism, which has a long and notorious history in France. The Marxist movement has always maintained a critical stance to the trade unions. Already at the start of the twentieth century, Lenin stressed that trade union consciousness was bourgeois consciousness, and that in periods of extreme social tension (such as 1914 to 1918 in Germany) the unions invariably stood at the outermost right wing of the workers' movement. [6]

The French syndicalists insisted on the principle of non-interference of political parties in trade union work. In 1906, the CGT embodied the principle of the complete independence of the trade unions from all political parties in its Charter of Amiens. As long as this independence was directed against the increasing conservatism and parliamentary cretinism of social democracy, French syndicalism possessed a certain degree of revolutionary vitality. Although it denied the role of the party, it "was essentially nothing but an anti-parliamentary party of the working class," as Trotsky once noted. [7]

However, this was no longer the case when the principle of the political independence of the trade unions was directed against the influence of the revolutionary party. In 1921, Trotsky, then a leading member of the Communist International, wrote: "The theory that there is a complete and unconditional division of labour between the party and the trade unions and that they must practice mutual and absolute non-intervention is precisely a product of French political development. It is the most extreme expression of it. This theory is based on unadulterated opportunism.

"So long as the labour bureaucracy, organized in the trade unions, concludes wage agreements, while the Socialist Party defends reforms in parliament, the division of labour and mutual non-intervention remain more or less possible. But no sooner are the real proletarian masses drawn into the struggle and no sooner does the movement assume a genuinely

revolutionary character then the principle of non-intervention degenerates into reactionary scholasticism.

"The working class can gain victory only if there stands at its head an organization which represents its living historical experience, and is capable of generalizing theoretically and directing the entire struggle in practice. On account of the very meaning of its historic task, the party can include only the most conscious and active minority of the working class. The trade unions, on the other hand, seek to embrace the working class as a whole. Those who recognize that the proletariat urgently needs the ideological and political leadership of its vanguard, united in the Communist Party, thereby recognize that the party must become the leading force inside the trade unions as well, that is, inside the mass working class organizations." [8]

This tradition of syndicalism had exercised considerable influence within the OCI for a long time. If one believes Pierre Lambert, the relationship of his organization to the unions had been based on syndicalist rather than Marxist principles for a considerable time.

In an autobiographical work written towards the end of his life, Lambert boasted that he restored the Charter of Amiens in his own organisation in 1947. Based on his experiences in illegal trade union work during the war and within the Stalinist dominated CGT, he proposed an amendment during the congress of the Trotskyist organization in France "which was unanimously accepted and replaced points 9 and 10 of the 21 conditions by the acknowledgment of the mutual independence of parties and trade unions." [9]

The "21 conditions" refers to the conditions for membership laid down by the Second World Congress of the Communist International in 1920, which were designed to exclude reformist and centrist organizations. Point 9 obliged member parties to "systematically and persistently develop communist activities within the trades unions" and to "expose everywhere the treachery of the social patriots and the vacillations of the 'centrists'." Point 10 required a break with "the Amsterdam 'International' of yellow trade union organisations" and the support of trade unions which adhered to the Communist International.

The replacement of these two points by "the acknowledgment of the mutual independence of parties and trade unions" meant abandoning the political struggle against the reformist and Stalinist trade union bureaucracy.

Political hide and seek

While the OCI uncritically glorified the trade unions, it carried out a game of political hide and seek regarding its own identity, which it largely kept secret. It only rarely spoke out in its own name, preferring to hide behind front organizations such as the *Comités d'alliance ouvrière* (Workers' alliance committees), whose precise political identity remained in the dark. Even de Massot only rarely refers to the OCI by its own name. Usually he writes of the "revolutionary avant-garde," leaving open whether he is referring to the OCI, one of its front organizations, or simply a group of active trade unionists.

As the conflict with the Gaullist regime approached its high point on May 29 and the reactionary role of the trade unions became highly visible, a widely distributed leaflet produced by the *Comités d'alliance ouvrière* did not call for the construction of the OCI or the Fourth International, but rather for the creation of a fictitious "Revolutionary Workers League."

This "Revolutionary Workers League" was a pipe dream. Nobody had heard of it before. It had neither members, nor a program, nor a constitution. It did not exist as a physical entity. The only mention of this organisation comes at the end of a 40-page manifesto drawn up by the OCI in December 1967.

There, the "Revolutionary Workers League" is described as "a stage on the way to the building of the revolutionary party." According to this manifesto, the perspective of the "Revolutionary Workers League" arises from the assumption that only the program of the OCI "can provide an answer to the historical crisis of mankind, but that the organizational cadres of the French working class are not ready to immediately join it." [10]

This kind of political camouflage reoccurs with regularity throughout the entire history of the OCI and its successor organizations. It recalls a Matryoshka doll. Just as one Russian doll hides inside another, so the OCI seeks to conceal its identity behind a succession of front or camouflage organizations. The political observer never really knows with whom who he or she is dealing.

This game of political hide and seek is a specific form of opportunism. The OCI shrank from the basic revolutionary principle, "Tell the truth!" and refused to show workers its true face. While invoking the Fourth International in small circles, it presented a watered down program to the masses, assuming that this was all they were ready to accept.

There may, of course, be circumstances when a revolutionary party refrains from openly presenting its entire program—e.g., under a dictatorial regime or within a reactionary trade union. But for the OCI, the task was not to deceive the state apparatus or the trade union bureaucracy, which were both well aware of the party's identity. The OCI deceived those workers and young people who had entered political life intent on finding a new orientation.

In particular, the OCI was keen to avoid any embarrassment for the lower ranks of the trade union bureaucracy whose support it intensively sought. By hiding its own identity, it created conditions whereby these functionaries could enter into a relationship with the OCI without risking an open conflict with the anti-Trotskyist upper echelons of the bureaucracy.

The OCI described these lower-rank trade union functionaries as "organizational cadres of the working class" or "natural organizers of the class"—two terms which show up repeatedly in its writings. The OCI was quite clear that this layer was of crucial importance for the union apparatus as a whole in maintaining control over the membership. Nevertheless, it argued that the conflict between the upper and the lower levels of the bureaucracy—between "apparatus" and "cadres"—would impel the latter in a revolutionary direction.

A statement produced by the party at the beginning of 1968 in *la vérité* explains that the "cadres" are "both the mediators, by means of whom the apparatus—and above all the Stalinist apparatus—secures its control of the class, and the militant layer which enables the proletariat to develop and organize as a class." In the same statement, these "organizational cadres" are numbered at between "10,000 and 15,000 activists," who "to a large extent are controlled and organized by the Communist Party." [11]

The OCI saw its own task as "pushing to maturity and rupture the objective contradiction that brings the pro-bourgeois orientation of the apparatus into conflict with these activists and organizational cadres, who are compelled by necessity to offer resistance and to fight alongside their class."

The above-quoted passages are linked to fierce attacks on Pabloism. But, in reality, the attitude adopted by the OCI to the unions and the Stalinists in 1968 was virtually identical to that of the Pabloites in 1953.

Pablo had concluded at that time that a new revolutionary offensive would not develop in the form of an independent movement of the working class under the banner of the Fourth International, but would rather take the form of a shift to the left by sections of the Stalinist apparatus under the pressure of objective events. In similar fashion, the

OCI anticipated a revolutionary development emerging from the “internal differentiation inside the organizations and the maturation of the present contradiction between the apparatus and the organizational cadres of the class.” [12]

Even though there existed profound divisions and tensions within the trade unions and the Communist Party in 1968, a revolutionary movement could have developed only in an open struggle against and in a political break with Stalinism. But the OCI avoided this task by elevating the united front tactic to a strategy and by hiding its own identity.

There are even many passages in de Massot’s book indicating that the Stalinists themselves could turn in a revolutionary direction. The author praises, for example, an appeal made by the Stalinist youth organization on May 13 because it did not attack the “radical left,” called for the unity of college students, high school students and young workers, and advocated a workers’ government. De Massot comments: “The apparatus not only sees itself forced to follow the movement. In order to maintain control and regain the initiative in the working class, it must also, in a certain form and within certain limits, precede it: take over the leadership... By proceeding in such a way, the apparatus assembles the activists around itself, and these then radicalise the working class as a whole.” [13]

To be continued

Notes:

1. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968),” Supplément au numéro 437 d’ “Informations Ouvrières.” All quotes in the above article, if not indicated otherwise, are from this book.
2. Leon Trotsky, “Two Articles On Centrism” (February/March 1934), Leon Trotsky, “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” (January 1932).
3. Leon Trotsky, “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” (January 1932).
4. Leon Trotsky, “The Third International After Lenin”.
5. Leon Trotsky, “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat” (January 1932).
6. On the attitude of the Marxist movement to the trade unions see: David North, “Marxism and the Trade Unions”.
7. Leon Trotsky, “A School of Revolutionary Strategy”.
8. Leon Trotsky, “A School of Revolutionary Strategy”.
9. Daniel Gluckstein, Pierre Lambert, “Itinéraires,” Éditions du Rocher 2002, p. 51
10. *La vérité*, no. 541, avril-mai 1968
11. “Le bonapartisme gaulliste et les tâches de l’avant-garde,” *la vérité* No. 540, février-mars 1968, pp. 13-14
12. “Le bonapartisme gaulliste et les tâches de l’avant-garde,” *la vérité* No. 540, février-mars 1968, p. 15
13. François de Massot, « La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968),” p. 58