

Fifty years after May-June 1968, the class struggle erupts in France

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A half century after the French general strike of May-June 1968, the class struggle in France is entering a new and explosive stage. A confrontation with revolutionary implications is emerging between the working class and the French government, backed by the entire European Union (EU).

Last week's strike against President Emmanuel Macron's decree privatizing the French National Railways (SNCF) shut down much of France's mass transit. Air France workers demanding pay increases and electricity and garbage workers demanding recognition as a public service have joined striking rail workers. Students are occupying universities to protest new selection rules limiting access to a university education.

These developments come amidst a broad international upsurge of the class struggle. This year has already seen major strikes by metal and auto workers in Germany, Turkey, and Eastern Europe; railway workers in Britain; and broad layers of teachers in Britain and the United States.

These struggles take place under the shadow of the 50th anniversary of the French general strike of May-June 1968, the largest strike in European history. This mass mobilization of the working class shook French capitalism and the regime of General Charles de Gaulle to the core. Mass anger triggered by repression of student protests erupted into a strike of over 10 million workers, and red flags flew over factories across France.

Two factors saved de Gaulle. The first was the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), then the leading party in the working class. It organized a return to work in exchange for wage increases, demoralizing workers by its betrayal of the revolutionary situation and allowing the Gaullists to win the 1969 elections. The second factor was that the strike erupted at the height of the 1945-1975 post-war boom. The bourgeoisie had resources to make

concessions, buy time and prepare its response. It went on to decimate French manufacturing industries and implement policies of mass unemployment and austerity.

There will be no reformist outcome to the class struggle today. The crisis of world capitalism is far deeper than 50 years ago. The quarter century since the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the foundation of the EU in 1992 has seen deepening social inequality and an escalating imperialist war drive across the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia.

Macron will not retreat. The French ruling class is drastically restructuring class relations to join in the imperialist scramble to re-divide the world. As the major European powers all rearm, Macron has pledged to spend €300 billion on a military build-up by 2024, restore the draft, and hand billions of euros in tax cuts to the rich. He plans to slash state spending and basic social services—including pensions, public health care, and unemployment insurance—to finance the military machine.

Workers can only oppose the moves to turn France into a militarized police state by a revolutionary struggle to bring down the Macron government and mobilize the working class in France and across Europe in a struggle for state power. This struggle sharply poses the need to build a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Since 1968, the working class has had vast experiences with the organizations that falsely claimed to speak for socialism. The PCF was destroyed by its role in 1968 and its support for the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The Socialist Party (PS), founded in 1969, proved itself to be a reactionary bourgeois party of austerity and war, from which Macron himself emerged.

As for the petty bourgeois descendants of various renegades from Trotskyism, which played a key role in setting up the PS—*Lutte ouvrière*, the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), and the *lambertiste* Independent Democratic Workers Party—they speak for

privileged layers of the upper-middle class.

Workers are increasingly aware of their hostility to these groups. Protesters threw *ex-lambertiste* and ex-PS senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon out of one recent demonstration, shouting, “Leave, Mélenchon”, “Out with the PS”, “Hey you senator, you did all the dirty deals” and “Neither God, nor master, nor Mélenchon.”

To contain the class struggle, the NPA is proposing an alliance stretching from the PS and the unions to the pseudo-left: “The path that is open can be extended to weave a united front bringing together unions, parties and associations of the social movement around common demands, a front with a long-term perspective for a broad convergence, for a general strike to make Macron retreat.”

This is cynical double-talk. Workers are not moving in the direction of a general strike to make a reactionary politician “retreat,” but to force him out. The NPA, moreover, is promoting a broad alliance of parties and unions that have helped implement the austerity policies Macron is now aiming at the workers. If one translated the NPA’s statement into plain English, it would say: “We are betraying you.”

The NPA and its allies play a carefully rehearsed role, to wear down opposition to militarism and austerity and allow Macron’s policies to pass. The unions are calling rotating transit strikes two days a week, until June. These will inconvenience and irritate the public, while leaving Macron in power and allowing him to wait for the end of the strike to announce the promulgation of his decree privatizing the SNCF, which he was negotiating with the unions only last month.

There is nothing for workers to negotiate with Macron. His policy is illegitimate and anti-democratic. In 2016, the unions negotiated the PS labour law that provides the basic framework for Macron’s decree and allows the unions and employers together to suspend the protections of the Labour Code and attack wages and conditions. The law was passed without a vote in parliament, using emergency powers, despite 70 percent popular opposition.

President François Hollande’s PS government violently repressed mass protests against the labour law during the state of emergency. This state of emergency was itself a political fraud, imposed in response to attacks carried out by Islamist networks that were in fact working under the protection of the intelligence services, as they helped wage NATO’s proxy war in Syria.

Macron was elected by default last year. Faced with the choice between the ex-banker and the unpopular neo-

fascist candidate Marine Le Pen less than half of voters participated in the legislative elections that gave Macron’s party a majority. Nonetheless, the parliament voted an enabling act adding vast powers to the PS labour law, allowing Macron to slash working conditions by decree. Under this legislation, the unions have already approved contracts facilitating job cuts in auto and sub-minimum wages in the chemical industry.

The revolutionary struggles developing against Macron will inevitably bring workers into conflict with the parties of what has passed for the post-1968 “left.” This underscores the significance of the foundation in 2016 of the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). It re-established the presence of Trotskyism in France, fighting for the revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the pseudo-left and all the capitalist parties.

As the union bureaucracies openly participate in implementing austerity, the PES calls for the formation of rank-and-file organizations in workplaces, schools and working-class communities across France. These are critical to provide workers and youth with forums to discuss and organize opposition to the social attacks and war plans of the entire political establishment.

The PES will fight to connect the growth of rank-and-file organizations and of the class struggle to an internationalist, socialist and anti-war movement in the European and international working class to take state power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit. It appeals to workers and youth entering into struggle to support the PES and the ICFI, study its programme, and make the decision to join and build the Trotskyist movement.



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