

Lessons of the May–June 1968 general strike in France

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The following speech was delivered to the International Committee of the Fourth International's May Day 2018 International Online Rally by Alex Lantier, leader of the French section of the ICFI, the Parti de l'égalité socialiste, (PES) founded in November 2016.

On this 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, I bring fraternal greetings from the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES). The *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's polemic against the petty-bourgeois democrats' betrayal of the 1848 revolution, and his condemnation of the massacre of the 1871 Paris Commune, won him the eternal admiration of the working class in France. And one can predict with confidence that the current upsurge of the class struggle, 200 years after his birth, will only strengthen the respect workers feel for him around the world.

In France, amid mounting anger against President Emmanuel Macron's social cuts and his missile strikes on Syria, alongside Trump, workers are striking against the privatization of the railways. Students are occupying universities across France. "1968–2018" graffiti has spread across Paris. Everyone is thinking back 50 years to the last great revolutionary experience of the working class in France: the general strike of May–June 1968.

These last 50 years also answer the question that will be decisive in the coming struggles: who are the Marxists in France? It is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its French section, the PES. The ICFI alone insists on the necessity of a movement of the international working class to take state power, and fights for the political independence of the working class against the Stalinists, Maoists, and all the petty-bourgeois parties that broke with Trotskyism.

To understand their counter-revolutionary role today, look at what they say about their own history. They all claim the 1968 general strike was not a revolutionary situation. What a lie! In 1968, the working class shook French capitalism to its foundations. After a week of

bloody police repression of student protests, a general strike of over 10 million workers erupted. Red flags flew over factories across France. The general strike posed the question: would the working class take state power in France in 1968, a half-century after the Russian workers took power in 1917?

Two main factors prevented the overthrow of capitalism. The first was the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), then the leading party among workers. It forced a return to work in exchange for wage increases, demoralizing workers by betraying the revolutionary situation. The second factor was that the strike erupted during the post-war economic boom. The bourgeoisie had resources to make concessions, buy time and prepare its counterattack.

It relied critically on middle class, anti-Trotskyist student groups—the Maoists and students won to Pabloism, the tendency that had broken with the ICFI in 1953. For the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie, it was one thing to protest; but they recoiled in horror at the danger of socialist revolution, as it emerged before their eyes. Over the decades, they have evolved into affluent supporters of capitalism, who overwhelmingly support Macron and war. Most of them boast of their counterrevolutionary role in 1968.

During the 1968 general strike, as the police disintegrated and hundreds of thousands marched in Paris, the student leaders increasingly opened discussions with the interior ministry. "No one had any idea of going to seize a ministry or to march on the Elysée presidential palace. We had not the least political perspective," said Maoist Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, who backed Macron in 2017.

At the 24 March 1968 march, the Pabloite students set up guards around police armories, to stop workers if they tried to take up arms. Speaking in 2009 to *Nouvel Obs*, their leader Alain Krivine explained: "We knew how far

we should not go.” He praised Maurice Grimaud, the Paris police chief in 1968: “On the one hand he was the head cop … on the other he was a democratic high official, a left-wing man.” Grimaud, he concluded, was a “good guy.”

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the iconic student leader of 1968, went on to become a Green parliamentarian, and last year announced he had been “won over by” Macron. His anti-Marxism, laid out in a 1968 book *Obsolete Communism*, was reactionary. The supposedly democratic critic of Marxism became an ardent supporter of “humanitarian” imperialist war, including the 2011 NATO war in Libya, and of Macron’s state of emergency that scrapped basic democratic rights.

All oriented to the *Parti socialiste* (PS), a bourgeois party founded in 1971 and which played the central role in the bourgeoisie’s post-1968 counteroffensive. Over the decades, the PS repeatedly imposed austerity, slashed industry, drove up unemployment, and waged neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Africa.

The *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI) broke with the ICFI in 1971 on a nationalist perspective. Liquidating into the PS, it backed the PS-PCF alliance that took office in 1981, with its members working simultaneously in the OCI and the PS. One, Lionel Jospin, became PS prime minister; another, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, became a PS minister and now leads the Unsubmissive France group [*La France Insoumise*], whose parliamentarians are helping Macron plan how to bring back the draft.

But, as Trotsky explained, the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucracies. Fifty years after 1968, and 27 years after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, the PS has collapsed, like unpopular social-democratic parties of war and austerity across Europe. Macron, the former PS economy minister, resigned from it last year.

The Macron regime will make no social concessions nor allow a reformist outcome to the class struggle, as in 1968. He is desperate to shovel hundreds of billions of euros into the banks and the war machine. But his plans to slash basic social rights and join in imperialist war threats against Iran, Russia and China are not a sign of strength, but of the mortal crisis of world capitalism. The working class will have no choice but to build a movement in France and internationally that will seek to take state power.

And in 2016, the ICFI founded the PES to offer a revolutionary, Trotskyist leadership to the coming class

struggles. The PES insists that responsibility for the post-1968 defeats does not lie with the working class or Marxism. It lies, as Trotsky and the ICFI insisted, with the charlatanry of the organizations that falsely posed as descendants of Marx. And the way forward is a turn back to the traditions of classical Marxism, the working class, and the building of its revolutionary vanguard party.

Against the entire petty-bourgeois, post-1968 establishment, the PES echoes the devastating judgment, on the petty-bourgeois democrats who betrayed the 1848 revolution, made by the old French revolutionary, Auguste Blanqui. His words, cited by Marx and Engels themselves in 1851, apply all the better to the petty-bourgeois anti-Marxists of today:

“The guiltiest of all,” Blanqui said, “are those in whom the people, deceived by their fine phrases, saw its sword and shield; those whom it enthusiastically proclaimed the arbiters of its future.... May the workers always keep in mind this list of cursed names, and if a single one, yes, a single one were ever to appear again in a revolutionary government, let them all cry with one voice: Treason!”

The alternatives Blanqui then posed to the French people in 1851 are still those facing workers today—in France and in every country. If the workers build a truly powerful revolutionary movement, Blanqui wrote, “all obstacles, all resistance, all impossibilities will disappear. But if proletarians let themselves be amused by ridiculous promenades on the streets, by the planting of ‘trees of liberty,’ by the ringing phrases of lawyers, they must expect holy water to begin with, insults to follow, eventually bullets, and always misery. Now let the people choose!”



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