

# 1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

## Part 1—A revolutionary situation develops

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*This eight-part series first appeared on the World Socialist Web Site during May-June 2008, on the 40th anniversary of the general strike in France. We are presenting it here unchanged, but with a new Introduction in light of intervening events.*

### Introduction

Fifty years ago, in May-June 1968, a general strike brought France to the brink of proletarian revolution. Around 10 million workers downed tools, occupied factories, and brought the country's economic life to a standstill. French capitalism and the de Gaulle regime survived only thanks to the support of the Communist Party and the CGT trade union it dominated, which did everything in their power to bring the situation under control and call off the general strike. The French general strike was preceded by a global radicalisation of youth against the war in Vietnam, the Iranian Shah regime, the oppressive social atmosphere, and other grievances. It was the prelude to the largest offensive by the international working class since the end of the Second World War. This offensive lasted until the middle of the 1970s, forced governments to resign, brought down dictatorships, and called bourgeois rule as a whole into question. Germany experienced the September strikes in 1969, while Italy underwent the "hot autumn." In Poland and Czechoslovakia (Prague Spring) workers rebelled against the Stalinist dictatorship. In Britain, the miners brought down the Conservative Heath government in 1974. Right-wing dictatorships fell in Greece, Spain, and Portugal. The United States was forced to withdraw in defeat from Vietnam.

Half a century later, the lessons from this revolutionary period are of immense significance. Although the class struggle was suppressed for an extended period, class contradictions have now reached a point where they can no longer be contained. Around the world, capitalism is in deep crisis. While the living standards of broad sections of the population are declining, those at the top of society are enriching themselves at unimaginable levels. The ruling classes of all of the imperialist powers are responding to the rising social and international tensions with war, militarism, and attacks on social and democratic rights. Signs of growing resistance and a sharpening class struggle are increasing around the world—the strikes by teachers in the United States, strikes by railway workers in France, and the high participation by industrial and public sector workers in strikes over new collective bargaining agreements in Germany are only the opening shots.

Capitalism survived the period 1968 to 1975 thanks to the Stalinist and social democratic parties, and the trade unions, which used their mass influence to control the struggles and lead them to defeat. Although the working class' offensive weakened the influence of these bureaucratic apparatuses, a variety of organisations, who described themselves as "socialist," "Marxist," and even "Trotskyist," blocked the development of a new revolutionary leadership and turned instead to the social democratic

parties. In France, this was the Socialist Party of François Mitterrand, which became the most important instrument of bourgeois rule for the next three decades; in Germany it was the Social Democrats under Willy Brandt, which reached the zenith of their influence in the 1970s.

In the 1930s, Leon Trotsky took the initiative of founding the Fourth International because the Third, Communist International, under the influence of Stalinism, had irrevocably gone over to the camp of bourgeois counter-revolution. However, shortly after its founding in 1938, petty-bourgeois tendencies emerged within the Fourth International and placed the blame for the defeats of the working class—in China in 1927, Germany in 1933, and Spain in 1939—not on the betrayals of its leadership, but on the alleged incapacity of the working class to fulfill its revolutionary task.

The assault on the revolutionary role of the working class culminated in 1953 with the attempt by a revisionist tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, to liquidate the sections of the Fourth International into the Stalinist, social democratic, and bourgeois nationalist movements, which, they claimed, would adopt revolutionary measures under the pressure of objective events. They praised Stalinist and nationalist leaders, like Ben Bella in Algeria and Fidel Castro in Cuba, as supposed "alternatives" to Trotskyism. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was founded during this period to defend the building of independent revolutionary parties of the working class based on the programme of the Fourth International against Pabloite revisionism.

Parts three and four of this series explain the role played by the French section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, the *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* (JCR) of Alain Krivine, during the events of 1968. The JCR covered for the betrayals of the CPF and CGT, and dissolved itself seamlessly into anarchist, Maoist and other petty-bourgeois student groups. Today, their remaining members are part of the *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste* (NPA), which explicitly rejects Trotskyism, cooperates with the Stalinists, Socialist Party and other bourgeois parties, and has propagandised for "humanitarian" imperialist interventions in Libya and Syria. Many former members of the JCR, which was renamed LCR in 1974, had long careers in the Socialist Party and other bourgeois organisations.

The ICFI was the only tendency in 1968 to struggle against the political influence of Stalinism, social democracy, and bourgeois nationalism. However, it waged this struggle under conditions of extreme isolation, which was not only caused by the large bureaucratic organisations, but also the despicable role of Pabloism. Under the social and ideological pressures within which it worked, tendencies of adaptation also developed inside the ICFI's own ranks.

The French *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI), a co-founder of the ICFI in 1953, pursued a centrist policy in 1968. As

thousands of inexperienced members streamed into the party, it turned sharply to the right. In 1971, the OCI split with the International Committee and sent its members into Mitterrand's Socialist Party. Among the OCI members who entered the PS at this time were subsequent PS leader and French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, current PS leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, and the founder of the French Left Party and leader of the movement *Unsubmissive France*, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mélenchon, a "left" nationalist, defends France as a nuclear-armed power and calls for the reintroduction of military service.

The last four parts of this series deal in detail with the role of the OCI, its history, and the theoretical and political problems that led to its transformation into a key pillar of support for bourgeois rule. The study and understanding of these experiences is of tremendous significance in preparing the coming struggles of the working class.

The evolution of the Pabloites and OCI was part of a rightward shift among the academic petty bourgeoisie. While many student leaders in 1968 employed a seemingly Marxist vocabulary, their conceptions were shaped by the Frankfurt School, existentialism, and other anti-Marxist tendencies, which denied the revolutionary role of the working class. By revolution—a concept which they used excessively—they did not mean the conquering of state power by the working class, but rather the social, personal, and sexual emancipation of the petty bourgeois individual.

The intervention of the working class in France in May 1968 "had a traumatic effect on broad sections of French intellectuals," wrote David North, chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, in his essay "The Theoretical and Historical Origins of the Pseudo-Left." "Their brush with revolution set into motion a sharp movement to the right." The so-called "new philosophers," including Jean-Francois Revel and Bernard-Henri Levy, "embraced anti-communism under the hypocritical banner of 'human rights.'" Another group of philosophers, led by Jean-Francois Lyotard, "justified their repudiation of Marxism with the intellectually nihilist formulations of postmodernism." Existentialist author André Gorz authored a book with the provocative title, "Farewell to the Working Class!"

These intellectuals spoke on behalf of the middle class, for whom 1968 was only a stage in their own personal social advancement, and who would later fill leading positions in government ministries, editorial offices, and even corporate boardrooms. The fourth part of this series cites Edwy Plenel, a long-standing LCR member, who, as editor of the leading daily *Le Monde*, wrote in 2001, "I was not the only one: we were certainly in the tens of thousands—those, who after being active in the extreme left—Trotskyist or non-Trotskyist—rejected the militant lessons and look back in part critically at our illusions from that period."

The German Greens, who have long recruited their leaders out of '68-militants, embody this process. They were transformed from a petty-bourgeois party of protest, environmentalism, and pacifism into a reliable prop for German militarism. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who is, at least in the media, the most well-known leader of the French student revolt, was the mentor to and personal friend of Joschka Fischer, who, as German foreign minister in 1999, was responsible for the first German military intervention since the Second World War in Yugoslavia. As a Green member of the European parliament, Cohn-Bendit backed the war on Libya, defends the European Union and praises French President Emmanuel Macron.

Today's looming class confrontation is taking place under very different conditions to those during the struggles of 1968-75.

Firstly, the bourgeoisie no longer has the economic leeway to make social concessions. The movement of 1968 was triggered, in part, by the first major post-war recession in 1966, which led to the end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 and a further recession in 1973. But the post-war boom had just reached its peak in this period. The bourgeoisie bought an end to the strikes and protests with significant improvements in wages and

working conditions. The universities were substantially expanded to get the rebellious youth off the streets.

Such reforms within a national framework are no longer possible today. The global struggle for competitiveness and the domination of international financial markets over every aspect of production has initiated a ruthless race to the bottom.

Secondly, the Stalinist and social democratic organisations, which had millions of members half a century ago and secured capitalism's survival, are now widely discredited. The Soviet Union no longer exists, after it was dissolved by the Stalinist bureaucracy. China has been transformed into a haven for capitalist exploitation of the working class by the Maoist Communist Party. Like other social democratic parties, France's Socialist Party has collapsed and Germany's SPD is in free-fall. The trade unions have been transformed into co-managers, who organise job cuts and are hated by the workers.

The pseudo-left organisations, which isolated the International Committee in 1968, have integrated themselves into the bourgeois state and its institutions. They support the attacks on the working class and imperialist wars. This is shown most clearly of all in Greece, where the "Coalition of the Radical Left" (Syryza) assumed responsibility for decimating the living standards of the working class on behalf of the international banks. The coming class struggles will develop in a rebellion against these bureaucratic organisations and their pseudo-left appendages, which have become a trap for the working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its historic struggle against Stalinism, social democracy, Pabloite revisionism, and other forms of petty bourgeois pseudo-left politics will prove decisive in arming the working class for these struggles. Its ability to predict the rightward trajectory of these tendencies and expose their role confirms that it is the Marxist party that must now be built. The ICFI and its French section, the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*, is the only tendency that represents a socialist programme capable of uniting the working class in struggle against capitalism and war.

#### **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 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 have 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 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 Algerian 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*



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