

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 2—The betrayal of the PCF and CGT

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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. Part 1, posted May 29, deals with the development of the student revolt and the general strike up to its high point at the end of May.

From 20 May, 1968 France is at a standstill. Two thirds of all wage earners participate in the general strike; students occupy the universities. At this point, the fate of de Gaulle and his government lies in the hands of the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français—PCF) and the CGT trade union (Confédération Générale du Travail—General Confederation of Labor) it controls. It is they who guarantee President Charles de Gaulle’s political survival and save the Fifth Republic. In 1968, the PCF is still a considerable political force with some 350,000 members, and it receives 22.5 percent of the vote in 1967. Although the number of CGT members has fallen since 1948 from 4 million to 2.3 million, it remains the dominant union in the key sectors of the economy. Its secretary-general, Georges Séguy, sits on the Politburo of the PCF.

As we have already seen, the PCF and CGT reacted with unconcealed enmity towards the student protests. The notorious article of May 3, in which Georges Marchais derided the students as troublemakers and Gaullist agents, is not the exception, but the rule. The PCF daily *l’Humanité* does not tire in its tirades against the “left radicals” (*gauchistes*)—among whom it includes everyone who opposes the right-wing line of the PCF. The CGT refuses to hold joint demonstrations of workers and students, and instructs its members to keep the students—who are trying to forge contacts with the workers—away from the factories.

The factory occupations and general strike have developed against the wishes of the CGT and outside its control. The occupation of Sud aviation, which becomes a model for all the other occupations, arises through an initiative of the trade union Force Ouvrière, which has influence among the lowest groups of wage earners and is led in Nantes by a Trotskyist, OCI member Yves Rocton. Although the CGT does not prevent the occupations, it tries to keep them under control and limit them to purely industrial demands. It opposes the establishment of a central strike committee and rejects any collaboration with forces outside the factories. It refuses to sanction the detention of the leading management personnel.

On May 16, the leadership of the competing trade union CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail—French Democratic Confederation of Labour) issues a declaration, in which it tries to exert its influence over the wave of occupations. In contrast to the CGT, it is positive towards the students’ revolt, which, it says, is directed against “the encrusted, stifling class structures of a society in which they cannot

exercise their responsibilities.” The CFDT directs the slogan of “self-management” (*autogestion*) towards the factories: “The industrial and administrative monarchy must be replaced by administrative structures based on self-management.”

CGT leader Séguy reacts with a fit of rage and publicly attacks the CFDT. He rejects any attempt to give the growing movement any common orientation, no matter how limited. The demand of the CFDT, which at this time is under the influence of Michel Rocard’s left-reformist PSU (Parti Socialiste Unifié—Unified Socialist Party), leads to a dead end as well. It questions neither capitalist rule nor the dominance of the capitalist market.

On May 25, the CGT finally hurries to directly aid the besieged government. At 3 p.m., representatives of the trade unions, employers’ associations and government meet in the Ministry of Labour on Rue de Grenelle. Their goal is to ensure order in the factories as quickly as possible. Although all the unions are represented, the negotiations are conducted almost exclusively by two men: Prime Minister Georges Pompidou and CGT head Georges Séguy.

Séguy wants a linear wage increase, without reducing the gap between different wage categories, as the workers in many factories demand. In addition, the position of the unions is to be strengthened. On this issue he has the backing of Pompidou against the employers’ associations. “The government is convinced that the integration of the working class through the trade unions, which have the necessary training and appropriate influence, helps the smooth running of the factory,” is the formulation that appears in the minutes of the meeting.

Alongside Georges Pompidou, on the government side of the negotiating table sits another future president, Jacques Chirac, as well as a future prime minister, Edouard Balladur. Like the present incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy, they all adhere to the agreement at the time and utilise the unions to “integrate” the working class. The term “Grenelle” has since become a synonym for such high-level conferences between government, unions and employers.

In barely two days, the negotiating partners are agreed. Early Monday morning, on May 27, they sign the Grenelle accord. It includes a 7 percent wage increase, a rise in the minimum wage from 2.22 to 3 francs an hour, and the legal anchoring of the unions in the factories.

The CGT abandons its original demands for a sliding scale of wages, full payment for strike days and the withdrawal of government regulations concerning social security. After learning that Rocard’s PSU, the CFDT and the UNEF (Union Nationale des Étudiants de France—National Union of Students of France) are planning a demonstration, without any previous agreement with the PCF and CGT, Séguy pushes for an immediate deal, which he secures in the early morning in a one-on-one discussion with Jacques Chirac.

At 7:30 a.m., Séguy and Pompidou appear before the press and announce the Grenelle agreement. Séguy explains: "Work can begin again without delay." He goes personally to Billancourt, in order to try to sell the agreement to the workers at the Renault plant. But they regard the agreement as a provocation and are not prepared to be bought off for a few francs. Séguy is booed down and faces a chorus of cat calls. The message spreads like wildfire throughout the country and nobody is inclined to break off the struggle. *Le Monde's* headline the following day reads: "CGT unable to induce strikers to resume work."

The question of power is posed

The political crisis now reaches its high point. The whole country is in an uproar. The government has lost its authority and the CGT has lost its control over the workers. Nobody can have any doubt that the question of who exercises power in the country is now being openly posed.

The social democrats, who so far have kept themselves cautiously in the background, now raise their voice. Since it is questionable whether de Gaulle can cling to power, preparations for an alternative bourgeois government are made. François Mitterrand organizes a press conference on May 28, which is reported on television in detail. He expresses his support for an interim government, as well as for new presidential elections, in which he will be a candidate.

Mitterrand heads the Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left (FGDS), an alliance of liberal and social-democratic parties that had discredited themselves in the Fourth Republic and lack any mass basis. In 1965, he had challenged de Gaulle in the presidential elections and was also supported by the PCF.

The PSU, the CFDT and the UNEF student federation pin their hopes on Pierre Mendès-France. In 1936, Mendès-France, a member of the Radical Socialists, a purely bourgeois party, had joined Léon Blum's popular front government. During the war, he supported General de Gaulle. In the Fourth Republic, he organized the withdrawal of French troops from Vietnam as head of government in 1954, earning the enmity of the right-wing. In 1968 he is close to the PSU.

Mendès-France's pronounced orientation to the West means the PCF regards him as an arch-enemy. The alarm bells sound in the PCF headquarters on May 27, when he is sighted at a big meeting of the PSU, CFDT and UNEF in Paris' Charléty stadium. The PCF fears that Mitterrand and Mendès-France could form a new government, without them having any influence on it.

On 29 May, the PCF and CGT organize their own demonstration in Paris; several hundred thousand march in the capital under the slogan: "For a popular government." The PCF does not even dream of a revolutionary seizure of power. Its demand for a "popular government" is an attempt to appease the revolutionary sentiments in the factories, without challenging the institutions of the Fifth Republic. The CGT underlines its rejection of revolutionary action by stressing the need for "democratic change."

The Paris chief of police later reports that he had no concerns regarding the CGT-PCF demonstration; he expected a classic, disciplined trade union demonstration, which is what took place. But the government is not sure whether the organisers have the situation under control. Army paratroopers are placed on standby and tanks are stationed in the Paris suburbs as a precaution.

On May 30, the PCF Central Committee meets to discuss the situation. A tape recording of this meeting confirms that the party rejects any ambitions to assume power itself and is exclusively concerned with preserving the existing order. Six months later, a Central Committee statement justifies this attitude with the words: "The balance of forces did not permit the working class and its allies to seize political power last May."

At the May 30 meeting, Secretary-General Émile Waldeck-Rochet declares his readiness to participate in an interim government under

François Mitterrand, if he grants the PCF sufficient influence. Such a government should fulfil three tasks, he says: get the state functioning again, respond to the justified demands of the strikers, and carry through presidential elections.

However, the holding of immediate parliamentary elections is the preferred option of the PCF. A party speaker sums up the general attitude: "We can only profit from a general election."

The situation this day is on a knife's edge. General de Gaulle has disappeared the previous evening without trace, having set off to Baden-Baden, where he holds talks with General Massu, commander of the French troops in Germany. Massu is notorious for his role in the Algerian war. Whether de Gaulle was planning his escape or just seeking support is still disputed to this day. In his memoirs, Massu later states he advised de Gaulle to return to Paris and publicly address the French people.

On the afternoon of May 30, de Gaulle then delivers a speech on the radio. The Republic is in danger and must be defended, he says. He announces the dissolution of parliament and calls new elections for June 23 and 30. At the same time, several hundred thousand of the general's supporters are demonstrating on the Champs Élysées under the French national colours.

The PCF supports de Gaulle's decision the very same evening and presents it as the successful result of its own policy. It professes its support for the legal framework of the Fifth Republic and seeks to ingratiate itself with the Gaullists by proclaiming the unity "of the red flag and the tri-colour flag of the nation." On May 31, CGT leader Georges Séguy announces his agreement with the elections. "The CGT will not obstruct the conduct of the elections," he says, which in view of the paralysis gripping the country amounts to abandoning the general strike. "It is in the interest of the workers to express their desire for change."

The CGT now uses all its energy to end the strikes and occupations well before the date for the elections, something it is only able to do with difficulty. But gradually the strike front crumbles. Workers return to work following the conclusion of factory agreements, the most militant sections are isolated, and the police begin to evacuate the universities. On June 16, workers at Renault-Billancourt resume work one week before the election; the same day the Sorbonne is evacuated.

However, it still takes weeks until the last strikes and occupations are ended, and the country does not really return to calm in the following months and years. But the working class has missed an opportunity to seize political power. Michel Dreyfus, author of a history of the CGT, summarises the attitude of the most influential trade union at the high point of the general strike as follows: "The CGT intentionally avoided confrontation with the state in May 1968, when the balance of forces seemed in its favour."

The right-wing counteroffensive

In the first weeks of May, the political right wing has been completely paralysed and isolated. Now, thanks to the aid of the PCF and CGT, it gradually recovers the initiative and its self-confidence. With the beginning of the election campaign, the struggle shifts from the streets and factories to the ballot box, benefiting de Gaulle and his supporters. They are now in a position to bring the more passive and backward sections of society into play, appealing to the fears of the "silent majority."

The first efforts in this direction can already be seen in May. The government exercises strict censorship over the state-controlled media (there are no private broadcasters at this time). On May 19, it bans television from spreading information that could be useful to the opposition. On May 23, it shuts down the frequencies, used by foreign broadcasters, which can be received in France, and whose journalists are reporting live from the demonstrations.

On May 22, the government withdraws Daniel Cohn-Bendit's residency permit. The student leader, who has a German passport, comes from a Jewish family that had fled to France to escape the Nazis. The end of the

Nazi regime lies only 23 years in the past, and the symbolism of this measure can be seen by all. There is massive anger and the student protests become more radical. Again there are violent street battles. Since the CGT continues to isolate the students, and rejects any joint action with them, the students often act without the protection of the workers—which only serves to escalate the situation.

On May 24, the violent struggles claim two victims. In Lyon, a policeman dies, and in Paris a young demonstrator is killed. The shock is great and the media begins a deafening campaign against the “perpetrators of student violence.”

Some Gaullists create a Committee for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), which collaborates with far-right elements from the milieu of the Algerian French. The latter regard de Gaulle as a traitor, since he granted Algeria independence, but the danger of revolution serves to unite the different right-wing fractions. On May 30, shouts of “Algérie française” (Algeria is French) combine with the symbols of Gaullism on the Champs Élysées. The first large demonstration supporting de Gaulle had been prepared jointly. On June 17, de Gaulle pays back by pardoning General Raoul Salan as well as 10 other members of the OAS terrorist organization, who in 1961 had organised a putsch in Algeria against him.

With the beginning of the election campaign, the state organs of repression begin to act with more self-confidence. On May 31, Interior Minister Christian Fouchet is replaced by Raymond Marcellin, who is welcomed by de Gaulle with the words: “At last, a true Fouché”—a reference to Joseph Fouché, who, following the decline of the 1789 French Revolution, became minister of police under the Directorate and Napoleon, creating a widely feared apparatus of oppression.

Marcellin acts with extreme harshness. On the day he is appointed, pickets are cleared from the streets outside fuel depots, in order to secure fuel supplies and get traffic moving again. On June 12, he bans all street demonstrations during the election campaign. On the same day, he issues a decree dissolving all revolutionary organizations and expelling two hundred “suspect foreigners” from the country. The prohibition affects the Trotskyist OCL, its youth and student organizations, Alain Krivine’s JCR (Jeunesses communistes révolutionnaires—Revolutionary Communist Youth), the anarchist “March 22 Movement” of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, as well as Maoist organizations. The Renseignements généraux (domestic secret service) is ordered to observe and collect information about every member.

Marcellin remains in office for six years and in this time is able to develop the police, the secret service and the CRS (specialist riot police) into a highly prepared civil war apparatus. He doubles expenditures on the police force, equips it with modern technology and weapons, and recruits 20,000 new police officers.

The Gaullists conduct an election campaign based on fear. They highlight the danger of a civil war, warn of a totalitarian, communist seizure of power and profess the unity of the republic and the nation. Opposition parties and trade unions join in this chorus. The continuous agitation of the PCF against “left radicals” is grist for the propaganda mills of the right wing. On television on the eve of the election, François Mitterrand protests: “From the first day on, and despite the attacks, we have only thought of the unity of the fatherland and the preservation of peace.”

The election is a disaster for the official left. The Gaullists and their allies receive 46 percent of the vote, the PCF, as the strongest opposition party, wins only 20 percent, far less than one year previously. The first-past-the-post election system means that when it comes to the allocation of seats, the result is even more devastating. Four fifths of the seats go to right-wing bourgeois parties—59 percent to the Gaullists, 13 to the liberals and 7 to centre parties. Mitterrand’s FGDS (Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste—Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left) gets 12 percent of the seats and the PCF only 7 percent. Above all, the

conservative rural areas vote by a massive majority for the right; while many of the most active elements—high school students, university students, young workers and immigrants—are not entitled to vote. The official voting age is 21 and the electoral rolls have not been updated before the hastily called election.

Two months after the beginning of the revolutionary crisis, the bourgeoisie has once again restored its grip on power. It now has the time to calmly replace de Gaulle and develop a new political mechanism, with which it can secure its rule and keep the working class under control in the coming decades—Mitterrand’s Socialist Party. For this it must pay an economic price. The Grenelle agreements finally come into force and working people experience a clear improvement in their standard of living over the coming years. These improvements, however, do not last and have now been largely taken back.

To be continued



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