

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 4—How Alain Krivine’s JCR covered for the betrayals of Stalinism (2)

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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. Part 2, posted May 30, examines how the Communist Party (PCF) and the union it controls, the CGT, enabled President Charles de Gaulle to regain control. Part 3, posted May 31, and Part 4, posted below, examine the role played by the Pabloites.

A cover for Stalinism

Although the Stalinists in the French Communist Party and the CGT trade union detested the rebellious spirit of the youth and therefore hated the left-wing student groups, which they referred to as *gauchistes* (left-wing radicals) and provocateurs, they were quite able to live with them—politically speaking. The anarchist stunts of Daniel Cohn-Bendit hardly threatened the dominance of the Stalinists within the working class. The same was true of the Maoists, and their enthusiasm for the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the armed struggle.

And the Pabloites carefully evaded conflicts with the Stalinists. They refrained from any political initiatives that would exacerbate relations between the working class and the Stalinist leadership and precipitate a crisis for the latter. At the highpoint of the 1968 crisis, when workers rejected the Grenelle accord, and the question of taking power was on the agenda, the JCR (Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire) provided a cover for the Stalinists. Twenty years after these events, Alain Krivine and Daniel Bensaid published a retrospective of 1968 that—while attempting to paint the JCR in favourable colours—clearly exposes its real role. [11]

The JCR participated in both of the large demonstrations called by the social democrats and the Stalinists at the height of the mass movement—the mass meeting on May 27 at the Charléty stadium, organised by the UNEF (Union Nationale des Étudiants de France) student organisation, the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail) trade union and the PSU (Parti Socialiste Unifié), and the mass demonstration of the PCF (Parti communiste français) and CGT (Confédération générale du travail) on May 29.

The aim of the meeting at the Charléty stadium was to prepare the way for a transitional government under the experienced bourgeois politician Pierre Mendès-France, who was then a member of the PSU. The task of such a government would have been to bring the strike under control, to restore order and prepare fresh elections.

Even sections of the right-wing press were, at this point, convinced that only such a “left” government would be able to save the existing order.

The financial newspaper *Les Echos* wrote on May 28 that the only choice was between reform and revolution, or “anarchy” as the newspaper put it. Under the headline “A way out must be found,” it commented:

“Nobody is prepared any more to listen to or believe anybody. Up to now it seemed that the CGT was a bastion of order and discipline. But now it has been destabilised by a mutinous common folk whose rebellion it had underestimated. The trade union leaders have been forced to the sidelines by the strikers, who no longer believe any promises—irrespective of who makes them. Not to speak of the government.... ‘Yes to reform, no to disorder’ was how the General [de Gaulle] put it recently in an unfortunate expression. Today one has both reform and anarchy under conditions where it remains unclear which will prove victorious.”

The PCF was quite prepared to enter a bourgeois government at this time. Its general secretary, Waldeck Rochet, proposed on May 27 that he and François Mitterrand immediately meet to discuss the conditions for a “replacement of the Gaullist regime with a people’s government of democratic unity on the basis of a common programme.” For those familiar with Stalinist terminology, there could be no doubt that the meaning of a “people’s government of democratic unity” was a bourgeois government dedicated to defending capitalist property.

The PCF feared, however, that Mitterrand and Mendès-France could form a government without it. Therefore, it organised, together with the CGT, its own mass demonstration on May 29, under the slogan of a “People’s Government.” This slogan adapted to the revolutionary mood of the masses, even though the PCF never dreamed of taking power via a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, and only strove for a coalition government with Mitterrand or some other bourgeois politician.

The JCR participated in the PCF-CGT demonstration under the slogan: “People’s government, yes! Mitterrand, Mendès-France, no!” thereby supporting, in effect, the manoeuvre of the PCF. Krivine and Bensaid wrote in their retrospective study about the slogan of the JCR:

“The formulation played with ambiguities. It counterpoised a people’s government, which could be interpreted as the most militant expression of the strike and its organs, to a government of political figures. Without completely rejecting a coalition government of the left parties it attacked those figures who lacked any clear links to the working class and were liable to use their autonomy from existing institutions as the basis for class collaboration.... Despite its deliberate lack of clarity, the formulation “people’s government” pointed towards a government of left parties, without going into any details.” [12]

In other words: the formulation used by the JCR was aimed at making the “most militant sections” of the working class believe that a left bourgeois government including the PCF would be a “result of the strike

and its organs.” This is a revealing confession. At a time when the revolutionary crisis had reached its high point, the JCR, having lost its authority and with de Gaulle disappeared from the radar—that is, at a time when it was necessary to openly and decisively take a stand—was playing with “ambiguities” and remained deliberately vague. It evaded the decisive question of who held power in the country.

The demand for a “people’s government,” which the JCR adopted from the Stalinists, received considerable support within the population. However, the demand remained general and noncommittal. The Communist Party understood this demand as a coalition government with the social democrats and petty-bourgeois radicals, whose most important task would have been to maintain the existing order. Nothing was further from the thinking of the PCF than the revolutionary taking of power. The Pabloites never challenged this standpoint and fell into line behind the Stalinists.

What should the JCR have done?

Of course the JCR lacked the support necessary for assuming power itself. However, there are numerous historical precedents that demonstrate how revolutionary Marxists—even in a minority—can fight for their programme and win the majority of workers to their side.

In Russia, at the beginning of 1917, support for Lenin’s Bolsheviks was considerably less than that for the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries. However, using skillful and principled politics, the Bolsheviks worked to win the support of the working class and take power in October. In France, where Trotsky lived in exile from 1933 to 1935, he took an active interest in the activity of the French section and submitted detailed proposals on how it could fight for a revolutionary programme as a minority. The central question was always the political independence of the working class from the reformist (and later also the Stalinist) apparatuses and the building of an independent revolutionary party.

When Lenin returned from exile to Russia in 1917, he attacked the half-hearted attitude of the Bolsheviks towards the provisional bourgeois government, in which the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries had assumed ministerial posts. He insisted on unwavering opposition and a programme that aimed for the conquest of power via the soviets.

On the basis of this programme, the Bolsheviks used a tactic that deepened the gulf between the workers and their reformist leaders, aimed at ultimately breaking the former from the latter. The Bolsheviks demanded that the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks break with the liberal bourgeoisie and take power in their own hands. Although the Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Mensheviks proved incapable of forming a government independently of the bourgeoisie, Trotsky later commented on this experience in the *Transitional Programme*, writing that the “demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and the SRs: ‘Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!’ had for the masses tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and SRs to take power, so dramatically exposed during the July Days, definitely doomed them before mass opinion and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.” [13]

In 1968, the JCR was posed with demanding that the PCF and CGT take power, based on the mobilisation for the general strike. Together with systematic agitation against the conciliatory attitude of the Stalinists toward the bourgeois parties, this demand would have carried enormous political weight. It would have sharpened the conflict between the working class and the Stalinist leadership and helped workers to politically break from them. However, nothing was further from the minds of the Pabloites than to place the Stalinists in a dilemma with such demands. As the revolutionary crisis reached its highpoint, they proved to be reliable props for the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The Pabloites could not, however, simply ignore the counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinists under conditions where it was being openly addressed in the bourgeois press. In June 1968, Pierre Frank

accused the PCF and CGT of having “betrayed 10 million strikers in the quest for 5 million votes.” He even compared this “betrayal of the PCF leadership” with the historic betrayal of the German Social Democratic Party: “If this leadership has not up until now acted in the manner that the Noskes and the Eberts acted against the German revolution of 1918-19, it is because the bourgeoisie has no need of it. But its conduct toward the ‘ultraleftists’ leaves no doubt that it is ready to do so should the need arise.” [14]

However, insofar as the JCR concentrated its entire political energy on adventurist actions and declared the students to be the revolutionary avant-garde, the Pabloites evaded the most decisive issue: the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the form of a section of the Fourth International. They deliberately avoided questioning the domination of the Stalinists. The Pabloite perspective of liquidating its organisation into Stalinism, which had led to the 1953 split in the Fourth International, also formed the core of their policies in 1968.

They did not call for a break with Stalinism, nor did they fight for the building of the Fourth International. Instead, their policies were based on the conviction that the activities of students and youth could spontaneously overcome the Stalinist betrayal and resolve the crisis of leadership in the working class. The JCR itself thereby became the most important obstacle to the development of a genuine revolutionary avant-garde.

In 1935, Leon Trotsky promoted the building of committees of action in France that would oppose the people’s front, which he characterised as a “coalition of the proletariat with the imperialist bourgeoisie, in the shape of the Radical Party.”

“Every two hundred, five hundred or thousand citizens adhering in a given city, district, factory, barrack and village to the People’s Front, in time of fighting actions, elect their representative to the local committee of action,” he wrote. Those able to take part in the election of committees of action include not only workers “but also civil service employees, functionaries, war veterans, artisans, small merchants, and small peasants. Thus the Committees of Action are in closest harmony with the tasks of the struggle of the proletariat for influence over the petty bourgeoisie. But they complicate to the extreme the collaboration between the workers’ bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie.” Trotsky stressed that it “is not the *formal democratic* representation of *all* and *any* masses but the revolutionary representation of the *struggling* masses. The Committee of Action is an apparatus of struggle.” It is “*the only means of breaking the anti-revolutionary opposition of party and trade-union apparatus*” (emphasis in the original). [15]

In 1968, the Pabloites adopted this demand for committees of action. On May 21, for example, the JCR distributed a leaflet that called for the establishment of strike committees in the workplaces, and of committees of action in the university faculties and in the suburbs. The leaflet called for the setting up of a workers’ government and stressed: “The power that we want must arise from the strike and action committees of the workers and students.”

However, the adaptation of the Pabloites to the Stalinists and petty bourgeois radicals robbed this demand of any revolutionary content. Divorced from the building of a new revolutionary leadership, the demands raised by the Pabloites merely resembled the radical background noises to what were thoroughly opportunist policies. [16]

Trotsky vs. Pierre Frank

This was not the first time Pierre Frank was to play such a political role. He had been fiercely criticised by Trotsky in 1935 for similar reasons and was eventually expelled from the Trotskyist movement. At that time, he led a group, together with Raymond Molinier, around the magazine *La Commune*, which in the name of “revolutionary action” proposed unification with centrist movements—in particular, the Revolutionary Left led by Marceau Pivert. Pivert was an incorrigible centrist. While quite

inclined to use revolutionary phraseology, in practice he was the left wing of the People's Front government led by Léon Blum, which suffocated the general strike of 1936.

Trotsky was irrevocably opposed to Pivert's centrism and the manoeuvres of Molinier and Frank. "The essence of the Pivert tendency is just that: to accept 'revolutionary' slogans, but not to draw from them the necessary conclusions, which are the break with Blum and Zyromsky [a right-wing Social Democrat], the creation of the new party and the new International. Without that, all the 'revolutionary' slogans become null and void." He accused Molinier and Frank of attempting "to win the sympathies of the Revolutionary Left by personal manoeuvring, by combinations in the lobbies, and above all by abdication of our slogans and of criticism of the centrists." [17]

In a further article, Trotsky described the stance adopted by Molinier and Frank as a political crime. He accused them of hiding their program and submitting to the workers "false passports. It is a crime!" He insisted that the defence of the revolutionary program had priority over united practical activity. "'Mass paper'? Revolutionary action? Communism everywhere? ... Very well, very well.... But *program first!*" [18]

"Without the new revolutionary party, the French proletariat is doomed to catastrophe," he continued. "The party of the proletariat can only be international. The Second and the Third International became the greatest obstacle to the revolution. It is necessary to create a new International—the Fourth. We must openly proclaim its necessity. They are petty-bourgeois centrists who falter at every step before the consequences of their own ideas. The revolutionary worker can be paralyzed by his traditional attachment to the Second or Third International, but when he has understood the truth, he will pass directly to the banner of the Fourth International. That is why we must present the masses with a complete program. By ambiguous formulas, we can only serve Molinier, who himself serves Pivert, who in turn covers for Léon Blum. And the latter puts all his forces behind [the fascist] de la Rocque ..." [19]

Three decades later, Pierre Frank had learned nothing from his conflict with Trotsky. If anything, he stood even further to the right in 1968 than in 1935. This time, he not only sought unity with centrists such as Marceau Pivert, but also with anarchists, Maoists and other anti-working-class tendencies. Trotsky's reproach of a "political crime" in 1935 was even more justified in 1968. The Pabloites constituted the crucial obstacle, which prevented workers and youth from turning to revolutionary Marxism.

Eventually, they transferred responsibility for the betrayal carried out by the Stalinists and their own abject failure onto the backs of the working class. Some 20 years later, Krivine and Bensaid wrote: "One can charge the weakness of the organized revolutionary forces at the start of the movement to the crimes of Stalinism and social-democracy. But if one seeks to avoid being plunged into a crazed idealism, then, in a distorted way, it is also an expression of a more general condition of the working class, their militant currents, their natural vanguard in the factories and trade unions." There were contradictions between the dynamic of the struggle and the Communist Party, they continue: "however these remained secondary.... The mass of the strikers wanted to regulate a social conflict and to shake off the yoke of an authoritarian regime. From there to revolution was still a long way to go." [20]

Another 20 years later, Krivine was even more explicit: In his autobiography he wrote: "Sure, in the leadership of the JCR we did not know how far the movement would go. But we knew quite exactly where it would not go. It was a rebellion of unsurpassed size, but it was not a revolution: There was neither a program nor credible organizations, which were prepared to take power." [21]

This line of argumentation is typical of Pabloite opportunism. In his polemic with the Spanish POUM, Trotsky once described it as an "impotent philosophy," which "seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary

link in the chain of cosmic developments, [and] is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programmes, parties, personalities that were the organisers of defeat." [22]

The LCR today

The French Interior Minister Raymond Marcellin banned the JCR and its successor organization, the Communist League (Ligue communiste), on no less than two occasions: on June 12, 1968, when he dissolved a total of 12 left-wing organizations, and on June 28, 1973, following violent clashes with the police after an anti-fascist demonstration in Paris.

However, following 1968, the more farsighted elements of the ruling elite were clear that the LCR did not represent a threat to the bourgeois order and that it could rely on the organisation in times of the crisis.

Following the ebb of the revolutionary wave of 1968, the LCR and the organizations it worked with became a fruitful field of recruitment for the establishment parties, the bourgeois media, the universities and the state apparatus. Former LCR members can be found in leading positions in the Socialist Party (Henri Weber, Julien Dray, Gérard Filoche, etc.), occupying chairs of philosophy (Daniel Bensaid) and on the editorial boards of leading bourgeois newspapers.

Edwy Plenel, who rose from the ranks of the LCR to head the editorial board of the renowned daily *Le Monde*, writes in his memoirs: "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, nevertheless retaining a loyalty to our original anger and without concealing our debt to the training we received." [23]

The anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendit became the political mentor and close friend of Joschka Fischer, German foreign minister from 1998 to 2005. Cohn-Bendit today leads the parliamentary group of the Greens in the European parliament and belongs to the right wing of what is now a thoroughly right-wing party.

In 1990, the Maoist Alain Geismar took over as head of the General Inspectorate for National Education and went on to fill a number state undersecretary posts in various Socialist Party-led ministries. The founding of the daily *Libération* also had its roots in Maoism. It was originally created in 1973 as a Maoist publication, with the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as editor-in-chief.

The large number of '68 radicals who were able to climb the career ladder in France cannot simply be explained on the basis of "the return of prodigal sons." It is, rather, the result of the perspective of the Pabloites and their allies who, despite their radical rhetoric, always pursued opportunist policies that were entirely compatible with the bourgeois order.

In light of an economic and political crisis that is far more serious than that of 1968, the services of the LCR are now needed more than ever. The globalisation of production, the international financial crisis and rising oil prices, have stripped away the basis for social compromises in France, as in every country. In the meantime, the PCF and CGT are a pale shadow of their former selves, and just 7 percent of the workforce is organized in trade unions. The Socialist Party, which was founded in reaction to the events of 1968 and proved to be the most important prop of bourgeois rule during the past three decades, is rent by divisions and rapidly losing support. Social tensions are at breaking point, and for the past 12 years the country has been rocked by one wave of strikes and protests after the other.

Under these circumstances the ruling elite requires a new left prop capable of disorienting the increasing number of workers and young people who have lost any confidence in a reformist solution of the social crisis, thereby preventing them from taking up a revolutionary alternative. This is precisely the role being mapped out by the new "anti-capitalist party," which the LCR plans to establish at the end of the year. Its

spokesman Olivier Besancenot, a protégé of Alain Krivine, has been warmly embraced by the media following the last presidential election, in which he won 1.5 million votes.

The parallels between the JCR of 1968 and the LCR's "anti-capitalist party" of today are only too apparent. They begin with the glorification of Che Guevara, whom Besancenot has acknowledged as an important role model. He even authored a book on Che Guevara last year. Additional parallels include the LCR's uncritical adaptation to various petty bourgeois radical currents. According to Besancenot, his new party is open for "ex-members of political parties, activists from the trade union movement, feminists, opponents of liberalism, anarchists, communists or anti-neo liberals." In addition, he explicitly rejects any historical connection to Trotskyism. Such an unprincipled and eclectic party, which lacks any clear program, can easily be manipulated and trimmed to serve the interests of the ruling class.

The lessons of 1968 are therefore not merely of historical interest. At that time the ruling class was able to restore its control and stabilise its rule in a period of revolutionary crisis with the help of the Stalinists and Pabloites. The working class will not allow itself to be deceived a second time round.

Notes:

11. Alain Krivine, Daniel Bensaid, *Mais! 1968–1988: Rebelles et repentis*, Montreuil: 1988

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40

13. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program*, Labour Publications, New York: 1981, p. 24

14. Pierre Frank, "Mai 68: première phase de la révolution socialiste française"

15. Leon Trotsky, "Committees of Action—Not People's Front," November 26, 1935, in *Whither France?*

16. Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, "Workers, Students," May 21, 1968

17. Leon Trotsky, "What is a 'Mass Paper'?" in "The Crisis of the French section (1935–36)," New York: 1977, pp. 98, 101

18. Leon Trotsky, "Against False Passports in Politics," *ibid.*, pp. 115, 119

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120

20. Krivine, Bensaid, *ibid.*, p. 43

21. Alain Krivine, *Ça te passera avec l'âge*, Flammarion: 2006, pp. 103–104

22. Leon Trotsky, "Class, Party and Leadership"

23. Edwy Plenel, *Secrets de jeunesse*, Editions Stock: 2001, pp. 21–22



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