

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 7—The centrist line of the OCI (3)

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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 June 1, examine the role played by the Pabloites. The final four parts will examine the role of Pierre Lambert's Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), including Part 5, posted June 2; Part 6, posted June 3; and Part 7 posted below.

The rightward evolution of the OCI

The events of 1968 mark a turning point in the history of the OCI. At the time of the general strike, the OCI, whose roots lay in the Trotskyist movement, had already evolved in a marked centrist direction, its policies increasingly oriented towards the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies. Three years later, it broke with the international Trotskyist movement and became an important prop of the French Socialist Party, and, thereby, of the French bourgeois state.

The student movement and the general strike had brought the OCI several thousand new members and contacts. They had joined an ostensibly Trotskyist organisation, but the centrist course of the OCI oriented them towards the bureaucratic apparatuses. They were not trained as Marxists, but rather were educated as opportunists.

These young people, who gradually displaced the older cadre, played an important role in the rightward development of the OCI. Many later switched to the Socialist Party and embarked on a political career that took them to the highest public offices.

The rightward evolution of the OCI was closely linked to the rise of a social layer to whom it paid special attention in 1968—the lower ranks of the trade union bureaucracy, which it referred to as the “organisational cadres of the working class.”

As we have seen, the OCI hoped that the sharpening political crisis would bring these “cadres” into conflict with the “apparatuses,” forcing them to the left. Not only was this hope based on a false understanding of the character of the trade unions, it also rested on an incorrect estimation of the Gaullist regime, whose strength the OCI massively overestimated.

From 1958, when General de Gaulle returned to power at the high point of the Algerian crisis, and put through a constitution tailored to his personal requirements, the OCI had characterised his rule as Bonapartism. “De Gaulle is not simply one element among others of the political personnel of the French bourgeoisie,” the OCI wrote, in a programmatic article published in *La Vérité* at the beginning of 1968, under the title

“Gaullist Bonapartism and the Tasks of the Avant-Garde,” but, rather, de Gaulle had forced himself upon his class and was supported by it because it could “conduct its struggle against the proletariat and its international rivals only buttressed by a strong state, which subordinates all social layers, mobilises all the resources of the economy and mobilises all areas of society exclusively in favour of big capital.” [25]

The OCI attributed almost superhuman powers to de Gaulle. “The state established by him is an iron brace that enables a senile and feeble bourgeoisie to stand on its feet,” the same article claimed. Parliament was merely a façade, enabling “the workers’ leaders to preserve the electoral illusions of the masses.”

For a long time, the OCI led a sort of underground existence because it anticipated that de Gaulle would adopt openly dictatorial forms of rule. It was convinced that in the event of a serious crisis, he would smash the workers’ movement with the support of the trade union leaders, who were integrated into the state.

The OCI wrote: “To politically smash the workers’ movement, destroying and dispersing the organisational cadre of the class, is the common aim of de Gaulle and the apparatuses.” The “apparatuses” faced the alternative of “going under or of integrating themselves into the state, becoming the direct agents of the murderous plans of Bonapartism,” while “the organisational cadres, which remain on the field of class warfare, will tend to detach themselves from the politics of the apparatus.”

But in 1968, reality looked very different from what the OCI had imagined. The Gaullist regime proved to be far weaker than it had expected. It did not dare suppress the general strike of 10 million workers by force. To bring it under control, it used not only the services of the “apparatuses,” but, above all, those of the “cadres” on which the OCI had set its hopes. And while the material concessions it made to the workers were relatively small, the actual beneficiaries of the general strike were these “cadres.”

For a broad layer of union bureaucrats, 1968 marked the beginning of a social ascent that secured it well-endowed positions as well as political influence. Part of the Grenelle accord was the stabilisation and legal anchoring of the trade unions within industry, something upon which the government had insisted against the initial resistance of the employers’ associations.

It also guaranteed the continuation of joint administration of the social insurance system by unions and employers. The state-subsidised budgets of the various social insurance schemes were worth billions, securing constantly growing pay cheques for numerous union officials (including many prominent OCI members), even as the number of union members declined.

In addition, the unification of the splintered social democratic groups into the Socialist Party in 1969, and its electoral alliance with the

Communist Party, provided many functionaries with opportunities for political advancement. The “left,” discredited by its infamous role in the Algerian War and the Fourth Republic, was once again a political force. Its numerous posts at the local, regional and (after François Mitterrand’s election as president) national level proved very attractive.

After 1968, the OCI maintained its orientation towards the bureaucracy and adapted its political programme to its social ascent. By 1971, it no longer drew a distinction between “cadres” and “apparatuses,” courting the “apparatuses” as well. Mitterrand, whom the OCI had fiercely attacked in 1968, now appeared as a speaker at a large OCI rally celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Paris Commune. The “united class front” was no longer identified with the “central strike committee,” but with the electoral alliance between the Socialist and Communist parties.

The OCI even denounced some of the radical groups because they had put forward their own election candidates. In 1969, the OCI aggressively attacked the Pabloite Ligue Communiste Internationaliste (LCR) because it stood its own presidential candidate, Alain Krivine. This, the OCI claimed in its youth newspaper *Jeunesse révolutionnaire*, split “the ‘advanced’ workers from those workers who remain faithful to their organisations and parties,” and provided “ammunition for the bourgeoisie and the Stalinist apparatus.” In 1974, it condemned the participation in the election of Krivine and Arlette Laguiller of Lutte Ouvrière as “unprincipled candidacies against the united workers front.” [26]

In 1971, the OCI sent several members into the Socialist Party. Their task was not to develop a faction, but rather to support Mitterrand. The most successful of these OCI members, Lionel Jospin, ascended rapidly within the circle of advisors to the future president, ultimately succeeding him as chairman of the Socialist Party in 1981. At this time, Jospin was still a member of the OCI and met regularly for consultations with Pierre Lambert. Witnesses have since confirmed that Mitterrand was quite aware of the true political identity of his favourite. From 1997 to 2002, Jospin was the Socialist Party prime minister of France.

The OCI also conquered the “apparatus” of the third-largest French trade union federation, Force Ouvrière, and the student federation, UNEF. For many years, party members or close supporters stood at the head of both organisations. In 1986, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, for many years in charge of the OCI’s student work, moved directly from the central committee of the OCI into the leadership of the Socialist Party, taking 450 OCI members with him.

From 1985 onwards, the OCI began to cautiously dissociate itself from the Socialist Party, which had, from 1981, supplied the bourgeois republic with its president and formed its government, pursuing policies favouring the interests of big business. The OCI created the *Mouvement pour un Parti des travailleurs* (Movement for a Workers Party, MPPT). Although this was a pure creation of the OCI, it always stressed that the “Trotskyists” were only a minority inside the organisation, and that it was open to social democratic, Communist and anarcho-syndicalist currents. The MPPT was a reservoir of dissatisfied trade union and party bureaucrats who had fallen out with the leaderships of their own organisations or whose career advancement had been overlooked.

In 1985, the MPPT was renamed *Parti des travailleurs* (Workers Party—PT), and in June of 2008 this was dissolved into the *Parti ouvrier indépendant* (Independent Workers Party—POI). The slogan of this new party, “For Socialism, the Republic and Democracy,” is unmistakably in the tradition of right-wing social democracy. It speaks for those layers of the petty bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracy that have responded to the consequences of globalisation by promoting the national state. Its political work centres on agitation against the European Union, to which it does not counterpose a socialist Europe, but rather “a free and fraternal union of all the peoples of Europe.” A further POI slogan reads: “Yes to the sovereignty of the peoples of Europe.” The nationalist undertones of

these slogans are inescapable.

The roots of the centrism of the OCI

The centrist decline of the OCI began long before 1968. In June 1967, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), wrote a long letter to the OCI sharply criticising the policies that would determine its intervention in 1968. In particular, this letter pointed to the OCI’s increasing scepticism towards the viability of the International Committee and the significance of its struggle against Pabloism. [27]

One year previously, at the Third World Congress of the ICFI, the OCI had supported an amendment submitted by the SLL that insisted that the revisionist efforts to destroy the Fourth International had been successfully defeated. The congress insisted that the struggle against revisionism was not a diversion from more important tasks of party building. Rather, in its persistent defence of Marxism against Pabloite revisionism, the Trotskyist movement had fought the ideological pressure of the bourgeoisie and developed its revolutionary perspective. The struggle against Pabloite revisionism embodied the continuity of the Fourth International, the congress insisted, and was the necessary precondition for the building of a new proletarian leadership.

The amendment of the SLL was directed against the Spartacist tendency and the group Voix Ouvrière (today, Lutte Ouvrière), which participated as guests at the congress. They had interpreted the somewhat ambiguous title of the main resolution, “Reconstruction of the Fourth International,” to mean that the ICFI had been destroyed and that the struggle waged by the International Committee since 1953 against Pabloite revisionism lacked any theoretical or political significance. They were striving at a “reconstruction” of the Fourth International on the basis of a broad political amnesty, whereby the crucial programmatic questions that had led to the split of 1953 were simply set aside. When these two organisations saw that the International Committee opposed such a course of liquidation, they left the congress.

Faced with the hysterical hostility displayed by the Spartacist tendency and Voix Ouvrière against the ICFI’s historical struggle against the Pabloites, the OCI aligned itself with the SLL at the Third Congress and voted for its amendment. But it soon became clear that the OCI maintained its own considerable reservations.

In May 1967, it published a statement that openly questioned the achievements of the Third World Congress. Under the pretext of drawing a “balance sheet of the activity of the IC” since the Third World Congress and seeking “to open discussions necessary to resolve problems which the Third IC Conference was not able to discuss,” the OCI denied the continuity of the Fourth International. [28]

“Having declared the bankruptcy of the Pabloite leadership, we cannot simply state that the Fourth International continues purely and simply, with the IC taking the place of the Pabloite IS [International Secretariat],” the OCI document stated. It went on to declare that “all of the old leadership of the Fourth International capitulated under the pressure of imperialism and Stalinism.”

The “Pabloite crisis dislocated the Fourth International organisationally,” the OCI document continued, and “accumulated theoretical and political problems to be resolved.... We cannot shout ‘the King is dead, long live the King.’ We must open a discussion on these questions, a discussion which has not yet been thoroughly undertaken inside the IC.”

The document culminated in the statement: “Basically, the Fourth International was destroyed under the pressure of hostile class forces.... The IC is not the leadership of the Fourth International.... The IC is the motive force for the rebuilding of the Fourth International.” [29]

The document then presented Pabloism in a way that deviated completely from the previous analysis of the International Committee. The OCI did not accuse the Pabloites of revising the Marxist programme,

giving up the struggle for the political independence of the working class and instead seeking to liquidate the Fourth International. Instead, it accused the Pabloites of maintaining “the conception of a finished Fourth International and parties endowed with a pyramid-style hierarchy, with world congresses and an ultra-centralist structure.” The OCI went so far as to claim that Trotsky considered the Fourth International “neither as constructed nor as possessing a definitive structure.” [30]

Following the dispute with the Spartacist tendency and Voix Ouvrière, the British SLL was quick to grasp the significance of these words and sharply rejected the attempt by the OCI to challenge the role of the International Committee. “The future of the Fourth International is represented in the stored up hatred and experience of millions of workers for the Stalinists and reformists who betray their struggles,” it wrote. “The Fourth International must consciously fight for leadership to meet this need.... Only this struggle against revisionism can prepare the cadres to take the leadership of the millions of workers drawn into the struggle against capitalism and against the bureaucracy.... The living struggle against Pabloism and the training of cadres and parties on the basis of this struggle *was* the life of the Fourth International in the years since 1952” (emphasis in the original). [31]

The SLL did not limit itself to defending the historical continuity of the Fourth International. It demonstrated the link between the objective changes in the class struggle and the increasing scepticism of the OCI. Faced with a growing radicalisation of workers and young people all over the world and the numerical weakness of its own cadre, the OCI sought an opportunist short cut that would permit it to win influence, without conducting a laborious struggle for Marxist consciousness in the working class. This was the meaning of its allegation that the Pabloites were advocating an “ultra-centralist” International, its claim that Trotsky favoured an international without any firm structure, and its dwelling upon the organisational weaknesses and lapses of the International Committee after the Third World Congress.

The SLL therefore warned: “Now the radicalisation of workers in western Europe is proceeding rapidly, particularly in France.... There is *always* a danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by an adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leadership—i.e., to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent party and the Transitional Programme are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity of all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc” (emphasis in the original). [32]

The opportunist orientation of the OCI emerged particularly clearly in its interpretation of the “united front.” The OCI wrote: “Between 1944 and 1951 it was customary for the PCI [forerunner of the OCI] to send letters to the PB of the French CP to offer it a united front, organisation to organisation.” Given the numerical weakness of the PCI, such a policy was unrealistic because: “What sector did the PCI lead which could provide a basis for a united front between it and the French CP?”

“Now,” the OCI continued, “our policy of a united front is different. We express the demands of the advanced workers to the leaderships recognised by the working class (SFIO, French CP, union leaderships); it is necessary to break with the bourgeoisie and bring about the united class front.... We bring together and organise layers of youth, workers and militants to struggle for the united front. Through these battles for the united front we are building the OCI.” [33]

The SLL protested strongly against this conception of the “united front.” It insisted that the party “must fight openly on its own policies to challenge the opportunist and centrist political leaderships of the working class.” When “the united front is posed as an *alternative*, an easier way, in opposition to the fight for independent leadership,” it diverted workers

from the path of revolutionary leadership. “At this stage of the world crisis, at this stage of the fight against revisionism, to take all the emphasis away from the building of the Bolshevik Party is to open the door immediately to the full pressure of the class enemy. The so-called united class front is an expression of this dangerous course, a disastrous course,” the SLL warned (emphasis in the original). [34]

The SLL wrote that, essentially, the policy of the OCI meant: “The United Front first, and through this, the party second. We reject this.” It continued, “In the form proposed by the OCI, it is a preparation for liquidation, just as surely as was the Pabloite theory of ‘entry *sui generis*’.... The essence in both cases is the abandonment of the *central* importance of the building of the revolutionary party” (emphasis in the original). [35]

As we have seen, the OCI rejected the criticism made by the SLL. Instead, the OCI’s intervention in the revolutionary events of 1968 was based on the political line criticised by the SLL, and, as the SLL predicted, this orientation eventually led to its liquidation as a Trotskyist party.

The letter of June 19, 1967, was the last comprehensive criticism of the political line of the OCI by the British section. In the following years, the SLL failed to undertake any thorough analysis of the line of the OCI. It published a superficial series of articles on the events of May–June 1968 by Tom Kemp, which largely ignored the role played by the OCI. While the avoidance of public criticism could be justified in 1968 on the basis that the OCI was still officially a member of the International Committee, the SLL also failed to examine the roots of the centrist degeneration of the OCI after it split with the ICFI in 1971.

Such an investigation was vitally necessary to politically and theoretically arm the cadre of the International Committee. Its task would have been to go back well before the events of 1968 and 1966 to demonstrate how the centrist orientation of the OCI developed, and reveal the political problems that were bound up with such a degeneration. The SLL avoided this task, however, by declaring that the political differences involved were only secondary manifestations of philosophical differences, and that the concrete investigation of political questions could be replaced by an abstract discussion of epistemological problems. It justified its break with the OCI solely on the basis of the latter’s rejection of dialectical materialism as the Marxist theory of knowledge.

Behind this evasion on the part of the SLL were differences within its own ranks, which the leadership of the party did not want to discuss. An open discussion, provoked by the dispute with the OCI, could have disturbed the practical and organisational successes that the leadership considered to be more important than political clarification.

In the end, the SLL paid a high price for its refusal to examine the degeneration of the OCI. With the fundamental political problems unclarified, they were to find their way into the SLL. In 1974, the OCI was able to provoke substantial tensions inside the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP, successor to the SLL) through the figure of Alan Thornett, the leader of the SLL/WRP’s trade union work. In the resulting crisis, the WRP lost a large part of its membership inside the factories. By the end of the 1970s, the WRP had increasingly adopted an opportunist course in Britain similar to that of the OCI in France—above all, with regard to its relations with the trade unions, the Labour Party and nationalist movements in former colonial countries. Finally, in 1985, the WRP was torn apart by its internal contradictions.

To be continued

Notes:

25. “Le bonapartisme gaulliste et les tâches de l’avant-garde,” *La Vérité* No. 540, février–mars 1968

26. Quoted in Jean-Paul Salles, *La ligue communiste révolutionnaires (1968–1981)*, Rennes 2005, p. 98

27. “Reply to the OCI by the Central Committee of the SLL, June 19,

1967,” in *Trotskyism versus Revisionism*, Volume 5, London 1975, pp. 107–132

28. “Statement by the OCI, May 1967,” *ibid.*, p. 84

29. *ibid.* pp. 91–95

30. *ibid.* p. 92

31. “Reply to the OCI by the Central Committee of the SLL, June 19, 1967,” *ibid.* pp. 107–114

32. *ibid.*, pp. 113–114

33. “Statement by the OCI, May 1967,” *ibid.* p. 95

34. *ibid.* pp. 123–24

35. *ibid.* p. 125



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