SEP holds Paris meeting on 50 years since May 1968 general strike

Our reporters
5 June 2018

On Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of France held a public meeting in Paris, titled “50 years after the May 1968 general strike, how to mount a Trotskyist struggle against Macron?” Students, workers protesting President Emmanuel Macron’s austerity policies, and members of the Tamil community in Paris and surrounding cities attended the meeting, which also featured remarks from Barbara Slaughter of the SEP (Britain).

The meeting took place amid continuing strike action against Macron’s plans for the privatization of the railways, attacks on public sector wage levels and cuts to key social programs in order to fund tax cuts for the rich and the diversion of hundreds of billions of euros into military spending. The meeting began with a presentation by Alex Lantier on the 1968 general strike and its significance for the class struggles and the international radicalization of workers and youth today.

Lantier noted that the meeting aimed not only to commemorate a great historical event, but above all to clarify political questions of revolutionary strategy still posed to workers. He explained that May–June 1968 and the class struggle today cannot be understood outside of the history of the struggle against petty-bourgeois anti-Marxism inside the Trotskyist movement itself.

Petty-bourgeois forces that had broken with Trotskyism not only helped sabotage workers struggles in 1968 and afterwards. They also produced a false historical narrative and perspective that shaped what passed for “left” politics for 50 years, rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class and the struggle to build a Marxist vanguard party to lead its struggles. Based on this, they built social-democratic parties across Europe, from Greece’s PASOK to France’s Socialist Party (PS), which are now collapsing due to mass anger at their militarist, anti-worker policies.

Lantier cited ex-1968 student leaders Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was close to the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group that split from the Fourth International in 1948, and Alain Krivine of the Pabloite tendency now represented in France by the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), that broke from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1953. Today, both claim that the May 1968 general strike was not a revolutionary situation, and that students, not workers, played the more left-wing role at the time. Both downplay Stalinists’ role in betraying the general strike.

Exposing this as a false perspective based on historical lies, Lantier reviewed how young workers mobilized to defend students from police repression in early May, ultimately leading to the largest general strike in European history, as 10 million workers occupied their factories, bringing French capitalism to its knees. Newsreels from 1968 show workers demanding revolution, denouncing the unions for pushing to end the strike in exchange for wage concessions and finally fighting deadly police repression of the last factories to return to work.

Lantier also reviewed the role of the Organisation communiste internationaliste (OCI), then the French section of the ICFI, in the strike. While it helped trigger the general strike in several key factories where it had influence, it did so only on the perspective of organizing a prolonged strike, not struggling for workers to take political power. The OCI explicitly rejected the ICFI’s call for an attack on the Stalinist Communist Party’s (PCF) refusal to take power in order to expose them and pose the question of state power before the working class.

Instead, the OCI advanced a centrist demand for a

© World Socialist Web Site

central national strike committee, together with Stalinist and social-democratic unions, which paved the way for its break with Trotskyism and the ICFI in 1971, and its entry into the orbit of the newly-formed PS, a bourgeois party.

The 1968 general strike, finally, terrified France's petty-bourgeois intellectuals. Their rapid shift to the right and to explicit attacks on Marxism shaped the postmodernist intellectual climate. Lantier analyzed the boasts today of Pabloite and Maoist student leaders in 1968 that they worked with the Interior Ministry to control protests after police ceased to function in France's major cities. These student counter-revolutionaries, he noted, have since evolved far further to the right and now even explicitly support NATO wars in Libya and Syria.

Lantier concluded by noting that this experience vindicated the SEP (France)'s opposition to claims by forces like the NPA that they and the unions are struggling against Macron. A revolutionary struggle in the working class can break out only in opposition to the NPA and its political and trade union allies, as in 1968, because they are hostile to proletarian revolution. The basic revolutionary task, he stressed, is to build the SEP and the ICFI as the weapon to fight their attempt to smash up revolutionary struggles by the working class.

Slaughter spoke to stress the international character of the lessons of the French 1968 general strike, pointing to subsequent struggles across Europe like the 1974 miners' strike in Britain that brought down the conservative Heath government. She recalled how broad sections of workers received large wage increases, both in Britain and in France, as the ruling class tried to defuse growing social anger and revolutionary sentiment.

She also explained that after decades of globalization starting in the 1970s, not only does the ruling class not have the resources or ability to make such concessions, but the working class today is international as never before. Workers across Europe are mobilizing as French workers struggle against Macron, with rail workers on strike in both Britain and France. Pointing to the counter-revolutionary role of the trade unions and their political allies not only in France but internationally, she appealed the audience to help build the SEP and the ICFI.

This was followed by a lively question and answer session. Audience members asked about the role of the French trade unions and of the descendants of the OCI in the struggles against Macron today, and also about whether the 1968 events could be compared to previous revolutionary experiences in France, since no revolution actually took place in 1968.

SEP members explained the role of the French unions, who are supported by the descendants of the OCI in the so-called Independent Democratic Workers Party (POID). By calling limited, disunited strike actions by different sections of the work force against Macron, while accepting virtually all his social cuts, they are effectively dividing the working class and restricting it, while helping Macron write his social cuts into law. At the same time, they are overseeing a drastic lowering of wage levels via the mass resort to temp work in the factories.

SEP members also stressed that in 1968, the de Gaulle regime nearly collapsed, and the working class was on the verge of power: the fact that there was not a party capable of breaking the Stalinists' opposition and leading the working class to power did not mean there was no revolutionary crisis. It simply highlights the counter-revolutionary role of the PCF and the various Pabloite, anti-Trotskyist forces.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site