

**WORKERS'  
ACTION**



# Why We Need a General Strike

**20p**

# For a general strike to stop the Tories!

WHEN A reactionary Tory government has a stable parliamentary majority and is determined to use it to revoke many of the democratic rights and axe many of the social gains which the British working class has established over decades of effort and struggle, then the labour movement is faced with a sharp choice.

EITHER it will obey the 'law of the land' — the rules which the boss class make up, or rip up, according to their needs and what they think they can get away with at a given moment — and hope that a future sympathetic Labour government will mend the damage some time in the future.

OR it will fight back here and now, recognising no ruling class right to meddle with the trade unions, believing that any law which threatens strikers with jail for defending the interests of their class is a vile and villainous law, insisting that it will not sacrifice social services and the livelihoods of whole working class communities for the bosses' profits crisis. It will refuse to keep within the 'normal' channels of bourgeois politics and resort to direct, generalised industrial action to smash the Tory attempt to shackle the trade union movement.

Those were the choices the working class faced with the passing of the Industrial Relations Bill into law early in 1972.

These are the choices the working class faces now with Tory cuts, closures, and anti-picket laws.

The first course means bowing down here and now before blatant class legislation, accepting that politics (all issues of the overall running of society) is totally and uncontrollably in the hands of the bosses, and that major issues between the capitalists and the workers are decided only through elections timed to its convenience by a bosses' government. That course is the traditional social democratic one of slavish legalism and rigid confinement to the rhythms, norms and political processes of a political system deliberately designed to keep control for the employers and their governments and to take all initiative, all political direct action, away from the working class.

Under these rules even the most favourable outcome from an election, a Labour victory, would not necessarily produce actual victory; Labour MPs would not be under the direct control of the workers who elected them; and after all, it was a Labour government which started the process that led to the Industrial Relations Act, with In Place of Strife in 1969.

Without the great industrial struggles of 1972, 1973 and 1974, which defeated and drove out the Heath government, a Labour government, when one was eventually returned, might not have ripped up the Tories' anti-trade union laws.

And, acting on the orders of the International Monetary Fund, the 1974-9 Labour government did introduce sweeping cuts in social services and help to push up unemployment to one and a half million.

In 1972, the second course meant challenging the Government there and then, refusing to let the Act operate as planned, insisting that the arena of struggle be one chosen by the working class, where we have the strength and the power to act urgently and directly and to challenge the right of the government to make such laws. That meant direct action, at its highest level a general strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act: necessarily a full industrial offensive. Anything less, though it might cause setbacks for the Government, force it to temporise and maybe even finally to look for a 'compromise' with the trade union leaders, would not cleanly rip up the Act and inflict the crippling defeat on the government which the class was capable of inflicting, and which it was in its interest to inflict.

The rank and file militants of the labour movement reacted with violent anger to this Tory Industrial Star Chamber. Instinctively they were for an industrial offensive against the Act and the government. Just as the Act became law the miners' strike showed the working class what tremendous

elemental power it possesses when it chooses to rouse itself in action. The cynical juggling with 'the law' by the middle class reactionaries around Heath (the Official Solicitor act, etc.) dispelled for many workers the mystique of legality and exposed the class interest of the bosses behind the aged and venerable institutions of the British state.

Throughout 1972 the logic of the class struggle, the drive of the militants, was towards a general industrial offensive, a general strike, recognising this as the only course of action. In confrontation after confrontation successive brass fronts of the Tory government were shown to be mounted on feet of clay. And the strength of the working class was shown to be beyond the power of the government to control — even with the help of foot-dragging union leaders. The powerful flame of direct action that flared in July when the five dockers were jailed and which forced a humiliating retreat on the government, demonstrated that mobilisation for a general strike could have — at least — smashed the Act and, probably, the government too. But the release of the five halted the strike wave before it had reached the stage of a full-scale mobilisation such as in France in 1968 (which it gave every indication of doing).

Although the Industrial Relations Act and the National Industrial Relations Court remained in operation until mid-1974, their operations were crippled.

The growing movement against cuts, the steelworkers' angry revolt against closures, and the support given them by the miners, and the campaign against the anti-union 'Employment Bill', again put the general strike on the agenda as the best weapon the labour movement will have to beat back the Tory offensive. The opportunities opened up by the 1979 Labour conference and the fight to really make the Labour Party an instrument of working class politics are today a central concern of every serious militant. But it would be as false now as in 1972 to wait for the election of a new Labour Government. The strength that we have here and now and can mobilise at will, is industrial strength. We must use it and begin to discuss the implications of using it.

The article *Stop the Tory Blitz* poses the tasks for today: it is reprinted from *Socialist Organiser*, January 1980. *Dare to Fight* (reprinted from the paper *Workers' Fight*, 25 May 1972) summarises the theory and experience of the general strike. The article on May 1968 (from *Workers' Fight* magazine, no.7, summer 1968) analyses the greatest recent general strike. Finally, *Why not 'General Strike to kick the Tories out'* (from *Workers' Fight*, 12 January 1974) argues that to focus the general strike on 'Kick the Tories out', though apparently bold and radical, is actually misleading.

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## workers' ACTION

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ation — revolution would become a real possibility. It may indeed turn out that the general strike brings no more than a change in government. But the revolutionary who accepts this in advance is ruling out the revolutionary potential of the general strike, as well as ignoring the experience of the general strike in history. S/he is cancelling out the activity of revolutionaries, and the slogans they raise, as a factor in how things actually develop.

To argue that a general strike for a minimalist goal of changing the government is the best slogan amounts to adventurist squandering and trifling with the energy of the working class. It is to advocate a giant mobilisation of the working class — and to chop it off in advance at a relatively limited objective. To take such a line in an actual strike would be to lose the possibility of helping to deepen the general strike along its anti-capitalist logic. To advocate it now would be to abandon attempts to build on the present militancy; it would be a straight transformation of the revolutionaries who advocated it into Labourites — militant Labourites, but Labourites all the same.

We must break from the traditional British fear of linking politics to industrial action. We believe, however, that it is crucial to understand that direct action is at all times primary, more important for revolutionaries than parliamentary considerations. The 'General Strike for a Labour government' policy reduces the most tremendous industrial direct action possible — General Strike — to an auxiliary of parliamentary politics.

General Strike is industrial action of a necessarily political quality. It may not realise its revolutionary potential. But it is revolutionary to box it in in advance in the framework of parliamentary politics is irresponsible. A General Strike for limited goals can be victorious, or can lead to a retreat, or can develop in an open-ended way. But a General Strike which poses for itself the goal of overthrowing the government had better be either the prelude to insurrection or resign itself to a quick electoralist collapse.

To mock at an implied call for insurrection like that of *Red Weekly* is not at all to deny the revolutionary possibilities in a general strike. What is wrong with *Red Weekly* is that by raising an empty slogan it contributes to the creation of a weapon that in the hands of reformists and reactionaries would help prevent a real General Strike from developing towards a situation where an insurrection might not be ludicrous to contemplate at all. The slogan of changing the government would be taken from the hands of the ultra-lefts and used as a weapon of electoralist derailment by the ruling class. They would use electoral calls to neutralise the strike, offering the change the government in the time-honoured traditional way — elections. Which would be something actually very trivial compared with the real possibilities of a general strike.

Linking 'General Strike' with changing the government now, in advance, would lead either to revolutionaries lining up with reformists or to a panic change of slogans (something *Red Weekly* does on average every six months — never, alas, with much noticeable improvement).

*Red Weekly's* slogan is cheap ultra leftism with an as yet hidden right wing content which a general strike would very quickly reveal. 'General strike to kick the Tories out' is pop-

ular with many militants now. The responsibility of Marxists, however, is to actually think problems through — not to reflect and mimic even fundamentally healthy but muddled 'gut' reaction.

Better to link industrial action and politics rationally, taking account of the possible development of a General Strike. We pose the general strike for specific goals — against the Industrial Relations Act, against any new wage freeze — while preserving the idea that the use of a general strike, for any reason, however apparently limited, would open up a new situation in which the question of government would be posed in a different and more fundamental light. Here is the root of the paradox that the apparently more limited goals (smashing the Act) do not threaten to collide with the revolutionary logic of the general strike once begun, whereas the apparently more advanced goal (Tories out) would immediately come into head-on collision with that logic.

Today's 'advanced' slogan would be transformed into a weapon of the reformists — as in France in 1968. There is every reason to believe that a general strike in Britain in the period ahead would be an angry offensive of tremendous power, probably leading to factory seizures — and as in France in 1968, probably an unwillingness to settle even for big concessions. It is the duty of revolutionaries to orientate towards these possibilities.

Finally, not the least lesson of France 1968 is that even such a titanic explosion cannot simply be translated into votes at an election. The reformists who tried to cash in on the strike got less votes than the numbers on strike.

The strike scared the middle classes behind the Gaullist 'Party of Order', and many strikers, reacting with bitterness at the betrayal of the 'Socialist' and 'Communist' leaders, didn't vote. However desirable a general election is, one that follows a general strike is unlikely to favour the anti Government party once the strike is over. A General Strike is not a tool for exerting electoral pressure!

There are many other questions on the General Strike that need to be discussed — for example, in relation to the Labour Party, the need to make specific demands on the Labour leaders on pain of giving them an entirely free hand in the struggles ahead.

In fact the *Red Weekly* slogan, with the whole emphasis on bringing down the Government, is based on a 'scenario' mechanically modelled on 1917 in Russia. Logically they should call for a Workers' Government. Quite rightly they refuse to peddle the illusion that a Labour Government would foreseeably be a workers' government. But in true sectarian style they go from this to implicit refusal to relate to the Labour Party at all except for a vague acceptance that getting the Tories out might mean putting Labour in. Refusing to make even limited specific demands on the Labour Party, they are totally passive towards the party of the trade unions. They are left with a scenario with a great hole in the middle — the lack of any visible working class governmental alternative to the Tories — unless they have quiet hopes of forming an IMG government soon!

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# Why not 'General Strike to kick the Tories out'?

ALREADY in 1980 the slogan 'General Strike to kick the Tories out' has become popular, both on workers' demonstrations and in the left press (*Socialist Press* and, more cautiously, *Socialist Challenge*). In 1970-4 that slogan was popular, too. First taken up by the Socialist Labour League (now 'Workers' Revolutionary Party'), it was later brought to the fore by *Red Weekly* (forerunner of *Socialist Challenge*). But in the great struggles of 1972 and 1974, the apparently radical slogan was disorienting and confusing for the socialists who took it up. In July 1972, the Socialist Labour League argued that the general strike which promised to develop out of the mass protest at the jailing of the Pentonville Five dockers "must not be lifted until the General Election when a Labour Government pledged to socialist policies can be elected". In other words, they directly argued for the 'ballot box trap' which served the French ruling class so well in 1968, and would have served the British ruling class, too, to demobilise a general strike.

*Red Weekly* and the International Marxist Group tried to give 'General Strike to kick the Tories out' a different content, when they took it up in late 1973 and early 1974. They talked about "real workers' elections" and about organising workers to march together from the factories to the ballot boxes — tried all sorts of other ways to make "kick the Tories out" appear the same as revolution — and when after polling day the Tories hesitated a couple of days before resigning, they dived into fantasy politics with a broadsheet calling for a General Strike to Finish Off the Tories and for the Labour Party to proclaim itself the Government.

In fact, the slogan 'General Strike to kick the Tories' could only be muddled and mystifying, or a very far from radical slogan, a call for a General Strike linked with a call for a general election as a safety-valve.

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WHY NOT link the call for a general strike with the question of government, by calling for a general strike to force the Tories out? This sounds very radical. But it is actually a snare. No government would simply resign in the middle of a general strike — it would fight and manoeuvre and scheme, in the interest of the continuation of the capitalist system, to demobilise the strike.

Therefore, either such a call is a call for armed insurrection in the course of a general strike to force the government out (or overthrow the system) — and since neither the working class nor the revolutionaries are anywhere near this possibility, that would be raving ultra left nonsense.

Or else it means a general strike to force the Tories to call an election.

In the circumstances this is all it can mean concretely. Thus, the call for a general strike to force the Tories out is really just another, mystified, way of calling for a general strike to get a general election. But in a general strike, the last thing revolutionaries would call for would be a general election, which would just be a trick to get the strike called off (as happened in France in May 1968).

Faced with the real alternatives of an unfolding general strike, this slogan would reveal its real, right wing meaning. Its advocates, if consistent, would actually help the government to get off the hook as soon as it was prepared to offer an election.

To kick out the Tories and replace them with a Labour government is of major importance now. But if a general strike, however it started, began to reach even some of its revolutionary potential, not least the mobilisation of millions of workers in direct action, then kicking out one capitalist government to be replaced by a slightly less obnoxious

one would become relatively trivial, compared with the possibilities that would exist for overthrowing capitalism.

Mystifying things with a slogan which has a number of possible meanings, none of them spelled out, can only serve those who benefit from muddle and confusion on the part of the socialists and militants. In reality *Red Weekly's* slogan means neither General Election, nor insurrection — but empty phrasemongering.

The slogan can be rationalised by opting for the reformist variant: General Strike for a Labour Government.

This rests on a cold calculation with the different factors — General Strike, Government, election, insurrection — as if it were all a matter of known and fixed quantities interacting mechanically. Insurrection is not an immediate possibility; replacing the Tories by Labour would be a step forward; therefore — General Strike for a Labour government.

This misses what it is essential to understand about the General Strike: that it is not fixed, given, a stable measured action — but something which develops. Politics now is limited and defined, by the restricted level of working class involvement, within bourgeois confines. A General Strike would transform this by a giant explosion of direct action. How deep and how explosive the strike is, and how far it is allowed to develop the mobilisation of the working class — that is what will establish in action what is really possible in a General Strike. To see a General Strike as just a bargaining counter in the current business of politics is to miss its revolutionary potential.

A general strike involves mobilisation of the whole working class on a gigantic scale. The strikers would begin to make decisions not normally in the province of workers. The very fact of a great strike compels this. A vast layer of the class would be involved in meetings, discussions, decision-making, of the sort that strike committees normally have to concern themselves with, and far beyond.

What, if any, supplies should be moved? Which, if any, sections of workers should work? What transport should move? Whose transport? How to deal with scabs, including the army. And so on. In short a general strike is a vast arousing of the class's initiative, determination, and creativity (of the sort, for example, which threw up the flying picket idea).

The spread of the strikes would create a need for coordination on regional and maybe national level of the various strike committees, of linking together the regional committees of different trade unions, and so on.

The whole tendency of such committees in the course of leading the strike would be to take more and more control — often against the pressure of national trade union leaders. In 1926 strike committees in Co. Durham effectively took control of their area.

Such committees can grow beyond just being strike committees and develop into councils in which the working class could organise and express itself politically in a way quite different from anything possible when control is fully in the hands of the bourgeois state and Parliament. The feelings, grievances, aspirations of the working class, going beyond the issues of the strike, would begin to emerge and find expression. The explosive discontent which does exist now and which in fact makes a general strike a real possibility in Britain today would burst out.

Even if the strength of reformism within such councils allowed the bourgeoisie to survive, call elections, and so on, at least a period could result when the bourgeoisie would not be in full control, and in which the working class would learn enormously.

To the degree that revolutionaries have influence — and gain influence, in the favourable conditions of mass mobilis-

# STOP THE TORY BLITZ

HOW CAN the labour movement stop the full-scale offensive launched by the Thatcher government since May 1979 and due to continue and escalate?

In response to cuts, closures, and anti-picket laws, the labour movement is beginning to see *general strike action* as the way to fight back.

The Wales TUC general council, on December 19th, called on all workers in Wales to strike from January 21st unless the steel closures were halted. Under pressure from the British TUC, the Wales TUC has postponed the indefinite strike call to March 10th, and then again to the indefinite future. But the response to a one-day general strike in South Wales, on January 28th, showed the will to fight is there.

The same conviction that general action is necessary to stop the Tories led the South Yorkshire Association of Trades Councils and the South Yorkshire Labour Parties to call for a general strike against cuts in their area for one day on February 18th.

On November 28th, 60,000 struck work to demonstrate against the cuts, responding to the TUC and Labour Party call. On September 13th, many workers joined a borough-wide strike and day of action against the cuts in Hackney, East London. They too saw the need for all-round class action to counter the all-round Tory offensive.

Now many labour movement organisations are calling on the TUC to make the May 14th day of action a one-day general strike — and organising in their own areas to make sure that it is a general strike.

A general strike could pull together the partial responses so far — none of them quite coming to grips with the scale of the Tory offensive — into a mighty power. In place of the hivering and dithering which has characterised labour movement resistance to the Tories so far, we would have full mobilisation of our strength against their full mobilisation of their strength.

The growing murmur of general strike moves indicates that, within six months of the return of a Tory government to power, the labour movement had to begin to rediscover the direct industrial action reflexes it learned to use as the only reliable political weapon to hand in 1969-74.

It is still only beginning, and there have even been some setbacks recently. But the hard facts of a Tory assault in the midst of gathering economic crisis must inevitably drive the labour movement to rediscover the powerful experience of using industrial action directly for political ends which it built up in the struggle against In Place of Strife and then in the battles against Heath's Tories.

Now, even more than in the period after June 1970, we face a vicious and reactionary Tory government with the knuckledusters on for the working class. Motivated by middle class spite and blind bourgeois economics, and driven on by the desperate state of the British economy, they are making the working class pay for British capitalism's crisis and for the Tories' quack solutions.

At the same time, their anti-union laws strike a first blow aimed to weaken the ability of the labour movement to resist and defend itself.

They build on the policies of the Wilson/Callaghan governments and add their own vicious twists. Encouraged by an election victory which was handed to them by the right wing policies of Callaghan's government, they have moved to make the third attempt in a decade to shackle the trade union movement.

Now — exactly as in 1970 and after — we face a militant class struggle Tory government, firmly entrenched behind a large and stable Parliamentary majority and backed by all the military and police power of the British state. They are determined to make war on the standards, conditions, and organisations of the working class. In their attack on our class they will use to the full their legal right to make the laws and control the finances of the state.

Either the labour movement will allow this Tory government with its programme of blatant ruling-class legislation to rule and administer society in the interests of the class they represent — even to the extent of the movement obeying anti trade union laws in the hope that, maybe, five years from now, perhaps a Labour government will be voted in which may undo some of the Tory damage.

Or the movement will fight back here and now, recognising no Tory or ruling class right to meddle with the trade unions, to cut into the standards which the working class has won in decades of activity, or to destroy whole working class communities through closure policies. It will refuse to keep within the normal channels of official politics. It will resist the Tories' attacks by every means necessary.

For a start, that means the labour movement must break off collaboration with the Government, and use the strength and power which we have now and can choose to unleash, irrespective of who has the majority in Parliament. That means using industrial action to stop the Tories in their tracks. Just like we did last time round.

It is because these are the only alternatives here and now and for the foreseeable future that sections of the labour movement have begun to raise demands for an industrial offensive and talk of a general strike is again heard.

To be sure, talk of the need for the 'big industrial battalions' to go into action against the Tories can be used as a cop out by people who want to avoid a fight here and now, in their own areas. Some left councillors excused their own unwillingness to refuse to carry out cuts last summer with such talk. Joe Gormley called for a general strike in 1973 as a basis for arguing against the miners alone going into action.

It is necessary to fight now and on every front, at the same time as we argue for and prepare for general industrial action.

The labour movement needs to develop and organise round an overall strategy to stop the Tories. For Thatcher can be stopped, just as Heath was stopped.

In the first place, we need to spell out and win support in the labour movement for this immediate objective — to stop the Tories, to force them to retreat, to defeat their attacks, to stop their closure policies, decimating working class communities, to make them abandon their cuts policies, to break

their will, to thwart their plans, and to drive them from office as soon as possible.

The outrageous anti working class politics of this Government demand from the entire political and industrial labour movement — from every section of it which claims to represent the working class interest, all the way through to the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Shadow Cabinet — a refusal to collaborate with the Tory government and its agents, backed up by offensive actions to kick out the Government.

The movement must demand that its leaders really fight the Tories, and really fight for Labour Party policies. And we must be prepared to break with and get rid of those who refuse to fight.

Such a policy, accompanied by a Labour and trade union campaign to explain the issues and to mobilise the working class, could have a tremendous effect.

Despite some setbacks, industrial action, or talk of industrial action, against cuts and closures, is already beginning to be a normal response. We need to generalise such responses, to link up the different battalions in conflict with the Tory government. In short, we need to concentrate the power of the labour movement.

A general strike could at the very least force the Tories to change course on trade union laws, on closures, on cuts, or on all of these policies.

In July 1972 the Government quickly changed its mind and released the five dockers jailed under the Industrial Relations Act, in response to a spontaneous strike wave of a few hundred thousand workers and the mere threat by the TUC to stage a one-day general strike.

In theory, if its Parliamentary majority held, as it probably would, the Tory government might remain in office after such a defeat. In fact, though, defeat would put the skids under the government and probably drive it from office.

And the level of self-mobilisation needed to allow the working class to defeat this entrenched government would open up tremendous possibilities beyond the limited objectives of defeating Tory policies or even of defeating the Tory government itself.

A general strike is more serious than a sectional strike. It challenges directly and openly the bosses' right to make and enforce the laws. Implicitly, it poses the question of who is master in the country, and explicitly it challenges the automatic right of the ruling class to control the general affairs of society.

If the Tories retain power after such a defeat, they would quickly counter-attack. So indeed would a right wing Labour government based on Parliament and committed to the capitalist system, should such a government be installed as the result of the working class offensive. (The 1974-9 Labour government continued the build-up of police power started under Heath).

But that would be the round after this one. The job now is to win this round. The experience before 1974 showed us how we can win it. After we win, we will be stronger to face any counter-attacks.

The situation now differs from that of 1971 and 1972. There were 27 million strike days in the first ten months of 1979, more than in the whole of 1972 (24 million). The mood in the working class is different, however.

The demand for a general strike is still only beginning to make its way in the working class.

So the role of socialist militants must be to formulate the lessons and experiences of 1969-74 and pose the need for a campaign to stop the Tories by every means necessary, specifically by industrial action.

Concretely, what can we do?

- Support all moves towards general strike action, like the Wales TUC's or the moves for May 14th. Demand that the TUC supports them, and organises a general strike.

- Argue within the unions and the Labour Party for a full scale offensive to *stop the Tories*, using the strength we have here and now, refusing collaboration.

Demand the Parliamentary Labour leaders start a campaign of Parliamentary obstruction. Demand they pledge themselves to complete repeal of the Tory anti-union law

and to restoration of all Tory cuts when they return to office.

Demand the TUC leaders break off their cosy chats with the Tories in the National Economic Development Council and dozens of other governmental and industrial 'participation' bodies. No talks on the anti-union Bill: start a fight-back! Demand the TUC withdraws its Guidelines on picketing.

Demand Labour councils defy the Tory cuts.

We must call for the leaders of the trade union movement and the National Executive of the Labour Party to launch such a campaign to stop the Tories, including preparation for a General Strike. We must be prepared to fight to remove Parliamentarians, councillors, and trade union leaders who collaborate and cooperate with the Tories.

- We ourselves — the militants, the socialists — must prepare on a local level, now. A General Strike will be won through the network of workers' committees and organisations, most of which exist already as part of the routine self-defence and self-betterment of the working class: stewards' committees, combine committees, etc. We must transfuse into these bodies the urgency of preparing for a head-on clash with the Tories, and equip them with the necessary democratic structure and flexibility to mobilise millions of workers for that clash.

- We must build and renew links between the Labour Parties and the trade union organisation in the workplaces. We must build workplace Labour Party branches.

- We must fight to rearm the labour movement politically with socialist policies, with working-class demands. The labour movement must *in fact* represent a real alternative to the Tories, so that there can be no repeat of the tragic and dismal experience of 1974 and after — when a Labour government, returned as a result of a huge wave of working class militancy, carried through essentially Tory policies and demobilised and disheartened its supporters.

JOHN O'MAHONY



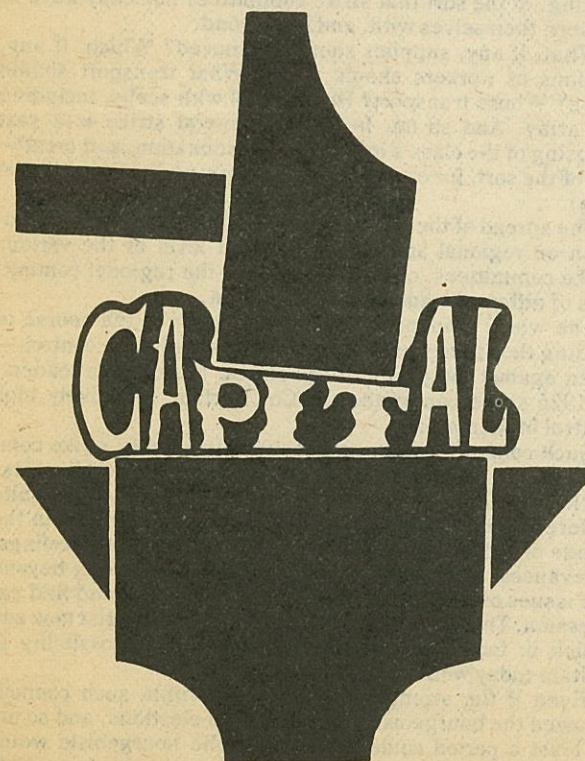
satisfaction. Had a revolutionary momentum been maintained, they could have been taken along even to the point of struggle for power. But many may now rally behind the entrenched Party of Order in disillusion with the Party of Revolution which did not even dare put forward a policy.

Again let the Paris correspondent of the *Economist*, who shames the pseudo-Marxist apologists of King Street, explain: 'A general strike is a tactic for seizing power, not for persuading voters. If the Left had seized power, it would now be the new order itself; but it stopped half way — after frightening many floating voters amongst the middle classes' (8.6.68).

If they lose the elections they will naturally say it proves there was no revolutionary situation. The point however is that to let capitalism canalise revolutionary energy into the rigged channels of its institutions; or to see 'Revolution' only through the reversed telescope lens of the bosses' legality; or to try to filter an explosive mass revolutionary ferment through the slit in a bourgeois ballot box, is to forego forever the prospect of workers' power. These institutions are specifically designed to prop up capitalism — not to knock it down.

## MASS STRIKE MEANS REBIRTH

Nevertheless the mass strike, the self-mobilisation of the masses, is the 'natural' regenerative process of a stagnant labour movement. Writing in 1936 of the French workers' upsurge then, Trotsky's description of this process is still alive with meaning for us today: 'The strike has everywhere and in every place pushed the most thoughtful and fearless workers to the fore. To them belongs the initiative. They are still acting cautiously, feeling the ground under their feet. The vanguard detachments are trying not to rush ahead so as not to isolate themselves. The echoing and re-echoing answers of the hindmost ranks to their call gives them new



courage.

*'The roll call of the class has become a trial self-mobilisation. The proletariat was itself in greatest need for this demonstration of its strength. The practical successes won, however precarious they may be, cannot fail to raise the self confidence of the masses to an extraordinary degree, particularly among the most backward and oppressed strata.'*

*'That leaders have come forward in the industries and in the factories is the foremost conquest of the first wave. The elements of local and regional staffs have been created. The masses know them. They know one another. Real revolutionaries will seek contact with them.'*

*'Thus the first self-mobilisation of the masses has outlined and in part brought forward the first elements of revolutionary leadership. The strike has stirred, revitalised and regenerated the whole colossal class organism. The old organisational shell has by no means dropped away. On the contrary, it still retains its hold quite stubbornly. But under it the new skin is already visible.'*

SEAN MATGAMNA

## POSTSCRIPT

Of course the Gaullists won. Their opponents got no thanks at all for allowing the elections to take place: and they failed to win the electoral support of many petty bourgeois and even some workers who had actively supported the movement in May. Any party which abandons its fortified position to fight on its opponents' ground is bound to get the worst of all possible worlds.

The Gaullists fought on a slogan of Never Again — cashing in on the inability of the workers' parties in May to go beyond the necessary anarchy of the strikes. And this slogan appeal to many who during the strikes had seen the anarchy as a prelude to something better, but who in disillusionment now saw them only as an interlude of anarchy leading to possible repression.

The CP and Left Federation, remaining silent at the CRS re-occupation of the Sorbonne and the brutality of the police, took the same line and thus endorsed the Gaullist propaganda: 'Keep the Gaullists and there may be a bigger explosion later!'

But the Lefts' respectability was easily outdone by the persuasion of fear so lavishly used by the Gaullists. 'Hopelessly torn and bewildered by the revolutionary crisis', the Left 'was permanently on the defensive, trying to prove that it had nothing to do with riots and barricades. Whether this was true or not turned out to be irrelevant. As a champion of established law and order M. Waldeck Rochet could not compete with M. Pompidou' [*Economist*, 29.6.68]. Finally the CP and Left Federation succeeded in getting less votes than the number on strike in May. Only the small opportunist PSU of Mendes-France, which defended the students, made any gains. Many workers and petty bourgeois who could have been led forward in May step by step in conflict with capitalism and its state — given revolutionary leadership — were simply not ready in the cold anticlimactic atmosphere of the elections to vote for those who had stood in their way. Many didn't bother to vote at all. On the other hand, the Right and Centre rallied to de Gaulle. The CP lost 39 seats out of 73, and the LF 61 out of 121.

The parliamentary cretins foresaw nothing of this. They were trying to force the heat of revolution onto the 'cross' square of a ballot paper. Instead they succeeded only in hurling back the advance of the masses and alienating from revolutionary activity many who were beginning to be educated in class action. Revolutionary parties which sell out revolutions rarely win the elections or plebiscites called by those in power to put the seal on their victory!

Jew"; in reply the students and young workers took up the slogan, "We are all German Jews", and young Algerians, making a distinction which many 'lefts' have yet to perceive, between Jews and the reactionary State of Israel, chanted that they too were 'German Jews').

Having accepted the elections, the CP again ignored all but bread-and-butter issues. It explained to its militants, as it did the latest somersault, 'We have not changed — life has'! Meanwhile, the police began to break up the strikes, starting with the post offices, radio, TV and fuel. The CP stood on the side-lines — warning against 'ultra-left provocateurs'. The *Morning Star* reported as follows, on June 1, the statement of the CPF: "[it] warned today that General de Gaulle had threatened to use 'other means than the elections'... Yet 'the Communists would enter the electoral battle with confidence and [the CPF] called on everyone to guard against giving any opening to provocations wherever they might come from... Cancellation of last year's social security cuts will not now be part of the present settlement, because the government has said the issue should be discussed in the new National Assembly'".

Lack of shame or self-consciousness is one major asset these people possess!

Thereafter the CP, guided no doubt by the notorious injunction of their late leader Thorez that "one must know how to end a strike", energetically set about getting the workers back to work, splitting up their unity (by instructing everyone to return to work as soon as their separate settlements were made) and isolating the hard core to face the now increasing violence of the police, which was to result in several deaths. The Party's mind was on the coming elections, as that 'ultra-left' high Tory paper the *Sunday Telegraph* put it: "Now there can be elections. The energy and violence generated by the upheaval can be canalised into a campaign for votes" (2.6.68). That is, of course, pretty much what Balanger said in the first place.

## WAS REVOLUTION POSSIBLE?

Between May 16th and 30th, as we have seen, and even after that, there was a mass working class movement openly striving for more than just wage concessions. There was active support from the petty bourgeoisie in town and country. (Western farmers offered the workers cheap food for the duration). The state was almost totally paralysed — even the police wavered.

Objectively, had the movement developed in accordance with its own drives, the ruling class would no longer have been able to rule, and in fact their rule was momentarily suspended. There was a deep, long-germinating national crisis, an eruption of 20 years of working class frustration. The deepest layers of the normally unorganised masses were brought into action by the struggle. Conditions were uniquely favourable for a relatively easy takeover by the workers.

One element was lacking to transform a revolutionary upsurge into a revolution: the 'subjective' factor. The organisations of the working class of all shades and stripes held it back, derailed it, split it up and allowed the bourgeoisie to ride out the storm, regain the power of its political limbs and re-establish its suspended control. The workers' organisations were not merely passive or negative, but actively hostile to the interests and the drives of the working class. The decisive role in maintaining the bourgeoisie in power fell once again to the Communist Party of France.

The Paris correspondent of *The Economist* described it thus: "The French Communists did everything in their power to control the revolutionary wave, and, once the General had made it plain that he would not abdicate, to direct it back into electoral channels. On the night of May 30th there was a risk of confrontation between the armed forces and the army of labour. Next morning the risk had vanished because the army of strikers had been dispersed. M. Seguy the boss of the Communist-dominated CGT, could not demobilise his followers. But, followed by other trade union leaders, he divided his troops into separate battalions, each seeking additional bargains, particularly in wages, from its employers. What had begun to look like a frontal attack on

the state, rapidly became a series of individual skirmishes. "And L'Humanité, the Communist daily, started to use the language of an election campaign... the Communist decision to call a retreat and the General's speech marked the turning point in the crisis. They were more decisive than the big Gaullist demonstration that followed the General's speech on May 31st" (8.6.68).

Instead of focusing the movement of the workers on the goal of workers' power, the most extreme demand the CP dared make was for a change of bourgeois regime, removing the mild bonaparte de Gaulle and putting in Mitterand as president and Mendes-France (premier when the Algerian war started) as prime minister.

Instead of workers' soviets, they put pressure on the bosses' parliament (which pressure drove the centre to the right). Instead of revolutionary leadership, traitorous manoeuvring to frustrate the workers' desires. ("Behind the smokescreen of public polemics, M. Pompidou and France's Communist leaders established a secret link at the very beginning of the strikes. Messages were exchanged every day and it is known who the contacts were and how they operated": *New Statesman*, 7.6.68).

Instead of unity of workers, students, and farmers in action, deliberate attempts to divide them and confine 'unity' to the parliamentary tops. Instead of a workers' militia, the most cringing self-abasement and cowardice before even the threat of the violence which it was by no means certain de Gaulle could inflict. Instead of being the left party, the CP and the CGT were usually to the right of both the Catholic unions and Force Ouvrière — and even of the bourgeois radical 'socialist' Mendes-France. And the final infamy: the government's ban on the Trotskyist, Maoist and Anarchist groups which sparked the movement didn't even call forth a whisper of protest from the CP or CGT.

What could have been a great revolution looks like ending as a lost election, with the bourgeoisie and de Gaulle strengthened. There is a cruel dialectic during such periods in the relationship of the three main classes in society. The petty bourgeois rallied to the workers, propelled by their own dis-



"The vote changes nothing. The struggle continues"

# Dare to fight

THE DEAD weight of 1926 lies heavy still, half a century later, on the British Labour movement. The bitter memories of that defeat and its terrible aftermath amidst the conditions of the Great Slump have bred a deep distrust for the idea of the general strike weapon. 1926 appears as a great pitched battle and a great defeat — which indeed it was. And the conclusion in many people's minds is that the workers should avoid pitched battles.

But 1926 is not the only general strike that ever occurred. There is a very rich arsenal of Marxist thinking on the general strike and an even richer experience up to the present time. Here we attempt no more than a brief discussion of some of the issues raised by the immediate situation of the working class in Britain today.

The Tory government grows bolder with each failure of the union leaders to react to its challenge. Faced with the escalating legal sanctions, only a counter-escalation by the workers' side could hope to smash the Industrial Relations Act.

The only immediate response possible is generalised economic action — that is, a 'general strike' use of the social and industrial strength of the working class. (The perspective of a Labour government to repeal the Act in the long term — if that: remember In Place of Strife — means acquiescing to the bosses now.)

Only the continuation of the fight to mobilise on the industrial front, at the sharpest point of the struggle, while all the time striving to generalise the industrial action, can now be an alternative to abandoning all hope of smashing the Industrial Relations Act.

A general strike means a head-on collision between the practical power of the bosses and their state, and the usually latent social and economic power of the working class. The collision could lead to a passing over from a limited mobilisation of the class for limited goals (such as the smashing of the Industrial Relations Act) to a full scale political confrontation in which the workers' struggle is extended into a conscious struggle against the state and capitalist society itself, ending either in serious defeat or decisive victory.

Such a contest is always implicit in a general strike.

Clearly then the general strike is not a weapon to be played with, and the call for it is not a slogan to be raised light-mindedly. If a strike, especially a sit-in strike, poses the question of power in a single factory, the general strike poses it in the whole country. If a strike can lead to limited clashes with the police, then a general strike can lead to full scale confrontation and civil war.

The idea of the general strike was first conceived in Chartist times, in the 1830s, as the ultimate weapon of the working class. The Great Holiday, as it was called, was to be the full scale proof of the ultimate dependence of society on the working class.

The idea entered the arsenal of the Social Democratic parties at the end of the 19th century. It was then seen as the ultimate threat the labour movement could make in order to stop wars, force a general franchise etc. And it was used, for example, in Sweden in 1893.

History shows us two basic types of general strike or mass strike: those called by the official leaders of the workers' organisations, and those which well up spontaneously.

The period of the decisive domination of the labour movement by the reformist or Stalinist bureaucracies has seen a series of strikes organised from above:

(a) Strikes for reformist goals, in which the leadership is genuine in its adherence to the stated goals, and maintains control of the working class. The best examples are the series of general strikes from the 1890s to World War I in Belgium, which won universal manhood suffrage.

(b) Token strikes for the purpose of demonstrating some point or protesting, with, once again, the reformist or Stalinist leadership keeping rigid control.

The French Communist Party was infamous for playing this game way before 1968 (when it got more than it bargained for) by holding one day general strikes, half day general strikes, and even half hour general strikes on all sorts of issues.

(c) Strikes in which the leadership or a large section of it agree in advance with the bourgeoisie to play the Grand Old Duke of York and to head off militancy — so demoralising the working class and dissipating its energies that the workers are led to defeat.

The most notorious example of this is the 1926 British general strike.

The result depends as usual on the relationship of forces. In areas like Durham, for instance, the movement almost got out of the hands of the TUC. If the young Communist Party had not naively supported the TU traitors "from the left", the strike might have escaped TUC control entirely.

History also of course shows us spontaneous mass strikes of the working class, mass self-mobilisations, usually drawing in much larger sections of the class than are organised at the beginning.

For instance, in Russia, as the revolutionary workers' movement took shape at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, the organised socialist movement helped and supported the mass strike wave with which the working class fought Tsarism. But, for all that, they were largely spontaneous: what Rosa Luxemburg called the elemental form of the self-movement of the working class.

Sometimes the class mobilises spontaneously or half-spontaneously to meet some threat, getting at best a grudging after-the-event endorsement from a reformist leadership.

In 1920 the right-winger Kapp took power in Germany for 3 days by means of a putsch. But this aroused, and was defeated by, a semi-spontaneous general strike.

In Spain the revolt of the fascist generals in 1936 was stopped by strikes, mobilisations and the self-arming of the workers after most of the official labour movement and the Popular Front government had virtually caved in to the fascist demands.

Lastly, there is the situation where the class, whose leadership proclaims socialism but does nothing about it, grows frustrated and impatient. The militants initiate direct action drawing massively greater sections of the working class into the movement — indeed, often being propelled forward by these fresh sections.

The factory seizures in Italy in 1919 were a conscious challenge to the rule of the bourgeoisie. But they failed to find a comparably revolutionary leadership in the sphere of politics. The indecisive left-talking Socialist Party failed the working class and left it wide open to being smashed later on by fascism.

Thus the 1936 general strike in France. And thus too, 1968, where the French working class, long frustrated by the misleadership of the Communist Party and the CP trade union, the CGT, long tired of low wages, sham fights, and half hour general strikes (with the CGT bureaucrats attempting to conduct the working class and its movements like a well-disciplined orchestra) suddenly rose and seized control of France.

In this situation of course the 'leading' bureaucrats of the labour movement ran to catch up with the movement, straddled it and stopped it from smashing the bourgeois state — although the bourgeoisie was forced to give massive concessions.

After a general strike there is a variety of possible situations.

There might be a period of quiet with the bourgeoisie generally on top, having clearly defeated the working class.

Or there might be a new equilibrium, based on there being an expanding economy enabling the granting of concessions to the working class, with the reformist leadership still in control.

Alternatively, the strike can be an episode in a continually explosive situation: after it the bourgeoisie mobilises, goes on the counter-offensive and the struggle continues — as in Italy after 1919. This obviously depends on the objective possibilities — the background and relationship of forces, the role of the labour leadership and its ability to control and manipulate the working class.

Further permutations are of course possible, based on these possibilities.

The experience of 1926 in Britain was an example of the first variant above. Most of the leaders were renegades, agreeing in advance with the Conservatives to head off the strike and betray it. It was growing in strength and determination. There were more men out on the last day than on the first.

Calling it off was an outright betrayal of a magnificent mobilisation of the working class by a leadership which (with a few honourable exceptions such as A.J. Cook) did not even have reformist goals for the strike.

The defeat resulting from the betrayal was serious but not catastrophic. But its effects were soon compounded by the heavy follow-up blow to the working class which was the Great Depression with its mass unemployment.

If the Depression hadn't come so soon after; if the revolutionary socialists of the time, the Communist Party, had been able to use the renegacy of the leaders of labour to discredit them and gain working class leadership for itself — then the outcome could have been very different.

Neither the outcome of the strike itself nor even the effects of betrayal and defeat were anything like inevitable.

Today a general strike could do to the Tories' Industrial Relations Act what the miners and their allies did three months ago to the 7% pay norm. Such a strike could smash the Act. And, in the process of mobilisation, the class would begin to create the sinews and muscles in preparation for the battles — intense and bitter — that would surely follow any partial defeat of the capitalists by the workers.

Those 'revolutionaries' who argue that the general strike demands so much serious preparation that it is irresponsible to advocate it unless and until there has been "adequate preparation" are caught in a vicious trap. They have learnt little from recent, particularly French, experience.

They see the general strike as a synonym for revolution, leading always either to decisive defeat or decisive victory.

With the labour movement hopelessly bureaucratised, they therefore see the call for such a strike as deeply irresponsible: as if we were calling for the revolution to be led by Vic Feather!

Therefore, they say, we must simply make long term propaganda about an eventual general strike and meanwhile wait until we have prepared, until we have a mass revolutionary party, and are ourselves the leadership of any general strike which we call for. Thus once again the general strike becomes a synonym for the revolution. (Moreover, all the talk about 'preparation' is a heaven-sent alibi for the union leaders' inactivity).

Such pedantic comrades usually rely on the quotation mines, from which they dig out Trotsky's 1935 warning to the Independent Labour Party, who were threatening to call a general strike — as a sort of punishment to the ruling class in the event of war.

Yet they ignore Trotsky's very important appreciation of the 1936 strike in France and its effects on the working class. (Not to mention the experience of 1968):

"The strike has everywhere and in every place pushed the most thoughtful and fearless workers to the fore. To them belongs the initiative. They are still acting cautiously, feeling the ground under their feet. The vanguard detachments are trying not to rush ahead so as not to isolate them-

selves. The echoing and reechoing answers of the hindmost ranks to their call gives them a new courage.

"The roll call of the class has become a trial self-mobilisation. The proletariat was itself in greatest need of this demonstration of its strength. The practical successes won, however precarious they may be, cannot fail to raise the self-confidence of the masses to an extraordinary degree, particularly among the most backward and oppressed strata.

"That leaders have come forward in the industries and in the factories is the foremost conquest of the first wave. The elements of local and regional general staffs have been created. The masses know them. They know one another. Real revolutionaries will seek contact with them.

"Thus the first self-mobilisation of the masses has outlined and in part brought forward the first elements of revolutionary leadership. The strike has stirred, revitalised and regenerated the whole colossal class organism. The old organisational shell has by no means dropped away. On the contrary, it still retains its hold quite stubbornly. But under it the new skin is already visible."

In essence the attitude of the pedantic revolutionaries is a variant of the old West European Social Democratic conception of the general strike as the well-orchestrated ultimate weapon controlled and directed from above. It is not a conception of the self-mobilisation of the working class.

Since their conception makes the general strike impossible, or only a prelude to betrayal, it follows for them that the slogan for a general strike cannot be used.

This ignores the experience of the mass strikes of which 1968 is the most important: welling up from below, directed as much against the labour bureaucrats (though not necessarily consciously) as against the system.

Since this is the major experience of the mass strike and of the general strike throughout most of its history, to ignore it is to ignore the real history of the working class. It is thus tantamount to preventing the revolutionary organisations from bringing the lessons of that history, in the form of propaganda, to the working class in this country.

It ignores the fact that the mass strike and the general strike, and the struggle for a general strike, can play a major role in shaking and ultimately smashing the control by the bureaucrats of the labour movement, and in helping to build the revolutionary movement — without which there will never be a full and final victory over the capitalists.

Thus it is the job of revolutionaries to make propaganda for the general strike, to promote and propagandise for a mass strike and for immediate solidarity strikes on every level.

We therefore say a general strike can smash the Industrial Relations Act. We advocate it as a tactical weapon for this limited goal. In the present situation it could win such a goal. We raise the demand that the leaders of the unions prepare and call a general strike.

Even when used as a tactical weapon for limited gains, the general strike still implicitly raises the question: who rules in society? Whatever the specific goals of the general mobilisation, its logic and its potential is the struggle for state power.

This is not merely an abstract logic, but a very practical logic. A general strike necessarily poses the creation of organising committees of the working class and of new organisational and administrative responsibilities for those stewards committees, councils and trades councils now existing.

It makes necessary the creation of broader workers' committees, street and area committees and councils; and of workers' self-defence organisations in the event of clashes with scabs and state personnel. That is, it would pose the question of the elaboration of the rudimentary organs of a potential working class state.

The outcome would be decided as a struggle between two perspectives within the mobilised working class — the reformist and the revolutionary. All the events of the strike, the very fact of the working class moving into action, would favour the revolutionary perspective, as does any real mobilisation of the working class into self-awareness.

Whether the strike was initiated by rank and file milit-

Running hard to keep control of the workers and to isolate the students and revolutionaries, the CGT and CFDT from the start of the upsurge demanded talks with the Government. (The Morning Star, 25.5.68, took Pompidou to task for being slow to reply!) Even the Catholic CFDT went further than the 'Communist' union in demanding structural reforms to the system, as well as bread-and-butter concessions: and in fact they remained consistently to the left of the CGT!

By the morning of May 27th they had got their 'big concessions': 10% all round increase; 35% rise in minimum wage; progress to a 40-hour week; social security cuts rescinded, etc. (By way of a tip, CGT leader Georges Seguy was promised that henceforth the CGT too would be eligible for government subsidy for the training of its officials...)

The size of these concessions is the measure of the bosses' desperate need to enable their labour tenants to placate the workers.

The happy band of bureaucrats, smiling and giving the thumbs-up sign for the cameras, hurried to Billancourt, symbol of Labour Militant, to bring the glad tidings — and call off the strike.

But the proletariat is an ungrateful class. Seguy and Franchon, the CGT bosses, were shouted down, and their 'big concessions' scorned.

All over France the same thing happened: the workers refused to call off the strike. They wanted more — in fact they wanted everything. But the CP and its union — built over decades on talk of socialism — stood four-square across their path, dithering and wriggling. And so, instead of advance, there was stalemate.

And now? Who could control the workers and end the bosses' period in limbo?

The General seemed eclipsed, and there was nothing remotely resembling a government in sight. The students and revolutionaries, despite the CP's anathema, were gaining. "The incredible success of the student leaders was to rally ... thousands of young workers disgruntled with the stick-in-the-mud unions..." to a mass rally on the 27th. Despite a number of CP counter-meetings, 30,000 attended, demonstrating the chasm that separated the timid leaders from large sections of the workers.

But what was to be done? Mitterand on May 28th hurried in with a solution to harness the workers' energies in the best interests of capitalism and of... Mitterand: a Provisional Government to supplant De Gaulle immediately — headed by Mitterand, with Mendes-France as Premier.

Naturally the CP agreed — but it had to haggle with these bourgeois politicians in whose small shadow it chose to walk, for a promise of a place in the new Government. A mass demonstration for "a change of policy opening the way to progress and democracy" covered Paris, 2 miles long, on

the 29th. It looked as if by sheer strength of the mass movement the Left leaders and the CP would be lifted into the saddle — despite their earlier reticence.

But then de Gaulle came back on stage, having met General Massu and arranged for CRS reinforcements and tanks to converge on Paris. On 30th May he made his second, belligerent, speech, drawing confidence from the proven timidity of his opponents and their ability to dupe and confuse the masses, rather than from any other real strength he and his class possessed.

Recognising that the strike must end either in insurrection or collapse, he said in effect to the cowardly social democrats of the 'Communist Party': 'Attempt to take power, or put your hands up!' Knowing his opponents, and perhaps preparing their retreat, he announced a General Election.

## VANGUARD OF THE RETREAT

Within two hours of the ultimatum, in a situation where they were not merely strong enough to boycott any capitalist election but could actually prevent it being held, the heroes of the CPF announced that they accepted this election, stage-managed by the Gaullist state! "There was [in de Gaulle's speech] also an element of bluff: had he really the power to break the strike if it continued and made elections impossible?... [How in any case could [the election] have been organised in a country paralysed by strikes — who would have printed the voting slips?...]..." (Observer, 2.6.68).

De Gaulle could safely bluff. He was aware of one great asset: the inbred social-democratic inertia and fear of action of the CP, who had publicly proclaimed their intentions by maintaining their dog-tail relationship with Mitterand and Co. Their demand for de Gaulle's and the government's resignation, so belatedly adopted, was now dropped like hot contraband. The other 'lefts' followed, with varying degrees of protest, where the CP led. "Even before the cabinet had announced its promise to respect last weekend's wage increases, the trade unions, disassociating themselves from the students, were engaged in back to work talks with their employers" (ibid.).

With de Gaulle's speech and the non-response of the workers' parties, his supporters raised their heads: "Paramilitary Committees of Civic Action sprang up here and there across the country, in one or two areas celebrating their legitimised thuggery by firing a few shots at trade union or CP office buildings..." The police, which had vacillated, now regained its loyalty to the force which appeared strongest, in face of the CP's feebleness. "At least we now know where we are", was the general police reaction to de Gaulle's speech, as reported in The Times (31.5.68). And the Gaullists took to the streets, 500,000 strong, some chanting: "Cohn-Bendit to Dachau". (He had habitually been referred to in the bourgeois press as "the German



"Let's choose our battle ground. June 1968: beginning of a long struggle"

demagoguery about outsiders interfering in the affairs of the workers. The student leader Danny Cohn-Bendit was consistently referred to in their usually chauvinist press as 'the German'.

Students were refused the right to participate in workers demonstrations. When on May 17th they marched to Billancourt they were refused access by CGT officials (but the workers came out onto the bridge over the road to greet them).

Later, the only CGT posters at Renault were numerous warnings about ... sellers of 'ultra-left' literature! A student plan to march on the Radio building on the 18th to protest against Government news control had to be cancelled because the CGT denounced it as a 'provocation' and warned all workers against taking part.

Yet despite all this, the CGT and CP had to run very fast just to keep up with the growing wave of workers' actions. *'The paradox which underlies this controlled chaos is that the Communist unions and the Gaullist government they appear to be challenging are really on the same side of the barricades. ... only in this way (ie by endorsing strikes) can the apparatus which leads the Communist unions retain its control and protect its base from contamination. Economic dislocation and incredible inconvenience are the price which French society is having to pay to head off an insurrectionary movement which no-one saw coming and few have yet understood.'* (Observer, 19.5.68)

By the 23rd May the peak of the wave was reached, with ten million workers in possession of the factories up and down the land: control seemed to have slipped out of the bourgeoisie's hands.

## TWO PERSPECTIVES

By its scope, tone and temper the mass strike was insurrectionary — the workers' drive was clearly for a total reconstruction of society. It raised inescapably the big question: which class is to rule? A choice of two perspectives faced the workers: keep physical control and take over entirely and go forward; or else settle for big concessions by way of ransom from the powerless bourgeoisie, which would — for the moment — gladly make them.

To attain workers' power the necessary steps were:

a) To prepare organs of workers' power by generalising the factory committees (already taking many decisions not normally taken by workers) into local, regional and finally a National council of workers' delegates — thus opposing an embryonic workers' state to the bourgeois state.

b). Begin to actually run the factories, under control of the workers' councils.

c). Decisively smash and dismantle the bosses' state and consolidate the new order as a workers' state.

Was this physically possible? What was the relationship of forces?

The workers had the factories. On May 23rd the Police Union declared itself in sympathy with the strikers, and unwilling to be used against them. The unknown quantity was the army: because of military discipline the only way to test the conscript soldiers is to confront them with a struggle which forces them to choose — and gives them an opportunity to cross over.

In *The Times* Charles Douglas Home (Defence correspondent) wrote: *'In an extreme emergency the troops could be brought into operation, but it is appreciated that they could be used only once, and then only for a short while, before the largely conscript army was exposed to a psychological battering in a general campaign of subversion which it would probably not withstand.'* (31.5.68). This would confirm all past revolutionary experience.

The nominal armed strength of the bourgeoisie was: 83,000 police including 13,500 CRS; 61,000 gendarmes; 261,000 soldiers in France and Germany. In a clash they could only firmly rely on a few battalions of regular soldiers, and presumably the CRS.

But there were 10,000,000 strikers, and over 400,000 members of the CP alone. Yet the CPF and their apologists say the workers would have faced massive defeat had they

attempted revolution.

In fact it is clear that with a *minimum* preparation, during the mass strike, the bourgeois state could have been smashed and dismantled. The strongest element of 'material' force that protected the bourgeoisie was the reformist, social democratic routine, the anti-revolutionary legalist-pacifist theory, and plain funk of the CPF leadership.

A party aiming at leading the working class to power in that situation would face the following tasks:

1) to raise the slogan of a workers' and farmers' government, as the immediate objective of the strike;

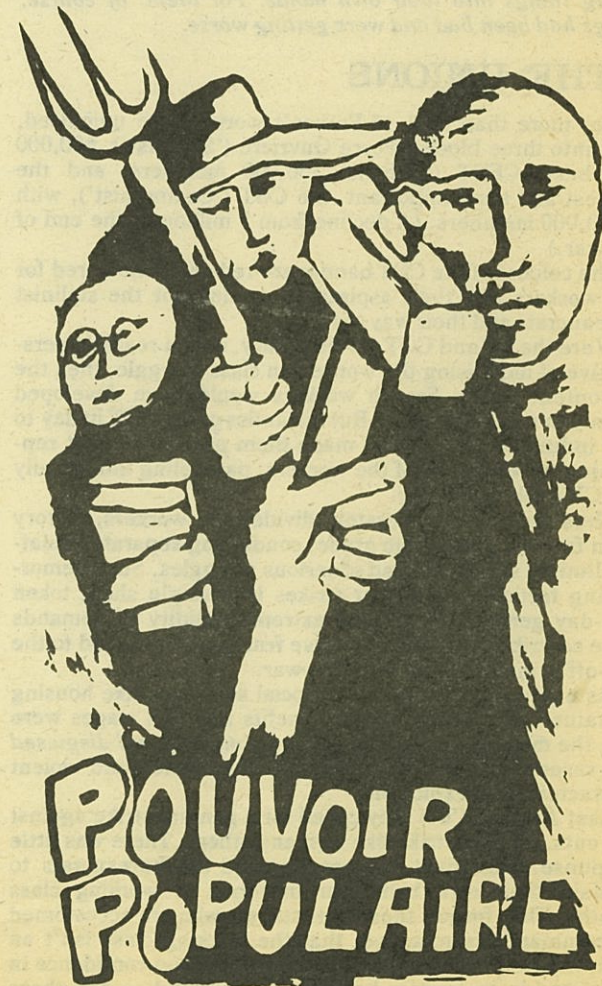
2) popularise the idea of workers' councils of self administration to organise the life of the country and begin to elaborate a counter-state, leading to dual power such as that in Russia between the rise of the workers' councils (Soviets) in February and their victory in October 1917;

3) it would begin to form workers' militias, initially its own cadres, drawing in militants from all the factories — thus arming the workers for an uprising to disarm and suppress the paralysed organs of bourgeois power and establish the workers' state.

A revolutionary party would have propagated this long before the upsurge. But even in the middle of the strike, such a programme of action, by a party with the ear of the masses, would have galvanised the workers — and at least led to a period of dual power.

## WHAT ROCHET'S 'REVOLUTIONARIES' DID

But the 'revolutionary party' chose a different course: initially it did not even dare pose the resignation of de Gaulle and his government as an objective of the strike! Amidst the greatest workers' movement for decades, and France's biggest-ever general strike, the CP/CGT concentrated on getting wage concessions.



"People's Power"

ants or by the official leadership, the revolutionary perspective would have to be fought for, and a series of concrete immediate steps elaborated to take the class continually forward.

Revolutionaries would popularise the idea of workers' councils of self-administration, to organise the life of the country and begin to elaborate a counter-state leading to dual power as in Russia between February and October 1917.

The starting point would be the factory committees thrown up by the strike, which in many cases would already be taking decisions not normally taken by workers. These would be generalised into local, regional and finally a National Council of workers' representatives — thus opposing an embryonic workers' state to the bourgeois state.

A revolutionary organisation would advocate that workers who have taken over their factories, services etc. should begin to run them under the control of the workers' councils, enabling services to be restored to the workers and their organisations, while the 'owners' were still excluded. Thus the bosses' property, instead of merely being immobilised and held, would be turned increasingly against them, giving the workers an increasing store of power.

The revolutionary party would begin to form workers' militias, initially from among its own cadres, drawing in militants from all the factories — thus arming the workers for an uprising to disarm and suppress the paralysed organs of bourgeois power and establish the workers' state. A revolutionary party should in any case advocate and work for

this in advance of such a situation. But even in the middle of the strike such a programme of action would galvanise the workers and could at least lead to a period of dual power.

Finally, revolutionaries in such a situation would raise the slogan of a workers' government as the immediate objective of the strike, and move to coordinate and consolidate the organs of workers' administration and defence into a counter-state which could challenge and decisively smash the bosses' state and establish a workers' state.

Such a prosecution of the strike movement by a party with a mass working class following could have taken a situation like that of May-June 1968 in France to a state of dual power — and from there to the revolution.

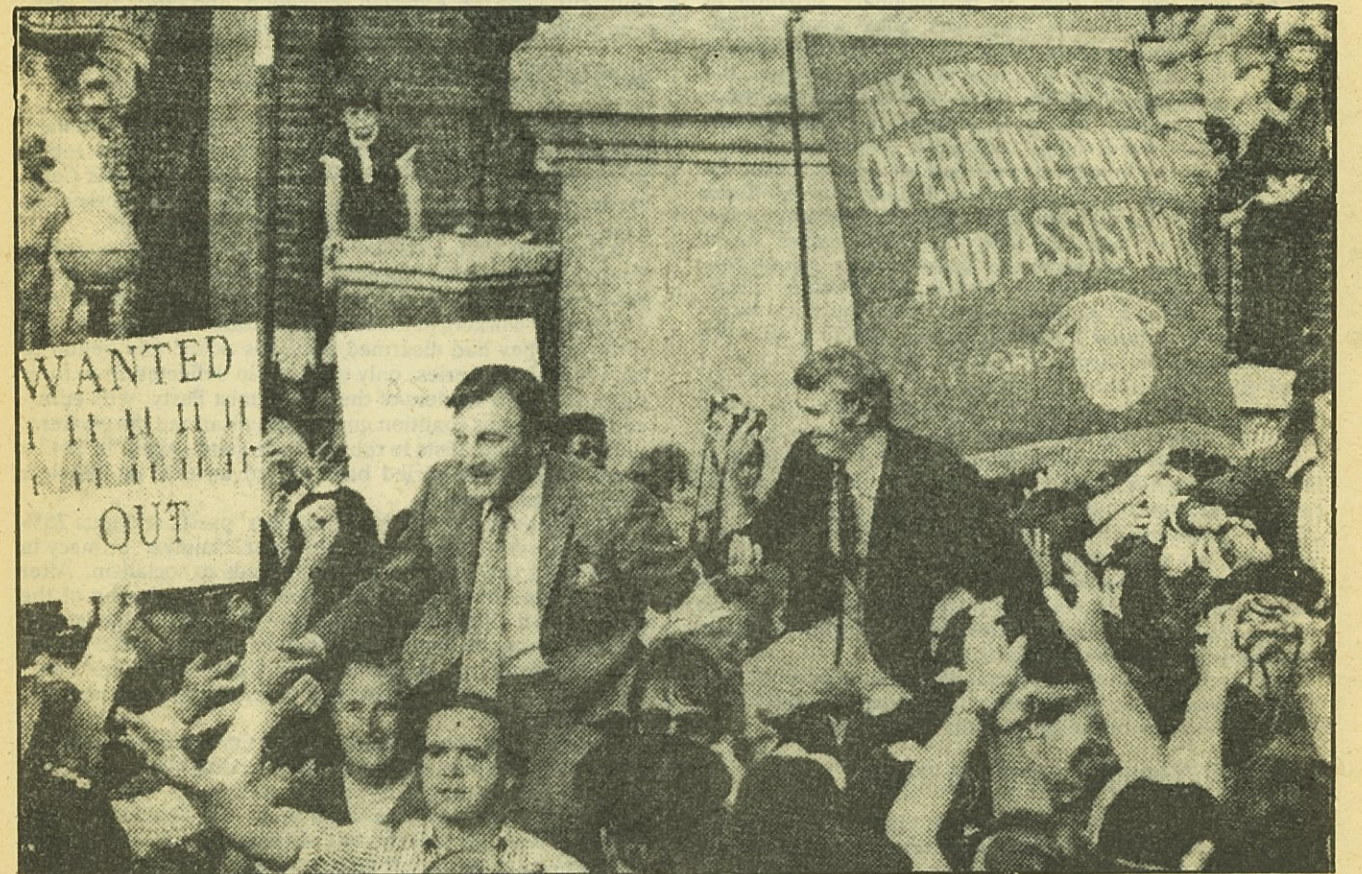
But even a struggle that does not end with the working class taking power can be an invaluable experience. New leaders and often new forms of organisation are thrown up. These can — even if the movement is for the time being repulsed — serve the class in future struggles.

This was true of the Soviets of 1905 which really came to the fore in 1917. It was likewise true of the Irish Citizen Army which was created in the strike movement of 1913 and became the cornerstone of the Easter Rising of 1916.

It is in this sense that Trotsky and Lenin thought of the 1905 revolution as the "dress rehearsal" for 1917.

And it is in this sense that all the strategies above must be put forward in any general strike situation, so that even if it is not the final showdown the best lessons will be learnt.

JACKIE CLEARY



## JULY 1972

In July 1972, Midland Cold Store got a court order under the Industrial Relations Act instructing London dockers' leaders to stop picketing their depot. The picket continued. On July 21, five dockers were arrested and thrown into Pentonville jail for contempt of court. At once, dockers struck nationwide. Lorry drivers, printworkers, building workers, engineering workers, airport workers, ship repair workers, and miners also came out: about quarter of a million struck, though the movement was almost entirely unofficial and

many militant factories were on holiday. Day after day there were massive demonstrations to 'Free the Five' and 'Smash the Act'. Posters produced by a worker-occupied printworks appeared everywhere. Eventually, the TUC General Council limped along after the movement, calling a one-day general strike for Monday 31st. But by Wednesday 26th the Tories had had enough. The Pentonville Five were freed and carried shoulder-high from the jail to address jubilant demonstrators in the road outside. A general strike was rapidly developing — and could at least have smashed the Act, and probably the Government too.

# May '68: When ten million workers had capitalism by the throat

*'I HATE the revolution like sin'* said the hangman of Germany's 1918 revolution, the Social Democrat Ebert. Less direct, but equally clear after the events in France, is the recent statement of the parliamentary leader of the French Communist Party, Robert Balanger: *'When we talk about the revolution we now think in terms of a political struggle in which our party agrees to fight the bourgeoisie with their own weapons'*.

The PCF leadership does not, of course, openly hate the revolution. Its feelings are repressed, producing a sort of 'hysterical blindness'. It simply refuses to see the revolution even when it looms up suddenly in front of it.

There was, we are told, no revolutionary situation in France: only ultra-lefts say there was. Since what is ultra-left at any given moment is determined by the current stance of the PCF, which is forever shifting to the right, the ultra-left gets bigger all the time. It now includes those bourgeois journalists who have depicted the real situation and the actual roles of the participants in events.

In 1920, for the benefit of some real ultra-lefts, Lenin defined the cardinal conditions for revolution: *'For revolution it is necessary that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. Only when the 'lower classes' do not want the old way, and when the 'upper classes' cannot continue in the old way, then only can the revolution be victorious. This truth may be expressed in other ways: revolution is impossible without a national crisis, affecting both the exploiters and the exploited. It follows that for revolution it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers [or at least a majority of the class conscious, thinking, politically active workers] should fully understand the necessity for revolution and be ready to sacrifice their lives for it; secondly, that the ruling classes should be in a state of governmental crisis which draws even the most backward masses into politics [a symptom of every real revolution is: the rapid, tenfold and even a hundredfold increase in the number of hitherto apathetic representatives of the toiling and oppressed masses capable of waging the political struggle], weakens the government and makes it possible for revolutionaries to overthrow it.'* (Left Wing Communism).

Which of the above conditions obtained in France? Was there an *objectively* revolutionary situation in France? If so, how and why did it develop and what happened to it?

## ECONOMIC SITUATION

In 1967 the standards of the French workers were seriously cut. Social security charges were raised by £250 million, extracted from the workers. Consumer prices had already in ten years risen by 45%. And wages? Whereas national wealth since 1958 had risen nearly 50%, workers had benefited little. One fifth of the total industrial labour force had a take-home pay of less than £8 a week.

Despite expansion, France's economy is sick: the only west European country in which the share of employment in manufacture has declined. With a decline in industrial investment, France finds herself at the bottom of the league for industrial expansion. Stagnation in the building industry has led to the most chronic housing shortages in Western Europe.

7 Against this background, the deflationary cuts of '67,

merging with the world economic slackening, generated the highest level of unemployment in 15 years. In January 1968 it was half a million, having increased in twelve months by 32% (51% in the Paris region, and 59% in the run-down northern mining areas). Most indicative of a sick economy, and a sick system, is that 23% of the total unemployed are young; many never had a job.

The first spectacular explosion was among the students. Not integrated into a bureaucratised, domesticated routine of day-to-day struggle, and sensitive to ideological movements, they were the first to respond to the growing crisis. Already in the early '60s they had been the main force of solidarity with the Algerian revolution, and lately the Vietnam issue had produced another militant mobilisation.

## REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

France's labour movement is marked by a revolutionary temper expressed in spontaneous outbursts of class action going right back to the first workers' state, the Paris Commune of 1871, and also in the allegiance of the workers to what they have regarded as the revolutionary party.

Already in 1936 a similar wave of sit-in strikes engulfed France, to be hoodwinked by the bourgeois Popular Front government and the Communist Party. In 1944 the armed communist workers of the resistance started to take over the country. They had disarmed the Paris police and begun to take over the factories, only to be again deflected from their purpose by the leaders of the Communist Party, who entered the bourgeois coalition govern and disarmed the workers, helping the capitalists to rebuild their state. Again in 1947 a mass strike wave hurled back the advance of de Gaulle's then neo-fascist party.

Traditionally the PCF is *the* workers' party, and gets 25% of the total vote. Thorez, its late leader, claimed primacy in developing the theory of peaceful roads to socialism. After its expulsion from the government at the beginning of the Cold War, it again assumed the role of an old social-reformist party in opposition, biding its time and the workers' time too. It differed from an ordinary social democratic party only in its allegiance to Moscow and in its rigidly undemocratic internal regime.

The PCF has, partly because of its unrestrained methods, effectively retained control of the working class, using demagoguery and smashing down with violence of various types and degrees on any opposition to its class-collaborationist policies. It suppresses the sale of Trotskyist literature to this very day by systematic thuggery, which increased sharply in the last year as the tension built up.

Besides the CP, there is a variety of bourgeois and petit bourgeois 'left' parties, some gleaning workers' votes. In the last three years efforts at unity have led to the formation of a Federation of the Radical and Socialist left, composing the Socialist Party, Republican Clubs, and the rump Radical Party (worn-out bourgeois liberals).

Essentially a re-alignment of the parliamentary riff-raff of the Fourth Republic, the Federation is led by one François Mitterand (eleven times a minister, Colonial Minister in 1950-51 and a defence witness for ultra-right OAS leader Salan at his trial). They plan finally to merge into a social

democratic party, with a predominantly petit bourgeois base. Collectively they dispose of four and a half million votes, but that is no match for the amalgam of Rightist groups making up de Gaulle's party.

And so the Left Federation's eyes have turned to the pariah party, the PCF.

The PCF also wants unity. Not revolutionary unity for struggle in factories and streets with the followers of the Federation — but a parliamentary unity with the cynical scoundrels like Mollet and Mitterand who dupe and betray the petit bourgeois and the non-Communist workers.

The PCF supported Mitterand for President in '65, as a gesture of goodwill without making demands. In the '67 election they formed an alliance against the Gaullists, collectively gaining 59 seats. CP secretary Rochet made it clear that their policy was neither for communism nor socialism — but for 'an end to the regime of personal power' and 'a little bit more justice for the working man'.

Both the Left Federation and CP *in fact* accept the de Gaulle constitution imposed ten years ago by the army — they merely wish to cut 'bonaparte' down to the size of a strong president by revoking Article 16. The biggest practical difference between the CP and LF is that one looks east to Moscow and the other west to Washington. And that means, ironically, that the CP supports de Gaulle's foreign policy, while the LF opposes it.

But necessity makes strange bedfellows. Sharing a perspective of a peaceful, endless road to an impossible 'socialism' the CP and LF have a lot in common: to be precise, 49% of the vote in 1967.

With a growing bond of mutual utility, things were looking bright. Time would smooth out the disagreements on foreign policy. Meanwhile the electoral margin would grow, the General would get older and maybe one day die: all was well and getting better.

*But then the bloody workers went and spoilt it all by taking things into their own hands. For them, of course, things had been bad and were getting worse.*

## THE UNIONS

Nor more than 30% of France's workers are unionised, split into three blocks: Force Ouvrière ('Socialist'), 600,000 members; CFDT (Catholic) 750,000 members; and the biggest and most important, the CGT ('Communist'), with 1,900,000 members. (A decline from 5 million at the end of the war.)

The colours of the CGT banner are red and yellow: red for the workers and their aspirations, yellow for the stalinist bureaucrats and their way of life.

Were the CP and CGT revolutionary, with a realistic perspective of mobilising the workers in class struggle, then the discontent of the French workers would have developed openly in mass struggles. But the antics of the CGT in day to day industrial issues have made them past masters at repressing the militancy of the workers, paralleling industrially the CP's role politically.

Thus the CGT deliberately divides the workers, factory from factory, grade from grade, conducting separate, isolated, limited strikes instead of serious struggles. Such demoralising tactics as half-hour strikes in a single shop, token one-day general strikes and extreme timidity in demands have contributed to the explosive frustrations and led to the fall-off in membership since the war.

As unemployment grew, as social shortages like housing remained chronic and social benefits and real wages were cut, the meanderings of the CGT only *masked and disguised* the resentment, and thus prepared the sudden and violent character of the explosion.

Last Autumn ('67) they called for a general strike against the cuts, a *token* strike like so many others. There was little response. This must have encouraged the bureaucrats to explain their own behaviour in terms of working class apathy. They forgot, these bureaucrats who are accustomed to commands from above, that the working class isn't an orchestra to play to order, that it must develop confidence in itself and in its leaders before it will respond — and there had been *too many* token strikes in France.

The whole behaviour of the PCF and the CGT since 1944 and earlier, and particularly the industrial antics of the CGT, had been designed to destroy any confidence in the workers' own ability to win. They needed a fighting lead, the prospect of a *struggle* rather than a charade, to rouse them with the hope of winning.

This hope the student movement, with its magnificent struggle on the barricades and in the streets — in the great tradition of the Commune itself — gave them.

## STUDENT GUERRILLAS

The students, free from the restraint of an ingrained loyalty to the PCF, were responsive to revolutionary propaganda (Trotskyist, Castroist, Maoist) which helped them develop the revolutionary élan to face the state in pitched battles.

When they stood up courageously in protest against police occupation of the Sorbonne, they were joined on the Night of the Barricades (May 10th) by many unemployed youth, attracted by their militancy. According to the Assistant Editor of L'Express these fought most bitterly and, of the 30,000 on the barricades, were the last to leave.

The heroism of students and unemployed against the brutal police riveted the attention of the workers, who loathe the police, especially the strike-breaking CRS. A wave of sympathy swept through the working class.

To head off moves for serious solidarity action the unions called a one-day token general strike — *one more token strike*. But the response on May 13th was anything but token. *Ten million workers*, three times and more the number organised in trade unions, struck.

Meanwhile the students' insurrection, and the very *threat* of a general strike, had forced the government to retreat. The students had won.

And the workers, who had earlier ignored the call for a futile pseudo-struggle, under the baton of the CGT bureaucrats, suddenly had found a blueprint for their own needs — they too would go out *to win*. The single spark of student action had landed on dry tinder.

Meant by the leaders as a safety valve, May 13th only convinced the workers of their own strength. Immediately an aggressive mood built up. In spite of the general return to work ordered for May 14th, some strikes continued. From May 16th the takeovers began. Workers seized Sud-Aviation; the students seized the universities. The workers in the most militant factory in the country, Renault at Billancourt, took control.

By the weekend a million workers throughout France had seized the big plants. The Red Flag was hoisted over the means of production. The strikers demanded wage rises, shorter hours and 'a real policy to deal with unemployment'. A great wave was rising, one which placed in question the very foundations of the capitalist system: its property.

## THE REARGUARD OF THE ADVANCE

This was entirely spontaneous. The CGT and other unions had remained in the background. Now the CGT endorsed the strikes and takeovers, moving quickly to catch up with the runaway workers. But it made it plain that at that stage, with only a million out, it was *not* calling a general strike.

But still the strikes continued to spread like a grass fire. Desperately now the CGT fought for control of the workers' movement. *'The behaviour of the Communists has been fascinating to watch. From the beginning of the crisis they have been more concerned to crush the guerilla challenge of their left than to overthrow M.Pompidou's government'* (Observer, 26.5.68).

The students, who had detonated the workers' revolt, were the first target in the CGT's campaign to reassert its control. At the beginning of the upsurge L'Humanité (the PCF's daily paper) had denounced them. Now it resorted to