



Riot police under attack, May '68

# May '68: when 8 million workers took capitalism by the throat

France in May 1968 gives us our best picture of what a socialist revolution will be like in the most developed

capitalist countries. Martin Thomas describes what happened, and discusses some of the lessons.

**It began, like many other revolutionary movements, over something small. In March 1967 students at Nanterre, a bleak new campus on the outskirts of Paris, started a campaign for the right to visit each others' rooms after 11pm.**

The campaign grumbled along. It drew in other issues — overcrowding, and the content of courses. On 2 May 1968 the exasperated administration shut down the campus.

On Friday 3 May the Nanterre activists went to the Sorbonne, in the centre of Paris, for a protest meeting. There were rumours that fascists would attack the meeting. These fascists had set fire to the national students' union (UNEF) office at the Sorbonne the previous day. In the early '60s, towards the end of France's war in Algeria, there had been many violent clashes between extreme right-wingers and the left in the university district.

The students prepared to defend themselves. The university authorities panicked and called in the CRS riot police. As 500 students were taken away in police vans, hundreds of others rallied, threw bottles at the vans, and fought the police. The police occupied the Sorbonne.

Student radicalism had been on the increase before May. The Vietnam war had drawn many students into activity: the US had started bombing North Vietnam in 1965, and January 1968 saw a spectacular counter-offensive by the North Vietnamese and NLF. There had been big student struggles in the US, Britain, West Germany, Italy and Spain. In 1965-6 the French Union of Communist Students had expelled two dissident factions, which became the Trotskyist Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire and the Maoist UJC-ml.

But these were small shifts after 20 years of isolation, marginalisation and attrition for the revolutionary left. The JCR, the most prominent group of the far left in 1968, had only 300 members. Only one left group — Voix Ouvrière (now Lutte Ouvrière) — had the resources to produce a weekly paper. The whole of the revolutionary left — Maoists, anarchists, Trotskyists, the lot — numbered perhaps 3,000, including unorganised sympathisers.

Those 3,000 were disproportionately concentrated in places like the Sorbonne. UNEF, the national students' union, was led by a member of the PSU (Unified Socialist Party), a leftish split-off from the then-moribund Socialist Party, with about 10,000 members. UNEF organised 50,000 out of France's 540,000 university students — a decline since 1960, when it had organised 100,000 out of 200,000.

The police raid on the Sorbonne galvanised many more students than just the left-wing activists. On the night of 3-4 May UNEF and the junior lecturers' union SNESup (led by a Maoist) called their members out on strike. They demanded the re-opening of the Sorbonne, the withdrawal of the police, and the release of the arrested students.

The following week, 6-11 May, thousands of students took to the streets of Paris. On Monday 6th 25 to 30,000 students marched and fought the police. On Tuesday 7th, 50,000 demonstrated.

On Thursday 9th 5,000 assembled for a big meeting to discuss the campaign. The Maoist UJC-ml proposed that the revolutionary students should scatter to the factories in order to "serve the people". A would-be Trotskyist group, the OCI, argued that the meeting should pass a resolution demanding that the leaders of the trade unions call a general strike.

The activists from Nanterre — led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who thought of himself as a sort of anarchist — and the JCR argued that the best way to create worker-student unity was in struggle. The students must develop their own battle against the state as audaciously as possi-



**“The general strike had a revolutionary logic whatever its initial demands”**

ble.

Voix Ouvrière reported the debate: “should the movement address itself directly to the workers, as Cohn-Bendit proposed, even if that means risking confrontation with the political and trade-union bureaucracies who lead them? Or should the students put themselves “at the service of the workers” as the representative of the UJC-ml said? Or should they pass a resolution demanding [the CGT leaders] launch a general strike, as a CGT militant, apparently influenced by the OCI, suggested?”

A school student reported on plans for a strike in the secondary schools, and another speaker called for the extension of the network of Action Committees which had begun to develop in the different districts of Paris.

The next day, Friday 10th, 20 to 30,000

students assembled for yet another demonstration. They wanted to continue the battle; no-one quite knew how. After circling aimlessly for a couple of hours, the demonstration arrived near the Sorbonne. Observing the ranks of riot police all round them, the demonstrators spontaneously built barricades. Members of the CP and OCI denounced this “adventurism”, and tried to lead people away; but the majority stayed at the barricades.

At 2am the police attacked the barricades. They used tear gas and CS gas. They smashed into houses in order to seize students who fled when their barricades were breached, and batoned everyone in sight. The students fought back bravely. Battles continued until 6am.

Elsewhere, in 1968 and the years around then, such battles between students and police would find the mass of the population uncomprehending and hostile to the students. But in Paris on the ‘Night of the Barricades’, 10-11 May, most people saw the students as bravely resisting arbitrary brutality from a government which was unresponsive to reasonable demands. An opinion poll showed that four-fifths of the people of Paris supported the students.

The students were overwhelmingly middle-class. Only 10% of them came from manual working-class families. The Communist Party, which maintained a jealous monopoly over left-wing politics in the working class and beat up student agitators at factory gates, was hostile to the student leftists. CP leader Georges Marchais wrote on 3 May:

“Small left-wing groups...have joined up in what they call the ‘Nanterre movement of 22 March’, led by the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit. Not satisfied with the agitation they are fomenting among students — which...invites fascist provocation — these pseudo-revolutionaries are now presuming to give lessons to the labour movement. They are more and more often to be found at the factory gates...These false revolutionaries must be energetically unmasked, because in actual fact they are serving the interests of the Gaullist regime and the great capitalist monopolies...”

“For the most part they are the sons of rich bourgeois who despise students of working-class origin and will quickly turn off their revolutionary ardour and go back to manage daddy’s firm...”

After 10-11 May the CP realised that it had to change its tone. The CP-led union federation, the CGT, joined with other trade unions in calling a one-day general strike for 13 May. “Public opinion”, they declared, “has been shattered by the ferocious police repression which has been unleashed against the students and academics in the Latin Quarter”.

Even de Gaulle’s prime minister, Georges Pompidou, felt obliged to say that he was “inspired by a profound sympathy with the students”. He agreed to withdraw the police from the Sorbonne and reopen it, and said that appeals for amnesty from the arrested students would be considered.

It was too late. The students swarmed back into the Sorbonne and, for the next month, turned it into a non-stop festival of revolutionary and utopian debates. Many young workers would join these debates.

On Monday 13th, one million workers and students filled the streets of Paris. There were big demonstrations in other cities, too.

The unions' call for a one-day general strike had been less dramatic than a similar call would be in Britain. France's unions, with much weaker workplace organisation but much stronger legal protections against employers' victimisation than Britain's, had long used protest strikes by minorities as a form of struggle.

France had (and has) three main trade union federations, defined politically. The CGT, dominated by the Communist Party, was by far the strongest in big factories. The CFDT was an ex-Catholic federation which had recently (in 1964) broken its links with the Church; in 1968 it was often more sympathetic to the students than the CGT was. The PSU was strong in it. FO (Force Ouvrière) had originated as a cold-war split from the CGT, and was mostly right-wing; but in some areas it was led by leftists excluded from the CGT by its Stalinist leaders.

The CGT claimed 1,500,000 members, the CFDT 800,000, FO 450,000, and other union groups about 400,000, giving a total of about 20% of the workforce unionised. In fact, most of France's big factories had only about 10% of the workers in trade unions. France's labour law enabled unions to win recognition and to establish 'shop stewards' or delegates (elected by all workers, union and non-union alike, from lists proposed by the unions) even with such tiny memberships.

The CGT and the CFDT had called a national protest strike over social security and unemployment only six months earlier, on 13 December 1967, and only a scattering of workers had responded. No doubt the union leaders hoped that the action on 13 May would let off steam and then things would return to normal. They got more than they bargained for.

The next day, Tuesday 14th, the workers of Sud-Aviation in Nantes occupied their factory, shut the manager in his office, and deafened him by repeatedly playing a record of the Internationale. The occupation was called by the established union leaders in the factory — one of the FO leaders there was a Trotskyist, a member of the OCI — and was based on demands which had been in dispute before May: full pay for shorter hours, no sackings, a wage rise, and conversion of casual workers to full status.

On Wednesday 15th, a number of other workplaces were occupied. The most important was the Renault car factory at Cleon. It had only had a turnout of 40% or so for the strike on the 13th. The CGT and CFDT had scheduled a lightning protest stoppage over the government's social security policy for the 15th. A group of some 200 young workers took over and transformed the action into an indefinite

occupation. There were no precise demands. Posters round the occupied factory declared: "United we shall win", "Trade union freedom", "Give us the time to live!", "The left to power", "Popular government".

On Thursday 16th the biggest Renault factory, at Billancourt near Paris, was occupied. The action started in two sections where an anarchist and some members of Voix Ouvrière were influential. The CGT hesitated for three hours, as the strike spread through the huge factory, before swinging behind it.

A set of demands was formulated for all the Renault factories: reduction of the work week to 40 hours without loss of pay, an increased minimum wage, earlier retirement, more holidays, repeal of the government's latest social-security decrees and more trade union rights. These were mainly demands which the unions had been pressing for years without getting any response from the bosses.

By the end of the week some two million workers were on strike. A general strike was under way. The trade unions supported the strike movement, though they never actually called an indefinite general strike. The Action Committees spread; by the end of May there would be 460 in the Paris area alone. Some concentrated on revolutionary propaganda, some on organising refuse collection and food supplies. They partly did what the revolutionary organisations could not do because of their small size.

Individual students and individual workers — especially young workers — joined efforts in Action Committees. But links between the student movement and the workers' movement remained difficult. On Thursday 16th, and again on Friday 17th, some thousands of students

marched from the centre of Paris to Renault Billancourt. The CP-dominated union leadership at Billancourt had already limited participation in the factory occupation to the union-activist minority of the workers, and now they locked the gates against the students. The union leaders explained to the workers that it was necessary to protect the machinery from being smashed up by the students. Only a few younger workers came out to talk to the students, or held hesitant conversations through one of the locked gates at the back of the factory.

But the general strike, which paralysed all the ordinary workings of the capitalist economy, had a revolutionary logic whatever its initial demands. And this was soon recognised on all sides. On 16 May the Sorbonne Occupation Committee suggested a list of demands beginning "Occupy the factories! Power to the workers' councils!" On 18 May the Communist Party declared: "It is time to get rid of the government and to promote an authentic democracy capable of opening a path to socialism...It is time to envisage the creation of a popular government of democratic unity". A Trotskyist magazine commented acidly: "but who could call for non-popular government?...All anyone knows about such a government is that the Communists are to participate in it, as in 1945."

On 19 May Pierre Mendes-France, who had been a Radical prime minister in 1954-5 but was now a member of the leftish PUS, proposed himself as a replacement for de Gaulle. On 21 May the Trotskyist JCR explained: "the power we want is not that of a left-wing government taking over from a right-wing government. The power we want has nothing to do with parliamentary combinations of



Art students produce anti-de-Gaulle posters

bourgeois and reformist politicians. The power we want should create the direct democracy of socialism, based on the authority of local committees in the enterprises and in the neighbourhoods. The power we want should emanate from strike committees and from workers' and students' action committees".

The Nanterre student activists, in a leaflet of the same date, addressed themselves to workers: "You are asking for a minimum wage of 1,000 francs in the Paris area, retirement at sixty, a 40-hour week for 48 hours' pay. These are long-standing and just demands: nevertheless they seem to be out of context with our aims.

"Yet you have gone on to occupy factories, take your managers hostage, strike without warning... These struggles are even more radical than our official aims, because they go further than simply seeking improvements for the worker within the capitalist system, they imply the destruction of that system... The form that your struggle has taken offers us students the model for true socialist activity: the appropriation of the means of production and of decision-making power by the workers".

Many Action Committees adapted the JCR's text for their own leaflets. A leaflet of 24 May signed by several Action Committees declared: "Let us prepare today the power of tomorrow (direct food supplies, the organisation of public services: transport, information, housing, etc.)... For the abolition of the employers, for workers' power!"

De Gaulle responded on 19 May by declaring "La reforme, oui; le chienlit, non" (reform, yes; shitting in the bed, no), and on 24 May by announcing a referendum on his reform plans. It was no good. The strike grew. On Friday 17 May there were about two million workers on strike; on Monday 20th, about six million; by Friday 24th, and until the end of May, about ten million were reported on strike.

Careful calculations have indicated that the peak number on strike was six to eight million rather than ten million. But it was by far the biggest general strike in history. France's general strike in 1936, and Britain's in 1926, mobilised far fewer workers — about two million in each case.

For each worker who had been willing before May to take the minimal step of joining a trade union, three would now go so far as to join a general strike. All large-scale industry was shut down. Power workers continued to supply electricity only to homes. Chorus girls and other staff at the Folies Bergeres music hall went on strike, the Cannes Film Festival was shut down in solidarity with the strike movement, and the headquarters of the employers' federation was occupied by junior managers.

A Central Strike Committee took control of the city of Nantes for a week, from 26 to 31 May, monitoring traffic, food supplies, and petrol distribution. On the night of 24-25 May, another big demonstration in Paris led to the fiercest street-fighting yet, and the Stock Ex-

change was set on fire.

On Monday 27 May the union leaders emerged from talks with the government and the employers with the 'Grenelle Agreement' — a 30% increase in the national minimum wage, a 10% rise in all private sector wages, a cut in the working week of one or two hours, and concessions on social security, union rights in workplaces, etc. CGT leader Georges Séguy hurried to the CP's greatest industrial fortress, Renault Billancourt, to sell this deal. Sensing the mood of the workers, he avoided a direct call for a return to work; he presented the results of his negotiations as positively as he could and told the workers they must decide.

The workers booted and whistled.

The same morning, many other factories rejected the Grenelle deal. The strike continued. Clearly the working class



"The working class wanted more than economic concessions of the usual sort"

wanted more than economic concessions of the usual sort.

By spreading the sort of local workers' power that had been created in Nantes, linking together the local workers' committees into a national congress of workers' councils to underpin a workers' government, and organising workers' militias to fight off the counter-revolutionaries, the movement could indeed have gone further. It could have overthrown capitalism. But those who had some idea of what to do, because they had studied such matters — the Trotskyists — did not have the strength and the roots in the working class to organise it; and the group which did have the strength, the Communist Party, did not want to organise a revolution.

On 27 May UNEF, the leftish PSU and the ex-Catholic union federation CFDT

staged a 50,000 strong rally. The PSU had called for "Workers' power, peasants' power, student power", and the CFDT leader Andre Barjonet declared at the 27 May meeting that "Today, revolution is possible". But the PSU version of "workers' power" comprised only a say for workers in the running of workplaces, "the extension of the public sector", and "workers' management" of social security. The 27 May rally functioned in fact as a platform for Mendes-France's aspirations to replace de Gaulle. The next day, 28 May, another veteran minister from the 1950s, Francois Mitterrand, proposed himself for President, with Mendes-France as prime minister.

On Wednesday 29 May half a million workers marched in a huge CGT demonstration through Paris. They chanted "Adieu de Gaulle" (Goodbye, de Gaulle), and "Dix ans, ca suffit" (Ten years is enough; it was ten years since de Gaulle had come to power in 1958). The revolutionaries were unable to intervene effectively. The national students' union UNEF stupidly boycotted the demonstration on the grounds that the CGT had refused to support the Nanterre student leader Cohn-Bendit, who had been deported by the government. (He was not a French citizen).

How was the strike movement to replace de Gaulle by a "popular government"? The CP wasn't saying, and no wonder. General strikes can force quick, limited concessions or, if they continue, they can generate the power of workers' councils, emerging to take the place of capitalism's paralysed mechanisms. They are not a good means of changing parliamentary governments.

De Gaulle understood that. The next day, Thursday 30th, he called off the referendum and announced that there would be general elections of the National Assembly in June. He called for 'civic action' against the revolutionaries. Over half a million people joined a pro-Gaullist demonstration in Paris, chanting "Back to work!", "Clean out the Sorbonne!", "We are the majority!" Some cried "Cohn-Bendit to Dachau!" and "Mitterrand to the firing squad!"

While the CP proudly hailed the election called by de Gaulle as a victory for the CP, the revolutionaries protested about the "election blackmail". The Trotskyist Voix Ouvrière wrote: "What we don't get from striking we won't get from the elections... We must not let go of what we've got just to clutch at straws and give up the strike for a ballot paper."

No doubt many workers agreed. But the combined weight of the government and of the main traditional leaders of the working class now began to press towards a return to work and reliance on the election. The revolutionaries — mainly because of their lack of numbers, rather than because of mistakes they made — were not able to show workers a sufficiently convincing alternative path.

On Friday 31st armed police seized the post office in Rouen, driving out the workers who had occupied it. On the

weekend of 1st-2nd June the government, with the cooperation of the union leaders, was able to ensure that petrol was available for holidaymakers leaving Paris. The next week the general strike started to break.

From 3 to 7 June workplaces abandoned the strike one by one, usually after winning some slight improvement over the Grenelle terms. On Friday 7 June the police went in to try to break the occupation at Renault Flins. Students came from Paris to Flins to support the workers. There were several days of fighting between the police and workers and students until the CRS left and the workers re-occupied on 11 June. A student was killed in the course of the fighting, on 10 June. The Flins workers eventually voted (4811 to 3456) for a return to work on 17 June.

On Tuesday 11th police broke the occupation at Peugeot Sochaux, killing two workers. As at Flins, the workers managed to reoccupy, but returned to work soon after. On Wednesday 12th all the revolutionary left groups were banned; on Saturday 15th, Raoul Salan was released from jail. Salan was a former general who, together with many other French army officers, had mutinied in April 1961 and led a murderous right-wing terrorist campaign against independence for Algeria. Salan's old comrade, Jacques Massu, now commander of the French army in Germany, had demanded an amnesty for Salan and all his associates in return for promising his support to de Gaulle in the May crisis.

On Sunday 16th the Sorbonne fell to the police, and on Tuesday 18th, Renault Billancourt returned to work. Only a few workplaces stayed on strike into July. On Sunday 23rd and Sunday 30th the elections were held for the National Assembly (in two rounds, as is the way in France). The Gaullists increased their majority from 244 to 353 out of 486 seats in the National Assembly. They had increased their share of the first round vote from 38% to 44%, while the CP dropped from 22.5% in 1967 to 20% in 1968 and the 'Left Federation' (in which the main force was the Socialist Party) declined from 18.5% to 16%.

The PSU, the only well-known party which had identified at all enthusiastically with the strikers and the students, increased its vote from 2% to 4%. But the election seemed to prove that all the talk of revolution in May had been utter fantasy. Not so.

In May millions of workers had started thinking for the first time that society could be organised differently. They had gained a new confidence; they had dared to think that perhaps the working class could run society, without the capitalists ruling over it.

Except among a small minority, these thoughts were vague, unclear, tentative. Then the traditional leaders of the working class did all they could to make the strike movement fade and peter out, with only minor bread-and-butter gains; and they went into an election where the CP strove no less than the Gaullists to present

itself as the Party of Order. No wonder many workers who had joined the general strike became disillusioned and voted for the real Party of Order. Working-class confidence and activity is not something that can be stored away like a bank account and then cashed on an election day chosen by the established order; either it develops, grows, and organises itself, or it can quickly turn into demoralisation and disillusion.

Were the workers revolutionary in May? The workers' immediate demands everywhere were about wages, jobs and conditions. But slogans, chants, and banners made it clear that the workers had political demands, too, even if they were expressed in vague terms like "Ten years [of de Gaulle] is enough" or the call for "democracy" and "self-management" which was very widespread in May. Rosa

## LES CONQUETES NOYÉES



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Luxemburg long ago pointed out that this very intermingling of political and economic demands is characteristic of revolutionary upheavals: bitter struggles over apparently minor workplace issues can be found in the midst of all the great revolutions. "The movement as a whole does not proceed from the economic to the political struggle, nor even the reverse...With the spreading, clarifying and involution of the political struggle, the economic struggle not only does not recede, but extends, organises, and becomes involved in equal measure".

In one area where the May strikes have been studied minutely (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, in the north of France), 47% of workplaces were occupied. This included 88% of nationalised enterprises and 70% of factories in the metal industries.

Sometimes the occupations were run by

a minority of union activists. But half the metal-working factories in Nord-Pas-de-Calais were occupied by over 25% of the workforce.

At the Berliet truck factory in Lyons, the workers rearranged the letters on the 'Berliet' sign to read 'Liberte'. At the CSF electronics factory in Brest, the workers continued production — making walkie-talkies for use of strikers and demonstrators. The workers at the FNAC chain of shops passed a resolution on 24 May declaring: "We have gone on strike not to see particular claims satisfied but to take part in the movement which now mobilises ten million manual and intellectual workers...to challenge the legitimacy of the whole leadership of the country and all the structures of the society...The workers want to put in its place the power which would represent them truly and democratically, i.e. they want self-management at the level of the plant and of public services as well as at the national level...For a true workers' democracy!"

At the Atlantic Shipyards in St. Nazaire, the workers showed that they wanted something more than improvements within the existing system by occupying the yard and *for ten days refusing to submit a list of demands* to the bosses. They knew they wanted something more than a little improvement in wages and conditions; they did not know how to put the aspiration to change society into the form of a list of demands; but they did not want to be tied down to limited demands.

The survey in Nord-Pas-de-Calais found that in only 59% of workplaces did the workers want immediate negotiations on their demands. Another survey — of 100 workplaces across France — found that only two-thirds presented a list of demands soon after beginning their action.

The Renault factory at Cleon, although its occupation started on the initiative of young workers who went over the heads of the factory union leadership, did quickly adopt a list of demands worked out by the CGT. Its strike committee, elected on the first night of the occupation, was dominated by the factory CGT leaders. This strike committee was able to block a demand from activists for the election of workshop committees, and it was energetic and effective in securing a return to work on 16 June.

Yet there was a revolutionary impulse at Cleon, too. There were two general assemblies of workers every day to discuss the running of the occupation. About 1500 of the factory's 5000 workers took part in the pickets. Films were shown, and plays by Brecht and Chekhov were staged in the occupied factory. There were meetings and discussions on all sorts of issues — a series of four debates, for example, on sexuality and contraception. Sexual freedom was a major issue of discussion in the May events, though feminist issues and demands were scarcely raised at all: the modern women's movement emerged in France only some years after.

The workers read leaflets from the JCR and from Voix Ouvriere, and were interested particularly in their calls for workers' control. Towards the end of the strike workers dissatisfied with the conservatism of the strike committee formed an Action Committee.

At Renault Flins, 5000 at least out of 10,500 workers attended the mass meeting every morning, and 1000 joined the picket lines. At the meeting on 20 May the workers applauded a CFDT speaker who declared: "The students say — this is the meaning they have given to their struggle — we have to get rid of this present-day society. Are we Flins workers in agreement?"

Conflict with the union leadership at Flins came at the end of the strike, when the police tried to smash up the occupation. The CGT initially opposed students helping the workers to resist the police, but was forced by rank-and-file pressure to accept the students and allow student speakers at the workers' meetings.

At the Nuclear Research Centre at Saclay, the 10,000 workers organised a highly democratic workers' council and established links with farmers to organise food supplies for workers in a nearby shanty-town. They requisitioned medical supplies from the Centre's stocks for the casualties on the barricades.

In Caen the unions blocked access to the town for 24 hours after the Grenelle Accord. And in Nantes a Central Strike Committee ran the city for a week, from 26 to 31 May.

Road blocks were set up round the city. Only necessary food supplies and supplies needed by farmers were allowed to pass. The Central Strike Committee also controlled the distribution of petrol.

A couple of days before, on 24 May, the initiative had been taken by working-class housewives in the Batignolles district of Nantes, who organised themselves into 'family associations' and then set up joint food-supply committees with the farm workers' unions. After 26 May district committees were set up in all working-class districts.

The Central Strike Committee opened its own sales depots for food, supervised the prices charged by private shops and issued coupons to families with no money. It also made sure that farms got electricity and any equipment they needed. It organised squads of workers and students to help in the fields and increase the supply of food.

If the established trade-union and political leaders of the French working class had wanted to, they could have spread the example of Nantes all across France. And if they had done that, de Gaulle could have been replaced by a workers' government based on workers' councils.

Already the official administrative machine had lost its grip, and the capitalists had lost their control over the means of production. Capitalist power was reduced to its hard core: the armed forces of the state. And those armed forces were not completely solid or invin-

cible. On 22 May the police federation had come out in support of the strike and declared the police would refuse to be used against it.

On Wednesday 29th de Gaulle went to Germany to talk to Jacques Massu, commander of the French forces stationed there. He got a promise of support from Massu in return for an amnesty for Salan and his 'keep Algeria French' rebels. But would the army have stayed solid in the face of mass armed resistance by the workers — the soldiers' fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, school friends?

All historical experience suggests not. And on 22 May an action committee from one mechanised infantry regiment stationed in Mutzig put out a declaration: "The young people and the workers must know that the soldiers *will never shoot workers...We shall fraternise...Long live*

against the wishes of the union leaders.

At first (and later, in its apologetics after the event) the CP said that the strikes were, and should be, only about wages and conditions. But in the midst of the general strike the CP was willing to make its main demand "a people's government"? What did this mean? To workers who wanted to change the system, the CP explained that the "people's government" would be "a democracy in which everyone will contribute to the orientation, running and control of the economy".

The CP leaders hoped that the Grenelle Accord would end the general strike. They soon saw it wouldn't; so they abandoned any effort to push the strikers back to work, and even called for the continuation of the strike. They preferred to have the factory occupations run by a trusty minority of union activists, but they did not insist: the survey in Nord-Pas-de-Calais found that there had been mass occupations (by more than 25% of the workforce) in 53% of workplaces where the CGT was the major union, and in only 13% of workplaces where the notionally more sympathetic CFDT dominated.

The CP leaders never set themselves brutally against the movement. They relied on the fact that a general strike cannot mark time. At a certain point, if it does not go forward, it must retreat. They gently stifled the possibilities of the struggle going forward, and then waited for it to ebb. Only when the return to work was gathering momentum did the CP come out strongly against continued strikes.

To the revolutionary students and to some young workers, it was glaringly, shockingly clear that the CP leaders were trying to stop a revolution. To CP worker-activists, and to workers accustomed to seeing those CPers as the best fighters against the bosses, things probably seemed different.

The French Communist Party of 1968 was something very different from the British Communist Party of 1988. It had long ceased to be genuinely revolutionary and become bureaucratic, gearing itself to USSR foreign policy and the search for positions within French capitalist society; but for 20 years it had been a pariah party, regularly condemned in the most vehement terms by the rulers of France. However much its leaders wished otherwise, it had no place in the corridors of power. It embodied a 'counter-culture' of sorts; it harboured an intense, if limited, class-consciousness; it organised the great majority of the most militant workers.

Workers who joined the CP thought they were joining a revolutionary party — indeed, *the* revolutionary party. Before 1968, most workers would never have come across Trotskyist politics, except possibly in the form of leaflets distributed at their factory gates by a few students. In May 1968 the CP explained the issues as a matter of the sober, sensible revolutionaries (the CP) against the wild-eyed 'pseudo-revolutionaries'. "Our Party is aware of the harm that utopia and anarchism, impatience elevated to the level of a theoretical argument, a foolhardy



"They had dared to think that perhaps the working class could run society"

solidarity of workers, soldiers, students, and secondary school pupils! Long live workers' democracy! Long live joy, love, and creative work!"

It was not the strength of the capitalist order that saved de Gaulle, but the weakness of the established opposition to capitalism.

Nowhere did the workers decisively throw off the leadership of the CP. Does that mean there was no revolutionary drive among the workers? No. The CP rode the movement with some skill. At first it condemned the militant students, then it supported them. It called only for a one-day general strike, but when a bigger strike movement developed, it supported it. A survey has found that in 35% of workplaces the strike was started by the established union leaders there. In only 16% of workplaces did it start directly

evaluation of the balance of forces and pseudo-revolutionary verbiage, have done to the labour movement in the past." The CP quoted Lenin on "revolutionary phrasemongering", and denounced the revolutionary left as "opportunists" whose "slogans merely mask their fear of reality, their evasion when faced with today's tasks..."

After May 1968 the revolutionary left grew at least tenfold in numbers and even more in profile. In the 1974 presidential election, a Trotskyist candidate, Arlette Laguiller, got 700,000 votes. Numerically, though not relatively, the CP gained more. Between 1966-7 and 1978 the CP doubled its membership, from 350,000 to 700,000; it also doubled the numbers of its youth organisation. The Socialist Party also gained, growing from maybe 60,000 members in 1968 to 200,000 in 1978.

May 1968 confirmed what had already been indicated by the events of 1918-19 in Germany and 1936 in France: in countries with a well-established labour movement, in times of revolutionary upheaval, a great number of workers turn first to the established parties, even if those parties are utterly reformist. In Germany in 1918-19, the flowering of workers' councils led to the development of a small Communist Party but also to the growth of the reformist Social Democratic party from 250,000 to over one million members. A new workers' party cannot be improvised out of nothing on the spur of the moment. Workers coming fresh into politics will try the big established workers' party first - unless they are absolutely clear and confident about the merits of a smaller party proposing a more revolutionary policy, and few will be so clear and confident.

The dilemma in such revolutionary situations for the Marxist groups is that they have to combine two tasks pulling them in different directions. They have to express and channel the bitter fury and the urgent will for action of those workers and youth who have seen through the phrases of the established workers' parties. At the same time they need to relate to the greater number of more cautious workers who still give the established parties credence.

The small revolutionary groups in France played a role in May '68 out of all proportion to their size. The biggest of the groups had only 300 or so members. But without them the student protests of 3-11 May might have dissipated. Without them it is not certain that the general strike would have started: in key factories like Sud-Aviation and Renault Billancourt they were central in beginning the action. They were present and prominent in Nantes (the OCI), Saclay (the JCR), and the regiment which put out an appeal for soldiers not to shoot workers (the JCR again).

If there had been a revolutionary Marxist organisation of just a few thousand members — instead of groups with only a few hundred — and if that organisation had had members active and well-respected in a few hundred of France's

major workplaces, then the strike movement could have gone a lot further. If that revolutionary organisation had avoided major blunders, it could have spread the example of Nantes to many other cities, and created a network of workers' councils. In those workers' councils it could have found opportunities for joint action with rank-and-file CP workers.

No amount of energy, dedication and political astuteness could have permitted France's revolutionary Marxists to build themselves a mass party in the decades before 1968. But nothing in the overall politics of that period made building an organisation of a few thousand impossible. There must have been many times in the '50s and early '60s when the daily grind of building a revolutionary organisation — the paper sales, the



"If there had been a revolutionary organisation of just a few thousand... then the strike movement could have gone much further"

meetings, the attempts to activate the inactive, the endless theoretical debates and arguments — seemed unproductive and futile. But in May '68 every effort expended over the previous decades was repaid a hundredfold; every lapse or mistake cost dear.

French capitalism seems to have absorbed the impact of May 1968 with great ease. Though the revolutionary left grew, it remained small, and has stagnated since the early '70s. The growth of the Communist Party and Socialist Party in the 1970s posed no threat to capitalism, as those parties showed when they took governmental office in 1981-6. In recent years the SP has declined, and the CP even more so, while the fascist National Front has gained ground.

Economically, the immediate result of the wage rises won in 1968 was a consumer

boom which in turn fuelled an industrial boom. Industrial production rose at 6.6% per year from 1967 to 1973, an improvement on the already brisk rate of 5% a year recorded between 1958 and 1967. The share of profits in non-agricultural value-added even rose, despite the big wage rises.

It has sometimes been argued on the left — with the aid of misused quotations from Trotsky — that a general strike is a sort of Armageddon: it leads either to revolution, or to the crushing of the labour movement. May 1968 disproves that argument. If the inertia of an established labour movement slows down the revolutionary dynamic of a general strike, it also slows down the capitalists' search for revenge.

The French capitalists, however, should not take too much comfort from their system's proof of its capacity to adapt. One of the lessons of 1968 is that capitalism can generate revolutionary crises even when it is relatively prosperous and flexible.

In hindsight it is possible to list factors which made France explosive in 1968. For ten years Charles de Gaulle had ruled the country under an authoritarian presidential regime introduced when he took power through a military coup in 1958. Although France still had the normal mechanisms of a parliamentary democracy, the parliament always had a Gaullist majority, and de Gaulle could use it to give him power to legislate by decree.

The French economy had grown fast. Industrial productivity had risen at about 5% a year. Real wages had increased too, but more slowly — at about 3% a year. The share of profits in non-agricultural value-added had risen from 15% in 1958 to 20% in 1968. The trade unions were weak: the CGT's membership had declined from 5½ million in 1947 to 2½ million in 1952 and 1½ million in 1968. France had the most unequal distribution of income in Western Europe, and the longest hours of work (an average of 45½ hours in manufacturing). Yet the growth of industry must have given workers a sense of increasing power: the workforce in engineering industries rose from 22½ million in 1954 to 26 million in 1968. Strike action increased from 980,000 striker-days in 1965 to 4,204,000 in 1967.

The number of university students had risen from 192,000 in 1958 to 540,000 in 1968. Facilities had not kept pace with this growth: lecture halls, libraries, and canteens were overcrowded, and between one-third and one-half of students did not finish their courses.

Hindsight can, however, be deceptive. Anecdote has it that in May 1968 exam papers at Oxford University (written a few weeks earlier) included the question "Account for the great political stability of France in recent years". Be that as it may, no-one at the time thought that France was about to explode. The revolutionaries were as surprised as anyone. Afterwards Daniel Cohn-Bendit said: "having lived through it, I can't ever say: 'It will never happen'..."