

Essays on the general strike

Part V

France 1968

During the course of the 1950s and 60s-long boom there was a growing chorus of opinion which asserted that violent revolution was irrelevant, unnecessary or an impossibility in advanced capitalist countries. Like the Russian revolution of 1905, the events in France 1968 put paid to that well-financed lie.

France in 1968 presents a mirror image of the 1926 General Strike in Britain (see supplements iii, iv). The political actors appear to be in many respects exactly the same - except their roles are reversed. The government under Baldwin shrewdly delayed, then assiduously prepared for the general strike. De Gaulle's was caught completely unawares.¹ The TUC sanctioned, and from the beginning carefully controlled and directed the long awaited and primed general strike. The Confédération Générale du Travail, Force Ouvrière and Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail tried to catch up with and rein in a spontaneous general strike so as to haul the workers back into the bureaucratic Bastille of collective bargaining and wage slavery. Conformist students enrolled in the OMS and formed a Bertie Wooster-type reactionary vanguard in Britain. Inspired by Marx, Lefebvre, Mao and Sartre in France, they fought at the barricades of the Latin Quarter, daubed and sprayed a competing medley of heterodox graffiti and cried out for worker-student unity, Vietnam solidarity and sexual promiscuity.² British trade unions lost members by the hundreds of thousands after the General Strike, but the Labour Party gained a million votes. The French workers' parties saw their share of seats in parliament halved, but the trade unions gained a million members. Finally, where workers in Britain showed their creative abilities because of our CPGB, workers in France showed their creative abilities despite the Parti Communiste Français.

De Gaulle's Bonapartist presidency meant there existed no strong bourgeois party and France plied a singular course in foreign policy which was never fully in tune with the American orchestrated Cold War. Yet notwithstanding de Gaulle's foibles prior to May 1968, France seemed to have become a model of capitalist stability. The Algerian war and the Fourth Republic's 'here today, gone tomorrow' governments had been replaced by General de Gaulle's post-colonial, almost regal, Fifth Republic and a decade of sustained growth under a Keynesian influenced *Commissariat du Plan*. As we know though, by 1968 conditions had become ripe for social explosion. There would appear to be a conjuncture of five main factors which account for this.

One. The great post-World War II boom had run out of steam. Economic growth was becoming harder and harder to sustain and mass unemployment, supposedly a thing of the past, was beginning to return - in 1968 unemployment in France had risen to half a million.

Two. French politics were still deeply affected

by the trauma of the 1954-62 Algerian struggle for national liberation which brought the country to the brink of civil war.³ Neither 400,000 troops, systematic torture nor the 3 million *piéds noirs* French settler population could defeat the Algerian FLN. In an interesting contrast with Britain and Ireland, French society had been completely divided over the issue. Against the conservatism of the PCF a powerful anti-war movement developed, particularly among the youth. The final coda of French rule was the Algiers coup in May 1958 under General Salan who had the support both of the French settlers and the army in Algeria. In an attempt to stop the drift towards independence he and his Committee of Public Safety refused to recognise the Paris government and demanded supreme power in France be handed to de Gaulle. In June 1958 parliament conceded, but to the dismay of the reactionaries de Gaulle went on to concede Algerian independence in March 1962. Feeling betrayed, the right wing OAS launched a campaign of terrorism and tried to assassinate him (there were 30 such attempts).

Three. In every field - pop music, sexuality, theatre, film, fashion - there was a rising tide of cultural rebellion against the dehumanising dullness of post-World War II society and a determination to *vivre autrement* - live differently. Politically, as shown by the Vietnam war, the American Black Panthers, Mao Zedong's red guards and Che Guevara's guerrilla foci in Bolivia, revolution was in the air.

Four. In response to the needs of the social democratic state and its big bureaucracy and the economy's changing technical demands, student numbers dramatically increased, making them a large and distinct social group in every advanced capitalist country. The student population in France climbed from 200,000 in 1961 to 500,000 by 1968. Gramsci's "category" of the intellectuals had been "inordinately enlarged" within the "political needs" of production, but had thereby produced a "crisis of education"⁴ Because of its anti-war activities in the early 60s the students' union had been severely restricted (shades of our NUS). Denied state funds, it had only half its 1961 membership in 1968 despite the increased college intake. Student discontent was building up alongside radical utopianism but had no institutional avenue of expression. Rigid administration, outdated teaching practices, massive overcrowding in lecture halls and single sex dorms in the age of the pill and rebellion against old sexual mores caused deep resentment, to say nothing of the "howl" of frustration, among the "extravagant swains" (Schiller).

Five. In an attempt to "make France marry her century", since the end of 1963 the Gaullist regime had imposed strict wage controls. That resulted in a slower increase in the pay packets of French workers compared with others in Western Europe and ever widening differentials between workers' incomes and those of middle class

professionals and upper class echelons.

Eric Hobsbawm, amongst others, has sought to play down the significance of the events in 1968 because, as always, objective conditions did not perfectly conform to the *a priori* abstract criteria necessary to allow high minded academic 'Marxists' to leave their studies for the streets.⁵ There was "not", he says, "a classical revolutionary situation". Apparently the "forces of revolution were weak, except in holding the initiative".⁶

Life speaks for itself. Unaware of it though he was, there can be no denying that de Gaulle stood atop a mountain of discontent which had revolutionary potential. Even Edouard Balladur - at the time of writing in 1993 Gaullist prime minister of France, who in his political youth served as an aide to Georges Pompidou - admits 1968 produced "an upheaval comparable with the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871".⁷ In fact all it took was the 'bedroom revolt' in favour of 'free circulation' in student hostels and anti-Vietnam war protest movement to ignite what ought to have been his pyre.

St Valentine's Day, 1968, saw the students' union, the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France under Jacques Sauvageot, stage a well planned nationwide protest against sexual segregation. It involved large numbers and forced the Minister of Education, Alain Peyrefitte, and the authorities to scatter petty concessions behind them as they ran for cover. Hot on the heels of Cupid came Mars. A big student demonstration took place on March 21, characterised not by tame calls for peace in Vietnam, as enjoined by the PCF, but against the USA and for Ho Chi Minh's National Liberation Front. The government fancied things were getting rather out of hand. The spoilt children were misbehaving. Order must be restored. A number of leaders were arrested, among them Nicolas Boulte of the National Vietnam Committee and Xavier Langlade, a student at Nanterre and member of the Trotskyite Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire.

On March 22 Nanterre student protests against the arrests led to the mass occupation of the university and its radio station - after a marathon debate those who had the stamina to last it out voted 142 for, two against and with three abstentions to approve the action. In effect the first student council, the 'March 22 Movement', had constituted itself. Similar molehills were to spring up all over France. Marx's little velvet-suited engineer was doing its work well. Soon a familiar black snout would again be sniffing Paris air.

Under the 'spokesmanship' of Daniel Cohn-Bendit - French born, of German refugee parentage - the March 22 student revolutionaries designated May 2 a day for political discussion and seized a lecture theatre where amongst other things they showed a film about the life of Che Guevara.⁸ Having 'tolerated' nearly a year of such *gauchiste* manifestations, the university's dean

decided enough was enough. He announced the indefinite closure of the Faculty of Letters. The following day rowdy student protests, also involving much more disciplined school students, spread to the Sorbonne. After a hurried telephone conversation with Alain Peyrefitte at the education ministry, rector Jean Roche called in the police, universally known to the students as *flics*.

To begin with there was no resistance. But as the police began to make mass arrests the mood suddenly changed. Stones were thrown, cars overturned, gas grenades fired. Fighting spilled out into the Latin Quarter. By the end of the day 596 people were in custody, including UNEF's Jaques Sauvageot and Cohn-Bendit - who, it should be noted, earned the opprobrium of the PCF's then number two, Georges Marchais. Marchais branded him a "German anarchist". This was no simple statement of fact: rather an act of filthy chauvinistic sectarianism from which the bourgeoisie could only gain strength. The PCF wanted respectability. Cohn-Bendit's real crime was his revolutionary activity (for which he was to be deported from his country of birth). In the spirit of Neil Kinnock's claim that the miners' violence in the Great Strike of 1984 helped Thatcher, Marchais had it that "objectively" Cohn-Bendit served "the interests of Gaullist power and the great capitalist monopolies".⁹ It hardly needs saying that it was the PCF's leaders who "objectively" served "the interests of Gaullist power and the great monopolies".

With both the Sorbonne and Nanterre closed, students were free over the next few days to take part in almost continuous demonstrations demanding the reopening of both sites and the release of those arrested. Though there were running clashes with the police, to the students' surprise they were not met with public hostility, rather sympathy, even the occasional burst of applause. Rector Roche and his faculty deans decided if a few sops were given the situation would soon quieten down. The university would reopen. UNEF responded defiantly. All those detained must be released, all charges dropped and the police withdrawn from the campuses. The doors of Nanterre and Sorbonne remained locked and under police guard.

May 10 was a decisive flash point, a Fahrenheit 415. Defying the police, 35,000 university and lycée students assembled at the Palace Denfert-Rochereau. At 6.30pm news arrived of concessions being offered by Louis Joxe, the acting premier. Police would be withdrawn from the Latin Quarter, the Sorbonne opened and students allowed to meet there straight away. The proposal was put to the crowd. It was a monster with many heads but one voice - in a huge roar the answer came: "*Libérez nos camarades!*"

Guarded by their *service d'ordre*, the demonstration moved off towards Santé Prison where the students' comrades were held. Massed police ranks kept them from the prison walls, but hands reached out from behind barred windows to greet them. Wheeling in a great arc, the students headed off to the hated *Maison de la Radio*, a fortress of Gaullist prejudice, patronage and propaganda. Finding their way blocked by one black phalanx of police vans after another, the demonstration was inexorably directed to the Latin Quarter. Police moved to surround the entire area, and to do the deed the notorious *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*, the CRS, were bussed in.

Among the students this news acted not to demoralise but galvanise. Exhausted defiance became joyful and tireless activity. What is a trap can become a redoubt. Fanning out in every direction, working to no plan but with a plan, a system of barricades took shape - the first in Paris since 1944 when the communist-led workers rose against the Nazis. They used whatever came to hand. Push, roll, dig, dismantle, overturn. Here, that door, that hoarding, that scaffolding, that car; and everywhere, cobblestones. Straight from the pages of Victor Hugo, 'tear down all, bring all, throw all' was the work of that night. Sixty barricades were built.

The 2am announcement, relayed over hastily rigged up tannoy, that the PCF was offering its 'solidarity' with the students breathed proletarian life into them. The *Internationale* was sung. Hopes and dreams soared on the wing. Not long afterwards the CGT declared it would be calling a one-day general strike on May 13. Bliss was it that night to be alive, but to be young was heaven. Here was change indeed. Till then, after all, the PCF had dismissed the student protests as the work of pseudo-revolutionaries and *agents provocateurs*. Roger Garaudy was wheeled out to tell everyone that the PCF "welcomed the human ferment".¹⁰ More important than the revolutionary avowals of this wrinkled liberal ornament of 'official communism', the working

class would be moving into action - clearly due to pressure from below. There was everything to fight for.

With the prime minister Georges Pompidou still far away in Iran meeting the Shah, the deteriorating situation was constantly monitored by a select emergency committee. Chaired by his deputy Louis Joxe, it consisted of four government ministers and two presidential advisors. Christian Fouchet - interior, Pierre Messmer - army, Georges Gorse - information, Alain Peyrefitte - education. And from the Élysée, Bernard Tricot, de Gaulle's *aide-de-camp* and Jacques Foccart, his expert on security matters. At 2.30am they ordered the CRS to go in. Tear gas and baton charge were met with a hail of *parés* and the torching of lost barricades. The booming thud of exploding petrol tanks could be heard across the city and acted as a claxon call for thousands of young workers and alienated malcontents.

In the acrid choking air there was fierce hand to hand fighting. The students and their allies gave ground but did not give up. With the morale boosting help of locals, their coffee and food, their sheets and rags to protect against the CS gas, their shouts of encouragement, they fought back. As dawn broke the battle was still raging. When the call to disperse came the wounded lay everywhere and nearly 500 were under arrest. But it was worth it. Under such circumstances to have fought so long is to be victorious. On Saturday night, May 11, Pompidou, having returned from abroad, went on the air. He attempted to put the glove back on the bloodied mailed fist. The Sorbonne would be open on Monday morning. The court of appeal would pronounce on the jailed students. As a splendid contemporary and on the spot account by Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville tells: "The clear implications were that the police would be withdrawn and the students released".¹¹ The night of the barricades had forced the government to capitulate.

5.1. Workers enter the fray

The students had shown through their derring-do that there was a defile in the supposedly impregnable Western European bourgeois order. Now was the time, before the defences were repaired, to send in the big battalions - ie, the working class. With decisive leadership - who knows? - the citadel might be stormed. Unfortunately, all the generals wanted was to parade around the walls - they were not latterday Joshuas.

That did not mean things returned to 'normal'. Pompidou's speech offered too little, too late. Too little, because the student appetite had been whetted, but not satisfied. Instead of defusing the situation, it encouraged far reaching demands and handed over the mass of students to the revolutionary activists. Too late, because the CGT and CFDT, along with the teachers' union, Fédération de l'Éducation Nationale, had decided to ignore the statutory five days' notice and were committed to a one day general strike on May 13 - the leaping flame of rebellion had already reached the working class.

In the early morning of May 12 students burst into Strasbourg University and hoisted the red flag. Inspired by the street fighting in Paris, they proclaimed the university's 'autonomy' from the Ministry of Education. Showing how even small numbers can have big effects under such circumstances, later the same day a group of 40 militants belonging to the Mouvement d'Action Universitaire took over the Censier Annex of the Faculty of Letters in the Rue Censier.¹² They targeted the annex because - whereas the Sorbonne itself was surrounded by thousands of police - it was left unguarded. The doors were flung open. MAU was determined to begin a general political discussion. For the whole day and into the night it raged. Anarchists, Maoists, Trotskyites, Marxists - every revolutionary school contended. Exhausting. Impassioned. Unrestricted. Its model was to be copied in the occupations and debates that swept France in the month of May 1968.

Support for the general strike on May 13 - the tenth anniversary of the Algiers coup that brought de Gaulle to power - was overwhelming. Yet though the CGT, CFDT and FEN had given the order to rally, the student leaders had the glory. The 800,000 strong demonstration that set off from the Gare de l'Est had in its front line Alain Geismar, Jacques Sauvageot and Daniel Cohn-Bendit. For once Georges Séguy, Eugène Descamps, François Mitterand, Guy Mollet, Pierre Mendès-France and Waldeck Rochet were lost back in the crowd.¹³

The *groupuscules* had boldly stepped out of the university ghetto and found themselves at the head of the prodigious worker-student demonstration as it snaked its way through Paris and

into a passion. Moving with ease, almost instinct, it knew the route. In another life it had ruled these streets - 1789, 1793, 1830, 1848, 1871. Bristling with red banners, breathing anger and exuding confidence, it obliged the police to keep their distance. No routine march. It pulsed with revolutionary energy. Its slogans thrilled, communicated, captivated. Closing speeches were not the signal to head home. They commanded attention. Something real, something important, something vital was being said. There were pleas and demands on government, empty talk and platform rhetoric. But there were also plans and preparation. The universities must be occupied! Student strikes will continue! Form action committees! And the day was not yet over. After the trade union bosses had marched off their members, the student leaders did the same - only to the call, "Everyone to the Sorbonne!" Pompidou had been true to his word. Imprisoned students had been freed. Police pulled back from the Latin Quarter. The doors of the Sorbonne were no longer under guard. Students poured in and made it their own.

Yet at the very moment when the student movement was reaching its zenith the centre of gravity shifted from students to workers. May 14 1968, the day after the Sorbonne occupation, there was the first of the workplace occupations. Beginning with the Sud Aviation plant at Nantes and the Renault factory near Rouen, within 72 hours industrial production the country over was being brought to a virtual standstill. And the strike kept spreading. On May 19 there were 2 million on strike. On May 22 10 million. Managers were locked up in their offices and had to endure a workers' escort to the lavatory. Footballers, and nuclear power workers, even weather forecasters went on strike. The Odeon National Theatre was occupied. Air and rail traffic stopped. Postal deliveries dried up. There was no public transport in Paris, Nice, Marseilles and a string of provincial towns. Banks began to run out of cash and had to ration customers. And though this was the biggest general strike in history at "no time did a general strike order go out from the Paris headquarters of the union federations".¹⁴ Here was a spontaneous general strike from below. The threat from the students seemed small compared to the forces now ranged against the government. A threat made all the more dangerous given its unofficial beginnings and potential for worker-student unity. This could have, should have been, Year I of the new proletarian order.

Alongside and associated with the general strike were the local action committees.¹⁵ A luxuriant growth, they "sprung up with incredible speed: in schools, universities, government offices, professional organisations and firms, but also spontaneously in residential areas on the basis of a network of streets".¹⁶ If these committees had been linked up with the occupation and strike committees they would surely have provided the embryo of the revolutionary Sixth Republic.

What about the students at the Sorbonne? After a brief flowering of debate and self-organisation involving literally tens of thousands, the students' 'soviet' quickly degenerated. Endless discussion there was. But most of it pointless and self-indulgent. Freedom reigned, so did hedonism and crazy 'happenings'. Utopian dreams of autonomy and doing one's own thing became licence for lumpen thugs, dossers and police spies. What could have been an invaluable auxiliary for the revolution became an anarchist playground.¹⁷

The proletarian front was different. Under conditions where the workers were beginning to talk of popular rule, the established workers' parties - including the PCF the largest and by far the most serious - did everything to catch up in order to lead. But what sort of a lead? In political struggle words are weapons. They can be explosives or tranquillisers, stimulants or poisons.

The CFDT and the atrophied factions that made up the socialist electoral bloc wanted to tranquillise. They declared their sympathy with the students, at least in so far as they called for reformist democratisation. However given their revolutionary origins and continued pretensions, the 'official communist' PCF and CGT felt threatened from the left by the UJC(M-L) and the JCR, and their Maoist and Trotskyite parents. The PCF was determined not to lose hegemony over the working class nor risk anything that might upset its Militant-style parliamentary road to socialism. It talked down the situation with poisonous words and rubbished student leaders. There was no revolutionary situation. What the workers want is higher pay - first things, first. It wanted to lead the strike in order "to deny it to the uncontrolled 'leftists'" and kill off any potential the working class had of going beyond the electoralist atomisation of

reformist politics.¹⁸

With these considerations guiding its every step the PCF "spared no effort to separate the workers from the students, issuing orders to its branch officials that no students were to be allowed inside factories under their control".¹⁹ So when on May 18 students marched to the giant Renault plant in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, CGT stewards made sure they were not let in. PCF-CGT tactics were to keep the student revolutionaries at arm's length, and to advance in the name of the working class purely economic demands. They wanted working class eyes on a slightly bigger slice of the capitalist cake, not the bakery.

What was the situation? Was it reformist or was it revolutionary? Sometimes our enemies let slip the truth when our supposed leaders only tell lies. In private Pompidou himself seems to have been in no doubt. He confided to the chief of police that France was in a "pre-revolutionary situation". To alert the forces of reaction and to cow his 'official communist' opponents, Pompidou issued dark warnings about the communist danger, Moscow plots and red dictatorship. Of course, in point of fact the PCF's leaders provided the capitalist system with a vital social support. Its determination to limit workers to reformist demands and shun the revolutionary students dovetailed perfectly with Pompidou's perspectives. He too considered it "essential" to "split the handful of revolutionary student leaders from their mass following and, still more vital, to keep workers and students apart".²⁰

5.2. Revolutionary situation?

The state was in utter confusion. What to do? Concession had not worked, only landed the regime deeper in the mire. What had been student unrest was now general strike. There was to boot a growing constitutional crisis. As a result splits within the ruling class became more numerous and more pronounced. The defile was becoming a yawning breach. De Gaulle brooded and bided his time with thoughts of counterrevolution. Pompidou favoured giving more ground before agreeing to the use of other means.²¹

Ministers compiled lists of what government building would be allowed to fall to the students and which ones should be stoutly defended - it was not a sense of humour which led to the decision to defend the Comédie Française. Febrile OAS remnants undertook an inventory of their arsenals. Amongst the reformists thoughts began to stir. The old contender, Pierre Mendès-France, awaited Kerensky-like the call of providence. The new contender, François Mitterand, tentatively suggested a "provisional government", perhaps with Mendès-France as caretaker prime minister, perhaps himself as president. The PCF protested - it did not want to be left out in the cold. For the moment however Pompidou still had his hand on the levers of state.

Bringing together a meeting at the Hotel du Chatelet in the rue de Grenelle he began intensive tripartite negotiations between government, employers and unions, primarily the CGT.²² The 'official communists' wanted a social contract. The sort its leader Maurice Thorez gained with the Matignon agreements; it defused the spontaneous 'crisis of expectations' brought about by the election of the left reformist government of Leon Blum in 1936. Or the 1945 settlement which saw five communists - Maurice Thorez, François Billoux, Marcel Paul and Ambroise Croizat - enter government: their Judas price for disarming the resistance partisans and not making revolution.

The meeting lasted from May 25-27. As street fighting continued to flare and the Paris Bourse was attacked, concession followed concession - from both sides. The CGT was a responsible and very helpful negotiating partner. The Grenelle protocol was signed. Wages would be increased by one-third, some by over 70%. What more could a trade union official ask? Georges Séguy, CGT general secretary, was delighted. Now the madness would be ended. Progress could begin again along the true parliamentary road to socialism. He drove straight to the giant Renault plant at Boulogne-Billancourt where there was a mass meeting of 25,000 workers. The fool expected adulation. Proudly laying before them the Grenelle protocol, he boasted: "This is what we have snatched from them, after extreme difficulty, difficult talks..."²³ He was interrupted not by applause, but booing. He left to a storm of cat calls and whistles. The scene at Boulogne-Billancourt was repeated throughout the country. At almost every occupation, strike committee, union branch and mass meeting the protocol was rejected out of hand. The two Georges - Séguy and Pompidou - had failed. The crisis widened and deepened.

Now de Gaulle took the initiative - in a manner that befitted a general, and an arrogant and idiosyncratic one at that. On the morning of Wednesday May 29 the regular cabinet meeting at the Élysée was cancelled without notice. The president would see no one. Later, a little after 11am, the soldier-statesman and his wife departed from Paris, it was said to Colombey-les-deux-Églises, the president's country house. To many it seemed that the regime was on the point of collapse. That de Gaulle would soon be announcing his resignation. In the words of the London *Evening Standard*, the "situation today can be summed up in a few words: it is a revolutionary situation of almost text-book kind".²⁴

De Gaulle did not go to the country for quiet contemplation. His exact movements are still uncertain. But it has been established that he did arrive by helicopter at Saint-Dizier, 125 miles east of Paris. According to some reports he then called at Taverny, the country's nuclear command centre, and spoke via its sophisticated communications network to various military top brass. He then definitely headed to Baden-Baden, the headquarters of France's 70,000 strong army in West Germany. De Gaulle did not leave the airfield. Army chiefs were summoned to meet him, including General Jacques Massu, commander of French troops in Germany and General Beauvillet, military governor of Metz.

There would appear to have been two main questions on the agenda at the council of war. The first political and strategic, the second military and tactical. Would the army fight? Was it reliable? De Gaulle was obviously weighing up the possibility of using the French army in Germany as a striking force against the capital in the manner of General Galliffet, the butcher of the Paris Communards. Previously de Gaulle had consulted Pierre Messmer, Minister of the Armies, on this matter. He thought the men were loyal but is believed to have replied that it would be "unwise to ask them to fire on civilians".²⁵ In Baden-Baden General Massu assured de Gaulle that the army was ready to carry out its duty.

This was despite (or because) of recent rumblings in both the army and navy. There had been a mutiny on the aircraft carrier *Clémenceau* and soldiers' committees had sprung up after rumours that they were to be used as strike breakers. One leaflet written by the 153rd Mechanised Infantry regiment stated: "The workers and the youth must know that the soldiers of the contingent will never shoot on workers ... We shall fraternise. Soldiers of the contingent, form your committees!"²⁶

De Gaulle was ready to risk it and a split in the army. He gave orders for counterrevolutionary contingency plans. A tactical command headquarters was established at Verdun. Lists were drawn up of the most trustworthy units - perhaps 20,000 troops - who would then be moved to Metz ready for action.²⁷ Having secured the necessary elements of a violent counter-revolution, de Gaulle was put down from his helicopter at Colombey on May 29. That night he drafted a short speech.

Meanwhile events in Paris had been moving with breakneck speed. "The general strike, far from showing signs of ending, is assuming more and more an insurrectional and openly political character," said the London *Evening Standard*.²⁸ Both the revolutionary students and the labour unions had staged huge *illegal* demonstrations, the CGT's being half a million strong. Not surprisingly, it appeared that "France has no effective government".²⁹ Such was the situation, not least given de Gaulle's strange disappearance, that Mendès-France and Mitterand felt a growing sense of confidence. They showed their hand to the National Assembly, modestly making clear their willingness to accept power on behalf of a united left. Even liberal politicians, such as Jean Lecanuet, a former presidential candidate, seemed to rally behind the candidacy of Mendès-France. A 'back Mendès' committee was formed. The days of Gaullism appeared over. A crisis regime ready in the wings.

The situation in France now strikingly confirmed one of Marx's profound propositions: revolution advances by giving rise to strong and united counterrevolution. Having put in place the contingency of state counterrevolution, de Gaulle mobilised the counterrevolution of civil society. On May 30 at 4.31pm he spoke to the nation. Citizens must defend the republic. There would be no referendum. The communist danger had to be crushed. He was not resigning. The National Assembly would be dissolved. There would be fresh elections. Special provincial 'commissioners of the republic' were to be appointed. If the trial of strength continued, he was ready to use other means - here was the threat of General Massu's troops.

As it turned out they were not needed. The

forces of democratic counterrevolution proved stronger than the forces of revolution. Not because of numbers, but leadership and politics. Neither Waldeck Rochet nor Cohn-Bendit were a match for de Gaulle. Neither 'official communism' nor student anarchism was capable of turning a revolutionary situation into a revolution. 'Official communism' because it did not "want to take power", student anarchism because it was not capable.³⁰ Under such circumstances the spontaneous explosion could only express itself negatively. It rebelled against existing conditions but could not develop a coherent strategy to win the prize. Initiative was therefore bound to pass to reaction and the established order.

Barely had de Gaulle finished his speech before, as had been carefully arranged, conservative France took to the streets of Paris - there were a million of them. The 'party of fear' suddenly overcame its fear. In a sea of red, white and blue *tricolours*, the 'silent majority' sang the *Marseillaise* and chanted, "*Le communisme ne passera pas!*" Reactionaries of every assemblage, strain and hue turned out or were pulled in. Besides Gaullists and liberal republicans there were no-hope monarchists, under-the-rug Pétainists, supporters of General Salan, former Poujadists, the apologetic dead sheep of Vichy France, the savage wolves of French Algeria.

The tide turned. De Gaulle pressed home his advantage. To instil uncertainty troops and tanks were ostentatiously moved round the country. Reservists were called up with the declared intention of using them as strike breakers. Armed police ejected pickets from the central post office at Rouen. Committees of Civic Action organised thugs to attack the left. Back to work ballots were imposed and local (surrender) talks between workers and employers formally began. After its brief experiment with 'objectivity', the radio (considered by the Gaullists more important than TV) subtly returned to type as a Gaullist propaganda mouthpiece. As to the communists and socialists they guiltily tried to excuse their unconstitutional bad manners and prepared to meet de Gaulle on the no-matter-who-wins-capitalism-never-loses field of parliamentary elections.³¹

On May 31 the unions obediently entered unconditional negotiations with the government on purely bread and butter economic claims. Though most strikers did not go back until well into June, the moment had been fatally squandered. Infinitely patient, the mole returned to its underground home. The revolutionary opportunity passed. Normality returned. On May 29 de Gaulle appeared finished. After the two-round general election - June 23 and 30 - he and his supporters had the largest majority in the history of the republic.³²

5.3. The official version

The PCF has no official document on the events of May 1968.³³ With its diabolical record that is to be expected. It would rather forget than remember let alone learn. Nevertheless for our own purposes we have countless authoritative statements from its leaders giving a clear account of how they were thinking at the time. It denied the existence of a pre-revolutionary situation and the possibility of the Communist Party bringing that situation to maturity.³⁴ Basically the PCF wanted to - 'had to' would be a more accurate phrase - believe the crisis in May 1968 was a dastardly Gaullist plot whose sole purpose was to discredit it and the left. Consequently there were supposedly only two options. Either the fight for wage increases and reforms or armed insurrection. Shortly after the PCF Central Committee meeting of July 8 1968, general secretary Waldeck Rochet summed up its collective view in a key article in *L'Humanité*:

In reality, the choice to be made in May was the following:

- Either to act in such a way that the strike would permit the essential demands of the workers to be satisfied, and to pursue at the same time, on the political plane, a policy aimed at making necessary democratic changes by constitutional means. That was our party's position.

- Or else quite simply to provide a trial of strength, in other words move towards insurrection: this would include a recourse to armed struggle aimed at overthrowing the regime by force. This was the adventurist position of certain ultra-left groups.

But since the military and repressive forces were on the side of the established authorities, and since the immense mass of the people was totally hostile to such an adventure, it is clear that to take such a course meant quite simply to lead the workers to the slaughterhouse, and to wish for the crushing of the working class and its vanguard, the Communist Party.

Well, we didn't fall into the trap. For that was the real plan of the Gaullist regime.

Indeed their calculations were simple; faced with a crisis which they had themselves provoked by their anti-social and anti-democratic policies, they reckoned on taking advantage of that crisis in order to strike a decisive and lasting blow at the working class, at our party, and at any democratic movement.³⁵

Frankly the idea that objective conditions demanded an either-or choice between channeling the crisis into purely economic demands and all out armed struggle is entirely without foundation. Such a proposition is unhistorical, illogical and diversionary. None of the main student revolutionary groups were calling for instant insurrection. No one suggests the PCF should have started the mass distribution of arms on May 13 - talking things down and holding things back is another matter.

If we use the simple device of reversing its formulation we can see how devious and dishonest it really is. Say the Communist Party *was* calling for armed insurrection. Would that mean telling workers involved in a dispute with their employer *not* to strike in order to further economic demands? Definitely not. A strike under such circumstances would aid the revolution, act as a valuable adjunct for the forces being deployed ready for an armed uprising. One form of struggle does not exclude other forms of struggle. On the contrary, as has already been emphasised in previous supplements, Marxism is positively open to the use of all tactical forms, and not just one at a time, but - heaven offend - in combination. After all an army would have no problem in bringing in air support at the same time as launching an artillery bombardment, laying mines and carrying out acts of sabotage behind the enemy's lines. Any general who ordered his troops to confine themselves to one form of struggle deserves a swift court martial or maybe a single bullet.

Revolution is a process. Men and women make revolution in the same way states tend to make war - they drift into it as the situation escalates. Revolutions invariably begin modestly with humble demands for higher wages, reasonable suggestions for the extension of democratic rights and respectful "constitutional means". But reformists do not want to admit that. Like the worst Cold War warriors they want to frighten people with talk of guns, blood and certain defeat. Because of their inability to break from the 'common sense' view of the world, reformists are wedded body and soul to the 'practical' idea that workers' "essential demands" can be obtained within capitalism and through trade unionism and "constitutional means".

However the class struggle by its very nature moves forward using many and varied forms; political polemic, strikes, mass meetings, participation in bourgeois elections, boycott of bourgeois elections, peaceful demonstrations, armed demonstrations, guerrilla actions, dual power, barricades, mutiny, etc. By drawing in broader and broader sections of the masses, without rejecting any tactics, as the situation develops the tempo must be constantly upped; the tactical *focus* going from one newly established higher form to another. Anti-war protests to political strikes. Political strikes to general strike. General strike to street fighting. General strike to dual power. Old demands are subsumed in new higher ones. Democratic and political demands become demands for workers' power and socialism. One thing is for certain though: revolutions do not begin with "a trial of strength" through "recourse to armed struggle". That is where they end. As the masses grow in confidence, show they mean business and come to realise the need for insurrection so the constitutional crisis for the ruling class becomes ever more profound. It cannot rule in the old way. Its servants begin to lose faith. Its armed forces become thoroughly disorganised, thoroughly subverted, thoroughly unreliable. Under such fully developed circumstances an insurrection would lead workers not to the "slaughterhouse", but liberation.

Even a Communist Party that has decided to place prime strategic emphasis on physical force would not inaugurate its revolutionary struggle with a direct frontal challenge against the state's armed forces. To do so would be more than a Blanquist "adventurist position"; it would be suicide. The first law of revolutionary war is to avoid a decisive head on clash with superior forces. That is not an excuse for reformist paralysis, but correct revolutionary practice. Unlike Waldeck Rochet and Marchais, neither Mao, Giap nor Castro froze into passivity because to begin with the "military and repressive forces were on the side of the established authorities". They formed their own makeshift fighting units, which trained and developed themselves with

carefully chosen and audacious surprise attacks on inferior units in the enemy's camp - units which were exposed or isolated, because of the distribution and morale of forces.

Certainly real revolutionaries do not start with the defeatist, static and fatalistic assumption that "the immense mass of the people" would be "totally hostile" to armed insurrection. The masses have to be won to understand that necessity through their own struggles, through their own self-movement, through the *active leadership* of their Party which, in the words of Marx and Engels, fights for "immediate aims", all the while representing and taking "care of the future".³⁶ The working class can only achieve its immediate "essential demands" of ridding itself of the threat of poverty, war, slump and unemployment by pursuing the class struggle all the way to communism. That might be alien to reformists living as they do in a famished mental world dominated by parliamentary procedure and trade union deals. For us though it is a profound truth based on the work and findings of every genuine communist theorist. Therefore a general strike must be viewed not as an opportunity to gain a few, possibly fleeting, petty reforms, but a political challenge to the existing order. Unless we are to betray the working class, we must ruthlessly fight, do absolutely everything in our power to take it through to revolution.

As to the idea that the events of May 1968 were somehow carefully staged managed, were the result of a sinister "plan" hatched by the Gaullist regime, that is a combination of cowardice, the patently absurd and the paranoid. Yes, the Tsar 'planned' to shoot down the workers on Bloody Sunday, 1905. Yes, the General Strike in 1926 involved detailed planning and plotting by the Baldwin government. But for revolutionaries that was no reason to turn reformist. Anyway it is transparently clear that the 1968 student movement and the general strike in France was a spontaneous outburst which owed nothing, not a thing, to the machinations of the state. Pompidou's government was complacent - not bent on provoking street fighting and a huge general strike. Once the strike started he did everything to bring it to a speedy conclusion. Only if that did not work would force be threatened, let alone used. De Gaulle and Pompidou were not out to crush the working class; they wanted to defuse a constitutional/political crisis by offering economic and electoral concessions. That the workers accepted them was due not so much to the generosity of the government, more that the working class had not been really roused to fight for anything else, anything better, anything grander.

A Communist Party that attempts insurrection against a strong and stable regime is courting certain defeat. But a Communist Party that rules out insurrection without having pushed things as far as they can go in a crisis situation against a regime that is staggering, divided and losing control shirks, betrays and breaks away from its elementary duty as a party of the working class. Preparing insurrection in France would have meant encouraging, widening, generalising what the students and workers were already doing. With ten million workers on strike, with countless factory occupations, with barricade fighting there was tremendous scope for a genuine Communist Party to do what it exists to do - lead the masses to revolution.

Of course the PCF was not under the leadership of genuine communists. It was led by Waldeck Rochet, Marchais, Garaudy and Séguy - blustering opportunists and miserable revisionists. Manifestly such types long ago abandoned any lingering thought of a revolutionary Sixth Republic. They believed in reforming the existing state and getting their snouts in the trough of corruption and privilege represented by state office.

A revolutionary situation was therefore viewed exclusively as an opportunity to further their supposedly realistic project of gradualist progress. Inevitably people will defend what they seek to reform. That is why, though the PCF claimed to be guided by the theory of Marxism-Leninism, the role it played in May 1968 was to all intents and purposes indistinguishable from Britain's self-confessed reformists in May 1926. Séguy, in a boot licking display worthy of Clynes, Bevin or Citrine, claimed in 1968 that: "Public opinion has come to look upon the CGT as a great force for peace and order".³⁷ What a toad! Clearly the PCF had as much in common with Marxists as Labourites have with socialism: ie, nothing except when it suits as ideological camouflage. In 'normal' times such parties might attempt to secure better conditions for the working class; they sometimes succeed. However when the stakes have been raised, when the state is in crisis, when the very existence of the system is thrown into the balance they have

no hesitation in betraying the basic interests of the working class. They fear revolution more than they fear defeat.

May 1968 was a festival of the oppressed. The workers and students performed organisational miracles. They thought unthinkable thoughts and did undoable deeds. What was lacking was a revolutionary party. Ironically at the time *The Economist* was able to put its high Tory finger on this most important subjective factor:

A revolution requires the coming together of a revolutionary situation and a party or organisation ready to take power. Since France has been virtually brought to a standstill, the situation might appear revolutionary. But the party that has always claimed the revolutionary role shows no sign of wanting to fill it. The communists have jumped on the train, but only to pull the brake.³⁸

A real Communist Party would have ensured that the working class identified with, defended and moved to lead the students. As the workers swung into battle it would have advanced the aims of communism more comprehensively and more boldly so that the Party's slogans were always one step in front of the galloping revolutionary initiatives of the masses. No one can tell how the struggle would have turned out. Then the same can be said about December 1905 and October 1917. The key thing is to fight: to make, not meekly accept history.

5.4. What was possible?

The revolution of France in May 1968 were primarily underdeveloped and contradictory because the politics of France in May 1968 was underdeveloped and contradictory. Needless to say, what is being referred to here is the politics of those below not those above - ie, the politics of the workers and students. Let us first deal with those of the working class. Although they pushed it to extreme limits, the mass of workers remained within the politics of wage slavery. David Caute is not wrong when he says: "The ten million strikers did not seek power. All they wanted was better conditions of life and work".³⁹ Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville also point out that: "In spite of the factory occupations, the working class in its immense majority did not cross that fateful frontier between striking for higher wages, shorter working hours, earlier retirement - all the traditional claims - and striking to change society".⁴⁰ This failure of the working class to carry through its historic mission could only further cool the ardour of 'new left' philosophers. Gorz, Levy and Glucksmann despairingly concluded that the working class had become economically corrupted or pacified by the 'affluent' society of the 1960s and its cars, TV sets, washing machines and other 'luxuries'.⁴¹

Of course, what is a 'corrupting luxury' for one generation becomes necessary for the subsistence of another. It should be said that as a Marxist category subsistence was never defined as some sort of datum line of physical survival, but relatively, as the ability to culturally reproduce. Mesmerised by the generalisation of 1930s luxury goods during the course of the 1950s and 60s long boom, the 'new left' philosophers over-philosophised. They also suffered from a bad case of confusing form with content and blaming the working class for its leaders.

Like armies, classes do not always get the general staff they deserve. Even in pre-'affluent' times, even in the darkest, most brutal and perverted years of primitive capitalist accumulation in the 18th and 19th centuries there existed a "distance" between what Lukacs calls "actual and ascribed class consciousness". Nevertheless because of the objective conditions of its existence the working class is a revolutionary class which can be won to a historic goal located outside existing society. The key to reaching that goal is subjective transformation. It is true, as we have argued, factory, mine, office, hospital and depot organise the workers on a daily basis as a class resisting capital. That can produce the militant syndicalism and fragmented anti-capitalism of sellers of labour power. But the working class must go further if it is to find freedom. Here is where the mediation, the politics, the theory of the Communist Party comes in. Through its tactical skill, discipline, programme and vision, the Communist Party equips the working class with the offensive theory and organisation it needs to smash the capitalist state.

Clearly a reformed Communist Party was needed to transform the power that was capable of stopping France in May 1968 into a real force capable of overthrowing the capitalist state and replacing it with the workers' semi-state. Made up of the most advanced, self-sacrificing and dedicated part of the working class, the genuine Communist Party shortens the "distance" between "actual and ascribed class consciousness"

through guiding the class struggle according to the sure compass of Marxism. Marxist theory and practice cannot be united in the ivory tower of academia, but only through the real working class movement, no matter if it is dominated by opportunists. After all changing existing conditions had as much to do with changing the working class as it has to do with criticising existing conditions.

Through political struggle genuine communists lift the eyes of the working class from purely economic struggles, from the baubles of consumerism, from workers' own particular concerns as a class exploited by capitalism. Utilising the sparks of political consciousness produced by the spontaneous economic struggle - and there was a veritable shower of them in May 1968 - communists convert them into revolutionary political struggle.

The genuine Communist Party embodies the class consciousness that enables workers to see what they are "compelled to do" by their very "being".⁴² The Party links the realisation of "better conditions of life and work" with crossing "that fateful frontier" of fighting to change society. That, as Lenin argued, is done crucially by imbuing them with the theoretical and practical understanding of relations between all classes and strata in society. Only this communist consciousness can realise the limitless revolutionary potential of the working class and allow it to liberate itself by liberating humanity. In the absence of a Communist Party or its domination by opportunists (which in a revolutionary situation amounts to the same thing), the working class operates by instinct, not plan. It can, given certain exceptional circumstances, momentarily break through the four humdrum walls of everyday life - home, workplace, shopping and leisure - by fighting to bring down a capitalist government, but it cannot chart its way to communism. That requires the communist programme and the uninterrupted class struggle.

Conveniently ill during the events of 1968, the structuralist philosopher Louis Althusser later came to the rescue of the PCF's reformist practice by issuing a lordly statement claiming that it "presented things in their real order: the primacy of the general strike over the student actions".⁴³ Treacherous, banal and arid though his economic affidavit was, it proved very useful for the PCF. Althusser had from 1965 won himself a pre-eminent reputation among "young leftwing French intellectuals".⁴⁴ His hostility to Khrushchev's 'humanism', his following among Maoist students and his extensive body of work - he authored numerous books including the influential *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* - meant that for many "Althusserianism was the highest stage of Marxism".⁴⁵ In reality Althusser was an academic charlatan. His madcap claim that the only truly 'Marxist' writings ever produced by Marx himself, "totally and definitively exempt from any trace of Hegelianism", were the *Critique of the Gotha programme* and *Marginal notes on Wagner* give us the undiluted flavour of his worth.⁴⁶

For genuine communists there was never an epistemological choice between the "primacy" of the workers' general strike and the students' actions. The real question was the attitude of the workers' party to students who had rebelled and who were fighting the bourgeois state. The Bolsheviks felt "obliged" to take "in tow behind the working class", to "help", "lead" and "direct" students who were against Tsarism.⁴⁷ Standing for the primacy or hegemony of the proletariat meant taking on "assistants and auxiliary forces", not least students, who were "to any degree" inclined to struggle.⁴⁸ Concretely developing working class consciousness in May 1968 did not mean shunning rebel students as they marched expectantly to the gates of occupied factories because of the "primacy of the general strike". It should have meant welcoming them, talking with them, debating with them. On the night of the barricades communists should have mobilised the workers to defend the students. As students and workers came together and workers took the students under their protection, Pompidou's problems and the crisis of the Gaullist regime would have multiplied along with the chances of splitting the state's forces.

What then of the revolutionary students? A not insignificant minority of the sons and daughters of the middle class were looking for an alternative to the rat race and alienation of capitalism. However, because of the indeterminate class position of students and the sclerotic conservatism of 'official' communism, they gravitated or produced politics which, despite their 'new left' label, were a throwback to the early 19th century and even before. The student revolutionaries of '68 wanted communism, but not the modern proletarian communism of

producers; rather the ancient communism of consumers.⁴⁹ This reflected the non-productive social-location of students. Their communism was more that of Nazarene Christianity, Thomas More and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, than Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels and Vladimir Ulyanov.

Cohn-Bendit was the father Gapon of Paris, not its Trotsky. His political clowning captured the headlines, but was incapable of challenging the PCF or leading France to successful revolution. Failure, self-destruction and de-politicising demoralisation was always the most likely outcome. Capitalism could never be overthrown through the infantile antics of the eclectic so-called 'new left', let alone the drugs, sexual promiscuity and nihilistic posturing of the 'counter-culture'. Without the leadership of the working class, student revolt inevitably fizzled out. Student revolutionism was by its very nature, mercurial and lacking in social weight. Most student revolutionaries were easily absorbed into mainstream bourgeois society through civil service careers or the education bureaucracy. A minority retreated into religion, ecologism, irrationality or drop-out utopianism; an even smaller minority into the individual terrorism of Action Directe.

Although May 1968 put revolution in the advanced countries back on the agenda, it is legitimate to paraphrase Marx's assessment of the revolutions of 1848. Its greatness lies not so much in the achievement of any positive gains, as in exposing illusions - illusions that revolution cannot happen in advanced capitalist countries, illusions in social democracy, illusions in Althusserism, illusions in Maoism, illusions in the 'new left'. In fact 1968 brought to the surface many of the key problems and contradictions of world revolution, centrally the failure of 'official' world communism which then organised the bulk of advanced workers in its ranks •

Jack Conrad

¹The Gaullists were not alone. Jean-Paul Sartre testifies that "like everyone else in France we were caught unawares by the events of May 68" (*S de Beauvoir Adieux*, Harmondsworth 1984, p371).

²On the matter of intellectual inspiration Cohn-Bendit made the following comments: "Some people have tried to force Marcuse on us as a mentor: that is a joke. None of us has read Marcuse. Some read Marx of course, perhaps Bakunin, and of the moderns, Althusser, Mao, Guevara, Lefebvre. Nearly all the militants of the March 22 movement have read Sartre" (*D Cohn-Bendit The French student revolt*, Harmondsworth 1968, p58).

³See M Kettle *De Gaulle and Algeria*, 1993.

⁴See I Mézáros *Marx's theory of alienation*, London 1982.

⁵p299

⁶At the time, in May 1968, Hobsbawm whistled another tune. Against the line of 'official communism' in Moscow, Paris and London he "saluted" the students and the progress they had made "in spite of the feet-dragging of the unions and party" (quoted in D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, p222). Only later did he come to the view that the PCF had acted correctly.

⁷E Hobsbawm *Revolutionaries*, 1973, p239.

⁸*The Times* April 30 1993.

⁹Herr Cohn-Bendit later became the Green deputy mayor of Frankfurt.

¹⁰*L'Humanité* May 3 1968.

¹¹A member of the Central Committee and the Political Committee of the PCF and its leading intellectual. Expelled for liberalism in 1970 after he penned the book *The turning point of socialism*. He went on to become a christian, then a muslim.

¹²P Seale and M McConville *French revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, p90.

¹³Set up in March 1968, MAU consisted mainly of graduate students and research workers. Many were veterans of student protest actions against the war in Algeria.

¹⁴There were also provincial demonstrations. Marseilles 50,000, Toulouse 40,000, Bordeaux 50,000 and Lyons 60,000.

¹⁵P Seale and M McConville *French Revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, p152.

¹⁶The PCF set up less successful *Comités d'action pour un gouvernement populaire et d'union démocratique* (Action committees for a government of the people and democratic union). The left reformist United Socialist Party did the same with its *Comités d'action populaires*.

¹⁷P Seale and M McConville *French Revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, p122.

¹⁸Georges Lapassade is reported to have told Simone de Beauvoir that in its last week of occupation the Sorbonne's "cellars were teeming with rats, lice were everywhere, at night the buildings filled with hippies, whores, tramps and drug pushers. The amphitheatres stank of hashish and pot. Mercenaries known as Katangais had been allowed in, ostensibly to repulse potential attacks from Occident, but were a law unto themselves" (Quoted in D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, pp224-5).

¹⁹P Seale and M McConville *French Revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, p149.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, p151.

²²Six years later, in 1974, the leftish newspaper *Liberation* published the government's plans for mass repression. They included a list of 25,000 to be arrested and 'concentrated' in stadiums (on the German or, later, Chilean model). They were to be implemented on May 24, but the date was three times changed, before being finally cancelled on May 29, the day de Gaulle made his secret visits to French army generals. "The paper's documents have never been denied" (H Konning *Nineteen sixty-eight*, London 1988, p79).

²³The union side included the CGT, CFDT, FO and FEN.

²⁴D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, p217.

²⁵*Evening Standard* May 29 1968.

²⁶P Seale and M McConville *French revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, p205.

²⁷Quoted in *Militant* April 30 1993.

²⁸Showing that its pacifism is no recent phenomenon, the June 1968 edition of *Militant* incongruously claimed: "If ever there was a time when the working class could take power peacefully, that time is now."

²⁹*Evening Standard* May 29 1968.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid* May 31 1968.

³²Ten years later and moving to the right at a steady pace of knots, Tariq Ali was almost at the point of parliamentary cretinism. For him the lesson of May '68 was that, whereas in Russia power was seized by a party "basing itself on a minority of the population", in the "west the opposite will be the case". He says that "the majority of the population will have to be involved from the beginning and the minority will possibly win over at a later stage" (*T Ali 1968 and after*, London 1978, pp30-1).

Here we have Trotskyite distortion mixed with Trotskyite opportunism. The Bolsheviks were, it is true, a party of the working class, which in 1917 made up only some 10% of the population. However as a party they had always sought to exert proletarian hegemony over the peasantry and other oppressed and exploited sections of the population - ie, the vast majority. After the triumph of October this was embodied in the workers' and peasants' state and its All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets, whose members were selected through a series of intermediate elections, at the institutional base of which lay the recallable delegates of local soviets. Before the revolution, west or east, revolutionaries, or even those wanting revolution, are bound to be in a minority. Those that wait to become the arithmetical majority will wait for ever.

³³The book by René Andrieu - *Les Communistes et la révolution*, Paris 1968, was an individual, not official, account. Needless to say it was of no consequence. My thanks to comrade Peter Manson for pointing out this obscure piece of 'official communist' memorabilia.

³⁴The Gaullist UDR secured 295 seats (compared with 197 in the previous parliament). Giscard d'Estaing's Independent Republicans won 43. The socialist bloc was down to a meagre 57 seats (against 118) and the PCF only 34 (against 73).

³⁵The editor of *Le Monde*, Pierre Vianson-Ponté, spoke for the whole ruling class when he pointed to the danger that: "France may go from a grave national crisis to a revolutionary situation in a climate of violence and confusion" (*Le Monde* May 28 1968). In other words May 68 posed the question of revolution and could have led to revolution.

³⁶Waldeck Rochet *L'Humanité* July 10 1968 (quoted in T Ali *1968 and after*, London 1978, pp26-7).

³⁷K Marx, F Engels *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Moscow 1973, p94.

³⁸D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, p224.

³⁹*The Economist* May 25 1968.

⁴⁰D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, p224.

⁴¹P Seale and M McConville *French Revolution 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968, pp145-6.

⁴²See A Hirsch *The French new left*, London 1981.

⁴³K Marx, F Engels *MECW* Vol 4, Moscow 1975, p37.

⁴⁴Quoted in D Caute *Sixty-eight*, London 1988, p223.

⁴⁵G Elliot Althusser: *the detour of theory*, London 1987, p210.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷L Althusser *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, London 1971, p90.

⁴⁸G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party*, London 1973, p66.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰See K Kautsky *Foundations of Christianity*, New York 1972, part 4.

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