

Ongoing Struggles: Echoes of May '68 Reverberate Through France

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Montpellier, France — On March 29, the ultra-conservative dean of the Montpellier University Law School was summoned to police headquarters, interrogated, hauled into court and held over in jail for arraignment based on the complaints of nine student strikers who were brutally assaulted while 'occupying' a school auditorium [1].

The students, backed by live videos, described Dean Philippe Pétel's active complicity in encouraging masked men with wooden staves to burst into the auditorium and violently expel dozens of students had refused to vacate the property as part of the university-wide student strike. The men were videoed brutally beating the students, even while some lay prostrate on the ground.

The men then returned to the auditorium's antechamber, where a counter-demonstration of anti-strike law students and faculty, including Pétel, were waiting. The dean was videoed congratulating the bulked-out aggressors. The complicity of other faculty members present is under police examination and one has been arrested.

Within hours, the law school attacks were all over social media networks. Student strikers, human rights groups, civil rights lawyers were busy organizing demonstrations and protests, framing the attack as an act of 'fascist aggression.'

This epithet is less of an exaggeration than it may seem. The tradition of law students supplying the muscle for extreme-right groups here in France goes back for over a century. The administration at Montpellier University is far from sympathetic to the strikers and the police aren't exactly allies of the left-wing student's either. How then to explain the man-bites-dog reversal of Pétel's arrest?

Vincennes 2.0

The paradox in this story is not Dean Pétel's more-or-less traditional role in the attack but in the prosecutor's decision to hold a venerable dean in the clink.

Today in France, twelve universities are on strike, and the situation is heating up rapidly. Here in Montpellier, Université Paul Valéry, a liberal arts school, just voted for an open-ended strike at an outdoor assembly attended by over 2,000 students. Support for the strike is near unanimous, but there is division over the tactic of blocking classes to enforce the strike, especially among first-year students who are worried about their exams (which will probably now be put off). Some professors are offering their courses online and a radical free university called "Vincennes 2.0" in memory of

Paris in May 1968 [2] has been set up. The local high schools are also full of agitation, with at least two on strike and riot cops hanging around and making arrests.

The situation is tense.

The paradox in this story is not Dean Pétel's more-or-less traditional role in the attack. (In Hamilton Hall, during the first night of the April 1968 Columbia University occupation, we were informed that Dean David Truman was making the rounds of the fraternities and dorms, organizing gangs of jocks to drive out the occupiers.) It lies instead in the prosecutor's decision to hold a venerable dean in the clink.

To be sure, Pétel, a youngish cocksure neo-conservative, was asking for it. He openly bragged of his role in the assault as if oblivious to the consequences and made the national TV news and the front page of the big Paris papers. The order to lock him up likely came from Paris. In centralized, hierarchical France the prosecutor answers to the prefect who answers to the minister of justice who answers to the president: Emmanuel Macron. Macron wants to push through his planned neoliberal reforms as quickly and as smoothly as possible. He is too smart to polarize the situation further and waste political capital on a far-right loser. He also wants to be seen as impartial, willing to knock down his enemies on the right as on the left.

Prof. Jean-Luc Coronel de Boissezon (dig the aristocratic name), who is accused of striking a student in the law school attack, declared that he was being "sacrificed" by a "government forced to make offerings to its most violent opposition."

The immediate issue for the university students is President Macron's educational 'reforms,' which like all of his 'reforms' will be imposed by administrative decree rather than through the legislative process, handily bypassing lengthy discussions and amendments. Although he has a solid majority of followers in the National Assembly, having split and evinced the parties of both the left and the right, Macron prefers the 'fast track' method. All his moves are carefully timed. His technocratic style definitely pisses off many, many French people, but especially those who are suffering cutbacks [3] while the super-rich get tax cuts [4]. Sound familiar?

Macron has already pissed off France's school teachers, upon whom he is imposing — without discussion — yet another new K-12 national curriculum so confusing that nobody can figure out how to implement it. Meanwhile, class sizes are huge averaging 35 students, and supplies are being cut back. At the university level, the goal of Macron's reform is to introduce "selection" in the university admissions process, which has traditionally been open to all just like the New York City colleges a generation ago.

Today's students, union members and others are much more open to coming together spontaneously.

France now has five million students, and thanks to constant cutbacks, there aren't enough places for about 20 percent of the incoming class. Hence the creation of competition and U.S.-style admissions offices at each school. Moreover, although all French universities are under the administration of the national Ministry of Education, Macron wants to make them compete with each other. Some schools will be easier to get into, but their degrees will be worth less. Both these 'reforms' are unfavorable to underprivileged students.

Macron has also laid down the gauntlet to public service workers including to the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) railway workers union whose militancy is legendary. Last spring, despite militant protests, Macron succeeded in pushing through, by decree, his reformed labor code, taking

away seniority rights and legal protections enjoyed by private sector workers and making it easier and cheaper for bosses to fire them. This spring, instead of relying on the traditional divide-and-rule precept, Macron proposes to take on both the five million students and the five million public sector workers (about 20 percent of the total labor force) together. He may have bitten off more than he can chew, especially with the general population in a hostile anti-government mood and ready to support popular struggles.

In attacking the public sector workers' so-called 'privileges' and proposing to dismiss them in large numbers, Macron is effectively attacking precious, popular public services which are used by the large numbers among the popular classes. Trains, subways, hospitals, social services, roads, etc. These services have all been subject to cutbacks, which make life harder and lines longer for regular folk, and now it is obvious to all that Macron is downgrading them in preparation for privatizing them to sell off cheap to corporations, as has already happened to the French Electric Company, the French Gas Company and to most of the French Post Office. They fear he will privatize the SNCF French railroad as Margaret Thatcher, his spiritual guide, did to British Rail, which is now expensive, dangerous and mostly late.

The First Skirmish

On March 22, the same date as the attack on the Montpellier Law School occupiers, there were 180 demonstrations led by students and public workers across France. Air flights were down by 30 percent. Over 5,000 railway workers from all over converged on Paris, held a march during which they set off loud industrial firecrackers and then conducted a spontaneous mass general assembly where they pledged to go beyond the announced schedule of staggered strikes planned by officials of the three railroad unions, beginning April 3 [5]. The day began with a huge morning demonstration of students converging from all over the Paris region. The students joined up with thousands of various public service workers demonstrating under their union banners, and this demonstration ultimately merged with the railroad workers. Hundreds of thousands of people were in the streets.

Remarkable, too, were the spontaneous actions of autonomous groups known as "March-Headers" (*Tête de cortège*) who come together at the very front of the legal, planned, well-organized and policed demonstrations with the aim of breaking the mass movement out of the routine of being led around like sheep by union organizers, subjected to prescribed slogans on signs and loudspeakers and then sent home with being about to express themselves. Their goal is to bring together students and workers, young and old people, workers from different sectors and to encourage discussion and self-organization.

Although they are also characterized as "black bloc-ers," whose role has often been divisive and provocative, the March-Headers movement appears promising in its push to open up political space for anti-government, anti-system demonstrators to come together, exchange ideas, build relationships and learn self-organization through direct action.

Heretofore, big official protest movements in France have been kept separate, divided into interest groups and regimented by union officials whose basic tactic has been to space out useless, symbolic one-day national mass mobilizations until people got tired, summer vacation arrived and the government won. To be sure, spontaneous (and sometimes violent) wildcat movements have often broken out of this straightjacket. But today's students, union members, and others are much more open to coming together spontaneously and to linking through social media.

From One Wild May to Another?

Fifty years ago, in 1968, the highpoint of the French May revolt was the conjuncture of the student movements occupying the universities and the organized working class occupying the factories under the discipline of the Communist-run CGT and other unions, the “student-worker uprising,” as it came to be known. But for those who lived it, the conjuncture never quite gelled. The union leadership mostly kept the workers barricaded inside the occupied factories and their student supporters outside, minimizing contact and exchange — a big disappointment, as recalled by a number of 1968 activists questioned by Mitchell Abidor in his lively just-published oral history, *May Made Me* [6]. Perhaps today’s student and worker activists are ahead of the game and will not let themselves be ‘divided-and-ruled’ like previous generations. Also, today they have the advantage of social media which allows them to bypass the establishment media, get out their information and organize themselves in real time.

Here in Montpellier, the movement augers well. The student strikers at Paul Valéry have invited workers into their assemblies and have received worker support and interest. Their action committees include not just students, but professors and campus workers too. This is a good start. Moreover, they are in touch with other universities. The record number of people that attended the last general assembly (up to 2,500) is in part attributable to organization through social media.

Ironically, both this first mass demonstration and the Montpellier Law School incident occurred on the date that marks the 50th anniversary of the 1968 student occupation of the Administration building of Nanterre University. That protest eventually set off a national general strike that shook Charles de Gaulle’s authoritarian regime and sent the general scurrying to Germany for army support. Might something similar be in store for Macron’s France today? The public mood is somber, after long years of high unemployment, stagnant wages, neo-liberal chipping away of hard-fought social support systems and privatization of social services under Sarkozy (now on trial!) and the “Socialist” government of François Hollande.

The echoes of the May 1968 uprising reverberate in the air. A website calling itself *lespaves* (cobblestones) [7] has issued an international call to converge in Paris on May 1 with the slogan: “They remember, we resume.”

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P.S.

* Apr 6, 2018:

<https://indypendent.org/2018/04/echoes-of-may-68-reverberate-through-france/>

* Richard Greeman has been a socialist and international activist in the United States and France since the 1950’s. He is best known as the translator (from French to English) of the revolutionary novels of Victor Serge. A version of this article originally appeared at newpol.org.

Footnotes

[1] <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/herault/montpellier/montpellier-doyen-demissi>

[onnaire-faculte-droit-entendu-police-1448805.html](https://www.annuaire-faculte-droit-entendu-police-1448805.html)

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_8_University

[3] <http://www.france24.com/en/20180323-france-macron-popularity-record-low-strikes-reform>

[4] ESSF (article 44357), [France: President Macron's Gift to the Rich](#).

[5] <https://paris-luttes.info/propositions-strategiques-pour-la-9785?lang=fr>

[6] <https://www.akpress.org/may-made-me.html>

[7] <https://www.lespaves.net/1968-2018-from-a-wild-may-to-another-call-to-converge-in-paris-on-may-1st/>