

# France: The Lessons of May 1968 — An immense reservoir of social experience

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**The revolutionary wave of May 1968 constitutes an immense reservoir of social experience. The inventory of this experience is as yet far from complete. What characterized that wave was precisely the irruption onto the historical stage of the creative energy of the masses, multiplying forms of action, initiatives and daring innovations in the struggle for socialism. Only by drawing on this reservoir, by basing itself on these gains, can the workers' revolutionary movement arm itself effectively to complete the task whose possibility and necessity were both confirmed by May 1968: the victory of the socialist revolution in the highly industrialized countries of Western Europe.**

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For several years now a very interesting debate has been carried on, around the definition of a new socialist strategy in Europe. [1] The events of May 1968 have settled a whole number of the key questions posed in this debate. At the same time, they have raised other questions. They have also obliged those who abstained from the debate to participate in it in their turn, even if only by falsifying the facts of the case. Hence we should go over the principal themes of this discussion, and examine them in the light of the experience of May 1968.

## **1. Neo-Capitalism and the Objective Possibilities of Revolutionary Action by the Western Proletariat**

Contradicting the myths of the bourgeoisie, which have been repeated by Social Democracy and even by certain authors who claim to be Marxists, the revolutionary wave of May 1968 has proved that neocapitalism is unable to attenuate the economic and social contradictions inherent in the system to an extent that precludes any mass action which is objectively revolutionary in scope.

The struggles of May 1968 were the direct result of the contradictions of neo-capitalism.

Such a violent eruption of mass struggle; a general strike involving ten million workers and accompanied by factory occupations; the spread of the movement to many strata peripheral to the proletariat and the middle class ('old' and 'new') – all this would be incomprehensible if there were not a profound and irrepressible discontent among the workers, induced by the everyday reality of

proletarian existence. Those who were blinded by the rise in the standard of living during the last 15 years did not understand that it is precisely in periods when the productive forces are increasing (periods of accelerated 'economic growth') that the proletariat acquires new needs, and that the gap between their needs and the available purchasing power grows wider. [2] Neither did they understand that as the workers' standard of living, technical skill and culture improved, the absence of social equality and freedom in the work-place and the intensified alienation within the productive process would become a heavier and less tolerable burden on the backs of the proletariat.

Neo-capitalism's ability to attenuate somewhat the extent of economic fluctuation, and the absence of a catastrophic economic crisis like that of 1929, concealed from too many observers its inability to avoid recessions. The contradictions that undermined the long phase of growth that the system had known in the West since the end of the Second World War (and in the USA, from the beginning of the War); the irreducible opposition between the necessity to ensure growth at the cost of inflation, and the necessity to maintain a relatively stable international monetary system at the cost of periodic deflation; the more and more definite evolution towards a generalized recession in the Western world: all these tendencies inherent in the system are among the underlying causes of the explosion of May 1968. The effects of the 'stabilization plan', and the reappearance of widespread unemployment (particularly among young people) are sufficient indicators. To these could be added the effects of the structural crisis in certain sectors (the naval shipyards of Nantes and Saint-Nazaire are a glaring example) on the radicalization of the workers in certain regions.

It is also significant that the crisis of 1968 did not occur in a country with 'out-dated' structures, dominated by an archaic *'laissez-faire'*, but, on the contrary, in the model-country of neo-capitalism – the country whose 'Plan' was referred to as the most 'successful' example of neocapitalism, the country with the most dynamic nationalized sector, whose relative 'independence' with respect to the private sector even suggested to some commentators a definition of it as a 'State capitalist sector'. The inability neo-capitalism showed to curb its social contradictions in the long run thereby acquires an ever more universal importance.

The detonator role played by the student movement is a direct result of the inability of neo-capitalism at any level to satisfy the needs of the mass of young people attracted to the university either by the rise in the mean standard of living or by the need for a massive reproduction of more and more skilled labour, as a result of the third industrial revolution. This inability was revealed at the level of the material infrastructure (buildings, laboratories, lodgings, restaurants, grants, pre-salaries); at the level of the authoritarian structure of the university; at the level of the content of university education; at the level of the 'orientation' of employment outlets for graduates and for those whom the system obliges to interrupt their university studies before they are completed. The crisis in the bourgeois university, which is the immediate cause of the explosion of May 1968, must be seen as an aspect of the crisis of neo-capitalism and bourgeois society as a whole.

Finally, the increasing rigidity of the system which largely contributed to the exacerbation of the socio-economic contradictions – precisely in so far as it curbed them for a relatively long period – is itself directly linked to the evolution of the neo-capitalist economy. [3] We have often emphasized that the tendencies to economic planning, to the 'globalization' of economic problems and social demands, are not merely the result of the specific plans of this or that fraction of the bourgeoisie, but derive from needs inherent in the capitalist economy in our time. The acceleration of technological innovation and the reduction in the cycle of fixed capital oblige the big bourgeoisie to calculate more and more precisely, and several years in advance, the depreciations and the investments to be made by self-financing. He who says planned depreciation and investments says planned costs, including therefore 'labour costs'. This is the ultimate source of the 'incomes policy', of the '*économie concertée*' and of the other devices that tend simply to suppress the possibility for 'normal' industrial action to change the division of the national income desired by Big Capital.

But this increasing paralysis of traditional trade unionism suppresses neither the action of the laws of the market, nor the increasing discontent of the masses. In the long run, it tends to make workers' struggles more explosive, as the proletariat strives to win back in a few weeks what it feels it has lost over long years. Strikes, even and above all if they become less frequent, tend to become more violent and, increasingly, to start as wild-cat strikes. [4] Big Capital's only way to avoid this evolution, which seriously threatens it, is to pass squarely from a strong State to an open dictatorship, as in Greece and Spain. But even in this eventuality – impossible unless the working masses are seriously defeated and demoralized *first* – a stronger curb on the socio-economic contradictions cannot in the long run but reproduce even more explosive and threatening situations for capitalism, as the recent evolution of Spain shows.

## **2. Typology of Revolution in Imperialist Countries**

To discover whether a socialist revolution is possible in Western Europe, despite all the 'gains' of neo-capitalism and 'mass consumption society', both right-wing and 'left-wing' critics used usually to refer to the models of 1918 (the German Revolution) or of 1944–45 (the victorious Yugoslav revolution; the French and Italian revolutions, abortive in conditions analogous to those of 1918 in Germany), or even to guerrilla action. For the former, in the definitive absence of an economic or military catastrophe, it would be perfectly utopian to expect anything but reformist reactions from the proletariat; for the latter, the possibility of new revolutionary explosions of the workers was linked to the certain reappearance of crises of a catastrophic type. In other words, for the former the revolution had definitively become impossible; for the latter, it was relegated to the – largely mythical moment of a 'new 1929'.

Since the beginning of the 1960's, I have tried to react to these schematic theses by referring to a different type of revolution, possible and probable in Western Europe. I hope I shall be allowed to remind the reader of what I wrote to this effect at the beginning of 1965:

*'I have shown above how neo-capitalism does not in fact put an end to the causes of workers' discontent and that it is still quite possible to launch powerful campaigns – perhaps even inevitable. But can these campaigns take on a revolutionary complexion, in the context of a welfare society? Or are they necessarily restricted to reformist objectives, as long as they take place in an atmosphere of more or less general prosperity?*

'Before replying to this objection, we must first look at it more closely. If the objection means nothing more than that, in the present economic atmosphere, there are going to be no repetitions of the 1918 German revolution or the 1941–45 Yugoslav revolution, then it is quite simply a truism. We have already admitted this truism and included it in our prior hypothesis. And that brings us to the real point: are these particular kinds of revolution the only ones which can achieve the overthrow of capitalism? Are "catastrophic" conditions necessary? No. There is a different historic model which we can refer to: that of the general strike of June 1936 in France (and, to a lesser extent, the Belgian general strike of 1960–61, which came near to creating an analogous situation to that of 1936).

'It is perfectly possible that in the present general economic climate that of "neo-capitalist affluence" or the "mass consumption society" – the workers will become more and more radicalized as the result of a whole series of social, political, economic or even military crises (incomes policy, wage-freezes; anti-union measures, authoritarianism; recessions, sudden monetary crises; protest movements against imperialist aggression, imperialist military alliances, the use of tactical nuclear weapons in so-called wars, etc.), and that, once they are radicalized, they will launch more and more far-reaching campaigns during the course of which they will begin to link their immediate demands

with a programme of anti-capitalist structural reforms, until eventually the struggle concludes with a general strike which either overthrows the regime or creates a duality of powers.’ [5]

I apologize for this long quotation. At any rate, it shows that the type of revolutionary crisis which burst out in May 1968 was broadly predictable, and should not have been regarded as at all improbable or exceptional; it also shows that Socialist and Communist organizations could perfectly well have prepared for this type of revolution years ago if their leaders had wanted to, and had understood the basic contradictions of neo-capitalism.

This type of explosion was all the more foreseeable in that we have had two foretastes of it: December 1961–January 1962 in Belgium; June–July 1965 in Greece. After the events of May 1968 there can be no more doubt that this will be the form taken by possible revolutionary crises in the West (assuming there is no radical change in the economic situation or a world war): a mass strike going beyond the ‘normal’ aims and institutional framework of the capitalist State and society.

In respect to the debate that has taken place in the international socialist movement concerning the broad lines of an anti-capitalist strategy in Europe, the events of May 1968 suggest several complementary details to complete the rough typology of the socialist revolution in Western Europe that we began in 1965.

First, when the long-curbed contradictions of neo-capitalism break out into mass actions of an explosive character, the mass or general strike tends to transcend the form of a ‘peaceful strike proceeding in perfect calm’ and to combine various forms of action. Among these, factory occupation, the appearance of larger and harder pickets, immediate response to any repressive violence, street demonstrations which are transformed into skirmishes with the repressive forces, and even the erection of barricades, deserve special mention.

To conceal the *spontaneous and inevitable* origins of this radicalization of the forms of action, and to give credence to the odious thesis of ‘left-wing provocateurs’ conspiring to create ‘violent incidents’ in the interests of Gaullism [6], the reformists and neo-reformists of every colour are obliged to ignore the fact that comparable demonstrations already occurred during the Belgian general strike of 1960–61 (street barricades in Hainaut, the attack on the Guillemins station at Liège); that young workers went over to action of this sort massively during the strikes in Mans, Caen, Mulhouse, Besançon and elsewhere in France in 1967; that the radicalization of the young workers has been accompanied by the re-emergence of analogous forms of action in Italy (Trieste, Turin) and even in Western Germany. In other words, short of espousing Pompidou’s ridiculous thesis of an ‘international conspiracy’, we must recognize that the turn taken by mass struggle is a spontaneous one caused by objective factors that we have to uncover, instead of blaming the petit-bourgeois character of the students, the ‘political immaturity’ of the young, or the role of the legendary provocateurs.

Now it is not hard to understand why every radicalization of the class struggle should rapidly lead to a violent confrontation with the repressive forces. For two decades, we have seen a continuous reinforcement of the repressive apparatus and the various legal devices that hinder strike action and workers’ demonstrations in Western Europe. If in a ‘normal’ period the workers cannot rebel against these repressive devices, this is no longer true during a mass strike, which makes them abruptly conscious of the immense power their collective action conceals. Abruptly and spontaneously, they realize that the existing ‘order’ is a bourgeois order that tends to stifle the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. They become conscious of the fact that this struggle cannot go beyond a certain level without increasingly running foul of the ‘guardians’ of that ‘order’; and that this struggle for emancipation will be eternally vain if the workers continue to respect the rules of the game invented by their enemies to strangle their revolt.

The fact that only a minority of young workers were protagonists of these forms of struggle, so long as they remained embryonic; the fact that it was young workers who were stirred most to an instinctive identification by the students' barricades; the fact that at Flins and Peugeot/Sochaux, it was also always the young workers who responded most decisively to the provocations of the repressive forces – these facts do not weaken the above analysis at all. In every revolutionary wave it is always a relatively small minority which tries out new forms of radicalized action. Instead of sneering at the 'anarchist theory of active minorities', the leaders of the PCF would do better to read what Lenin has to say on this very subject. [7] Besides, the failures and disappointments of the past and the ideological deformation that results from ceaseless propaganda in favour of the 'peaceful and parliamentary road' weigh less heavily precisely on the younger generation than they do on their elders.

The events of May 1968 also show that the idea of a long period of dual power, the idea of a gradual conquest and institutionalization of workers' control or of any anti-capitalist structural reforms, depends on an illusory conception of the exacerbated class struggle in a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary period.

The bourgeoisie's power will never be shaken by a succession of small conquests; if there is not an abrupt and brutal change in the balance of forces, Capital finds, and always will, the means to integrate them into the working of the system. And once there is a radical change in the balance of forces, the movement of the masses spontaneously tends towards a fundamental shaking of bourgeois power. Dual power reflects a situation in which the conquest of power is already objectively possible, as a result of the weakening of the bourgeoisie, but where only the lack of political preparation of the masses, and the preponderance of reformist and semi-reformist tendencies among them, temporarily halts their action at an intermediate stage.

In this respect May 1968 confirms the law of all revolutions – i.e. that when such large forces are involved, when the stake is so great, when the slightest error or the slightest daring initiative from either side can radically change the trend of events in the space of a few hours, then it is quite illusory to hope to 'freeze' this extremely unstable equilibrium for several years. The bourgeoisie is obliged to try almost instantaneously to win back whatever the masses seize from it in the domain of power. The masses, if they do not give way to their adversary, are obliged almost instantaneously to enlarge their conquests. It has been this way in all revolutions; it will still be this way in the future. [8]

### **3. The Central Strategic Problem**

All the weakness, all the impotence of the traditional organizations of the working-class movement faced with the problems posed by possible revolutionary upsurges in Western Europe, is shown by the way in which Waldeck-Rochet, the secretary-general of the PCF, formulates the dilemma in which, according to him, the French proletariat was imprisoned in May 1968:

*'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. This was our Party's position,

Or else quite simply to provoke a trial of strength, in other words move towards an insurrection: this would include a recourse to armed struggle aimed at overthrowing the régime 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 [9], 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 régime.

'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.' [10]

In other terms: either one had to limit the objectives of the general strike of ten million workers [11] to immediate demands, i.e. to just a fraction of the minimum programme; or else one had to hurl one's forces at once into an armed insurrection for the revolutionary conquest of power. It was one or the other, the minimum or the maximum. Since one was not prepared for an immediate insurrection, it was necessary to turn in the direction of a new set of Matignon agreements. One might as well conclude that, since one will never be ready for an immediate insurrection at the beginning of a general strike – above all if one continues to inculcate in the masses and one's own party a 'respect for legality' – one will never engage in struggles other than those which are axed round immediate demands.

Is it possible to conceive of an attitude further removed from Marxism, not to speak of Leninism?

When the bourgeois régime is stable and strong, it would be absurd to hurl one's forces into a revolutionary action aimed at the immediate overthrow of Capital; by doing this one would plunge to certain defeat. But how will one move from this strong and stable régime towards a régime which is weakened, shaken, disintegrating? By some miraculous leap? Does not a radical modification of the balance of forces necessitate decisive, staggering blows? Do not such blows open up a process of progressive weakening of the bourgeoisie? Is it not the elementary duty of a party which claims to be that of the working class – and even of the socialist revolution – to push this process to its furthest extent? Can this be done if one excludes automatically all struggles other than those for immediate demands ... for as long as the situation is not ripe for an immediate armed insurrection, with victory fully guaranteed?

Does not a strike of ten million workers, with the factories occupied, represent a considerable weakening of the power of Capital? Should one not concentrate all one's efforts on an attempt to enlarge the breach, to gain a hold over the enemy, to make sure that Capital will no longer be able rapidly to re-establish a balance of forces which favours it? Is there any means of achieving this other than by wrenching real power from the hands of Capital, power in the factory, power on the streets – i.e. by moving from a struggle for immediate economic demands to a struggle for anti-capitalist structural reforms, for transitional demands? If one refrains deliberately from struggling for such objectives; if one confines oneself deliberately to a struggle for immediate demands, does one not create all the conditions propitious for the reestablishment of a balance of forces favouring the bourgeoisie, for a new and sudden reversal of trends? The entire history of capitalism bears witness to the latter's capacity to give way on material demands when its power is threatened. It knows only too well if it can preserve its power it will be able in part to take back what it has given (by increased prices, taxes, unemployment, etc.) and in part to digest it through an increase in productivity. Besides, any bourgeoisie which has been scared by an exceptional strike, but which has been left in possession of its State power, will tend to go over immediately to a counter-offensive and to repression, as soon as the mass movement starts to ebb. The history of the working-class movement goes to demonstrate it: a party enclosed in Waldeck-Rochet's dilemma will never make

the revolution, and will inevitably be defeated. [12]

By refusing to involve themselves in the process which leads from the struggle for immediate demands towards the struggle for power, via the struggle for transitional demands and the creation of organs of dual power, reformists and neo-reformists have always condemned themselves to considering any revolutionary action as a 'provocation' which weakens the masses and 'strengthens reaction'. This was the refrain of German social democracy in 1919, in 1920, in 1923, in 1931-33. It was the fault of 'leftist adventurers, anarchists, putschists, spartacists, bolsheviks' (at the time trotskyists were not yet included) if the bourgeoisie had a majority in the Constituent Assembly of Weimar; for their 'violent actions' had frightened the people', moaned Scheidemann and company in 1919. It was the fault of the communists if Nazism had been able to gain strength; for the threat of revolution pushed over the middle classes into the camp of counter-revolution, they repeated in 1930-33.

It is significant that even the Kautsky of 1918 still understood that, faced with powerful mass strikes, the working-class movement could not limit itself to traditional forms of action and organization (trade unions and elections), but had to pass over to higher forms of organization, i.e. to the setting up of committees elected by the workers, of a Soviet type. Lenin nevertheless castigated the hesitations, the contradictions and the eclecticism of the Kautsky of 1918. What lengths would he have gone to in opposition to Waldeck-Rochet's line of argument, which runs: since we are not ready at once to organize a victorious armed insurrection, it is better not to alarm the bourgeoisie and to limit ourselves to wage increases and to elections - this at the moment in which France experiences the largest strike in its history, in which the workers are occupying the factories, in which the police federation announces that it will no longer be used for repressive purposes, in which the Bank of France can no longer print banknotes for lack of workers ready to work, in which - most certain sign of the instability of bourgeois power - strata as peripheral as architects, professional cyclists, junior hospital staff, and notaries start 'contesting' the régime?

Discussion about a 'power vacuum', posed in so abstract a way, is clearly quite fruitless. But Waldeck-Rochet, who takes over the Gaullist thesis of a 'plot' (in his version, it is the Gaullists who are its authors!), and who thus replaces an analysis of the class struggle by a recourse to demonology, should remember that the same régime which, according to him, wished at all costs to lure the working class into the 'trap' of a 'trial of strength', fell over itself in its haste to meet the union leaders and negotiate the end of the strike in exchange for very substantial material concessions.

If the Gaullist aim had really been that of 'provoking a trial of strength', their course of action was quite clear: to refuse any dialogue with the unions as long as the factories were occupied. The trial of strength would have been inevitable within the space of a few weeks. However, the Gaullist régime of course avoided any such madness, and it had good reason to! Its estimate of the balance of forces, and of the latter's constant deterioration from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, was more accurate than that which Waldeck-Rochet presents today. In other words, the régime was seeking not a trial of strength, but the end of the strike, as quickly as possible, and at almost any price. In other words, the whole thesis of the 'trap' is nothing but a myth whose aim is to distract attention from the real problems. [13] Moreover, if there existed any 'plan' of de Gaulle's, that of May 30<sup>th</sup> was crystal clear: stop the strikes as quickly as possible, then move on to elections. What was the reaction of the PCF leaders? Did they not run headlong into this 'trap,' to the extent even of reproaching the strikers with 'helping the régime to avoid elections'? And what was the result?

This is why all the casuistry deployed around the question of whether there was really a power vacuum in May, and whether de Gaulle ever 'made clear his intention of withdrawing and abandoning the field', belongs to the same methods of thinking which substitute allusions to plots,

subterfuges, and 'provocateurs' for any serious analysis of the social forces present and of the dynamic of the interplay of relations between them.

The 'power vacuum' is not a gift bestowed ready-made by history; to await it passively, or with the aid of electoral campaigns, means to resign oneself to never experiencing it. The 'power vacuum' is only the culminating point in a whole process of deterioration of the balance of forces as far as the dominant class is concerned. Even Kerensky did not show any 'intention of withdrawing and abandoning the field', a few hours before the October insurrection. The essential is not to engage in scholastic debates about the definition of a real 'power vacuum': the essential is to intervene in the mass struggle in such a way as to accelerate continually that deterioration of the balance of forces from the point of view of Capital. Apart from a strategy aimed at wresting real powers from the bourgeoisie, tireless propaganda in favour of revolution, even if the conditions are not yet 'completely' ripe, is a necessary condition of its success. [14]

The central strategic problem is therefore precisely that of exploding the dilemma 'either purely economist strikes and elections (i.e. business as usual); or immediate armed insurrection, and with the proviso that all the conditions of victory are guaranteed in advance.' It must be understood that general strikes like those of December 1960-January 1961 in Belgium and that of May 1968 - above all if new forms of radical mass combat appear in connection with them - can and must lead to more than wage increases, even if the preparations for an armed insurrection are by no means complete. They can and must result in the conquest by the masses of new real powers, powers of control and of veto which create a duality of power, raise the class struggle to its highest and bitterest level, and thus bring the conditions for a revolutionary seizure of power to maturity.

#### **4. Spontaneity of the Masses, Duality of Power and Revolutionary Organization**

It may be accepted that the students really had revolutionary intentions in May 1968; but surely the immense majority of workers limited themselves to accepting the economist character which the union leaders gave to the strike? Thus M. Duverger, Jean Dru and others chimed in behind the PCF's analysis.

It is very hard to know what the mass of workers were really thinking during the days of May; they have not in fact been asked to speak for themselves. However it would have been easy to discover their preoccupations, if there had been any real desire to know them. It would only have been necessary to call the workers in each firm together in a general assembly, to call upon them to make their opinions amply known, to decide that the factories should be occupied by the entire mass of workers, to see to it that the widest possible form of workers' democracy reigned within them, and to call meetings between the different factories at every turning-point of the strike: in brief, to create within the context of that general strike the type of elected strike committee with delegates revocable at any moment, and the type of permanent contestation and debate beneath the critical eye of the masses, represented by the soviets - advocated for such strikes not merely by Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, but even by the Kautsky of 1918. The official leaders of the French working-class movement fall far short even of that Kautsky. [15]

The union leaders strove to avoid such mass occupations and such confrontations of ideas at all costs; they sought by every means to deny the revolutionary spokesmen of the students access to the factories. This shows that they were not so sure of the workers' reactions. The fact that the workers, bought together to ratify the 'Grenelle agreement', in fact rejected it by overwhelming majorities constitutes another index of the masses' instinctive will to transcend the phase of a movement purely concerned with immediate demands.



Moreover, one may well ask: if all that the workers wanted was really a large wage increase, why did they spontaneously embark upon the occupation of the factories? The French workers have been involved in numerous actions for wage increases in the last twenty years. These movements have never attained a comparable scale to that of May 1968; the forms of action have never approached those of May 1968. By occupying the factories, by turning out into the streets in their tens and sometimes hundreds – of thousands, by hoisting the red flag over their workplaces, by spreading everywhere such slogans as: ‘Ten Years is Enough’; ‘The Factories to the Workers’; ‘Workers’ Power’; ‘Power to the Working Class’, the mass of strikers expressed aspirations which went far beyond purely economic demands. [16]

But there is a far more convincing proof still of the fact that the workers too wanted to go beyond a simple routine campaign ‘for wages and good elections’. This proof is their conduct wherever they had the opportunity of expressing themselves freely, wherever the bureaucratic screen had been shaken or had given way, wherever mass occupations had taken place in the factories, wherever initiatives were able to develop from the base up. Nothing like a complete inventory of such experiences as yet exists; but the list is already an impressive one:

- at the CSF factory in Brest, the workers decided to carry on production, but they produced what they themselves considered important, notably walkie-talkies to help the strikers and demonstrators to defend themselves against the forces of repression;
- at Nantes, the strike committee tried to control traffic to and from the town; they distributed permits for the use of vehicles, and blocked the entrances to the town with barricades. It also appears that the same committee even issued credit-tokens which were accepted as currency by certain shopkeepers and farmers;
- at Caen, the strike committee forbade all access to the town for 24 hours;
- at the Rhone-Poulenc factories, at Vitry, the strikers decided to establish relations of direct exchange with the farmers, sought to extend this experiment to other firms, and discussed the transition to an ‘active strike’ (i.e. to a return to work, but work for themselves, according to their own plans) – though they came to the conclusion that it would be better to postpone this last experiment until such time as several other firms were ready to follow their example [17];
- at the Mureaux Cement Works, the workers voted in a general assembly to remove the manager. They refused to accept the employers’ proposal for a new vote. The manager in question was thereupon sent off to a different branch of the same Cement Works, where, out of solidarity with the lads from Mureaux, the workers immediately came out on strike – for the first time in the history of the factory;
- at the Wonder Batteries factory, at Saint-Ouen, the strikers elected a strike committee, and, in order to show their disapproval for the reformist line of the CGT, they barricaded themselves inside the factory and refused to let the union officials in;
- at Saclay, the workers of the nuclear energy centre requisitioned materials from the factory in order to carry on the strike;
- at the Rouen naval yards, the workers took young people selling revolutionary literature under their protection, and prevented the CRS who were following and trying to arrest them from entering the factory;
- in several Paris printing works, the workers either insisted on changes in a headline (*Le Figaro*) or refused to print a newspaper (*La Nation*), when the content was directly damaging to the strike;

- in the Peugeot plant at Sochaux, the workers built barricades against any intrusion by the CRS, and chased the latter victoriously out of the factory;
- in Paris, the CLEOP (student-worker-peasant liaison committee) organized food convoys supplied by agricultural co-operatives; these distributed produce directly to the factories, or sold it at cost price (e.g. chickens for 80 centimes a kilo, eggs for 11 centimes each);
- at the Citroen factories, in Paris, a first modest and embryonic attempt was made to requisition lorries for the purpose of supplying the strikers [18];
- perhaps the most eloquent case of all: in the Atlantic Yards at Saint-Nazaire, the workers occupied the plant and for ten days refused to submit a list of immediate demands, despite constant pressure from the union apparatus.

When this list is completed, how will it be possible to deny that it expresses the spontaneous tendency of the working class to take its destiny into its own hands, and to reorganize society in accordance with its convictions and its ideals? Are these the activities of a strike purely concerned with immediate economic demands, of a 'typical strike', or are they the activities of a strike whose extent and whose logic impelled the masses themselves to go beyond immediate demands? [19]

An argument against this analysis has been found in the result of the legislative elections and the Gaullist upsurge which this result reflects. But such arguments are strongly coloured by parliamentary cretinism, by feigned ignorance of what elections represent in bourgeois democracy.

On the first round, the Left obtained 41% of the votes and the Gaullists 44%. But if account is taken of the large number of workers who abstained on this occasion out of disgust for the politics of the big working-class organizations, but who nevertheless remain available for working-class action; if account is taken of the hundreds of thousands of young people who were in the vanguard of the May 1968 movement but who remain deprived of the right to vote by an anti-democratic electoral system, including 300,000 who – although over 21 years old could not vote because the régime refused to allow the electoral roll to be brought up to date; then one may presume without exaggeration that even after the immense disappointment of May 30<sup>th</sup>, the forces of the Left and those of Gaullism were evenly balanced among the French people.

Moreover, that balance came after a successful manoeuvre on the part of the Gaullist régime, and after a lamentable tactical defeat for the Left, which had accepted the rules of the game as laid down by the class enemy: i.e. to stop the strike on a basis consisting purely of economic demands; to accept de facto repression against the extreme left; to look to the elections for a solution to the vital questions raised by May 1968. Can it be doubted for an instant that if the initiative had remained with the Left, and if the latter had been able to exploit the enormous capital of combativity, of enthusiasm and of generosity which had been accumulated during the four weeks of May in order to impose workers' control, democratically elected neighbourhood and factory committees federated and confederated at the national scale, armed strike pickets, printing works at the people's disposal, in addition to satisfaction of the immediate economic demands – can it be doubted that in this case the 45% of the French nation which the Left represented despite everything on the evening of June 23<sup>rd</sup> would within the space of a few days have become 50 and more than 50%?

For all contemporary history bears witness to the fact: if the 'fear of civil war' is a motive of political choice for the middle classes and the 'floating voters', nonetheless the tendency to move over to the strongest side, the temptation to jump onto a victorious bandwagon, the power of attraction of the side showing the most determined and energetic initiative, these factors weigh far more decisively in the balance. [20] In this sense, De Gaulle had won the battle by the evening of May 30<sup>th</sup>, far less by

mustering round himself the 'party of fear' than by outsmarting his political adversaries – who were characterised by hesitation, lack of imagination, immobility, and the spirit of capitulation.

The objection has often been made to the strategy of anti-capitalist structural reforms, to the transitional programme strategy which I advocate, that it is only effective if applied by the great working-class organizations, both industrial and political, themselves. Without the protective barrier that only these organizations are capable of erecting against the permanent infiltration of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideology into the working class, the latter, in this view, is at present condemned to confine itself to struggles having immediate economic aims. The experience of May 1968 has totally invalidated this pessimistic diagnosis.

Certainly, the existence of mass unions and parties unintegrated into the capitalist régime, educating the workers ceaselessly in a spirit of defiance and of global contestation vis-à-vis that régime, would be a potent trump-card in accelerating the maturation of revolutionary class consciousness among the workers. This would be true even if those unions and parties were not adequate instruments for the conquest of power. But the experience of May 1968 has shown that in the absence of a mass revolutionary vanguard, the proletariat ends up by generating that class consciousness all the same, because it is nourished by all the practical experience of the contradictions of neo-capitalism which the workers accumulate daily, throughout the years.

Spontaneity is the embryonic form of organisation, Lenin used to say. The experience of May 1968 permits one to verify the present relevance of this observation in two ways. Working-class spontaneity is never a pure spontaneity; the fermentation among the workers brought about by vanguard groups – sometimes by just one experienced revolutionary militant – is an operative factor: their tenacity and patience are rewarded precisely at such moments, when social fever attains its paroxysm. Working-class spontaneity leads to the organisation of a larger vanguard, since in the space of a few weeks thousands of workers have understood the possibility of a socialist revolution in France. They have understood that they must organize to that end, and with a thousand threads they are weaving links with the students, with the intellectuals, with the vanguard revolutionary groups which little by little are giving shape to the future revolutionary mass party of the French proletariat, and of which the JCR already appears to be the most solid and most dynamic nucleus.

I am not a naïve admirer of working-class spontaneity pure and simple. Even if the latter necessarily acquires a new validity faced with the conservatism of the bureaucratic apparatuses [21], it shows obvious limitations when confronted with a State apparatus and a highly specialized and centralized machinery of repression. Nowhere has the working class as yet spontaneously overthrown the capitalist régime and the bourgeois State nationally; it will doubtless never succeed in doing so. Even to extend organs of dual power over an entire country the size of France is, if not impossible, at least made far more difficult by the absence of a vanguard already sufficiently well implanted in the factories to be able swiftly to generalize the initiatives of the workers in a few pilot plants.

Furthermore, there is no advantage in exaggerating the scale of the spontaneous initiative of the working masses in May 1968. This initiative was everywhere potentially present; it only became a reality in a certain number of limited cases, whether on the level of decisions to occupy the factories or on that of the above-mentioned initiatives towards establishing a duality of power. The students, when in action, in their vast majority escaped all efforts to channel them in a reformist direction; the majority of the workers on the other hand once again allowed themselves to be so channelled. This should not be held against them. The responsibility lies at the door of the bureaucratic apparatuses who have striven for years to smother within themselves all critical spirit, every manifestation of opposition to the reformist and neo-reformist line, every residue of working-class democracy. The Gaullist political victory of June 1968 is the price which the working-class movement is paying for the fact that it has not yet reversed these relations between vanguard and mass within the French

proletariat.

But if May 1968 has demonstrated once again the absence of an adequate revolutionary leadership, and the inevitable consequences for the success of the revolutionary upsurge which flow from this fact, the experience also makes it possible to glimpse – for the first time in the West for over thirty years – the real dimensions of the problem and the ways leading to a solution of it. What was lacking in May 1968, if a first decisive thrust towards dual power was to be made, if France (with all necessary qualifications) was to experience its February 1917, was a revolutionary organization no more numerous in the factories than it was in the universities. At that precise moment and at those particular points, small nuclei of articulate workers, armed with a correct political programme and analysis and able to make themselves understood, would have been enough to prevent the dispersal of the strikers, to impose mass occupation and the democratic election of strike committees in the principal factories of the country. Of course, this was not an insurrection or a seizure of power. But a decisive page in the history of France and Europe would already have been turned. All those who believe that socialism is possible and necessary should act so that it will be turned next time.

## **5. Participation, Self-Determination and Worker's Control**

For a conquest of power, there must be a revolutionary vanguard that has already convinced the majority of wage-earners and salaried staff of the impossibility of reaching socialism by the parliamentary road, that is already capable of mobilizing the majority of the proletariat beneath its flag. If the PCF had been a revolutionary party – that is, if it had educated the workers in this spirit even in periods when revolution was not on the immediate agenda; even, as Lenin put it, in counter-revolutionary phases – then, in the abstract, such a seizure of power was possible in May 1968. But then many things would have been at least very different from the reality of May 1968.

As the PCF is not a revolutionary party, and as none of the vanguard groups as yet has at its disposal a sufficient audience in the working class, May 1968 could not terminate in a seizure of power. But a general strike accompanied by factory occupations can and should terminate in the conquest of anti-capitalist structural reforms, in the realization of transitional demands – i.e. in the creation of a dual power, an empirical power of the masses opposed to the legal power of Capital. To realize such a dual power, a mass revolutionary party is not indispensable; all that is necessary is a powerful spontaneous thrust by the workers, stimulated, enriched and partially co-ordinated by an organized revolutionary vanguard which is still too weak to dispute the leadership of the workers' movement directly with the traditional organizations, but already strong enough to outflank it in practice.

This organizational vanguard is not yet a party; it is an emerging party, the nucleus of a future party. And if the problems of building this party can be broadly situated in a framework analogous to that suggested by Lenin in *What is to be Done?*, their solution must be enriched by sixty years of experience and the incorporation of all the particularities which today characterize the proletariat, students and other exploited classes of the imperialist countries.

Also, it is necessary to take into account the fact that historically this will be the third attempt – since the SFIO and the PCF have failed – and that past setbacks have instilled in workers and students a pronounced and justified suspicion of all attempts to manipulate them, of all schematic dogmatism, and all efforts to *substitute* objectives imposed from afar for those which the masses give themselves. On the other hand the capacity of militant revolutionaries to support and amplify all partial movements towards just objectives, and to demonstrate the best organization in these partial and sectional struggles, gives them (and their organizations) the authority necessary to integrate the masses into unified anti-capitalist action.

The mystifications of the Gaullist movement for 'participation' have been sufficiently denounced for us not to carry on about it here at any great length. As long as the principal means of production are in private hands, irregularity of investment will inevitably provoke cyclical fluctuations in economic activity, i.e. unemployment. As long as production is in essence production for profit, it will not principally be aimed at satisfying the needs of men but will be oriented towards those sectors which produce the greatest profit (even if they do so by the 'manipulation' of demand). As long as the capitalist and his manager keep their right of command over men and machines within the firm – and, from de Gaulle to Couve de Murville, all of the régime's representatives have made it quite clear that they never for one instant considered questioning *that* particular power! – the worker remains alienated in the process of production.

If one adds together these three characteristics of the capitalist régime, one obtains the image of a society in which the basic features of the proletarian condition remain. The insecurity of existence remains. The alienation of the producer remains; that of the consumer will even grow. As before, the sale of labour power will lead to the appearance of surplus value and to the accumulation of capital – the property of a class other than that which produced it through its work. [22] Participation within such a framework is really tantamount to an attempt to accentuate alienation by making the workers lose their consciousness of being exploited, without suppressing exploitation itself. The proletariat will have the right to be consulted about how many of them are to be fired. Happy is the chicken which can help to choose the methods by which it will be plucked!

However it is not sufficient to demystify the demagogy of 'participation'. The phrase did not arise during the May crisis by chance. It is an expression of the régime's comprehension of how sharp the contradictions are in neo-capitalist France, a foreboding of their explosive character for an entire historical period. How otherwise can one explain why significant forces of Big Capital saw themselves obliged to utilize arguments which they never had to bring out even in 1936 or in 1944–45? There is a striking parallel between the German Social Democrats fighting the Spartacists and the workers' and soldiers' councils in January 1919 with the slogan 'Socialisation is under way', and de Gaulle seeking to dam the revolution from below and insinuating that he is getting ready to realise one from above – in a context of order and tranquillity, naturally.

The May explosion at one blow confronted the whole of French society with the social question of the epoch for the imperialist countries. Who will govern the machines? Who will decide investments, their orientation and their location? Who will determine the rhythm of work? Who will select the range of products to be made? Who will establish the priorities in the use of the productive forces at society's disposal? Despite the attempt to reduce the General Strike to a problem of payment for labour-power, economic and social realities oblige and will oblige everybody to discuss the fundamental problem, as formulated by Marx: 'Not merely increased wages, but the suppression of wage-labour'.

Revolutionary socialists can only rejoice. The turn of events has confirmed what they have proclaimed for many years; that the logic of the neo-capitalist economy and of the intensified class struggle will increasingly displace the centre of gravity of debate and of action away from problems of redistribution of national income towards those of maintaining or overthrowing capitalist structures – in the firm, in the economy and throughout bourgeois society.

During the May crisis, the slogan of 'self-management' was pronounced in various quarters. As a general propaganda slogan there was nothing wrong with it, on condition that it meant 'self-management for the workers' and not 'self-management for each firm', and on condition that it was made clear that it implied the introduction of democratic-centralist planning of investments with some supplementary guarantees; otherwise the 'deproletarianised producer' risks finding himself no better off than before – and one morning he may wake up unemployed. [23]



However, outside of pre-insurrectionary situations in which the immediate overthrow of the capitalist system is posed, the slogan of 'self-management' as an objective for immediate action conceals a dangerous confusion – and especially when used in the way it sometimes was by the leaders of the CFDT. Self-management for the workers presupposes overthrowing the power of Capital – in the firms, in society, and in the sphere of political power. As long as this power continues to exist, it is not only utopian to wish to transfer the power of decision to the workers, factory by factory (as if the strategic decisions in contemporary capitalist economies were taken at that level and not at the level of the banks, trusts, monopolies and the State!). It is also reactionary utopianism, for if it happened to attain some initial institutional form, it would tend to transform workers' collectives into production cooperatives, obliged to take on capitalist firms in competition and to submit to the laws of the capitalist economy and to the imperatives of profit. Thus one would be brought back, by another route, to the same result that Gaullist 'participation' aims to achieve; that of taking the workers' awareness that they are exploited from them, without suppressing the essential causes of their exploitation.

The May events suggest the same answer as does a socio-economic analysis of neo-capitalism to the problem of an alternative to the capitalist framework of the firm and the whole economy. Thus this answer can neither be that of 'participation' (open class collaboration), nor that of 'self-management' (indirect integration into the capitalist economy), but must be that of workers' control. Workers' control is the exact equivalent for the workers of what global contestation represents for the students.

Workers' control is the affirmation by the workers of a refusal to let the management dispose freely of the means of production and labour power. The struggle for workers' control is the struggle for the right of representatives freely elected by the workers and revocable at any moment [\[24\]](#) to veto decisions as to hiring and firing, the speed of the production line, the introduction of new processes and the maintenance or suppression of all existing processes, and obviously the close-down of firms. It is a refusal to enter discussions with the management or the government as a whole on the division of the national income, so long as the workers have not acquired the ability to reveal the way the capitalists cook the books when they talk of prices and profits. In other words, it is the opening of the management's account books, and the calculation of the real production costs and the real profit margins by the workers.

Workers' control should not be conceived as an established schema that the vanguard is trying to force onto the real development of the class struggle. The struggle for workers' control – with which the strategy of anti-capitalist structural reforms, the struggle for a transitional programme, is largely identified – must, on the contrary, keep close to the preoccupations of the masses, must constantly arise from the everyday reality experienced by the workers, their wives, the students and the revolutionary intellectuals.

Does the rise in wages exacted in May 1968 'necessarily' imply a rise in production costs? To what extent? Is the rise in retail prices really the result of this rise in wages? [\[25\]](#) Is the management trying to 'recover the losses caused by the strikes' when it speeds up production, in other words is it trying to re-establish its profit-rate by increasing relative surplus value? Who is responsible for the haemorrhage of exchange reserves suffered by France in the space of a few days? It cannot be the workers, or 'leftist groupuscules' who have transferred billions of francs to Switzerland and elsewhere. On the basis of such questions and analogous ones that arise out of everyday reality, the agitation for workers' control can be constantly amplified, actualized and perfected.

The aim is not to create new institutions within the framework of the capitalist régime. It is to raise the level of consciousness of the masses, their combativity, their ability to respond like lightning to each reactionary move by the management and the government, and to challenge the working of the

capitalist régime not just in words but in action. Thus the revolutionary insolence of the masses will assert itself, their determination to dismiss capitalist 'order' and 'authority' and to create a higher order, tomorrow's socialist order, in a spirit of intransigent respect for workers' democracy.

May 1968 has the historical merit of demonstrating that the struggle for this kind of workers' control, the birth of dual power from the sub-soil of neocapitalist contradictions and from the creative initiative of the masses, is possible and necessary for all capitalist Europe. [26] A later stage will see its expansion, i.e. will put onto the agenda the passage towards socialism, towards man's escape from alienation. It is only a beginning. The struggle will go on.

July 20<sup>th</sup> 1968

**Ernest Mandel**

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**P.S.**

\* "The Lessons of May 1968". Published in *New Left Review* I/52, November-December 1968 (Special Issue on France May 1968).

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1968/07/lessons-may68.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] Any list of the articles and pamphlets that refer to this debate is bound to be incomplete. As a reminder, I refer the reader to the articles that appeared in *Les Temps Modernes*, August–September 1964 (Mandel, Santi, Poulantzas, Declercq-Guiheneuf, Trentin, Ingrao, Tutino, Anderson, Topham, Liebman); in *International Socialist Journal*, nos. 7, 8, 9 and 10, 1965 (Prager, Basso, Herkommer, Therborn, Marchal, J-M Vincent, Marcuse, Mallet, Mandel, Gorz, Topham); books by André Gorz, Serge Mallet, Pierre Naville, Ken Coates, Livio Maitan, Jean Dru; and the conferences at the Gramsci Institute and the CES.

[2] The 'historical' elements incorporated into the value of labour power – to use Marx's vocabulary – beyond the purely physiological ones, tend to increase, and thereby real wages, even when they are rising, may be falling further below this value.

[3] The suppression of the mediations between the authorities and the people induced by the advent of Gaullism is often cited as one of the root causes of the May explosion. Beyond the peculiarly French phenomenon, we should look for general characteristics typical of neo-capitalism as such.

[4] This was even confirmed in Western Germany in 1967, a year marked by an exceptional rise in the number of wild-cat strikes. The most important 'official' strike of that year, the Hesse rubber workers' strike, began as a wild-cat strike.

[5] Ernest Mandel: A Socialist Strategy for Western Europe, *International Socialist Journal*, no. 10, pp. 440-441.

[6] In his report to the Central Committee of the PCF, July 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> 1968 (*L'Humanité*, July 10<sup>th</sup> 1968), Waldeck-Rochet claims that 'our second task is the defence of democratic freedoms against the authoritarian and fascist tendencies which are growing stronger'. How was it, then, that the PCF had nothing to say in protest at the banning of extreme left-wing organizations, and that it even offered the government its pretext for this ban by talking openly in front of the authorities of 'Geismar's armed militia'? But the history of the democratic working-class movement confirms that a repression tolerated when it is directed at the extreme left steadily spreads to all the left. In Nazi concentration camps, the German Social-Democratic leaders had an opportunity to meditate upon the political wisdom of accepting anti-Communist measures on the pretext that the fascist repression was 'objectively' provoked by 'Communist violence'.

[7] 'The principal forms of the December movement in Moscow were the peaceful strike and demonstrations, and these were the only form of struggle in which the vast majority of the workers took an active part. Yet the December strike in Moscow vividly demonstrated that the general strike, as an independent and predominant form of struggle, is out of date, that the movement is breaking out of these narrow bounds with elemental and irresistible force and giving rise to the highest form of struggle - an uprising' (Lenin: Lessons of the Moscow Uprising, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, Moscow 1960, Vol. I, p. 608):  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/aug/29.htm>

[8] From the beginning of the factory occupations, the repressive forces tried to recover a number of strategic points occupied by the strikers, such as the telecommunications centre. A workers' movement which was not caught off its guard could have defended these key positions that it had taken without a blow, and used the authorities' provocation so that the masses progressively came to accept the idea of defensively armed strike pickets. The 'fear of civil war' would have been replaced by a desire for self-defence.

[9] The reader will appreciate the value of this argument. No doubt the kind of 'peaceful revolution' the PCF leadership expects is a revolution in which 'the military and repressive forces' will have evaporated as if by magic, unless ... they have gone over to the people's side. We are impatiently waiting for Waldeck-Rochet to reveal to us the secret of this miraculous trans-substantiation of a repressive force into nothing of into an 'arm of the people', without a prior struggle to disintegrate this army, which would have to employ revolutionary means. Cf. Lenin: 'It is alleged that there is no possibility of fighting modern troops; the troops must become revolutionary. Of course, unless the revolution assumes a mass character and affects the troops, there can be no question of serious struggle. That we must work among the troops goes without saying. But we must not imagine that they will come over to our side at one stroke, as a result of persuasion or their own convictions. The Moscow uprising clearly demonstrated how stereotyped and lifeless this view is. As a matter of fact, the wavering of the troops, which is inevitable in every truly popular movement, leads to a real *fight for the troops* whenever the revolutionary struggle becomes acute. The Moscow uprising was precisely an example of the desperate, frantic struggle for the troops that takes place between the reaction and the revolution' (*op. cit.*, p. 611).

[10] *L'Humanité*, July 10<sup>th</sup> 1968.

[11] It is significant in this respect that the leadership of the CGT never declared a general strike, contenting itself with the statement that the general strike 'was a fact'. In reality, the declaration of a general strike implied the formulation of aims that went beyond those of an industrial

struggle, and implied (in the Leninist Tradition) that they recognized that the question of power had been posed. In Belgium in 1960-61, confronted with a much less solid strike than in France in May 1968, and without factory occupations, the CP criticized the Social-Democratic union leadership because the latter did not call a general strike. In Belgium, though, the CP is only a fairly small minority inside the union movement ...

[12] Waldeck-Rochet also claims that 'A condition for the success of the peaceful road is that the working class, thanks to a correct political alliance, succeeds in gathering together in the struggle for socialism such a superiority of forces that the isolated big bourgeoisie is no longer in a position to turn to civil war against the people'. The whole of reformist cretinism is displayed in these words: the 'superiority of forces' is no longer measured by the level of mobilization, the initiative, the daring or the energy of the proletariat, but exclusively by the disappearance of the opponent's will to resist. So long as the bourgeoisie is capable of 'turning to civil war', it is better to keep down! With this kind of spirit neither the Russian, the Yugoslav nor the Chinese revolution, not to speak of the Cuban or the Vietnamese revolution, would ever have been started. It should be added that such feebleness of spirit is the best way to encourage the bourgeoisie to launch its civil war on its own. Social-Democracy kept down when Hitler threatened it, on the strength of similar arguments; in Greece, the same mentality allowed the colonels to take power without meeting any serious resistance.

[13] When De Gaulle reversed the situation on May 30<sup>th</sup>, because the leaders of the workers' movement accepted the withdrawal to the 'parliamentary road', he could obviously increase the pressure of the repressive forces. But even then, the cases of Flins and Sochaux show the possibilities of the workers' response. The 'spectre of civil war' is used by the regime as it is by the leadership of the PCF to conceal the real situation and its possibilities; the possible impetus of a policy of popular self-defence, against repressive forces exhausted by their ceaseless struggles with the students, which began to spread to an increasing number of cities; the regime's hesitation to mobilize the army stationed in France (confined to barracks during the decisive weeks); the possibility of transforming several hundred firms into bastions of resistance against the CRS and protection for the demonstrators. These are the facts of the case. In these concrete contradictions, what possibilities and aims could an intervention by the paras have had, in the middle of a general strike and faced with a proletariat holding the supreme surety in its hands: the country's whole productive apparatus? The experience of July 1936 in Spain, when an army intervention was broken in a few days in practically all proletarian centres by determined workers, is rich in lessons. France in 1968 is far from containing the backward regions, acting as base areas for fascism, that Spain still contained in 1936: the Europe of 1968 has nothing in common with the Europe of 1936. The French middle classes are hardly ready to accept a bloody dictatorship. Is it possible that De Gaulle did not make all these calculations, or that he would have dared to formulate the threats he did if he had not been convinced that his opponents would retreat rather than take up the challenge?

[14] "Kautsky does not display a shadow of an understanding of the truth that a revolutionary Marxist differs from the ordinary philistine and petty bourgeois by his ability to preach to the uneducated people that the maturing revolution is necessary, to prove that it is inevitable, to explain its benefits to the people, and to prepare the proletariat and all the working and exploited people for it." (Lenin: The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, Selected Works, Vol. III, p. 130):

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/index.htm>

[15] Lenin quotes Kautsky, who wrote: 'It appears that everywhere the old methods of the economic and political struggle of the proletariat are inadequate against the gigantic economic

and political forces which finance capital has at its disposal ... Thus, the Soviet organization is one of the most important phenomena of our time. It promises to acquire decisive importance in the great decisive battles between capital and labour towards which we are marching.' (Ibid., p. 101)

[16] I refer the reader to Lenin once again: 'What a stain on Social-Democracy will be left by this talk about conspiracy in connection with such a people's movement as the December struggle in Moscow!' (Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP, June 1906, Collected Works, Moscow 1962, Vol. X, p. 367):

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/rucong/index.htm>

[17] Note that the same workers spontaneously made contact with various chemical works in Western Europe, showing more initiative and a more 'European consciousness' than all the union leaderships put together. The FIOM whose congress was in session during the May events expressed no higher level of solidity than to vote \$10,000 to support the strikers (0.1 cent per striker).

[18] or the source of this information see particularly Le Monde, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1968; Le Figaro, May 30<sup>th</sup> 1968; La Nouvelle Avant-Garde, June 1968; Nouvel Observateur, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1968 and July 1968; Mai 1968, première phase de la révolution socialiste française, special number of Quatrième Internationale, May-June 1968, etc., etc.

[19] Waldeck-Rochet quotes Lenin: 'To say that every strike is a step towards the socialist revolution is an absolutely empty phrase'. The enormity of this sophism is staggering. Does Waldeck-Rochet mean to insinuate that Lenin wrote: 'To say that a strike of ten million workers with factory occupations is a step towards the socialist revolution is an absolutely empty phrase'? The same Lenin who wrote that 'a general strike poses the question of power, the question of an uprising'?

[20] 'They (the representatives of the Second International and of the "independent" Social-Democrats - EM) forget that, to a very large degree, the bourgeois parties are able to rule because they deceive the masses of the people, because of the yoke of capital, and to this is added self-deception concerning the nature of capitalism ... "First let the majority of the population, while private property still exists, that is, while the rule and yoke of capital still exist, express themselves in favour of the proletariat, and only then can and should the party take power" - so say the petit-bourgeois democrats who call themselves socialist but who are in reality the servitors of the bourgeoisie. "Let the revolutionary proletariat first overthrow the bourgeoisie, break the yoke of capital, and smash the bourgeois State apparatus, then the victorious proletariat will be able rapidly to gain the sympathy and support of the majority of the non-proletarian working people by satisfying their needs at the expense of the exploiters" - say we.' (Lenin: The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Collected Works, Vol. XXX, pp. 272-273):

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/dec/16.htm>

[21] We cannot analyse here the material and social roots of the conservatism of the mass CPs of France and Italy. These roots are in part identical with the roots of classical reformist Social-Democracy; in part they differ from them. One remark on the 'ideological' plane will suffice: it is impossible to educate and organize for more than two decades in the spirit of 'new democracy' and the 'peaceful road to socialism' without this organization being entirely at a loss and disarmed when it is confronted with a revolutionary drive of the broad masses, breaking the yoke of bourgeois 'legality' and parliamentarianism.



[22] We need not insist on the fraudulence of the 'profit-sharing' which is the Gaullist variant of the 'popular capitalism' dear to the American and West German capitalist. It would only suppress the proletarian condition if it freed the worker from his economic obligation to sell his labour power, that is, if it allowed him to constitute for himself a fortune that would ensure him a livelihood. A 'capitalism' that arrived at this result would have negated itself, for it would have no more labourers to exploit in its factories.

[23] The Yugoslav example shows that self-determination limited to the enterprise level and accompanied by an excessive growth of the market economy, on the pretext that the worker must be protected against 'centralization' (as if the authority of a national congress of 'workers' councils - Soviets - permanently in session and scrupulously respecting workers' democracy, would not serve as an effective instrument in the struggle against bureaucracy), risks increasing social inequality, the power of the bureaucracy and disadvantages for the workers (including redundancies and massive unemployment).

[24] Several strike committees - notably those of the Galeries Lafayette and of the Rhone-Poulenc factories in the Paris region - were elected under a system in which the members were revocable at the discretion of their electors.

[25] The US economist J.K. Galbraith, who is no Marxist, remarks that the American steel trusts usually defer previously decided price rises until after a strike, so that they can then shift the responsibility onto 'excessive wage increases.'

[26] I have not enough space here to discuss the implications and consequences of the explosion of 1968 on the international plane - in Europe and beyond. However, I should like to stress the unanimity with which international capital flew to the support of De Gaulle in the decisive days, and despite all the friction that divided him from the Anglo-Saxons. Contrast this with the lamentable spectacle of the total inability of the official trade-union and workers' movement to organize a single action in solidarity with the largest general strike the West has seen for decades.