

**SPOT  
WORK THE  
AUTONOMY**

**MAY 68**

# May '68: Spot the Workers' Autonomy

## Past Tense Introduction

This text about some of the events of the May-June 1968 events in France, was originally published by Mouvement Communiste. We have republished the English version, which has only had a limited distribution despite being available on their website, because we think it flags up some interesting questions about myth and reality in the 'May 68' revolt.

"May '68" casts a long shadow. Four decades on, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2008 saw much pontificating over its legacy (a process that has ripened and matured on cue every ten years). While the movement of these weeks contains much to celebrate, for both participants and those inspired by it during the four decades of subsequent struggles, the myths that have grown up have also cast long negative shadows. In many ways the myth of the revolt, its images and slogans, have defined ideas about revolution, at least in 'developed western democracies'. It has also been used to sell both large volumes of hip capitalist merchandise and many alleged left alternatives to capitalism, as well as providing endless livings for celebrity lefties and ex-lefties, sociologists and other commentators. The student movement is usually celebrated; the situationists are name-checked, and the same slogans and posters are reproduced.

The mass strike wave that the student protests helped to spark is often tacked on as an afterthought. That "10 million workers were on strike" at the height of the '68 events is an oft repeated statistic... "On strike" as a simple statement, though, obscures questions about numbers of workers actively participating in occupying factories, initiating walk-outs, maintaining pickets etc. Most strikes, up to today, usually see an active minority pushing action, and a largely passive or inactive majority... Obviously there are exceptions to this. The idea that the Communist Party-dominated CGT union took control of the strike wave and channeled it away from "revolutionary demands" towards immediate bread and butter goals (heading strikers off from alliances with more "revolutionary" students) has also become widely accepted. But this muddies questions about how many of the individual factory disputes or occupations were initiated by CGT militants, how much local union structures largely controlled the strikes from the start, as well as how much real sympathy workers had with student demands.

In some ways the myths about May 68 can be compared to the those about the 1926 British General Strike. In the case of 1926, the cast-iron myths about TUC leaders selling out the Strike obscure wider questions about how local Strike Committees and Trades Councils prevented the movement's escalation, and how, despite increasing militancy and huge participation, workers themselves were not able to overcome their reliance on these structures.

The accounts contained in this pamphlet attempt to clarify some of these issues. As Mouvement Communiste themselves admit, they are not attempting to paint a picture of the whole movement of May-June 1968 in France. However, does their concentration on workers and factories, on factory militants predominantly, weaken the importance of these texts? As MC point out, they made choices about what to include - these were based on their ideas of what is important and useful to them from this period... Their approach, leaning to the workerist, is in many ways a very narrow view of what class struggle is. Part of the legacy of May 68 and the 60s/70s era as a whole, is a widened vision of the importance of forces that oppose/could overthrow capitalism; breaking out of the vision of the factory as the only crucible of change, and recognising the relevance of social struggles in diverse arenas, from the women's' movement, through struggles around race and, sexuality, as well as attempts to break with hierarchies, traditional social structures and rebel against work itself. Is this legacy, though, double-edged? The recognition of a more complex balance of forces, the interweaving of levels of power relations is vital, especially as capital has reduced its reliance on manufacturing (at least in the west). But conversely, how much does the fragmenting, since the 70s, of a sense of opposition and common cause to capital owe to the institutionalisation and recuperation of many of these movements?

We're not publishing these accounts to attempt to relegate May 68 to events of no importance. Studying upsurges, revolts, movements, victories and defeats of the past can have a positive impact on our own movements, ideas and tactics and it's important to have critical and dissident views on these events - especially from those who lived the events themselves. Responses, replies, critiques of this pamphlet are of course welcome.

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(Past Tense - Pere Lachaise Commando)

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*Thanks to George Gordon*



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# Abbreviations used in this text

<b>CAL</b>	Comités d'action lycéens (secondary school action committees)
<b>CFDT</b>	Confédération française démocratique du travail (trade union federation)
<b>CFTC</b>	Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (Catholic trade union federation)
<b>CGC</b>	Confédération générale des cadres (executives' and managers' union)
<b>CGPME</b>	Confédération nationale des petites et moyennes entreprises (small and mid-sized employers' association)
<b>CGT</b>	Confédération générale du travail (PCF-oriented trade union federation)
<b>CLER</b>	Comité de liaison des étudiants révolutionnaires (Trotskyist student organization)
<b>CNPF</b>	Conseil national du patronat français (major employers' organization)
<b>CNJA</b>	Centre national des jeunes agriculteurs, (Farmers union born from a Christian union in 1957, often close to the PSU)
<b>CRS</b>	Compagnies républicaine de sécurité (national riot police)
<b>EDF-GDF</b>	Électricité de France, Gaz de France (nationalised gas and electricity companies)
<b>FEN</b>	Fédération de l'éducation nationale (teachers' union)
<b>FER</b>	Fédération des étudiants révolutionnaires (Trotskyist student organization)
<b>FGDS</b>	Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste (left-centre political party)
<b>FNEF</b>	Fédération nationale des étudiants de France (rightist student union)
<b>FNSEA</b>	Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles (right-wing farmers' union)
<b>FO</b>	Force ouvrière ("moderate" trade union federation) Founded in 1948 as a split from the CGT, organised by representatives of the USA and composed of a strange mixture of right-wing socialists, "pure" trade unionists, Trotskyists and anrcho-syndicalists.
<b>JCR</b>	Jeunesses communistes révolutionnaires (Trotskyist/Guevarist organisation) Created in 1966 by people coming from the PCF student and youth organisations, and Trotskyists belonging to the Fourth International (Mandel tendency). Dissolved by the government in June 68. Later transformed into the Ligue Communiste (LC).
<b>JOC</b>	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (Catholic youth organization)
<b>LCR</b>	Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Trotskyist party, still in existence). Founded in 1973 after the dissolution of the LC (see above) after the mass demonstration against the far right group Ordre Nouveau in Paris where demonstrators violently and successfully confronted the police. Affiliated to the Fourth International (Mandel tendency). They always supported the official left in the elections.
<b>LO</b>	Lutte Ouvrière (Trotskyist party, still in existence) In 1940 a Romanian Trotskyist living in France refused to join the Fourth International French group because it was "petty bourgeois" in relation to Bolshevik organisational methods. He (Barta, a.k.a. David Korner) was the founder of UC (Union Communiste). This little group lead a struggle in Renault

Billancourt in April-May 1947 against Stalinist domination of the union. The group then created a rank and file union, but disintegrated in 1950. Some of its members founded VO (Voix Ouvrière-Workers voice) in 1956, which became LO after June 1968.

<b>MAU</b>	Mouvement d'action universitaire (militant student group)
<b>MNEF</b>	Mutuelle nationale des étudiants de France (student mutual aid organization)
<b>ORTF</b>	Office de radio et télévision française (state monopoly of radio and television)
<b>PCF</b>	Parti communiste français (French Communist Party)
<b>PDM</b>	Progrès et démocratie moderne (centrist party)
<b>PSU</b>	Parti socialiste unifié (left political party) Founded in April 1960 by the merger of two opposing groups, one from the PCF the other from the SFIO. Well rooted in some factories, it tried to play a role in '68 as a link between the movement, and the leftist organisations, and the official left.
<b>PTT</b>	Postes, Télégraphes, Téléphones (state post and communications monopoly)
<b>RATP</b>	Régie autonome des transports parisiens (Paris public transportation network)
<b>RTL</b>	Radio, Télévision Luxembourg (Luxembourg radio and television. Private broadcaster)
<b>SFIO</b>	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (Socialist political party)
<b>SNCF</b>	Société nationale des chemins de fer (nationalised rail network)
<b>SNESup</b>	Syndicat national de l'enseignement supérieur (leftist university teachers' union)
<b>UEC</b>	Union des étudiants communistes (Communist Party student organisation)
<b>UNEF</b>	Union nationale des étudiants de France (leftist student union)

# Mouvement Communiste's Introduction

The aim of this work is the same as many others taken on by our group: to try to understand what was really a social movement constitutive of the last forty years of class struggle in this country, going beyond the unrestrained and uncritical enthusiasms and the unfounded critical rejections. To clear away the myths and the facile enthusiasms and to expose the facts to criticism, this is our method. And the movement of May-June 1968 is a choice cut: the biggest general strike that the country has ever known. But how do we situate this general strike? What were its actors? How was the strike concretely organised? What was the participation of the strikers in the strike itself and other actions? And, for us more particularly, what were the traces of workers' autonomy, the attempts at self-organisation by the strikers, and the balance of forces with the unions, principally the CGT?

Taking account of the small number of firsthand accounts from participants on the one side, and the panegyrics<sup>1</sup> which were published immediately after May-June and up to ten years after the events on the other, we have to say that the analysis of the balance of forces is difficult without a painstaking work that it is not possible for us to undertake. The firsthand accounts from two comrades that we have included are valuable enough in themselves to justify the publication of the text.

Nevertheless, some major themes can be identified. To allow some discussion on the subject the text includes:

- A brief view of the situation before May 68;
- A commented chronological description from May and June from the point of view of workers' struggles;
- The two firsthand accounts;
- An attempt at a conclusion.

So as to limit the text to what seems most interesting to us we will concentrate on:

- The first week of the workers' strike (from 14 to 21 May);
- The return to work (starting on 4 June) and attempts at opposing it;

And, above all, the elements of workers' autonomy.

Also, this text is not the work of a historian; it cannot include accounts or analyses on everything which happened. We therefore don't want to say that the struggles which are not mentioned are not important or have less importance, but that we have made choices.

Amongst various sources, we have used the following works:

- *"La France de 68"*, A. Delale et G. Ragache, Seuil, Paris, 1978,
- *"Mai retrouvé"*, J. Baynac, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1978,
- *"The Imaginary Revolution. Parisian Students and Workers in 1968"*, M. Seidman, Berghan Books, New York, 2004,
- *"Worker-Student Action Committees, France May '68"*, R. Gregoire & F. Perlman, Black & Red Books, Kalamazoo, 1969,
- And the text *"Les grèves en Mai 68"* on the site <http://www.mondialisme.org/spip.php?article243>



# The May-June 1968 worker

## *1-13 May - the premises*

It was the student movement which made the first days of May. After the demonstration of 1 May, which was the first to be authorised since 1954 and a relative success which saw 100,000 people march in Paris with clashes between the Order Service of the CGT and “the extreme left”, the agitation which began in Nanterre on 22 March reached Paris.

On Thursday 2 May, the dean Pierre Grappin decided for the second time in the year to close the literature faculty of Nanterre. The next day, 500 CRS and mobile police units occupied the campus, searched cars and stopped “carriers of weapons” (catapults, bolts etc.). Six people were given suspended sentences.

On Friday 3 May, the police, acting on the request of Rector Roche, cleared the courtyard of the Sorbonne occupied by the students, notably from Nanterre, who had come for a meeting. They took the students away. This stirred up protest by others, leading to six hours of violence and 600 being grabbed by the cops.

In *l'Humanité*, Georges Marchais wrote an editorial in which he lambasted “the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit” and made fun of “*revolutionaries [...] sons of the high bourgeoisie [...] who will quickly turn down their revolutionary flame to go and run daddy's business and exploit the workers*”. The government announced the closure of the Sorbonne on Sunday 5 May.

At dawn on Monday 6 May, the police cordoned off the Latin Quarter. From the morning (during the disciplinary hearing for eight students from Nanterre, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit), there were gatherings and marches on the Boulevard Saint-Michel which lead to fights with the police. This transformed itself into a march of 6000 people to Halle-aux-Vins. The UNEF called for people to go to Denfert-Rochereau at 18.30. Then they left in a procession which went towards the Latin Quarter after passing along the right bank of the Seine. In the rue des Ecoles there was an unexpected and violent charge by the police. There was a violent reply from the students, with barricades. At the same moment, the demonstration of the UNEF formed up at Denfert-Rochereau. It encountered the police at rue du Four. There were violent conflicts and well-constructed barricades. In the evening there were very violent demonstrations in the Latin Quarter (500 wounded, 400 arrested). There were also demonstrations in the provinces, some violent like in Grenoble.

On Tuesday 7 May, a gathering took place at 18.30 at Denfert-Rochereau. A march crossed Paris (as police roadblocks allowed) for four hours: Invalides, Quai d'Orsay, Concorde, Arc de Triomphe (21.30). Then it returned towards the left bank. There was a police roadblock where rue de Rennes crossed rue d'Assas. 50,000 demonstrators were present and the confrontations were more dispersed than the previous day with a lot of violence from the police.

On Wednesday 8 May, a gathering occurred at Halle-aux-Vins. The demonstration went by Boulevard Saint-Germain towards the Senate and Place Edmond-Rostand. Some CP members of parliament wanted to take the head of the demo. They were pushed back in to the demonstration. The Sorbonne was inaccessible. The UNEF was in control and managed the dispersal without any conflicts.

On Thursday 9 May, there were no demonstrations but some political meetings.

On Friday 10 May, which would become celebrated as “the night of the barricades”, things began after the demonstration gathered at Denfert-Rochereau where, despite the opposition of the UNEF, part of the demonstrators began to set up barricades in the Latin Quarter from 21.00. In the course of the next few hours more than sixty would be set up. Towards 22.00 the rector declared himself ready to receive a student delegation. Then a double dialogue took place on the international radio broadcasts: Geismar responded to the vice-rector on Radio-Luxembourg, Sauvageot<sup>2</sup> to the rector on Europe 1. The negotiations stalled on the issue of charges brought against students: the rector declared that he was not competent to deal with the matter. At 00.15, 3 lecturers and 3 students were allowed to enter the Sorbonne. Before leaving, Cohn-Bendit, who was part of the delegation despite being forbidden by the rector, gave the order: “Occupation of the Latin Quarter, but without attacking the forces of the police.” An hour and a half later, the negotiations reached an impasse. It was at 2.15 in the morning, after issuing

the customary warnings, that the police attacked the demonstrators. The battle, which was extremely violent, lasted until 4.30, causing a total of a hundred injuries on both sides.

The events in the Latin Quarter, described minute by minute by the international radio stations (Europe 1 and RTL), acquired an important dimension and appeared (on the television) to the dumbfounded and appalled provincials as the beginning of a civil war.

Learning from the night of the barricades, Pompidou authorised the reopening of the Sorbonne on 11 May. The student movement seemed to run out of steam. The union leaders appealed for a national strike day (to protest against police violence and repression) on 13 May.

## ***13-18 May – the tremors***

### **The 13 May General strike**

The demonstrations of 13 May had a real success but more in terms of number of participants than in terms of any strikes that were behind them. The section of industrial employees belonging to companies with less than 50 staff did not go on strike, but those in the big workplaces, or rather in the state sector, were in the front line: EDF and GDF (80%), Railways (50%)<sup>3</sup>, RATP (60%) education (75%) and above all the Post Office. In the latter, sporadic strikes had been breaking out since 8 May in the offices of Paris Nord (74% strikers), Paris Est (33% strikers), Paris Austerlitz and Paris Brune, and on 10 May amongst the drivers on the orders of the CGT, following on from agitation growing since March<sup>4</sup>.

However, in the Paris metalworking industry the figures for participation were only between 25% and 35%, principally in cars and aviation. 35% of the employees in Social Security and from 10 to 16% in the insurance industry were involved. At Renault-Billancourt the participation in the strike is difficult to estimate (between 40 and 80% according to the figures), but it was mostly the unionised, therefore the most skilled, who went to the demonstration. At Thomson (Bagneux and Gennevilliers [Hauts-de-Seine]) the rate of participation was 60-65%. In the Atomic Energy Centre (CEA) at Saclay (Essonne), the rate was 75%, at Chaussou 90%. At the Rhône-Poulenc chemical factory in Vitry (Val-de-Marne), it was 50%. These few figures give an idea of the atmosphere in the workplaces, because if it had been a long time since a trade union “day of action” had achieved such a success, this was still not a tidal wave. Without doubt it is this which encouraged the management of Citroën-Levallois to lock out the workers, who had not yet gone on strike.

More important, certainly, is the fact that thousands of workers were affected by the student agitations and, however weakly, had expressed their disapproval of the authorities. What would happen next?

The strike began<sup>5</sup> on 14 May in Woippy, a suburb of Metz: 500 workers from the Claas factory (producer of agricultural machines) went out. After a brief meeting, they demanded the application of a metalworking industry joint agreement, a new salary scale, the improvement of working conditions and the revision of timing norms. The next day they voted for an indefinite strike. Now let’s look at some of the workplaces that were significant at the beginning of the strike.

### **Sud Aviation**

The strike subsequently started up at the Sud-Aviation factory, in Bouguenais, close to Nantes<sup>6</sup>. For a few months there had been the threat of redundancies and reductions in working hours – following a reduction in activity, the management wanted to cut the working week from 48 to 47 hours, paid for 47 hours; the workers wanted the cut to 47 hours but paid for 48 hours – which led to a certain amount of agitation which would reach its crescendo at the beginning of May. Thus between 9 April and 10 May there were thirteen days when there were stoppages called by the unions, between one hour and eight hours long<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, on Tuesday 14 May there was a stoppage from 14.30 to 15.00 and from 15.30 to 16.00 with a march through the workshops. The meeting between the delegates and the management achieved nothing. For the first time the salaried staff stopped work. The director Duvochel was blockaded in his

office during the wait for the response from the managers in Paris. The delegates blocked the exits to stop the workers from leaving so a *de facto* occupation was put in place, perfectly controlled by the CGT. The director and his assistants were therefore kept in the management offices, with telephones, kept supplied by the unions until they were freed on 29 May.

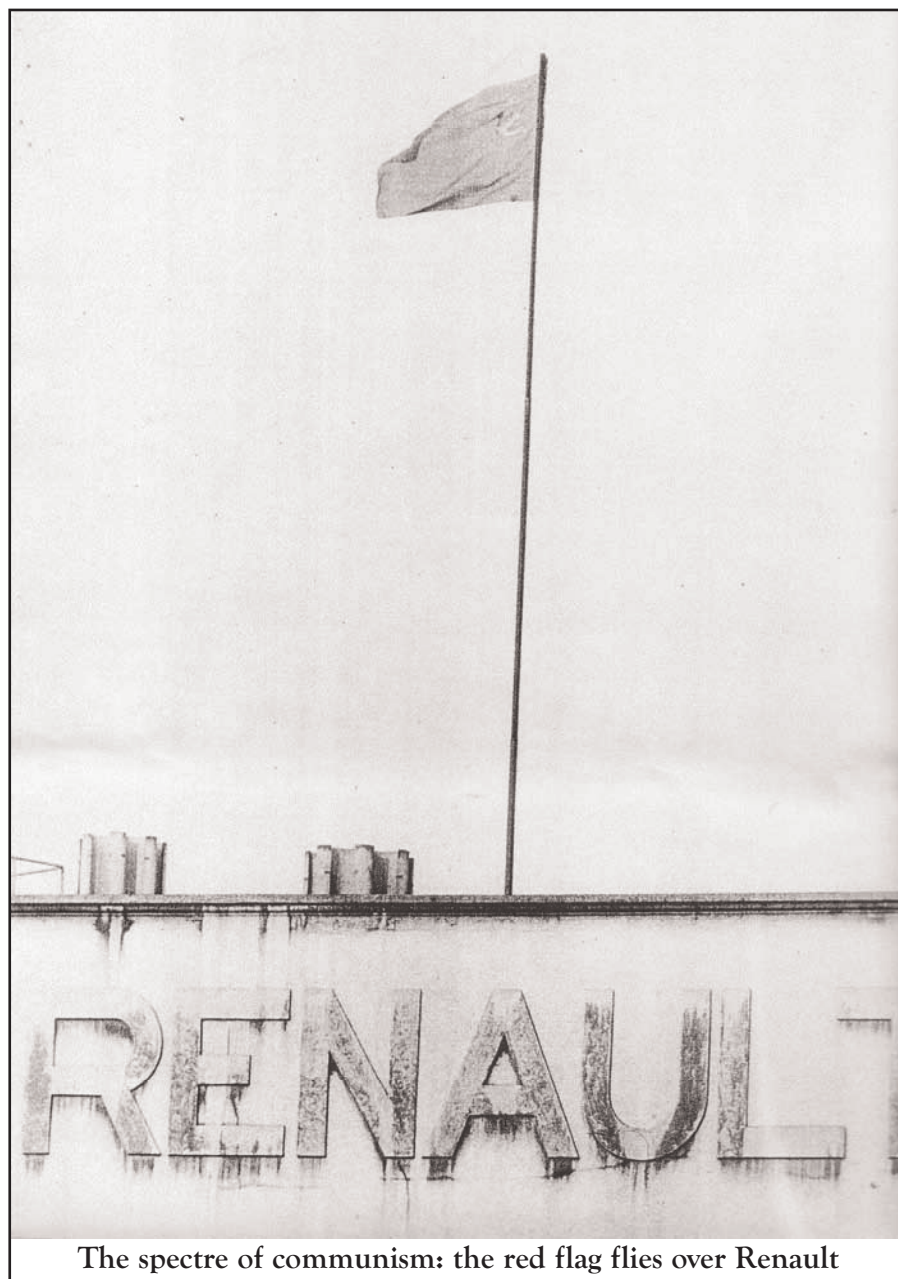
## Renault Cléon

On 15 May in Cléon<sup>8</sup> the unions took the temperature of the shop floor to see if they could rebound from the success of the 13<sup>th</sup> and bring some pressure to bear for the removal of some Social Security regulations imposed by the government on 21 August 1967. They succeeded in getting a decision for a one-hour stoppage per shift.

During the morning stoppage the workers, led particularly by the resurgent youth, marched through the

workshops to incite the non-strikers to stop work. They called for the formation of a strike committee and hardly mentioned the question of the regulations in their slogans. It took all the diplomacy of a CFDT official to get the workers back to their posts, and elsewhere they frequently interrupted work to discuss and keep the new arrivals up-to-date about what had happened.

For the afternoon shift there was the same initial scenario of a stoppage, but under pressure from the youth they organised a march. At its head were 200 young people who went and chanted slogans under the management's windows. There they gathered, pushed in front of their stunned delegates and demanded that these should be met (the director refused). In the offices, the department heads panicked, blocking the doors with iron bars. Seeing this, the workers announced that the management would not leave their offices until they had met the delegates. At 6 p.m. no one was working any more and the occupation was voted for with enthusiasm. The



The spectre of communism: the red flag flies over Renault

managers were therefore blocked in like at Sud Aviation from the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup>. The CGT tried to free them on 17 May, but had to give up in the face of the outcry which met their proposal. They finally succeeded on 19 May.

The unions created an order service. They organised the occupation — which consisted in particular of protecting the machines — and put forward a list of demands, which appeared in the form of a pamphlet at 11 p.m.: “Reduction of working time to 40 hours without loss of pay; minimum wage of 1000 francs; lowering of the retirement age; transformation of the contract workers into permanent



*staff; increase in trade union rights.”*

On the same evening the strike, complete at Renault, paralysed two other workplaces in the region: Kléber-Colombes at Elbeuf and La Roclainne at Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray. Nevertheless, the CGT (and the older workers) rapidly gained control of the strike.

## Renault Flins

At Flins<sup>9</sup> on the morning of 16 May, the trade union activists of the CFDT had arranged a meeting to discuss how to put into practice the confederation’s directives on the question of the regulations. Before going to this one of the members heard by phone that the Cléon factory was on indefinite strike with an occupation, and that the managers were being held. As a result the CFDT-ers decided to go and see the CGT to propose a one-hour stoppage at 10.15 a.m. In teams of two (one CFDT and one CGT), the union activists went into the workshops to give the order. At the appointed hour around 500 workers stopped work and gathered outside the buildings. They went back into the workshops as a march to encourage the others to stop work. At 11.30, they regrouped in front of the canteen. The two officials of the CFDT and the CGT explained what had happened at Cléon and proposed to start an indefinite strike. The proposal was adopted and the occupation was organised right away. At the beginning this consisted of putting pickets in place and writing names of volunteers on picket lists. Before breaking up for lunch they met up at 14.00 for a new meeting with the afternoon shift. This meeting again adopted the principle of the indefinite strike with an occupation. At 15.30, the management shut down the factory for those who were still working. This version of events comes from a unionist of the CFDT.

At the morning meeting it had above all been a question of solidarity with Cléon. In the afternoon, one of the unions presented a list of demands: *“40 hours without loss of pay; 1000 francs minimum wage; retirement at 60 (55 for women); five weeks holiday for young people; cancellation of the regulations; trade union rights”*.



Workers occupying Renault-Flins

## Renault Billancourt

A lot has been said about the CGT/PCF versions of how the strike started, of impressions, of false or tendentious facts etc. We will remark only that the account of Aimé Halbeher, General Secretary of the CGT of Renault Billancourt, has this flash of honesty; *“On the 17<sup>th</sup> in the morning at 6 a.m. they opened the doors to the shifts arriving for work and set up a rendezvous for a meeting at Seguin Island at 10.00”* and, further, they *“decided on Friday to occupy for the weekend”* <sup>10</sup>

True, except that the factory had already been stopped since the day before, because it is rather on the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Thursday, that the sectors got going spontaneously. At no time was there any link-up on the afternoon of Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> between the strikers of sections 55 and 70 and those at 37 (on the headland downstream from Seguin Island)<sup>11</sup>. Contrary to what has been written elsewhere (cf. mondialisme.org), sector 37 only went on strike towards 5 p.m. How therefore could there be a common meeting between the two sectors of strikers at the Zola Kermen crossroads opposite sector 37 (more than two kilometres away on foot)?

This is the account of a comrade who worked in section 37, sheet-metal working, composed of skilled workers. He was at this time in contact with the group Voix Ouvrière [“Workers’ Voice”, “VO”]. On the famous 16 May at mid-day there was an attempt at a meeting in the National Square of the Trotskyist group the PCI (“Lambert” group) and the workers from the neighbouring buildings returning from the canteen. They stopped for a few minutes, discussed and then went back to their workshops, while others went to lunch, left, etc. In the aftermath of this the workers of sections 55 (bar turning) and 70 (small scale machining) began to move without being on a declared strike but without working very much either for an hour or two.

The word went around the island that the strike had started, but they didn’t know what had happened and, in section 37, sprits rose. The boys said *“good, let’s go”* and then it fell back again. Then it started up again, with everyone discussing. The union delegate for the CGT local was in the same boat as the others and knew nothing. Finally, towards 5 p.m., without anybody in particular taking the lead, it started up massively when 200 to 300 boys from the department began to go back to Seguin Island in a march, therefore crossing the assembly lines (metalworking, bodywork, assembly) where mostly immigrants worked (and where the presence of the CP and CGT was weaker). The lines stopped and the mass of unskilled workers deserted the factory right away. It’s difficult to say that the lines were on strike. They weren’t working any more, that’s for sure, but a good part of the workers simply fled before the march, running away and leaving the factory. Hardly any workers from the lines joined the march of strikers from section 37. In a situation of total improvisation, the strikers launched an occupation. It wasn’t a question of occupying the whole island because there weren’t enough of them. They therefore went off to occupy the Bas-Meudon sector and thus at the same time closed the southern access to Seguin Island by blocking the Meudon bridge.

The next day, Friday 17, the factory was closed. There were a lot of people at the meeting organised by the CGT at 10 a.m. in the middle of Seguin Island. The CGT had largely mobilised the sectors where it had the major influence, that is to say the professional sectors, and that made up a lot of people, but there were also a lot of workers from the assembly lines on the island. After the meeting the CGT contingents headed towards Bas-Meudon supposedly to “reinforce the pickets”. In fact, starting from then, the workers in occupation since the day before were submerged and it was the apparatus of the CGT which took charge of things with all the means at its disposal: canteens, works councils etc., and this was the case until the end of the strike.

To sum up after some considerable research, the strike began on Thursday 16 May in two separate parts of the factory and two hours apart without any direct connection between them: Sections 55 and 70, towards 14.15, Section 37, towards 17.00.

These two beginnings were “outside the unions”, as Halbeher recognises in a comment elsewhere<sup>12</sup>.



## First impressions

Geographically, the strong points of this first wave of strikes were the Paris region and the valley of the Seine as far as Le Havre, the region of Nantes Saint-Nazaire and the Lyon region. In the other regions the strike remained limited.

On 17 May the number of strikers reaches 200,000. The movement spreads like wild fire around the original regions and then takes the South East, from Besançon to Provence. In the Paris suburbs many factories were on strike but, up to the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>, it was above all the workers of the provinces who led the action.

On the first days workers' spontaneity was obvious. "*Occupied Factory: we've had enough!*" proclaimed the banner on the Vinco factory (metal office equipment) in Dieppe. This was not an isolated case. The anagram which the workers made from the letters of BERLIET, replaced with LIBERTÉ, was charged with a symbolic value. None of these actions corresponded to a precise slogan.

This first wave has often been presented as spontaneous, which is not exactly true unless we understand spontaneous to mean "the absence of trade union strike slogans on the federal or confederal level". In the absence of detailed reports from each factory, it nevertheless emerges that many strikes were launched or supported by militants of the CGT<sup>13</sup>, however often they were imposed or carried out by minorities (like the 200 young people at Cléon) who carried along the rest of the workers or won their passive agreement. Even in the Paris region, where we have the benefit of reports from the CATE (Worker-Student Action Committee) of Censier on the contacts made that week in numerous workplaces (FNAC, BHV, RadioTechnique, NMPP, etc.), we can state that only a minority of workers, including CGT delegates, asked themselves the question "what shall we do?" and were not hostile to outsiders turning up to discuss things with them. What were the causes of this?

First of all there were the years of frustration, as much for the younger generation of workers as for the older ones. Then there was the weariness from the days of action which were seen as repetitive and useless even by the union militants. Finally there was the sensation that the authorities were weakened and that this was something they could benefit from. More marginally, for some PCF union militants there was the fear of being outflanked. These various pressures were not fought by the leadership of the CGT even if it didn't necessarily make publicity about them. But elsewhere the movement carried on and extended itself. Let's take a quick snapshot of the sectors entering the strike from 14 to 17 May. Among the first factories, 45 were linked to heavy metalworking or engineering, 19 others were in car manufacturing and 13 were in aeronautics. However, the massive presence in this avant-garde of chemical and artificial textile workers (23 factories), of electrical engineering (17), of food processing (15), of building (2) and still other sectors indicates a profound and general discontent which went beyond simple sectional problems.

## 18-20 May – the tipping point

The hesitations of the trade unions on the confederal level appeared during this week. The CFDT tried to give itself an appearance of being open to the intentions of the students, while the FO remained cautious and did not want to find itself in conflict with the CGT, which hesitated.

On 15 May the day of action against the new regulations, planned long in advance, did not achieve the expected success: a few stoppages, some delegations and rare marches did not spark much enthusiasm.

The same day the CFDT once again asserted its desire for a connection with the "progressive" students. Some officials from the confederation and some militants spoke with the occupiers of the Sorbonne. The metalworking federation even advised its members: "*It would be appropriate to develop debate with the students, not only to tell them that we agree with their demands, but also, and above all, so that our preoccupations with democracy in the workplace, the right to work and the real democratisation of education should be understood and shared by them.*"

In the name of FO, André Bergeron met the leaders of the CFDT at Montholon gardens. He declared himself ready to support the occupations, but to remain independent of the CGT.

The latter remained reserved about this. The demands for self-management and structural reforms proclaimed by the CFDT were abruptly described as "hollow formulae" by the CGT leader Georges

Séguy. At Billancourt, the CGT section disapproved of the initiative by the UNEF to organise a solidarity march on the factory, while the sections of the CFDT and the FO declared themselves to be happy with this gesture of sympathy. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the CGT published a statement in which it raised the now ritualised appeal for “*the formation of a trade union front without any divisions*”, and a separate phrase envisaging “*the replacement of the existing power by a popular government*”. Finally, the CGT called for “*the mobilisation of the workers for settling the ‘overdue accounts’*”.

But the flood of strikers was always rising and the CGT (and the PCF, although it is difficult to distinguish the two in the confederation office) decided to react. The choice was simple but tough: amongst the students in particular, and amongst youth in general, the PCF seemed discredited and in any case its youth organisations no longer carried any weight – could they run the risk of the same thing happening within the working class? The movement was certainly still largely minoritarian (200,000 strikers on the evening of 17 May), weakly organised (it was the occupation of the factory accompanied or not by the locking up of the managers or directors which took the place of organisation), geographically localised and, contrary to the illusions of the leftists, far from being revolutionary, but the potential danger was there.

So, for the PCF-CGT it was not a question of “riding the tiger” but rather of drowning this embryonic movement by launching a strike where the CGT had the means to do so, principally on the SNCF, the RATP, La Poste [state post office] or in the suburbs (such as Seine Saint-Denis) where the combined weight of workplace militants, trade union officials and municipal employees could force a strike, but also by the cutting of power to the workplaces by the CGT unionised workers of EDF as in Seine Saint Denis from the 20 May, so as to “get our way”. Thus the example of the Carbone Lorraine factory (1200 workers) at Gennevilliers, where the CGT only launched the strike on 18 May.

From a general point of view, according to the Ministry of the Interior, out of 77 metalworking firms in the Paris region, 68 had experienced a strike launched by the CGT, 6 by the CFDT and 3 by FO. According to the same statistics 58% of strikes were started by employees between 30 and 40 years old; 27% by employees between 20 and 30, 8% by employees younger than 20 and 7% by employees older than 40. According to the statistics of the UIM (metalworking bosses’ association), 75% of strikes were decided after discussion, and in 26% of cases the strikers used force to make the workplace go on strike. How it was necessary to change tactics in the face of embryonic forms of workers’ organisation is illustrated perfectly by the example of Alsthom in Saint-Ouen described later.

## **Towards the decision**

The blockage of public transport, SNCF and RATP (in Paris) gave a good excuse for all the employees in small firms and isolated employees in general not to go to work. But if the danger of being outflanked existed, the fact of launching the strike presented another even greater danger: who could say that once the floodgates of the overflowing workers were open it would be possible to easily return things to normal?

Even if we can’t follow the discussions inside the leadership of the CGT, the fact is that it is only on the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> after an extraordinary national committee meeting of long duration that the CGT decided to exploit the movement, without necessarily achieving unity of action, since Séguy, peremptorily declared that “*in the CFDT as well as the FEN there is still not any very clear view of things*”. But behind this hackneyed formula, the choice had been made and made well.

From the next day, 18 May, the launch of the “general” strike succeeded in totally paralysing the country in five days. The number of strikes grew rapidly: on the 18<sup>th</sup>, towards mid-day, 1 million workers were out, in the evening more than 2 million<sup>14</sup>! After the Sunday pause, work stoppages reached every region and every kind of job: more than 4 million on Monday evening, 6 to 7 million on Tuesday, 8 million on Wednesday 22 May and, the day after Ascension Day, it just missed the 9 million mark. On 18<sup>th</sup> in the Paris region metro trains and buses stayed in their depots. Already on 17 May, the rail workers of Achères and Saint Lazare were going on strike. According to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior, 85,000 out of 92,000 rail workers in the Paris region were on strike from the evening of 18 May as well as 29,000 out of 30,300 employees of the RATP. Across the whole country the post

offices closed one by one. In the following days EDF/GDF (in the Paris region 33,200 out of 38,700 employees were on strike) and the teachers joined the movement. In the post office, for example, from 21 May they gave the following figures for strikers: 50,000 out of 80,000 in the Paris region and 66,000 out of 175,000 in the provinces. Most of the sorting offices in the Paris region were occupied and the post offices were closed by the strikers. From 18 May, the management of the post office called on the police to expel the hundred or so strikers from the telecommunications centre of the Second Arrondissement, close to the Bourse [stock exchange]. After negotiation with the CGT, the centre was given up peacefully.

All sectors of industry were affected but also the banks and insurance companies, government administrations, etc.

In secondary education the high schools had already gone on strike on 18 May before the general strike order was given by the FEN on 22 May. The big shops closed their doors, the fishermen stayed on land, the road toll and customs employees lifted their barriers. In the countryside agricultural workers and road-menders stopped work. France was paralysed.

## ***20-29 May – the rising tide***

But can we speak of an “active strike”<sup>15</sup>? Apart from a few examples which we’ll come back to later, and without getting too focused on the example of Renault-Billancourt, we have to say the following: the workers did not work but stayed at home. The factories were occupied, but by a handful of workers, most of the time trade union militants (and above all those of the CGT). They voted or not on a daily basis for the continuation of the action. They went in search of news or provisions, but they did not discuss the movement or which actions to take. It was the biggest general strike (at its height, 9 million strikers for ten days) in history and also that in which the workers participated the least. This is the paradox of May-June 1968.

### **The agricultural workers as well...<sup>16</sup>**

Dispersed across the countryside, the agricultural workers traditionally had difficulties coordinating their actions. However, in ‘68, the strike also took on a massive character in this sector.

From 13 May, the CFDT (largely in the majority) and the CGT called for active solidarity with the students. Then, as the strike generalised across the country, the agricultural workers in numerous places refused to make common cause with their employers organised in the FNSEA or MODEF<sup>17</sup>. They wanted to fight to improve their lot with their own demands. They demanded:

- a minimum wage at least equal to that in industry,
- better housing conditions,
- regulation of working hours,
- a retirement regime allowing a decent life.

The movement was born on the big farms of Valois where a militant of the CFDT started, with his comrades, two demonstrations: one at Crépy, the other at Plessis-Belleville where, with the help of thirty or so students, a barricade was built across national highway 2.

Starting on 24 May, the agitation spread: 6,000 strikers in Picardie, 5000 in Anjou (the market garden workers marched beside the factory workers in Angers), 2000 in Provence (particularly forestry workers), and 6000 in the Languedoc. In these regions the agricultural workers sought out contact with other employees rather than with peasants.

In the South West, in Brittany and in the mountains, where small-scale exploitation dominates, there was no important autonomous movement. There the small peasants led the action, but locally agricultural workers could “outflank” the FNSEA. Everywhere, cooperatives and agricultural research institutes were occupied.

In ‘68 the agricultural employees did not remain on the margins. Calm progressively returned to the farms starting from 6 June.



## Political crisis and riots

De Gaulle left for a trip to Romania on 14 May. On his return on 19 May he pronounced his celebrated phrase *"The party's over"* then *"Reform, yes, havoc, no!"* and announced a speech on the radio and TV for 24 May.

While he waited Pompidou had a lot to do. Taken by surprise by the development of the general strike, he first of all had to put the maintenance of order at the top of his list. In this situation for which there was no historical precedent, he had to make sure that the state still had at its disposal a sufficient police force and, in case of necessity, could use the army for rapid intervention. And yet discontent reigned also within the forces of order.

The government could not immediately react against the development of the strikes, even when they affected strategic sectors for the state, such as the post office, the railways or air traffic control. While the office of Central-Radio, which maintained telephone communications with other countries, was occupied by the police and entrusted to the army, the government did not have sufficient forces to take over all the provincial centres of telecommunications. The state had to rely on the civic spirit of the striking posties, and for the rest to wait for the opening of negotiations between the workers' unions and the bosses' organisations.

On the evening of 24 May De Gaulle spoke. The crisis is, according to him, a crisis of structure, and its solution can be found in a *"more extensive participation of everyone in the progress and in the results of the activity which concerns him directly"*. This conception had already been expressed many times in the past: therefore nothing really new on the political plane.

The method was also very much in the Gaullist tradition: immediate referendum; a blank (or almost) check given to the President of the Republic; plebiscite. It was a question of short-circuiting the whole "political class" and calling the country's bluff: a negative vote means there will be a power

vacuum and the risk of *"going, via civil war, to adventures and usurpations the most odious and ruinous"*.

At the demonstration at Lyon station in Paris, thousands of handkerchiefs were taken out of their pockets; the demonstrators waving goodbye to De Gaulle. In the evening one of the most violent demonstrations took place in Paris, but the same thing happened in the provinces. Lyon, Strasbourg, Nantes and Paris experienced their biggest "night of the barricades", and the next day Bordeaux took its turn. There were a total of one dead and 500 hospitalised, 144 being in a serious state. In all cases, the principal slogans related to the residence prohibition slapped on Daniel Cohn-Bendit: *"We are all German Jews!"*

From 22 to 26 May, more than a hundred student-worker demonstrations took place across the whole of France. These demonstrations didn't have any systematic character; everything depended on the local situation.

In some towns "unitary, enormous and peaceful" marches could take place where the climate was still harmonious. In Caen, for example, the students toured around the occupied factories in a march before going off to join an inter-union rally in front of the prefecture. In Marseille, the students asked to



be integrated into the CGT demonstration. To do this they had to roll up all their banners bearing the name of Cohn-Bendit, and the Order Service of the CGT kept them separate from the workers. At Clermont-Ferrand on 25 May trade union unity broke down in the middle of a demonstration: the UNEF, ordered to abandon its slogans, left the march and went its own way.

In other cases there was no unity. In Toulouse, the 25-April movement<sup>18</sup>, the CFDT and the CNJA called a demonstration on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The town hall was peacefully invaded by the crowd which fraternised with the striking municipal employees. The next day the CGT carried out its own march, on its own.

The Paris CGT marches of the 24<sup>th</sup> gathered around 20,000 people. The first one, which had to go from the place Balard to Austerlitz station, was diverted towards Porte de Choisy, with the aim of making it impossible to meet up with the UNEF marches which were forming up. A certain discontent manifested itself amongst the young workers of Renault and Citroën: the organisers did not succeed in imposing their slogans: the planned “*Abolish the regulations!*” and “*Raise our wages!*” gave way to “*Power is in the street!*” and “*Power is us!*” Despite some incidents, brief and not very violent, all the unitary demonstrations went off calmly. It wasn’t the same in some university towns where the UNEF was on its own in the streets.

On 22 May in Paris, a demonstration returning to the Latin Quarter after a stroll up to the National Assembly [parliament]<sup>19</sup>, degenerated into sporadic clashes between midnight and 4 a.m. The next day, without any organisation having given the slightest order, 300 young people attacked the police. Immediately the students left the Sorbonne. They appeared divided: some joined the demonstrators; others formed a chain and tried to interrupt the fighting. But the news was announced on the radio and in less than an hour several thousand young people converged on the Latin Quarter. They fought for nine hours solidly and there were more than 150 injured.

The objectives of the demonstrators had become more and more diverse. It was no longer just a question of fighting with the police. They attacked the dens of the enemy: Gaullist party offices, police stations, prefectures, town halls and even the stock market were attacked and, in some cases, sacked or burned. In Bordeaux, the Grand Théâtre was occupied for the second time. Apart from the fighting, shop windows were smashed and, in Lyon, in the place des Cordeliers, a large shop was partly looted.

Such was the intensity of the fighting that confrontations lasted a very long time: ten hours in Paris, eight hours in Lyon, seven hours in Nantes on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and eight hours in Bordeaux on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The police received an order to avoid all close contact so as to limit their losses. When the demonstrators were numerous enough to occupy one or several districts of a town they barricaded themselves in solidly and dislodging them from their positions was a long, hard job. The one exception was Strasbourg, where the demonstrators were not numerous enough to occupy the terrain and could only resist the police charges for two hours.

Everywhere the violence reached a maximum point which it would have been difficult to go beyond without using fire arms. And inevitably, what the government was trying to avoid happened: there was a death on the night of 24 May. René Lacroix, police superintendent, had his chest crushed by a lorry full of stones that the demonstrators of Lyon had sent hurtling towards the Lafayette Bridge with the aim of forcing a way through.

In the hot towns, like Lyon, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Nantes and Paris, the demonstrations took place on a daily basis. The forces of order could not keep up with this shocking rhythm, not while it was now necessary to disperse their forces across the whole of France to confront the worker and peasant agitation.

## **The agitation in the countryside**

Often misunderstood or forgotten, agitation also took place in the countryside in 1968. In addition to the struggle of agricultural workers already mentioned (and even more forgotten), the agricultural world was in motion. Delale and Ragache cite a number of examples<sup>20</sup> :

“What’s more the *demonstrations began with a blockade in Allier. They steadily spread up to the 24<sup>th</sup>*, with the hardest regions throwing themselves into the action first of all.

*The forms taken by the agitation in the countryside were varied. Because of the lack of petrol and*



*the difficulties of communication, there were fewer people in the streets and on the roads than expected. The total number of peasant protesters across the country nevertheless reached 200,000.*

*In some cases the FNSEA contented itself with convening its departmental council and drafting a motion. In Chamalières, close to Clermont-Ferrand, the president of the FNSEA held a simple information meeting in the presence of the prefect. At Tulle the MODEF held a meeting of its members behind closed doors, confiscated red flags, expelled the city-dwellers and refused to join a workers' meeting which was taking place in the town.*

*If in Argentan and Besançon the peasants contented themselves with a brief solitary and silent march, in other places, such as Limoges, they joined in the unitary demonstrations, but the farmers in a few regions also had recourse to their traditional methods of violent action: systematic blocking of the national highways in Allier, the Vaucluse, the Landes. In Gironde, dozens of telegraph poles were sawn down in the course of the night. .... There were also surprise demonstrations: 1,000 peasants from Cahors and Caussac invaded the small village of Cajarc, whose mayor was called Georges Pompidou.*

*Finally there are the attacks against official buildings: the sub-prefecture of Guingamp on the 22<sup>nd</sup> (3 piglets were hung from the railings), the prefecture of Rennes on the 24<sup>th</sup>, and that of Agen, where the peasants invaded the local offices and lit fires, before being expelled by the police, who had to gain possession of several barricades. In Puy, the protesters were pushed out of the square where the prefecture was and barricaded themselves into the fair stalls. Concentrated salvos of tear gas created panic there and a child of ten was seriously injured.*

*In Nantes, the peasant protesters really got themselves noticed: gathering in four marches on the edge of the town, on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> they "invaded" the town behind an enormous banner saying "No to the capitalist regime, yes to the complete revolution of society!", and solemnly re-baptised Royal Square as "People's Square". Some of them did not hesitate to join in the evening gathering of students and workers which attacked the prefecture and set up dozens of barricades over the course of eight hours."*

## **The Grenelle accords**

On 25 May, at 15.00, Georges Pompidou opened the first discussion meeting in the presence of the bosses (represented by the CNPF, whose president was P. Huvelin) and the CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC and CGC trade unions.

The unions pointed out that the talks which were beginning to get under way were only concerned with general demands, and that any agreed text must be completed by means of collective agreements at all levels. The CGT posed the abrogation of the regulations on Social Security of August 1967 as a precondition. The CFDT added a second, the immediate adoption of a fundamental law "*on the exercise of trade union rights and power in the workplaces*".

The order of the day proposed by the CGT-CFDT unions was then restraint. The negotiations went on for two-day marathons with the main participants being the Pompidou-Huvelin-Séguy triumvirate.

What were the contents of the agreement? They were:

- Increase of the SMIG, to 3F per hour, on 1 June (which was still far from the minimum wage of 600F per month),
- General increase of wages in private industry (7% on 1 June and 3% on 1 October),
- The bosses' proposal to reduce working time to 44 hours,
- Immediate reduction of the patient's contribution to medical expenses from 30% to 25%,
- The practical details of making up for days on strike. There would be an immediate advance to workers representing the average of the total hours reclaimed.

Apart from the financial measures, the success itself was above all important for the unions. The government committed itself to voting through a law on "*the exercise of trade union rights in the workplace*" which would be based on the text elaborated in committee by the representatives of the FO and the CFDT. As for the CGT, it was almost totally disinterested in the question, but not the reestablishment of a mobile scale of wages, nor the abolition of the Social Security regulations.

The CGT decided that G. Séguy was going to present the first results of the agreement to the

assembly of strikers at Renault Billancourt on Monday 27 May 1968, at 7 in the morning. Everywhere in the factories the strikers listened to the terms of the final agreement on the radio. In many large workplaces, Renault-Flins, Renault-Sandouville, Berliet, Sud-Aviation, Rhodiaceta, Citroën, etc., they voted by a show of hands to continue the movement: they expected “the managers to show themselves” and agree to discuss all the demands elaborated by the local strike committees.

But everyone’s attention was focused on the radio show that the CGT organised on Séguin Island, in the centre of the Renault-Billancourt factories. Since 7 a.m., 10,000 workers had waited. Without the journalists knowing (they hadn’t arrived yet), the main event had already happened: on the basis of a report from the CGT representative of the inter-union committee of the factory, A. Halbeher, the continuation of the strike was decided.

The national union leaders could express themselves. Benoît Frachon (CGT), who was not at the last night-long meeting in Grenelle, spoke without notes and played the role of a defence lawyer, recalled 1936, and exclaimed: “*The agreements of Grenelle Street will bring to millions of workers a well-being that they had not hoped for*” André Jeanson of the CFDT was very pleased with the initial vote in favour of continuing the strike and evoked the solidarity of the workers with the university and school students in struggle. He was applauded.

Then Georges Séguy came. He dedicated himself to an “*objective balance sheet*” of what had “*been gained at Grenelle*”. At the beginning there were some whistles and at the end some serious booing which took several minutes to subside. Séguy concluded: “*If I judge by what I’m hearing, you won’t let yourselves be pushed around*” They applauded him and the PCF militants chanted: “*Popular Government!*”, “*Popular Government!*”

What can we deduce from the events of Seguin Island?

The leftists who saw the events of the Seguin Island assembly, at the time or in the following years, as a radicalisation of the base against the CGT showed, once again, how simplistic they are. Halbeher had made the vote for the continuation of the strike before the intervention of Séguy and that was the CGT. But Frachon was also the CGT and he had presented the results as a great victory. And Séguy, who also presented the very feeble results from the beginning as a wonderful advance, was always the CGT.

Knowing the cunning of the cadres of the CGT apparatus, we can say that they had foreseen every eventuality. If the little presented by Séguy was accepted, then fine. If that wasn’t accepted, the CGT had held the vote for continuation, no problem. The apparatus would once again land on its feet (and that is what happened).

But knowing the protagonists we can also say that all of them, rivals behind the scenes, defended different policies, representing the various currents inside the PCF.

Which version is the right one? We’ll never know.

However, during the day of the radio announcement of the meeting at Billancourt, certain Stalinist militants (like at Alsthom) already believed that Séguy had been disavowed at Billancourt. Elsewhere, they quickly forgot that at Citroën, Krasucki was hissed by the strikers during the presentation of the results of Grenelle. It no less remains the case that the tendency after ten days on strike was still not to return to work. But the unions knew how to act and waited a week before beginning to order a return to work.

## CharlétY and after

The UNEF called for a new series of big demonstrations for the 27 May across the whole of France, and organised a meeting in the CharlétY stadium in Paris. The CGT responded by calling 12 local gatherings, “*with the aim of informing the working class and the population about the results of the Grenelle negotiations*”. It gathered scarcely 10,000 loyal followers, while at CharlétY 30,000 people heard the orators of the “alternative left”.

The meeting was voluntarily placed under the patronage of the unions whose worst bureaucrats attempted a reconversion, such as M. Laby, boss of the Chemical Federation of the FO. Also represented, apart from the UNEF and the SNESup were: the Paris CFDT, 4 FO federations, the FEN, the CAL<sup>21</sup> and even the CGT union of the ORTF. On the other hand some extreme left groups avoided the gathering, whose objectives they considered too vague. The 22-March movement organised some small

local meetings at the same time, with the help of the Action Committees which it controlled.

But Mendès France, the former president of the Council and member of the PSU, was waiting in the wings, along with the National Centre for Study and Training which was part of the FGDS<sup>22</sup>. The politicians didn't speak. It was the unions who took their place on the stand one after the other and set out their views on the revolution, the CGT, "dual power" etc., without committing themselves to much more than their individual responsibility nor advancing any tangible perspectives.

In the end the Charléty gathering was only an exchange, where they set out their revolutionary good intentions without taking any concrete decision, and a real attempt at recuperation and the launching of a politician's alternative to the PCF trying to find legitimacy within the movement

The CGT took the initiative again and gave the national order for a demonstration on Wednesday 29, which had to break up in front of Saint-Lazare station. De Gaulle started to search for support in Germany from General Massu. On 29 and 30 May, more than 60 marches, consisting of more than half a million people, set off in the provinces in an atmosphere of unity because the CGT locally had toned down its attacks on the UNEF. In Paris, some students and teachers joined the workers' march which went from Bastille to Saint-Lazare station with 350,000 people and passed off completely peacefully.

This show of strength, which for thirty six hours constituted the dread and the fantasy of a seizure of power by the PCF for some members of the government, only finally gave rise to the relaunch of negotiations within the left between the FGDS and the PCF.

## **The Gaullist counter-offensive**

On 30 May at noon, De Gaulle returned to the Élysée Palace. At 14.30 he received Pompidou and told him: "*We're staying. I've given up on a referendum*". The Prime Minister asked the President to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies [parliament].

At 15.00, at the Council of Ministers, De Gaulle presented his position and announced: "*After the elections, the government will resign*". Pompidou realised, despite what the president had told him the same morning, that this would mean setting a date for his own expulsion. The address took place on the radio at 16.30. It was a fighting statement where the philosophy of participation had no place. Above all it was a matter of organising the counter-offensive.

The demonstration organised the day before at the instigation of the "barons" of Gaullism<sup>23</sup> met one hour later on the place de la Concorde. It had 700,000 to 800,000 participants and was the first sign that the tide was turning. The psychological blow succeeded, and the parties of the left understood it. They adapted themselves to the new political situation in a few hours and everyone began to prepare for the legislative elections.

## ***30 May to 7 June – the downturn***

### **The first retreats**

During the first five days in June there were numerous police interventions affecting all the big cities of France. The priority targets were: post office banking centres, tax offices, petrol depots, ORTF relay transmitters, etc.

The unions had given moderation instructions: stop the scabs returning to work but don't oppose police intervention. Nevertheless there were incidents at Dijon, Nancy, Metz, Nantes and Rennes, where the central post office had to be evacuated using tear gas grenades.

The SNCF posed a particular problem: they couldn't imagine a serious return to work just on a local level. The occupation by the police of one station or one isolated depot could not lead to a significant result in itself. Nevertheless, the government counted on the wildfire effect, due to the supposed demoralisation of the strikers. On 3 June, in Paris, the police cleared the stations of Lyon, Strasbourg, Colmar and Mulhouse. Some trains from the suburbs set out for Strasbourg but at Mulhouse the strikers lay down on the tracks and reoccupied the signal boxes. At 3 in the morning the strikers peacefully reoccupied the stations of Strasbourg and Mulhouse. The demoralised scabs preferred to go home.

In the PTT there was the same disappointment for the authorities: with few exceptions the non-

striking personnel were not sufficient to maintain minimum levels of security. Each morning they had to go back under the protection of the police and the boos of the assembled strikers. After much hesitation, the minister admitted his defeat and sometimes returned the evacuated buildings to the pickets, providing that they promised to maintain a “minimal service in the public interest”.

So they had to wait for the results of the big negotiations taking place. These were taking place in the offices of various ministries and conformed to the methods put in place during the Grenelle agreements, taking on the appearance of real marathons. In most cases there was an impasse: the unions demanded a substantial increase in the financial package assigned to the new social measures; the ministers declared that this was outside their area of responsibility.

## **The return to work on the SNCF**

On the SNCF the government proposed 1200 million francs worth of concessions, the unions wanted 200 million extra. The government consented to one last effort on condition that the union organisations ordered the return to work. This therefore made 1400 million. The unions voted depot by depot, station by station. Alsace-Lorraine took part: the vote on 4 June gave a massively negative response.

During the day of 5 June there was a new ministerial ruling: all of the hours lost would be considered to be immediately reclaimed, because the return of the network to normal required an “*exceptional effort*” from the rail workers. No train had run for almost three weeks, and it was necessary to prepare the tracks to allow the functioning of signal lights, verify that the signals are working, reconstruct the trains whose carriages have been scattered randomly across France by the strike... But this final “flower”, which in 1968 was unique, came with an element of blackmail: if there was no return to work the next day the arrangement was cancelled. In the evening, they organised new consultations which had various results: while trains were already moving in the East and the return to work was generally decided in the North and in Paris, on the other hand votes in favour of continuing the movement were carried in the West and the South.

The trade union organisations then published a joint communiqué which allowed them to give in to the ministerial blackmail while maintaining the illusion of “*trade union democracy*” and “*workers’ unity*”. Citing the various results with a small majority for a return to work (although they still hadn’t received all the results), they called for a total stoppage of the strike. What’s more: “*In response to worries about coordination expressed by many militants, the federations demand that the rail workers in the centres which have decided to return to work must organise the return in unison within the next few hours*”.

On the morning of 6 June, the trade union delegates had the task of liquidating the strike at any price. They proceeded with a new vote amongst the obstinate workers and when it was, despite all the pressure, once again negative (as was the case in Nantes and at Montpellier station), the local unions decided even then to go back, in the name of “*workers’ discipline*” and “*so as not to oppose the rest of France*”.

This technique of the forced return to work was used in other branches and had the result of sickening the strikers most involved in the action. Some of these, in some places, publicly tore up their union cards. But this symptomatic reaction often only reflected the powerlessness of the strikers to take over their strike themselves along with their isolation.

## **The return to work on the RATP**

On the RATP, the return to work was going to be more difficult. Following the refusal of the return to work on 3 June, new consultations were undertaken by the Corporation, which accepted some additional concessions: a more substantial budget was provided, paid holidays were increased by one day. On 5 June, they voted in the depots again.

The CGT and the independents declared themselves unambiguously in favour of a return to work. Didn’t the Confederal Bureau of the CGT say “*that, everywhere where the essential demands have been satisfied the interest of employees lies in pronouncing themselves en masse for a unified return to work*”? However, a minority of employees did declare themselves for the determined continuation of the movement. On the morning of 6 June, five lines of the Metro, Nation station and three bus depots



(including the Lebrun depot in the Thirteenth Arrondissement) were completely paralysed.

Since the evening before there had been violent discussions between the union officials and part of their own militants, supported by many not belonging to any organisation and the comrades linked to the Censier action committee.

Above all, the CGT systematically spread misinformation about the return to work in other depots to counter the recalcitrant workers and make them believe that such and such a depot was the only one wanting to continue<sup>24</sup>. You could see drivers getting into their vehicles in tears. But what this showed is that horizontal connections between depots were in their infancy and that the CGT was the master of centralisation.

With the RATP having gone back along with the SNCF, normal life in the Paris region was able to begin again.

## **The return to work in other sectors**

In the PTT, in the collieries, in the steelworks of the East, in the refineries, it took almost a week to negotiate an agreement and some time to convince the workers that they had to accept that agreement. But from 6 June, the return to work was accepted by the employees despite the strikes sporadically continuing for a few days until the bosses employed scabs and temps to break these last strikes. On the evening of Friday 7 June, even if the situation was still far from having returned to normal, France was no longer really paralysed.

But the last sectors of strikers show themselves to be more resistant to the hand-back to the bosses. So, amongst the Paris primary school teachers the protesters called a meeting for the evening of Monday 10<sup>th</sup> at the trade union offices. The unions refused to let them have the offices. But at the appointed hour 3,000 angry teachers demanded to be heard. The return to normal in primary education only happened on 14 June.

In many other sectors, like metalworking, electronics and rubber, the conflict dragged on. Feeling themselves buoyed up by the Gaullist wave, the chambers of commerce refused any idea of a national collective agreement and pretended, in the best cases, to stick to a strict application of the Grenelle accords.

However, the regime won a psychological victory for public opinion: petrol reappeared in the service stations.

## ***The blockades of the fuel depots***

In the Paris region three complexes assured the supply of petrol: the port of Gennevilliers, Villeneuve le Roi/Choisy and Colombes. From 21 May, the depots of Gennevilliers (Mobil, Elf, Antar and SITEC) were occupied along with Total at Saint-Ouen, Antar at Villeneuve and Desmarais at Colombes. On 23 May, the strikers tried to storm the Shell refinery at Nanterre but without success, despite the destruction of telephone cables. But in fact, with the exception of SITEC in Gennevilliers, the main petrol depots were protected by very light pickets (Total Saint-Ouen) or no picket at all (Antar Gennevilliers, Mobil Gennevilliers, Total Colombes). It was therefore very easy for the government to negotiate a reduced distribution with the unions and then to retake the depots after 30 May, peacefully most of the time or violently like at BP Vitry, where the strikers were expelled militarily.



# Firsthand Accounts

## *The Montreuil Action Committee*

### **The creation of the Montreuil Action Committee**

I ended up leaving the JCR. For a year and a half I was working at AFTAM (Association for the Reception and Training of African and Malagasy Workers) as the person in charge of a hostel for migrant workers (Maliens and Senegalese originally from the Kayes Ouest region of Mali). With a psychologist mate from the head office of AFTAM (where she did literacy work) I set up a section of the CGT.

The meetings of the future activists of the Action Committee of Montreuil often took place in this hostel along with screen printing of posters saying things like: “The bourgeoisie are afraid”.

On 3 May I heard on the radio that a violent student demonstration was going to happen in the afternoon in the Latin Quarter. I nipped over to Boulevard Saint-Germain next to Place Maubert and I saw the front of a building burning and debris all around. The aim of the demonstration was to defend the students threatened with exclusion from the university for having occupied the U estate of Nanterre. The original demand was: the right of boys to visit the girls’ building and without doubt *vice versa*. Two or three days later I came back to take part in a new demo. I had never seen people so determined and ready to confront the cops, who often retreated onto the Boulevard St Germain which was barred by the CRS and two water cannon – we had attacked and taken one of these water cannon vehicles by force. Later on we attacked the cops with all kinds of projectiles. Of course we used paving stones, but also smoke bombs and stun grenades which were returned to the cops (some people’s hands were seriously injured on these occasions).

We lived as if it was a real festival. After so many years of bending before the Gaullist state and its cops: starting with the Gaullist coup of 1958 itself, then the repression of the revolt of the Algerians and the demonstrations against the Algerian war. The only victorious movement had been a strike by coal miners when they refused forced labour in 1963, which began to be seen as a victory<sup>25</sup>! Finally there was the movement of solidarity with Vietnam – the future leftists sold these actions to us as solidarity and anti-imperialism but also as preparation for revolution.

Therefore in those first days up until 10 May, demonstrations took place almost every day. Despite many injured, we had the feeling of taking the street, of making them respect us and finally hoping it would lead to something, something that we began to discuss in the streets and after the demos. Socialism seemed possible. For me and many others? It was a ten year pressure cooker which finally exploded, and without the control of the Stalinists and other reformists and other professional organisers.

At the end of a very hectic demo towards Montparnasse, we managed to escape from the cops with two young guys, carpenters who we got to know in the car (Roland and Michel). They lived in Rosny sous Bois next to Montreuil, and we decided to see each other again the next day to discuss politics and go back to the demonstrations together. They came to the first meet-up with two other mates, a plumber and another carpenter (Little Swiss and Yoyo).

After the reoccupation of the Sorbonne by the students, certain future leftists and the UNEF (some of whom would later put out *Libération*), had launched an appeal to set up action committees. I wrote my name and address on one of the lists in the heart of the Sorbonne and girls and boys started to come to see me in the hostel. In Montreuil at the beginning there were two action committees which fused very quickly. One of the action committees was run by militants of the JCR. The committee which I was in had between 20 and 30 people and the rank and file militants didn’t understand why there were two CAs and so they fused after a few days. At the end of May or in June some plenary meetings gathered around 100 people.

### **What activities for the members of the Action Committee?**

We were active in Montreuil and some members of the Montreuil committee therefore came from Rosny, but we didn’t try to contact people elsewhere, which seems incredible to me today. In general we

were naïve enough to believe that the weaknesses of the movement: lack of links with the workers in the factories (which were very numerous in Montreuil at the time), lack of political development, and the absence of an organisation which if it was not military would at least constitute an order service, would sort itself out during the development of the movement that we thought would last years rather than months.

I listened to the radio a lot. With each news bulletin we learned that new workplaces, after the big demonstration on 13 May, were going on strike and that kept our morale at a high level.

All I knew is it wouldn't be a picnic. One evening I took the car with the intention of going to see the factories situated between Pantin and the north-east suburb (national highway 3). I went to the gates of 5 or 6 factories and each time I arrived full of enthusiasm. I bumped into the CGT delegates, probably members of the PCF. It was impossible to enter the factories and discuss with the strikers. I realised that the factories were not occupied and that the atmosphere was not so terrible: we were not in 1936. I hoped that the demos would arrive and break through this blockade.

Personally, and also as a representative of the committee, I saw the meetings of the action committees in Paris and they quickly got on my nerves so I went there as little as possible. I had to at least go there for the newspapers and leaflets. I abandoned the regular coordination meetings of the CAs and nobody else was there to represent us. In fact nobody really wanted to get involved in politics and confront the enemies on the left.

The action committee was made up of workers but they were always isolated people, who did not represent a group in their workplace or only if the workplace was very small etc. They were rather comrades of the anarchist tendency – one of them (Roland) had contacts with the Anarchist Federation (FA). We also had Princet, another anarcho who was a paver by profession, quite old in the eyes of us 20-25 year olds (the refrain of our elder quickly became: "*it's the reflux*"), a secretary of the MNEF (a student mutual aid organisation), Michelle a coordinator at Léo Lagrange and a technician from Roussel-Uclaf, at Romainville, who had participated in the Resistance during the war in the Corrèze region. There were also a few teachers and students.

Above all we tried to contact workplaces whether they were in Montreuil or elsewhere. There was one workplace which made televisions, Grandin, certainly quite important. We could discuss with the workers easily enough in front of the gate but we couldn't go inside and participate in their meetings. The CA wanted to carry out common actions with the workers of Grandin, but the CGT and the Maoists tried to prevent any contacts. We thought that it was very negative to have verbal confrontations (or worse) at the gates of the factory. Without doubt we weren't that persistent and sticking to the gate like limpets didn't interest us.

At no point did we have sustained and political contacts with workers in the large workplaces, independent of the unions.

In fact, in Montreuil as elsewhere, if the workers themselves didn't want to organise themselves the activity of outside militants (leaflets or posters or meetings) couldn't achieve anything while proletarians still had confidence in the unions and left parties.

Our links with the general population were also quite superficial. We discussed a lot with the people who demanded discussion at that time. For some big demonstrations we could lead 2, 3 or 400 people.

Honestly I was happy to talk to people but it was a little too calm and when we approached the cops we preferred to smell the tear gas and the petrol of Molotov cocktails.

## **What organisation or what absence of organisation?**

Two, three or four times a week there was a new edition of the paper *Action*. The journal of the CAs was sold almost every day. We went to find a pile of 100 copies somewhere in the Latin Quarter and sold them all in an hour, generally in front of the Montreuil town hall, and the tankies never bothered us. On 13 May, during the demo which lasted the whole day, I sold seven piles of 100 papers (700 copies) of *Action* just on my own. I kept some editions of *Action* and, rereading them, the content is very reformist, some pages are Marxist theory or, in the beginning, the whole journal is about repression: a funny mixture. It was not a good journal of propaganda or of reflection, and at the time we didn't see that. We did not write articles for *Action*, no one asked us to and we did not try to get involved in the

editing. The paper served above all as a means of discussion with passers-by and in that it worked very well. We went to find the posters of the Beaux-Arts<sup>26</sup> and we also made local screen-print posters with our own texts. This looked like a pamphlet and I remember the titles: “The bourgeoisie is afraid” and the second “The bourgeoisie is still afraid”, just before the holidays no doubt, at the end of July.

Some mornings we distributed CA pamphlets, on other mornings or at night we stuck up posters. We never had any trouble except with a squad of Gaullists at the end of June during the elections.

There was no leader but some people did more than others. It seemed to me that I had an activity of meeting and coordinating with a friend Sylvia, Roland L., the technician from Roussel, a woman who was an animator etc... in an informal or organised way we went out twice or more per day, according to the needs of the action. We were certainly activists. We sensed that it was now or never.

We went from some thirty members to around a hundred at some plenary meetings which took place in a meeting hall belonging to some Protestants. If on most days, twelve to fifteen of us did some actions, the others only went to demos and that was enough “from the menu”. Almost every day meetings took place in someone or other’s flat or in a café. We discussed the political situation of the moment and decided if we were going to participate in the actions of all the action committees. There was no secretary, no treasurer, and no particular positions. Decisions were taken on the basis of majority but often we tried to find unanimity. The discussions often centred on practical tasks and there were no big divergences apart from between the organised militants who’d come to sell their particular brand of Maoism or Trotskyism. The Maoists came fishing (without success as elsewhere) whereas the Trots were more subtle; at least two participated and won over one comrade and one workplace bulletin.

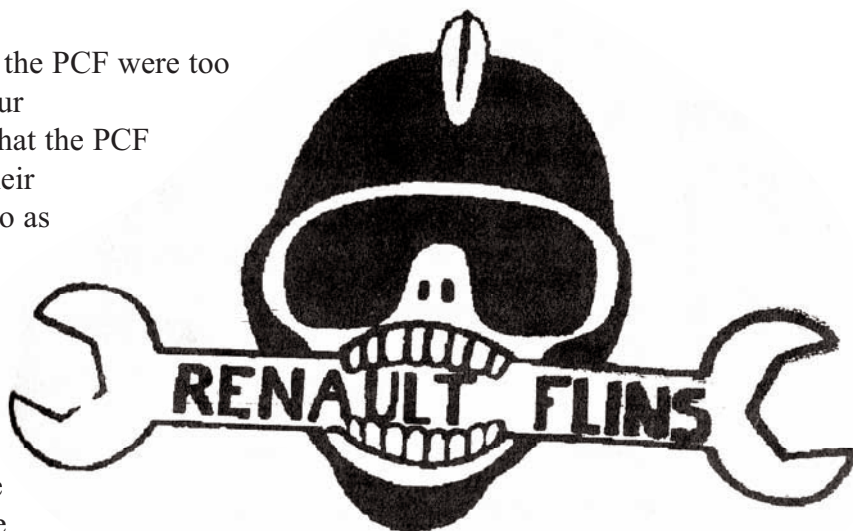
We also went to support the picket line of the striking employees of the Printemps department store, between Nation and Vincennes.

At the end of June we contacted someone at Krema Hollywood. The mother of a woman in the action committee worked in that firm. With her and one or two other workers we made a bulletin for the workers of Krema. We criticised the wages policy in the workplace, and the conditions and security of work. One of the problems was health, particularly for the women who had to clean the machines every morning with smelly and dangerous products. Sometimes they passed out. We wrote the bulletin, taking inspiration from the fact that we were telling the workers, while the workers wrote nothing themselves. Were distributed them at the door while the workers distributed them secretly inside. This lasted around six months and then the LO revived the action committee which no longer existed and which the friend with contacts at KREMA passed to the LO.

For these two or three months we had the impression that the only two political forces in Montreuil were the PCF and the CA. It was play-acting. We had no contacts with the PCF and did not try to have any, even less to propose common actions. In Montreuil on the day of De Gaulle’s speech which announced his referendum, the PCF called a local demo to stop people going to Bastille. By chance the two demos, that of the PCF and that of the CA which went to Paris, crossed. They were almost the same size. There were no clashes or insults but each remained on its own path.

We found that the members of the PCF were too easily led up the garden path but, in our optimism, we hoped and we thought that the PCF and CGT militants would soon lose their blinkers, that the proletarians would do as the students were doing.

During the legislative elections at the end of June, we led a moderately active campaign for abstention: “elections are a trap for idiots” was our slogan. On the day of the elections we went fishing in the countryside with a few mates from the CA and, when we came back, we went to taunt the PCF people in the polling stations with our fishing rods. They were really annoyed and



couldn't get over our fishing rods but the proles of Montreuil or Rosny had voted, and in large numbers!

One evening, on 17 May, the action committees called for a visit to Renault. On Seguin Island we sang a ballad, and tried to discuss with the workers but the gates remained shut and no contact took place.

Off we went again at the beginning of June to Flins: this time the cops were waiting for us and the course of the trip was diverted across some fields...

I was summonsed by the cops at the beginning of July. I had daubed "*After February, October!*" on the wall of the house of someone who didn't appreciate it. He had remembered my registration number, and I had acted alone, in daylight and in a car. At the beginning of July we already thought that the movement had provisionally calmed down but that it would start up again in the autumn.

What happened in Montreuil was not isolated from the rest of the situation. On 10 May, the night of the barricades, the Boulevard Saint-Michel was packed and I had the opportunity to discuss with lots of young workers. I had no strategy in my head but I was happy. We were leaving behind ten years of Gaullism protected everywhere and the PCF blocking everything on the part of the working class. During the days of May and June we could even see a great window opening onto the future!

We didn't know that the PCF still had enough strength to push the window shut again, even if it had to die there and would never again be able to pass itself off as a revolutionary party, and that the modernist bourgeoisie had enough tricks up its sleeve to re-padlock the aforementioned window with the help of the "ex-sixty-eighter" stars.

In September 1968 I participated in a demo against the massacre in Three Cultures Square which happened during the Mexico Olympic Games. Whereas a few weeks before we would have been ready to have a go at the cops, we picked up a few hundred of them without any reaction. A comrade had arrived with some pickaxe handles in his car. No one wanted to take them into battle. The pickaxe handles ended up dumped in the gutter. It was as if the ambiance of May 68 had completely disappeared.

In December 1968, a bit disgusted, I left for Madagascar to be a cultural presenter (there were four of us from the Montreuil CA) and we only returned to France in January 1971 with the idea of lending a hand to Lutte Ouvrière, for want of anything better to do.

## ***Alsthom Saint-Ouen***

### **About the factory**

Following the restructurations that had already happened in electrical construction, there were two distinct companies inside the factory:

DELLE ALSTHOM which assembled power circuit breakers of medium voltage, essentially for electricity distribution from power stations and large companies. 500 staff, around 300 workers, mostly not very skilled, and 200 technicians – draftsmen, professionals etc. A workshop plus some offices.

ALSTHOM SAVOISIENNE which made, from start to finish, big transformers for power stations. 1300 staff, around 1000 workers and 300 technicians, managers etc....

Three workshops (plus some offices):

The boiler works which made the frame of the transformers, a workshop composed of skilled workers, the boiler makers,

The winding rooms, which, as their name indicates, made the coil windings of the transformers, a workshop made up of workers with very specific skills,

The assembly platform which integrated the winding into the frame, fitted it out, tested it and dispatched it, another workshop made up of workers with very specific skills.

It was one of the factories which counted for workers' struggles in Seine St-Denis, along with a few others like Rateau, Babcock, etc., which people looked towards whenever something got going in the working class.

### **Before the strike**

The radio and the press had been publishing some information about the student milieu, particularly Nanterre, for several weeks. We didn't know too much about why the students were fighting,



but in the factory a few mates amongst the young workers were sympathetic and had heard that one of the demands was the lifting of the ban on boys going to the areas reserved for girls (or something like that). Then there was the campaign in the press against Cohn Bendit launched by *Minute*, the weekly paper of the extreme right which talked about “*the Jew Cohn Bendit*”<sup>27</sup> and *l’Humanité* which talked about “*the German anarchist*”<sup>28</sup>. Straightaway that ginger guy became their best mate as far as a good part of the young workers were concerned. He was a laugh and we liked that. He had a tendency to stick two fingers up at morality and ridicule its contradictions, and that pleased us a lot. One morning in early May next to Place de Clichy, I found myself by chance at the start of a demonstration by secondary school students. There were thousands of young and very young people from the local schools shouting: “We are all German Jews”. I couldn’t get over it!<sup>29</sup>

Although my family, and the workers’ milieu more generally, was not especially anti-Semitic, the remarks about the Jews were current enough, despite everything. As for the Germans, even then they still had something of the hereditary enemy about them. The propaganda of the PCF was still directed towards the “*revanchists of Bonn*”, and the “*death to the Boches*” from the end of the 39-45 war wasn’t very far away: 20-22 years. The generation of “*everyone kill a Boche*” extolled by the PCF during the Liberation was still there and very much present, and the PCF had a major influence in the working class (I’ll return to this later).

And here were thousands and thousands of school students in solidarity with the ginger guy declaring that they were all German Jews; and with red or black flags. As the internationalist anti-racist that I was at heart, I was dumbfounded, it was incredible!

While the PCF, for as long as I’d been old enough to understand anything, had never gone out with anything other than the three-coloured floor cloth (that’s how friends described the thing at the time), the red flag returned *en masse* and the black flag of the anarchists was there too. Back in the factory I told the boys in the workshop what I had seen, I was just so astounded.

But in the factory generally the stories about the students were viewed rather badly by the workers. The PCF banged on about the sons of the bourgeoisie whose studies we paid for etc., about the leftists who don’t give a fuck about the working class; and that worked; apart from with some of the young workers and all of our little gang which had been thrown out of the union a few months before and which had very quickly come to detest the Stalinists. But we never had any contact with the students and school kids. We didn’t even come up with the idea of having a link. It was like that, and for days and days the demos of the students progressively made front page news, and the propaganda of the PCF became more and more hateful towards the demonstrators, “those car burners” led by “the German Cohn-Bendit”<sup>30</sup>.

Most of the workers were suspicious, even hostile, to the students. But in the younger layers some of them could tell very well what they wanted and began to recognise themselves more in the students who were fighting than in the others who poured bile on them. During the week of 6 to 10 May, very precisely, when there was fighting every evening in Paris, our little gang came down completely on the side of the students, but we were a very small minority – a few dozen who knew each other, perhaps we’re talking about a hundred in the whole factory – and always faced with the propaganda assault of the PCF which churned out tract after tract against the “car burners”.

I only remember one evening of that week (the memories are there precisely because it was the week which ended on 10 May with the night of the barricades in the Latin Quarter). I had a meeting with some other “Workers’ Voice” comrades from other factories and told them that at Alsthom, we were going to produce a leaflet to distribute at the gates with some lads from the workshops. The comrades were very sceptical. They didn’t feel that enough of a swing was going on. For sure, all the comrades were at heart with the students who were fighting, but they all asked themselves if it wasn’t my congenital optimism which made me overestimate the possibilities of intervention... we had to be prudent. Finally the leaflet was distributed at Alsthom, on Thursday 9 May, at the gate by new workers from the factory. I remember the title: “*DOWN WITH THE COPS, BRAVO THE STUDENTS*” and that it was signed “*some young workers from Alsthom Saint Ouen*”.

The PCF and the CGT were purple with rage and the little gang of mates were very proud of



what they'd done. It was around this time that we started to see young Maoists around the factory and in the cafés of the Saint Ouen town hall. They were, I believe, of the "Serve the People" style. They were quite nice and not at all stupid, and very quickly the workers from the factory who met them directed them towards me. We didn't have bad discussions with them, and they hadn't realised that there were a few militants within the working class who had been fighting for a few years against the union bureaucracy and for revolution. But, of course, they were for Stalin and Mao and, for the old young man that I already was (at 25 you're old for those of 20 or less), that was something I couldn't stand. Nevertheless, we stayed good friends with them, the first ones to come to the factory. That was not the case afterwards with the various groups who came after the battle (after the strike) at Alsthom. But that's another story.

After distributing our leaflet at the gate, we immediately came into contact with the other young workers from the other end of the factory, in the big boiler works. Until then we didn't know each other. I'm writing this so that comrades in 2006 can understand how quickly the situation was changing. It was these friends here that we're going to talk about later on who went on strike less than a week later.

It was also on this Thursday and Friday that some "old guys" showed signs of sympathy, as much because they somewhat admired the students fighting the CRS, as because they supported us against the Stalinists. Because despite their heavy weight on the working class, even then there were old guys, from the period straight after the war, who intensely detested them and who saw us as courageous for not giving in to their dictatorship. It was on this very day that a lathe operator who'd been there since the end of the war told me about how things were when... Croizat<sup>31</sup> was the minister of labour.

*"It was the boys of the PCF who broke the records for productivity"*

*"We worked six days a week, 12 hours a day, with a break of an hour and a half so we could sleep one hour. We slept by the machines"*

Around the same time another worker from the same generation told me this for the first time *"then ... Thorez<sup>32</sup> said 'let's roll up our sleeves' and since then there hasn't been one who has said to roll them down"*.

This guy became a good friend afterwards, but at that time he had not yet swung over to the reds.

## **The night of the barricades**

On Friday 10 May throughout the night it was the radio which was the most important element, because that evening it was broadcasting live from the Latin Quarter where the CRS and students were fighting. Everything has been said about this episode – it is not useful to go over it again. For my part, I only knew about it the next day from my mates and the newspapers. But on Saturday 11 May, it was obvious that a large number of workers had listened to the radio for part of the night. I never knew if some workers from the factory had gone to join the barricades; events had happened so quickly that no one had taken the time and the effort to find out, but in the various circles who knew each other in the town it's certain that young people from the workers' milieu went to fight when they knew what was going on. Above all, the great mass of workers had live info about the fighting, and this time it was certain that the students were really going for it and that the CRS did not have the upper hand and that they were not coming out of it unscathed. Even the least revolutionary workers in those years didn't carry a policeman in their breast and if someone was fighting against the cops it couldn't really be a bad thing.

From mid-day on Saturday we knew, also from the radio, that the CGT had called a 24 hour general strike for Monday 13 May. The factory was closed on that Saturday; contacts between people were virtually non-existent. We had no other choice but to turn up on Monday morning. Many "historic" accounts of the negotiations between the CGT, the CFDT and the FO around taking the decision for the call on 13 May have talked about the skulduggery between unions. As far as I'm concerned, I know absolutely nothing about that and, like all the workers, I knew nothing then. What's more I still believe that this had absolutely no interest. After the event, historians have made the link with the set piece trade union actions in the same period against the Social Security reform<sup>33</sup>. From memory, and for this period of a few days when everything was changing it is perfect, this was of no

importance. Perhaps in the trade union milieu, but not for the workers and like them I had no contact with the trade union quagmire.... no memory of this.

What happened was on another level from what you can get from understanding the political role played by the PCF which we've already said had a massive influence on the working class through the CGT. At Alsthom, for example, there had never been any other trade union or political formation apart from the PCF and the CGT up till the end of 1967, the date when the first leaflet appeared from the "Workers Voice" group along with exclusions and resignations from the CGT on the part of a dozen young workers.

This organisational hold of the PCF over the working class had two consequences. First of all, there was an extreme sensitivity to the evolution of consciousness within the proletariat, and, in consequence, the PCF was the only political force capable of containing the eventual rise in workers' combativity. This was a strong argument for imposing itself on the state and the bourgeoisie as an essential mediator despite its attachment to the USSR.

But also, to keep this hold on the working class, the PCF<sup>34</sup> could never allow itself to be outflanked. In the decision to call for a general strike on Monday 13 May, this was the determining factor in the policy of the PCF. The political headquarters could tell which way the wind was blowing and chose to take the initiative so as to channel an eventual reaction from the working class.

After having churned out its propaganda against the students and the leftists for several weeks, nobody in the conscious bourgeoisie could accuse it of being the initiator. It wasn't taking any risk by taking the initiative and the state knew very well that it wouldn't go too far.

On 13 May, there were about twenty people at the gate of the factory, the union apparatus on one side and some mates on the other. Nobody knew what was going to happen. Would there be a strike? Massive or not? We didn't know anything. Everything was decided over the weekend without the workers from the factory. There were some workers who turned up as usual. How many? Impossible to say... Perhaps half the boys (not more). But the others were not there. They stayed at home and we dozen militants just stayed in front of the gate. Not for very long, however, because there would very quickly have been a spark between the Stalinists and us, and without the workers being there we would not have had enough weight to deal with it.

In the morning we had a meeting with the comrades of "Workers Voice" from the other factories to take stock of the situation and it was almost the same situation there as well. The general strike was not a failure – in so far as we could judge because we were only a very small group, but there was no euphoria. We decided then what we were going to do at the demonstration in the afternoon. We did not know for sure if there would be a mass of workers or not. We had made a poster "10 years is enough, Happy Birthday General"<sup>35</sup>, not signed, and placards to tape it to. We were so uncertain about the participation of workers in the afternoon demo that we'd decided not to tape them up in advance. We would see on the spot what the balance of forces was with the Stalinists before deciding if we had any chance of imposing ourselves or not.

It's useful to explain here that for some years the little group of "Workers Voice" comrades had fought physically with the PCF thugs on practically every demonstration. This went from organised jostling to a straightforward smack in the mouth, but the PCF could not stomach the fact that someone could express themselves on its left in the name of communism and on our side we were determined not to be crushed so we quickly came to blows, whether it was at the factory gates or on demonstrations. So, a few hours before the gathering on 13 May, we did not know, and nobody knew, if the workers would come or not, and in what proportion.

On that afternoon, in the Place de la République, a compact mass of proletarians from the suburbs had come in to Paris, obviously a good part of them were workers who had gone on strike that morning, without travelling to the factory in most cases. It was immense.

Obviously our placards were brought out, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators. There was no mistaking the signs in the demonstration. When there were banners five metres long there was no mass of workers, but on the contrary, when you could see very few banners or none at all ... This was the case here, the mass of workers was here; a veritable human mass, and the general appearance was the indisputable proof that it was the proletarians who were here, those who you never, or very exceptionally, see in the streets. They didn't laugh, they didn't sing, they were there because it was

serious and the very depths of workers' consciousness had raised the necessity of being there... How many? Definitely a few hundred thousand. Figures of 500,000, even a million, have been put forward... whatever. The mass of the proletariat of the Paris region had come with a single idea in their heads which was truly discernable: between De Gaulle and the CRS on one side and the leftist students on the other, they had made up their minds.

## The ALSTHOM demonstration

On that day I went on foot to the demo (there was almost no transport) via Boulevard Magenta. There were crowds of workers everywhere. In the areas surrounding the East and North stations you couldn't believe that the demonstration had already begun. A massive torrent was heading for Place de la République, and I suppose the situation was the same on all the other routes towards Place de la République.

Again I met up with our group from Alsthom on the demonstration. In front, a naturally large comrade carried a huge red flag which took up the whole width of the avenues. In the front rank there were forty or so comrades from the factory and, very quickly, numerous demonstrators lined up behind. At the Place St-Michel this formed a huge compact mass. People asked us "who are you?" We didn't have banners or anything and we answered briefly "the leftists of Alsthom St-Ouen". This was true for those at the front... but for the thousands behind....

It particularly pleased the comrades to chant "*a dozen fanatics [enragés]*" with their hands stretched forwards and their fingers spread out. This was in reaction to some politician or other who had talked about a dozen fanatics in connection with the students of Nanterre.

The demo went as far as Denfert for those who were the most courageous, because there was a human mass everywhere and masses of people never arrived at the end because there were so many.

## Towards the strike

The next day, Tuesday 14 May, there was a very particular ambiance in the factory. In my whole life I've never seen anything like it. It worked "quietly" we can say, but everyone thought that something was going to happen. There was no euphoria, nobody said "*we've got to go there!*", but all discussions turned around the demonstration of the day before. A good number of workers from the factory had gone there individually (and because of this the strikers didn't come to the factory in the morning) and in the workshop there was an atmosphere of open camaraderie. I think I can say, without exaggeration, that the working class surfaced as such. That evening while discussing with two student comrades from the VO group who were concerned with the workplace from the outside I became conscious that it was necessary to go there, and I therefore decided to take the initiative by organising a meeting for the evening of the next day with conscious workers. Therefore on Wednesday 15, from the early hours I made a tour of the boys I could most rely on to organise the meeting for the evening when people left. Where? We didn't know yet; perhaps in the castle grounds, or the town square, we'd see.

All of us, a dozen, therefore worked at getting the boys to come along in the evening. There wasn't much enthusiasm, only a few said "Yes"... But in the morning the union apparatus got wind of what was happening and after dinner time a CGT leaflet called for a meeting of all militants that evening at the trade union centre. This floated among the various workers who'd said "Yes" to us and as on the day before we'd foreseen that the PCF would react. We'd foreseen that they would set up a megaphone outside the factory to prepare for every eventuality. There they addressed the workers who were leaving to appeal to them to go to the trade union centre to set out some perspectives. Since the CGT had organised a meeting they joined it.

At the trade union centre of Saint Ouen, the PCF had rounded up everyone it could from its fans in the factory. On that basis in three hours they had a good forty. There were eight of us. Two friends didn't want to go to "*the union trick*". We were treated to an exposition by Mr Secretary on the "*relaunching of action for demands*" (that's how the apparatus spoke at the time) and told that the office was preparing an initial stoppage of two hours and ... all that stuff.

As soon as there was a gap, I cut it short. I can remember pretty closely the words I used "*You are really useless and you never understand anything, we are not interested in two hour stoppages, we have to organise the fight, occupy the factory and raise the red flag ... and ...*" Brouhaha. And as we

didn't want to be slaughtered, we left to organise our coup. There were eight of us. We spent an hour establishing our plan of battle, with the objective of a strike and occupation. From the beginning it was necessary to go everywhere we could and call a meeting for 10 p.m.

We could do something in two workshops out of four: the big boiler works and the circuit breakers. We had some boys there and if they got going the other workshops would follow. I insisted on what little I had retained from what Pierre Bois had been telling me for some years: it was absolutely necessary to vote for the strike, it was necessary to organise the Strike Committee without the union, with the boys truly represented and with them taking on the direction of operations. If some boys from the union wanted to come along, then that was fine, but as strikers not as representatives of the union. It had to be on the basis of one striker = one vote to elect the Strike Committee. We had to explain that only the assembly of strikers could decide the direction to take; the members of the SC were there to organise the application of decisions, etc.

The other mates understood (we understood quickly in situations like that). We were all on the same wavelength – I was 25 and I was the oldest in the gang. None of us had ever participated in launching a strike. And then at four we set out for the Sorbonne to see those bloody leftists, since everybody in the factory called us that and we might as well know who they were.

We entered the Sorbonne by Place Paul Painlevé. We didn't even know that the entrance was on the other side, given that none of us had even been through the door of a faculty! Straightaway we were struck by the grandiose buildings and a joyous chaos reigned. There was a statue in the courtyard covered in red and black flags.... We felt like Earthmen landing on another planet.

The only people we found were some from the PSU, some Maoists of all varieties and some anarchists. We didn't like the Maoists because of their Stalin. We didn't understand that there were revolutionaries who claimed to follow the gravedigger of the revolution. We discussed a bit with the PSU people. We talked about what had happened in the factory, what we are trying to do, but we didn't really get on with them. Those who we really agreed with were the Workers' Voice group, because I'd spoken to them with my mates, but this group had not organised in the Unis at this time. The group was only oriented towards the working class and the factories. This made it, it has to be said in passing, completely mistaken in its understanding of the contestation movement of the students in 1968.

At least they had the modesty, rare among political groups of the time, of recognising this fact. Comrades, of which I was one, afterwards analysed the fact as an important error (after the event....). The student contestations, particularly those which were sharpest at Nanterre and elsewhere, were very political and not at all corporatist, throwing into question the hierarchy of decision-makers dominating the workers, etc. ... all things which were fundamental in the contestation of capitalist society. You can't rewrite history... That's how it was. The VO group, which I was part of, understood nothing.

And then we began to get tired, and we had to be fit for the next morning. For once, everybody had to pay attention to the time. We finished by going to bed. I think that I didn't sleep well that night. In my head I went over all the guys I knew: those who were definitely "For"; then quickly looking at the others; those close to the union apparatus... The difficulty of discussing; such and such, what arguments; who could we rely on; who did we have to be suspicious of etc. It was certain we were going to pull off the coup. That morning I put the big red flag in the bag and set off.

## 16 May

After having made the tour of the fifteen to twenty blokes in the circuit breaker workshop who were the most determined, the bosses had sniffed out that there was something going on. We had to play hide and seek a bit, because, anyway, under the circumstances, you couldn't help focusing on details. *"Meeting in the locker room at 10, will you be there? Let's see" "Yes, OK ...!"*

The young ones were mostly for it and there were sectors of the workshop – mounting and cabling, for example – where there was a majority who were less than 21. Alstom St Ouen was a workplace which paid so badly that it was only young people who went to work there and there was an extraordinary turn-over. When they found something else they left; a lot of workers didn't even come to collect what they were owed.

Amongst the older ones it was much harder. Some didn't believe in it. All those who were close to the union apparatus didn't want it or didn't respond to it. But some others really wanted it if it was



truly serious, because *"it's not easy, you know"*. Some of the most "anti" were won over by the idea of a Strike Committee. They discussed, everyone discussed. I particularly remember a middle-aged woman (there were only six women in the workshop) who drove the overhead cranes. I went to see her. She lowered me a sign on a piece of string. I scrawled on a paper *"We're having a meeting of everyone at 10"*. She gave me back the paper *"there's going to be a strike?"* I nodded yes. *"You're going?"* Yes I nodded. I never had occasion to discuss with her about why. Until then this woman had never participated in anything when there was a stoppage or a meeting. That day she was for the strike.

At ten the workshop stopped completely. Part of the workers disappeared – those who were neither for nor against – around a third. The others met up in the changing rooms. All the "antis" were there; the CGT apparatus was there in its entirety. We discussed, but not a lot. It was me who took the initiative: *"the students who are fighting; let's get something from the situation for ourselves the workers, etc."* There was intervention from the CGT side as well, not vicious but like a fire extinguisher. *"Let's not put everything into a single blow"*, *"let's conserve our forces"* etc... We knew. I therefore put it to the vote: *"those who are for the occupation"* over there (on the left) with a sweeping gesture of the arm. *"Those who are against"* over there with the same gesture towards the right. Hesitations, discussions from one person to another *"but, if we have to go"*, *"Come with us"*, *"fucked if I know what to do"* and in a few minutes the two blocks were formed. There was not one abstention. We counted 76 for the occupation of the factory and 78 against (including the whole union apparatus without any exception). A young friend whispered in my ear *"We're going even so, eh!"* *"Obviously, you're not going!"*

I therefore announced that there was a meeting like ours in the other workshops and that therefore we would meet again after lunch (it was now 11-11.30) with the rest of the factory. It is notable, and I didn't even notice it at the time, that we hadn't even discussed whether we were on strike or not. We had discussed and voted directly on the occupation. We could see that we were obviously on strike. All the tool boxes were shut and the machines stopped. We were on strike. Neither we nor anyone else spoke about demands. That was absolutely not what we were concerned about.

I left my mates in the circuit breaker shop and rushed off to the boiler making shop, the other workshop where we had to get something going. The workshop was completely empty, not the slightest sound, not even the purring of a welding station. In fact, despite all the wonderful plans we'd had the day before, our boys had got going straight after breakfast. No meeting, no vote, nothing. They went from section to section and brought the workshop out on strike often with arguments whose style would be condemned by proletarian ethics *"if we've got it, it's the time to prove it"*, that's it! That proved to be very effective. The lads from the union had followed. It was a workshop where there were plenty of PCF militants, but they were a lot less lined up with the official policy of betrayal however much they were committed to opposing the leftists. A low-level manager was wandering about there and he told me that the strikers were heading for the winding assembly platforms. That was the most corporatist sector of the factory. We didn't have any contacts there and the lads were really into their skilled jobs. How were they going to react? There also the workshop had stopped but there were a few lads in the workshop. In fact, the morning had passed so quickly that everybody was already in the canteen or on the road. In the canteen there was a dreadful brouhaha. You had the impression that everybody had something to say at the same time as everyone else. The whole union apparatus in the largest sense was there. Our gang was there as well. The lads were laughing! We went all over saying that there would be a meeting of all the workshops in front of the central store after lunch.

At the central meeting in question, the PCF union headquarters had turned around. They ratified the strike without discussing it. They proclaimed the occupation of the factory and demanded that we form a strike committee with half the delegates from the union and half from the workers in the workshops. I began to explain that it didn't work like that, but I wasn't going to be followed. There was euphoria and even part of the young people who were close to us in the morning didn't understand why I wanted to quibble about the composition of the strike committee. We were on strike, we occupied the factory, so it was going to be fine.

In fact, as we could judge after the end of the strike, the strike committees were like this everywhere. A means for the unions to include everybody and assure their supremacy, and everywhere they were only in fact a means to carry out union policy. In no way were they a means of autonomous

workers' organisation for exercising power over their own strike. It called itself a "*strike committee*" but, like Canada dry, it had neither the taste nor the function. What was called the "Strike Committee" was therefore designated as such without any further discussion.

So in two hours, three at the maximum, on that Thursday 16 May 1968, the PCF and the central apparatus of the PCF had decided to take charge of operations, to not oppose the strikes and even to open the floodgates. What we experienced at Alsthom was reproduced on the same day and the same hour in the first factories to move, particularly in the Paris suburbs.

## The PCF in 1968

We have to know, and today in 2006 only the oldest comrades can remember, that the PCF of the time was an enormous militant machine. The immense majority of workplace committees were their almost hegemonic preserve. All the industrial suburbs of the big cities were, with few exceptions, close to being in the hands of the PCF. The Paris ring road, which we should remember was stuffed with big industrial companies, was their domain and the union-political apparatus, even if it had lost something of its magnificence since the years of 45-50, was still an influence everywhere in the big workplaces – those which counted in terms of the workers' *avant garde*.

And the permanent closeness of the PCF apparatus allowed it, centrally and directly on the level of its political bureau, to know exactly what was happening in the working class and consequently to take initiatives. On 16 May 1968, the PCF had decided at a very high level to not let itself be outflanked by the workers' tide. In a few weeks it had lost all influence in the student scene and amongst "the intellectuals" – it was not going to let the same thing happen with the working class. Against its wishes and with a heavy heart, the PCF decided to take charge of the events everywhere.

So, Alsthom was less than 100 metres from the town hall of Saint-Ouen where the deputy mayor for some years was Etienne Fajon, also director of *l'Humanité*. In political circles he was known, probably correctly, as "*Moscow's eye in France*"! There was an immediate connection with the highest level of the PCF apparatus. In addition, it's known that the PCF, on the level of its political bureau, had a direct link with militants in a dozen of the biggest proletarian concentrations in the country. Militants kept under wraps, who were often unknown to the other militants in the factory, and who sometimes were not even on the organisation chart of union posts (so as to be certain that they would not be influenced), who's mission was to report directly to the political bureau about the reaction within the working class. Alsthom was not in these dozen factories, but Billancourt was. To return to the strike, on Thursday 16 May, we didn't know that the workers of Sud Aviation in Nantes had been on strike, with an occupation, since 14 May, and that Cléon had also been out since 15 May. We'd only heard it said that the NMPP were on strike in Paris. We were convinced that we were the first.

Did we place it in the perspective of the general strike?

It's certainly true that we were for it, but we didn't think, in fact we didn't even touch on, how it could come about and how it could develop. In the four days which followed, it was the great May 68 which had to be demystified a bit to understand things. I think I can remember that from Friday 17, the PCF apparatus began to turn around but it is above all on the following Monday when the pyramid of influence had acted to the very bottom that you could see the CGT-PCF taking the initiative everywhere, from the largest workplace to the smallest; willingly or by force, it was a strike. And in a good many workplaces, even the big ones, the workers found themselves on a strike proclaimed by the union apparatus. I don't think that you can find examples where the workers fought against it, because everywhere and massively the workers were for the strike, but in the immense majority of workplaces the process of maturation of consciousness towards a real well-considered attack on the bosses' system did not happen and did not even begin. This is fundamental in understanding the complete absence of independent forms of organisation of the working class in '68.

Starting from the moment when the PCF decided to open the floodgates, from one end of the country to the other and almost without any overflowing, the CGT remained master of the movement from A to Z.

At Alsthom, I only have a few precise memories of the meetings of the strike committee. There

were only a few turbulent episodes. What's more, the lads closest to us and myself had rapidly stood back from organising ourselves independently. The first decision of the PCF was to make the women leave the factory in the evening. No women at night (in case the savage workers acted like pigs!). This shows the level at which the PCF placed the question of the emancipation of women in 1968. Immediately after this there were closed doors, guard patrols (in case we stole from the factory), strikers' ID cards, stamps (from the works council because there was nothing else!) and everything surrounded by a heavy bureaucratic apparatus, and a free canteen for everyone (run by the works council). That evening there remained only about 100 to 150 workers, including our little gang and the whole union apparatus, and this figure barely changed during the whole of the strike. The apparatus controlled everything<sup>36</sup>.

But during the day it was necessary to take control of the factory, and a lad came to us towards 3 p.m. telling us that the two directors and the chief security guard were still in the factory. We therefore set off at four on patrol to throw them out. They were flanked by a union official. We found them towards Rue des Bateliers. The discussion was brief. The tanky began to come out with *"Sir, I must inform you..."* but he didn't have time to finish his sentence because a friend shouted out *"are you the directors?"* (We'd never seen them) *"Then you've got five minutes to get out. And as for the chief security guard [we knew him], we don't want to see him any more"* which did the job but not without one of the directors asking the tanky to make sure that the electricity sub-station was guarded. Throwing out the directors of the factory at the age of 25 – that is one of those little pleasures that you don't miss when it's on offer. It wasn't a big thing but it was something at least.

One of the turbulent meetings of the "strike committee" was when the PCF decided to remove the red flags from the gates and put the three-coloured floor cloth in their place. Here also, as far as I can remember, it was the same thing in every workplace on the same day, even if a number of places kept the red flag flying right to the end. In the morning the flags on the gate opposite the town hall had been replaced. What a row! The Strike Committee urgently paraded all the classic arguments: we're French, it's a revolutionary flag, you're like the Versaillais [who suppressed the Paris commune], we don't want to shock people who aren't revolutionaries. You are connected with the CRS barracks, etc... And at one point a Stalinist, who was also a municipal councillor in Fajon, told us: *"symbols can be interpreted in different ways, the red flag is also what you put on the back of a lorry when there's a hazard"* but there was already no one but the Stalinists and us in the "Strike Committee" because very quickly, just as they had deserted the factory, the workers had also deserted the "union Strike Committee" meetings. We played a bit at getting offended by the flags; and I put out the red flags and then I put out the others... and we put out them both; as if that wasn't saying "long live the Republic!" By contrast at the 27 metre gate, Rue des Bateliers, they never had the floor cloth. A group of lads had taken over the gate and made it their headquarters; lads from the boiler making shop, the winding shop, and not a bad little gang. There we were amongst workers and we didn't accept their decisions. Barbecue, grilled meat ... it was a bit nicer than at the other gate where the guard hut was inhabited by the PCF.

## The demonstrations

In the evening, very often, it was in Paris that something happened. We left the factory in cars (we'd requisitioned the factory's stock of petrol) to go to the demos. When the tankies saw us going past they turned white as a sheet.

How many of us were there? That depended when we slept. Some times it was just one car, but there could be up to twenty of us leaving the factory. It was more exciting than guarding the factory walls. Obviously when we got back in the morning it didn't take much to annoy us. Arguments started quickly.

At the same time, let's say in the first three weeks, we made a closer link outside the factory with a group of gentlemen who didn't work there but who we had won over to the leftist cause: a secretary of the Saint-Ouen JC [Young Communists] and some comrades from the town who were all originally from St Ouen and more or less JC or ex-JC people that May 68 had brought down on our side.

While in the factory there was an armed peace between the PCF and us, because they wanted to make the point that it wasn't just for them, outside the factory, in the town, it was a fight. We set up a meeting place in the town square in front of the Bank of France (which has since become the municipal



centre) and “Workers’ Voice” had launched an agitational publication in the town that was distributed in markets and on council estates. But here as well the population in the larger sense was not ready to participate. We put out the idea *“For workers’ power we must turn the town hall into the Sorbonne”*. Immediately the municipal headquarters spread the word everywhere that we wanted to attack the town hall and had loud-speaker vans going around town churning out their crap. We have to remember the ambiance of the time – there was tract after tract against the car burners and the leftist yobs and similar rubbish. Stalin’s spirit was still alive and well.

But this didn’t have much effect on the inhabitants of the town. None of them gathered at the town hall and their mobilisation was a damp squib. On the other hand, the leftists of Saint-Ouen were furious. They gathered on the steps of the town hall to see if they were going to have to throw out these... For the whole month of May 68, that was the ambiance in Saint-Ouen: fighting in the town square, and as much slander spread around as you could possibly want. The PCF made sure of the second plank of its policy in relation to the state: the state had to forgive it for taking charge of the general strike which it kept on a tight rein because at the same time it was the strike force against the leftists. What’s more, the French bourgeoisie were not fooled – at the end of 68 they granted new rights to the unions.



## 24 May: the return of De Gaulle

When De Gaulle made his return speech on 24 May, our mates from Alsthom were demonstrating in front of Lyon station. Everyone listened religiously to his speech, and when it was over, an immense shout went up: *“fuck his speech”, “power is us; the chienlit<sup>37</sup> is him”* and we went off to take on the CRS, as usual.

There were about twenty of us from Alsthom, equipped with helmets and clubs. That evening I was cut off completely from the Workers’ Voice group; it was swarming with people in all the areas around Bastille so it was impossible to meet up. Therefore I made contact with a group who seemed to be organised and offered our services. The brave boys who had the air of being in charge were completely at a loss what to do. I’m still waiting for their response. That day we didn’t do badly against the CRS: charge, counter-charge ... it had become normal.



The demos of May 68 were like that. Those who were organised were the CRS, while on the side of the demonstrators there was no centralisation. Then you fought when you could and avoided getting hurt as best you could – it was complete improvisation. There were lots of demos in Paris in May and June. What's more, very often, they were not demonstrations but an almost spontaneous taking to the streets, very often in the evening.

One evening we found ourselves in front of the medical school with the boys from the boiler making shop. The CRS took their place in front of Saint-Germain-des-Prés church but they were completely surrounded. They set out their cars in a circle bumper to bumper and the front wouldn't move any more. The electoral campaign had started. There were polling station signs in the streets. These made good shields: two strapping lads would carry them and the others marched behind...

That evening, for the first time in Paris, I think, the CRS made copious use of shock grenades. Obviously gas was useless when the wind was against them, and, because they were in a circle, there had to be a wind against them.

When the first shock grenades went off, we asked what was happening, and, very quickly remembering from the army, the older ones explained to us that above all we must not try to pick them and throw them back. So we spent several hours advancing and retreating. I think it only stopped in the early hours of the morning.

## **Grenelle, Billancourt and Citroën**

That morning, the 27 May, we had had a turbulent night with two other mates from the factory. We got up towards 11, and set out for the canteen to find something to eat.

Obviously, we came across the PCF/CGT gang, and they were shaking their heads in disbelief. We looked at them in astonishment and one of the boys from the CGT, a reasonably decent one (there were 2 or 3), explained with a tremor in his voice that Séguy had been booed at Billancourt. This couldn't be missed: "it serves you right" and we went to get some food. This was therefore the day after Séguy had gone from Grenelle to Billancourt and Krasucki to Citroën to present the result of their negotiations with the CNPF (Confédération Nationale du Patronat Français). On both occasions they were booed and hissed at Citroën as much as at Renault.

We knew later on that the CGT had already voted on the strike before Séguy arrived at Billancourt. Therefore, they had foreseen what would happen and the solution of retreat. But at Citroën, there was no vote before and it was well and truly the CGT and Krasucki who were hissed. Krasucki immediately retreated and said into the mic "that is what is proposed but the CGT has signed nothing". Maybe not, but it always seemed in the work places that it was Séguy / Krasucki who were booed at Billancourt and Citroën.

## **Charléty**

Who called the big meeting at Charléty? We knew nothing about it, and that didn't matter. It was "the leftists", 20-25 of us going from the factory to Charléty because for once there was a gathering which was going to be truly independent. Our good mood lasted only up until we got there, because at the meeting they gave the floor to various politicians including Barjonet, the CGT apparatchik who had just broken with it, and Maurice Labi. I was wild with rage. Those who claimed to embody the revolution were rolling out the red carpet for those bastards. I howled like a stuck pig; it wasn't any use but that's too bad. Because me, I knew all of them. Particularly Labi, who some mates from Rhône-Poulenc and I had had a brush with a few years before (he was the secretary of the FO chemical industry federation). That fucking reformist advocate of totally integrated trade unionism like in Germany dared to talk of revolution.

But my mates from the factory didn't understand why I was hopping mad; they didn't know who it was. I was only able to explain it to them afterwards. We left Charléty no more advanced than when we'd got there, no perspective, no lucidity, nothing. Just like all of May 68. It was an immense mass movement above all in the student milieu; the biggest (on the surface) strike which the country has ever known, but no emergence of the consciousness of an organised class. Opportunists, archeo-Stalinists pretending to be revolutionaries. The self-managementist version, from Maoists to syndicalo-trotskyists!

## De Gaulle disappears.... and returns

De Gaulle's<sup>38</sup> pilgrimage to the East was hardly discussed in the factory. We didn't give a fuck about it. Long afterwards, fantastic interpretations were formulated about how he had gone to see his old friend Massu, to fortify himself and assure himself that the army was with him in the case of a revolutionary threat...

Above all it was the trade union apparatuses which put out this stuff to justify the climb-down which they'd announced. We mustn't go too far in case the army intervened... etc. They wanted us to despise De Gaulle to make us believe that he didn't know that, with the PCF having the direction of operations all over the factories and neighbourhoods, the risk of workers' revolution was so small that it wasn't necessary to be certain of the loyalty of the army general staff. De Gaulle knew very well how far the PCF was prepared to go. For weeks they made a bitter attack on the leftists, and De Gaulle knew very well that he could count on the PCF – there was no need for the army or anyone else. He had had them as ministers twenty years earlier, and he *“never had any complaint against them”* (the phrase is his). And when he reappeared to announce a general election, the PCF rushed into the funnel immediately.

## The fashionable districts demonstrate

De Gaulle<sup>39</sup> had called for a demonstration on the Champs Elysées. We discussed this in the factory. From the PCF/CGT, radio silence. No orders. Nothing. This proved once again to De Gaulle that the PCF absolutely did not want a fight, no matter what. We found ourselves, and to my knowledge it was the case everywhere, conned good and proper. The lads were certainly ready to go to a counter-demo, including a good few from the PCF, but no one took the initiative amongst those who were perhaps able to take it; particularly the student leftist leaders, and obviously not the PCF any more. We were reduced to listening to what was happening on the radio. We were stuck. If on that day there had been a counter-demo, it would have been a real fight. I think I'm right in saying that the suburbs would have gone there, and not to run from the charges of the CRS, finally!

## Weapons?

Well after the strike, there were “accounts” from Stalinists or assimilated leftists that arms had circulated. These were mythomaniacs, eccentrics or both. At Alsthom, the question was posed by the workers of 27 metre gate (Rue des Bateliers) preparing materials to use in self-defence if they were attacked. Immediately this led to a row with the CGT. There was no question. When the boys asked what they were supposed to do if the CRS were sent, the response was clear and unequivocal: we do not resist by fighting. The boys then asked why they were keeping watch over the gates. If they were going to calmly withdraw if there was an attack, then there was really no point.

During the whole of '68, I didn't hear arms spoken about once, even though we were in a factory in a suburb with a certain reputation. What's more, arms against who? The enemy was not in the posh districts but in the factories themselves first and foremost. The PCF/CGT assumed its role as the political police of the bourgeoisie within the working class (I was one of those who considered them like that at the time) and they had control of the strike and held the reins.

## The non-strikers

No one worked in the factory, that's for sure, but not all the employees were strikers. Among the workers, at no point was there any pressure for a return to work. By contrast, on the side of the professionals and managers, there were some attempts. Towards 10 June, these Gentlemen began to gather in front of the trade union centre. Knowing this I went there one morning with a lad from the boiler making shop. There, there were a hundred or so of these clowns and two or three boys from the second college of the CGT who were trying to democratically convince them to do nothing against the strike. They managed like idiots to try to be understanding democrats while the others chanted *“a vote, a vote!”* I then started to speak. This little group of people did not know me and I did not know them any more. They listened to me. I remember very well what I said:



- "Do you want a vote?"
- "Yes" "Yes" came from the audience.
- *"But we workers have already voted. We are not weathervanes and we are not going to change that. What you want is for the strike to stop, but I who am a worker in the workshop, am telling you loud and clear. All year long you have plenty of time to work and we slave away in the workshop. Then now that we have decided to strike, no one is working. And if there are those who want to play at heroes and want to break the strike, it's simple, we'll leave them free to knacker themselves."*

And I stopped there. They were so flabbergasted that they didn't even have the reflex to open their mouths. The tankies no longer knew what to do with themselves. The mate who was with me made the sign to leave (it's true that it was a bit risky). And we stayed there. We didn't hear any more talk from the non-strikers.

## **Towards the return to work**

It was not the anti-strikers who had pushed for a return to work; it was the CGT. It must have been the 15 June (or around then). There was no longer either a strike committee or something which was just the CGT and us. A CGT leaflet announced that the CGT executive committee had organised a vote for or against the continuation. It would be a secret ballot, obviously making it a vote by everyone, strikers and non-strikers. We had a serious row about it, but the secret ballot took place massively surrounded by "union militants". The mass of workers came (almost half the factory). Some union militants were not proud of it at all...

But to general surprise, the majority was for continuing the strike. Even under the conditions where it was carried out there was a majority of strikers. So, we continued. But it was obvious that a little bit everywhere the factories were restarting work. The perimeter of the general strike began to seriously shrink. The technique of the PCF and the unions after the Grenelle accords, which had sliced up the strike into particular strikes by opening negotiations on a factory by factory basis, bore fruit in so far as each boss gave away a few bits and pieces. The CGT called for a return to work.

In total, Alstom Saint-Ouen had been on strike for five weeks. It was then on Monday 24 June that, with the general morale exhausted, the CGT made a call to stop the strike. This happened in front of the



offices inside the factory. There, there were a lot of people. There was no vote, nothing. Only a lengthy speech from the union boss. When he'd finished his washing, I got up on the steps with a group of mates, and the Stalinists cut the sound. There was yelling against them down below. I therefore spoke without a mic in total silence.

Contrary to what the CGT said, we had not won the strike. Those who accepted the electoral game against the general strike were responsible for the defeat. We had to start out again with new struggles which took lessons from what had happened. And without any enthusiasm, everyone went back to the workshops.

## ***The RATP Action Committee***

On 22 May, three workers from the RATP turned up at Censier. They were looking for students to form a committee of action (CA). One of them had built barricades with the students (he was young) but all three of them were pushed by the desire to "do something", which appeared to them to be impossible inside the trade union organisations of the "Retape".

The following day the committee was formed. There were numerous problems coming from the fact that the 36,000 workers were extremely divided geographically: 22 bus depots, 17 workshops, 14 terminus points for the metro, not to mention all the sub-stations. We decided to put out a leaflet (which would be distributed on 24 May by the students) calling on comrades wanting to be active in a CA to get together. The leaflet was moderate: it didn't tackle the problem of the unions.

Some workers from various depots and lines came to join us in the following week (Balard, the Sceaux Line, Nation 2 and Nation 6, Lebrun). The principal discussions, apart from highly debatable "tactical" problems which we might set out in our leaflets, were concerned with the following issues: How to break through the barrier that the unions use to oppose communication (between workers and students etc.) according to the old adage of "divide and rule"?

How to shed light on the true nature of the strike that the unions, specialists in the sale of the labour power of the proletariat, want to keep within the limits of demands at all costs?

How to organise solidarity with strikers other than through charity or the "spectacular gesture"?

How to make an analysis denouncing the role of the unions, whose HIERARCHICAL mode of organisation condemns them to being only instruments of power?

How the proletariat must organise itself to take its own destiny in its hands without delegating it to some power or other (cf. the base committees of Rhône-Poulenc)?

Throughout the week our actions remained very much restricted to themes of discussion because first of all we had to search, for a long time without success, to develop more contacts. Although its vocation was to rapidly transform itself into a committee of liaison it remained an action committee of around thirty members, functioning in a closed loop.

The workers were prepared to take over the distribution of leaflets so as to avoid the conflicts which had increased between students and union reps anxious to avoid "all provocations". For the same debatable reasons, our leaflets would also remain within the themes of the discussions. They concerned: Information: an RATP CA exists.

The attempt to turn the yellows [scabs] yellow by being ironic about the "freedom to work".

The refusal of derisory demands and the call for minimal demands (qualitative, not quantitative).

The Grenelle accords, the announcement of close votes in the depots, the numeric diminution of strike pickets suggesting an immediate return to work, came to accelerate our action. On 4 June, we distributed a leaflet calling for the continuation of the strike, written on the initiative of workers from the terminuses Nation 2 and 6.

In front of the depots, the trade union guard dogs redoubled their vigilance. In their absence, contacts were numerous, productive and fraternal, but when they were there things took a turn for the worse. In the Hainaut depot, they accused two comrades from the Sceaux line (including one with a dozen years service) of being *agents provocateurs* who had never belonged to the RATP and they were booted out of the door by the workers who were fooled. A tasty detail: these comrades were, or rather had been, members of the CGT.

The next day fifty or so workers turned up at the trade union office, 15 rue Charlot, to find out about the result of the vote of the inter-union network and meeting which had taken place there. They



were forbidden entry, with punches. The CGT didn't spare the slanders, often contradictory, while trying to justify the action of the "manual workers" guarding the doors: we were paid by the Americans, by the police, by the government, by the CFDT etc. We immediately wrote several leaflets which were distributed the same evening:

The first one denounced the welcome given to the workers by the CGT and its strong arm men, the manoeuvres to influence the votes and the fiddling of the results when the influence was not sufficient, the dishonest use of the monopoly of the means of communication between workers thanks to which the unions could prepare the return to work against the will of the mass of workers.

Others signed by those who had decided to continue the strike despite the threats of the CGT which had announced that starting from Thursday 6 June at 8 a.m., it would no longer cover the strikers) called on comrades to take the same decision in every terminus and depot.

On Thursday 6 June, despite the orders from the unions, the strike continued in various depots. As soon as this was known the unions sent their "big cheeses" to put this intolerable situation in order.

Despite the historic headline of *l'Humanité* from the 6<sup>th</sup> ("*Victorious return to work in unity!*"), we soon learned that the return to work was difficult at Gonesse, Ivry, Les Lilas, Croix-Nivert, Clichy, Montrouge, Lebrun, Nation 2 and 6, etc. Attempts at restarting the stoppages multiplied, and to some extent everywhere the workers regrouped for action.

So it was that on Friday 7 June, fifty or so comrades from the Croix-Nivert depot met (in a café, despite the invitation from a Lebrun comrade to go to Censier, because, influenced by their union reps, many were still repelled by the idea of openly contacting "*leftists and student provocateurs*"). Facing the aggressive questions and responses from their base, two CGT delegates came to defend the shitty (as we shall see proved) electoral positions of their union. They decided, when their position had become untenable, to leave under the pretext that we were being anti-union (the attitude of a virtuous vicar who puts his fingers in his ears and says "*I prefer not to hear that*" when he encounters blasphemy). We were then free to move to Censier. The result of the discussion was a leaflet calling for a general assembly of RATP workers for the next day.

The leaflet was distributed during the whole of the morning of Saturday 8. The assembly met. The workers from the Lilas depot announced that they were going to set up a workers' committee (or base committee, or workers' council, or soviet etc.). They said that everywhere the process was the same: when the strikers didn't vote for a return to work unwillingly under union pressure, the delegates fiddled the over all results, while giving the order to go back to work in the name of "*the unity of the working class in struggle*". An example: Lebrun declared itself 80% for continuing the strike, but, by a curious lapse, the CGT announcement in the other depots was that Lebrun was 80% FOR THE RETURN TO WORK). Under these conditions a relaunch of the strike appeared possible, but there weren't enough of us. Therefore we wrote a new leaflet calling for a general assembly on Monday 10 June.

Monday 10 June: almost a complete success, 11 depots, 9 lines and 1 workshop are represented. Each person spoke about the development of the strike on their line or in their depot: the facts really were the same everywhere. It was the lack of connection between the workers which had allowed the strikers to be tricked and defeated. We decided to form a liaison committee grouping two comrades from each depot. The course of the debate aiming at the organisation of workers in CAs led on to the formation of base committees. While the comrades of the liaison committee were going off to another room to write a leaflet appealing for this kind of action, another tendency made itself apparent. A certain number of comrades, mostly young, said they were fed up with "endless discussion", called for "*an immediate action, selective restarting of the strike in certain depots by the most determined who have to easily succeed in leading all the workers*". This tendency, although it wasn't incompatible with the other one, nevertheless ended up by causing some confusion which can be partly held responsible for a double setback.

On the one hand the attempts at organisation, based on an assessment of the role of the unions, was put on the back burner although it had been positive. On the other, the selective restart of the strike couldn't take place because, caught up in the enthusiasm of an assembly of 400 or 500 people, many resolutions were passed but did not stand the test of reality.

# Conclusion

## *The Stalinist gamble*

One of the most striking facts about May-June '68 is the attitude taken by the PCF and the CGT after the first week of the strike: to drown the nascent movement in the flood of a strike which they initiated and controlled. However much history, particularly the return to work in June, has proved the PCF and CGT strategy right, that is to say that there were little or no excesses, the risk was real (and is always real) that a general strike movement can liberate energies which escape their initiators.

What were the facts of the matter which allowed them to take the decision to call a general strike on 17 May?

The strike movement which began on 14 May at Claas and Sud Aviation quickly spread to Renault Cléon, and then spread like wildfire, but it remained confined to a minority quantitatively (200,000 strikers on 17 May) but also qualitatively. Certainly we don't have precise figures, but the strikers were not a majority in the workplaces where it broke out, particularly in terms of active participation by the strikers. Even if in numerous cases (the shining example being Cléon) it was determined young workers who started the action, they were often joined by older workers, often CGT militants. So, what we had was a minority strike but one which benefited from the benevolent passivity of the other workers in the workplaces concerned. Nevertheless, the movement was already rising and full of potential (see below for examples related to the action at CATE Censier). Contacts were made with people outside and whole workplaces were ready to go on strike, as happened between 18 and 21 May. The general strike launched in the SNCF, the RATP and in the key sectors where the PCF-CGT apparatus was hegemonic made these contacts disappear into the background (except where there was geographical proximity). Therefore, the decision by the CGT was taken at an opportune moment, acting as a preventive against the movement. Of course, no worker was simply put on strike by the troops of the PCF-CGT (in Seine Saint Denis, for example, on 18 May in the morning) but in those workplaces from the beginning there wasn't much of an "active" strike, just a light occupation controlled by the CGT.

But let's go back to 17 May. The CGT, by its national implantation and its hundreds of thousands of militants, had far more sensors than anyone else for assessing the situation after 13 May. At the beginning, there was a temporary weakness of the executive because each of its two heads was absent in turn (Pompidou was visiting Afghanistan from 3 to 10 May, and then De Gaulle was in Romania from 14 to 20 May) and the replacements were not as competent: they did not see the student crisis coming and did not succeed in pacifying the situation which culminated in 10 May, the night of the barricades. The intelligent retreat by Pompidou, on 11 May (reopening of the Sorbonne, freeing of prisoners), which played on the lack of rebound of the student movement (which in fact happened), was interpreted by the population, and particularly the working class, as a defeat for the power of an authority which seemed almost invincible, omnipotent. The students had shown that you could do that and that it paid off, including by using violence against the police. This was a police which in Paris kept control of the situation and avoided serious blunders. For many workers, including CGT militants, it was the moment to get some advantage. If the demonstrations of 13 May were a success they somewhat masked the more uneven participation in the strike. But they allowed thousands of workers, albeit superficially, to be in contact with the students and hear a different music from the corny old tunes of the "good-for-nothing" trade union demonstrations.

From the beginning of the student agitation the PCF, whose presence in the universities in the UEC had been eroded since 1965, did not support the movement (this is an understatement, see the article by G. Marchais in *l'Humanité* on 3 May) and tried to hold it back as much as possible. It was a waste of effort and the PCF was discredited even more. But the university sector didn't matter so much. If a movement of the same type was to break out and develop in the worker milieu, then that would be another problem altogether. The very existence of the PCF, and to some extent the CGT, could be threatened. And unfortunately for the Stalinists, this is what seemed to be happening. The strike started up without any orders from the unions and it was spreading. While at the beginning (see the example of Alsthom) the Stalinists turned a deaf ear while opposing themselves to the vague desires for autonomy,

after 17 May, they did an about-turn. The benefit was double:

The strike became its property. The CGT militants who wanted to take advantage of the situation were reassured, and, in relation to the government and the state, the PCF-CGT couple justified itself as the maintainer of order and master of the destiny of the “workers’ flock”.

In the first phase the operation succeeded in brushing aside the “leftist” danger in the worker milieu. It was now necessary, by maintaining and controlling the pressure, to obtain concessions from the state and the bosses to enable the return to work.

The facts bear out this vision, even if the rejection of the Grenelle accords in most workplaces on 27 May seems to invalidate them. Seems to, because if we look more closely, the movement went down from 3 June and this tendency became irreversible after the return to work on the SNCF and particularly on the RATP after 6 June, and even if the point of no-return was only reached on 14 June, despite the spectacular events of Renault-Flins and Peugeot-Sochaux and the various returns pulled out with forceps by the CGT, there were only the nice hard-liners left. What were the reasons for the success of the return to work?

First of all, in the key sectors which it controlled (SNCF, EDF-GDF, mines), apart from a few marginal examples, the CGT succeeded in stopping what it had begun. After this, the strike was not wanted by the immense majority of strikers who hadn’t participated in it: there was no reason for them to turn into enraged strikers on the day of the return to work. The one counter-example was Peugeot Sochaux where the workers who had voted for the return went on strike again to confront the CRS. But if this was a victory of military organisation paid for by the deaths of two workers, it didn’t lead to any desire for political autonomy on the part of the workers.

After more than two weeks on strike, a lassitude could be felt outside the workplaces: fear of the unknown, the loss of pay. All this brought down the moderates, the hesitators, on the side of the return to normal. Finally, in the rare places where the workers were organised and determined, trickery, hard or soft pressure, demoralisation, were the scores which the PCF-CGT soloists played marvellously by relying on the weakness of the experiences of workers’ autonomy...

## ***Workers’ autonomy***

It may appear easy to put your stethoscope to a movement after the event and declare that there were no examples, or very few, of workers’ autonomy. But this is unfortunately the only method for sweeping away illusions (which will always be paid for, sooner or later) about the practice and qualities of a movement. Let’s regret in passing that those who had the most to do 40 years ago – and here we are thinking of the comrades involved in CATE Censier – did not do it, and even if they are not lulled by triumphalist illusions, they have not brought the fire of criticism to bear on the limits of the movement.

As well as the quantitative<sup>40</sup> weakness of the movements showing some sign of autonomy in relation to the unions – that is, all the unions, because for a while in May-June 68 the CFDT was out of tune with the CGT so as to better recuperate the energy of the base and develop its place in the sun of state unionism – we can add a qualitative weakness, due principally to the inexperience of militants and workers, increased by the very nature of May-June 68: an immense passive strike.

Later on we will examine the experience of CATE Censier which was the closest approach to workers’ autonomy, that is to say the fact that groups of workers organised themselves against the parties and unions in base or action committees (the distinction is not important) and were capable of acting on the strike, linking their particular conditions to the general conditions of capitalism and thinking of their practice as political. If such cases were rare in May-June 68, on the other hand two phantasms have emerged from the same epoch: self-management (which in 1973 led to the strike at Lip in Besançon) and the myth of “central strike committees”.

## ***Self-management, myth and reality***

We began to talk a lot about self-management in 1968. Whether it corresponded to the programme of the PSU, certain anarchists or, under the name of “workers’ control”, to the Trotskyists, this concept, which literally means exploitation of the exploited by themselves, in most cases meant the workers themselves assuring essential production<sup>41</sup>, keeping the means of de production in a useful

state<sup>42</sup>, or assuring the supply of petrol<sup>43</sup>. At Clermont, in the Oise, the personnel of the psychiatric hospital themselves imposed a working week of 40 hours over five days. More elaborate actions took place in the Meudon observatory and at that in Puy-de-Dôme where a “Self-management Council” was created. The researchers and the technicians there thought about how to improve the methods of management and work in a group. Those of Saclay went in the same direction. In fact, in these cases, the high level of skill of the personnel and the habit of working in a group favoured these efforts. The most advanced attempt at “self-management”, or at least that which was presented as such, took place at CSF in Brest, where the CFDT was the most important union.

### ***Self-management - CSF - Brest*** <sup>44</sup>

Since 1962, a thousand men and women have worked in the (electronic) factory CSF of Brest. The CFDT has a large majority there: it organises 83% of the workers as opposed to 17% for the FO. On 20 May 68, the buildings were occupied. Immediately, the CFDT militants organised groups charged with urgent repairs, coordination, provisioning, finances, etc. Links were established with the peasants of the region who helped with supplies. They granted credit to the strikers (the conflict only ended on 24 June). In the workshops we showed films and slides, and organised debates with people from outside: a few times militants from the UNEF were invited to come and give their opinions and participate in the debates. Some teachers ran a conference on sex education. Members of the management could also come and speak.

Apart from the classical demands, the CFDT called for the creation of Workers' Commissions. It put one of these commissions in place, composed of members of management and 12 employees who wrote up reports on: personnel information, participation in the management of the firm, conditions of work etc. Certain strikers thought at one point of getting the factory working again. The project failed because the circuits of finance were blocked and, what's more, the army, which was the biggest customer, would never accept it.

There was therefore no real self-management in Brest, at the most there was a bit of co-management.

Above all this self-management only really concerned the engineers (as opposed to the management) or the technicians (as opposed to the management or the engineers) – the majority of workers only wanted to escape from work and not to consider themselves as productive workers. To conclude this brief account (because we can no longer imagine today what a disproportionate importance was given to this Brestian self-management), it only acted principally to maintain and preserve the instruments of work, very often anticipating the return to normal. And so what if the workers who know how to do it can do it even better than the boss... without him?

### ***Central strike committees***

The best known and the most mythologised example is that of Nantes. Since the demonstrations of 24 May, the prefect had barricaded himself in the prefecture, where the majority of employees were on strike. The police no longer appeared in public; the municipality was in crisis, because part of its members had resigned. The “Central Strike Committee” [CCG] (in fact the inter-union organisation of the CGT-FO-CFDT)<sup>45</sup> then installed itself in the town hall and assured such services as undertakers and the registry office. In fact, the CCG handled the emergencies which were no longer dealt with by the state services. On 27 May, the CCG celebrated its recent formation by organising a march of 50,000 people. On 31 May, they called again for a demonstration and 30,000 people still responded to the call. But, from 3 June, it decided to hand back to the municipality the political functions which it had exercised, leaving the town hall and installing most of its services in the office of the agricultural unions. In a sign of the times, the prefect immediately took over control of the distribution of petrol.

### ***The action committees***

In the framework of this text we can't retrace the whole history of the Action Committees appearing after 10 May. The firsthand account about that of Montreuil gives some indication of their



strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, it's worth looking at the most interesting one<sup>46</sup>, the Worker Student Action Committee (CATE) also called CA Censier, after the faculty where it met from 12 May to 16 June 1968.

From its formation by a handful of comrades, the future CATE isolated itself from the leftist groupuscules and decided to intervene in workplaces with the aim of developing liaison (and actions) between the workers themselves and students or outside militants. Some of the principal activists were not organised in any group but there were also militants from "La vieille Taupe"<sup>47</sup>, and a bit later from GLAT<sup>48</sup>.

The first days were dedicated to the distribution of leaflets and the establishment of contact with workers, with the hope of then creating CAs in the factories while the strike was still in its early stages. Thus, there was FNAC Châtelet (contacts on 17 May, creation of a CA on 21 May), then BHV (with the creation of a common bulletin, *La Base*), the print works L'illustration in Bobigny, Frimatic in Puteaux, Dassault in Suresnes, Decauville in Corbeil, Thomson Houston in Bagneux, on 17 May, Imprimerie Lang (nineteenth arrondissement) and above all the NMPP [press distribution company] (Paris-Réaumur and Bobigny), Rhône-Poulenc in Vitry which, with Citroën Balard and the Lebrun RATP depot (thirteenth arrondissement), would be the place where the CATE had the most influence.

The first actions of the CATE thus accompanied the first strikes or vague desires for a strike before 18 May, the date when the CGT decided to launch the general strike to drown the movement. There are precious firsthand accounts which show the existence of a weak minority of workers (on average 10% per workplace, according to Baynac) ready to go out without relying on the unions.

At Citroën (in the fifteenth arrondissement), thanks to personal contacts, the CATE was present, and from 18 May participated in the beginning of the strike on Monday 20 May. Not forgetting the immigrants who made up 60% of the workforce, they distributed a leaflet in four languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Serbo-Croat) calling for the strike and its organisation. With the strike not established yet, the CGT let them act (they pushed for an occupation of the factory) and took up their demands afterwards. But from 21 May, with the strike established, the CGT took over the gates and physically prevented them from entering the factory<sup>49</sup>. But contacts continued outside. The CATE developed several actions of contact between workers from different Citroën sites (Levallois, Saint Ouen, Nanterre) by doing work around the immigrant hostels in the suburbs<sup>50</sup>. When, on 22 June, the CGT and the management negotiated the return to work, the CATE succeeded in stopping it for two days.

Conscious of the limits of the general strike after 18 May, the CATE put out several leaflets calling for "*the transformation of the passive strike into an active strike*", but, apart from Rhône-Poulenc in Vitry, where the participation in the strike reached 50%<sup>51</sup> and where the CATE had a certain influence (benefiting, it's true, from a CFDT more "base-ist" and hostile to the CGT) and where it was able to meet in the factory on 24 May with an assembly of 300 workers and, on 28 May, to oppose an attempt by the CGT federation to get a return to work<sup>52</sup>, the results were deceptive and there was no echo in favour of this "*transformation*". But it was the nature of the movement which was at issue. Before 18 May, when the strike began without any orders from the union confederations, the strike was confined to a minority almost everywhere (to various degrees) and the determined workers were not tempted to do more than vote for the strike and to go home or participate in demonstrations. After 18 May, when the CGT had succeeded in imposing the strike, the majority of workers were not hostile to it but preferred to stay at home.

In addition to its work in the Paris region, from 20 May the CATE concerned itself with the problem of contacts in the provinces. From 21 May, teams were sent to Troyes (to the textile industry), Dijon, Metz and Montpellier. This was also the occasion for creating contacts with farmers for assuring the provisioning of the CAs and the CATE.

Elsewhere the CATE created an inter-enterprise committee which met at Nord Aviation in Châtillon, on 28 May, to coordinate the efforts of the workplace CAs and to distribute a leaflet called "*Defend our strike*". It met every day from then on and gathered militants from a dozen factories in the Paris region<sup>53</sup>. The objective at the beginning of June was to oppose the return to work pushed by the CGT.

The return to work on the RATP, which was under way on 6 June, became a critical issue for the CATE. On Monday 10 June, 400 employees of the RATP (out of 36,000) met at Censier, called together by the RATP CA to organise continuation of the strike. It was a question of countering the CGT offensive which rested on pressure on the strikers and the monopoly of information and, if necessary, the lie or the fist. Despite this, on 10 June, 11 bus depots out of 22, 9 metro lines out of 14 and one workshop out of 7 continued the strike and representatives met at Censier. Despite the enthusiasm of this general assembly, energy fell apart from lack of a perspective very rapidly and, apart from the Lebrun depot which continued its last-ditch stand, the return to work was achieved by 12 June. The end of the strike on the RATP brought about the end of the CATE which left Censier on 16 June<sup>54</sup>.

Baynac, in his book, does not give detailed figures for the participants in CATE, but we can assume around 500 participants, militant workers in a dozen factories (at least 5 per factory) and contacts in about thirty others, a certain influence in some workplaces (Rhône-Poulenc, the Lebrun RATP depot) and a will to favour self-organisation.

## *The question of violence*

Another aspect which needs to be questioned is that of violence.

Here are the principle repression services at work in the year of 1968. The police from the prefecture of police (PP), the Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité (CRS), the Gendarmes mobiles. The first two were armed with truncheons and “bidules” (clubs the size of pickaxe handles), shields, tear gas grenades... The Gendarmes mobiles used their rifle butts, and sometimes detectives in plain clothes carrying out spying, provocations or helping with arrests as soon as a crime was committed, with everything being coordinated and commanded by one of their superintendents.

All the forces of repression were in the habit of cleansing the streets of demonstrators of every kind: workers, students, and, without too much difficulty, democrats protesting against wars (Indochina, Algeria, Vietnam....).

On 3 May at 3.35 a.m., the police superintendent for the fifth arrondissement received a four-line message from the Prefecture of Police which would lead to the first confrontations in the Latin Quarter: *“The rector of the Paris Academy, president of the university council, undersigned, requests that the police force re-establishes order inside the Sorbonne by expelling the disruptive elements.”* The “requestor” was M. Roche.

On that 3 May the forces of repression wanted to clean the Sorbonne of several hundred union and leftist militants who they allowed to leave without opposition. But around the Sorbonne they encountered an unusual level of resistance: half a dozen hours of throwing stones at the cops, a few direct confrontations, petrol bombs thrown in all the neighbourhoods of Latin and St. Germain.

This was the start of several weeks of fighting.

This first day already had the characteristics of what would follow. Young people who recognised themselves very little or not at all in the self-proclaimed leaders and existing organisations, whether trade union: UNEF, CAL, SNESup, or political: the leftist groups (Trotskyist, anarchist, Maoist...) had very little influence in the seven weeks of fighting which disturbed the months of May and June. The rebellious youth went on to use what the militants proposed to them or not to create their own political line and their own organisation: journals (Action, for example), structures (action committees, for example). But they got so involved in these means that it prevented the appearance of any real discussion on a political line and discussions and arguments which could have dealt, amongst other things, with the problems of repression and self-defence of the movement. A majority sought cohesion at the expense of clarity. Each committee, each group of young proletarians, and often each member of a committee did whatever they wanted.

Each little group of young people went to the almost daily demonstrations on their own initiative, and the mutual trust and the political ambiance of the moment between the demonstrators were nothing short of miraculous. From the first confrontations onwards the most determined or the most experienced put themselves in the front line, while further back they pulled up paving stones, made projectiles (some came with munitions, Molotov cocktails) and hurled paving stones onto the police charges, cars being turned into barricades. The wounded were numerous and often serious in moments of panic when the

demonstrators surged backwards in chaos and when the cops whacked the arms, backs and heads in turn of demonstrators on the ground or when they were isolated, but when the chance came we often managed to push back the pigs and then it was they who had to collect up their injured.

Here are two articles from the first militant journal created by the student unionists (and perhaps a bit more than that) who tried to link together all those who recognised themselves in this nascent movement. To a large extent the movement started out against repression and on this basis obtained popular support, despite the destruction of cars and sundry damage.

**Action N°1**

**Repression: face to face**

**7 May 1968**

## **Guard Dogs**

The movement against repression has forced all the guardians of order to distance themselves from it. Students, you are front page news. Look at how they talk about you.

Last Friday several hundred Gardes mobiles braved a handful of students making their traditional racket in the area around the Sorbonne. *“These troublemakers have forgotten a little too much that they are, all the same, privileged. The Bastille demonstrators should remember how only the other day they were treated like the sons of Papa”. “I don’t know if there are a lot of sons of Papa [spoilt bourgeois kids] among them but I would not be surprised.” said Paris Jour*

A faculty much spoken about: Nanterre la Folie. Do you know how the students live there? In the middle of shanty towns where the sub-proletariat rots, the bourgeoisie has installed every convenience which its sons are entitled to. *“When they are tired the residents of Nanterre can rest in their rather modest (in their opinion) room. You know the sort of room which costs 3500 old francs per night in a hotel: big picture windows, cork notice boards for sticking up whatever you want, a screened-off toilet, hot water, cold water, a power point for an electric razor. On the landing: a shower cabinet. A telephone and a little kitchen with a fridge and cooker, and definitely a lift. As they are intellectuals, women are employed to clean each room every day... Five star comfort”. Paris Jour*

But according to the sayings of Doyen Grappin this experiment remains a failure:

*“The marriage of a hall of residence and a faculty has turned out to be unfortunate in the light of experience. The campus has become, I won’t say a witch’s cauldron, but a space turned in on itself where all kinds of rumours are spread.” L’aurore*

The “sons of Papa” have misunderstood the problem and they insult the memory of their elders who have made so many sacrifices so that they can live in paradise.

*“I was a student myself and it seems to me that students today have an easy life. We didn’t – apart from a few privileged ones in the university residences. Most often we lived in rooms without a fire. We did not have those corporate restaurants where today you can have a decent meal for 1.5 F. Your estates would have been paradise for us. So, get on with your work and calm down.” Camille Leduc - Paris Jour*

But sometimes making a racket can degenerate into a drama. The troublemakers don’t care. It is not they who pay for the broken windows. The people are profoundly disorientated, but the good French are on watch, they forcefully denounce the provocateurs who take their orders from abroad.

*“Certain groupuscules” “anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists.” “in general composed of the sons of big bourgeois and led by the anarchist Cohn Bendit use the pretext of deficiencies of the government to indulge in acts aimed at preventing the normal functioning of the faculty” “vandalising offices, interrupting courses, proposing boycotts of exams, etc.” l’Humanité.*

## **Thank you and get lost, Monsieur Roche**

Friday 3 May, the University responds to the action of the students of Nanterre with a truncheon. From 10 in the morning, at the Sorbonne, the students of Nanterre respond to the closure of their faculty. The fascist group Occident, celebrated for its assaults, its arson attacks and its commando actions, took the closure of Nanterre as the signal to announce that it would “cleanse” the Latin Quarter to exterminate

*“the Bolshevik vermin”*. To protect the Sorbonne, self-defence groups were set up at the gates. But the response to the authoritarian measures of the authorities is more important than the battle against fascist groups. What’s more, the authorities hope for such a battle because it will allow them to portray the student actions as *“faction fighting between extremists”*.

### **COURTYARD OF THE SORBONNE – 10-12 a.m.**

On the initiative of the UNEF, the JCR, the MAU and the FER, the Paris students held a meeting in solidarity with the students of Nanterre which joined those of the “22 March movement”. On the previous day they’d heard that 7 students from the 22 March movement, threatened with exclusion for their political activity, had been called to appear before the disciplinary council of the University of Paris. By hitting the supposed leaders the authorities want to intimidate the students. The morning passed off peacefully.

### **THE AFTERNOON**

The meeting took place and a thousand students were there to denounce the university and police repression. At 3 p.m. the group “Occident” came down from Boulevard St-Michel: there were only 100 protesters, flanked by three rows of paras and others nostalgic for Indochina and Algeria, who’d come from the provinces and from Belgium. They wore crash helmets and carried clubs and chanted “Vietcong murderers”, with the emblems of the fascist movement on their arms. They went back up rue des écoles in the direction of rue de la Sorbonne. It was only at this moment that the police intervened: no arrests, they held back the “procession” and channelled it towards Place Maubert. A few fascist remnants criss-crossed the Latin Quarter until the evening, trying to provoke the students.

The police then surrounded the Sorbonne, moving towards the exits: it was 15.30.

Inside the students demanded the opening of an amphitheatre, and refused to leave the buildings as the administration demanded. The rector Roche appealed to the police to close the entrance to the faculty: not a single student was allowed back in. The Union des Etudiants Communistes, who were in the Sorbonne distributing a leaflet denouncing the provocations of extreme left groupuscules when the Occident commando turned up, were booed.

15.30- 16.00, everything is calm. Although on the radio the tone begins to rise: they are already talking about scenes of rioting. They even announced that the student order service was taking down slabs of marble in the courtyard of the Sorbonne (they were simply moving chairs and tables to protect the doors, when the Occident commando were approaching the Sorbonne).

16.00 – second meeting between the students and the administration. Second conclusion: the police are no longer just preventing access to the Sorbonne; they are not allowing anyone to leave. Not being able to meet in an amphitheatre the students organised a sit-in: they discussed the forms of action and the perspectives of the student movement. How to link the action undertaken with the struggles of workers? How to struggle against repression? Seated on the steps, they discussed the latest events at Nanterre and the Sorbonne.

16.45 – The students discuss but for the rector Roche, a discussion must already be the beginning of a riot. He calls the police. The sit-in is interrupted by the force of events. The deliberate provocation by the rector succeeds: the police burst onto the scene with arms in hand as if they were coming out of the trenches. There were 300.

A bit later, they are followed by intervention brigades in fatigues (judo and karate instructors; special anti-riot forces), and the Gardes mobiles with rifle butts in hand. Some students manage to flee. Faced with such a show of force, the students refuse the provocation. To limit confrontations, a delegation enquires about the intentions of the “representatives of order”: if there is no resistance, they promise to allow people to leave. The student order service forms a cordon between their comrades and the forces of the police to avoid clashes. Despite the promises, the first students are “bagged” on leaving and taken away in police vans. A new provocation. The aim: to find a pretext to break the movement.

A moment of hesitation: outside they release the women immediately. Groups of protesters form.

*“Trouble-makers”, “enragés”, “extremists”*? They are not even necessarily the politicised students, some of them having simply been in the library. They respond spontaneously to the police presence in the University and join the ones who are left to protest against the arrest of their comrades. “Stop the



repression”, “CRS = SS”, the slogans are found, normally, spontaneously. Throughout the evening there is a chain reaction. Demonstrations are born spontaneously, one causes another. They express the solidarity of the students against police arbitrariness. They put down deep roots in the student milieu. Everything kicks off in the Place de la Sorbonne when the first cars leave. Police charges to clear the square, smoke grenades, the not very numerous demonstrators surge towards Boulevard St-Michel. Immediately, without any order being given, all the order services, all the political and union leaders are locked up in the Sorbonne until 8 p.m., and then taken away little by little to the police station where they are put on the files. Other young people, other students gather around the first little groups. Many have come after the announcements on the radio, conscious of the importance of the situation. Some go to the Luxembourg gardens, the hottest of the hot spots of the evening (the demonstration went on until 23.00), then to Port Royal. Others went to the St-Germain crossroads. Dispersed, they reform the demonstration at the St-Jacques crossroads when they stop the traffic.

The strength of the police is immobility; the strength of the demonstrators is mobility. There was no direct confrontation between the police and demonstrators. The latter managed to “stick” to responding with missiles. They pulled up paving stones and the grills from trees; they caught grenades on the ground and threw them back. They built barricades, retreated in the faces of charges and sheets of tear gas, dispersed and then reformed. Maybe they would even be charged twice, but that would be enough. Their slogans: “Free our comrades. Stop the repression. Gaullist dictatorship!”

Returning by van, a furious cop has received a projectile in the shoulder blade, “*broken by a demonstrator*” at 21-22.00. The intervention brigades scour the Latin Quarter. Every civilian is suspect. The police truncheon anyone who looks like a student. More than one passer-by, nothing to do with the demonstration, ends up spending three hours in the police station.

Forty students escaped from a van. How? There were only four policemen in the van, in an isolated street. They broke the windows and ran away. Since then the “scenes of rioting” have been the talk of the town. The dominant feature of the day of 3 May was the spontaneity of the resistance to police repression. It proves that they have not been able to “smash” the movement with a blow from a club. It reveals the depth of the student crisis. It shows that the agitation is not a matter of a “handful of enragés”, but that it has found a deep echo in the mass of students. The day of 3 May was the first moment of a radicalisation of the struggle. The movement has begun to spread itself in the provinces and to find international support.

As for the demonstrations on Friday, the movement succeeded in regroupment through dispersal, each time increasing the number of active militants. The students have gone on to a higher stage of action.

*Articles taken from the journal “Action N°1” of the action committees set up by the UNEF, the 22 March Movement (Nanterre), and the secondary school action committees (CAL).*

Here is an assessment made at 22.00 on Friday 3 May: “*During the evening the SNESup had a meeting on rue Monsieur-le-Prince, which for several weeks has been the headquarters of the revolt. The General Secretary of the SNESup, Alain Geismar (29 years old, senior lecturer at the physics laboratory on rue d’Ulm) put forward the slogan of a general strike in higher education without having had the time to consult the national office. After five hours of confrontation the area was calm again. Balance sheet: 83 police injured, and 574 arrests, of whom 179 were minors, 45 were women and 58 were foreigners. The Renseignements généraux [political security police] have carefully kept until today the 574 files on those arrested on 3 May. After the retreat, reading them will be interesting, because there you can find, still almost anonymous, some people who have made their mark, including future ministers of the left... or the right. Certainly the leaders are on board: Alain Krivine, Trotskyist leader of the Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire, Jacques Sauvageot, number one in the UNEF, the formidable Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Henri Weber (today a PS senator); but you can also find Brice Lalonde (filed as president of the Fédération des groupes d’études de lettres) and José Rossi, future UDF minister of Édouard Balladur, presented as a “member of the executive bureau of the Association nationale des jeunes du Centre démocrate” and the sons of the left Gaullist writer David Rousset, that de Gaulle had met a week earlier, telling him: “We have to condemn capitalism, capitalist society. We have to expressly condemn it. We have to condemn totalitarian communism. We must find a new way, participation ”.*

*Some future journalists or writers have done their share: Guy Hocquenghem, Bernard Guetta (presently publishing director of *Nouvel Observateur*, "already seized by the police in 1964 during confrontations with the partisans of Tixier-Vignancour") or Hervé Chabalier (boss of the Capa agency). May 68 has begun."*

### **Monday 6 May**

*"Gathering on Boulevard St Germain, the protesters head for Place Maubert.*

*At 15.00 the first violent clashes at the St Germain crossroads.*

*At 16.00 and for two hours, 1500 protesters prevented police operations."*

For an hour or two we prevented the cops from advancing across the whole width of Boulevard St. Germain. We stopped the cops from advancing and made them retreat but then they came back with two water-cannons which sprayed the demonstrators (a protester climbed up on one and stopped the jet from working!). Paving stones also flew and as on all demonstration nights to come, once the front of the demonstration was broken up by the cops there would be hours of confrontation with little groups of 10 to 100 demonstrators who could blend into the night.

The tenth correctional chamber judged 13 arrested young people: four were condemned to two months in prison for violence against police officers – eight others got suspended sentences.

### **Action N° 2**

The night of 10-11 May (so-called night of the barricades).

The demonstration set out from Denfert-Rochereau and was called by UNEF and SNESup. It passed in front of La Santé prison guarded by the police and showed its sympathy between the prisoners and demonstrators. The demo had to go to the Palais de Justice and the radio station (ORTF). The bridges on the Seine were barred by strong squads of police, and the demonstration established itself on the Boulevard St. Michel from the Seine to Luxembourg. Discussions flowed easily amongst little groups on the boulevard, in cafés and in neighbouring streets, while others began to pull up paving stones, a public works vehicle set out towards Luxembourg station. They constructed more and more barricades, apparently without order or organisation. The Molotov cocktails arrived, and the face-off lasted until 2 a.m. when discussions took place between university officials and Geismard (SNESup), Cohn-Bendit (22 March Movement, Nanterre), Sauvageot (UNEF), an appeal for calm didn't shift the enraged who were still very numerous (some thousands) behind the barricades. The order to clear the area was given at 2 a.m. With much noise (percussion grenades, tear gas grenades against Molotov cocktails, burning cars), the police assaults carried on until 5.30. The last demonstrators pushed them back with Molotov cocktails, with the police hot on their heels, and fled into the teacher training college on rue d'Ulm and, with a ladder, into the monks' place next door. The state and its cops remain masters of the area.

M. Maurice GRIMAUD, the Prefect of Police, provided the balance sheet for the riots on Saturday morning: 367 injured from an inventory of the hospitals, of which 251 were from the forces of order and 102 were students. Of the 367, 54 were hospitalised of whom 4 students and 18 policemen were in a very serious condition. 460 people were seized by the police, 61 were foreigners - 63 were handed over to the courts - 26 students - 3 secondary school students, the rest were 34 individuals who were not students.

The material damage was important: 60 cars burned, 128 other severely damaged.

It is little remarked in the official accounts that more or less half of those seized were neither students nor from secondary schools, worker youth were very much attracted by this radical struggle by violent means.

This game of demonstrations - repression led to one of the biggest demonstrations of the century but did not allow the creation of a workers' political movement autonomous of the workers' unions and the PCF. The latter prepared to take the movement into their hands with the complicity of the leftists who in one

way or another dreamed of reviving the unions and the PCF rather than helping the working class to organise itself.

## ***What remains of May 1968?***

On the level of workers' conditions, there was an increase of at least 10% in wages, which was taken back by inflation in two or three years, and a very significant increase in the SMIG (minimum wage) of 35%. But we should realise that the SMIG was very little practiced in industry and that it was very much below real wages. By contrast, it was important in many small companies, particularly for agricultural workers. For the immediate situation, after 68, that was about it. We cannot say that union recognition and union rights in the workplace (law of 28 December 68) and the facilities given to the unions were gains for the working class. During the strike in May 68, the workers were not opposed to this demand but it was a demand of the union apparatuses, not of the workers.

This translated itself into a better integration of the unions into the state with the union delegates nominated by the apparatus, more and more for the functioning of their apparatus etc.... And if this allowed in a number of small companies, and this is not a negligible thing, the formation of union sections which had not existed before, this was part of the general evolution of the unions towards a more thorough integration into the state, which doesn't amount to anything very positive for the working class.

On the other hand, in the years following '68, everywhere, there was an important reduction in working time, not only because of the strike, but because it was happening anyway.

Renault worked 48 hours before '68; a place like Alsthom St-Ouen worked 47.5 hours and that was the regime pretty much everywhere in the factories. That's without counting overtime on Saturday which meant a working week of 55-56 hours. Within the following four or five years, the time had fallen to around 40 hours "actually worked". The bosses never having swallowed the idea that legally the eating time spent by workers in shifts was counted as working time, the real hours most often fell to around 42. We mustn't forget that it was in the years after 68 that shift work largely developed.

The real gain of 1968 for our class was elsewhere. This was the birth, everywhere, in all the factories, of a minority of workers who had more or less broken with the union apparatus. There, something changed and in the ten years which followed, we can talk about the important strikes of the 1970s which escaped, in whole or in part from the apparatus of the PCF/CGT, and there were some big strikes in those years.

## ***From 1968 to ....1971***

The paradox of May-June 68 is that it broke out as a movement showing fewer signs of autonomy than those in the years following: the wave of strikes in spring 1971 (whose most shining example is the struggle of the unskilled workers at Renault Le Mans), 1972 Girosteel, Penarroya, Le joint Français, Alsthom, Chausson etc., up until 1974 with the strike of the PTT and that of the banks.

Scarcely three years after May-June 1968, there was a wave of strikes in spring which was perhaps an expression of the workers' autonomy that May 68 had not seen (or very little).

At the end of May '71, there were dozens of factories on strike across the country, with declared hostility to the CGT/PCF apparatus everywhere. It was not a question this time of overlap by generalisation. The press and the TV had observed a complete black-out about the strikes; the TV had been purged in 1968 and the newspapers which had been accused of giving too much space to the outbreak of the strike in '68<sup>55</sup> said nothing about it.

Everywhere, you could find minorities of proletarians who had revealed themselves in 1968, minorities certainly, but decisive in 1971.

The journal *Lutte Ouvrière* ["workers' struggle"] (which succeeded the dissolved group *Workers' Voice*), wrote in one of its editorials in spring 1971 that a workers' *avant-garde* was in the process of appearing in the factories which allowed great hope.

It was true.

The real gain of May-June 1968 for the workers can be found here. Subsequently, these minorities of workers which had been able to constitute the framework of real workers' revolutionary



committees were lost to all organisation or to trade unionism. Certainly this was true in the CFDT, which seemed more leftist than the CGT in '68, and even in the CGT, which after '68 had done an about-turn and no longer excluded those that it considered to be leftists, but, on the contrary, offered them posts in which they were swallowed up in believing that they could succeed in changing the counter-revolutionary nature of trade unionism by becoming those who exercise responsibility. It was they who became trade unionists, and not the unions which changed their nature. A good number went to the LCR or LO and the Maoists, and the biggest part went nowhere.



# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Such as those about “workers” violence which exaggerate the examples of Renault Flins and Peugeot Sochaux, or those about self-organisation which exalt the “central strike committees” etc. But today, forty years later, there remains nothing about workers’ strikes in recent publications.

<sup>2</sup> A UNEF leader.

<sup>3</sup> A very strong participation in the Paris region as well as in the provinces.

<sup>4</sup> The account relating to Paris Austerlitz.

<sup>5</sup> Delale and Ragache signalled the first case of an occupied factory, Wisco at Givet, in the Ardennes, where the boss had refused to apply a regional collective agreement since April: *“The workers replied with a series of stoppages with no result. On 9 May they decided on a surprise occupation of the factory: at 2 in the morning the strike pickets took up position. The boss then called for two platoons of gendarmes and a bailiff. In response the strikers barricaded themselves in the building (trade unionists of the CFDT, CGT and FEN came as a march to support them). The face-off lasted two days. Fearing disturbances the prefect made the boss apply the agreement. Victorious, the first “occupiers” of May went home on 10 May, at 21.30”*

<sup>6</sup> In January 1968, Sud-Aviation Bouguenais employed 2682, of which 1793 were hourly-paid workers and 831 were technicians and salaried staff.

<sup>7</sup> For more details see: [www.mondialisme.org](http://www.mondialisme.org)

<sup>8</sup> The factory was recently built (1958) and implanted in a rural area where traditional industries (textiles at Elbeuf) were being rapidly lost. It employed 5200, of whom 750 were contractors. The rate of unionisation was 18% (national average 22%). There were 11% immigrants and 1600 younger than 25. The majority of workers were unskilled, and there were 95 different hourly rates! The factory made engines and gear boxes.

<sup>9</sup> Constructed in 1952, the Flins factory, which mostly recruited from rural areas, was famous for its harsh regime. Above all, it is here that Renault put in practice the principle of a job wage, before the generalisation to all its establishments. According to this principle, a worker is paid according to the job he does, and not according to qualification. The job wage therefore had a double effect: an infinite division of the particular situations of workers, and the reinforced power of the boss who could change a worker’s job to either bully or promote him. The factory employed around 10,500 at the beginning of the year and 12,300 at the end. 1968 was also marked by the passage to working in two shifts of eight hours (“2x8”).

<sup>10</sup> According to Aimé Halbeher (See n°34, April 1998 “Un début modeste dans la “forteresse ouvrière”): *“At Renault, the strike movement started on the 16 May in the morning at Cléon, then at the branch in Le Mans. At Billancourt, hearing on the radio what had happened, we called a meeting on Seguin Island and there were a thousand of us out of 35,000 workers. We one thousand occupied Seguin Island. We occupied for the night but it wasn’t decided in place of the boys, we occupied to avoid a bosses’ lock-out. In the night a few hundred salaried staff joined us after getting an idea of the development of the movement from the radio. On the 17<sup>th</sup> in the morning, at 6 a.m., they opened the doors to the shifts starting work and we got together for a meeting on Seguin island at 10 a.m. There were a lot of people there. The CGT was the great majority in the factory but they had looked for an alliance as quickly as possible. During the night they joined up with the FO and the CFDT and appealed for the strike together.*

## **A strike massively voted for every morning**

*They didn’t call for an indefinite general strike but for a renewable strike with an occupation, with a vote by the general assemblies each morning. This was a new approach. They decided on Friday to occupy for the weekend to give time for the management to open negotiations without seriously disturbing production. They created strike committees by section and by workshop, each one putting forward its list of demands. The management showed no sign of life. On Monday there was a new mass meeting where the three trade union organisations proposed carrying on with the renewable strike, it was massively voted for each morning.*

## **Hot days for the first worker-students meeting**

*The first night the radios had passed on the slogan of the students to go into the factories to fraternise with the workers. We appealed to the students not to come. We didn’t want to give any pretext for a police intervention. The students didn’t understand that we were refusing them permission to enter. That was the first worker-student encounter. I am certain that, if we had let the students in, the next day the workers would not have re-entered the factory to occupy it with us. In those hot days in May, we often went in a delegation to Nanterre. I even invited Sauvageot to debate at the Place Nationale on the themes of “workers’ power” and “student power”. They refused to debate, but they organised one which I went to in the middle of the night. It was a crazy world. Sauvageot was not present. I explained the rights that we already had at Renault and that their slogans about co-management did not bring any great thing that we didn’t know already and that all this stuff wasn’t very revolutionary. We had debates like this throughout the duration of the strike.”*

<sup>11</sup> In 1968, Billancourt had 38,230 employees.

<sup>12</sup> See the note on the previous page

<sup>13</sup> See M. Seidman “The imaginary revolution”, p 169

<sup>14</sup> Remember that at that time work on Saturday (or one Saturday in two) was normal.

- <sup>15</sup> The militants of CATE Censier were conscious of this problem and appealed in their leaflets for an “active strike”, which proves that it was not active.
- <sup>16</sup> See Delale and Ragache, pp 89
- <sup>17</sup> MODEF: Mouvement de Défense des Exploitations Familiales, an agricultural union very close to the PCF.
- <sup>18</sup> Often presented as the Toulouse counterpart of the 22 March movement in Nanterre
- <sup>19</sup> Note that no demonstrator was actually interested in the parliament as such.
- <sup>20</sup> See pp 99-100
- <sup>21</sup> CAL: Comités d’Action Lycéens [secondary school action committees], created in December 1967.
- <sup>22</sup> FGDS: Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left, an electoral grouping around the SFIO, the Socialist Radical party and various groups “on the left” in the outcome of the Mitterrand candidature of December 1965.
- <sup>23</sup> Debré, Malraux, Mesmer, Guichard, etc.
- <sup>24</sup> Oral account.
- <sup>25</sup> The miners’ strike broke out in 1963 in a period when the Gaullist regime, in power since May 1958 and after the end of the Algerian war in March 1962, seemed untouchable, even more so as not much was happening on the terrain of strikes. It began at the command of three unions CGT, CFTC and FO on 1 March 1963. One of the causes of it was the suppression of wage to price indexation for miners (put in place in 1954). Consequently the average wage of miners fell in relation to other categories. From the beginning of the strike, the Pompidou government, via the minister of labour Bokanowski, announced that the strike could only last 48 hours and that after that there would be forced labour. The order appeared on 4 March 1963. The 200,000 striking miners resisted the order. The strike lasted 35 days (until 4 April 1963) and the government was not able to impose its order for forced labour and agreed to increase wages by 8% plus the 4.5% minimum, spread out until the 1 April 1964, and with a fourth week of paid holiday. And it is this which was interpreted as a victory. In fact a minority of strikers wanted to continue and felt cheated by the order to return to work given by the unions, led by the CGT. In many mines in the North (Déchy, Hénin-Beaumont, etc.) strikers tore up their CGT cards.
- <sup>26</sup> The Ecole Nationale de Beaux-Arts was a famous art school in Paris that was already on strike on 8 May. Declaring their studio to be an “atelier populaire” [popular workshop] the occupying painters produced numerous posters which were plastered up all over Paris and which have filled books about May 68 ever since!
- <sup>27</sup> In the edition of 2 May 1968
- <sup>28</sup> In the edition of 3 May 1968
- <sup>29</sup> A comrade has told me that the slogan “*We are all German Jews*” was launched later during the expulsion of Cohn Bendit. Nevertheless, I’m sure that the demo I’m talking about definitely took place before the strike.... ? ? ?
- <sup>30</sup> It’s in *Humanité* on 3 May that G. Marchais denounced “*the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit*” and railed against “*revolutionaries [... ] sons of the high bourgeoisie [... ] who will quickly turn down their revolutionary flame to go and run daddy’s business and exploit the workers*”.
- <sup>31</sup> Ambroise Croizat (1901-1951) Stalinist minister for “Work and Social Security” without interruption from November 1945 to May 1947.
- <sup>32</sup> Maurice Thorez (1900-1964), General Secretary of the PCF (1934-1964), Minister of State and then vice-president of the Council of State from November 1945 to May 1947.
- <sup>33</sup> Common CGT-CFDT-FO days of action against the Social Security reform regulations of 21 August 1967 (De Gaulle, president of the Republic; Pompidou, prime minister) which had shaken up the architecture of social protection. Previously unified, Social Security had been broken into autonomous branches (sickness, old age, family allowances). The majority representation of employees in the administration councils (two tiers of seats) was swept away to the benefit of the bosses (joint representation) and the election of administrators by their constituents was replaced by a nomination by decree. The same regulation increased the expenses remaining after the insurance charge (patient’s contribution), fixing this relevant part by decree (government) and no longer by law (Parliament). The role of mutual insurance companies was limited.
- <sup>34</sup> When we talk about the PCF at that time we want to say the formation which is its instrument in the working class: the CGT.
- <sup>35</sup> It was ten years to the day that de Gaulle had been in command since the “Algiers coup” of 13 May 1958.
- <sup>36</sup> During the whole of the strike there were 560 striker’s cards distributed. That is to say 560 workers (out of a staff of 1800) who came at least once. It should be known that the striker’s card gave access to benefits in the town halls, the free canteen etc.
- <sup>37</sup> A vulgar French term for “disorder”, meaning literally “shit in the bed”. De Gaulle had already described the student movement as *chienlit*.
- <sup>38</sup> De Gaulle, running out of steam after the setback of his televised conference on 24 May, went to seek the support of General Massu, Commander in Chief of the French forces in Germany, at Baden Baden, on 28 and came back on 29 May.
- <sup>39</sup> In fact it was Malraux, Debré and a few barons of Gaullism who organised the demonstration on 30 May.
- <sup>40</sup> According to Seidman, scarcely 10% of enterprises on strike had contact with “leftists”, or more exactly with militants outside the PCF.



- <sup>41</sup> At Fontenay-aux-roses, where the Triton reactor was kept running to provide radio-isotopes to the hospitals.
- <sup>42</sup> At Péchiney, in Noguères, to avoid damaging the aluminium smelters.
- <sup>43</sup> At the petrol refinery at Grand-Couronne, near Rouen, petrol was distributed by the strike committee which decided its own priorities.
- <sup>44</sup> Taken from Delale and Ragache, pp 94
- <sup>45</sup> A CGC self-proclaimed by the federations and not made up of militants sent from the occupied factories.
- <sup>46</sup> See the book by Jacques Baynac "*May retrouvé*", Robert Laffont, 1978
- <sup>47</sup> Literally "The Old Mole" - a communist bookshop in the Latin Quarter. The activists based around the bookshop had been expelled from Pouvoir ouvrier (Workers' Power) in 1967. Pouvoir ouvrier had been the "marxist" wing of Socialisme ou Barbarie, who had split in 1962. The "vieille Taupe" group studied Marx and tried to make a balance between Bordigism and Councilism.
- <sup>48</sup> "Groupe de Liaison pour l'Action des Travailleurs" ("Liaison Group for Workers' Action") founded in 1959. It was a "workerist" group close to Socialisme et barbarie and Pouvoir Ouvrier. It dissolved in 1976.
- <sup>49</sup> See the account of F. Perlman, an American militant present in Paris in May 1968, and someone who intervened at Citroën, in F. Perlman & R. Grégoire. "*Worker-student action committees. France May '68*", Black & Red, February 1969, starting on page 23.
- <sup>50</sup> Apart from Citroën, the CATE tried to organise Italian, Portuguese and Moroccan immigrants and developed work towards the shanty towns of the Paris region (Nanterre, Champigny). Elsewhere, contacts were established with the *Lega Studenti-Operai* in Turin.
- <sup>51</sup> According to Baynac, pp223, the strikers were organised into 39 base committees (one per building). They elected a central strike committee of 156 members revocable at any time. While participating, the CGT maintained an Executive Committee authorised to talk to the management.
- <sup>52</sup> Baynac honestly recognises, pp 225, that the 30 May followed the Gaullist counter-offensive and the victory of 28 May showed itself to be ephemeral.
- <sup>53</sup> Nord Aviation Châtillon, CSF and CET Malakoff, Otis Levallois, RATP Paris XIII, PTT Paris, Rhône-Poulenc Vitry, Sud Aviation Suresnes, Hachette Paris, Schlumberger Clamart, Thomson Houston Bagneux, BNP Paris office, Inter Bâtiment Paris.
- <sup>54</sup> For example, on 20 May 1968,

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