Workers' Liberty

reason in revolt

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THE FRENCH GENERAL STRIKE OF 1968

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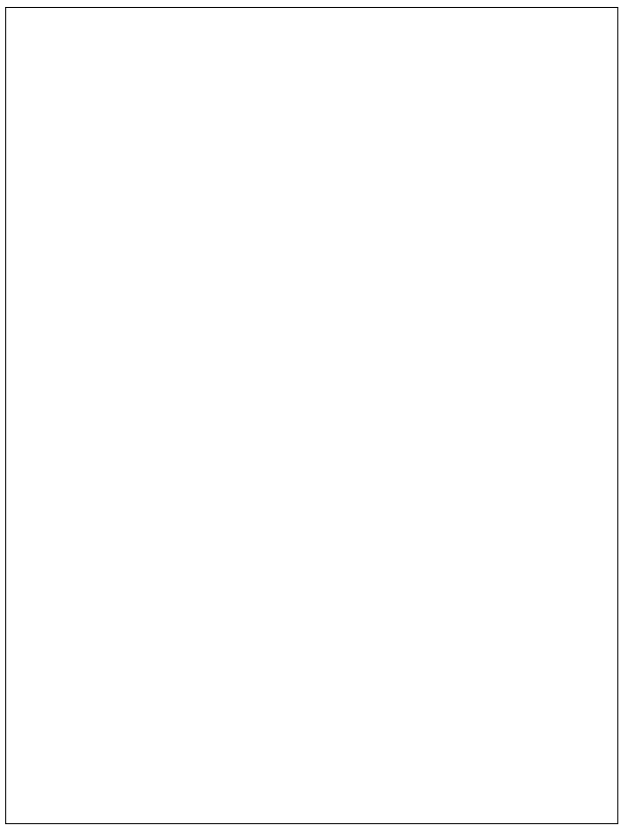
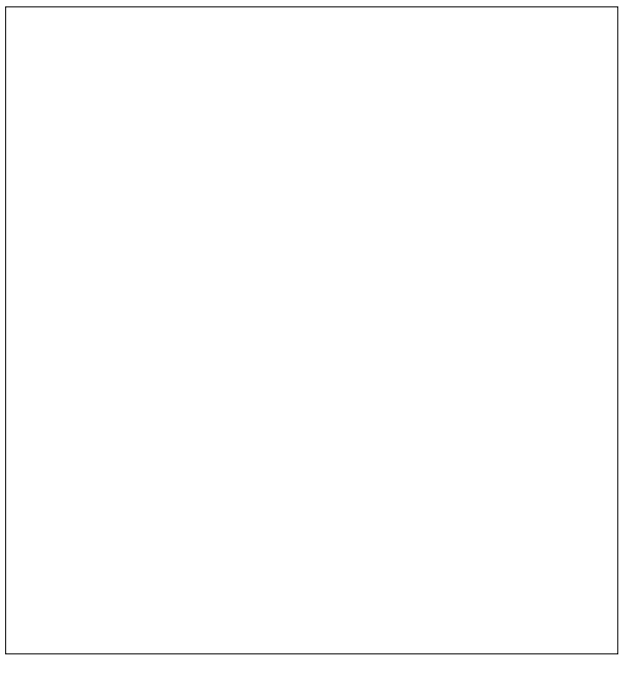
Class struggle in France May-June 1968



Communist Party election poster boasting about being the party that fought the violence



Demonstration 13 May

By David Broder

The May 1968 general strike in France is often bracketed with the other events of that year. Although student activism did play an important role in "detonating" the factory occupations movement in France, to see the general strike as just one among many acts of "resistance" is to denude it of its class content. It was a tooth-and-nail struggle in which the working class withheld its labour power, brought the de Gaulle administration to its knees and had the ability to take state power from the ruling class.

The French general strike should properly be compared with the 1974-75 Portuguese Revolution, which saw organs of dual power and hundreds of factories under workers' management; the Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969-70, with 440 million strike hours and enormous wildcat actions; and the boldness of the British labour movement in the early 1970s with actions such as the 1974 miners' strike which brought down Edward Heath's Tory government.

These were actions in which large numbers of workers entered the political stage and challenged the rule of capital.

The level of spontaneous mobilisation for the strike was immense and although the Stalinist union tops were ultimately able to sign the Grenelle agreement with the government and march the workers back to the factories, this was not without some resistance. The Communist Party was still very much the dominant force in the workers' movement after the strike was over, but the real class-struggle left had begun to find its voice. After the General Strike the idea of workers' economic self-management became increasingly widespread in the workers' movement, with even the left social-democrat Parti Socialiste Unifié and the centre-left ex-Catholic CFDT union pressured into making sops, talking of various forms of workers' control and "employee participation" in making workplace decisions.

The general strike in France was plainly not a mere reaction to the economic situation and the conjuncture capital had reached. If we believe that socialism is the mass of the working class mounting conscious action to take power then clearly we cannot entertain notions that socialist revolution is just the "locomotive of history" pulling into its final stop. However, to understand the May 1968 general strike we must look into both the state of the French workers' movement and the situation with which it was confronted.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The dominant force on the left, the Parti Communiste Français had many hundreds of thousands of members and was in effective control of the largest union federation, the CGT. Closely aligned to the USSR, the PCF was bureaucratic, thoroughly conservative and even more fiercely nationalist. Although electorally less successful than the Fédération de la Gauche Démocrate et Socialiste (ancestor of today's Parti Socialiste), it was very much the mass party of the working class and its greater rank-and-file membership was several times greater than its social-democrat rival.

Following Stalin's line the party had participated in several cross-class governments, the first of which was the Popular Front coalition of 1936-38, where it backed an administration led by the social-democratic SFIO and the middle-class liberal Parti Radical. Tied into this alliance, in June 1936 the Communists smothered a strike wave which saw over 2.5 million workers down tools and occupy 9,000 factories, party leader Maurice Thorez commenting "Comrades, we must know when to end a strike" .

The PCF similarly warned its governmental allies off rocking the boat of French capitalism too much, rebuffing SFIO plans to nationalise several major industries and refusing even to discuss the question of women's suffrage fearing that women would vote for Catholic conservative parties. Furthermore, the PCF called on "patriotic" fascist bands to join a "French front" against the threat of Nazi Germany. Thorez signed up for the French Army, seeing the far-right danger as an essentially foreign phenomenon. But when Stalin made his 1939 pact with Hitler to carve up Eastern Europe, the PCF was forced to backtrack entirely, acquiescing to the invasion of France. Its press was silent on Hitler's crimes and presented Nazism as a lesser evil compared to the "English government of lords and bankers" and "Anglo-Saxon capitalism" with which French nationalists like Charles de Gaulle were allied. The Communist Party even applied to the fascist Vichy régime for permission to continue printing its paper, *l'Humanité*.

This hypocritical stance — and geopolitical balance — could not hold, and within months thousands of PCF activists took to demonstrating against the Nazi occupiers, before the party itself began armed resistance when in June 1941 Hitler broke his pact with Stalin and Germany invaded the USSR. Having performed a second 180-degree volte-face, the Communists now served as a leading element in the French Resistance. While spineless bourgeois politicians like Pierre Laval bowed down before the Vichy government, the PCF fought to defend France, and was able to create a huge patriotic aura around itself in spite of its earlier capitulation. It was the party which could claim that 75,000 of its number had been killed in the fight against fascism.

This propaganda coup, combined with the post-1945 demand of millions for a welfare state and job creation in the wake of wartime destruction of their homes and livelihoods, saw a period of great success for the PCF. Indeed, in the six legislative elections taking place between 1945 and 1958, the PCF won more votes than any other party on no fewer than five occasions.

Never able to form a government off its own back, the PCF from 1944 until 1947 took part in a coalition administration with the SFIO and the right-wing MRP close to Charles de Gaulle. In this government the PCF served as a left-wing buttress for the project of capitalist reconstruction on the ruins of World War Two — Thorez denounced strikes as "a weapon in the hands of the trusts" and the party launched campaigns such as "the battle for coal" — for workers to work harder and produce more in the interests of the French economy, even without any improvement in working conditions. The Communists also supported the bloody suppression of the people of France's colony Algeria, including the 1945 Sétif bombing which killed 45,000 people, proclaiming the "one and indivisible" character of the French state and its possessions.

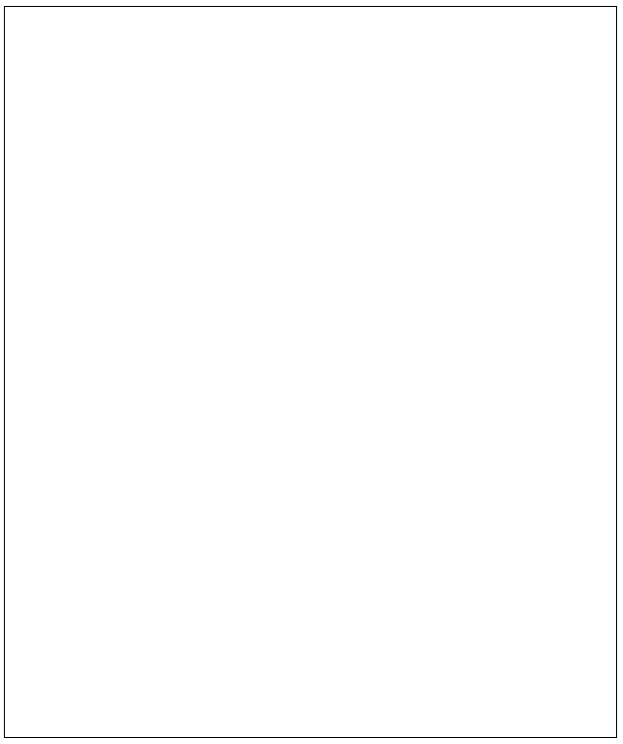
Indeed, even after the onset of the Cold War forced it out of this tripartiste cross-class government, the PCF had acquiesced to Gaullist foreign policy, whose anti-NATO sentiment was welcomed by Moscow. It refused to support Algerian independence — there, as in Indochina, it simply called for "peace" and a more "democratic settlement", which could only mean that France's colonies accept some variant the status quo. French imperialism was, at least, not pro-American.

When making such alliances the party was keen to keep the labour movement in check, denouncing struggles not under its control as "provocations" against the PCF and defining itself as a respectable party of law and order. Given the party's reliance on the dogma of "socialism with French colours" working-class revolution was placed far off the agenda — calling for a reforming government to nationalise industry and maintain France's independence from American foreign policy, the PCF's aim was to use parliament to gradually introduce a state-capitalist version of "socialism from above".

From this perspective, rank-and-file direct actions common to May 1968 such as factory occupations, fights with the police, and workers and students expressing the desire to take their lives into their own hands were seen as little more than "manoeuvres" which cut against the envisaged legal course to socialism. In May the PCF did not want the working class in its millions to seize power. Here was a real chance to unleash the potential existing in the working-class movement generated after the crushed strikes and lock-outs of the preceding decade, but it was not the process the Communists had planned.

The party, which played no role in the acceleration of the student movement or the mass downing-of-tools, welcomed the "opportunity" offered by the elections called by Charles de Gaulle at the end of May, even as the rest of the left vociferously complained that the vote was a tool to bolster the government's authority in its battle to break the strike. The PCF was apparently more excited by the prospect of winning some extra seats in the Assemblée Nationale than the idea that workers might overthrow de Gaulle themselves and reorganise society.

This was in contrast to the culture of the far left, such as



Maurice Thorez

the Mouvement du 22 mars student activist network central to struggles at the Nanterre faculty of the University of Paris and its most prominent member Daniel Cohn-Bendit. This group, which brought together anarchists, Trotskyists and Maoists, knew the elections to be a "treason" which would kill the movement, displacing the class struggle from the factory gates, where the mass of workers were organised collectively, onto the far safer terrain of parliamentary tit-for-tat by machine politicians.

Unlike the staid Communist bureaucrats, the M22M had the sentiment of a movement which wanted to transform society from below, both in its utter rejection of the etiquette, standards and mores of a conservative order, and in its refusal to respect the authority of the trade union officials or "left-wing" politicians. The student revolutionaries exclaimed "Power to the Imagination!" because they sought to create a radically different, equal and liberated world, not just to shuffle the names and faces in the Cabinet. However, their forces were very weak — even the largest groups on the revolutionary left could count their members in the hundreds.

GAULLIST FRANCE

The post-World War Two era had seen an unprecedented era of success for the French economy — the "Trente Glorieuses", three decades of unbroken growth which would not sour until the 1973-6 recession. There was strong and steady GDP growth — an average annual rate of 4.5% — and unemployment rates much lower than in the modern era. The buzzword throughout these decades was dirigisme, heavy state intervention in the economy and central planning through the Commissariat au Plan. This comprised an attempt to end the fragmentation of the pre-war era, in which the economy was dominated by small producers. It involved encouraging mergers, for example in banking and chemicals, and the formation of "national champions", large and technologically developed industries better able to challenge the hegemony of the USA and Soviet Union. The post-war programme also involved nationalisations of major industry and infrastructure — Renault, EDF (electricity), GDF (gas), SNCF (railways), Air France and the PTT (telephones and post) were all under state control.

However, the most significant development in the French economy during this period was the decline of the peasantry — whereas immediately after World War Two, 30% of the workforce were employed in farming (twice as many as in industry), this figure halved over the next twenty years, with many small producers pushed into taking manufacturing jobs. Despite this de Gaulle could rely on solid electoral support from the Catholic peasantry — on social and family questions the Gaullist project contained a strong authoritarian-paternalistic streak, which may be construed as contradictory with its régime of rapid modernisation of the economy. France had to catch up with the 20th century world order, but on the terms of its particular conservatism.

In spite of the country's overall economic well-being, the rights of the working class and the labour movement were under attack from the plans of a series of governments.

An agenda of technocratic and modernising reforms of the economy (including the education system), the Fourth Plan (1962-5) and Fifth Plan (1966-70) envisaged rapid GDP growth of 5% plus, but the neo-Taylorist production lines' reliance on relatively skilled "ouvriers specialisés" yielded diminishing returns, a disappointment which the ruling class met with cuts in pay packets and changes in working hours. GDP growth far outstripped increases in workers' salaries, the 48 hour working week was commonplace, and job insecurity became rampant in a society where it had been common for workers to have one job for their whole life. The government had a nominal commitment to a full employment economy, but planners regarded all effective guarantees of workers' jobs — either by law or via the existence of a labour movement — as obstacles to modernisation.

Although low by modern standards, the number of jobless was rapidly increasing. At just 250,000 in 1966, by spring 1968 the official figure had surpassed 500,000 - the real figure may have been closer to a million. While this was partly due to layoffs in sectors such as mining and manufacturing, a huge proportion of the new unemployed were young workers — as many as half of them were under-20s. The average period of unemployment was five months — but for over a third of unemployed youth, their spell without work was between seven months and a year.

At the same time, the welfare state was undermined. In April 1967 Prime Minister Georges Pompidou asked the National Assembly for the power to rule by edict (les ordonnances) for six months, which he used to mount a rough-and-ready "renovation" of the welfare system. The contribution patients had to pay for their own healthcare was increased by 50%. The Social Security administration was broken up into three separate departments, and the elections of administrators abolished. Trade union control in the administration councils was reduced from two-thirds to one-half of administrators, to the benefit of the CNPF employers' federation.

Furthermore, the government's power in the economic sphere was backed up with centralisation and an effort to undermine political opposition, including anti-union laws, suppression of those who supported Algerian independence and rule by decree.

The state broadcaster, Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française, was subject to constant government interference and censorship. Much as high school history classes avoided politics by not covering any events after 1914, TV news was heavily weighted towards foreign affairs and social problems in other countries. In March and April 1968 ORTF avoided any reference to student disquiet, and even once the general strike had taken off it gave sparse and highly partisan information, the government having banned all live reports from demonstrations.

Gaullist authoritarianism did not stop at controlling the media. The government had no qualms about breaking up demonstrations as it attacked its opponents' right to organise. The worst single incident was the slaughter of Algerian demonstrators in Paris on 17 October 1961, not widely known for its full horrors at the time. As France continued the war in its North African colony, 30,000 French Algerians held a protest at the introduction of a curfew which banned them from venturing outside between 8:30pm and 5:30am. Although the government was now giving up on hopes of clinging onto "French Algeria", it was also desperate to keep order in its own backyard, and the protest was bloodily suppressed. As many as 200 unarmed people were murdered by the police in the Paris suburbs that night.

Similarly, on 8 February 1962, during a banned trade union demonstration against the far-right Organisation de l'armée secrète — a group of European colonists who committed numerous terrorist acts in their campaign to keep Algeria in French hands — nine CGT members were killed by the police at the Charonne métro station. As in October, the policeman in charge was Maurice Papon, not only a leading ally of de Gaulle, but also a man who had served as a leading official in the Nazi puppet regime which had ruled France during World War Two, presiding over the Mérignac concentration camp.

Aside from the Algerian question, the most important conflict between the government and the labour movement during de Gaulle's presidency was over the mining industry, which was subject to extensive job cuts and pit closures at the start of 1963. The trade unions, meanwhile, demanded an 11% wage increase in order to catch up with pay in other sectors. The Minister of Labour, Michel-Maurice Bokanowski, would only meet halfway, and as the union leaders failed to take decisive action — calling a one-day strike for 1st February and then cancelling it — workers determined to defend their livelihoods grew impatient. 20,000 Lorraine iron miners threw themselves into action on 1 March, and by the 5th all of the mines in France were on strike.

Charles de Gaulle decided to break the strike and used his executive power to proclaim a decret de réquisition, ordering all of the miners to return to work immediately without any negotiations or resolution of their grievances. Despite the strong image of the General, who had not only been a leading figure in the Resistance, but had also been France's "saviour" after the 1958 military coup — the miners refused to give in. Having played his hand, de Gaulle was severely weakened, and, confident of success, on 13 March miners from Lorraine held a large rally at the Place des Invalides in Paris. Workers from the RATP rail depot in Clichy walked out in solidarity with the miners, and at the rally raised a banner calling for a general strike to support the miners. But while the railworkers wanted to buttress the miners' strike by linking it up with the ongoing dispute in the RATP, the CGT dismissed talk of unity:

"[the idea of a general strike is] utopian, since it leads people to believe that all the problems of the Gaullist régime could be resolved by such a measure. That allows you to imagine easily enough what such an initiative might result in."

The miners' strike continued for almost five weeks, winning significant wage increases across the board, but not delivering a long-term blow to the government or its Plan. And it was not long afterwards that the CGT decided to start a series of rolling strikes of RATP workers — but having refused to link this up with the miners' dispute, the action was left isolated and weak. The Gaullists were rather more determined than the union leaders in fighting for their class interests, and on 31st July 1963 brought in legislation requiring five days' warning before any strike in the public sector. This severely curtailed the right to strike of around a third of the workforce, even though this entitlement was embodied in the 1958 Constitution. Furthermore, since the law required the trade unions to give the warning for a strike — and conferred responsibility upon the unions if strikes happened without warning — the net result was that any strike without the authorisation of the trade unions became illegal, despite the fact that only a fifth of workers were unionised.

And even when they did use their power and called for generalised actions, the union leaders were poor at building unity among workers. For example, in January 1965, the CGT and CFDT (along with the white-collar CGC and FEN teachers' union) called a strike for all public sector workers in France. However, they spread the action over two days, with the net result that the workers were not striking in unison — for example, workers in Social Security took action in Paris on 27 January, but in the rest of the country, only on the 28th. Such was the lack of unity that when the tiny union for métro drivers decided against taking action on the morning of the 27th, the union confederations had absolutely no other means of stopping the normal functioning of transport — hence everyone else in Paris was able to go to work as normal, weakening the action. While a one-day strike on the same demands on 11 December had seen 80% of workers on the picket lines, overall participation on 27-28 January stood at a mere 40%.

This series of small, unconnected actions lacked coherence and exhausted militancy by leading the workers down blind alleys. Other big struggles, such the 23-day strike at the Rhodiaceta textile factory in Lyon-Vaise, in March 1967, were left isolated. A subsequent strike there in December resulted in 92 workers, including 10 CGT shop stewards, being sacked for "spoiling machinery". In the face of victimisations, mass redundancies and a 20% drop in wages, Rhodiaceta workers had a difficult fight on their hands. And although their colleagues in Besançon

had previously made a mark by staging the first factory sit-in since June 1936, workers in Lyon-Vaise were left wanting for solidarity strikes.

While the miners in the east, workers at vehicle factories such as Dassault and Berliet and the Saint-Nazaire dock-workers all put up a fight against poverty wages and lay-offs, the union confederations never built links between different struggles or turned the simmering level of discontent into any united campaign to pressurise the government. However, a wave of belligerent strikes across France in the winter of 1967-68 displayed a desire on the part of many workers to resist Gaullist "reforms". The actions, initiated by young workers in Le Mans, Caen, Quimper and Redon, were well out of the control of the unions, with rowdy demonstrations and pitched battles with riot police in the streets — in January 1968 Caen even saw looting, so wild were the protests. If the unions would not lead a fight against the government, the workers would have to do it themselves. Coming at the same time as the battle for sexual freedom in the universities, the importance of this wave of workers' struggle was not lost on the revolutionary left — the Situationists saw hope in the Caen uprising that the big explosion was near. The Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires — a recent split from the Communist Party student section (UEC) and tied to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International's local section, the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, an ancestor of today's LCR — also had some involvement in this strike wave:

"JCR militants were actively involved, for example, in the strike at Rhodiaceta in Besancon and at Moulinex in Caen. During the SAVIEM strike, Caen was the scene of sharp clashes with the police in which Molotov cocktails were thrown... The JCR's social composition is beginning to change. The neighbourhood committees which were at first composed entirely of students now also include workers. In some cities workers are in the minority. In Rouen, neighbourhood clubs consisting solely of workers have been formed. In Le Mans the JCR club is made up almost exclusively of workers"

It is not surprising that it was young workers who were most radicalised in the winter's strikes — unemployment was most common among youth and many others only had casual work. But with such tiny numbers the PCI-JCR struggled to win over and keep working-class cadre — it was "mostly a student organisation". While the small *Voix ouvrière* (now *Lutte ouvrière*) group used its student members to distribute industrial bulletins to workers where they could, the revolutionary left as a whole found much greater success winning influence over struggles in the university milieu. Indeed, Trotskyists (particularly the JCR) as well as anarchist currents and Maoists all played a significant role in stoking the student discontent which started the great movement on the campuses of France in early May. But here our particular focus is on the activity of the working class in the May events, and so we take up the story from 11 May 1968, after the "Night of the Barricades" in which 20,000 mostly student demonstrators had fought with CRS riot police at 60 road blockades in Paris in an effort to reclaim the Sorbonne faculty of the University of Paris, which had been occupied by police in response to mass student demonstrations.

THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

In the aftermath of the Night of the Barricades, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, having rushed back from a diplomatic visit to Iran, addressed the nation, calling for a cease-fire and announcing an amnesty for the students.

"I have not ceased to follow with great sadness the development of the university malaise, and the demonstrations which it has given rise to, which have degenerated all too often to the point that the government has been forced, as is its duty, to re-establish order.

"Since my return barely three hours ago I have met with the relevant ministers and, after speaking to the President of the Republic and obtaining his consent, I have decided that the Sorbonne will be re-opened from Monday, with courses starting again in the care of the rector and the deans. These measures will be taken so that examination candidates may not suffer any delay to their studies. Also, as of Monday, the Court of Appeal will be able to — within the law — redress the demand for release posed by the convicted students. These decisions have been taken with sincere goodwill towards the students and confidence in their good sense.

"In handing back control of the Sorbonne, we also put it back to its calling, study taking place under mutually agreed discipline and, if it is needed, will take measures to renew our university. The government and I have not ceased to make clear that this renewal is indispensable. We already have plans and shall pursue them in collaboration with lecturers, students and all interested parties.

"I ask everyone, in particular officials of organisations representing students, to reject the provocations of certain professional agitators and to cooperate with a rapid and complete compromise. For my part, I am ready for this compromise. May each hear my call."

But the resulting police retreat from the Sorbonne did not stop the union confederations pressing ahead with their national strike on 13 May. Rather, Pompidou's concessions were like oxygen for the movement — they had shown that it was possible to fight and win, that the government was not invincible, as, evidently, Pompidou had been forced to over-rule his ministers and the authorities had changed course. This partial climb-down was not enough to appease student anger after the previous days' CRS attacks, and they could hardly be expected to invest confidence in that same government's "reforms". The head of the Paris police force admitted that Pompidou's declaration was "right-on, but too late" .

The ensuing national strike day was remarkable for the involvement of all the unions, marking somewhat of a break with the strategy of the labour movement over the previous decade. While the tactic of one-off 24 hour actions had been used by the CGT and CFDT on several occasions before in fights against unemployment, the "Fifth Plan" and Social Security cuts, Force Ouvrière had on each previous occasion resisted the idea of joint action. Nationally, the number of strikers was in the millions, although participation varied widely from industry to industry, even amongst workers who had strong records of militancy. 80% struck at Renault's Billancourt factory, but only 50% at the Cléon plant; at Rhône-Poulenc's chemical works in Vitry — a good example of grassroots involvement in the factory occupation later in May — only half of workers walked out on the 13th ; similarly, only 90,000 of 320,000 SNCF (rail) workers responded to the union leaders' call. However, the strike of EDF (electricity) workers across France was very effective- the power cut-off was such that the Peugeot factory in Sochaux could not function at all, even if its employees had wanted to work. All this despite the fact that the strike had only been announced 48 hours in advance, breaking laws requiring five days' notice for public sector strikes.

Even more impressive were the demonstrations held that day in every major town and city across France. As we shall see, not only were these protests much larger than the unions had anticipated, but they were also more difficult to control than the PCF and trade union leaders might have hoped.

IN PARIS

The organisation of the Paris march displayed certain labour movement bureaucrats' desire to keep workers away from the influence of students, many of whom they saw as "agents provocateurs". While the main trade union contingent started marching from the Place de la République at 3pm, the students and teachers were not allowed do so until 4:30pm, having earlier gathered near the Gare de l'Est — a tactic to keep them apart. But the unity of students and workers against the government was a powerful force, and as many as one million people turned out in Paris on 13 May to raise their voices against state repression. Such was the size of the demonstration, it was not until 7pm that the last protestors could leave the start point.

Enforcing the division between demonstrators, Communist Party stewards surrounded the workers' contingent, forming a cordon several lines deep in order to prevent student "infiltration" from behind. Libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton estimates in his account of the march that there were "at least 10,000 such stewards, possibly twice that number", a force composed both of PCF members and of functionaries in Communist-run municipalities from across northern France.

Unhappy to be cowed by such gamesmanship, packs of hundreds of students from the Mouvement du 22 mars, JCR and the Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes (Maoist students) broke away from the students' and teachers' bloc. Rather than simply following the march through the city, they sprinted through the sidestreets and overtook the trade union contingent as it passed over the Pont St. Michel into the Latin Quarter. Much to the surprise of the CGT leaders at the head of the demonstration, young revolutionaries dared to march in front of them. Free from the Stalinist stewards' embargo, the students did indeed "infiltrate" the workers' contingent, where they were welcomed as comrades — albeit with some surprise and bemusement — rather than pushed away like so-called "dubious elements". Indeed, many of the slogans of the far-left were taken up by the demonstration as a whole, such as "Dix ans, ça suffit" (Ten years, that's enough [of de Gaulle]"), although by all accounts radical students were more keen on the slogan "All power to the workers" than the Stalinist and reformist-led workers themselves. And while the Mouvement du 22 mars activists demanded "an end to the classist university", the UEC called for "a democratic university" — their choice of words concealed the chasm between the hope for revolutionary overhaul from below and tinkering with the system from above.

A further move by the Communists to silence "ultra-leftists" was their proclamation that "only the literature of the organisations sponsoring the demonstration will be allowed". But it was naive to expect revolutionaries to accept a silencing order — coming at a time when students were in open revolt against the state and had taken over their campuses for the sake of freedom of expression — and the PCF's edict was ignored.

"A man suddenly appears carrying a suitcase full of duplicated leaflets. He belongs to some left 'groupuscule' or other. He opens his suitcase and distributes perhaps a dozen leaflets. But he doesn't have to continue alone. There is an unquenchable first for information, ideas, literature, argument, polemic. The man just stands there as people surround him and press forward to get the leaflets. Dozens of demonstrators, without reading the leaflet, help him distribute them. Some 6,000 copies get out in a few minutes. All seem to be assiduously read. People argue, laugh, joke. I witnessed such scenes again and again"

As the million-strong snake, with its union banners and red flags, winded towards the Place Denfert-Rochereau, the Stalinist stewards moved into action. They lined up in rows five or six deep, a barrier on either side of the march, as the CGT loudspeakers called out "the demonstration is over, go back to your homes". In their eyes, a token act of protest was now over. What they really didn't want to happen was for the workers to go to the meeting called by the Mouvement du 22 mars, a mass assembly on the Champ de Mars to discuss the day's events and what action to take next. Dany Cohn-Bendit sat on the Lion de Belfort statue, exhorting the demonstrators to head to the M22M meeting — but stewards were positioned to make sure that people could only leave the Place Denfert-Rochereau down the Boulevard Arago, in the opposite direction . All the other roads were blocked off — the stewards had torpedoed the M22M's plans. Despite the PCF's long history of suppressing the far left — including physical attacks on Trotskyist meetings — Cohn-Bendit was caught unawares by their methods on 13 May.

"That really showed Dany's naivety. He didn't understand the way the trade union movement worked at all"

Later that night at the General Assembly of the Sorbonne — now occupied by the students — Daniel Cohn-Bendit asked J M Catala, UEC general secretary, to explain his comrades' manoeuvre against the M22M. Brinton recounts the conversation;

""Simple, really," sneered Catala. "The agreement concluded between the CGT, the CFDT, the UNEF [students' union] and the other sponsoring organisations stipulated that dispersal would take place at a pre-determined place. The Joint Sponsoring Committee had not sanctioned any further developments..."

"A revealing answer," replied Cohn-Bendit, "the organisations hadn't foreseen that we would be a million in the streets. But life is bigger than the organisations. With a million people almost anything is possible. You say the Committee hadn't sanctioned anything further. On the day of the Revolution, comrade, you will doubtless tell us to forego it 'because it hasn't been sanctioned by the appropriate sponsoring Committee...'

"This brought the house down"

OUTSIDE PARIS

While the capital was the centre of the 13 May demonstrations, there were also large protests in the rest of the country. 50,000 people turned out in Marseille and in Toulouse, 25,000 in Bordeaux, 20,000 in Nantes and 12,000 in Saint Nazaire.

For most of the day the demonstration in Nantes proceeded in orderly fashion, and in the evening 12 trade union representatives went to meet the prefect of police, Jean-Emile Vié, in order to place their demands upon the local authorities. Told that only the government in Paris had the authority to cede to their demands, the unions told the demonstrators to disperse. But local students' union leader Yvon Chotard, a sympathiser of the Situationist International , had already warned the protestors of the risk that union officials; "aside of any trade union or political apparatus, we shall forge our unity in the streets" . Now 2,000 — mostly young — workers and students, angry at the authorities' obstinacy, did just that. From 6pm, a barrage of cobblestones thrown at the Prefecture's windows was followed by an all-out assault on the building. Rocks and stones were used to bring down the gates (with the aid of a bulldozer), before burning both Vié's car and the tricolore which they had torn down from its flagpole. Building three barricades around the building, they resisted the riot police with hastily prepared Molotovs.

As the red flag was hoisted above the building, the shaken Vié called his superiors in Paris for help. He spoke to Interior Minister Christian Fouchet's under-secretary;

"My Prefecture is about to be invaded — I ask you, give me permission to open fire!"

"If you can't hold out, why don't you take refuge in the Châteaubriant sub-Prefecture?"

"Run away? Surely you don't think so? That would be disgraceful!"

Had the police opened fire to crush the riot, the city could have been drowned in blood. Instead, Vié was forced to capitulate totally; announcing "You win!" he withdrew his official complaint against the students (as did the rector), said that there would be no legal repercussions for anyone involved in the day's events, and agreed that the Nantes students' union could get their state subsidy back . Thus 13 May marked a real success for the movement in Nantes.

But in Toulouse, despite the existence of the powerful

The aftermath of the "night of the barricades"

JCR-animated Mouvement du 25 avril at the university, the 13 May demonstration was predominantly a protest of the unions — both industrial and agricultural. Out of the 50,000 at the rally in the Place du Capitole, only 1,200 were students — noticeably, well under half the number of students who had demonstrated for the Rector's resignation seven days before, or indeed the attendance at the students' and teachers' assembly on the social role of the university at the Palais des Sports on Thursday 9th. Clearly, the kind of semi-insurrectional militancy seen in Nantes was not common in most major cities — in Toulouse, even the mayor turned out for the protests.

EXTENDING THE STRIKE?

The day was over — and, as the mainstream left and union functionaries saw it, so was the strike. A few workers kept the strike going — 500 stayed out at Claas, a farming equipment producer in Woippy, a suburb of Metz, and at Badan shunting yard (near Lyon) the workers locked the boss in his office after two of their colleagues were sacked in the wake of the 13 May strike . But it would be at least three days before other SNCF workers would join them, and overall little momentum had carried through into a second day of action. The union leaderships had designed no particular strategy for what to do next, even if their national day of action had served as proof to millions of the power of a united movement.

However, the student revolt and the strong trade union action of the 13th had changed the dynamic of the situation — workers who had long been looking for an outlet to resist the Fifth Plan, rapidly increasing unemployment and Social Security cuts now saw a beacon of hope. It really was possible to mount a fightback, with the solidarity of other workers and students — this reality meant that the movement had to go beyond a mere "24 hour action". Additionally, the police's withdrawal from the Sorbonne showed that victory over the Gaullist authorities was by no means impossible — not only did the students leave the authorities in disarray with their daring forms of struggle, but they breathed new life into the labour movement by giving the example of taking decisive action, standing up for themselves and their demands with concrete tactics. And so it was the workers already in dispute with their bosses — but whose struggles had previously been isolated — who took a leading role in starting the general strike.

The first significant factory occupation came on 14 May when around 2000 Sud Aviation workers blocked themselves inside their factory in Bouguenais and "imprisoned" the boss in his office. Having seen partial strikes in the preceding weeks (and a lock out on the 13th), Sud-Aviation workers now took the lead over the tactics of other French workers in dispute — they had tired of meek partial actions and decided upon a real show of strength. This step was decisive in moving the May movement as a whole onto the terrain of industrial action, deepening the government's malaise and forcing the union leaders to take sides.

The plant had long been a centre of poor industrial relations — there had been a 53-day strike followed by police occupation in 1955, a two week lock-out in 1960 and another fortnight's lock-out in 1962. Yet in February 1968, when the bosses announced a plan to reduce working time from 48 to 45 hours per week, with only a 1% raise in the hourly rate to compensate, the unions vacillated. It was not until April 9th that they held a meeting to consult Sud Aviation workers about how to react, and even then the CFDT was hostile to any strike. The usual weak resistance followed by defeat seemed inevitable.

"At the start of April 1968 no-one still believed that there would be a generalised and concerted action led by the union confederations. So each prepared to face up to the difficulties of the time by himself."

With 76% of workers voting to "take action", what then played out was a series of very short walk-outs. One hour on 9, 23 and 24 April; 45 minutes on the 25th and 29th ; only after this yielded no results did the Lambertists in charge of the Force Ouvrière section at Sud-Aviation Bouguenais propose an all-out strike.

A fight on the 30th in which the boss, Duvochel, was chased around the factory, made clear the workers' anger — but the idea of occupying the factory, or even an all-out strike, seemed risky when there was no solidarity coming from elsewhere and disarray among the workers themselves — the CGT, for their part, claimed that raising the intensity of the strikes would mean breaking the unity of the Sud-Aviation workers. So followed another two weeks of occasional short walkouts — two hour stoppages here and there punctuated by an all-day strike on the unions' joint "L'Ouest va vivre" regional day of action on 8 May.

But there was a rising tide of discontent with the unions' tactics, expressed not just through riots in the factory, but also in union meetings, and on 10 May a small majority of workers voted for an all-out strike. However, the CGT and CFDT, who were against such a change of direction, simply decreed that the decision would be deferred until a later date. There was also a lack of outside support — "In the factories across France, everything was strangely calm". This dilemma was alleviated when the workers' isolation was broken — with the nationwide strike of the 13th, and the student revolt showing the plausibility of resisting the de Gaulle administration, the Sud-Aviation struggle could take on new forms. On the 13th Nantes had not just seen a raid on the police headquarters, but also tens of thousands of workers and students marching through the streets in unity.

"The discontent was deep, very deep, and the workers were ready. All they needed was the spark — it came from the students"

The movement was no longer just a student revolt — in Nantes, as in different industries across the country, workers could find new expression for their latent ambitions. The day after the demonstration, the mood was electric, a real blow against the bosses now all the more possible;

"The mood was explosive. Slogans were shouted, and you could see the tension on everyone's faces. The handful of scabs who dared to keep on working were given a seeing to. You could feel drama in the air".

And so, after another series of half-hour actions failed to win concessions from the bosses, at 4pm on the 14th the shop stewards called an all-out strike. Such was the relief, Le Madec reports that many workers literally cried for joy now that their strike finally had some direction, shouting slogans and singing the *Internationale*! Faced with such militancy, when a group of workers headed to Duvochel's office to accost him, he had no choice but to give in — "I am your prisoner. Do to me what you will" . Along with other management staff, he would remain a 'prisoner' in the factory for over two weeks.

The doors and gates of the factory were blocked off, and only women workers and the over-60s were allowed to leave. Nervously awaiting the police and "news from Paris", 2,000 workers stayed in the plant overnight. Barricades and chicanes were set up on the roads around the factory, along with guard posts and night watches. Only delegations of trade union or students' solidarity were allowed in, bringing food and supplies. The "imprisoned" bosses were also fed, and their clothes washed in the laundry service the workers organised. Gramophone records of revolutionary anthems were played endlessly, at full blast, to remind Duvochel who was now in charge.

The right-wing papers constructed a myth that the barricades were the work of "200 anarchists" who had kidnapped 1800 workers and were forcing them to stay in the factory. But by 19 May, the spread of the strike across the country, along with the strength of the occupation, were such that the "fêtes and leisure commission" set up by the workers could feel secure in laying on a day for visitors, opening the occupied plant up to the public.

THE MARCH ON BILLANCOURT

Students were delighted to hear on 15 May of the Sud-Aviation occupation in Bouguenais. Their movement was spreading. That same day, 5000 workers halted production and occupied the Renault plant at Cléon, and on the 16th, the SNCF along with the Renault works at Flins and then Billancourt saw stoppages.
At the Sorbonne students eagerly grouped around transistor radios to hear the latest strike reports, while some stuck posters to the walls with information about the factory occupations — a task which became increasingly impossible as the movement exploded in thousands of different locales. Such "wall newspapers" at métro stations were often surrounded by crowds of dozens of people, able to get news from activist sources which the ORTF was not allowed to communicate.

The strike movement was growing sporadically, prompted by small groups of workers in disparate workplaces — but Billancourt in particular made waves. From 3pm, workers at France's largest factory walked out workshop by workshop, and as the news spread that action was afoot, by 5pm the whole factory was occupied. This was particularly significant because the CGT's plea to wait for negotiations was ignored at what was their most prominent stronghold, referred to as the "fortress of the proletariat" and the "bastion of proletarian resistance" . Furthermore, the Parisian plant was within reach of the Sorbonne. Early on the afternoon of 17 Friday, JCR activists called on the General Assembly to march on the factory to help the occupation. Just as they had invited workers into their faculty, they wanted to open up Billancourt as a revolutionary centre for all — in contrast, the CGT was not happy that the strike had broken out, and was even less impressed by the students' hope to march on Billancourt. Within a couple of hours, the Renault bureau of the union had produced a leaflet for Sorbonne activists;

"We have just heard that students and teachers are planning to set out towards Renault this afternoon. This decision was taken without consulting the relevant trade union sections of the CGT, CFDT and FO.

"We greatly appreciate the solidarity of the students and teachers in our common struggle against personal power and the employers but are opposed to any ill-judged initiative which might threaten our developing movement and allow a provocation which would lead to a diversion by the government.

"We strongly advise the organisers of this demonstration against proceeding with their plans.

"Together with the workers now struggling for their demands, we want to lead our own strike. We refuse any outside interventions, in compliance with the declaration jointly signed by the CGT, CFDT and FO unions, and approved this morning by 23,000 workers belonging to

the factory."

For Stalinist bureaucrats, the 13th May national strike had been all too much of a fillip for the left wing of the movement. It had united workers. For all of their suspicions of far-left "provocateurs", the unions' call for a national strike day had itself acted a transmission belt for the revolt, since — in part — it demonstrated the ability of the class to stand up for itself. Now they stood firmly against any such unity, isolating strikes and asserting their individual character. UNEF was put off supporting the march to the factory, and so the 1500 people who started the five-mile trek from the Latin Quarter to Billancourt did so under a Maoist banner, "The strong hand of the working class must now take over the torch from the fragile hands of the students".

As they marched past the occupied Odéon theatre and through the poor suburbs of western Paris, shouting "Come with us to Renault" and "Power to the workers", the demonstrators' excitement reached fever pitch . Filling the dark streets with renditions of the *Internationale*, *La Jeune Garde* and the *Chant des Partisans*, the marchers came to a rather abrupt halt upon reaching the factory, where they were told by CGT officials to stay away;

"Thank you for coming comrades. We appreciate your solidarity. But please no provocations. Don't go too near the gates as the management would use it as a pretext to call the police. And go home soon. It's cold and you'll need all your strength in the days to come."

The gates were blocked by trade union heavies. Workers inside the factory were interested in the hubbub outside, but could do little but peer out of the windows, unable to talk to the exotic student revolutionaries who had come to help their cause. Maurice Brinton relates the distance which accompanied the worker-student solidarity;

"We wave. They wave back. We sing the 'Internationale'. They join in. We give the clenched fist salute. They do likewise. Everybody cheers. Contact has been made..."

"A group of demonstrators starts shouting 'Les usines aux ouvriers' (the factories to the workers). The slogan spreads like wildfire throughout the crowd... ten, twenty times the slogan reverberates around the place Nationale, taken up by a crowd now some 3000 strong.

"As the shouting subsides, a lone voice from one of the Renault roofs shouts back: 'La Sorbonne aux étudiants". Other workers on the same roof take it up. Then those on the other roof. By the volume of their voices they [sic] must now be at least a hundred of them, on top of each building. There is then a moment of silence. Everyone thinks the exchange has come to an end. But one of the demonstrators starts chanting 'La Sorbonne aux ouvriers'. Amid general laughter, everyone joins in."

This, along with speaking to workers through little slits in the wall, was about as much communication as the union officials would allow — they would not even allow small, escorted delegations of students into the factory, given the need to "look after the machines" . This posed problems for the M22M and allied tendencies. Although some workers visited the occupied Sorbonne and there was some contact on demonstrations, the fact that the student activists were kept away from workplaces — the centre of the strike and therefore of the struggle — meant that they had little opportunity to imbuing the strike movement with their ideas. Visiting factories to try and speak to workers reaped little reward.

"We knew that [going to factories] wouldn't achieve anything. But we knew that we had to make links with the workers, and the way to do that was speaking to them at demos. But it was very difficult, since the Stalinists controlled some factories totally. The famous march we organised [to Billancourt]; well, as the photos show, the workers were just sitting there looking at us out of the windows. They were forbidden to talk to us."

Furthermore, as the situation stabilised, many trade union officials told the workers that they could stay at home until the "return to normality", which served to render them into geographically and politically isolated individuals rather than an organised collective. But despite the difficulty of engaging with workers the worker-student action committees at the University of Paris remained active, with initiatives such as collecting food from farmers for picket lines; laying on classes for migrant workers living in company dormitories, for example, Citroën workers from Iberia, Yugoslavia and North Africa unable to afford to get from their living quarters to the occupied factories; and producing multi-lingual leaflets. Although unable to get much of a hearing among workers on picket lines, these actions displayed their desire to solidarise with workers and invigorate an assertive working-class movement.

The left's communication problems were further amplified by a media blackout, with ORTF and later the private radio stations barred from reporting what was going on. It was not until 14th May that the state media, which had consistently played down demonstrations, put out a programme on the student movement, and that was only when its hand was forced by a threatened strike. The ORTF did not report live from protests, and on May 24th, the government issued a decree banning the use of radio-telephones and hence live reports which could let activists know what was happening. One slogan encapsulated the students' view of the service — "ORTF: The police talking to you every evening at 8".

Activists did however take advantage of exceptions to this blackout — the teachers' leader Geismar, the UNEF representative Sauvageot and Cohn-Bendit all took part in round-table discussions on both state and private outlets. With the interviewers unwilling to seem too critical of the student movement, the stage was set up neatly for them to explain their case — and indeed for Dany's banter. For example, when a Gaullist newspaper editor appearing beside him on ORTF could be heard on the microphone tapping his fingers on the table, Dany chided him for taking his listeners seriously, and when asked if the exams would take place, replied "enough of that, let's talk about something else — I'm bored of this" . Furthermore, M22M activists made no small amount of money from forcing journalists to pay to interview them or to come to their meetings.

But government tolerance of the far left was limited, and it lacked a real voice on the national scale, particularly given that it lacked serious industrial implantation. They could not speak to the mass of striking workers just by giving out leaflets in the street or selling the "movement" newspaper, Action (a co-production of the Mouvement du 22 mars, UNEF, SNESup and the Comités d'action lycéen). Hoping to break through this obstacle, on May 17th they called for a march on the Paris ORTF buildings, which had also just gone on strike.

"For the right to free information

"Workers' control of the ORTF

"Freedom of expression on the ORTF for those engaged in struggle"

However, just as at Billancourt, the leaders of the unions - in particular CGT shop stewards representing media workers — opposed any takeover of the means of communication, and denounced the planned demonstration vociferously.

"This scheme has nothing to do with an effective action to put in place the objectivity of information which the workers demand — it has the smell of a provocation which can do nothing but serve the cause of personal power [de Gaulle]"

The CGT instead put forward the demand of a "democratic reform of the statute"; its only grievance against government censorship being that the union itself was large enough to expect access to the media . The workers did not take control — the evening news was cancelled, but the union did not use the ORTF for its own ends or even effectively prevent scabs from keeping programming on the air. The government reasserted control, using soldiers to guard ORTF transmitters and stepping up the use of a radio tower positioned high up on the Eiffel Tower. Unable to do anything in defiance of the union officials, the far left were forced to back off, and the opportunity was lost.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE STRIKE

Despite the labour movement leaders' hostility to the activist left, with widespread factory occupations and the lid blown off years of pent-up anger the strikes continued to gather apace. After stoppages on the railways, airlines, buses, Paris métro, electricity and post on 18 May, France's infrastructure was in turmoil, making workers in other industries all the more ready to stop work — solidarity action was facilitated if a factory or office could not function normally anyway.

At first a sporadic movement given a spark by the students' struggle, the strike movement now spread rapidly. 200,000 were on strike by the 17th, two million on the 18th, six million by Monday 20th and, by the 22nd, 9 million workers. Even the Citroën and Michelin works, which had not known any strikes in decades and where trade union density stood at some 6-7%, were occupied. Although the unions never called a general strike and democratic structures in the labour movement were very limited, clearly the mindset of working class collectivism did serve as a kind of transmission belt for the strike. The government was left powerless as millions of workers occupied the factories — there was no way that the police force could be used to break up so many strikes, even if they were illegal. Not only was the strike movement too big to take head-on, but there was dissent among the force's own ranks. After being called in to fight the students, the police federations were angry when troublemakers were amnestied while the police were vilified for following orders. Indeed, there was some risk of the police themselves walking out, and the SGP, SNPT and SNIP published an angry communiqué in *le Monde* on 15 May:

"We didn't want any violence... We are astonished that effective dialogue with the students was not sought before these regrettable clashes took place".

With De Gaulle on a diplomatic visit to Romania until the 18th and workplace occupations not meeting with any state resistance, the strike wave spiralled and the government malaise deepened. Production stopped, infrastructure froze, and the army was called in to empty the bins. Although wary of any "bid for power", on 22 May the Communist Party attempted to pass a motion of censure against the government in the National Assembly — the Gaullists had a stable majority, but could not even cajole all of their own deputies into voting to save Pompidou's neck.

The régime looked weak and the strikers powerful. However the trade unions' lethargic strategy of tagging along with strikes but doing nothing to further the movement or connect different struggles promoted the idea that the strike was simply a waiting game until enough concessions were made by the bosses and government that "normality" could return. No other route was imaginable. And although only one in eight workers was member of a union — most French workers being represented by collective bargaining agreements anyway and therefore not joining a union unless particularly keen to get involved — the existing union apparatuses controlled the strike committees.

This was the case even in the very few instances where workers had the chance to elect their strike committee rather than their having their struggle directly administered by a CGT or CFDT office. For example, so fearful were the Stalinist leaders of what the workers might get up to if they organised for themselves, at Sud-Aviation in Toulouse not only did the local CGT bureaucracy fill out the strike committee in toto, but the local Communist Party branch did not meet once throughout May and June's events. Across France, the large majority of workers were sent home by shop stewards, who kept the occupations ticking over themselves as the workers dispersed.

It was not easy for activists to circumvent these bureaucratic measures. The Mouvement du 22 mars' generalised, abstract slogans such as "For the abolition of the bosses! All power to the workers!" or the Situationist-inspired Sorbonne CMDO's "All power to workers' councils" — fell on deaf ears. The JCR hoped to show up the union leaders and progress the struggle by demanding that the CGT, CFDT and FO themselves declare a general strike and set up a national strike committee had little influence given their very weak numbers, near total lack of implantation in workplaces and the lack of democracy within the unions.

In the large majority of cases, the trade union leaders had the strikes in hand from the point that they decided to give them token backing. However, of particular interest were the small number of cases where the grassroots did play a more active role in strikes, and so below I shall refer to some examples where rank-and-file activism confronted bureaucratic control.

RHÔNE-POULENC, VITRY

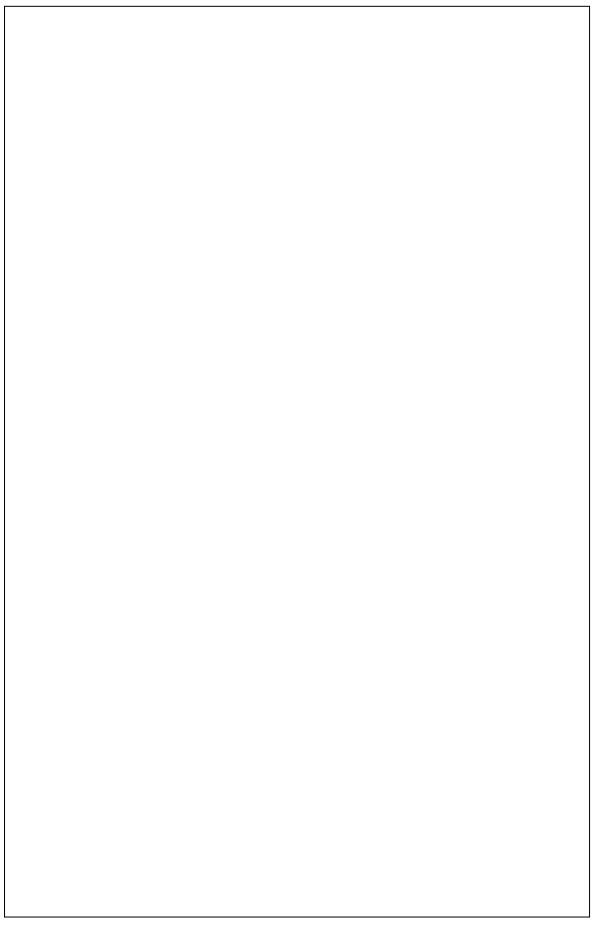
This chemical plant in Vitry, a southerly suburb of Paris, was subject to a shut-down on Friday 17th as the bosses prepared for a lockout, in the aftermath of a fairly effective action on 13 May. On the evening of the 17th a meeting of 1,000 workers voted for an immediate occupation, but since the unions' requirement of a two-thirds majority vote was not met, action was postponed until after the weekend.

The next day, with France consumed with strikes, the unions called a sit-in for Monday 20th. The CFDT nominated a slate of union officials for the strike committee, asserting their desire to run the strike on their own terms — in spite of the fact that they had not themselves initiated the strike. Many of the workers apparently thought this unfair, and so demanded that they be allowed to represent themselves in more democratic organisations. The union gave in, and 39 rank-and-file committees were created in different parts of the workplace, each delegating four representatives to a Central Committee of 156, which sat daily. The Central Committee was thus directly elected by the workers on strike — most participated in the occupation — and all of the 1850 workers were entitled to observe the proceedings.

Only one quarter of the participants in the rank-and-file committees were trade union members — although higher than trade union density at Rhône Poulenc, this fact does demonstrate that other workers did have some control over the strike. However, union functionaries had made sure that the Central Committee did not operate in the same way as the Action Committees in the suburbs, the Mouvement du 22 mars or the Sorbonne Occupation Committee. It was in reality subordinate to an Executive Committee, entirely composed of trade union officials.

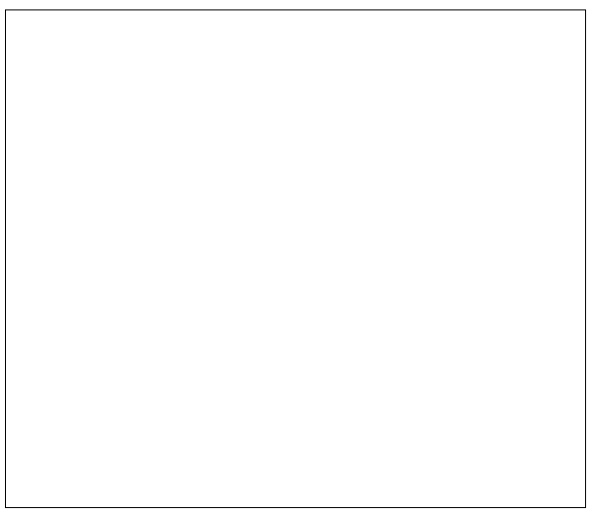
The pretext for establishing an Executive Committee was that management would not recognise any unofficial strike committees or organisations — the idea was therefore that an Executive Committee responsible to the Central Committee could negotiate on behalf of the workers.

The strikers tired over the next week, as the action failed to develop and participation in the rank-and-file committees dwindled as many workers stayed at home. Grassroots control over the strike was less effective if the action just simmered while the trade union top brass sorted out a settlement with the government in Paris, and given that union officials were perfectly able to keep such action ticking over, most workers went back home rather than sitting in the factory. During the Whitsun holiday

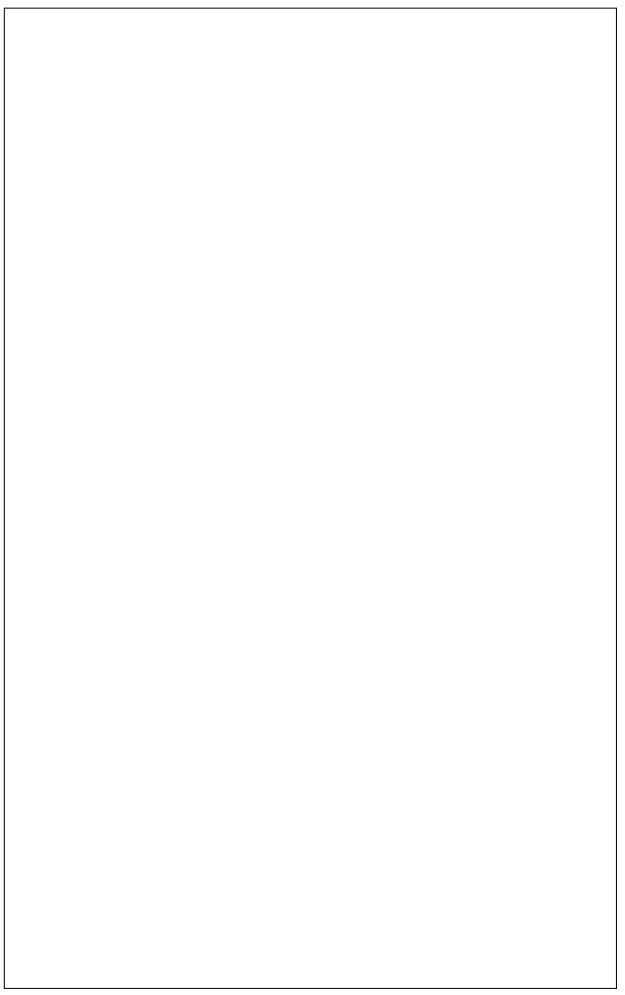


Renault Flins pillar of the strike holds out

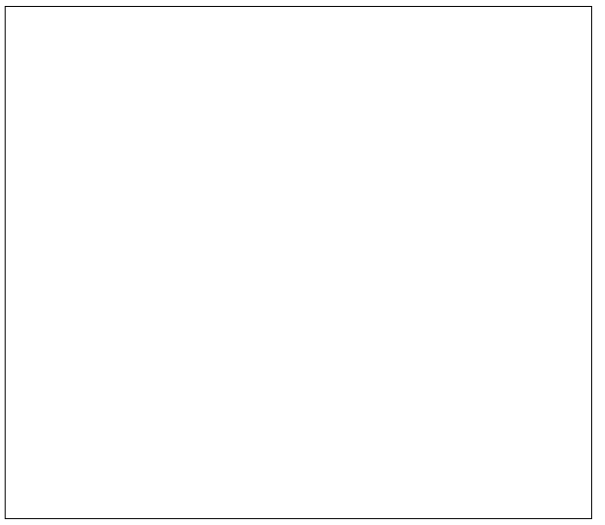
Support the postal workers' strike



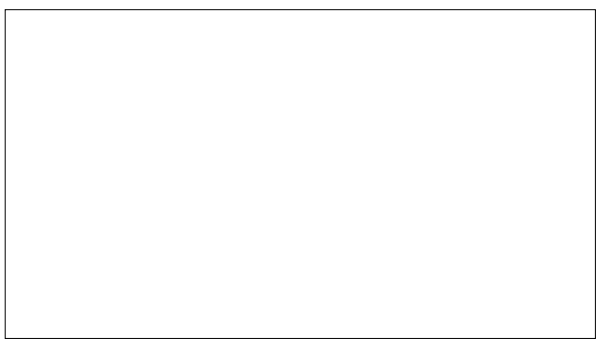
Solidarity with the railwaymen on strike. With and for the workers.



We are on the road because we have been betrayed. We want a decent CGT which defends the interests of the working class.



Workers and unemployed all united. Join your local action committees



The famous "May '68" posters were produced by an art collective, Atelier Populaire. They wanted to break through and counter bourgeois propaganda.

weekend, only a handful of people stayed occupying the plant.

At first, the Grenelle agreement for a small improvement in pay and conditions was not put to the vote at Rhône Poulenc — but in early June as the CGT pushed for a return to work across France, the strike reached an impasse. On June 12th, when the CFDT decided upon capitulation, the hollowness of Vitry's 'democratic' structures was plain for all to see. The Rhône Poulenc workers still voted 580 to 470 to continue the strike — but the trade union functionaries ignored their members' "advice" and agreed with management that they would go back without further concessions.

THE NUCLEAR STUDIES CENTRE, SACLAY

Saclay's nuclear research facility had no long history of industrial militancy like Billancourt or Flins — not only because scientists were a relatively privileged group of workers, but also in that half of its 10,000 staff were contractors of other businesses and so had no stable role at the Centre. While trade union membership was an unspectacular 1600, Saclay was unusual in the forms of action taken by workers — going on strike did not necessarily mean stopping work, but instead stopping following orders and being paid;

"Because of their craze for physics and biochemistry, their research took priority over any political or trade union activity".

This practice lent itself to a more active strike involving discussion of workers' management of the facility, and young (if well-off) physicists sympathetic to what was going on in the universities, along with the ultra-left's discourse on the control of knowledge, animated real activism at Saclay. On May 13th 2,000 workers participated in a demonstration at the Centre in solidarity with the students against repression, and four days later a meeting of some hundreds of workers decided upon strike action beginning on Monday 20th, without bothering to ask the union bureaucrats' permission. This was a skilled group of workers, acutely aware of what was wrong with the running of the Centre and the orientation of its research, taking strike action not because they needed higher wages, but because they were awakened to the need to change the structures of the facility. This was at odds with the position of both the CFDT and in particular the CGT, whose leader Georges Séguy that day declared himself disinterested with "such vacuous ideas as workers' control, reform of society and other inventions" .

As the strike began, 6,000 workers participated in a general assembly, voting through a text calling for "recallable and elected enterprise committees... holding power over management and decision-making" and attacking all forms of capitalist and bureaucratic management. Refusing to make any demands, the workers instead decided that pay and conditions would be decided by the workers when their new democratic structures were in place;

"Our demands? All that is just massive intellectual mas-

turbation... we won't ask for anything, we will take it. So we won't make any 'demands' — that word which reminds us all too much of concessions and sell outs -we will talk about our NEEDS."

A pyramid of control commissions was set up not only to run the strike but also as means of workers' management of the Nuclear Studies Centre itself — different commissions had responsibility over separate projects and areas of research. These were all elected and recallable, and carried out practical action to support other workers — for example, organising food distribution for migrant workers in the surrounding bidonville, radio-elements needed for hospitals and shifting some 30,000 litres of petrol.

Following Saclay's lead, the idea of technicians' decision-making over research was partially replicated in other nuclear studies centres — at Fontenay aux Roses the workers' general assembly, backed by the CFDT, voted to fight for co-management, as did the facilities at La Crouzille and Marcoule.

Despite the workers' hostility to placing demands on the bosses or "treacherous" negotiations, it was difficult to avoid confronting those obstacles, since everyone knew that workers' control over decision-making in a state-run nuclear centre implied co-operation with higher levels of management and government officials. Thus taking on the question of who controlled the government, within days the Saclay commissions made the case for "a government of advanced social programme and making the necessary structural reforms", and a week after the strike had begun, the slogan of self-management was replaced with a "demand for participation in the elaboration of projects" . This was not simply because the PSU was the main left group at Saclay, or that the CFDT was moderate in fear of a right-wing split, but that the workers could not operate an island of self-management as part of the bourgeois state apparatus.

Compared to the car factories or railway stations, participation in the occupation was very high — even on the Whitsun bank-holiday weekend 500 stayed in the facility — but Saclay's workers had their hands tied by the decline of the strike movement elsewhere. Having believed that the bosses were powerless to stop them taking charge of the facility and running it as their own, the workers now had no alternative but to accept a deal promising future changes meaning shorter hours, a lower retirement age (subject to the government's approval) and trade union recognition.

At the start of June the workers' commissions were co-opted into ordinary management structures. The workers' organisations were recognised, but only as advisory bodies with no veto over decision making or hiring and firing. Into the summer of 1968 they produced papers on how work should be focused. But although they could provide management with feedback on the efficiency of working practices, Saclay technicians could no longer dream of direct workers' management.

CSF WORKS, BREST

Similar was the situation at the CSF wireless telegraphy works in Brest, Brittany, which has often been cited — for example by Alain Touraine and Cohn-Bendit — as the leading example of workers' management in May 1968, given that striking workers at the plant produced walkie-talkies for demonstrators. However, any idea of taking charge of the factory and starting production again was clearly problematic, given that CSF's main client was the French Army.

Rather than taking power, the CFDT union (which represented the vast majority of workers, except for a small Force Ouvrière section) suggested that the workers establish co-management commissions which would share authority with the bosses. These were set up on 24 May, and it was intended that they should exist beyond the strike and into the long term:

"We think that the workers' commissions and the factory committee which we have created represent an irreversible choice. The strike committee has all decision-making power in a democratic establishment. Workers' commissions will be put in place in each production unit. They are responsible for everything which impacts directly upon employees in their work (working practices, job definitions, hiring and firing, promotion, etc.)"

Management rebuffed the strikers' demands, and long held out against any negotiation over management structures. The workers' commissions continued their discussions on how they might run the factory, but due to a lack of capital, attempts to set the wheels in motion again were frustrated.

After a month-long strike and having become increasingly isolated, the workers at CSF were too exhausted to continue pushing for structural reforms, and so on 21 June returned to work not under the aegis of workers' commissions but instead an ill-defined "works council" offered by management. The bosses, who nominated 5 of the 17 members of the council, did not take even this co-management structure seriously, and did not accept any compulsion to follow the works' council's advice. Despite their bold step in establishing workers' commissions and their discussion of workers' control, the retreat of the strike meant that CSF workers were able to win very little more than that provided for in the Grenelle Accords — just a 10 centime per hour wage increase to bring pay into line with Paris .

RENAULT, BILLANCOURT

It was not only student "provocateurs" who the CGT were keen to keep out of the huge Renault works at Billancourt — on 23 May a delegation of workers from the sister factory in Flins was turned away at the gates. In contrast to this attitude, student action committees made attempts, however weak, to organise workers from different factories together, for example the Comité inter-entreprises at Censier. In its 21 May report to the General Assembly, early in the strike, this committee admitted that "Sadly, it is likely that the strike will stagnate and crumble [but] it is possible that there will be a backlash if the trade union leaders wanted a return to work and some section of the strikers were to continue, hardening the strike".

Given the isolation of the plant from "outsider" influence and its long tradition as a CGT stronghold, Séguy believed that it would be simple to put an end to the strike at Billancourt, and thus went there to announce the results of his discussions with Pompidou and the CNPF at Grenelle — the flagship "bastion" of the Communist-dominated union would provide the perfect scenery for his capitulation.

However, the workers at the Renault plant scorned Séguy's desire to make a pact with the ruling class just days into their great strike. When he declared at the Billancourt general assembly on the morning of the 27th that "much remains to be done, but for the most part our demands have been met and we will not go back on what we have agreed", he and CGT president Benoît Franchon were booed loudly. The workers were not impressed by the trumpeting of the "victory" of the Grenelle Accords, and Séguy was forced to change the end of his speech to imply that the strike could continue. The CFDT officials present who spoke subsequently took the opportunity to posture as more committed to continuing the strikes than the CGT, despite having themselves signed the deal with the government. CFDT leader Eugène Descamps had after all earlier commented that "we've got the result we've been looking for for years".

But even with the government's concessions in their pocket, the Billancourt workers displayed the will to stay out on strike, raising the demands of a 40 hour week at the same pay as they now received for 48, retirement at 60, payment of strike days and a basic salary of some 1000 francs per month. But as the May movement lost momentum, Charles de Gaulle moved to reassert his authority and the CRS "evacuated" the Flins Renault works and the occupied Peugeot plant in Sochaux, the strikers' spirits flagged. Although reluctant to go back to work, the Billancourt workers were unable to force the CGT and CFDT officials to keep the movement going nationally, their own strike began to crumble. After a further three weeks' strike action, the workers settled for a 10% pay increase, payment of half of their strike days, a 90 minute reduction in the working week and enhanced union rights.

THE CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE IN NANTES

In Paris, even as the crisis reached its very peak on 24 May, the leaders of the labour movement had already embarked on the beginning of the end of "May '68". But given the government's malaise, a strike movement which had not yet stopped growing, and uneven development of struggle in different parts of France, the unions' policies were not consistent everywhere.

Nantes was perhaps the city where the shift in the balance of power was most pronounced — not just because of ongoing militant strikes, but because of a power vacuum which saw the trade unions' Central Strike Committee replacing local government for several days at the end of May. It administered food and petrol rations for a city cut off from the rest of France by truckers' blockades, while workers even exercised their rule over electricity provision. However, the extent to which workers had real control over local government or industrial production can be exaggerated.

The national strike movement had begun in the western region ten days previously, as campaigning at Nantes University and developments in Paris had shown the way workers in dispute locally. After the 13 May demonstration, in which the police had been over-run and their headquarters taken over by 2,000 protestors, the municipal authorities were in some disarray, and the movement was increasingly confident in its ability to fight and win. Moreover, the CGT was not so dominant in the region as it was nationally, while a long series of strikes at the Saint Nazaire docks and the Sud Aviation plant in Bouguenais meant that radical ideas such as those put forward by the student ultra-left had far more currency among the working class.

Indeed, Nantes and its environs enjoyed a visit from Daniel Cohn-Bendit on the weekend of 18-19 May. His meeting at La Briandais attracted a thousand people — not only did they listen intently to his talk on the students' relationship to the labour movement:

"the students have no lesson to hand down to the workers. They have learned the methods of workers' struggle. The conjunction comes in the streets".

But they held a long debate on the way forward for the movement. The discussion continued until 1.45am, over five hours after the meeting had begun. The next day Dany was turned away from the docks by CGT heavies, but there were more than 2000 students and workers at the forum he staged on the beach, continuing where they had left off the night before and discussing the spectre of revolution in small groups under the sun. The same day, the Sud-Aviation plant was opened up to the public, who could meet the strikers and better understand France's first major factory occupation — aside from the behaviour of certain trade union officials, Nantes' strike movement had a genuinely open, fraternal and democratic character.

In the context of combative strikes, some groups of striking workers in the western region began to take charge of their workplaces. The electricity plant at Cheviré-le-Rouge, which had been occupied by its 293 workers on 18 May, continued to deliver power both to hospitals and to farmers who needed to keep their milking machines going. On 2 June the strike committee's deal for an average salary rise of 150 francs a month was not enough to get the workers to go back to work — they were showing their muscle.

"The bosses haven't been here for two weeks, but everything's working. We can keep the current going without them".

Nantes University saw successive departments go on strike from 7 May, before the institution was put under the authority of students and teaching staff via the Mouvement du 13 mai. Law students voted to abolish exams, and set up eight commissions to examine such topics as the content of their course, selection, the social role of the university and the control of knowledge. Strike committees including teachers, students and parents were set up in the lycées.

Furthermore, from 24 May, starting in the working-class suburb of Les Batignolles, comités de quartier (district committees) were set up to organise food distribution in each part of the city. These committees included workers, residents and students irrespective of union and political affiliations, enjoying a much greater level of popular participation than the Action Committees, which were mostly confined to the capital itself.

They were nevertheless radical — the comités de quartier built solidarity links with the agricultural unions CNJA and FNSEA in surrounding villages. Not only did they collect food to distribute to strikers and their families, but also sent delegations to help the farmers gather potatoes. Truck drivers started a blockade of all of the roads leading out of Nantes in order to check up on the supplies leaving the city — needing no prompting from their union .

The agricultural workers' unions had called a "national day of action" for the 24th, and that day 200,000 stopped work. Nantes was "invaded" by peasants from the local area as the CNJA and FNSEA demonstrated in conjunction with students and teachers. In the capital of the region which had seen the strongest royalist resistance to the French Revolution, protestors covered signs on the Place Royale with the legend "Place du Peuple". At 5 o'clock, the police Prefecture suffered its second assault in as many weeks, with a thousand of the demonstrators ignoring the call to disperse and setting up dozens of barricades. The barrage of stones thrown at the police was met with tear gas grenades. In the subsequent seven hours of fighting 100 protestors were injured, along with 108 police.

The police had taken a beating, but the seven students arrested on the evening of 24 May were released by 1.30am. By this stage the authorities were nevertheless well aware that their criticisms of the force's violence and amnesties for arrested protestors had fomented anger among the ranks, and after this demonstration, they kept the forces of order off the streets for some days. The local council appeared overwhelmed by the crisis, and it was the trade unions, already working together in many strikes, who decided to fill the power vacuum.

On 26 May a Central Strike Committee was initiated by the local Force Ouvrière section (UDFO), led by anarcho-syndicalist Alexandre Hébert. The committee included two delegates from each of the CGT, CFDT, UDFO, FEN, CNJA and FNSEA unions, and, from 30 May, the students' union. The following day, it met in the town hall and declared its authority over fuel and food rationing and which stores were allowed to open, while bringing in a strict régime of emergency price controls. Direct agricultural production and distribution, along with the controls, meant huge price cuts — a kilo of potatoes cost just 12 centimes (down 80%), while a kilo of carrots or a litre of milk cost 50 centimes (both down by over one-third). Prices were enforced by pickets of striking workers. Free food

and medicine was available for poor strikers' children. All under-threes were given a one franc milk token, whilst a 500g bread token was provided for each child aged three or more in addition to the milk .

They introduced a makeshift rationing system, the committee filling school exercise books with long lists of names and allocations. They produced vouchers for individuals, and stamped small shops' supply receipts, with the words "Central Strike Committee — Supplies Service" — the fuel vouchers were marked variously as "French Republic", "CGT — CFDT — CGT-FO — FEN — AGEN" or just "Union départementale Force Ouvrière". Although most large grocers were not allowed to open, their stock was not requisitioned and there was no discrimination stopping anyone who applied for provisions from getting them. Nantes' Centre d'histoire du travail stocks a number of vouchers and receipts in its archives, notably some even allowing banks to obtain petrol for the sake of "transferring funds".

Nor was the Central Strike Committee hostile to the local authorities, as shown by the advertisements for the meeting held in one suburb on 26 May to inform the public of what the committee was up to;

"The Mayor of Rezé, the municipal councillors, the strike committees of Rezé (of workers, teachers and pupils' parents) are concerned with the subsistence of the population during this current situation."

Local politicians who could hardly be termed as class-struggle socialists shared a platform with strike leaders, all of them saying that their priority was to ensure smooth running of supplies. Indeed, the press release of the Central Strike Committee upon its founding simply said that "[the committee's] goal is to resolve several problems, such as that of food supplies" , markedly similar to the role which social democratic mayor André Morice hoped he could carry out; "the municipality...will strive to make sure that the essential needs of our population are satisfied. It will carry out an operation of welfare provision for citizens most in need of help" . Henri Simon, of Informations correspondances ouvrières fame comments that the union leaders and local authorities were far from antagonistic, "The whole thing was staged. It is a myth, it was a farce". Such claims seem highly plausible given that the Lambertistes, a significant part of whose modus operandi was trying to sink its representatives into labour movement machinery in the utmost secrecy, were furthermore heavily tied up with local Freemasonry.

Keeping up supplies was not the only issue at stake when the Central Strike Committee was founded. There was tension between the trade unions' authority and that of the comités de quartier, and some local groups resented the unions' decision to take control from above, particularly at a time when in Paris the unions were negotiating with the government for a deal to end the strikes. One of the Batignolles district's strike committee's four 'public information' posters used the slogan "A massive wage increase without changing political and economic structures = a huge increase in the cost of living and a return to poverty in a few months from now", implicitly criticizing the trade unions' policy.

Numerous accounts have eulogized Nantes's Central Strike Committee — claiming that it "amount[ed] to an autonomous soviet"; displayed "workers' government based on direct control of the economy" ; or even refer to it as the "Nantes Commune" . However, the picture is much less clear-cut, even beyond the fact that the committee held power for less than a week. While the trade unions did undertake some executive and economic powers, they did not enter any direct verbal or physical confrontation with the government, expropriate private property or attempt to break up the existing machinery of state.

At Sud-Aviation the union leaders explicitly rejected the idea of workers' management of the factory, a proposal which had some currency among the workers there. The CFDT argued that all was possible was a vaguely outlined "partnership" with the bosses, and at the strike committee meeting where this proposal was meant to be discussed, the union mandarins chose instead to argue for some two hours about whether it was permissible to hold a Mass in the plant. Despite the CFDT's programmatic commitment to ""substituting for the industrial and administrative monarchy... democratic structures based upon workers' management", it like the other unions rejected this idea in practice. Equally, when Yvon Rocton of Force Ouvrière suggested on 20 May that the imprisoned Sud-Aviation boss Duvochel should be offered as an exchange for imprisoned labour movement activists, the CGT and CFDT refused. Indeed, one week later, when Duvochel phoned in to a Europe No. 1 radio discussion with Eugène Descamps and Georges Séguy, the CGT leader said that he disapproved of the boss's being "imprisoned" , and, soon enough, a CGT official was flown in from Paris to secure his release, which took place on 30 May.

Although its price controls and rationing were no doubt of great use for striking workers and those living in poverty, the Central Strike Committee hardly represented sort of challenge for power, and few in Nantes perceived it as such at the time. Local papers *Nantes-Éclaire* and *Ouest-France* displayed absolutely minimal concern at the activities of the committee, whose creation warranted no coverage on their front pages . Through the strike the press instead featured bland front page headlines like "Normal situation on the markets", echoed in their narrative; "strikers picket the markets, particularly keen to prevent any abuse of price controls". The anarchist Noir et Rouge group were not beset with excitement;

"Given the deficiency of the old authorities (police prefecture and municipal government) but also with their active support, the trade unions jointly used their respective organisations, and supporting bodies, to put in place a new power structure. Far from reopening the huge modern distribution centres — of which the workers were on strike — which would have meant taking 'risks' and an attack on the rule of private property, instead they supported the small-scale farmers and shopkeepers. Stuck in the middle between this 'social base' of theirs and the old police and administrative apparatus, the inter-trade union committee would limit itself to pathetic vacillation until the 'return to normality'."

The end of the Central Strike Committee was a direct result of the agreement with the government in Paris. While on 31 May all of the unions had demonstrated for joint demands — student-worker partnership lasting longer than it did in the capital — the CGT and FEN refused to take part in the 13 June rally. Local trade union officialdom was keen to encourage the return to work, with the bureaucrats Brard (CGT) and Ayoul (CFDT) telling strikers that they broke the "unity" of the workers' movement by staying out, and exaggerating the isolation of those who held out longest. In their leaflet CNTC: ouvriers, étudiants unis dans la lutte, striking bus drivers made the point that the strike was in itself the display of workers' unity. The students' Mouvement du 13 mai saw the parallels with the Communists' efforts to end the 1936 general strike, and reprising the old slogan of the PCF leader Maurice Thorez, produced a tract "Comrades, we must know when to end a strike (yes, after the satisfaction of all of our demands)" .

But the strikers' demands would not be met, and the battle was soon lost. This was not the result of the piecemeal antics of the Gaullist "Committees for the Defence of the Republic" or the right-wing students' union FNEF, who represented the most explicit opposition to the strikes, as much as the inaction of the labour movement's own leaders. As the government in Paris seemed to be getting back onto its feet and the unions signed the Grenelle Accords, the Central Strike Committee made no attempt to hold on to its power — by the end of May the local authorities were firmly back in control. On the evening of the 29th the police asserted the return to normal by breaking up a road blockade at Sorinières manned by 100 Force Ouvrière truck drivers and their student supporters, injuring two . The Central Strike Committee soon folded, giving on petrol rationing on 1 June, and, while the trade unions made the gesture of issuing their remaining food tokens until as late as 18 June, the strike was clearly collapsing.

THE GAULLIST COUP

In their efforts to end 1936's strike wave, the Communist Party had proclaimed that:

"One must even know how to agree to compromises, in order not to lose any strength and, more importantly, not to make the fear and panic campaigns waged by reactionaries any easier. The working class, having imposed wage increases and the right to exercise trade union rights, must protect its unity with middle-class workers, particularly the peasants, by not separating itself from them through more accelerated [social] progress. Thorez reminds us that "Not everything is possible," and that the guiding word of the party remains "Everything for the Popular Front! Everything through the Popular Front!"" .

Thirty-two years later they clung to the same dogma — the strikes had to end so that "progress" could be achieved by parliamentary horse-trading. On this note the French labour movement's leaders eagerly encouraged the Grenelle Accords, which set out a framework for an end to the mass strike, and the same trade unions which controlled the strike committees and acted as the official representatives of the working class now accepted government concessions in exchange for delivering a back-to-work movement. However, given the strikers' reluctance to accept the terms of the agreement, the police's disarray and the militant student movement, the government was by no means in the clear. Although stifled by the trade union bureaucracy, the working class had shown itself to be a powerful social force, and the parties of the left were keen to make concrete political gains out of the strike movement.

For the groupuscules which had sparked off the revolt, any consideration of inspiring some sort of working-class bid for power seemed unthinkable. Cohn-Bendit explained that "the Revolution" was not about to happen, but there was some hope for a government of the left parties:

"The best we can hope for is that the government falls. You mustn't dream about smashing the bourgeoisie... Let's suppose the workers hold on and the régime falls. What would happen? The left would come to power. All would then depend on what it did. If it really changed the system — which, I must say, I doubt — it would find a following and that would be fine. But if we get a government à la [Harold] Wilson, whether with or without the Communist Party, offering nothing but minor reforms and adjustments, the far left would again regain strength and one would have to continue the real problems of the running of society, workers' power, and so on."

Similarly, the PCI-JCR called for a "workers' government". However, much unlike the PCF, who called for a "popular government and democratic union" with social-democrats and bourgeois liberals, they did not call for a vote for any party in June's elections. Even if a government headed up by Waldeck Rochet or Mitterrand disappointed workers and was shown up as inadequate, the far left still lacked either the hearing among the working class needed to take propagandistic advantage or the structures necessary to pose an alternative. Moreover, the JCR was unwilling to call for a Communist vote when it had such an opportunity to recruit masses of student activists disgusted with the PCF and opposed to the election's taking place.

However, the CFDT, PSU and UNEF — reformist elements independent of the Stalinists — were keen to pose a challenge to the government themselves, and the rally they held at the Charléty stadium on 27 May attracted hundreds of PCI-JCR activists and followers. At the centre of the CFDT-PSU-UNEF initiative was Pierre Mendès-France, a Parti Socialiste Unifié leader who had served as Prime Minister as a representative of the bourgeois liberal Radical Party from 1954 to 1955. An outspoken and unqualified supporter of the students, Mendès-France was, as the Paris police chief put it, "the link between the gauchistes and the Left" — a respectable face for the May movement.

The Charléty gathering attracted some 50,000 people. Headlining the event were defectors from the Stalinist camp, including expelled PCF dissident Jean-Pierre Vigier and ex-CGT official André Barjonet, who criticised the union leaders, sparking cries of "Séguy, resign!". Other speakers called for a new government, which in front of the activist left implicitly suggested the possibility of a Pierre Mendès-France presidential bid. Throughout the event, Mendès-France himself sat on stage listening attentively, but did not get up to speak. He had made clear where his allegiances lay, yet, as the Observer's correspondents pointed out, the CFDT and PSU were "flirting with the revolutionaries" but unwilling to take the risk of saying anything that might be construed as inflammatory.

Rather less subtle was the approach of François Mitterrand, another social democrat politician looking to make a bid for power. Mitterrand had long been somewhat of an ally of the Communist Party — they had supported his presidential campaign in 1965, while his FGDS had drawn up a memorandum of understanding with the Communists in February looking to a joint governmental programme — but on May 27th, when the PCF asked for negotiations with Mitterrand in a bid to avoid being outflanked by Mendès-France and his supporters, it was crudely rebuffed. He would not benefit from association with the Communists, and ignored the letter he received from the PCF declaring itself "in favour of building a popular government." He instead opted to hold a press con-

Daniel Cohn-Bendit

ference on the morning of Tuesday 28th in which he suggested that a "provisional government" be constituted in order to replace de Gaulle if and when he lost the June 16th referendum on "participation" . Mitterrand told the 500 journalists assembled that a ten-man cabinet would then arrange fresh elections and keep the state ticking over. Although promising that this administration would not be politically "exclusive", Mitterrand's use of the phrase "provisional government" was somewhat alarming for some, buttressing the right's scare-mongering about a leftist coup d'état. Indeed, Mitterrand was plainly not simply extending a hand of reconciliation to the Gaullists — addressing the question of who would lead the proposed government, he commented that;

"If necessary I will assume that responsibility, but there are others who could equally take on that role. Primarily, I'm thinking of Pierre Mendès-France."

Amazingly, Mitterrand had not even asked Mendès-France for permission to suggest that he could lead a provisional government. But to the Communist Party, it looked as if their erstwhile ally was positing a centre-left lash-up which brought together the FGDS and PSU but specifically excluded the largest party on the left. The PCF had been cuckolded. Asserting his right to serve in any "provisional government", Waldeck Rochet issued a bitter response;

"There can be no left-wing policy of social progress without the active collaboration of the Communists... We will not allow the replacement of the present régime by another... marking a return to a detestable past when governments claiming to be on the left pursued a policy of the right, excluding the working class and the Communist Party from the direction of the country's affairs."

With the results of the Grenelle Accords still up in the air and the left manoeuvring to form a government, de Gaulle was very worried. Mitterrand's press conference appeared to show that the left was readying to topple the President. While Pompidou had wanted swift reconciliation with the PCF, de Gaulle remained wary of the threat they posed to his régime, and bereft of any idea what to do, he cancelled his meeting with the Cabinet on Wednesday 29th (using the pretext of a retreat to his country house at Colombey). In a crisis of confidence which he later described as akin to those he faced during France's darkest hours in World War Two and during the 1958 Algerian coup, de Gaulle even pondered whether to resign. Surprising the media by not arriving in Colombey, he went "missing" for several hours.

But then the senescent General turned up at Baden-Baden, France's largest military base in Germany. This was the course of action — a show of force to reassert control. Meeting General Jacques Massu, he asked whether the army could be relied on to maintain order, and, indeed, whether the troops would fire on demonstrators. The generals' response was decisive — 20,000 men were to be moved from Germany to Metz in eastern France, while an operational base would be set up at Verdun. In a further show of force the Gaullists organised their supporters into "Committees for the Defence of the Republic" in every town and city.

The army had built up its forces over the previous few days, and despite the government's severe crisis the 77-year-old General de Gaulle was prepared to make one last stand to defend his régime. As hysterical as his response may seem, given the Communist Party's lack of real will to action, the right and the government seem to have been preparing for counter-revolution. When Organisation de l'armée secrète leaders like Raoul Salan were freed from prison in early June 1968, many saw it as a gesture of gratitude for the army's loyalty.

On the afternoon of 30 May, de Gaulle addressed the nation with a fiery speech asserting his right to govern, and fulminating against the Communist Party's "totalitarian enterprise" he promised that "I will not withdraw. I have a mandate from the people. I will fulfil it". Calling for the population to defend France against the supposed coup threat, de Gaulle, fresh from Baden-Baden, declared his determination to keep order.

"As the bearer of legitimate [authority] over the nation and the Republic, I have, during the last 24 hours, considered all contingencies — without exception — that will allow me to maintain it."

Casting aside the proposed referendum, he announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and fresh elections which would give a mandate the government to break the strike movement. As his four-minute speech came to a close, Gaullist choreography came into its element as the eruption of a "spontaneous" demonstration in Paris, in reality organised by de Gaulle's UDR party machine, brought a million people into the streets. This was the spectacle which crowned the ruling class fightback. Many of the demonstrators wore military medals — most had tricolore flags, and sang *La Marseillaise* in loud voice. On 30 May, the right displayed their own brand of militancy akin to that of the last three weeks' student protests, venting their anger at "the disorder". Aside from official slogans like "Communism shall not pass" were more odious reactionary sentiments such as "France to the French", and "Cohn-Bendit to Dachau". Much unlike on the workers' and students' protests, here there were no troupes of CRS to break up the demonstration .

After weeks of dithering, de Gaulle had taken action and proven his strength, smashing the left's hope of unseating his government. Mitterrand called the Gaullist coup at the end of May "a call to civil war". But the right had already won.

On 31 May the strike movement started to crumble in the face of widespread demoralisation and the government onslaught. Before dawn armed police started to break up the pickets of workers at postal sorting offices and fuel depots, knowing them to be important to state infrastructure but also sites where employees were poorly organised. In factories, offices and other workplaces across France, the bosses and trade union representatives sat down to shore up deals, almost exclusively along the lines of the Grenelle Accords, which were then validated in secret ballots of the staff. Whilst the strikes had, of course, not been started by organising referenda of all workers, including scabs and the demoralised in decision-making was an easy way to put the action to an end. The Stalinists at the head of the labour movement supported the back-to-work movement, arguing that the most important struggle was that to be held at the ballot box on 23 June .

"With the elections giving our ongoing struggle for democracy a concrete and close-at-hand goal, it was in the interests of the workers to lead the movement to a victorious close on the terrain of [strike] demands, and that the elections take place normally [without being beset by strikes]."

While on the whole the union leaders told workers to vote as they wished in back-to-work ballots, rather than agitating for a 'yes' or a 'no' vote, they were patently engaged in an effort to put an end to a strike movement they had never wanted to take place. For example, CGT shop stewards told workers in each RATP depot around Paris that they were the only depot still out on strike, and therefore isolated and without hope of success, even though this was not the case. They told transport workers that the notoriously militant Lebrun depot had voted 80% to 20% in favour of a return to work, when in fact the figures were exactly the opposite. Of course, the bar on workers from different enterprises talking to one another or organising their strikes jointly greatly aided this effort at deception. Further tactics included holding strike ballots repeatedly until achieving the "right" result, or as in the case of the CFDT-dominated strike committee at Rhône Poulenc in Vitry, ignoring the workers' decision completely. Here the established trade unions' monopoly on the right to negotiate in collective wage bargaining gave them a free hand to do as they pleased, with little accountability to the mass of the workers.

Over the Whitsun weekend participation in the factory occupations dwindled to almost nothing — for example, just a couple of hundred out of the over 25,000 workers supposedly mounting collective action at Billancourt took part on June 2nd-3rd. While in some industries workers refused the offer to return to work — like in Social Security where on June 4th less than 25% of workers voted to accept the CGT-CFDT deal with management (out of a 42% turnout) , much like workers in the postal service — over the following few days the strike movement withered away. There were however some last outposts of resistance. Even though there was little concerted fight within the monolithic CGT for the union to stand up for its members, workers at Renault in Flins and the Peugeot plant in Sochaux did resist the harsh government attacks on their strikes, as, keen to "clear up" the last bastions of the May movement, the Gaullist authorities sent in the CRS to break up picket lines. Both factories had serious industrial muscle — large groups of car manufacturing workers with a history of activism posed the last remaining danger to a government keen to ensure the "return to normal" in time for the first round of the elections.

RENAULT, FLINS

The incident sparking police intervention at Flins came on 4 June, when in response to the bosses' call for a vote to end the strike, workers set fire to the ballot boxes and voting papers. At 3 am on the 6th, the plant was invested by 1,000 CRS and gendarmes mobiles, who kicked out the occupying workers and announced the "freedom to work". Two mass meetings organised by the unions that day failed to define a clear response, although with only a trickle of Renault employees taking the opportunity to go back to work, the door was open to a counter-offensive. The most prominent attempt — a worker-student action committee mobilisation announced for June 7th — was condemned by the CGT and the solidarity effort denounced:

"We have learnt that the students' and teachers' unions have decided to call for a march on Flins. We must make clear our complete disagreement with an initiative which risks engendering a police provocation and damaging the Renault workers' strike. Workers at Flins, as at Billancourt, have shown that they are able to resolve their problems with methods [of action] chosen by the workers and carried out in their interests."

In reality, the student-teacher demonstration had been planned after a delegation of Flins workers visited the Beaux Arts in Paris seeking support . The Mouvement du 22 mars and the Action Committees responded to the CGT's allegations;

"The students and teachers who have come to Flins do not at all seek to lead the workers' struggle — they know well enough what they must do. We have come here to bring our solidarity and to put ourselves at the service of the workers. We will do nothing except what the workers ask us to do"

This they did very effectively — students from the Beaux Arts were packed off to Flins with 10,000 leaflets early on the morning of the 7th, in time to meet the first shifts of workers. Having met a hundred young workers at the factory gates at 5 am, the student contingent helped to block arriving coaches, telling the workers,

"The cops are holding the factory. You can't go back to work with a gun pressed against your back! The strike isn't over!"

Most of the 7.30 am shift joined in the picket, and with merely 10% of all workers scabbing on the strike, the CRS had to repel the picketers towards the Place de l'Étoile in Elisabethville. Although the factory itself was virtually inaccessible, the Place de l'Étoile was the scene of a rally of some 7,000 Flins workers, backed by several hundred students and teachers. The Renault employees chanted raucously to demand that the Mouvement du 22 mars's Alain Geismar — the Maoist and former general secretary of the SNESup — be allowed to speak, breaking the union bureaucrats' monopoly. While the CGT had attacked the students' and teachers' solidarity efforts, the strikers were enthused by the idea that they might actually resist the police invasion of their workplace, and some detachments of workers headed back towards the factory. As they did so, the CRS counter-attacked.

The result was a riot. There were three days of intermittent skirmishes in the streets, fields and gardens surrounding the factory. The authorities were determined to crush the strike by any means necessary, with a brutal show of force aiming at terrorising the local population. Anyone under the age of 30 automatically became a target for arrest, while workers were beaten up and cars from outside the département had their tyres slashed, the police assuming all of these to be outsiders involved in troublemaking. On the night of the 10th, a police charge forced 17 year-old UJCml supporter Gilles Tautin off a bridge and into the water. He drowned. After the violent clampdown on the strike, Tautin's death and a lockout by Renault management to prevent re-occupation of the factory, the workers voted to go back on 17 June.

Flins was a rare case in point. At the national level, the labour movement bureaucracy claimed that the real task of the masses was to consolidate their victory by electing a "popular government". The PCF blindly tailed de Gaulle in shifting their efforts from the terrain of industrial action to that of electoral politics and parliamentary manoeuvring, where the collective organizations of the working class could exert far less pressure. But promoting national reconciliation, the Communists were keen to distance themselves from the revolutionary wing of the May movement. PCF politburo member Roland Leroy commented that;

"When he snubs the national flag, [Cohn-Bendit] harms the interests of the working class. This is absolutely fundamental. The working class both in itself, and in its struggles, represents the national interest. It does not let the big bourgeoisie take the tricolore flag hostage. Leading his troops against the PCF and trade unionists, he objectively acts in the interests of the bourgeoisie."

Similarly party leader Waldeck Rochet made clear that;

"We always have, and always will, fight unhesitatingly against the nihilistic attitude towards our nation preached by certain so-called "revolutionary" anarchist elements. The Communists love their country passionately."

It furthermore claimed that "provocateur" leftist groups hostile to such French patriotism had "done everything to distort and discredit the mass movement standing up to the Gaullist authorities" .

The PCF's efforts were not enough to prevent a record Gaullist landslide, losing 600,000 votes and more than half of the seats it had held since the March 1967 elections . The Stalinists blamed this on the revolutionary left, "Each barricade, each car set on fire, swung hundreds of thousands of votes to the Gaullist party" , as if workers and students should not have defended themselves from riot police in the interests of shoring up a higher electoral tally for the PCF — the party which had betrayed the general strike; the party which had once again, like in June 1936 and late World War Two saved the day for the bourgeoisie by calling off the class struggle; the party which was the gravedigger of socialism. There was no-one to blame for de Gaulle's triumph but the Communists themselves.

Occupying Sud Aviation

The first factory occupation in 1968 took place at the Sud Aviation aircraft plant at Bouguenais near Nates. François le Madec, a CFDT union activist at the factory, gave this account of the first night of the strike in his 1988 book *L'aubépin de mai* (The Hawthorns of May). Translated by David Broder.

On Monday 14th there were the usual sporadic walkouts. Management were going to meet with the union reps in early afternoon: it wasn't exactly clear why, but something big was in the offing. The atmosphere was electric. During the first afternoon walkout, between half past two and three o'clock, there was a meeting in the corner of Workshop 4. The workers looked like ants in this massive space: they wandered in from all sides, hands dug into their pockets. There were a few whistles and shouts as the now busy crowd packed out the workshops.

The mood was explosive. Slogans were shouted, and you could see the tension on everyone's faces. The handful of scabs who dared to keep on working were given a seeing to. You could feel drama in the air. A scab who braved the pack was sprayed with a rivet gun: he went pale and stood as stiff as a starched shirt.

The workers walked out and stood outside the windows of the bosses' office, where the union reps were being received.

*Le père Duvoche*l [a song about the boss] rang out, followed by the *Internationale*. Waiting for the next walkout planned for half past three, workers started to talk. There were lively debates and animated conversations. Would the bosses make a reasonable offer?

At half past three was another meeting of all the staff. The union reps had emerged from the bosses' offices. The CGT rep climbed on a metal mounting-block to speak, but saw worried faces… What news did he have? When he had silence, you could only hear the dull thudding of the compressors and the echo of the machines' belts turning. He reported that the bosses' answer was still no.

At once the crowd started to break up: the union reps shouted "Silence!". At first the workers ran, but then slowed to creep round the western side of the huge offices. The stairs were weighed down by the mass of men gripping the guide-rails. Low voices could be heard, chanting "Ho! Hiss! Ho! Hiss!". Finally, the door crept open and the crowd burst into the tracing room, their cries dampened by the soundproofed ceiling. The temps were petrified: what were they going to do? The crowd called on them to join their number, but there was a moment's hesitation… the workers tried to contact the temps' reps; the crowd advanced through the offices; the anger mounted; but a few temps didn't want to follow. Finally, the temps' reps called for a walkout: there were cries of victory among the occupiers. Through the windows you could hear some of the workers crowded in the yard.

They took the stairs down to the director's office on the first floor. Songs and slogans reverberated through the corridors as the crowd flowed into the hall and occupied the management corridor.

The director came out of his office, flanked by his personnel manager. He forced a smile and said "I am your prisoner, do with me what you will", a statement greeted with shouts of "Duvochel will give in! We want our pay back! Sign the deal!". The director replied "You're not going to get very far with that".

Anger was reaching a climax. The crowding in the corridor was terrible. The lights kept going out. Fists drummed on the walls to the rhythm "Com-pen-sa-tion". The director was pushed about roughly, and in vain did he try and escape from the hands of this gang in their dirty blue overalls. An ORTF reporter they found there with a camera in his hands (no doubt, he was invited in by the bosses) was precipitously pushed through an office door.

It was impossible to breathe. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, and the smell of oil on the workers' overalls and sweat made the crowding unbearable. A bar of soap flew over the workers' heads, striking the boss on the shoulder, and this was followed by a jet of water thrown from the toilet door. What was going to happen? Would somebody lose their nerve? For now at least they were only using their fists to strike up the *Internationale*.

Already at this stage some people scared by the power of the revolt had hurried out of the premises. But a spontaneous occupation was beginning. Union men arrived and told all the boilermakers to help them seal shut the exits in order to stop workers reluctant to strike leaving the building. Men were already guarding the main exits.

In the management corridor a state of relative calm had been restored, and the director was allowed to telephone Paris. They waited. They sat around. They offered the boss a chair. The men sat on the floor of the corridor and began a series of revolutionary anthems, which would last throughout the first night. Their throats were dry: a litre of red wine passed from mouth to mouth. They offered some to the boss but he refused. They played cards.

The union reps returned from the heart of the factory. They asked them what was happening with the blockades at the exits: they told them that the boilermakers had done a good job, and the metal doors on the western and eastern exits had been soldered shut. The other doors, albeit not soldered, were bolted shut. The occupation was a fortress. There were speeches in the yard, and the workers organised patrols to watch over the exits.

People who did not participate in the action (or barely did so) emerged from their offices and workshops, impatient in the expectation that the problem would soon be sorted out… they didn't understand the top management. The Paris bosses were totally silent, refusing to negotiate.

The normal time for clocking off came and went, and they had to start thinking about dinner: some people went to the boulangerie and the local grocer. Helped by a few volunteers the canteen staff prepared some Viandox [a product similar to Bovril].

They rigged up a loudspeaker in the bosses' offices, and the first refrains echoed around the factory.

At the main entrance there was something of a panic, with a few people finding good excuses to escape the plant. It must be said, people were very worried, fearing that the police would come to clear out the factory and thinking about the consequences. Food supplies were a problem: the local boulangeries would not open again until the morning.

News of the occupation spread quickly: workers' wives and friends came to see what was going on, hoping to speak to their husbands through the gates or talk to the

Inside the plant: a public meeting for workers and their families

men perched on the walls. The food brought by the workers' wives and their support on that first night was a vital fillip for the troops' morale.

But still no news from Paris. Now everyone was thinking about the night ahead. For beds they used boxes, stretchers, packets of fibreglass, rags, shavings of wood…

Some scabs still hoping to escape sidled along the fences, concocting plans for escape, but the more militant pickets going round were keeping an eye out for them. Workers reluctant to strike were out in force at the main entrance, despite the authorisation given to women and workers over sixty years old to leave the plant. Some pretended that they had fallen unconscious or were having nervous breakdowns. An ambulance took them home, the noise of its siren leading many people in the surrounding area to believe that there had been a fight in the factory and the ambulance was taking away the injured.

There was in fact only one injury: someone broke their leg trying to jump across a ditch. But it would be difficult to get opponents of the strike to admit the truth.

As time passed and night came, there was more and more tension at the main gates. There was a busy crowd: people were here, there and everywhere. All the other exits were tightly guarded by pickets, already solidly in place around the factory.

But the main gates were the most vulnerable, and it was here that people wanting to leave the occupation made all their efforts to try and escape. Most of them were temps, of whom there were around 150. They were increasingly angered as all their attempts to break through the blockade were rebuffed. The gates were in the hands of "People's Guards" who enthusiastically carried out the unions' joint instructions.

Faced with failure the people trying to escape tried to work together. Some line managers who would later take part in the "scabs' committee" harangued: they had to bloc and try and break through the blockade by force, even if the human blockade was five or six ranks deep in front of the gate.

The picketers were ready and stood steadfast. The confrontation was brutal, and no quarter was given. In the mêlée you could hear no few daft "philosophical" arguments the rights of the individual and the right to work. But every scab who dared say his piece would get a lecture about workers' rights!... They were allowed to speak, but not to leave.

But these pious "philosophers" were stubborn: they insisted… The situation remained rather dangerous, since they were organised together, angry and had their eyes fixed on the gates that weren't being opened for them. But God knows what they were waiting for or what they expected to get out of this: a pressie from the picketers, perhaps? They seemed totally unaware of the importance of what was happening; they were only motivated by their little daily routines and the desire to go home.

For God's sake! "Democracy" can be difficult at moments like that!

The defence of the main gate was reinforced, since it was important strategically. If they managed to get through there, the whole movement might have gone

Keeping guard

Barricaded in

under. Furthermore, given the course of events, the picketers became skittish and less willing to give in. But these were only arguments about organisation and exasperation caused by the events: most of the time they just had to go out and get snacks or take food for a striking worker from one of their friends or relatives.

On the other hand, for a few vulnerable souls ill-prepared for such happenings the workers' "militia" banded together at the entrance raised a few moral and intellectual dilemmas! Without doubt, many of them only had a few fairly naïve ideas about factory occupations gleaned here and there from little history books or sentimental and superficial memories of June 1936.

But those who wanted to leave met with failure, and their exit-by-force was never carried through… their rubbish leaders eventually gave up. They thought about making a few individual openings through the security ring surrounding the factory, hoping to evade the patrols who continued to circle the factory and scoured through the bushes; the bushes where a few scabs had planned to hide themselves for a few hours before reaching their selfish little abodes.

The other scabs stood silent in front of the entrance or returned in small groups to the yard, waiting for better times. Most of them, despite everything, did manage to escape during the first days and nights of the occupation. But that would be no great threat to the success of the factory occupation. Nor was it a great loss for most of the people actively involved in the "new commune" which was being born. These people would later be found in the scabs' committee. To each his own: the fainthearted outside, the "workers making history" inside.

What mattered was that the gates held, and the movement with them… Some will always make great play of criticising the harsh measures taken to achieve this, at a crucial stage of the occupation. But this type of preaching has no grip on events. They talk a lot about the brutal attitude of over-zealous pickets and of kidnapping… But to the over-zealous preachers who make these easy criticisms we say "Could it have been done differently?" Given the circumstances, the so-called "prisoners" were agents provocateurs causing trouble and regrettable confrontations which would not have taken place if it was not for their reactionary and anti-democratic attitude to a strike which was proven to be supported by the majority of workers. They are poor little preachers who know nothing except how to jabber on about the little 'morals' of their exploiters.

The seals on all the doors and exits of the factory were now secure. All along the 1,800 metre perimeter wall which encircled the factory, workers devoted themselves to careful work planning and strengthening guard-posts. Personal and collective initiative burst forth everywhere. They set up installations reminiscent of soldiers' watchtowers in the countryside. The blockade took place quickly and efficiently. They had to hurry as night closed in: it would be a night of unforgettable memories for all concerned, on one side or the other. A clear, cool night… brimming with activism: hard for a few splitters but exciting for the participants...

News of the occupation quickly spread to the households of Nantes and the surrounding area. A few cars driven by worried wives circled the plant, stopping before the guard post fires. Names were shouted over the walls and through the bars. But it was difficult to make contact with this or that occupier lost in the mass of men scattered across the workshops, offices, wagons and boxes. Only later, when loudspeakers were installed at the main entrance to beam out the names of the comrades asked for, could contact finally be made more easily.

Throughout the night a team of volunteers went from one post to the next carrying an enormous stew pot full of burning hot bouillon and snacks, which served as some comfort on this cold night. For almost everyone this was a night without sleep, a night of nervous tension, all eyes focused on the guard-posts and ears straining to hear news from Paris. But Paris slept…

The big offices were lit up, a permanent headquarters. There, there was no question of trying to sleep even for a minute. It was the place where picketers and activists came to see the boss. For many this was the first time they had met: each of them introduced themselves. In the last few hours "power" had changed hands in the factory. An atmosphere of free discussion reigned; conversation with the old "authorities" was direct and good-humoured; there was curiosity but not hatred.

Revolutionary anthems followed one after the other without end. The corridor was very musical indeed: some songs were moving, sung in unison or listened to in complete silence by the bosses' guards, and made these people of strength and solidarity - smoking cigarette after cigarette as they supervised the door – watch the birth of this new brash and loud working-class order with deadpan faces. What were they thinking about as the night wore on? Without doubt, they could only have a limited view of things given their lack of direct participation in events outside the office at the guard-posts.

The cold, pale dawn had not yet come to an end, an odd sight for these tired men shivering with insomnia and the nerves build up over the last month. The frippery bodies started to clamber out of the boxes they had slept in. Their bearded faces hung heavy; their eyes were as red as the last night's brazier fires. But the moment would pass: time to wake up and have a coffee. Down the length of the wall they could feel the hawthorns; a perfumed bouquet for the "campers" every breakfast-time. Spring and the strike had both arrived: in the morning daisies and hawthorns would start to flower on the cabin roofs.

Throughout the day on 15 May, the factory and its surroundings looked like a giant building site, but the workers soon tidied up the scene and their ramshackle structures, beginning to construct coverings and cabins. No need for leaders or orders from the union for this ant colony. Solidarity and self-discipline could work wonders.

The "commune" took shape, a "People's Administration" putting things in place with surprising efficiency. Participants, supporters and locals were struck dumb by all this upheaval. Soon enough, around a kilometre down the road from the factory, a sign put up by the trade unions' joint committee delineated the borders of the occupied area. It invited passers-by to take a diversion down the Couëts road to get to the Château-Bougon aerodrome.

A hundred metres from the plant they duly erected a blockade with chicanes for cars; there was a special path through for pedestrians. Notices were dug into the ground. They reworked all the rules. To take the "rue de l'Aviation" required a special pass: the "exterior" guard stopped people not from the factory venturing within their "perimeter".

Only trade union, political party and student delegations that came in the early hours of the morning to bring solidarity to the striking workers were allowed in: but they were not allowed past the red barriers placed around the plant.

At the main entrance they set up an information service with loudspeakers: its work was unceasing and tiresome, since workers' relatives, delegations and all sorts of visitors kept coming in. By the end of the afternoon the square in front of the entrance was packed with people. Until late in the night the loudspeakers did not stop calling people and broadcasting communiqués and trade union instructions. From now on this noise would be a constant part of occupation life.

The speakers were relentless: such-and-such comrade was called to the main entrance… this comrade… that comrade…

After the last day's anger, an unbelievably tumultuous mood continued to reign at this "iron gate", both on the walls and among the crowds. Some of them had spent practically a whole day and night on the wall. Wives, mothers and friends were pressed up against the gates trying to see this or that friendly face, get a message across or pass across some food. Along the walls of the offices loads of young women were pressed against each other, trying to hold the hands of their young husbands or fiancés stretched through the bars of the windows.

Whatever comfort this may have offered the striking workers, the situation was plenty confused and tense. The picketers kept the doors firmly sealed, since the success of the occupation could hardly allow for any laxity. Despite this there was a certain degree of movement between the occupation and the outside world, with small groups of men going out to see their family on the other side of the gates: there was time to embrace, have a little chat and hand over a basket of food before going back. When these men had returned, others could go out in their place. They therefore tried to have some sort of balance between the numbers going out and the numbers coming in. Although there were, inevitably, some confrontations between the "supporters at the gates" (who were not exactly delighted) and the workers coming out, the men understood that they had to return all the same.

To guarantee permanent control over this worn-out post the exhausted picketers were taken off duty. They decided to "liberalise but formalise" the exits with a system of badges. Each worker was given a little card on which was written his name, the time of exit and return. The badge was signed by a trade union rep and recorded in a book. This safe-passage also allowed him through the road blockades. This "administrative and regulatory" measure allowed them bit by bit to relieve the gates while maintaining the strength of the occupation. All these details did nothing to cloud the mood.

But a bolt out of the blue in the afternoon changed the atmosphere, as the first report of success passed into the hands of the information service. The speaker cried with joy: the Renault factory at Cléon is on strike! The news spread through the aisles… the men crowded at the gates were overcome with fresh enthusiasm, and the announcement met with cries of joy.

Now there was one question on everyone's lips: is the strike going to spread? Renault: that meant something… everyone was filled with hope. Would there be a general strike tomorrow? They had talked about it so much before, but never really believed it.

After Sud-Aviation-Bouguenais, now Renault – Renault-Cléon, but Renault all the same. Those names meant something. Tomorrow, they would catch the attention of the French workers – the struggle had to go further, even if there would still be more waiting. Solidarity messages poured in from across France.

Activists around France had started to pay attention to Sud-Aviation. Following on from the students, they felt like all France's eyes were on them. History was in the air. Soon the sun would shine all the brighter: they learned that 1800 workers at DBA (Lockheed) in Beauvais had gone on strike.

"Camping" inside the occupation