

The Battle of France: May '68

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FE Introduction

During the months of May and June 1968, the mass strikes and uprisings that occurred in France shook the foundations of an unsuspecting world. This crisis for capital appeared at a time when newspapers like *The New York Times* and *le Monde* were describing the French people as bored and lethargic and they weren't completely inaccurate—the French were bored with their lives under capitalism and their boredom exploded onto the streets of Paris on May 18th creating a new reality for several weeks.

In the end, because of the intense violence of the State and the traitorous actions of all the leftist parties and organizations, combined with the inability of the insurgents to go beyond their initial acts, the breath of fresh air that was let loose during those days was stifled.

In an attempt to gain a perspective for our own activity, we are presenting two views of those events. The first [below], written immediately following the uprisings, is reprinted from a long-defunct SDS publication, CAW; it was written by an unknown participant. The second ("May-June 1968: The exposure," FE #295, November 3, 1978) by Jacques Camatte comes from the vantage point of almost a decade.

This has undoubtedly been the greatest revolutionary upheaval in Western Europe since the days of the Paris Commune. Hundreds of thousands of students have fought pitched battles with the police. Nine million workers have been on strike. The red flag of revolt has flown over occupied factories, universities, buildings, shipyards, primary and secondary schools, pit heads, railway stations, department stores, docked transatlantic liners, theatres, hotels. The Paris Opera, the Folies Bergeres and the building of the National Council for Scientific Research were taken over as were the headquarters of the French Football Federation—whose aim was clearly perceived as being "to prevent ordinary footballers enjoying football."

Virtually every layer of French society has been involved to some extent or other. Hundreds of thousands of people of all ages have discussed every aspect of life in packed, non-stop meetings in every available schoolroom and lecture hall. Boys of 14 have invaded a primary school for girls shouting "Liberte pour les filles." Even such traditionally reactionary enclaves as the Faculties of Medicine and Law have been shaken from top to bottom, their hallowed procedures and institutions challenged and found wanting. Millions have taken a hand in making history. This is the stuff of revolution.

Under the influence of the revolutionary students, thousands began to query the whole principle of hierarchy. The students had questioned it where it seemed most "natural": in the realms of teaching and knowledge. They proclaimed that democratic self-management was possible—and to prove it began to practice it themselves. They denounced the monopoly of information and produced millions of leaflets to break it. They attacked some of the main pillars of contemporary "civilization:" the barriers between manual workers and intellectuals, the consumer society, the "sanctity" of the university and of other founts of capitalist culture and wisdom.

Within a matter of days the tremendous creative potentialities of the people suddenly erupted. The boldest and most realistic ideas—and they are usually the same—were advocated, argued, applied. Language, rendered stale by decades of bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, eviscerated by those who manipulate it for advertising purposes, suddenly reappeared as something new and fresh. People reappropriated it in all its fullness. Magnificently apposite and poetic slogans emerged from the anonymous crowd. Children explained to their elders what the function of education should be. The educators were educated. Within a few days, young people of 20 attained a level of understanding and a political and tactical sense which many who had been in the revolutionary movement for 30 years or more were still sadly lacking.

The tumultuous development of the students' struggle triggered off the first factory occupations. It transformed both the relation of forces in society and the image, in people's minds, of established institutions and of established leaders. It compelled the State to reveal both its oppressive nature and its fundamental incoherence. It exposed the utter emptiness of Government, Parliament, Administration—and of ALL the political parties. Unarmed students had forced the Establishment to drop its mask, to sweat with fear, to resort to the police club and to the gas grenade. Students finally compelled the bureaucratic leaderships of the "working class organizations" to reveal themselves as the ultimate custodians of the established order.

But the revolutionary movement did still more. It fought its battles in Paris, not in some under-developed country exploited by imperialism. In a glorious few weeks the actions of students and young workers dispelled the myth of the well-organized, well-oiled modern capitalist society from which radical conflict had been eliminated and in which only marginal problems remained to be solved. Administrators who had been administering everything were suddenly shown to have had a grasp of nothing. Planners who had planned everything showed themselves incapable of ensuring the endorsement of their plans by those to whom they applied.

This most modern movement should allow real revolutionaries to shed a number of the ideological encumbrances which in the past had hampered revolutionary activity. It wasn't hunger which drove the students to revolt. There wasn't an "economic crisis" even in the loosest sense of the term. The revolt had nothing to do with "under consumption" or with "over production." The "falling rate of profit" just didn't come into the picture. Moreover, the student movement wasn't based on economic demands. On the contrary, the movement only found its real stature, and only evoked its tremendous response, when it went beyond the economic demands within which official student unionism had for so long sought to contain it. And conversely, it was by confining the workers' struggles to purely economic objectives that the trade union bureaucrat have so far succeeded in coming to the assistance of the regime.

The present movement has shown that the fundamental contradiction of modern bureaucratic capitalism isn't the "anarchy of the market." It isn't the "contradiction between the forces of production and the property relations." The central conflict to which all others are related is the conflict between order-givers and order-takers. The insoluble contradiction which tears the guts out of modern capitalist society is the one which compels it to exclude people from the management of their own activities and which at the same time compels it to solicit their participation, without which it would collapse. These tendencies find expression on the one hand in the attempt of the bureaucrats to convert men into objects (by violence, mystification, new manipulation techniques—or "economic carrots) and, on the other hand, in mankind's refusal to allow itself to be treated in this way.

Related

"May-June 1968: The exposure" by Jacques Camatte, in this issue, FE #295, November 3, 1978)

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