

The Battle for France

May/June 1968

No Picnic

1988

FE Note: What follows are thoughts on the revolutionary upsurge which shook France 20 years ago. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the message is that revolt is possible in modern society. In ours today, it is not the cops which prevent revolt, but the inertia of what is—the weight of the present.

The **introductory section** is from the fine new magazine, *No Picnic*, Spring 1988, Box 69393, Stn. K, Vancouver BC, Canada V5K 4W6; \$1.50 per issue. The piece from Fredy Perlman, written from a participant's viewpoint, appeared in *Worker-Student Action Committees*, co-authored by R. Gregoire, 1968, \$2 from FE Books. The excerpt from Jacques Camatte appeared originally in FE #295, November 3, 1978 and is available at \$1. Also recommended is Paris: May 1968, by Solidarity, available from FE Books for \$3.

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Nobody predicted it. Oh sure, later, the specialists all pointed to so-called “objective conditions,” and described how this condition and that and the other brought about “the moment.” But still, no one predicted it. It came as a surprise. A great shock to some. Those who had something to lose. To others it was an explosion of freedom, of power, a celebration of life and love.

Large student movements had developed in Japan, West Germany, the United States, Italy and elsewhere. In France it quickly grew into a mass movement that sought to overthrow the socio-economic structure of capitalist society. The University of Nanterre in Paris was shut down by the Dean on May the 2nd. The next day the Sorbonne was closed and riot police were sent in to attack student demonstrators. This set off a chain reaction. Students ejected from their universities took to the streets, drawing layers upon layers of new people into the struggle. For a week the demonstrations grew larger and more militant. On May 10th some 50,000 decided to occupy the traditional student part of the city, the Latin Quarter. They built over 60 barricades in the streets with newspaper stands, automobiles, construction equipment and whatever else was at hand. The police were ordered to clear the streets. The resulting battle lasted several hours, with repeated charges by club-swinging riot police firing a deluge of phosphorus grenades and teargas at the students who responded with molotov cocktails, homemade smokebombs and cobblestones torn from the streets. Hundreds of police and demonstrators were injured, many of them seriously.

Up to this point, the newspapers, including the Communist Party organ, *L'Humanité*, had characterized the student movement as “tiny groups” and “adventurist extremist.” After the brutality of the 10th, the Communist Party-led union, the CGT, called for a general strike. On May 13th, over 800,000 people hit the streets of Paris to demonstrate against the state repression; these were no tiny groups. The next day the factory of Sud Aviation was taken over by its workers who held the chairman hostage. On the 15th, numerous plants were taken over by workers, including the automobile producer Renault. Students and workers occupy the French national theatre, the Odeon, and plant revolutionary red and black flags on its dome, announcing an end to a culture limited to only the economic elite.

Students have taken over the universities and are organizing committees of action and factory occupations continue to spread while the radio stations continue to broadcast that the students are concerned only with final examinations and workers only with improving their salaries.

Inside the liberated universities, the state, the ministries, the faculty and student government bodies are no longer recognized. A vast experiment is taking place. Laws are now being made in the lecture halls and auditoriums by "general assemblies." There is a great explosion of creativity. Art and posters quickly cover the walls everywhere. Spray paint is the most popular medium of communication. Walls now captured the imagination of passersby with their scrawled words, much of it inspired by the Situationists.

"Power to the imagination!" "Forbidding is forbidden!" "Only the truth is revolutionary!" Posters reflected the deeply libertarian philosophy; "Humanity will only be happy when the last capitalist is strangled with the guts of the last bureaucrat!" "Culture is disintegrating. Create!" "I take my dreams as reality for I believe in the reality of my dreams!" University corridors sprang to life with poster wisdom; "Workers of all lands, enjoy yourselves!" "Those who carry out a revolution only halfway, merely dig their own graves. (St. Just)" "Long live communication! Down with telecommunication!" "We will claim nothing. We will ask for nothing. We will take! We will occupy!"

Action committees established contacts with striking workers and leaflets informed them of the experiences of direct democracy taking place at the universities.

The insurrection quickly spreads throughout Paris and the rest of the country. France is brought to its knees. The impossible, the unimagined has happened. The world is shocked. DeGaulle orders the army and the police to stay in their barracks and stations, for their safety cannot be guaranteed.

But something is amiss. The worker-student action committees are met at factories with the gates closed. The Communist union reps inside tell the committees to go home. Workers, isolated in their homes and locked out of their factories, through radio, T.V. and the papers, hear only of workers demanding pay raises. No talk of workers demanding self-control over factories and an end to the bourgeois-capitalist state.

Inside the factories the reactionary union bosses control the loudspeakers and the presses, repeating over and over that their leaders are working hard, negotiating to increase their wages and improve working conditions. Workers are told to stay away from the student "provocateurs."

The trade union hierarchy was a negative force on the revolution. They had but one objective; to strengthen their own position of power within the existing social system.

At this point the insurrection began to die. DeGaulle called in all of the troops at his disposal, including the Gaullist Action Civique-hundreds of thousands of petit bourgeois supporters frightened by recent events hit the streets where the workers still had control. Riot police re-occupied factories.

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