

May-June 68

by Roger Smith

In May 1968 I went to Paris for the Black Dwarf, a new radical paper of the left; its first publication coincided with what were known as "les événements" [the events] in France. It was a polite, fearful name for a revolution in progress. I went there for the Dwarf to report on it first hand.

When I returned to London in June it was clear that the revolution was at an end. A deal had been struck by the Communist Party and De Gaulle and the General Strike was over. The heady euphoria of possibility fizzled out.

The Revolution had been betrayed. The French Communist Party had played a counter revolutionary role.

As a relative novice to this kind of politics I came back determined to find answers to this betrayal. Eventually I joined the Socialist Labour League in November and accepted, among other things, their thesis on France.

Briefly it was that, contrary to revisionist belief, revolution was on the agenda for the metropolitan capitalist countries, that the major obstacle to this was Stalinism and reformism, and that the task in Britain was to build the revolutionary party to lead the working class to power when our turn came.

And that was it really. May June was never really considered outside of that. The fact that the revolution-that-nearly-happened took place in an advanced capitalist country for the first time, and showed features that had never really been seen before, wasn't considered to be of any importance. We went back of course to the old model of Russia 1917, the successful revolution, led by a Bolshevik party.

But the truth is May-June didn't fit that model. Neither did the Transitional Programme written by Trotsky in 1938 have much of an echo in the demands that I saw scrawled on the walls of Paris. Slogans like "Underneath the paving stones, the beach", "Be a realist, demand the impossible", "I take my desires for reality, because I believe in the reality of my desires", "Run forward Comrade, the old world is behind you", or "Ten days of happiness already".

It took me thirty years to think about France again, which says something about the training you got in the Socialist Labour League and its successor, the Workers Revolutionary Party. Mind you, there wasn't much room in my time in the Party for notions like "happiness" and "desire"; we all discovered later that

these were the sole prerogative of the leader, G. Healy. The "impossible", however, we knew only too much about – the vain, back-breaking attempt to maintain the facade of a Daily Paper.

But that wasn't what the young students had in mind when they scrawled their visions for a liberated and human future for mankind. They were reaching out for a vision of communism.

But these demands were ignored, or dismissed as anarchist waffle, or at best romantic illusions. And I think the SLL/WRP wasn't alone in that kind of dismissal. Most of the Trotskyist groups shared the same analysis.

But what were these demands trying to tell us? Where did they come from? Did they express in any way the real contradictions of modern capitalist society? Were they simply an aberration?

I remember my first impressions of Paris then, walking along the Boulevard St Michel, the air heavy with the



"We must prevent the worm of power from devouring the fruit and destroying the garden" (poster, Paris, May 68)

sweet smell of CS gas. It had been used by the police for the very first time. It seemed to hang from the elm trees. Paradoxically it was the very smell of revolution itself.

The streets were crowded, teeming, and there was a wonderful feeling of carnival, of belonging, of the excitement of childhood, of wondering what was going to happen. You felt as if you were entering a whole new era. The future was staring you in the face and it was totally liberating and totally human. You were part of a whole. And it was like poetry.

The early major battles between students and police had been fought out. The Sorbonne was now re-occupied by the students and one by one the mood began to spread throughout the factories.

First Sud Aviation, near Nantes: a few dozen workers left their machines and, within hours, two thousand workers had occupied the plant. The students at the Sorbonne were delirious. Then Renault Flins followed, Renault Billancourt. The movement spread like wild fire – factory occupation after occupation, red flags flying at the gates, “Occupe”. The whole of industry, transport, services.

I remember going to a railway depot that was occupied. I was proudly shown round the works by a representative of the occupation committee. He was a train driver, so eager to talk about his life, his work, his gripes. We climbed up into the drivers’ compartment of one of the enormous SNCF engines and my guide explained how management had done away with co-drivers. “You do the journey on your own. And in case you fall asleep they introduced this automatic brake” – a wachma, he called it. “You have to squeeze it every few seconds, otherwise the train will automatically stop. They figured that would keep you awake. But believe me you learn to sleep and squeeze the brake in your sleep. It’s inhuman, this system. They want you to work twice as hard for the same money.”

And then I saw a man in a suit apparently under escort being led from his office to the lavatory. He was being marched at a fair lick by a couple of young workers in overalls. My driver from the occupation committee explained with a smile. “That’s our depot manager. He was against the occupation so we got him under lock and key. He has his three meals a day but otherwise he’s our prisoner.”

Throughout France workers had their management under factory arrest.

I remember one night at the Sorbonne. Outside, a pitched battle between the CRS and students and now young workers. The students had thrown up huge barricades. Inside, the old Alma Mater of learning had been transformed into an improvised hospital, where

the wounded were patched up by young medical students who had transformed themselves into qualified doctors.

I am delegated to be a guard. “You look tough enough. You can be security.” And a red band is tied round my arm and that’s what I am. CS gas is deadly. You need oxygen to recover and it’s in short supply. At about 1 a.m., to tremendous cheers, a team of firemen drove into the courtyard and dished out their cylinders of oxygen. Vive l’Occupation!

These are just memories that drift back over the years, but I can recall the atmosphere, the daring, the imagination. But above all was the confidence of the shared voices of those who’d had enough, enough of authority, enough of being ripped off, enough of having the living freedom beaten out of you by mob-handed policemen. It was the voice of today, a voice wanting a good time, wanting to break down all the barriers of class and education that divide us, to find a true individuality through the collective struggle. It was a voice looking for a truly human society.

It was a voice, it has to be said, that the Trotskyist groups couldn’t hear. It was a movement that they couldn’t see. They were too busy looking backwards to October 1917. The OCI, the Lambertist group – to their everlasting shame – led a march of 5,000 of their supporters to the Boulevard St Michel where barricades were being built against the gathering riot police. The OCI arrived singing the Internationale and then instead of joining the barricades, they marched away, like the grand old Duke of York, denouncing the students as petit-bourgeois adventurers.

But it is the danger of being behind the times that still confronts us, of trying to make the new fit the old, stale wretched formulae. It bedeviled all these self appointed “Marxist leaderships”. None came as near as the situationists with their demands: “What can the Revolutionary Movement Do Now? Everything. What Will It Become in the Hands of Parties and Unions? Nothing. What does the Movement Want? The Realisation of a Classless Society Through the Power of Workers’ Councils.”

And they were right, the Situationists, in their prediction. The revolution was defeated. And it certainly wasn’t the power of the state that defeated it. The CRS became a demoralised crew, making demands themselves on De Gaulle, bitching about their treatment and their conditions.

It wasn’t the army that defeated it – the troops remained firmly in their barracks. Let’s face it: it’s a daunting task for the forces of the bourgeoisie to take on by force some 12 million working people occupying their work places. People learned very quickly the power of mass action in modern capitalist society.

LA POLICE S'AFFICHE AUX BEAUX ARTS



LES BEAUX ARTS AFFICHENT dans la RUE

"The police post themselves in the Beaux Arts. The Beaux Arts poster in the streets"

But alas the occupation committees couldn't take that extra step forward, and the Stalinists filled the vacuum with their compromise deal with wage concessions and a few reforms for the students. It was their betrayal.

We do need to examine that defeat. Yes there are important lessons to learn from it. But it's very easy to pursue that to the exclusion of the central question itself – namely what was the thing itself, what was that great historic lurch to liberation?

It has to be said that as far as I can see, the Trotskyist movement has given no thought to these questions. It's no accident, as the Comrades used to say, perhaps still do, that it has taken me thirty years even to dare think about them. I have to say that Cyril Smith's book, *Marx At The Millennium*, was a great liberator, a necessary push to dare to look at the things that you thought you couldn't dare to look at.

But once you begin to think a little about May-June 68, there it is – the great watershed of the second half of the twentieth century, when something happened that had never happened before in an advanced capitalist country. And nearly did it, that's the amazing thing. And it remains there to be explored, to be examined, to discover what it really did mean. That's the work that faces us.

What was this great collective struggle for individual development? Where did it come from this glimpse of a possible future? It was prepared within existing society itself. It's developing all the time. If we don't believe that development is happening within capitalism, then we don't have any future at all.

And here it was in a modern country with millions of people involved, learning it was possible to live humanly.

That was the essence of those demands emblazoned on the walls of the Quartier Latin. They questioned how we lived, denounced the madhouse that we live in.

May 68 took everybody by surprise, but the conditions for the eruption were developing unnoticed. It was the first fearless step to a new world. The first of many to come. We need to know more about it, see it in its multifaceted newness. And dare to do it.

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