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France: The General Strike of 1968

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These days you are more likely to hear the word 'revolution' on the soundtrack of a film or on the latest pop release than you are to hear someone talking about bringing one about. It is partly for this reason that people think of revolutions as buried deep in history. Yet, as little as 25 years ago France was on the verge of a total revolt with 12 million workers on strike, 122 factories occupied, and students fighting against the old moribund system in which they found themselves.

In the late sixties in France real wages were on the rise, but large sections of the working class were still suffering from low pay. This was despite foreign trade having tripled. 25% of all workers were receiving less than 500 francs per month. Some unskilled workers were only getting 400 francs per month. Unemployment was at half a million, in a period which was considered a post-war boom. Trade union membership had dropped to around 3 million, as opposed to 7 million in 1945. Not many victories had been won in the preceding years. Michelin boasted that they had only talked to trade unions three times in thirty years. So how did everything change so quickly in the France of 1968?

Student Anger

Nanterre was a university outside Paris. It was a new soul-less campus built to cater for the increased influx of students. The place was unlike the throbbing cultural live wire of the famous Latin Quarter (Left Bank).

On March 22nd 1968 eight students broke into the Dean's office to protest at the recent arrest of six members of the National Vietnam Committee. Among these was a sociology student called Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He had been part of a group who organised a strike of 10,000 to 12,000 students in November of 1967 as a protest against overcrowding.

In the preceding 10 years the student population had risen from 170,000 to 514,000. Although the state had provided some funding this was not equal to the huge influx of students it had asked the universities and colleges to take. The total area covered by university premises had doubled since 1962 but the student numbers had almost tripled. Facilities were desperately inadequate and overcrowding was a serious issue.

Six days after the occupation of the Dean's office the police were called in and the campus was surrounded. 500 students inside the college divided into discussion groups. Sociology students began to boycott their exams and a pamphlet was produced entitled 'Why do we need sociologists?'. The students called for a lecture hall to be permanently made available for political discussions.

The lecturers began to split, some in favour of the student demands. The college did provide a room, but by the 2nd of April a meeting of 1,200 students was held in one of the main lecture halls.

March 22nd Movement

After the Easter break agitation was more rampant. On April 22nd (one month after the occupation) a meeting was held in lecture hall B1. It was attended by 1,500 students and the resulting manifesto called for “Outright rejection of the Capitalist Technocratic University” and followed this by a call for solidarity with the working class. It was clear that the March 22nd Movement (which had come together as a semi-formal alliance of anti-authoritarian socialist students) was winning the battle of ideas in the campus amongst their fellow students.

The college decided to discipline eight of the students involved, including Cohn-Bendit. They were called upon to appear before the disciplinary committee of the Sorbonne on May 3rd. Four lecturers volunteered to defend them.

The education strike had not interested the Minister for Education. There were major industrial strikes the preceding year at Rhodiaceta and Saviem. In Rhodiaceta (a synthetic fibres factory in Lyons) a strike took place involving 14,000 workers over 23 days. Management went on to sack 92 militants at the end of the year and had also resorted to lock-outs. In June of 1967 Peugeot called in riot police during a dispute and two workers were killed.

From March to May 1968 there was a total of eighty cases of industrial action at the Renault Billancourt car plant. It was becoming obvious that “the French did not interest their leaders” as Alain Touraine (a professor at Nanterre who was prepared to defend the student action) said. These leaders were soon about to be awoken from their oblivious slumber.

Red & Black Flags Drape the Arc de Triomphe

On Friday May 3rd a few students gathered in the front square of the Sorbonne. The students were from Nanterre and they were joined by activists from the Sorbonne college itself. The ‘Nanterre Eight’ were about to face charges on the following Monday. The eight and some colleagues from Nanterre were meeting student activists from the Sorbonne to discuss the impending Monday.

The crowd began to swell and the college authorities panicked. By 4pm the Sorbonne was surrounded by police and the Campagnies Republicaines de Securite (CRS riot police). Students were being arrested by the CRS, on the basis that they

were spotted wearing motorcycle helmets. News spread rapidly and students came from all over the city. Fighting began to free those who had already been arrested. Such was this battle between students and police that the college closed.

This was only the second time in 700 years that the Sorbonne was forced to close, the other time being in 1940 when the Nazis took Paris.

The National Union of Students (UNEF) and the Lecturers' Union (SNESup) immediately called a strike and issued the following demands 1. Re-Open the Sorbonne. 2. Withdraw the Police. 3. Release those arrested.

These unions were joined by the March 22nd Movement. The original discontent had arisen from overcrowding but it now began to take on a larger perspective.

Police Riot

On Monday May 6th the 'Nanterre 8' passed through a police cordon singing the 'Internationale'. They were on their way to appear before the University Discipline Committee. The students decided to march through Paris. On their return to the Latin Quarter they were savagely attacked by the police on the Rue St. Jacques.

The students tore up paving stones and overturned cars to form barricades. Police pumped teargas into the air and called for reinforcements. The Boulevard St Germain became a bloody battleground with the official figures at the end of the day reading: 422 arrests and 345 policemen injured. This day was to go into the annals of '68 as "Bloody Monday".

A long march followed on the Tuesday and by outmanoeuvring the police Red & Black Flags were draped from the Arc De Triomphe and the 'Internationale' echoed around the streets. The week continued on in a similar fashion and the streets were alive with crowds and talk of politics. By Wednesday public opinion was shifting.

Stomach for a Fight

The middle classes were appalled by the brutality dished out to the students by the police and large sections of the working class were inspired by the students' stomach for a fight against the state. On Friday (May 10th) 30,000 students, including high school students, had gathered around the Place Defret-Rochercau. They marched towards the Sorbonne along the Boulevard St. Germain. All roads leading off the boulevard were blocked by police armed for conflict.

Fifty barricades were erected by the demonstrators in preparation for an attack by the police. Jean Jacques Lebel a reporter wrote that by 1am “Literally thousands helped build barricades . . . women, workers, bystanders, people in pyjamas, human chains to carry rocks, wood, iron”.

“Our barricade is double: one three foot high row of cobble stones, an empty space of twenty yards, then a nine foot high pile of wood, cars, metal posts, dustbins. Our weapons are stones, metal, etc found in the street.” reported one eye witness.

Radio reporters said that as many as sixty barricades were erected in different streets. France stayed up to listen to reports on Europe One and Radio Luxembourg. The government had yielded on two of the three demands but would not release those arrested. There was to be no “Liberez nos comrades!”.

The Beat Goes On

The barricades were attacked by the police. They used tear gas and CS grenades. Students and demonstrators used handkerchiefs soaked in baking soda to protect themselves from the nauseous gasses. Fighting continued throughout the night. Houses were stormed by the police and people were dragged and clubbed as they were thrown into vans. The police, and in particular the CRS, were most brutal in their treatment of the demonstrators.

There were reports of pregnant women being beaten. Young men were stripped and some had their sexual organs beaten until the flesh was in ribbons. At the end of this battle of the streets there were 367 people injured, and 460 arrested. On Saturday morning troop carriers were brought in to clear the barricades and they were booed and hissed as they drove down the Boulevard St Germain.

On Monday May 13th the students were released but the spark had already started the forest fire. The trade unions called a one-day strike and a march was organised in Paris for the same day. Over 200,000 people (a conservative figure) turned up for the march shouting “De Gaulle Assassin”. The leader of the government was now singled out as an enemy by the people. After the march there was a call for the crowd to disperse and many did but a large group of students decided that they would occupy the Sorbonne.

Communists Up to Thier Old Tricks

The PCF (French Communist Party) had condemned the Nanterre rebels from the start. Their future General Secretary, Georges Marchais, published an article

entitled “False revolutionaries to be unmasked”. In this article he claimed the March 22nd Movement were “mostly sons of the grand bourgeois, contemptuous towards the students of working class origin” and predicted that they would “quickly snuff out their revolutionary flames to become directors in Papa’s business.”

But by May 8th when the party leadership saw the size of the movement they changed their tune and attempted to take control of the uprising. They saw that the example of the students was now being followed in the workplaces. They thought it better to be seen encouraging action than letting the situation escape their control.

Once again the Communists had misjudged the situation. The CGT (the Communist dominated trade union) leadership also started to support workplace action, though only after workers had already taken the lead. Louis Aragon (France’s most famous Communist writer) was sent to address a meeting at the Odeon. Those of the March 22nd Movement who were present jeered and heckled him throughout with satirical cries of “Long live Stalin, father of all people”.

One member of the political bureau Roger Garudy embraced the students’ doctrine of economic self-management, autonomous councils and decentralisation. Along with extending solidarity with the aims of the students he also applauded the events of the ‘Prague Spring’. He was soon expelled from the PCF.

Truth is Whatever Serves the Party

Mostly, the PCF persisted in classifying the student movement as “an entire ultra-left, petty-bourgeois cocktail of Bakunin, Trotskyism and plain adventurism . . .”. Around this time an anonymous article was published in the party paper ‘L’Humanite’. Its author claimed that the Minister for Youth had “contacts” with Cohn-Bendit and that money was granted to the March 22nd Movement. This accusation was a complete fabrication and the height of some very strange imagination. This, of course, was neither the first nor last time the Communists resorted to this type of tactic.

The Sorbonne became transformed overnight as posters of Marx, Lenin, and Mao decorated the old pillars surrounding the front square. Red & Black flags hung alongside the Vietcong flag. Trotsky, Castro and Che Guevara pictures were plastered on walls alongside slogans such as “Everything is Possible” and “It is Forbidden to Forbid”. This picture of the Sorbonne gives a good indication of the confusion of ideologies encompassed within the student movement.

A fifteen person occupation committee was elected on the May 14th and its mandate was limited to 24 hours. The central amphitheatre was pulsating day and

night with political debate. The examination system was condemned as “being the rite of initiation into the capitalist society”. The March 22nd Movement wanted to “eradicate the distinction between workers and managers rather than turn more workers’ sons into managers”.

Revolutionary Collectables

The Ecole de Beux Arts (School of Fine Arts) was occupied on May 14th. There were meetings every morning at which themes were chosen. Then posters would be produced via a silk screen production basis. It was most ironic that these posters became almost immediately collectors’ items and were soon to be found in the homes of the rich.

The posters were covered with such slogans as “Mankind will not live free until the last capitalist has been hanged with the entrails of the last bureaucrat”. “The general will against the will of the general”. “Commodities are the opium of the people”. Paris was plastered with such posters.

The political atmosphere of the time led to occupations by radical doctors, architects, and writers. Even the Cannes film festival was disrupted in 1968 when “Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut seized the festival hall in support of the national strike movement”.

Strikes

On the 14th of May the workers of Sud Aviation near Nantes occupied their factory. Then Renault plants at Cleon, Flins, Le Mans and Boulogne Billancourt all went on strike. Young workers at Cleon refused to leave the factory at the end of their shift and locked the manager into his office. The union leadership were stumbling behind the mood of the workers. At places like Sud-Aviation the decision to go on indefinite strike was taken by the workers without consulting the union officials.

The CGT leaders had been taken totally by surprise and now were desperately trying not to lose all influence. The workers were leading, in their demands and actions. The union leadership — for a short time — followed like a dog keeping up with its master, as it saw this as the only method to maintaining some influence over the workers.

On May 16th a few thousand students marched to Boulogne Billancourt where 35,000 workers were on strike. The CGT officials locked the factory gates to

discourage communication. But workers got up on the roof of the factory and shouted greetings and discussions took place through the iron railings. Solidarity was there and it could not be suppressed by a few chains and locked gates.

Industrial Normandy, Paris and Lyons closed down virtually on mass. On May 18th coal production stopped and public transport in Paris halted. The National Railways were next to go out on strike. Gas and electricity workers took over control of their workplaces but continued domestic supplies. Red flags hung from shipyards at St Nazaire which employed 10,000 workers. The weekend of the 19th of May saw two million people on strike and 122 factories were reported to be occupied.

Strike Wave Sweeps France

Money withdrawals from banks were limited to 500 francs as the possibility of a Bank Of France strike panicked people. Petrol supplies soon dried up as drivers stocked up. By Monday the 20th no cross-channel ferries were in operation and tourists queued for buses or evacuation coaches to Brussels, Geneva, and Barcelona.

The Citroen factory which employed a lot of immigrant labour from Portugal, North Africa and Yugoslavia was still in operation. On the May 20th as the morning shift headed into work at 6am they were greeted with the sight of a student picket. As the young foreign workers were puzzling over the students' leaflets and whether or not to go into work along came a march of colleagues from a nearby factory. Citroen was on strike.

The textile industry and big department stores of Paris joined the snowballing general strike on Tuesday 21st. The air traffic controllers in Orly and French television (ORTF) had already voted to come out the previous Friday.

On the 20th of May ORTF staff issued the following demands; 1. Forty Hour Week 2. Lower Retirement Age. 3. Abrogation of the anti-strike laws of 1963. 4. Minimum wage of 1000 francs a week. 5. Repeal of the government's involvement in the television station.

Teachers were on strike as of the 22nd, although many attended school in order to keep in contact with school students as the unions had requested.

Now is not a Good Time to Die

Within a fortnight of the general strike being called, more than nine million workers were out on strike. As one person put it "On Wednesday the undertakers went on strike. Now is not a goodtime to die."

Workers displayed a great ability to lead by example. The gas and electricity workers joined the strike but maintained supplies apart from a few brief power cuts. Food supplies reached Paris as normal after initial disruptions. The postal workers agreed to deliver urgent telegrams.

Print workers said they did not wish to leave a monopoly of media coverage to TV and radio and agreed to print newspapers as long as the press “carries out with objectivity the role of providing information which is its duty”. In some cases print-workers insisted on changes in headlines or articles before they would print the paper. This happened mostly with the right wing papers such as ‘Le Figaro’ or ‘La Nation’.

In some factories workers continued or altered production to suit their needs. In the CSF factory in Brest the workers produced walkie-talkies which they considered important to both strikers and demonstrators alike. At the Wonder Batteries factory in Saint-Ouen the strike committee disapproved of the reformist line of the CGT and decided to barricade themselves in rather than talk to the union officials.

A Workers’ City

In Nantes, the whole movement and events of 1968 were to reach a pinnacle. For a week in May the city and its surrounding area was controlled by the workers, themselves. The old guardians of power and authority looked on helplessly as workers took control of their own lives and city. On May 24th road blocks were set up around the city as farmers made a protest of solidarity with the workers and students.

The transport workers took over the road blocks and they controlled all incoming traffic. Petrol supplies were controlled, with no petrol tankers being allowed into the city without the workers’ permission. The only functioning petrol pump was reserved for use by doctors. By circumventing the middle man, the workers and farmers made it possible to reduce the cost of food. Milk was now 50 centimes as opposed to 80 previously. Potatoes dropped 48 centimes per kilo in price.

To make sure these price cuts were passed on, shops had to display stickers provided by the strike committee saying “This shop is authorised to open. Its prices are under permanent supervision by the unions”. Teachers and students organised nurseries so that strikers’ children were cared for while the schools were closed. Women played a very active role in Nantes organising, not only as strikers but also playing a vital role in committees dealing with food supplies.

This all too brief week in Nantes is a prime example of the working class seizing control of an area and running it in a socialist manner, even in such

difficult circumstances. We can see that the society created in many ways was an improvement on the one Nantes unfortunately slipped back into after the events of 1968.

Pacify and Dissipate

De Gaulle, now fearing for the survival of his government and slowly looking at his power disappear, addressed the country on television on May 24th. He spoke of “a more extensive participation of everyone in the conduct and the result of the activities which directly concern them.” DeGaulle asked the people through a referendum as a “mandate for renewal and adaption”.

On the same day the March 22nd Movement organised a demonstration. 30,000 marched towards the Palace de la Bastille. The police had the Ministries protected, using the usual devices of tear gas and batons, but the Bourse (Stock Exchange) was left unprotected. This was the time to act and a number of demonstrators armed with axe handles, wooden clubs and iron bars went and set fire to it.

It was at this stage that some left wing groups lost their nerve. The Trotskyist JCR turned people back into the Latin Quarter. Other groups such as UNEF and Parti Socialiste Unife (United Socialist Party) blocked the taking of the Ministries of Finance and Justice. Cohn-Bendit said of this incident “As for us, [March 22 Movement] we failed to realize how easy it would have been to sweep all these nobodies away . . . It is now clear that if, on 25 May, Paris had woken to find the most important Ministries occupied, Gaullism would have caved in at once . . .”. Cohn-Bendit was forced into exile later that very night.

The students of the March 22nd Movement would not have caused the collapse of Gaullism with this occupation, but it would have raised the consciousness of many of the young militant workers who were inspired by the fighting spirit shown by the students. The students’ struggle, although confused, and encompassing many varying ideologies, had been an inspiration. The dynamite was there and the student uprising was the fuse paper.

To the Ministries

The occupation of the Ministries would have been one step further along the line towards a social revolution. Of the 12 million workers now on strike only 3 million were previously involved in trade unions. The general strike which had paralysed the country saw workers’ demands far surpass those issued by the

union leaders. Expectations had been raised by the wave of agitation that was sweeping across the land.

The occupations of the Ministries could have brought an awareness to people that what could be won here was more than economic agreements with the bosses. The move would have brought the workers closer to the realisation that what was at stake here was how the system was run and not just how to tinker with its engine. In every uprising of the sort we witnessed in 1968 there is a need for organised groups to win the battle of ideas and to fuse those ideas into action so that people are aware of what can be gained, what victories are possible.

The student movement, if it had occupied the government buildings, would have taken a step in this direction. The workers were inspired by the fight of the students on the streets of Paris, militant workers would have been inspired by the occupations of the Ministries, and a realisation could have swept through France that there was more to be won than pay rises from the bosses.

Fin

By Monday May 27th the Government had guaranteed an increase of 35% in the industrial minimum wage and an all round wage increase of 10%. The leaders of the CGT organised a march of 500,000 workers through the streets of Paris two days later. Paris was covered in posters calling for a 'Government of the People'. Unfortunately the majority still thought in terms of changing their rulers rather than taking control for themselves.

De Gaulle and his puppets had been so scared by the possibility of revolution that he flew to military airfield at Saint-Dizier and talked with his top Generals, making sure that he could rely on them if he needed the army's help to maintain his grip on power. On May 30th he once again appeared on French television abandoning his plans for the referendum and promising elections within forty days.

De Gaulle in typical fashion promised tougher measures if, as he put it, "the whole French people were gagged or prevented from leading a normal existence, by those elements (Reds & Anarchists) that are being used to prevent students from studying, the workers from working". Following De Gaulle's address the CRS were sent to disperse the remaining pickets from workplaces.

By June 5th most of the strikes were over and an air of what passes for normality within capitalism had swept back over France. Any strikes which continued after this date were crushed in a military style operation using armoured vehicles and guns. In isolation those pockets of militancy stood no chance.

Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

All street demonstrations were banned and once again the PCF sought respectability by using its influence to destroy what was left of the action committees. By the end of June the colleges were regained and the Red & Black flags were torn down from the front of the Sorbonne.

In this climate of defeat and demoralisation people turned back to the certainties of conservatism. In the elections the Gaullists captured 60% of the vote. Their grip on the reins of power was reinforced.

In 1968 you had a system which is replicated in most countries in western Europe today. Yet, during the events of May that system was in total turmoil and De Gaulle had foreseen that he might have had to use the army to crush the movement of people. The streets of France could have flowed with blood like they most certainly did in Chile five years later.

Cohn-Bendit and the March 22nd Movement aspired to a classless society based on workers' councils where the division of labour between order-givers and order-takers disappeared. But obviously this vision of a future society was not shared by others on the left and the part they played was to place more obstacles in the way rather than to overcome the ones that already existed.

Where the power of the state has been broken down, the working class led by example, as in Nantes where they showed themselves capable of controlling and managing their city. The most active strikers were more progressive and far sighted than their union leaders. Workers showed that there was more to be attained than simple demands and inspiringly took that fight to the bosses.

Stalinists Wanted Total Control

Why did France '68 ultimately fail? There was no co-ordination of ideas or tactics when events reached a crucial stage. The influential PCF believed that their power would increase in the elections and so were hostile to all movements which were outside of their control. The trade union leadership helped pacify the workers by restricting the focus of workers to 'bread and butter' demands and away from the wider political issues.

Many people had fine aspirations but not much idea of how to achieve those aims. Too many things were left to chance and the whole movement seemed to stumble on from day to day like a blind man desperately trying to find the light of freedom that must exist at the end of the tunnel. What lessons can we learn from the events of '68. We saw a developed capitalist society being brought to the edge of revolt, people questioning the entire system.

The events took place very rapidly as the working class, fused by the energy and bravado of the students, raised demands that could not be catered for within the confines of the existing system. The general strike displays with beautiful clarity the potential power that lies in the hands of the working class. However, the situation needed more co-ordination and organisation. The workers needed to organise inter-workplace committees, and create a mechanism whereby delegates began to deal with the real problems.

From Negotiations to Revolt

The anti-authoritarian left, though very active, were too weak among striking workers. The various workers on strike could have co-ordinated their action in order to push the state backwards. France was already in turmoil industrially and the government was weakening. Workers' councils and real democracy throughout the workplaces could have led to stronger negotiations and, eventually, outright revolt.

Once the factories went into a position of self-management the state would be losing the battle. Self-management never got onto the agenda, for reasons explained above. Shopfloor workers needed a mechanism to represent their views and have an effective democratic decision making process. The union leadership feared and circumvented this. But through democratically elected delegates, factory committees could have raised demands which would be impossible for the state to satisfy. It could have posed the question, who should run France? When our chance comes to knock the bosses from their pedestal we must grab it with both hands. We must destroy and replace the system when it falls into a position of weakness, not just for our own sakes but for the future of humanity.

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