

Riders on the Storm

A Blow-by-Blow Report from May Day 2018 in Paris

CrimethInc.

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In Paris, on May Day 2018, nearly 15,000 people joined a confrontational march rejecting capitalism and the state, including a black bloc of 1200 people. Intense clashes immediately broke out with the police. This is the story of the events leading up to May Day, what we experienced that afternoon in Paris, and what comes next.

Tension has been building in France for years now, from the street confrontations of 2016 against the *Loi Travail* to the defense of la ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Here, we offer first-hand reports from the events of May 1, 2018 in Paris and discuss the aftermath of this day in order to participate in the critical analyses that have emerged within our radical circles for several days now.

To hear reports from other May Day actions worldwide, listen to the May Day 2018 roundup episode of our podcast, the Hotwire. To learn more about the origins of May Day, read “The incomplete, true, authentic and wonderful history of May Day”, or read our timeline charting its legacy.

Background: 127 Years of History

May Day is observed as International Workers’ Day in France, as it is in many other countries. For more than a century, workers, trade unionists, traditional leftists, and anarchists have demonstrated together or separately to pay tribute to the struggles of the late 19th century and the introduction of the eight-hour workday.

Yet May Day has never been limited to legal demonstrations. On May 1, 1891, in Fourmies, soldiers shot at striking workers, killing nine people—including four under the age of 18—and injuring 35 more. Afterwards, a crowd took the streets of Clichy brandishing a red flag. At the end of the demonstration, police attempted to seize the revolutionary emblem, provoking a riot. Gunshots echoed in the streets and some policemen were injured. Three anarchists were arrested and detained. Tried in August 1891, the defendants were sentenced to up to 5 years in prison. These events awoke the convictions of many future radicals, including the notorious anarchist François Koëningstein, better known by his nickname, Ravachol.

In France, May Day also has other connotations. In 1941, aiming to force a rupture with socialism, Marshal Pétain—fervent anti-Semite, head of the French government during the occupation, and among those chiefly responsible for state collaboration with the Nazis—passed legislation declaring that May Day would be called *la Fête du Travail et de la Concorde Sociale* (“the day of labor and social harmony”). Since then, Labor Day in France continues to bear the name “Fête du Travail,” paying tribute to Pétain’s maxim “*Travail, Famille, Patrie*” (“Work, Family, Fatherland”).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Labor Day disappeared in France. During the war in Indochina (1946–1954) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), successive French governments seeking to preserve their colonial holdings instituted a State of Emergency (1955-1958-1961). The state used this “exceptional” law granting special powers to the executive branch to forbid demonstrations of all kinds in France. It was only on May 1, 1968 that people in France were once again able to take the streets to celebrate Labor Day.

More recently, in 2016 and 2017, anarchists and other autonomous rebels succeeded in taking the front of the afternoon May Day demonstration, relegating trade unions and political parties to the end of the procession. By adopting an offensive strategy—attacking every single potential

target on our route—we brought new life to the demonstration, interrupting the ritual it had become.

As we approached May Day 2018, we faced a new challenge. Once again, we had to rewrite the story.

The Storm Approaches

“We are the birds of the coming storm.” –August Spies

This year, May Day took place in the context of France celebrating the 50-year anniversary of the uprising of May 1968. This event had a massive impact on the collective imagination—not only in France, but also worldwide, as evidenced by the slogans, artwork, and images of rioters throwing cobblestones it summons to mind. The so-called “revolution of 1968” saw massive demonstrations, general strikes, wildcat strikes, and occupations of universities and factories throughout France. Initiated by Parisian students, the revolt spread to working class milieux and then to many other demographics. What began as a local struggle became a national upheaval. According to historians, May 1968 represented a new form of cultural and social movement that emerged outside of traditional parties and trade unions. This movement challenged consumer society by critiquing its ideology of productivity and profit, but it also questioned the authoritarian political model of the time and put the notions of individuality and personal subjectivity at the center of the struggle.

From traditional leftist activists to career politicians and reactionaries of all stripes, everyone has something to say about May ’68. The struggles of May 1968 became yet another component of the society of the spectacle. Since the beginning of 2018, the French government, politicians of every party, the corporate media, and the Ministry of Cultural affairs have all been commemorating this long-past social and cultural upheaval that supposedly marked a turning point in French history. The museum exhibitions serve to fix the possibility of revolutionary change in a long-concluded past, but they are not even the worst part. For example, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a former student activist who became the self-proclaimed heir of the revolution of May ’68, took up a career in journalism and politics and finally came to support President Macron and his neoliberal policies. We can appreciate the irony of the situation and the hypocrisy of the French government as it actively strives to suppress any contemporary form of experimentation—see, for example, the recent evictions at la ZAD and of several occupied universities.

In response to this political farce, some radicals published a call announcing that “instead of commemorating May 1968, we could try organizing a beautiful month of May 2018.” You can read translations of this call [here](#). The authors invited people to converge in Paris in order to dethrone the myth of May 1968 and precipitate the fall of Macron and his government. This can only be understood in the context of the social, economic, and political situation in France today. As some have argued, the growing anger against President Macron and his reforms could become a serious threat for the government. For months now, railroad workers, airplane company employees, civil servants, students, professors, postal employees, hospital employees, and many others have been out on strike or protesting government policies. If all of these groups joined forces against the authorities, the impact would be considerable.

Two days before May Day, the Police Prefecture of Paris published a press statement in which Michel Delpuech, the Police Commissioner, announced that he would receive the trade union

leaders and other organizers of the demonstration to warn them about the potential for public disorder that threatened the smooth functioning of the march. Amid typical redundant gibberish, the communiqué stated that:

“During the traditional May Day demonstration, activists of protest groups belonging to extremist movements are planning to violently attack law enforcement and capitalist symbols. [...] Thus, in the continuity of May 1, 2017, and accentuated by the 50-year anniversary of the events of May '68, activists want to take advantage of this demonstration to engage in multiple attacks and destruction against street furniture, banks, real estate or insurance agencies, car dealerships... and violently attack police forces. It appears that incendiary devices could be used.”

In view of this threat, the Prefecture deployed some 1500 policemen and gendarmes in order to insure order during the march. Regarding the risks of violence, the communiqué added that:

- Under the order of the public prosecutor, numerous checks and searches will be implemented upstream and on the outskirts of the demonstration, as well as at nearby public transport access points.
- A particular vigilance and attention will be brought to the detection of all objects considered to be potential weapons.
- Any individual breaking the law will be subject to immediate arrest in anticipation of a judicial procedure.
- Video-protection in real-time will be used to identify individuals trying to blend in the crowd in order to commit acts of violence.
- Any material item will be collected for the purposes of judicial exploitation [sic].”

With such statements, the authorities sought to set the tone for May Day in advance. Anyone who wished to do anything to express discontent beyond marching passively would face uncompromising repression. The Police Prefecture of Paris also sought to increase its control over the May Day demonstration by imposing a shorter route than usual. Instead of the classic route linking *Place de la République* to *Place de la Nation*, the 2018 march was only authorized a two-mile walk between *Place de la Bastille* and *Place d'Italie*, a route that seemed to offer fewer potential targets for rioters. It was obvious that authorities hoped to lead us into a trap.

In response, some radicals of the “*cortège de tête*” (“the leading procession”) published their own communiqué on May Day morning. Regarding the threats and injunctions made against them, they answered:

“We, members of the leading procession, announce for May 1 that we are going on renewable strike concerning the role assigned to us by authorities in the demonstration. We are making the call to retaliate by invading the Latin Quarter as soon as the demonstration has been dissolved.”

Joking aside, many of us were determined to break the spell of May '68 once and for all by invading the streets of Paris for May Day and letting our dreams, inventiveness, and rage speak for themselves.

The Storm Rages

“Fuck May ’68, fight now!” –Unknown

On May Day morning, as is customary, several small morning gatherings occurred before the classic massive demonstration in the afternoon. That morning, no fewer than five different actions were planned. Around 10 am, traditional unions and organizations (including the CGT, FO, FSU, Solidaires, and UNEF) gathered at the Père Lachaise cemetery in front of the “Mur des Fédérés”—the wall where many of the last participants in the Paris Commune were executed. (Although the Communards died fighting as revolutionaries, they have been dead long enough that these legalistic organizations can risk keeping company with them.) At 10:30 am, a morning demonstration took place in Saint-Denis, a northern suburban city. At 11 am, after leaving their own traditional morning procession, some people gathered in downtown Paris in memory of Brahim Bouarram, a 29-year-old man killed on May 1, 1995 by supporters of the French National Front after they left the National Front May Day morning procession. At noon, as usual, the traditional annual anarcho-syndicalist march left *Place des Fêtes* to walk to the departure point of the afternoon procession. Finally, around 1 pm, people were supposed to meet at *Place de la Bastille* for a lively gathering to support the ZAD.

In view of the threats of the authorities, we decided to play it safe and joined the anarcho-syndicalist march to get a sense of the situation in the field. Once we reached *Place des Fêtes*, some of us decided to redecorate the police station with personal messages and posters about the Haymarket affair and the origins of May Day. As more and more people arrived, it was already apparent that a lot of autonomists, anarchists, and other radicals had decided to join the morning festivities before the afternoon march. Throughout the crowd, we could hear people speaking in French, Italian, German, and English. International call or not, some comrades had decided to visit France and spend May Day in Paris with us.

The morning march finally started. Everything went smoothly; trade unionists and families walked alongside autonomists and newer generations of anarchists while police remained almost invisible the entire time. Some of us took this opportunity to take action: banks and insurance companies saw their front windows smashed and colorful messages appeared on the walls. As we were approaching *Place de la Bastille*, the departure point of the afternoon procession, tension and apprehension were palpable. Would the police actually stop and search everyone attempting to join the May Day demonstration? Not at all! As the anarchist procession passed a group of policemen in plainclothes (members of the anti-criminality brigade, the BAC) and insulted them, we reached the *Place de la Bastille*. We had entered the belly of the beast without a hitch!

When we arrived, the *Place de la Bastille* was packed. Thousands of people already thronged the streets, making their way through the numerous food trucks, traditional organizations, political stands, and balloons. As in 2017, we decided to leave traditional organizations behind us and hurried to catch up with the front of the procession. Along the *bassin de l’Arsenal*, hidden by the blossoming trees, the colorful crowd progressively changed color. Waves of black appeared among the leading procession. Once everyone was properly changed and equipped, we all moved forward to reach the first lines of the march, already located on the Austerlitz bridge. Once on the bridge, we realized that we would not be at the front of this May Day demonstration, as another crowd of activists was already walking ahead of us.

The beginning of the demonstration was quite strange. While we waited on the bridge, a line of journalists separated us from the front of the procession. All the corporate media outlets wanted to have their own footage of the impressive bloc that was occupying the bridge. For long minutes, we remained completely static; several smoke bombs and torches were lit and the banners at the front formed a perfect line. To us, this entire situation was unproductive and somehow narcissistic, as it seemed that part of the bloc was completely at ease with having their pictures taken by photographers. We felt that they were actively participating in the political spectacle of May Day by playing their role and posing so the media could broadcast their sensational images. In the end, when people were tired of waiting, fireworks and large firecrackers were thrown at journalists to push them back. After several unsuccessful attempts, the bloc charged them and thus finally managed to cross the bridge.

Once we reached the other riverbank, we found police forces and water cannons waiting on both sides. This created confusion in our ranks. For several more minutes, no one knew what to do or what we were waiting for. Would police forces try to split the procession and carry out an enormous mass arrest before the march even started? While the bloc paused again, indecisive about what to do next, the journalists recreated their line in front of us, taking more shots of the famous “black bloc” while preventing us from reaching the other group of demonstrators ahead of us.

Then things began to accelerate. Someone climbed a post and started to smash a city camera with a rock. As the journalists continued filming us unrelentingly, we were finally compelled to respond by smashing or spray painting every single camera in our path. It was time to put out the eyes of the state; in such a situation, rather than being neutral tools, cameras are connected directly to the apparatus of repression. Then the first advertisement billboards were smashed, along with some bus shelters. It seemed that we had finally found our pace.

We entered the *boulevard de l'Hôpital*, passing the *Jardin des Plantes* (a large public park) and the *rue Buffon*, where additional police units were already blocking the street, until we reached a McDonald's. The storm broke. Activists took out all the front windows of the fast food restaurant while others enthusiastically decorated the walls. As the windows fell to the ground, others entered the restaurant, destroying and looting everything inside. At the end, someone threw a Molotov cocktail inside. Other activists extinguished the flames, as inhabitants living in flats above the restaurant started appearing at their windows. (As *lundimatin* put it, “Finesse was not the theme of the day.”)

From this point on, nearly every window display was smashed and every wall spray-painted. The march continued thus, destroying everything in its path, until it reached two car dealerships. Again, some activists ran to the front windows and shattered them. Others entered the premises of one car dealership, wrecking everything inside. Finally, they pulled two cars out onto the sidewalk and set them on fire.

On the other side of the street, not far past the Austerlitz train station, several activists were breaking down the barriers around a construction site. Behind the fencing, they found an excavator. This, too, was set on fire. As the flames consumed the machine, someone took the time to spray-paint “ZAD everywhere” on it. Whatever happens at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the ZAD will survive! Perhaps not in its current form—as the process of normalization seems to leave fewer and fewer breaches open for experimentation—but its spirit continues to inspire us in other struggles, as this tribute action demonstrates.

At this point, we looked ahead and saw that we couldn't go any further: police forces were waiting with anti-riot fences and water cannon trucks. They were blocking the route of the demonstration, probably to prevent us from reaching the district police station located a little further ahead on our right. At the same time, confrontations with police broke out at the construction site near the train station. It seemed that police were located inside or near the station, behind additional fences. Law enforcement units answered our projectiles with showers of tear gas canisters, which created a great degree of confusion. As reported by lundimatin:

“Then, we witnessed the most absurd scenes of the day. Dozens of activists in black threw hundreds of stones over the fences at an enemy that was completely out of reach. Others threw stones at a machine in flame, others at a McDonald's that would no longer cause any harm to anyone. Actions that showed that the static but overwhelming and ubiquitous police presence was about to win, that is to say, to diffuse powerlessness. There was certainly a lot of will and determination during these events, but it ended being compressed in a restricted space where in reality frustration and fear prevailed.”

Little by little, the police trap was closing. While we were distracted by the confrontations near the construction site, the police lines blocking the boulevard ahead of us took the opportunity to move forward with their water cannon trucks, then filled the streets with tear gas. Our only option was to retreat. We were pushed back near the ruins of the McDonald's. There, we were blocked between the thick clouds of tear gas, the closed fences of the park, and a disoriented and panicking crowd. Facing the jets of water cannons and uninterrupted showers of tear gas canisters, some of us tried to resist with Molotov cocktails and stones, but without any real success. As the intensity of confrontations escalated, people began to escape by climbing over the fences of the public park. Eventually, realizing that the increasing panic could lead to a potential tragedy, firemen decided to open the gates of the park. A breach was opened, and some of us took this opportunity to exit the confrontations. Shortly after, police units fanned out to attempt to arrest people inside the park.

Those who stayed on the *boulevard de l'Hôpital* continued retreating as the water cannons were now in full use. They ended up crossing the bridge we had departed from and then tried to start several actions by taking other routes. Some joined the march of the CGT, others went back to the *bassin de l'Arsenal* in order to bypass police lines and harass them. For the occasion, a huge barricade was built to slow the police while others were attacking another car dealership and several stores. Then, as police reinforcements arrived, activists dispersed into the nearby streets, only to gather again a bit further away to begin another spontaneous demonstration. Several Autolib's—electric car sharing vehicles owned by the Bolloré industrial group—were set on fire during the action. Later, the *Place de la Bastille* was occupied by police, who repeatedly tried to surround people in order to carry out additional arrests, while other small groups of activists were blocked in a nearby boulevard by other law enforcement units. The authorities cleared the entire square of any potential activists.

Once the afternoon demonstration was definitely over, people began to converge around a bar located at *Place de la Contrescarpe*, in the Latin Quarter, the same district where most of the confrontations of May 1968 had taken place half a century earlier. The main objective of this event was to gather people from different political horizons in order to meet, debate, and

create new connections. Unfortunately, police forces were already on site when the first groups of people showed up at the square. As more and more people arrived, police left the square so people could occupy it, but not without stopping and controlling some groups that wanted to join the gathering. Clashes erupted, with police repeatedly beating and pepper-spraying the crowd. The rest of the night witnessed an ongoing cat-and-mouse game between activists and police forces, involving several reoccupations of the *Place de la Contrescarpe*.

During these events, several spontaneous demonstrations took place. In one case, activists succeeded in escaping police units by entering an already occupied building of the EHESS, the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences. Fascists and neo-Nazis armed with gulf clubs were patrolling the Latin Quarter at the same time. They assaulted several activists who were on their way to the gathering, injuring at least one individual.

After the Storm

May Day 2018 was a special day on several different levels. First, fully 14,500 people joined the non-affiliated march, demonstrating behind or alongside a black bloc of 1200. These are the figures provided by authorities. That means that about half the people who attended the May Day demonstration decided to abandon the traditional political marches. We saw the first signs of this in 2016. It reveals a deep change in terms of political traditions. It seems that more and more people are searching for something more in their activism while losing faith in trade unions and political parties. We are glad to see that this is continuing to spread. To illustrate this phenomenon, here is a translated extract of a personal account written after May Day 2018. The authors explain why they decided to join the leading procession despite their “non-violent” moral stand:

“[...] We recognize that we might have come to the head of the procession because we are attracted by the smell of powder, with the feeling that ‘this is where things happen.’ All this precisely because elsewhere, there is not much going on. The rest of the march is nothing but a deadly boredom, both politically and philosophically. The trade union processions are saturated with trucks, sound systems, a technical power that crushes all life and reduces demonstrations to, at best, a nice walk, at worst, a funeral march. These regulated parades do not disturb anyone and always end with the ritual discussions about figures. The human reduced to numbers: beautiful result!”

The great number of radicals present during May Day—the largest black bloc constituted in Paris so far—along with the intensity of the attacks (31 stores attacked and 16 cars damaged) and our mobility and determination not to be separated from the rest of the leading procession: together, these created difficulties for the authorities. Because the police decided to avoid direct confrontations with demonstrators in favor of maintaining a security perimeter from a distance, they were not able to contain us or track all of our movements once we had no option other than to retreat. Because of the chaotic situation, the Police Prefecture of Paris, with the agreement of trade union leaders, decided to simply cancel the May Day procession. A surprising decision, when we bear in mind that beforehand, the Prefecture had discussed an alternative route with

trade union leaders in case violence occurred during the march. It is always instructive to see the masks of trade union leaders fall, revealing how superficial their convictions are.

Later that night, authorities, politicians, trade union leaders, journalists, and “specialists” of all kinds continued to argue over the events of the day and the tactics used by police against the black bloc. Journalists and politicians are still having a great deal of trouble understanding that the “black bloc” is not a specific entity but a street tactic; the black bloc was blamed not only for the cancellation of the May Day procession, but also for all the evils of our modern world. As usual, the same old patronizing discourse distinguishing “good demonstrators” from “violent thugs” returned to center stage in these debates. What irony, to see self-proclaimed leaders celebrating May 1968 one day, then denouncing demonstrators the next day on account of some of the same confrontational tactics.

Due to intensifying polemics regarding the tactics used by law enforcement during the afternoon, the Prefect of Paris had to improvise a press conference to explain why the police did not simply charge the crowd to put a stop to the vandalism. The Prefect explained that the results of the day were extremely positive in that, despite the property damage, only one policeman had been lightly injured and the police had carried out numerous arrests. On our side, we don’t know how many people were injured during the confrontations.

The trap the authorities had set for May Day 2018 ended up being more effective than we expected: afterwards, we learned that over 250 people had been arrested during the day. That night, the authorities announced that more than 100 had been taken into custody, and that the first court appearances were already scheduled for the end of the week.

On Thursday, May 3, six individuals went to court; all of them refused immediate appearance. Their trials will be held at the end of May and in mid-June. In the meantime, two friends were put in pre-trial custody and three under judicial control. On May 4, seven individuals were indicted, two were convoked later, and thirteen just received reminders of the law. Three defendants accepted immediate appearances: two were discharged, and the last one received a 1000-euro fine for carrying a smoke bomb and spray-paint cans. The others will be tried later. Two more people were put in pre-trial custody and others under judicial control. We send our love and support to everyone arrested on May Day—not only in Paris, but everywhere. For those seeking more details about the several days of hearings concerning the events of May Day in Paris, we recommend this report by the Parisian legal team.

Even if this massive wave of arrests ends up being simply a symbolic gesture orchestrated by the government and the Police Prefecture of Paris, the number of individuals held in custody shows their determination to increase repression towards anyone suspected of belonging to the leading procession—even simply on account of clothes, accessories, or medical supplies. By spreading fear of being arrested for “participating in a group formed in order to commit vandalism or violence,” the authorities aim to discourage demonstrators from the practices of the leading procession, and to compel everyone else to dissociate from us. History will show whether we can avoid this trap.

Reflections

The storm of May Day 2018 is over. It’s time for us to reflect on the events of that day, the strategies and decisions on the field, and some attitudes and postures within the leading procession

that, in our eyes, are becoming problematic. Many personal essays and reflections have already appeared online on the subject, indicating that everyone feels there is room for improvement.

Deserting Social Media, Keeping a Low Profile

As anarchists, we are all aware of the risks that new technologies can involve. It is no surprise that our phones and computers can be tapped and that our favorite websites and social media platforms are monitored by the authorities. This is why, for strategic reasons, we believe that we should minimize our dependence on social media and new technologies in general. How many times has online information—statements, posts, pictures, friendships, events—been used against us in court to add more charges to our cases? We need to be more cautious with these tools in order to protect others and ourselves. As younger generations of activists are joining us for actions like those of May Day, we have to find ways to pass on proper security practices to new participants before they get themselves into trouble.

A Facebook event entitled “May Day 2018: A Day in Hell” and a call for a “revolutionary, determined, and fighting procession” were posted online before the eyes of the world. Our point here is not to attack the authors of this call, but to consider the use of social media as a platform to announce actions. What is the goal of advertising such an event online? Publicity, certainly. It is true that we need to announce events in order to draw people to them who are not already involved in our circles, but perhaps there could be a way to do this that would not also forewarn the authorities as to the character of our plans. When we do so, it enables them to prepare strategies for media narrative and repression in advance. Of course, the authorities already suspected that we intended to join the traditional procession and unleash hell, as we did in the past; but we should not make it easy for them to predict where and how we will strike, nor to identify the most confrontational elements. Regarding such press statements from our side, they may sometimes be necessary, but we should avoid publicity stunts of all kinds, and we also have to consider what the process is by which it is determined which actions are announced and how. These announcements can make things possible, but they can also make things impossible. One of the greatest structural challenges of organizing in the 21st century is how to resist the dictatorship of those who have the most media access.

Because we openly announced our intention to carry out a frontal assault, the authorities had plenty of time to prepare a trap for us. They used this call to warn trade union leaders and to stir up the tensions that exist between them and some individuals in the leading procession. We should take care not to use rhetoric or publicity strategies that will leave us more isolated and vulnerable in the end. There is no doubt that the government is increasing its pressure on us, and an approach that works once may not work so well the next time. Michel Delpuech, the Police Commissioner of Paris, reported that the police and government officials were generally pleased with the results of the law enforcement strategy they used on May Day, and that they already knew in advance what our main targets were: the train station and the district police station.

All this raises a lot of questions regarding our discretion, our ability to stay under the radar while getting organized until the day of the action, and also our ability to remain unpredictable. We should not depend on social media to communicate among ourselves, and we should be intentional in determining which information we share in different venues. There have to be other safer ways to reach out to others—especially newer generations—without having to rely on

social media or voluntarily drawing attention to ourselves before an action. For us, the solution lies deeper underground, in our informal assemblies, gatherings, meetings, and parties, where real human interactions and affinities can flourish. It is there, and through meeting new people in the streets or during actions, that we can develop and extend new informal connections and solidarity while escaping as much as possible from the constantly increasing state surveillance.

Down with Radical Rituals, Postures, and the Cult of Images

Another concerning issue is that since its first appearance in 2016, the head of the leading procession—the “black bloc”—is becoming more and more ritualized, at the risk of becoming a caricature of itself. When at first, groups of students, anarchists, autonomists, and other radicals decided to take the head of the demonstration at the expense of trade unions, it was to open up new horizons for activism in France. This strategy worked: new forms of action and solidarity emerged as people decided to secede from the trade union processions. The leading procession became an uncontrollable body for which diversity, mobility, and spontaneity were the watchwords.

Two years later, the situation has changed. Of course, we are happy to see that the leading procession still exists and keeps attracting more and more people. Nevertheless, when we decide to take part in an action, everything follows a familiar pattern: we join the demonstration, we reach the front of the procession, we change our clothes for anonymity, we create a bloc at the head of the leading procession, we pose with our banners and smoke bombs for photographers, we march, we shout the same slogans, we attack some targets, we confront police forces, we escape and disband. Once again, we have reached a plateau, and we find ourselves fulfilling a role in an orchestrated spectacle. What used to be an unpredictable spark, a way of outflanking specific demonstrations, is now becoming an expected form of action. In ritualizing our strategies, we end up integrating them into others’ expectations and facilitating the task of the police at the same time. We have to create a new momentum in our actions. Only our creativity and originality can add new subversive, spontaneous, and chaotic elements to the “black bloc” strategy.

As a starting point, we could start by refusing the cult of images, an integral part of the “society of spectacle.” It seems that there is a lot of work to be done in this regard among the monochrome bloc of the leading procession. For us, it is clear that images of all kinds are nothing more than invisible chains that tie us to the narcissistic and materialistic aspects of the prevailing order. We should not be imitating popular images of struggle; we should seek to interrupt a way of living based on emulating images. While the autonomous bloc was waiting on the Austerlitz bridge, we witnessed a strange scene in which dozens of photographers captured footage of the autonomous procession, while some of us proudly posed with banners and smoke bombs. It took the crowd a long time to show the first signs of irritation against journalists, even though they repeatedly blocked our path.

Regardless of the intentions of journalists, their profession endangers us. They record us before, during, and after actions; often, they are positioned between us and our targets, or our comrades, or the police. Their presence can distract us from other important objectives, obstruct our movements, and incriminate us afterwards if police utilize their footage for investigations. After May Day, discussing this subject with comrades, we all agreed that some of the newer

generations in the leading procession probably decided to join us only because they saw images online of the confrontations during the movement against the *Loi Travail*. Unfortunately, the power of images is a double-edged sword: on one side, it can make people choose to join us, but on the other side, they might remain fascinated by this warrior posture and the production of spectacular images.

As the government tries to intensify control and repression, we have to be especially careful regarding the presence of cameras during actions. Once, the only cameras we had to be worried about were police or city cameras. Today, they are everywhere. But this should not make us accept them as inevitable: we need to keep journalists and cameras out of our procession, without any exceptions. What is more important, the dissemination of images flattering our egos, or making it possible to act freely during demonstrations?

For more information about the issue of cameras in our radical processions, you can read the zine “*Dialogue imaginaire avec un-e défenseur-euse de l’image photographique d’individus.*”

Improving Our Organization, Strategies, and Solidarity

Rather than taking for granted the simplistic dichotomy of “victory” versus “defeat,” we would like to discuss several points that could be improved for future actions. Some decisions taken on May Day raise questions that we must confront if we want to move forward.

First, when we passed the Austerlitz bridge to enter the *boulevard de l’Hôpital*, we all realized that police forces were waiting for us on both sides of the procession. This made us uneasy for some time. Then, when we finally decided to move forward and reached the McDonald’s, we realized again that police forces were blocking the nearby street *rue Buffon*. In our view, as soon as we ravaged the McDonald’s, we were already within the trap of police forces, as anti-riot fences and water cannon trucks were blocking us from progressing further. In other words, starting at that specific moment, we had no options except to retreat via the park, to return across the bridge we had just crossed, or to endure the police attacks. Next time, we need to be more aware of our surroundings, to anticipate the movements of law enforcement, and to think ahead of time about possible escape routes in order to avoid the moments of panic that we saw on May Day. We are fortunate to be able to say that we succeeded—for the most part—in escaping and outflanking the massive police presence, at least for a moment. But we could certainly do better.

We also should revisit individual decisions, such as the choice to throw a Molotov cocktail inside the McDonald’s when people were living above the restaurant, or to set cars on fire on the sidewalk so that flames threatened the apartments above them. The point is not to criticize the use of Molotov cocktails, but to consider when and where to use them. We should never risk collateral victims because of our decisions. Let’s avoid another tragedy like the one that took place in Greece several years ago in the Marfin bank fire. A tragedy like that would affect all of us on several different levels.

Also, we need to take better care of each other during actions. On May Day 2018, many people were not equipped to endure the showers of tear gas. Many people experienced panic attacks or respiratory issues while caught in a middle of a large confused crowd. We saw at least one person with a head injury receiving medical attention from firemen. It is obvious that we need to bring more medical supplies with us to these actions.

Finally, let us recall that solidarity is one of our greatest assets. Today, about 50 arrestees await trial. Several gatherings took place in front of the police stations in which individuals were incarcerated. These actions need to intensify, and not only because friends known to us personally are detained. Solidarity is for everyone, friends or not. One idea for future actions could be to find new tactics to protect each other from being arrested, or to respond to arrests.

Our Rage Must Not Be Contained

It is now apparent that the autonomous procession, in all its diversity, needs to use creativity to break out of the current stalemate. To accomplish this, we need to free ourselves from the defeatist rhetoric that tends to crop up in our discussions, to accept criticism, and to abandon the ritualized framework of the leading procession. We need to become unpredictable again.

Regarding the argument currently circulating to the effect that we should join forces once more with trade unions, we have some reservations. Let's not forget that trade union leaders are the ones who negotiate with every successive government to determine the length of the chains with which we are all bound. We don't need longer chains, but to be rid of chains once and for all! And what about the trade union service personnel who attacked students and radicals on several occasions during the demonstrations of 2016?

Let's make it clear that we don't want to join forces with trade unions—with an authoritarian and hierarchical political apparatus. Rather, we want to create connections with everyone—unionized or not—who is disillusioned with the presiding political hierarchies. We can form these connections during blockades, in spontaneous actions, or in the leading processions.

Here are some closing thoughts that we could discuss in hopes of opening new breaches in our struggles:

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First, why not take law enforcement by surprise during major events like May Day? Instead of converging for the afternoon demonstration as we usually do, we could desert the demonstration. As police units would be positioned along the official route, we could seize this opportunity to carry out actions everywhere else, outside the official route of the demonstration. Certainly, such action requires a lot of preparation and organization. The goal would be that every single affinity group that would otherwise have constituted the head of the leading procession should attack a specific target, all at the same time. It might not work, of course—calls for “autonomous actions” often fall flat, and this strategy (branded as “Plan B” for the 2007 G8 summit in Germany) has failed before. People usually need to experience a certain amount of concentration to gain the morale necessary to take transformative action. But if we could decentralize our efforts, we could outmaneuver the police and draw more people into the confrontations.

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Another solution could be to dissolve the autonomous bloc at the head of the leading procession, as the latter is now becoming too predictable and somehow too slow. In doing so, we might be able to use to our advantage the fact that the majority of the crowd in the leading procession supports our actions, so as to move through the crowd like free electrons, attacking one target after another. If they had to control the entirety of the leading procession, police forces would constantly be harassed or overtaken by events. As mentioned earlier, traditional trade unions are still eroding, and more people are joining the leading procession; therefore, we can expect

more and more people on our side. Strategically, it would be a nightmare for law enforcement. How would they carry out arrests amidst thousands of uncooperative individuals? If they sought to divide the procession, they would risk being surrounded by demonstrators as they were on May Day 2016; if they charged the crowd, it would be a public image nightmare for the government. The Police Commissioner of Paris made it clear that the current strategy of the police is to avoid direct confrontations; if this continues, it means that sending undercover officers into the crowd to arrest specific individuals is not an option. Our mobility and agility would be a precious asset. Finally, distributing the confrontational black bloc throughout the rest of the leading procession would dissolve the dividing lines of identity, creating confusion for the authorities as to who to target and opening up the possibility that people who had not previously expected it of themselves might cross the threshold into action.

One thing is certain: the present situation cannot continue. As the authors of an article entitled “*Ce sera tout?*” (“That will be all?”) put it:

“The self-satisfied ‘leading procession’ has now been instituted as a norm of superficial radicalism to the detriment of inventiveness, effervescence, and riotous joy, thus removing all its subversive significance and opposing the savage and uncontrollable aspects that no longer find a place to express themselves within it.”

It is vital to consider every single criticism made of the leading procession, in order to find solutions to escape from this dangerous stalemate. We need to rethink everything and begin acting according to a different logic.

All of that being said, the events of that afternoon continue to fill our hearts with warmth, joy, and passion. Count on us to continue smashing every single symbol of the prevailing order until we reach its very foundations.

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