

With the youth in '68 and '86

Avec les jeunes en '68 et '86

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Introduction

In 1986, as in 1968, France saw a massive student movement. The mobilization by high-school and university students — in which the 22 year-old Malik Oussekiné was killed by police — ultimately forced Jacques Chirac's right-wing government to abandon its plans to introduce greater academic selection.

Daniel Guérin (1904–1988) was a witness to that movement just like the '68 revolt. His article on its success, first published in *Lutter!* on 18 January 1987, was republished on Mediapart upon the thirtieth anniversary of his death. Its message is timely, as university occupations today spread in opposition to Emmanuel Macron's planned reforms:

Avec les jeunes en 68 et 86!

In '68, I was already 64 blasted years old. I was among the young people at their demos. When they chanted 'hop, hop, hop!' or suddenly started running, it was only right that I should join in with them — if I could still manage to do so. At the start, the '68 movement was no more politicised than today's: there was just a spark of solidarity with the guys from the 22 March movement in Nanterre, and those who had been expelled or even faced trial after the 2 May events at the Sorbonne.

The evening of 10 May we listened to Dany [Cohn-Bendit] perched on the Lion of Belfort statue. He was practising direct democracy, debating with everyone what route the demo should take. At that initial point, there were far more high-schoolers than students, and they were real novices in terms of getting clobbered by the police.

Later that night, with the bridges and boulevards locked down, the flow of young people was forced into the trap of the rue Gay Lussac. The CRS riot cops attacked, euphoric; to defend themselves, the students had to dig up the paving stones and set up barricades.

Finally, then, we had a total politicisation of the students, and simultaneously the politicisation of the workers who came running to their aid. Just as in recent times, the repression itself fed the struggle. On the evening of 13 May there were a whole million of us marching through Paris. The panicked [prime minister] Pompidou opened the Sorbonne up to the students again.

This Sorbonne citadel became a formidable hotbed of rebellion, including all the different tendencies. Just as the occupied factories day and night emboldened the workers, the Fac we had reconquered became our own fortress, and indeed a fortress for everyone. In the big lecture hall, the anarchists held huge debates on self-management. Everyone got to speak, even late into the night.

This was what was missing, up till the breakthrough in 1986. The dissolution of the National Student Coordination denied us this irreplaceable sounding board and amplifier.

As compared to '68, today we are still just at the beginning of the workers' mass intervention.¹ Back then, their intervention did a lot more to strike fear into the hearts of the rich than the student guerrillas did. And it will come again.

¹ In the wake of the student movement, in December 1986 several strikes took off among rail workers, teaching staff, nurses and airport workers, organised in the form of 'co-ordinations' and 'general assemblies' able to take decisions for themselves.

For what are doubtless rather interesting reasons, the CGT [union confederation] is not today capitulationist — for the moment at least. It no longer tries to lock the guys down in the factories, keeping them away from any contact with the students, so that they can instead play cards and oil their machines. As for the CFDT leadership, it seems to have lost touch with its base, which is far more combative than [its leader] Edmond Maire.²

Here we will not go through the cock-ups of '68, like when we allowed ourselves to get beaten back through the Latin Quarter when the ministerial archives and the Stock Exchange were on fire. And there must be no fresh attempt to recuperate the struggle, like when Mendès appeared at the Stade Charléty.³

If the swindler Big Charles [de Gaulle] could rally a counter-demonstration on the Champs Élysées with goons like Charles Pasqua [an organiser of this rally, and a late 1980s Interior Minister], this was not because we went too far but because we had not gone far enough. The Stalinists behind [1967–82 CGT leader Georges] Séguy and the students' inexperience made us miss the boat. The bastard 'Union of the Left' that came after collapsed, and [Séguy's successor Henri] Krasucki could not play the same game.

The young people studying today are more alert than they were in '68, even though some might want to say they are 'apolitical.' They have learned very quickly, and their understanding will mature faster still. Believe me — an old invalid who's picked up the scent and understands what's going on!

The youth has not said its last word. It will not allow itself to be tricked either by the budding apparatchiks or by empty promises. We respect the young people's autonomy. But we tremble just as they do. We will fight with them for a new world, without gods or masters.

² Edmond Maire railed against the 'black sheep' in the union... who were just reasserting the CFDT's own post-'68 strategy of fighting for self-management. In 1988, these dissident trade unionists, either expelled from the union or removed from their posts, would set up alternative unions like SUD in the post and CRC in the health sector. They were joined by many others during the strike wave at the end of 1995, which gave rise to SUD unions in many other sectors.

³ The UNEF students' union, the SNESup union for higher-education staff, some left-wing parts of the CFDT and the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) — but not the CGT or the Communist Party — called the 27 May 1968 meeting at the Stade Charléty. It rallied some thirty to fifty thousand people, expressing the full diversity of the 'May '68 current.' Only part of it looked to former prime minister and PSU leader Pierre Mendès-France — who was present but did not speak — as the architect of an institutional 'political way forward.'

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