

Vive les Étudiants !

John Rety

19 May 1968

TEN MILLION WORKERS were called out on strike in France in support of the student demands. This follows ten days of militant action by the students. Considering that the Communist hierarchy has previously denounced the students as Anarchists, Trotskyists and Maoists, this action is as much bowing to public sentiment as the sudden capitulation of the French Government. The Sorbonne is to be reopened and cleared of the hated combat police and the release of all students was promised for today (May 13).

The antecedents of this struggle go back to January 26 of this year. On that day 40 members of the Nanterre University anarchist group marched into the faculty hall with comical posters ridiculing the police. The porters attacked the anarchists but were defeated. The authorities called in the police; one thousand students fought back and attended a protest meeting. The movement thus launched has grown ever since. The students are determined to get rid of the uniformed and plain-clothed police that haunt the faculties.

On May 3 a great meeting was called at the Sorbonne by the extreme left. The rector appealed to the police to dislodge the students. As the student protest grew, the Government stepped in and closed down the Sorbonne and Nanterre University, which were occupied by the combat police. The students organised quickly and brilliantly to reoccupy the universities from the hated police. As many as 15,000 students and sympathisers fought in street battles until the capitulation of the Government.

One of the demands of the students was that Danny Cohn-Bendit of the Nanterre anarchist group should not be deported to Germany.

There has been many conflicting accounts in the British Press about our comrade. Although Nesta Roberts of the *Guardian* has accurately described him as an anarchist, Joseph Carroll, in the same paper, on the same day, imputed he was a Trotskyist. Margot Lyons in the *New Statesman* said he was a 'Maoist' ringleader, the Observer said he was the leader of the 'anarcho-Maoists'. More to the point was Mandrake in the *Sunday Telegraph* who said amongst the students were many tendencies — Marxists, two kinds of Trotskyists, Maoists, Anarchists, Castroists, situationists. 'On March 22, they invaded the administrative offices of Nanterre University and demanded the right to hold political meetings'. The subsequent 'Movement of March 22' was led by Danny Cohn-Bendit and no doubt attracted others than anarchists.

Tuesday, May 7. Ten thousand students had taken possession of a vast circle round the Arc de Triomphe, their red and black flags massed on either side of the unknown soldier's tomb, singing

the 'International'. The police kept out of the way. General de Gaulle declared that he would not tolerate any further student violence.

The students declared that they were ready for a dialogue on three conditions: withdrawal of the police forces from the Latin Quarter; release and immediate amnesty for the imprisoned students; reopening the Sorbonne and Nanterre. Four hundred and thirty-four demonstrators were that day under arrest. The police that day restored D. Cohn-Bendit's residence permit (but only for a short period).

Wednesday, May 8. Strong police forces still occupied the Sorbonne and the student union delivered an ultimatum to the Government. If the demands were not met they would 'liberate' the Sorbonne. Mon-general changed his tune and said: 'The Government is ready to take the steps necessary for the adaptation of education to the modern world'. M. Pierre Sudreau, of the Party of Modern Democracy, said in the French Assembly that extremists had been trained in street fighting at two anarchist camps.

Thursday, May 9. The Ministry announced that until calm was restored the Sorbonne will remain closed. The students declared that as soon as they reoccupied the Sorbonne they 'would take over the premises and hold discussions day and night on the problems of the university'.

Friday, May 10. The industrial unions (Communist and Christian) have thrown their lot in with the students and called for a general strike on Monday. Beyond Paris the movement is now supported all over France. Several thousand young pupils marched through Paris with placards: 'Tomorrow we shall have the same problem'.

Saturday, May 11, saw the decisive battle and the defeat of the Government. There was ferocious fighting, barricades were set up by the students and cars were upturned to form a barrier. It was a night of the barricades which the capital had not witnessed since the Commune days of 1871. After a hurried conference with General de Gaulle, M. Pompidou, the Prime Minister, announced the concessions. The student unions were not overawed. The union described the concessions as 'extremely interesting' but they would wait till Monday to see if their comrades were to be released.

From all reports the population of the Latin Quarter was solidly backing the students. They showered debris over the police and water over the students to minimise the effect of the chlorine gas grenades. The demonstrators were themselves issued with a leaflet on how to protect themselves against tear gas. They took an anti-flu pill before demonstrating and one when the grenades started flying; carried lemon-soaked handkerchiefs and smeared bicarbonate of soda around their eyes.

The brutality of the police horrified all reporters. Photographs seen in London, but unavailable to this paper, showed policemen clubbing students on the ground, blood streaming from their faces. But the students also fought back, kicked gas grenades back to the police, and the police had to protect their faces from thrown stones with what looked like fencing masks.

The French Government is desperately trying to cope with the revolutionary situation forced by the students and now supported by the working class. The general strike is called on the tenth anniversary of de Gaulle's assumption of power, on the day that the Vietnam 'peace talks' were to provide him with added glory. The adulation in Sunday's British Press was an indication of the treatment he was to be given and still got without a reference to the upheavals!

The students will also have to fight off the dubious embrace of the Communist Party and all those who are now climbing on the bandwagon. But their cool determination hitherto to force their just demands is an inspiration to us all!

John Retty

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