

Paris: May 1968

Maurice Brinton's diary

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1968

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Introduction

(Written for the original edition, published by Solidarity In June 1968.)

This is an eye-witness account of two weeks spent in Paris during, May 1968. It is what one person saw, heard or discovered during that short period. The account has no pretence at comprehensives. It has been written and produced in haste, its purpose being to inform rather than to analyse — and to inform quickly.

The French events have a significance that extends far beyond the frontiers of modern France, They will leave their mark on the history of the second half of the 20th century. French bourgeois society has just been shaken to its foundations, Whatever the outcome of the present struggle we must calmly take note of the fact that the political map of Western capitalist society will never be the same again. A whole epoch has just come to an end: the epoch during which people couldn't say, with a semblance of verisimilitude, that 'it couldn't happen here'. Another epoch is starting: that in which people know that revolution is possible under the conditions of modern bureaucratic capitalism.

For Stalinism too, a whole period is ending: The period during which Communist Parties in Western Europe could claim (admittedly with dwindling credibility) that they remained revolutionary organisations, but that revolutionary opportunities had never really presented themselves. This notion has now irrevocably been swept into the proverbial 'dustbin of history'. When the chips were down, the French Communist Party and those workers under its influence proved to be the final and most effective 'brake' on the development of the revolutionary self-activity of the working class.

A full analysis of the French events will eventually have to be attempted, for, without an understanding of modern society, it will never be possible consciously to change it. But this analysis will have to wait for a while until some of the dust has settled. What can be said now is that if honestly carried out, such an analysis will compel many orthodox revolutionaries to discard a mass of outdated slogans and myths to reassess contemporary reality; particularly the reality of modern bureaucratic capitalism. its dynamic, its methods of control and manipulation, the reasons for both its resilience and its brittleness and — most important of all — the nature of its crises. Concepts and organizations that have been found wanting will have to be discarded. The new phenomena (new in themselves or new to traditional revolutionary theory) will have to be recognised for what they are and interpreted in all their implications, The real events of 1968 will then have to be integrated into a new framework of ideas, for without this developmental revolutionary theory, there can be no development of revolutionary practice — and in the long run no transformation of society through the conscious actions of men.

Rue Gay-Lussac

Sunday 12 May

The rue Gay-Lussac still carries the scars of the 'night of the barricades'. Burnt out cars line the pavement, their carcasses a dirty grey under the missing paint. The cobbles, cleared from the middle of the road, lie in huge mounds on either side. A vague smell of tear gas still lingers in the air.

At the junction with the rue des Ursulines lies a building site, its wire mesh fence breached in several places. From here came material for at least a dozen barricades: planks, wheelbarrows, metal drums, steel girders, cement mixers, blocks of stone. The site also yielded a pneumatic drill. The students couldn't use it, of course — not until a passing building worker showed them how, perhaps the first worker actively to support the student revolt. Once broken, the road surface provided cobbles, soon put to a variety of uses. All that is already history.

People are walking up and down the street, as if trying to convince themselves that it really happened. They aren't students. The students themselves know what happened and why it happened. They aren't local inhabitants either. The local inhabitants saw what happened, the viciousness of the CRS charges, the assaults on the wounded, the attacks on innocent bystanders, the unleashed fury of the state machine against those who had challenged it. The people in the streets are the ordinary people of Paris, people from neighbouring districts, horrified at what they have heard over the radio or read in their papers and who have come for a walk on a fine Sunday morning to see for themselves. They are talking in small clusters with the inhabitants of the rue Gay-Lussac. The Revolution, having for a week held the university and the streets of the Latin Quarter, is beginning to take hold of the minds of men.

On Friday 3 May the CRS had paid their historic visit to the forborne. They had been invited in by Paul Roche, Hector of Paris University. The Rector had almost certainly acted in connivance with Alain Peyrefitte, Minister of Education, if not with the Elysee itself. Many students had been arrested, beaten up, and several were summarily convicted.

The unbelievable — yet thoroughly predictable — ineptitude of this bureaucratic 'solution' to the 'problem' of student discontent triggered off a chain reaction. It provided the pent-up anger, resentment and frustration of tens of thousands of young people with both a reason for further action and with an attainable objective. The students, evicted from the university, took to the street, demanding the liberation of their comrades, the reopening of their faculties, the withdrawal of the cops.

Layers upon layers of new people were soon drawn into the struggle. The student union (UNEF) and the union representing university teaching staff (SNESUP) called for an unlimited strike. For a week the students held their ground, in ever bigger and more militant street demonstrations. On Tuesday 7 May 50,000 students and teachers marched through the streets behind a single banner: 'Vive La Commune', and sang the Internationals at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, at the Arc de Triomphe. On Friday 10 May students and teachers decided to occupy the Latin Quarter en masse. They felt they had more right to be there than the police, for whom barracks were provided elsewhere. The cohesion and sense of purpose of the demonstrators terrified the Establishment. Power couldn't be allowed to lie with this rabble, who had even had the audacity to erect barricades.

Another inept gesture was needed. Another administrative reflex duly materialised. Fouchet (Minister Of the interior) and Joxe (Deputy Prime Minister) ordered Grimaud (Superintendent of the Paris police) to clear the streets. The order was confirmed in writing, doubtless to be preserved for posterity as an example of what not to do in certain situations. The CRS charged...clearing the rue Gay-Lussac and opening the doors to the second phase of the Revolution.

In the rue Gay-Lussac and in adjoining streets, the battle-scarred walls carry a dual message. They bear testimony to the incredible courage of those who held the area for several hours against

a deluge of tear gas, phosphorous grenades and repeated charges of club-swinging CRS. But they also show something of what the defenders were striving for...

Mural propaganda is an integral part of the revolutionary Paris of May 1968. It has become a mass activity, part and parcel of the Revolution's method of self-expression. The walls of the Latin Quarter are the depository of a new rationality, no longer confined to books, but democratically displayed at street level and made available to all. The trivial and the profound, the traditional and the esoteric, rub shoulders in this new fraternity, rapidly breaking down the rigid barriers and compartments in people's minds. 'Désobéir d'abord: alors écris sur les murs (Loi du 10 Mai 1968)' reads an obviously recent inscription, clearly setting the tone. 'Si tout le monde faisait comme nous' (if everybody acted like us...) wistfully dreams another in joyful anticipation, I think, rather than in any spirit of self-satisfied substitutionary. Most of the slogans are straightforward, correct and fairly orthodox: 'Libérez nos camarades'; 'Fouchet, Grimaud, démission'; 'A bas l'Etat policier'; 'Grève Générale fundi'; 'Travailleurs, étudiants, solidaires'; 'Vive les Conseils Ouvriers'. Other slogans reflect the new concerns: 'La publicité te manipule'; 'Examens = hiérarchie'; 'L'art est mort, ne consommes pas son cadavre'; 'A bas la société de consommation' 'Debout les damnés de Nanterre'. The slogan 'Baisses-toi et broute' (Bend your head and chew the cud) is obviously aimed at those whose minds are still full of traditional preoccupations. 'Centre la fermentation groupusculaire' moans a large scarlet inscription. This one is really out of touch. For everywhere there is a profusion of pasted up posters and journals; V'ois Ouvrière, Avant-Garde and Revoltes (for the Trotskyists), Servir le Peuple and Humanité Nouvelle (for the devotees of Chairman Mao), Le Libertaire (for the Anarchists), Tribune Socialiste (for the PSU), Even odd copies of l'Humanité are pasted up. It is difficult to read them, so covered are they with critical comments.

On a hoarding, I see a large advertisement for a new brand of cheese; a child biting into an enormous sandwich. 'C'est bon le fromage So-and-so' runs the patter. Someone has covered the last few words with red paint. The poster reads 'C'est bon la Revolution'. People pass by, look, and smile.

I talk to my companion, a man of about 45, an 'old' revolutionary. We discuss the tremendous possibilities now opening up. He suddenly turns towards me and comes out with a memorable phrase: "To think one had to have kids and wait 20 years to see all this..." We talk to others in the street, to young and old, to the 'political' and the 'unpolitical', to people at all levels of understanding and commitment. Everyone is prepared to talk — in fact everyone wants to. They all seem remarkably articulate. We find no-one prepared to defend the actions of the administration. The 'critics' fall into two main groups'.

The 'progressive' university teachers, the Communists, and a number of students see the main root of the student 'crisis' in the backwardness of the university in relation to society's current needs, in the quantitative inadequacy of the tuition provided, in the semi-feudal attitudes of some professors, and in the general insufficiency of job opportunities. They see the University as unadapted to the modern world. The remedy for them is adaptation: a modernising reform which would sweep away the cobwebs, provide more teachers, better lecture theatres, a bigger educational budget, perhaps a more liberal attitude on the campus and, at the end of it all, an assured job.

The rebels (which include some but by no means all of the 'old' revolutionaries) see this concern with adapting the university to modern society as something of a diversion. For it is modern society itself which they reject. They consider bourgeois life trivial and mediocre, repressive and

repressed. They have no yearning (but only contempt) for the administrative and managerial careers it holds out for them. They are not seeking integration into adult society. On the contrary, they are seeking a chance radically to contest its adulteration. The driving force of their revolt is their own alienation, the meaninglessness of life under modern bureaucratic capitalism. It is certainly not a purely economic deterioration in their standard of living.

It is no accident that the 'revolution' started in the Nanterre faculties of Sociology and Psychology. The students saw that the sociology they were being taught was a means of controlling and manipulating society, not a means of understanding it in order to change it. In the process they discovered revolutionary sociology. They rejected the niche allocated to them in the great bureaucratic pyramid, that of 'experts' in the service of a technocratic Establishment, specialists of the 'human factor' in the modern industrial equation. In the process they discovered the importance of the working class. The amazing thing is that, at least among the active layers of the students, these 'sectarians' suddenly seem to have become the majority', surely the best definition of any revolution.

The two types of 'criticism' of the modern French educational system do not neutralise one another. On the contrary, each creates its own kind of problems for the University authorities and for the officials at the Ministry of Education. The real point is that one kind of criticism what one might call the quantitative one – could in time be coped with by modern bourgeois society'. The other – the qualitative one – never. This is what gives it its revolutionary potential. The 'trouble with the University', for the powers that be, isn't that money can't be found for more teachers. It can. The 'trouble' is that the University is full of students – and that the heads of the students are full of revolutionary ideas.

Among those we speak to there is a deep awareness that the problem cannot be solved in the Latin Quarter, that isolation of the revolt in a student 'ghetto' (even an 'autonomous' one) would spell defeat. They realise that the salvation of the movement lies in its extension to other sectors of the population. But here wide differences appear. When some talk of the importance of the working class it is as a substitute for getting on with any kind of struggle themselves, an excuse for denigrating the students' struggle and 'adventurist'. Yet it is precisely because of its unparalleled militancy that the students' action has established that direct Action works, has begun to influence the younger workers and to rattle the established organizations. Other students realise the relationship of these struggles more clearly. We will find them later at Censier (see page 31), animating the 'worker-student' action committees, But enough, for the time being, about the Latin Quarter. The movement has already spread beyond its narrow confines.

May 13th: From Renault to the streets of Paris

Monday 13 May

6:15am, Avenue Yves Kermen. A clear, cloudless day. Crowds begin to gather outside the gates of the giant Renault works at Boulogne Billancourt. The main trade union 'centrales' (CGT, CFDT and FO) have called a one day general strike, They are protesting against police violence in the Latin Quarter and in support of long-neglected claims concerning wages, hours, the age of retirement and trade union rights in the plants.

The factory gates are wide open. Not a cop or supervisor in sight, The workers stream in. A loud hailer tells them to proceed to their respective shops, to refuse to start work and to proceed,

at 8am, to their traditional meeting place, an enormous shed-like structure in the middle of the Ile Seguin (an island in the Seine entirely covered by parts of the Renault plant).

As each worker goes through the gated, the pickets give him a leaflet, jointly produced by the three unions. Leaflets in Spanish are also distributed (over 2000 Spanish workers are employed at Renault). French and Spanish orators succeed one another, in short spells, at the microphone. Although all the unions are supporting the one-day strike, all the orators seem to belong to the CGT. it's their loudspeaker...

6:45am, Hundreds of workers are now streaming in. Many look as if they had corpse to work rather than to participate in mass meetings at the plant. The decision to call the strike was only taken on the Saturday afternoon, after many of the men had already dispersed for the weekend. Many seem unaware of what it's all about. I am struck by the number of Algerian and black workers. There are only a few posters at the gate, again mainly those of the CGT. Some pickets carry CF DT posters. There isn't an FO poster in sight. The road and walls outside the factory have been well covered with slogans: 'One day strike on Monday'; 'Unity in defence of our claims' 'NO to the monopolies'.

The little café near the gates is packed. People seem unusually wide awake and communicative for so early an hour. A newspaper kiosk is selling about three copies of l'Humanité for every copy of anything else. The local branch of the Communist Party is distributing a leaflet calling for 'resolution, calm, vigilance and unity' and warning against 'provocateurs'.

The pickets make no attempt to argue with those pouring in. No-one seems to know whether they will obey the strike call or not. Less than 25% of Renault workers belong to any union at all. This is the biggest car factory in Europe. The loud hailer hammers home its message: The CRS have recently assaulted peasants at Quimper, and workers at Caen, Lyon and Dassault. Now they are turning on the students. The regime will not tolerate opposition. It will not modernize the country. It will not grant us our basic wage demands. Our one day strike will show both Government and employers our determination. We must compel them to retreat." The message is repeated again and again, like a gramophone record. I wonder whether the speaker believes what he says, whether he even senses what lies ahead.

At 7am a dozen Trotskyists of the FER (Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires) turn up to sell their paper Revoltes. They wear large red and white buttons proclaiming their identity. A little later another group arrives to sell Voix Ouvriere. The loudspeaker immediately switches from an attack on the Gaullist government and its CRS to an attack on "provocateurs" and "disruptive elements, alien to the working class". The Stalinist speaker hints that the sellers are in the pay of the government, As they are here, "the police must be lurking in the neighbourhood". Heated arguments break out between sellers and CGT officials. The CFDT pickets are refused the use of the loudhailer. They shout "démocratie ouvrière" and defend the right of the 'disruptive elements' to sell their stuff. A rather abstract right, as not a sheet is sold. The front page of Revoltes carries an esoteric article on Eastern Europe.

Much invective (but no blows) are exchanged. In the course of an argument I hear Bro. Trigon (delegate to the second electoral 'college' at Renault) describe Danny Cohn-Bandit as "un agent du pouvoir" (an agent of the authorities). A student takes him up on this point. The Trots don't. Shortly before 8am they walk off, their 'act of presence' accomplished and duly recorded for history.

At about the same time, hundreds of workers who had entered the factory leave their shops and assemble in the sunshine in an open space a few hundred yards inside the main gate. From there

they amble towards Ile Seguin, crossing one arm of the river Seine on the way. Other processions heave other points of the factory and converge on the same area. The metallic ceiling is nearly 200 feet above our heads, Enormous stocks of components are piled up high right and left. Far away to the right an assembly line is still working, lifting what looks like rear car seats, complete with attached springs, from the ground to first floor level.

Some 10,000 workers are soon assembled in the shed. The orators address them through a loudspeaker from a narrow platform some 40 feet up. The platform runs in front of what looks like an elevated inspection post but which I am told is a union office inside the factor. The CGT speaker deals with various sectional wage claims. He denounces the resistance of the government “in the hands of the monopolies”, He produces facts and figures dealing with the wage structure, Many highly skilled men are not getting enough. A CFDT speaker follows him. He deals with the steady speed-up, with the worsening of working conditions, with accidents and with the fate of man in production. “What kind of life is this? Are we always to remain puppets, carrying out every whim of the management?” He advocates uniform wage increases for all (‘augmentations non-hiérarchisées’), An FO speaker follows. He is technically the most competent, but says the least. In flowery rhetoric he talks of 1936, but omits all reference to Léon Blum. The record of FO is bad in the factory and the speaker is heckled from time to time, The CGT speakers then ask the workers to participate en masse in the big rally planned for that afternoon. As the last speaker finishes, the crowd spontaneously breaks out into a rousing ‘Internationale’, The older men seem to know most of the words. The younger workers only know the chorus. A friend nearby assures me that in 20 years this is the first time he has heard the song sung inside Renault (he has attended dozens of mass meetings in the Ile Seguin). There is an atmosphere of excitement, particularly among the younger workers.

The crowd then breaks up into several sections. Some walk back over the bridge and out of the factory. Others proceed systematically through the shops where a few hundred blokes are still at work. Some of tees: men argue but most seem only too glad for an excuse to stop and join in the procession. Gangs weave their way, joking and singing, amid the giant presses and tanks. Those remaining at work are ironically cheered, clapped or exhorted to “step on it” or “work harder”. Occasional foremen look on helplessly, as One assembly line after another is brought to a halt.

Many of the lathes have coloured pictures plastered over them: pin-ups and green fields, sex and sunshine. Anyone still working is exhorted to get out into the daylight, not just to dream about it, in the main plant, over half a mile long, hardly 12 men remain in their overalls. Not an angry voice can be heard. There is much good humoured banter. By 11 am thousands of workers have poured out into the warmth of a morning in May. An open-air beer and sandwich stall, outside the gate, is doing a roaring trade.

Monday 13 May 1 , 15 pm.

The streets are crowded, The response to the call for a 24-hour general strike has exceeded the wildest hopes of the trade unions. Despite the short notice Paris is paralysed. The strike was only decided 48 hours ago, after the ‘night of the barricades’. It is moreover ‘illegal’. The law of the land demands a five-day notice before an ‘official’ strike can be called. Too bad for legality. A solid phalanx of young people is walking up the Boulevard de Sébastopol, towards the Gare de l’Est. They are proceeding to the student rallying point for the giant demonstration called

jointly by the unions, the students' organization (UNEF) and the teachers' associations (FEN and SNESup).

There is not a bus or car in sight. The streets of Paris today belong to the demonstrators. Thousands of them are already in the square in front of the station, Thousands more are moving in from every direction. The plan agreed by the sponsoring organizations is for the different categories to assemble separately and then to converge on the Place de la République, from where the march will proceed across Paris, via the Latin Quarter: to the Place Denfert-Rochereau. We are already packed like sardines for as far as the eye can see, yet there is more than an hour to go before we are due to proceed. The sun has been shining all day, The girls are in summer dresses, the young men in shirt sleeves. A red flag is flying over the railway station. There are many red flags in the crowd and several black ones too.

A man suddenly appears carrying a suitcase full of duplicated leaflets. He belongs to some left 'groupuscule' or other. He opens his suitcase and distributes perhaps a dozen leaflets. But he doesn't have to continue alone. There is an unquenchable thirst for information, ideas, literature, argument, polemic. The man just stands there as people surround him and press forward to get the leaflets. Dozens of demonstrators, without even reading the leaflet, help him distribute them. Some 6000 copies get out in a few minutes. All seem to be assiduously read, People argue, laugh, joke. I witnessed such scenes again and again.

Sellers of revolutionary literature are doing well. An edict, signed by the organizers of the demonstration, that "the only literature allowed would be that of the organizations sponsoring the demonstration" (see *L'Humanité*, 13 May 1968, page 5) is being enthusiastically flouted. This bureaucratic restriction (much criticised the previous evening when announced at Censier by the student delegates to the Co-ordinating Committee) obviously cannot be enforced in a crowd of this size. The revolution is bigger than any organization, more tolerant than any institution 'representing' the masses, more realistic than any edict of any Central Committee. Demonstrators have climbed onto walls, onto the roofs of bus stops, onto the railings in front of the station. Some have loud hailers and make short speeches. All the 'politicos' seem to be in one part or other of this crowd. I can see the banner of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, portraits of Castro and Che Guevara, the banner of the FER, several banners of 'Servir le Peuple' (a Maoist group), and the banner of the UJCML (Union de la Jeunesse Communiste Marxiste-Léniniste), another Maoist tendency. There are also banners from many educational establishments now occupied by those who work there. Large groups of liches (high school kids) mingle with the students as do many thousands of teachers. At about 2pm the student section sets off, singing the 'Internationale'. We march 20-30 abreast, arms linked. There is a row of red flags in front of us, then a banner 50 feet wide carrying four simple words: 'Etudiants, Enseignants, Travailleurs, Solidaires'. It is an impressive sight.

The whole Boulevard de Magenta is a solid seething mass of humanity. We can't enter the Place de la République, already packed with demonstrators. One can't even move along the pavements or through adjacent streets. Nothing but people, as far as the eye can see. As we proceed slowly down the Boulevard de Magenta, we notice on a third floor balcony, high on our right, an SFIO (Socialist Party) headquarters, The balcony is bedecked with a few decrepit-looking red flags and a banner proclaiming 'Solidarity with the students'. A few elderly characters wave at us, somewhat self-consciously, Someone in the crowd starts chanting "O-pur-tu-nistes". The slogan is taken up, rhythmically roared by thousands, to the discomfiture of those on the balcony who beat a hasty retreat, The people have not forgotten the use of the CRS against the striking miners in 1958 by

'socialist' Minister of the Interior Jules Moch, They remember the 'socialist' Prime Minister Guy Mollet and his role during the Algerian War. Mercilessly, the crowd shows its contempt for the discredited politicians now seeking to jump on the bandwagon. "Guy Mollet, au musée", they shout, amid laughter. It is truly the end of an epoch. At about 3pm we at last reach the Place de la République, our point of departure, The crowd here is so dense that several people faint and have to be carried into neighbouring cafes, Here people are packed almost as tight as in the street, but can at least avoid being injured, The window of one café gives way under the pressure of the crowd outside, There is a genuine fear, in several parts of the crowd, of being crushed to death. The first union contingents fortunately begin to leave the square. There isn't a policeman in sight. Although the demonstration has been announced as a joint one, the CGT leaders are still striving desperately to avoid a mixing-up, on the streets, of students and workers. In this they are moderately successful. By about 4.30pm the students' and teachers' contingent, perhaps 80,000 strong, finally leaves the Place de la République, Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have preceded it, hundreds of thousands follow it, but the 'left' contingent has been well and truly 'bottled-in'. Several groups, understanding at last the CGT'S manoeuvre, break loose once we are out of the square. They take short cuts via various side streets, at the double, and succeed in infiltrating groups of 100 or so into parts of the march ahead of them or behind them. The Stalinist stewards walking hand in hand and hemming the march in on either side are powerless to prevent these sudden influxes. The student demonstrators scatter like fish in water as soon as they have entered a given contingent. The CGT marchers themselves are quite friendly and readily assimilate the newcomers, not quite sure what it's all about, The students' appearances dress and speech does not enable them to be identified as readily as they would be in Britain.

The main student contingent proceeds as a compact body. Now that we are past the bottleneck of the Place de la République the pace is quite rapid. The student group nevertheless takes at least half an hour to pass a given point. The slogans of the students contrast strikingly with those of the CGT. The students shout "Le Pouvoir aux Ouvriers" (All Power to the Workers); "Le Pouvoir est dans la rue" (Power lies in the street); "Libérez nos camarades". COT members shout "Pompidou, démission" (Pompidou, resign). The students chant "de Gaulle, assassin", or "ICRS-SS". The CGT: ("Des sous, pas de matraques" (money, not police clubs) or "Défense du pouvoir d'achat" (Defend our purchasing power) The students say "Non à l'Université de classe". The CGT and the Stalinist students, grouped around the banner of their paper Claret reply "Université Démocratique". Deep political differences lie behind the differences of emphasis. some slogans are taken up by everyone, slogans such as "Dix ans, c'est assez" , "A bas l'Etat policier", or "Bon anniversaire, mon Général". Whole groups mournfully intone a well-known refrain: "Adieu, de Gaulle". They wave their handkerchiefs, to the great merriment of the bystanders. As the main student contingent crosses the Pont St Michel to enter the Latin Quarter it suddenly stops, in silent tribute to its wounded. All thoughts are for a moment switched to those lying in hospital, their sight in danger through too much tear gas or their skulls or ribs fractured by the truncheons of the CRS. The sudden, angry silence of this noisiest part of the demonstration conveys a deep impression of strength and resolution. One senses massive accounts yet to be settled.

At the top of the Boulevard St Michel I drop out of the march, climb onto a parapet lining the Luxembourg Gardens, and just watch. I remain there for two hours as row after row of demonstrators marches past, 30 or more abreast, a human tidal wave of fantastic, inconceivable size, How many are they? 600,000? 800,000? A million? 1,500,000? No-one can really number them. The first of the demonstrators reached the final dispersal point hours before the last ranks

had left the Place de la République, at 7pm. There were banners of every kind: union banners, student banners, political banners, non-political banners, recordist banners, revolutionary banners, banners of the 'Mouvement contre l'Armement Atomique', banners of various Conseils de Parents d'Elèves, banners of every conceivable size and shape, proclaiming a common abhorrence at what had happened and a common will to struggle on. Some banners were notably applauded, such as the one saying 'Libérons l'information' (let's have a free news service) carried by a group of employees from the ORTF. Some banners indulged in vivid symbolism, such as the gruesome one carried by a group of artists, depicting human hands, heads and eyes, each with its price tag, on display on the hooks and trays of a butcher's shop. Endlessly they filed past, There were whole sections of hospital personnel, in white coats, some carrying posters saying 'Où sont les disparités des hospitaliers?' (where are the missing injured?). Every factory, every major workplace seemed to be represented, There Were numerous groups of, railwaymen, postmen, printers, Metro personnel, metal workers, airport workers, market men, electricians, lawyers, supermen, bank employees, building workers, glass and chemical workers, waiters, municipal employees: painters and decorators, gas workers, shop girls, insurance clerks, road sweepers, film studio operators, busmen, teachers, Shakers from the new plastic industries, row upon row upon row of them, the flesh and blood of modern capitalist society, an unending mass, a power that could sweep everything before it, if it but decided to do so, My thoughts went to those who say that the workers are only interested in football, in the 'tiercé' (horse-betting), in watching the telly and that the working class, in their annual 'conges' (holidays), cannot see beyond the problems of its everyday life. It was so palpably untrue. I also thought of those who say that only a narrow and rotten leadership lies between the masses and the total transformation of society. It was equally untrue. Today the working class is becoming conscious of its strength. Will it decide, tomorrow, to use it?

I rejoin the march and we proceed towards Dented Rochereau. We pass several statues, sedate gentlemen now bedecked with red flags or carrying slogans such as 'Libérez nos camarades'. As we pass a hospital silence again descends on the endless crowd. Someone starts whistling the 'Internationale', Others take it up. Like a breeze rustling over an enormous field of corn, the whistled tune ripples out in all directions. From the windows of the hospital some nurses wave at us.

At various intersections we pass traffic lights which by some strange inertia still seem to be working. Red and green alternate, at fixed intervals, meaning as little as bourgeois education, as work in modern society, as the lives of those walking past. The reality of today, for a few hours, has submerged all of yesterday's patterns. The part of the march in which I find myself is now rapidly approaching what the organizers have decided should be the dispersal point. The CGT is desperately keen that its hundreds of thousands of supposers should disperse quietly, It fears them, when they are together. It wants them nameless atoms again, scattered to the four corners of Paris, powerless in the context of their individual preoccupations. The COT sees itself as the only possible link between them, as the divinely ordained vehicle for the expression of their collective will. The 'Mouvement du 22 Mars', on the other hand, had issued a call to the students and workers, asking them to stick together and to proceed to the lawns of the Champ de Mars (at the foot of the Eiffel Tower) for a massive collective discussion on the experiences of the day and on the problems that lie ahead.

At this stage I sample for the first time what a 'service d'ordre' composed of Stalinist stewards really means. All day, the stewards have obviously been anticipating this particular moment.

They are very tense, clearly expecting 'trouble'. Above all else they fear what they call 'débordement', ie being outflanked on the left. For the last half-mile of the march five or six solid rows of them line up on either side of the demonstrators. Arms linked, they form a massive sheath around the marchers. CGT officials address the bottled-up demonstrators through two powerful loudspeakers mounted on vans, instructing them to disperse quietly via the Boulevard Arago, ie to proceed in precisely the opposite direction to the one leading to the Champ de Mars. Other exits from the Place Denfert Rochereau are blocked by lines of stewards linking arms. On occasions like this, I am told, the Communist Party calls up thousands of its members from the Paris area. It also summons members from miles around, bringing them up by the coachload from places as far away as Rennes, Orleans, Sens, Lille and Limoges. The municipalities under Communist Party control provide further hundreds of these 'stewards' not necessarily Party members, but people dependent on the goodwill of the Party for their jobs and future. Ever since its heyday of participation in the government (1945-47) the Party has had this kind of mass base in the Paris suburbs. It has invariably used it in circumstances like today. On this demonstration there must be at least 10,000 such stewards, possibly twice that number. The exhortations of the stewards meet with a variable response. Whether they are successful in getting particular groups to disperse via the Boulevard Arago depends of course on the composition of the groups. Most of those which the students have not succeeded in infiltrating obey, although even here some of the younger militants protest: "We are a million in the streets. Why should we go home?" Other groups hesitate, vacillate, start arguing. Student speakers climb on walls and shout: "All those who want to return to the telly, turn down the Boulevard Arago. Those who are for joint worker-student discussions and for developing the struggle, turn down the Boulevard Raspail and proceed to the Champ de Mars". Those protesting against the dispersion orders are immediately jumped on by the stewards, denounced as 'provocateurs' and often man-handled. I saw several comrades of the 'Mouvement du 22 Mars' physically assaulted, their portable loud hailers from their hands and their leaflets torn from them and thrown to the ground. In some sections there seemed to be dozens, in others hundreds, in others thousands of 'provocateurs'. A number of minor punch-ups take place as the stewards are swept aside by these particular contingents. Heated arguments break out, the demonstrators denouncing the Stalinists as 'cops' and as 'the last rampart of the bourgeoisie'.

A respect for facts compels me to admit that most contingents followed the orders of the trade union bureaucrats. The repeated slanders by the CGT and Communist Party leaders had had their effect. The students were "trouble-makers" "adventurers" "dubious elements". Their proposed action would only lead to a massive intervention by the CRS' (who had kept well out of sight throughout the whole of the afternoon). "This was just a demonstration, not a prelude to revolutions" Playing ruthlessly on the most backward sections of the crowd, and physically assaulting the more advanced sections, the apparatchiks of the CGT succeeded in getting the bulk of the demonstrators to disperse, often under protest. Thousands went to the Champ de Mars, But hundreds of thousands went home. The Stalinists won the day, but the arguments started will surely reverberate down the months to come.

At about 8pm an episode took place which changed the temper of the last sections of the march, now approaching the dispersal point. A police van suddenly came up one of the streets leading into the Place Denfert Rochereau. It must have strayed from its intended route, or perhaps its driver had assumed that the demonstrators had already dispersed. Seeing the crowd ahead the two uniformed gendarmes in the front seat panicked. Unable to reverse in time in order to

retreat, the driver decided that his life hinged on forcing a passage through the thinnest section of the crowd. The vehicle accelerated: hurling itself into the demonstrators at about 50 miles an hour. People scattered wildly in all directions. Several people were knocked down and two were seriously injured. Many more narrowly escaped. The van was finally surrounded. One of the policemen in the front seat was dragged out and repeatedly punched by the infuriated crowd, determined to lynch him. He was finally rescued in the nick of time, by the stewards. They more or less carried him, semi-conscious, down a side street where he was passed horizontally, like a battered blood sausage, through an open ground floor window.

To do this, the stewards had had to engage in a running fight with several hundred very angry marchers. The crowd then started rocking the stranded police van. The remaining policeman drew his revolver and fired. People ducked. By a miracle no-one was hit. A hundred yards away the bullet made a hole, about three feet above ground level, in a window of 'Le Belfort', a big café at 297 Boulevard Raspail. The stewards again rushed to the rescue, forming a barrier between the crowd and the police van, which was allowed to escape down a side street, driven by the policeman who had fired at the crowd.

Hundreds of demonstrators then thronged round the hole in the window of the café. Press photographers were summoned, arrived, duly took their close-ups — none of which, of course, were ever published. (Two days later *l'Humanité* carried a few lines about the episode, at the bottom of a column on page 5.) One effect of the episode is that several thousand more demonstrators decided not to disperse. They turned and marched down towards the Champ de Mars, shouting "Ils ont tiré à Denfert" (they've shot at us at Denfert). If the incident had taken place an hour earlier, the evening of 13 May might have had a very different complexion.

The Sorbonne Soviet

On Saturday 11 May, shortly before midnight, Mr Pompidou, Prime Minister of France, overruled his Minister of the Interior, his Minister of Education, and issued orders to his 'independent' Judiciary. He announced that the police would be withdrawn from the Latin Quarter, that the faculties would re-open on Monday 13 May, and that the law would 'reconsider' the question of the students arrested the previous week. It was the biggest political climb-down of his career: For the students, and for many others, it was the living proof that direct action worked. Concessions had been won through struggle which had been unobtainable by other means. Early on the Monday morning the CRS platoons guarding the entrance to the Sorbonne were discreetly withdrawn. The students moved in, first in small groups, then in hundreds, later in thousands. By midday the occupation was complete. Every 'tricolore' was promptly hauled down, every lecture theatre occupied, Red flags were hoisted from the official flagpoles and from improvised ones at many windows, some overlooking the streets, others the big internal courtyard. Hundreds of feet above the milling students, enormous red and black flags fluttered side by side from the Chapel dome. What happened over the next few days will leave a permanent mark on the French educational system, on the structure of French society and — most important of all — on the minds of those who lived and made history during that hectic first fortnight. The Sorbonne was suddenly transformed from the fusty precinct where French capitalism selected and moulded its hierarchs, its technocrats and its administrative bureaucracy into a revolutionary volcano in full eruption whose lava was to spread far and wide, searing the social structure of modern France.

The physical occupation of the Sorbonne was followed by an intellectual explosion of unprecedented violence. Everything, literally everything, was suddenly and simultaneously up for discussion, for question, for challenge. There were no taboos. It is easy to criticise the chaotic upsurge of thoughts, ideas and proposals unleashed in such circumstances. 'Professional revolutionaries' and petty bourgeois philistines criticised to their heart's content. But in so doing they only revealed how they themselves were trapped in the ideology of a previous epoch and were incapable of transcending it. They failed to recognise the tremendous significance of the new: of all that could not be apprehended within their own pre-established intellectual categories. The phenomenon was witnessed again and again, as it doubtless has been in every really great upheaval in history.

Day and night, every lecture theatre was packed out, the seat of continuous, passionate debate on every subject that ever preoccupied thinking humanity. No formal lecturer ever enjoyed so massive an audience, was ever listened to with such rapt attention – or given such short shrift if he talked nonsense. A kind of order rapidly prevailed. By the second day a noticeboard had appeared near the front entrance announcing what was being talked about, and where. I noted: 'Organisation of the struggle'; 'Political and trade union rights in the University'; 'University crisis or social crisis?'. 'Dossier of police repression'; 'Self-management'; 'Non-selection' (or how to open the doors of the University to everyone); 'Methods of teaching'; 'Exams', etc. Other lecture theatres were given over to the students-workers liaison committees, soon to 'assume great importance. In yet other haies, discussions were under way on 'sexual repression', on 'the colonial question', on 'ideology and mystification', Any group of people wishing to discuss anything under the sun would just take over one of the lecture theatres or smaller rooms. Fortunately there were dozens of these. The first impression was of a gigantic lid suddenly lifted, of pent-up thoughts and aspirations suddenly exploding, on being released from the realm of dreams into the realm of the real and the possible. In changing their environment people themselves were changed. Those who had never dared say anything suddenly felt their thoughts to be the most important thing in the world and said so. The shy became communicative. The helpless and isolated suddenly discovered that collective power lay in their hands. The traditionally apathetic suddenly realized the intensity of their involvement. A tremendous surge of community and cohesion gripped those who had previously seen themselves as isolated and impotent puppets, dominated by institutions that they could neither control nor understand. People just went up and talked to one another without a trace of self-consciousness. This state of euphoria lasted throughout the whole fortnight I was there, An inscription scrawled on a wall sums it up perfectly'. 'Déjà dix jours de bonheur' (ten days of happiness already).

In the yard of the Sorbonne, politics (frowned on for a generation) took over with a vengeance. Literature stalls sprouted up along the whole inner perimeter, Enormous portraits appeared on the internal walls: Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Castro, Guevara, a revolutionary resurrection breaking the bounds of time and place. Even Stalin put in a transient appearance (above a Maoist stall) until it was tactfully suggested to the comrades that he wasn't really at home in such company.

On the stalls themselves every kind of literature suddenly blossomed forth in the summer sunshine: leaflets and pamphlets by anarchists, Stalinists, Maoists, Trotskyists (three varieties), the PSU and the non-committed. The yard of the Sorbonne had become a gigantic revolutionary drug-store, in which the most esoteric products no longer had to be kept beneath the counter but could now be prominently displayed. Old issues of journals, yellowed by the years, were

unearthed and often sold as well as more recent material. Everywhere there were groups of 10 or 20 people, in heated discussion, people talking about the barricades, about the CRST about their own experiences, but also about the commune of 1871, about 1905 and 1917, about the Italian left in 1921 and About France in 1936. A fusion was taking place between the consciousness of the revolutionary minorities and the consciousness of whole new layers of people, dragged day by day into the maelstrom of political controversy. The students were learning within days what it had taken others a lifetime to learn. Many liches came to see what it was all about. They too got sucked into the vortex. I remember a boy of 14 explaining to an incredulous man of 60 why students should have the right to depose professors.

Other things also happened. A large piano suddenly appeared in the great central yard and remained there for several days. People would come and play on it, surrounded by enthusiastic supposers. As people talked in the lecture theatres of nee-capitalism and of its techniques of manipulation, strands of Chopin and bars of jazz, bits of La Carmagnole and atonal compositions wafted through the air. One evening there was a drum recital, then some clarinet players took over. These 'diversions' may have infuriated some of the more single-minded revolutionaries, but they were as much part and parcel of the total transformation of the Sorbonne as were the revolutionary doctrines being proclaimed in the lecture halls. An exhibition of huge photographs of the 'night of the barricades' (in beautiful half-tones) appeared one morning, mounted on stands. No-one knew who had put it up. Everyone agreed that it succinctly summarised the horror and glamour, the anger and promise of that fateful night. Even the doors of the Chapel giving on to the yard were soon covered with inscriptions: 'open this door — Finis, le tabernacles'; 'Religion is the last mystification'. Or more prosaically: 'We want somewhere to piss, not somewhere to pray'. The massive outer walls of the Sorbonne were likewise soon plastered with posters — posters announcing the first sit-in strikes, posters describing the wage rates of whole sections of Paris workers, posters announcing the next demonstrations, posters describing the solidarity marches in Peking, posters denouncing the police repression and the use of CS gas (as well as of ordinary tear-gas) against the demonstrators. There were posters, dozens of them, warning students against the Communist Party's band-wagon jumping tactics, telling them how it had attacked their movement and how it was now seeking to assume its leadership. Political posters in plenty. But also others, proclaiming the new ethos. A big one for instance near the main entrance, boldly proclaimed 'Défense d'interdire' (Forbidding forbidden). And others, equally to the point: 'Only the truth is revolutionary', 'Our revolution is greater than ourselves', 'We refuse the role assigned to us, will not be trained as police dogs'. People's concerns varied but converged. The posters reflected the deeply libertarian prevailing philosophy: 'Humanity will only be happy when the last capitalist has been strangled with the guts of the last bureaucrat', 'Culture is disintegrating. Create!'; 'I take my wishes for reality for I believe in the reality of my wishes'; or more simply, 'Creativity, spontaneity, life'. In the street outside, hundreds of passers-by would stop to read these improvised wall-newspapers. Some gaped. Some sniggered. Some nodded assent. Some argued. Some, summoning their courage: actually entered the erstwhile sacrosanct premises, as they were being exhorted to by numerous posters proclaiming that the Sorbonne was now open to all, Young workers who 'wouldn't have been seen in that place' a month ago now walked in groups, at first rather self-consciously, later as if they owned the place, which of course they did.

As the days went by, another kind of invasion took place — the invasion by the cynical and the unbelieving, or — more charitably — by those who 'had only come to see'. It gradually gained

momentum. At certain stages it threatened to paralyse the serious work being done, part of which had to be hived off to the Faculty of Letters, at Censing, also occupied by the students. It was felt necessary, however, for the doors to be kept open, 24 hours a day. The message certainly spread. Deputations came first from other universities, then from high schools, later from factories and offices, to look, to question, to argue, to study.

The most telling sign, however, of the new and heady climate was to be found on the walls of the Sorbonne corridors. Around the main lecture theatres there is a maze of such corridors', dark, dusty, depressing, and hitherto unnoticed passageways leading from nowhere in particular to nowhere else. Suddenly these corridors sprang to life in a firework of luminous mural wisdom – much of it of Situationist inspiration. Hundreds of people suddenly stopped to read such pearls as: 'Do not consume Marx. Live it'; 'The future will only contain what we put into it now'; 'When examined. we will answer with questions', 'Professors, you make us feel old'; 'One doesn't compose with a society in decomposition', 'We must remain the unadapted ones'; 'Workers of all lands, enjoy yourselves': 'Those who carry out a revolution only half-way through merely dig themselves a tomb (St Just), 'Please leave the PC (Communist Party) as clean on leaving as you would like to find it on entering'; 'The tears of the philistines are the nectar of the gods'; 'GO and die in Naples. with the Club Méditerranée'; 'Long live communication, down with telecommunication' 'Masochism today dresses up as reformism; We will claim nothing. We will ask for nothing. We will take. We will occupy'; 'The only outrage to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was the outrage that put him there', 'No, we won't be picked up by the Great Party of the Working Class', And a big inscription, well displayed'. 'Since 1936 I have fought for wage increases, My father, before me, also fought for wage increases. Now I have a telly, a fridge, a Volkswagen. Yet all in all, my life has always been a dog's life. Don't discuss with the bosses. Eliminate them.'

Day after day the courtyard and corridors are crammed, the scene of an incessant bi-directional flow to every conceivable part of the enormous building. It may look like chaos, but it is the chaos of a beehive or of an anthill. A new structure is gradually being evolved. A canteen has been organised in one big hall, people pay what they can afford for glasses of orange juice, 'menthe', or 'grenadine' and for ham or sausage rolls. I enquire whether costs are covered and am toad they more or less break even. In another part of the building a children's creche has been set up, elsewhere a first-aid station, elsewhere a dormitory. Regular sweeping-up rotas are organised. Rooms are allocated to the Occupation Committee, to the Press Committee, to the Propaganda Committee, to the student- worker liaison committees, to the committees dealing with foreign students, to the action committees of Lyceens, to the committees dealing with the allocation of premises, and to the numerous commissions undertaking special projects such as the compiling of a dossier on police atrocities, the study of the implications of autonomy, of the examination system, etc. Anyone seeking work can readily find it. The composition of the committees was very variable. It often changed from day to day, as the committees gradually found their feel. To those who pressed for instant solutions to every problem it would be answered: "patience, comrade give us a chance to evolve an alternative. The bourgeoisie has controlled this university for nearly two centuries. It has solved nothing. We are building from rock bottom, We need a month or two..."

Confronted with this tremendous explosion which it had neither foreseen nor been able to control the Communist Party tried desperately to salvage what it could of its shattered reputation. Between 3 May and 13 May every issue of *L'Humanité* had carried paragraphs either attacking

the students or making slimy innuendoes about them. Now the line suddenly changed, The Party sent dozens of its best agitators into the Sorbonne to 'explain' its case. The case was a simple one. The Party 'supported the students' — even if there were a few 'dubious elements' in their leadership. It 'always had'. It always would. Amazing scenes followed. Every Stalinist 'agitator' would immediately be surrounded by a large group of well-informed young people, denouncing the Party's counter-revolutionary role. A wall-paper had been put up by the comrades of Volà Ouvrière on which had been posted, day by day, every statement attacking the students to have appeared in l'Humanite- or in any of a dozen Party leaflets. The 'agitators' couldn't get a word in edgeways. They would be jumped on (non-violently). "The evidence was over there, comrade. Would the Party comrades like to come and read just exactly what the Party had been saying not a week ago? Perhaps l'Humanité would like to grant the students space to reply to some of the accusations made against them?" Others in the audience would then bring up the Party's role during the Algerian War, during the miners' strike of 1958, during the years of 'tripartisme' (1945–1947). Wriggle as they tried, the 'agitators' just could not escape this kind of 'instant education'. It was interesting to note that the Party could not entrust this 'salvaging' operation to its younger, student members. Only the 'older comrades' could safely venture into this hornets' nest. So much so that people would say that anyone in the Sorbonne over the age of 40 was either a copper's nark or a stalinist stooge. The most dramatic periods of the occupation were undoubtedly the 'Assemblées Générales', or plenary sessions, held every' night in the giant amphitheatre. This was the soviet, the ultimate source of all decisions, the fount and origin of direct democracy. The amphitheatre could seat up to 5000 people in its enormous hemicycle, surmounted by three balcony tiers. As often as not every seat was taken and the crowd would flow up the aisles and onto the podium, A black flag and a red one hung over the simple wooden table at which the chairman sat. Having seen meetings of 50 break up in chaos it is an amazing experience to see a meeting of 5000 get down to business. Real events determined the themes and ensured that most of the talk was down to earth.

The topic having been decided, everyone was allowed to speak. Most speeches were made from the podium but some from the body of the hall or from the balconies. The loudspeaker equipment usually worked but sometimes didn't. Some speakers could command immediate attention, without even raising their voice. Others would instantly provoke a hostile response by the stridency of their tone, their insincerity or their more or less obvious attempts at manoeuvring the assembly. Anyone who waffled, or reminisced, or came to recite a set-piece, or talked in terms of slogans, was given shod shrift by the audience, politically the most sophisticated I have ever seen. Anyone making practical suggestions was listened to attentively. So were those who sought to interpret the movement in terms of its own experience or to point the way ahead.

Most speakers were granted three minutes, Some were allowed much more by popular acclaim. The crowd itself exerted a tremendous control on the platform and on the speakers. A two-way relationship emerged very quickly. The political maturity of the Assembly was shown most strikingly in its rapid realization that booing or cheering during speeches slowed down the Assembly's own deliberations. Positive speeches were loudly cheered — at the end. Demagogic or useless ones were impatiently swept aside, Conscious revolutionary minorities played an important catalytic role in these deliberations, but never sought — at least the more intelligent ones — to impose their will on the mass body. Although in the early stages the Assembly had its fair share of exhibited nests, provocateurs and nuts, the overhead costs of direct democracy were not as heavy as one might have expected.

There were moments of excitement and moments of exhortation. On the night of 13 May, after the massive march through the streets of Paris, Daniel Cohn-Bandit confronted J M Catala, general secretary of the Union of Communist Students in front of the packed auditorium. The scene remains printed in my mind. “Explain to us”, Cohn-Bandit said, “why the Communist Party and the CGT told their militants to disperse at Denfed Rochereau, why it prevented them joining up with us for a discussion at the Champ de Mars?” “simple, really” sneered Catala. “The agreement concluded between the CGT, the CFDT, the UNEF and the other sponsoring organizations stipulated that dispersal would take place at a predetermined place. The Joint Sponsoring Committee had not sanctioned any further developments...” “A revealing answer”, replied Cohn-Bandit, “the organizations hadn’t foreseen that we would be a million in the streets. But life is bigger than the organizations. With a million people almost anything is possible. You say the Committee hadn’t sanctioned anything further. On the day of the Revolution, comrade, you will doubtless tell us to forego it ‘because it hasn’t been sanctioned by the appropriate sponsoring committee’...”

This brought the house down. The only ones who didn’t rise to cheer were a few dozen Stalinists. Also, revealingly, those Trotskyists who tacitly accepted the Stalinist conceptions — and whose only quarrel with the CP is that it had excluded them from being one of the ‘sponsoring organisations’. That same night the Assembly took three important decisions. From now on the Sorbonne would constitute itself as a revolutionary headquarters (‘Smolny’, someone shouted). Those who worked there would devote their main efforts not to a mere re-organisation of the educational system, but to a total subversion of bourgeois society. From now on the University would be open to all those who subscribed to these aims. The proposals having been accepted the audience rose to a man and sang the loudest, most impassioned ‘Internationale’ I have ever heard. The echoes must have reverberated as far as the Elysee Palace on the other side of the River Seine...

The Censier revolutionaries

At the same time as the students occupied the Sorbonne, they also took over the ‘Centre Censier’ (the new Paris University Faculty of Letters). Censier is an enormous, ultra-modern, steel-concrete-and-glass affair situated at the south-east corner of the Latin Quarter, its occupation attracted less attention than did that of the Sorbonne. It was to prove, however, just as significant an event. For while the Sorbonne was the shop window of revolutionary Paris — with art that that implies in terms of garish display-, Censier was its dynamo, the place where things really got done.

To many, the Paris May Days must have seen an essentially nocturnal affair: nocturnal battles with the CRS, nocturnal barricades, nocturnal debates in the great amphitheatres. But this was but one side of the coin. While some argued late into the Sorbonne night? others went to bed early for in the mornings they would be handing out leaflets at factory gates or in the suburbs, leaflets that had to be drafted, typed, duplicated, and the distribution of which had to be carefully organised. This patient, systematic work was done at Censier. It contributed in no small measure to giving the new revolutionary consciousness articulate expression.

Soon after Censier had been occupied a group of activists commandeered a large part of the third floor. This space was to be the headquarters of their proposed ‘worker-student action committees’. The general idea was to establish links with groups of workers, however small: who shared

the general libertarian- revolutionary outlook of this group of students. Contact having been made, workers and students would co-operate in the joint drafting of leaflets. The leaflets would discuss the immediate problems of particular groups of workers, but in the light of what the students had shown to be possible. A given leaflet would then be jointly distributed by workers and students, outside the particular factory or office to which it referred. In some instances the distribution would have to be undertaken by students alone, in others hardly a single student would be needed. What brought the Censier comrades together was a deeply-felt sense of the revolutionary potentialities of the situation and the knowledge that they had no time to waste. They all felt the pressing need for direct action propaganda, and that the urgency of the situation required of them that they transcend any doctrinal differences they might have with one another. They were all intensely political people. By and large, their politics were those of that new and increasingly important historical species: the ex- members of one or other revolutionary organization.

What were their views? Basically they boiled down to a few simple propositions. What was needed just now was a rapid, autonomous development of the working class struggle, the setting up of elected strike committees which would link union and non-union members in all strike-bound plants and enterprises, regular meetings of the strikers so that the fundamental decisions remained in the hands of the rank and file, workers' defence committees to defend pickets from police intimidation, a constant dialogue with the revolutionary students aimed at restoring to the working class its own tradition of direct democracy and its own aspiration to self-management (auto- gestion), usurped by the bureaucracies of the trade unions and the political parties. For a whole week the various Trotskyist and Maoist factions didn't even notice what was going on at Censier. They spent their time in public and often acrimonious debates at the Sorbonne as to who could provide the best leadership. Meanwhile, the comrades at Censier were steadily getting on with the work. The majority of them had 'been through' either Stalinist or Trotskyist organizations. They had left behind them all ideas to the effect that 'intervention' was meaningful only in terms of potential recruitment to their own particular group. All recognised the need for a widely-based and moderately structured revolutionary movement, but none of them saw the building of such a movement as an immediate, all important task, on which propaganda should immediately be centred.

Duplicators belonging to 'subversive elements' were brought in. University duplicators were commandeered. Stocks of paper and ink were obtained from various sources and by various means. Leaflets began to pour out. first in hundreds, then in thousands, then in tens of thousands as links were established with one group of rank and file workers after another. On the first day alone, Renault, Citroen, Air France, Boussac, the Nouvelles Messageries de Presse, Rhone-Poulenc and the RATP (Métro) were contacted. The movement then snowballed.

Every evening at Censier, the action committees reported back to an 'Assemblée Générale' devoted exclusively to this kind of work. The reactions to the distribution were assessed, the content of future leaflets discussed. These discussions would usually be led off by the worker contact who would describe the impact of the leaflet on his workmates. The most heated discussion centred on whether direct attacks should be made on the leaders of the CGT or whether mere suggestions as to what was needed to win would be sufficient to expose everything the union leaders had (or hadn't) done and everything they stood for. The second viewpoint prevailed. The leaflets were usually very short, never more than 200 or 300 words. They nearly all started by listing the workers' grievances — or just by describing their conditions of work. They would end by

inviting workers to call at Censier or at the Sorbonne. “These places are now yours, Come there to discuss your problems with others. Take a hand yourselves in making known your problems and demands to those around you.” Between this kind of opening and this kind of conclusion, most leaflets contained one or two key political points. The response was instantaneous. More and more workers dropped in to draft joint leaflets with the students. Soon there was no lecture room big enough for the daily ‘Assemblée Générale’. The students learned a great deal from the workers’ self-discipline and from the systematic way in which they presented their reports. It was all so different from the ‘in-fighting’ of the political sects. There was agreement that these were the finest lectures held at Censier!

Among the more telling lines of these leaflets, I noted the following’, Air France leaflet “We refuse to accept a degrading ‘modernisation’ which means we are constantly watched and have to submit to conditions which are harmful to our health, to our nervous systems and an insult to our status of human beings... We refuse to entrust our demands any longer to professional trade union leaders. Like the students, we must take the control of our affairs into our own hands.” Renault leaflet “If we want our wage increases and our claims concerning conditions of work to be secure, if we don’t want them constantly threatened, we must now struggle for a fundamental change in society... As workers we should ourselves seek to control the operation of our enterprises. Our objectives are similar to those of the students. The management (gestion) of industry and the management of the university should be democratically ensured by those who work there...” Rhone-poulenc leaflet “Up till now we tried to solve our problems through petitions, partial struggles, the election of better leaders. This has led us nowhere. The action of the students has shown us that only rank and file action could compel the authorities to retreat... the students are challenging the whole purpose of bourgeois education. They want to take the fundamental decisions themselves. So should we. We should decide the purpose of production, and at whose cost production will be carried out.” District leaflet (distributed in the streets at Boulogne Billancourt) “The government fears the extension of the movement. It fears the developing unity between workers and students. Pompidou has announced that “the government will defend the Republic. The Army and police are being prepared, De Gaulle will speak on the 24th. Will he send the CRS to clear pickets out of strikebound plants? Be prepared. In workshops and faculties, think in terms of self- defence...” Every day dozens of such leaflets were discussed, typed, duplicated, distributed. Every evening we heard of the response: “The blokes think it’s tremendous. It’s just what they are thinking. The union officials never talk like this”. “The blokes liked the leaflet. They are sceptical about the 12%. They say prices will go up and that we’ll lose it all in a few months. Some say let’s push all together now and take on the lot,” “The leaflet certainly staged the lads talking. They’ve never had so much to say. The officials had to wait their turn to speak...”

I vividly remember a young printing worker who said one night that these meetings were the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. All his life he had dreamed of meeting people who thought and spoke like this. But every time he thought he had met one all they were interested in was what they could get out of him. This was the first time he had been offered disinterested help. I don’t know what has happened at Censier since the end of May. When I left, sundry Trots were beginning to move in, “to politicize the leaflets” (by which I presume they meant that the leaflets should now talk about “the need to build the revolutionary Party”). If they succeed – which I doubt, knowing the calibre of the Censier comrades – it will be a tragedy.

The leaflets were in fact political. During the whole of my short stay in France I saw nothing more intensely and relevantly political (in the best sense of the term) than the sustained campaign emanating from Censier, a campaign for constant control of the struggle from below, for self-defence, for workers' management of production, for popularizing the concept of workers' councils, for explaining to one and all the tremendous relevance, in a revolutionary situation, of revolutionary demands, of organised self-activity, of collective self-reliance.

As I left Censier I could not help thinking how the place epitomized the crisis of modern bureaucratic capitalism. Censier is no educational slum. It is an ultra-modern building, one of the showpieces of Gaullist 'grandeur'. It has closed-circuit television in the lecture theatres, modern plumbing, and slot machines distributing 24 different kinds of food, in sterilized containers and 10 different kinds of drink. Over 90% of the students there are of petty bourgeois or bourgeois backgrounds. Yet such is their rejection of the society that nurtured them that they were working duplicators 24 hours a day, turning out a flood of revolutionary literature of a kind no modern city has ever had pushed into it before. This kind of activity had transformed these students and had contributed to transforming the environment around them. They were simultaneously disrupting the social structure and having the time of their lives. In the words of a slogan scrawled on the wall: 'On n'est pas If pour s'emmerder' (you'll have to look this one up in the dictionary).

Getting together

When the news of the first factory occupation (that of the Sud Aviation plant at Nantes) reached the Sorbonne — late during the night of Tuesday 14 May — there were scenes of indescribable enthusiasm. Sessions were interrupted for the announcement. Everyone seemed to sense the significance of what had just happened. After a full minute of continuous, delirious cheering, the audience broke into a synchronous, rhythmical clapping, apparently reserved for great occasions.

On Thursday 16 May the Renault factories at Cléon (near Rouen) and at Flins (North West of Paris) were occupied. Excited groups in the Sorbonne yard remained glued to their transistors as hour by hour news came over of further occupations. Enormous posters were put up, both inside and outside the Sorbonne, with the most up-to-date information of which factories had been occupied: the Nouvelles Messageries de Presse in Paris, Kléber Colombes at Caudebec, Dresser-Duiardin at Le Havre, the naval shipyard at Le Trait...and finally the Renault works at Boulogne Billancourt. Within 48 hours the task had to be abandoned. No noticeboard — or panel of noticeboards — was large enough. At last the students felt that the battle had really been joined.

Early on the Friday afternoon an emergency 'General Assembly' was held. The meeting decided to send a big student deputation to the occupied Renault works. Its aim was to establish contact, express student solidarity and, if possible, discuss common problems. The march was scheduled to leave the Place de la Sorbonne at 6pm. At about 5pm thousands of leaflets were suddenly distributed in the amphitheaters, in the Sorbonne yard and in the streets around. They were signed by the Renault Bureau Of the CGT. The Communist Party had been working...fast. The leaflets read: "We have just heard that students and teachers are proposing to set out this afternoon in the direction of Renault. This decision was taken without consulting the appropriate trade union sections of the CGT, CFDT and FO. "We greatly appreciate the solidarity of the students and teachers in the common struggle against the 'pouvoir personnel' (ie de Gaulle) and

the employers. but are opposed to any ill-judged initiative which might threaten our developing movement and facilitate a provocation which would lead to a diversion by the government. We strongly advise the organizers of this demonstration against preceding with their plans. "We intend, together with the workers now struggling for their claims, to lead our own strike. We refuse any external intervention, in conformity with the declaration jointly signed by the CGT, CFDT and FO unions, and approved this morning by 23,000 workers belonging to the factory."

The distortion and dishonesty of this leaflet defy description. No-one intended to instruct the workers how to run the strike and no student would have the presumption to seek to assume its leadership. All that the students wanted was to express solidarity with the workers in what was now a common struggle against the state and the employing class.

The CGT leaflet came like an icy shower to the less political students and to all those who still had illusions about Stalinism. "They won't let us get through." "The workers don't want to talk with us." The identification of workers with 'their' organizations is very hard to break down. Several hundred who had intended to march to Billancourt were probably put off, The UNEF vacillated, reluctant to lead the march in direct violation of the wishes of the CGT. Finally some 1500 people set out, under a single banner, hastily prepared by some Maoist students. The banner proclaimers 'The strong hands of the working class must now take over the torch from the fragile hands of the students'. Many joined the march who were not Maoists and who didn't necessarily agree with this particular formulation of its objectives.

Although small when compared to other marches, this was certainly a most political one. Practically everyone on it belonged to one or other of the 'groupuscules': a spontaneous united front of Maoists, Trotskyists, anarchists, the comrades of the Mouvement du 22 Mars and various others. Everyone knew exactly what he was doing. It was this that was so to infuriate the Communist Party. The march sets off noisily, crosses the Boulevard St Michel, and passes in front of the occupied Odeon Theatre (where several hundred more joyfully join it). It then proceeds at a very brisk pace down the rue de Vaugirard, the longest street in Paris, towards the working class districts to the South West of the city, growing steadily in size and militancy as it advances. It is important we reach the factory before the Stalinists have time to mobilize their big battalions...

Slogans such as "Avec nous, chez Renault" (come with us to Renault), "Le pouvoir est dans la rue" (power lies in the street), "Le pouvoir aux ouvriers" (power to the workers) are shouted lustily, again and again. The Maoists shout "A bas le gouvernement gaulliste anti-populaire de chômage et de misère" — a long and 'politically equivocal slogan, but one eminently suited to collective shouting. The Internationals bursts out repeatedly, sung this time by people who seem to know the words — even the second verse! By the time we have marched the five miles to Issy-les-Moulineaux it is already dark. Way behind us now are the bright lights of the Latin Quarter and of the fashionable Paris known to tourists. We go through small, poorly-lit streets, the uncollected rubbish piled high in places. Dozens of young people join us en route, attracted by the noise and the singing of revolutionary songs such as 'La Jeune Garde', 'Zimmerwald', and the song of the Partisans, "chez Renault, chez Renault" the marchers shout. People congregate in the doors of the bistros, or peer out of the windows of crowded fiats to watch us pass. Some look on in amazement but many — possibly a majority — now clap or wave encouragement. In some streets many Algerians fine the pavement. Some join in the shouting of CSCRS — SS" "Charonne" "A bas l'Etat policier" They have not forgotten. Most look on shyly or smile in an embarrassed way. Very few join the march.

On we go, a few miles more. There isn't a gendarme in sight. We cross the Seine and eventually stow down as we approach a square beyond which lie the Renault works. The streets here are very badly-lit. There is a sense of intense excitement in the air. We suddenly come up against a lorry, parked across most of the road, and fitted with loudspeaker equipment. The march stops. On the lorry stands a CGT official. He speaks for five minutes. In somewhat chilly tones he says how pleased he is to see us. "Thank you for coming, comrades. We appreciate your solidarity. But please no provocations. Don't go too near the gates as the management would use it as an excuse to call the police. And go home soon. It's cold and you'll need all your strength in the days to come." The students have brought their own loud hailers. One or two speak, briefly. They take note of the comments of the comrade from the CGT. They have no intention of provoking anyone, no wish to usurp anyone's functions, We then slowly but quite deliberately move forwards into the square, on each side of the lorry, drowning the protests of about a hundred Stalinists in a powerful 'Internationale'. Workers in neighbouring cafes come out and join us. This time the Party had not had time to mobilize its militants. It could not physically isolate us.

Part of the factory now looms up right ahead of us, three storeys high on our left, two storeys high on our right, In front of us, there is a giant metal gate, closed and bolted. A large first floor window to our right is crowded with workers. The front row sit with their legs dangling over the sill. Several seem in their teens', one of them waves a big red flag. There are no 'tricolores' in sight – no ideal allegiance' as in other occupied places I had seen. Several dozen more workers are on the roofs of the two buildings. We wave. They wave back. We sing the 'Internationale'. They join in. We give the clenched fist salute. They do likewise. Everybody cheers. Contact has been made. An interesting exchange takes place. A group of demonstrators stabs shouting "Les usines aux ouvriers" (the factories to the workers). The slogan spreads like wildfire through the crowd. The Maoists, now in a definite minority, are rather annoyed. (According to Chairman Mao, workers' control is a petty-bourgeois, anarcho- syndicalist deviation.) "les usines aux ouvriers"..10, 20 times the slogan reverberates round the Place Nationals, taken up by a crowd now some 3000 strong.

As the shouting subsides, a lone voice from one of the Renault roofs shouts back'. "La Sorbonne aux Etudiants". Other workers on the same roof take it up. Then those on the other roof. By the volume of their voices they must be at least 100 of them, on top of each building. There is then a moment of silence. Everyone thinks the exchange has come to an end. But one of the demonstrators starts chanting'. "La Sorbonne aux ouvriers". Amid general laughter, everyone joins in.

We start talking. A rope is quickly passed down from the window, a bucket at the end of it, Bottles of beer and packets of fags are passed up. Also revolutionary leaflets. Also bundles of papers (mainly copies of *Server le Peuple* – a Maoist journal carrying a big title 'Vive la CGT'). At street level there are a number of gaps in the metal facade of the building. Groups of students cluster at these half-dozen openings and talk to groups of workers on the other side. They discuss wages, conditions, the CRS, what the lads inside need most, how the students can help. The men talk freely. They are not Party members. They think the constant talk of provocateurs a bit far-fetched. But the machines must be protected. We point out that two or three students inside the factory, escorted by the strike committee, couldn't possibly damage the machines. They agree. We contrast the widely open doors of the Sorbonne with the heavy locks and bolts on the Renault gates – closed by the CGT officials to prevent the ideological contamination of 'their' militants. How silly, we say, to have to talk through these stupid little slits in the wall.

Again they agree. They will put it to their 'dirigeants' (leaders), No-one seems, as yet, to think beyond this. There is then a diversion. A hundred yards away a member of the FER gets up on a parked car and starts making a speech through a loud hailer. The intervention is completely out of tune with the dialogue that is just starting. It's the same gramophone record we have been hearing all week at the Sorbonne. "Call on the union leaders to organise the election of strike committees in every factory. Force the union leaders to federate the strike committees. Force the union leaders to set up a national strike committee. Force them to call a general strike throughout the whole of the country" (this at a time when millions of workers are already on strike without any call whatsoever). The tone is strident, almost hysterical, the misjudging of the mood monumental. The demonstrators themselves drown the speaker in a loud 'Internationale'. As the last bar fades the Trotskyist tries again. Again the demonstrators drown him, Groups stroll up the Avenue Yves Kermen, to the other entrances to the factory. Real contact is here more difficult to establish. There is a crowd outside the gate, but most of them are Party members. Some won't talk at all, Others just talk slogans.

We walk back to the Square. It is now well past midnight. The crowd thins, Groups drop into a couple of cafes which are still open. Here we meet a whole group of young workers, aged about 18, They had been in the factory earlier in the day. They tell us that at any given time, just over 1000 workers are engaged in the occupation. The strike started on the Thursday afternoon, at about 2pm, when the group of youngsters from shop 70 decided to down tools and to spread into all parts of the factory asking their mates to do likewise. That same morning they had heard of the occupation of Cléon and that the red flag was floating over the factory at Flins. There had been a bit of talk about what to do. At a midday meeting the CGT had spoken vaguely of a series of rotating strikes, shop by shop, to be initiated the following day. The movement spread at an incredible pace. The youngsters went round shouting "Occupation! Occupation!". Half the factory had stopped working before the union officials realized what was happening. At about 4pm, Sylvain, a CGT secretary, had arrived with loudspeaker equipment to tell them "they weren't numerous enough, to start work again, that they would see tomorrow about a one-day strike". He is absolutely by-passed. At 5pm Halbeher, general secretary of the Renault CGT, announces, pale as a sheet, that the "CGT has called for the occupation of the factory". "Tell your friends", the lads say. "We started it. But will we be able to keep it in our hands? Ça, c'est un autre problème..."

Students? Well, hats off to anyone who can thump the cops that hard! The lads tell us two of their mates had disappeared from the factory altogether 10 days ago "to help the Revolution". Left family, jobs, everything. And good luck to them. "A chance like this comes once in a lifetime." We discuss plans, how to develop the movement. The occupied factory could be a ghetto, 'isolant les durs' (isolating the most militant). We talk about camping, the cinema, the Sorbonne, the future. Almost until sunrise... 'Attention aux provocateurs'

Social upheavals, such as the one France has just been through, leave behind them a trail of shattered reputations. The image of Gaullism as a meaningful way of life, 'accepted' by the French people, has taken a tremendous knock. But so has the image of the Communist Party as a viable challenge to the French Establishment, As far as the students are concerned the recent actions of the PCF (Parti Communiste Français) are such that the Party has probably sealed its fate in this milieu for a generation to come, Among the workers the effects are more difficult to assess and it would be denature to attempt this assessment. All that can be said is that the effects are sure to be profound although they will probably take some time to express themselves. The

proletarian condition itself was for a moment questioned. Prisoners who have had a glimpse of freedom do not readily resume a life sentence.

The full implications of the role of the PCF and of the CGT have yet to be appreciated by British revolutionaries, They need above all else to be informed. In this section we will document the role of the PCF to the best of our ability, It is important to realise that for every ounce of shit thrown at the students in its official publications, the Party poured tons more over them at meetings or in private conversations. In the nature of things it is more difficult to document this kind of slander.

Friday 3 May

A meeting was called in the yard of the Sorbonne by UNEF, JCR, MAU and FER to protest at the closure of the Nanterre faculty. It was attended by militants of the Mouvement du 22 Mars. The police were called in by Rector Roche and activists from all these groups were arrested. The UEC (Union des Etudiants Communistes) didn't participate in this campaign. But it distributed a leaflet in the Sorbonne denouncing the activity of the 'groupuscules' (abbreviation for 'groupes minuscules', tiny groups). "The leaders of the leftist groups are taking advantage of the shortcomings of the government. They are exploiting student discontent and trying to stop the functioning of the faculties, They are seeking to prevent the mass of students from working and from passing their exams. These false revolutionaries are acting objectively as allies of the Gaullist power. They are acting as supporters of its policies, which are harmful to the mass of the students and in particular to those of modest origin." On the same day l'Humanité had written: "Certain small groups (anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists) composed mainly of the sons of the big bourgeoisie and led by the German anarchist Cohn-Bandit, are taking advantage of the shortcomings of the government..." etc... (see above). The same issue of l'Humanité had published an article by Marchais, a member of the Party's Central Committee. This article was to be widely distributed, as a leaflet, in factories and offices:

Not satisfied with the agitation they are conducting in the student milieu — and agitation which is against the interests of the mass of the students and favours fascist provocateurs — these pseudo- revolutionaries now have the nerve to seek to give lessons to the working class movement. We find them in increasing numbers at the gates of factories and in places where immigrant workers live, distributing leaflets and other propaganda. These false revolutionaries must be unmasked, for objectively they are serving the interests of the Gaullist power and of the big capitalist monopolies."

Monday 6 May

The police have been occupying the Latin Quarter over the weekend. There have been big student street demonstrations. At the call of UNEF and SNESUP 20,000 students marched from Denfert Rochereau to St Germain des Prés calling for the liberation of the arrested workers and students. Repeated police assaults on the demonstrators'. 422 arrests, 800 wounded. L'Humanité states: one can clearly see today the outcome of the adventurous actions of the leftist, anarchist, Trotskyist and other groups. Objectively they are playing into the hands of the government...

The discredit into which they are bringing the student movement is helping feed the violent campaigns of the reactionary press and of the ORTF, who by identifying the actions of these groups with those of the mass of the students are seeking to isolate the students from the mass of the population...”.

Tuesday 7 May

UNEF and SNESUP call on their supporters to start an unlimited strike. Before discussions with the authorities begin they insist on: ‘ a. a stop to all legal action against the students and workers who have been questioned, arrested or convicted in the course of the demonstrations of the last few days! b. the withdrawal of the police from the Latin Quarter and from all University premises, c. a reopening of the closed faculties.

In a statement showing how completely out of touch they were with the deep motives of the student revolt, the ‘Elected Communist Representatives of the Paris region’ declared in *l’Humanité*:

“The shortage of credits, of premises, of equipment, of teachers...prevent three students out of four from completing their studies, without mentioning all those who never have access to higher education... This situation has caused profound and legitimate discontent among both students and teachers. It has also favoured the activity of irresponsible groups whose conceptions can offer no solution to the students’ problems. It is intolerable that the government should take advantage of the behaviour of an infinitesimal minority to stop the studies of tens of thousands of students a few days from the exams...”. The same issue of *l’Humanité* carried a statement from the ‘Sorbonne-Lettres’ (teachers) branch of the Communist Party: “The Communist teachers demand the liberation of the arrested students and the reopening of the Sorbonne. Conscious of our responsibilities, we specify that this solidarity does not mean that we agree with or support the slogans emanating from certain student organizations. We disapprove of unrealistic, demagogic and anti-communist slogans and of the unwarranted methods of action advocated by various leftist groups.”

On the same day Georges Séguéy, general secretary of the CGT, spoke to the Press about the programme of the Festival of Working Class Youth (scheduled for May 17–19, but subsequently cancelled):

“The solidarity between students, teachers and the working class is a familiar notion to the militants of the CGT., It is precisely this tradition that compels us not to tolerate any dubious or provocative elements, elements which criticise the working class organisations—”.

Wednesday 8 May

A big students’ demonstration called by UNEF has taken place in the streets of Paris the previous evening. The front page of *l’Humanité* carries a statement from the Party Secretariat:

“The discontent of the students is legitimate. But the situation favours adventuring activities, whose conception offers no perspective to the students and has nothing

in common with a really progressive and forward-looking policy,” In the same issue, J M Cabala, general secretary of the UEC (Union des Etudiants Communistes) writes that: “the actions of irresponsible groups are assisting the Establishment in its aims... What we must do is ask for a bigger educational budget which would ensure bigger student grants, the appointment of more and better qualified teachers, the building of new faculties...”

The UJCF (Union des Jeunesses Communistes de France) and the UJFF (Union des Jeunes Filles Françaises) distribute a leaflet in a number of lycees. L’Humanité quotes it approvingly’..

“We protest against the police violence unleashed against the students. We demand the reopening of Nanterre and of the Sorbonne and the liberation of all those arrested. We denounce the Gaullist power as being mainly (!) responsible for this situation. We also denounce the adventuring of certain irresponsible groups and call on the Lycéens to fight side by side with the working class and its Communist Party...”.

Monday 13 May

Over the weekend Pompidou has climbed down. But the unionsr the UNEF and the teachers have decided to maintain their call for a one-day, general strike. On its front page l’Humanité publishes, in enormous headlines, a call for the 24-hour strike followed by a statement from the Political Bureau’.

The unity of the working class and of the students threatens the regime... This creates an enormous problem. It is essential that no provocation, no diversion should be allowed to divert any of the forces struggling against the regime or should give the government the flimsiest pretext to distort the meaning of this great fight. The Communist Party associates itself without reservation with the just struggle of the students...”

Wednesday 15 May

The enormous Monday demonstrations in Paris and other towns – which incidentally prevented L’Humanité as well as other papers from appearing on the Tuesday – were a tremendous success. In a sense they triggered off the ‘spontaneous’ wave of strikes which followed within a day or two. L’Humanité publishes, on its front pages a statement issued the day before by the Party’s Political Bureau, After taking all the credit for May 13, the statement continues:

The People of Paris marched for hours in the streets of the capital showing a power which made any provocation impossible. The Party organizations worked day and night to ensure that this great demonstration of workers, teachers and students should take place in maximum unity, strength and discipline... It is now clear that the Establishment confronted with the protests and collective action of all the main sections of the population, will seek to divide us in the hope of beating us. It will resort to all methods, including provocation. The Political Bureau warns workers

and students against any adventurous endeavours which might, in the present circumstances, dislocate the broad front of the struggle which is in the process of developing, and provide the Gaullist power with an unexpected weapon with which to consolidate its shaky rule...”

Saturday 18 May

Over the past 48 hours, strikes with factory occupations have spread like a trail of gunpowder, from one corner of the country to the other. The railways are paralysed, civil airports fly the red flag. (‘provocateurs’ have obviously been at work!) L’Humanité publishes on its front page a declaration from the National Committee of the CGT:

From hour to hour strikes and factory occupations are spreading. This action, started on the initiative of the CGT and of other trade union organizations (sic), creates a new situation of exceptional importance... Long-accumulated popular discontent is now finding expression. The questions being asked must be answered seriously and full notice taken of their importance. The evolution of the situation is giving a new dimension to the struggle... While multiplying its efforts to raise the struggle to the needed level, the National Committee warns all CGT militants and local groups against any attempts by outside groups to meddle in the conduct of the struggle, and against all arts of provocation which might assist the forces of repression in their attempts to thwart the development of the movement..”

The same issue of the paper devoted a whole page to warning students of the fallacy of any notions of ‘student power’ – en passant – attributing to the ‘Mouvement du 22 Mars’ a whole series of political positions they had never held. Monday 20 May The whole country is totally paralysed. The Communist Party is still warning about ‘provocations’. The top right hand corner of L’Humanité contains a box labelled ‘WARNING’:

Leaflets have been distributed in the Paris area calling for an insurrectionary general strike, it goes without saying that such appeals have not been issued by our democratic trade union organizations. They are the work of provocateurs seeking to provide the government with a pretext for intervention... The workers must be vigilant to defeat all such manoeuvres...”

In the same issue, Etienne Fajon of the Central Committee, continues the warnings’..

“The Establishment’s main preoccupation at the moment is to divide the ranks of the working class and to divide it from other sections of the population... Our Political Bureau has warned workers and students, from the very beginning, against venturing slogans capable of dislocating the broad front of the struggle. Several provocations have thus been prevented. Our political vigilance must clearly be maintained...”.

The same issue devoted its central pages to an interview of Mr Georges Séguy, general secretary of the CGT, conducted over the Europe No 1 radio network. In these live interviews, various listeners phoned questions in directly. The following exchanges are worth recording:

Question Mr Séguy, the workers on strike are everywhere saying that they will go the whole hog. What do you mean by this? What are your objectives?”

Answer, The strike is so powerful that the workers obviously mean to obtain the maximum concessions at the end of such a movement. The whole hog for us trade unionists, means winning

the demands that we have always fought for, but which the government and the employers have always refused to consider. They have opposed an obtuse intransigence to the proposals for negotiations which we have repeatedly made. "The whole hog means a general rise in wages (no wages less than 600 francs per month), guaranteed employment, an earlier retirement age, reduction of working hours without loss of wages and the defence and extension of trade union rights within the factory. I am not putting these demands in any particular order because we attach the same importance to all of them."

Question "If I am not mistaken the statutes of the CGT declare its aims to be the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. In the present circumstances, that you have yourself referred to as 'exceptional' and 'important', why doesn't the COT seize this unique chance of calling for its fundamental objectives?"

Answer "This is a very interesting question. I like it very much, It is true that the CGT offer: the workers a concept of trade unionism that we consider the most revolutionary insofar as its final objective is the end of the employing class and of wage labour. It is true that this is the first of our statutes, It remains fundamentally the CGT'S objective. But can the present movement reach this objective? If it became obvious that it could, we would be ready to assume our responsibilities. It remains to be seen whether all the social strata involved in the present movement are ready to go that far"

Question "Since last week's events I have gone everywhere where people are arguing. I went this afternoon to the Odeon Theatre. Masses of people were discussing there, I can assure you that all the classes who suffer from the present regime were represented there. When I asked whether people thought that the movement should go further than the small demands put forward by the trade unions for the last 10 or 20 years, I brought the house down. I therefore think that it would be criminal to miss the present opportunity, It would be criminal because sooner or later this will have to be done. The conditions of today might allow us to do it peacefully and calmly and will perhaps never come back. I think this call must be made by you and the other political organizations. These political organizations are not your business, of course, but the CGT is a revolutionary organization. You must bring out your revolutionary flag. The workers are astounded to see you so timid"

Answer "While you were bathing in the Odeon fever, I was in the factories. Amongst workers. I assure you that the answer I am giving you is the answer of a leader of a great trade union, which claims to have assumed all its responsibilities, but which does not confuse its wishes with reality"

Caller "I would like to speak to Mr Séguy. My name is Duvauchel. I am the director of the Sud Aviation factory at Nantes." Séguy "Good morning, sir."

Duvauchel "Good morning, Mr General Secretary. I would like to know what you think of the fact that for the last four days I have been sequestered, together with about 20 other managerial staff, inside the Sud Aviation factory at Nantes" Séguy "Has anyone raised a hand against you?"

Duvauchel "No. But I am prevented from leaving, despite the fact that the general manager of the firm has intimated that the firm was prepared to make positive proposals as soon as free access to its factory could be resumed, and first of all to its managerial staff" Séguy "Have you asked to leave the factory?"

Duvauchel "Yes!"

Séguy "Was permission refused?"

Duvauchel "Yes!"

Séguy “Then I must refer you to the declaration I made yesterday at the CGT’S press conference. I stated that I disapproved of such activities. We are taking the necessary steps to see they are not repeated”.

But enough is enough. The Revolution itself will doubtless be denounced by the Stalinists as a provocation! By way of an epilogue it is worth recording that at a packed meeting of revolutionary students, held at the Mutuality on Thursday 9 May, a spokesman of the Trotskyist organization Communiste Internationalists could think of nothing better to do than call on the meeting to pass a resolution calling on Séguy to call a general strike!!!

France, 1968

This has undoubtedly been the greatest revolutionary upheaval in Western Europe since the days of the Paris Commune. Hundreds of thousands of students have fought pitched battles with the police. Nine million workers have been on strike. The red flag of revolt has flown over occupied factories, universities, building sites, shipyards, primary and secondary schools, pit heads, railway stations, department stores, docked transatlantic liners, theatres, hotels. The Paris Opera, the Folies Bergères and the building of the National Council for Scientific Research were taken over, as were the headquarters of the French Football Federation — whose aim was clearly perceived as being “to prevent ordinary footballers enjoying football”.

Virtually every layer of French society has been involved to some extent or other. Hundreds of thousands of people of all ages have discussed every aspect of life in packed-out, non-stop meetings in every available schoolroom and lecture hall, Boys of 14 have invaded a primary school for girls shouting “Liberté pour les filles”. Even such traditionally reactionary enclaves as the Faculties of Medicine and Law have been shaken from top to bottom, their hallowed procedures and institutions challenged and found wanting. Millions have taken a hand in making history. This is the stuff of revolution.

Under the influence of the revolutionary students, thousands began to query the whole principle of hierarchy. The students had questioned it where it seemed the most ‘natural’: in the realms of teaching and knowledge. They proclaimed that democratic self-management was possible — and to prove it began to practice it themselves. They denounced the monopoly of information and produced millions of leaflets to break it. They attacked some of the main pillars of contemporary ‘civilisation’: the barriers between manual workers and intellectuals; the consumer society, the ‘sanctity’ of the university and of other founts of capitalist culture and wisdom. Within a matter of days the tremendous creative potentialities of the people suddenly erupted. The boldest and most realistic ideas — and they are usually the same — were advocated, argued, applied. Language, rendered stale by decades of bureaucratic mumbo- jumbo, eviscerated by those who manipulate it for advertising purposes, suddenly reappeared as something new and fresh. People re-appropriated it in all its fullness. Magnificently apposite and poetic slogans emerged from the anonymous crowd, Children explained to their elders what the function of education should be. The educators were educated, Within a few days, young people of 20 attained a level of understanding and a political and tactical sense which many who had been in the revolutionary movement for 30 years or more were still sadly lacking.

The tumultuous development of the students struggle triggered off the first factory occupations. It transformed both the relation of forces in society and the image, in people’s minds of

established leaders. It compelled the State to institutions and of established reveal both its oppressive nature and its fundamental incoherence. It exposed the utter emptiness of Government, Parliament, Administration — and of ALL the political parties. Unarmed students had forced the Establishment to drop its mask, to sweat with fear, to resort to the police club and to the gas grenade. Students finally compelled the bureaucratic leaderships of the ‘working class organisations to reveal themselves as the ultimate custodians of the established order.

But the revolutionary movement did still more. It fought its battles in Paris, not in some under-developed country, exploited by imperialism. In a glorious few weeks the actions of students and young workers dispelled the myth of the well-organised, well-oiled modern capitalist society, from which radical conflict had been eliminated and in which only marginal problems remained to be solved. Administrators who had been administering everything were suddenly shown to have had a grasp of nothing. Planners who had planned everything showed themselves incapable of ensuring the endorsement of their plans by those to whom they applied. This most modern movement should allow real revolutionaries to shed a number of the ideological encumbrances which in the past had hampered revolutionary activity. It wasn’t hunger which drove the students to revolt. There wasn’t an ‘economic crisis’ even in the loosest sense of the term. The revolt had nothing to do with ‘under-consumption’ or with ‘over-production’, The ‘falling rate of profit’ just didn’t come into the picture. Moreover, the student movement wasn’t based on economic demands. On the contrary, the movement only found its real stature, and only evoked its tremendous response, when it went beyond the economic demands within which official student unionism had for so long sought to contain it (incidentally with the blessing of all the political parties and ‘revolutionary’ groups of the ‘Left’). And conversely it was by confining the workers’ struggle to purely economic objectives that the trade union bureaucrats have so far succeeded in coming to the assistance of the regime.

The present movement has shown that the fundamental contradiction of modern bureaucratic capitalism isn’t the ‘anarchy of the market’. It isn’t the ‘contradiction between the forces of production and the property relations’. The central conflict to which all others are related is the conflict between order-givers (dirigeants) and order-takers (exécuteurs). The insoluble contradiction which tears the guts out of modern capitalist society is the one which compels it to exclude people from the management of their own activities and Which at the same time compels it to solicit their participation, without which it would collapse. These tendencies find expression on the one hand in the attempt of the bureaucrats to convert men into objects (by violence, mystification, new manipulation techniques — or ‘economic’ carrots’ and, on the other hand, in mankind’s refusal to allow itself to be treated in this way.

The French events show clearly something that all revolutions have shown, but which apparently has again and again to be learned anew. There is no ‘inbuilt revolutionary perspective’, no ‘gradual increase of contradictions’, no ‘progressive development of a revolutionary mass consciousness’. What are given are the contradictions and the conflicts we have described and the fact that modern bureaucratic society more or less inevitably produces periodic ‘accidents’ which disrupt its functioning These both provoke popular intervention and provide the people with opportunities for asserting themselves and for changing the social order. The functioning of bureaucratic capitalism creates the conditions within which revolutionary consciousness may appear. These conditions are an integral part of the whole alienating hierarchical and oppressive social structure. Whenever people struggle, sooner or later they are compelled to question the whole of that social structure. These are ideas which many of us in Solidarity have long

subscribed to. They were developed at length in some of Paul Cardan's pamphlets. Writing in *Le Monde* (20 May 1968) E Morin admits that what is happening today in France is "a blinding resurrection: the resurrection of that libertarian strand which seeks conciliation with marxism, in a formula of which *Socialisme ou Barbarie* had provided a first synthesis a few years ago...". As after every verification of basic concepts in the crucible of real events, many will proclaim that these had always been their views. This, of course isn't true.' The point however isn't to lay claims to a kind of copyright in the realm of correct revolutionary ideas. We welcome converts, from whatever sources and however belated. We can't deal here at length with what is now an important problem in France, namely the creation of a new kind of revolutionary movement, Things would indeed have been different if such a movement had existed, strong enough to outwit the bureaucratic manoeuvre, alert enough day by day to expose the duplicity of the 'left' leaderships, deeply enough implanted to explain to the workers the real meaning of the students' struggle, to propagate the idea of autonomous strike committees (linking up union and non-union members); of workers' management of production and of workers' councils. Many things which could have been done weren't done because there wasn't such a movement. The way the students' own struggle was unleashed shows that such an organization could have played a most impotent catalytic role without automatically becoming a bureaucratic 'leadership'. But such regrets are futile. The non-existence of such a movement is no accident, If it had been formed during the previous period it certainly wouldn't have been the kind of movement of which we are speaking, Even taking the 'best' of the small organizations — and multiplying its numbers a hundredfold — wouldn't have met the requirements of the current situation. When confronted with the test of events all the 'left' groups just continued playing their old gramophone records, Whatever their merits as depositories of the cold ashes of the revolution — a task they have now carried out for several decades — they proved incapable of snapping out of their old ideas and routines, incapable of learning or of forgetting anything.

The new revolutionary movement will have to be built from the new elements (students and workers) who have understood the real significance of current events. The revolution must step into the great political void revealed by the crisis of the old society. It must develop a voice, a face, a paper — and it must do it soon. We can understand the reluctance of some students to form such an organization. They feel there is a contradiction between action and thought, between spontaneity and organization. Their hesitation is fed by the whole of their previous experience, They have seen how thought could become sterilizing dogma, organization become bureaucracy or lifeless ritual, speech become a means of mystification, a revolutionary idea become a rigid and stereotyped programme. Through their actions, their boldness, their reluctance to consider long-term aims, they had broken out of this straight-jacket. But this isn't enough.

Moreover many of them had sampled the traditional 'left' groups. In all their fundamental aspects these groups remain trapped within the ideological and organizational frameworks of bureaucratic capitalism. They have programmes fixed once and for all, leaders who utter fixed speeches, whatever the changing reality around them, organizational forms which mirror those of existing society. Such groups reproduce within their own ranks the division between order-takers and order-givers, between those who 'know' and those who don't, the separation between scholastic pseudo-theory and real life. They would even like to impose this division into the working class, whom they all aspire to lead, because (and I was told this again and again) "the workers are only capable of developing a trade union consciousness".

But these students are wrong. One doesn't get beyond bureaucratic organization by denying all organization. One doesn't challenge the sterile rigidity of finished programmes by refusing to define oneself in terms of aims and methods. One doesn't refute dead dogma by the condemnation of all theoretical reflection. The students and young workers can't just stay where they are. To accept these 'contradictions' as valid and as something which cannot be transcended is to accept the essence of bureaucratic capitalist ideology. It is to accept the prevailing philosophy and the prevailing reality. It is to integrate the revolution into an established historical order. If the revolution is only an explosion lasting a few days (or weeks), the established order – whether it knows it or not – will be able to cope. What is more – at a deep level class society even needs such jolts. This kind of 'revolution' permits class society to survive by compelling it to transform and adapt itself. This is the real danger today. Explosions which disrupt the imaginary world in which alienated societies tend to live – and bring them momentarily down to earth help them eliminate outmoded methods of domination and evolve new and more flexible ones. Action or thought? For revolutionary socialists the problem is not to make a synthesis of these two pre-occupations of the revolutionary students. It is to destroy the social context in which such false alternatives find root.

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Maurice Brinton
Paris: May 1968
Maurice Brinton's diary
1968

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First edition published by Solidarity, June 1968. This edition published jointly by Dark Star
Press and Rebel Press, 1986

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