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For fifty years, the events of May–June 1968 in France have had a collective hero: the striking students and workers who occupied their factories and universities and high schools. They've also had a collective villain, one within the same camp: the French Communist Party (PCF) and its allied labor union organization, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), which together did all they could to put a brake on a potential revolution, blocking the students and workers from uniting or even fraternizing.

This reading of the events is often found in histories, most recently Ludivine Bantigny's *1968. De Grands soirs en petits matins.* I heard it fairly consistently from rank-and-file student and leftist participants in the May events whom I interviewed for my oral history of May '68, *May Made Me.* Prisca Bachelet, who helped the students at Nanterre organize their occupation of the university administrative offices on March 22, 1968, and who was present for every decisive moment of the May–June days, said of the CGT lead-

ers that "they were afraid, afraid of responsibility." Joseph Potiron, a revolutionary farmer in La Chapelle-sur-Erdre, near Nantes, said the strikes "ended when the union leaders pushed the workers to return to work." For the writer Daniel Blanchard, the occupations were a fraud: "The factories were very quickly occupied, not by the workers but by the local CGT leadership. And this was an essential element in the demobilization of the strikers." Éric Hazan, at the time a cardiac surgeon and now a publisher, viewed the Communists' actions as "Treason. Normal. A normal treason."

There is an element of truth in this characterization of the Communists, though only an element: the party line modified with events, and the general strike and factory occupations would not have been possible without Communist participation. In late April, before the beginning of *les évènements*, the PCF had issued warnings against the anarchist-leaning March 22 Movement, formed at the University of Nanterre and led by, among others, Daniel Cohn-Bendit; the party secretariat instructed its cadres to ensure the students not be allowed to approach factory workers should they march to the factories. On May 3, the party newspaper *L'Humanité* carried an article about the students at Nanterre headlined "The Fake Revolutionaries Unmasked." But by May 7, just days after the beginning of the uprising on May 3, the party leadership spoke of "the legitimacy of the student movement." Though the Communists continued to stand firmly against students entering the occupied factories, this change in party attitude opened the door the following week to the CGT and PCF's call for the workers to go on strike throughout France and join the students on the streets. In fact, the first major worker-student march was the first workday after the violence of the Night of the Barricades on Friday, May 10.

Huge marches that included both students and workers were held, starting May 13, when the workers joined the students on strike. But the unity was deceptive. Alain Krivine, the founder and leader of the Trotskyist Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, said about these marches that "there were common worker-student

demos but we didn't have the same slogans: they had theirs, we had ours. There was never any real connection with them." Hélène Chatroussat, at the time a Trotskyist in Rouen in Voix Ouvrière, admitted that when they went to factories and saw the workers behind the gates occupying them, "I said to myself, they are many, they're with us… so why don't they tell the Stalinists [the PCF] to get lost so we could come in and they could join us?"

Behind such questions lay the assumption—pervasive among the students and their supporters on the left—that the workers supported the demands for a new society, and that they were aiming for a new world, the same new world as the students. For the students and their allies, who wholeheartedly rejected the PCF, it was the Communists who kept the workers from joining their cause. Despite its avowedly pro-Soviet stance, the PCF never denied that it had a much more reformist approach to domestic politics than the students did. Roland Leroy, a leader of the PCF, said in a speech at the National Assembly on May 21, 1968, that "The Communists are not anarchists whose program tends to destroying everything without building anything."

But in this, the Communists did indeed have the support of the mass of the workers, few of whom marched behind the black flag. A constellation of far-left groups—anarchist, Trotskyist, and Maoist—flourished in France in the 1960s, all claiming to represent the interests of the working class. In reality, it was the Communist Party, and not the smaller left-wing groups or the Socialist Party, that had the strongest working-class presence in 1968. Over the course of its history, more than 2,000,000 workers were members of the party, and according to the sociologist Jean-Paul Molinari, in the 1960s, when 35 percent of the French population was defined as "working-class," 44 percent of the membership of the PCF was proletarian. Since its founding in 1920, the PCF had not only been the most militant defender of workers' interests; it had given workers an identity, and a world, distinct from that

of French society at large. Workers joined the Communist Party because it spoke for them.

That the PCF should have tried to control its members is hardly a surprise. The Communists' particular diktats of party discipline and cleaving to "the line" aside, what political party wouldn't do the same? What is significant is that the members stood by the leadership. The filmmaker and PCF member Pascal Aubier told me about his brief flirtation with a group called Pouvoir Ouvrier, an offshoot of the small but influential Socialisme ou Barbarie. He said that he attended one meeting, where he found that "[t]here were about thirty people there. And there was one worker. That struck me. I said to myself, 'We can't do without the working class in making the revolution.' So as simplistic as it might sound, the PCF represents the working class, and so I joined it."

Krivine, who had been expelled from the PCF in 1965, fought tooth and nail against the Communists' hold on the workers. But he was still honest about the disconnect between the workers and the students: "Even though I was *gauchiste* at the time I didn't see the working class following us. And so when we said, or Cohn-Bendit or Geismar said, 'Power to the People,' the workers said, 'What are you, nuts?'"

The suspicion and distrust of the average worker for the students and their radical demands during May was expressed to me by Colette Danappe, who worked in a factory outside of Paris. After she told me that politics were never discussed at her occupied factory, I asked if students came there. She said they did, and that she and her co-workers rejected the students "because they came with red flags that they put up around the factory. The students were more interested in fighting, they were interested in politics, and that wasn't for us." As for seeing beyond bread-and-butter demands: "No, the workers in the factory didn't, and I followed along."

Even rank-and-file workers who pushed for the strikes and occupations to go further than they did and seek wider social change were met with resistance from their fellows. Daniel Pinos,

working class of 1968. Not so the New Left student movement. In the end, it had only *ouvriérisme sans ouvriers*.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the PCF began its slide into political irrelevance, and by 2002, its score in the presidential elections had sunk to 3.39 percent. By then, the Communist Party, left high and dry with its pro-Moscow loyalties after the Soviet Union dissolved, had ceased to be a significant force in French politics. But proletarian discontent had not come to an end, and as in much of the West, the lives and livelihoods of working-class people were becoming increasingly precarious. The social-democratic centrism of the Mitterrand-led Socialist Party (PS) did little for the workers; the later Hollande government did even less. With its strong *bobo* (bourgeois-bohemian) representation and prominent recycled *soixante-huitards* in its upper echelons, the Socialist Party came to embody everything about the radical students of 1968 that had originally aroused workers' suspicions.

Grievance demands expression, and the far-right National Front (FN) became its advocate. The PCF had prepared the way for the party of the Le Pens, and the FN took over its part in French politics. Had the PCF not consistently defended *French* jobs and *French* industries, all the way back to the party's historic leader of the early postwar period, Maurice Thorez? Later, in 1980, did the Communist mayor of Vitry-sur-Seine not bulldoze the homes of immigrants at Christmas time? And did the PCF's general secretary Georges Marchais not campaign for the presidency in 1981 on the slogan "Stop immigration, official and illegal"? This was the same Georges Marchais who, on May 3, 1968, the very day the revolt began, appealed to working-class xenophobia by dismissing Daniel Cohn-Bendit in the pages of *L'Humanité* as a "German anarchist."

Once it lost the PCF as the mediating force to represent its grievances, the French working class fulfilled Herbert Marcuse's 1972 warning that "The *immediate* expression of the opinion and will of the workers, farmers, neighbors—in brief, the people—is not, per se, progressive and a force of social change: it may be the opposite." The PCF understood this latent conservatism in the

a teenage anarchist and the son of an exiled Spanish anarchist, recounted that while his father was hoping for revolution, when Daniel made anti-capitalist speeches at his factory's general assemblies in Villefranche-sur-Sâone, his father "had problems with it. I remember he'd say, 'We're not in Spain here.'"

For the students and their allies, it has always been impossible to accept that the PCF expressed what the workers truly felt and desired. If the workers didn't want a violent revolution, it could only be because they had been the victims of Communist misdirection; they required nothing more than the guidance and support of the students at their pickets and occupations to travel the true revolutionary road. This vision of May '68 says more about the outdated, romantic *ouvriérisme* of the students than about anything else. Krivine described the infatuation with the working class that ruled the student world:

> We were at the Sorbonne, there was a general assembly with everyone braying, and I said okay, let's go to Renault, at which point everyone applauded. 'We're going to see the workers!' And anytime a worker spoke it didn't matter, he could be a drunk, lumpen… It was the token worker, a few stray workers, it was pitiful: the students were all excited.

To the students and the far left, the acceptance of the Grenelle Accords, which ended the strikes by granting wage gains of 35 percent in the minimum wage and a 10 percent rise in salaries, was a betrayal rammed through by the union leadership. Henri Simon, a longtime militant of the anti-authoritarian left, said that "the vote on the return to work was a fraud." But Danappe viewed the end of the strike favorably: "We got almost everything we wanted and almost everyone voted to return." When I asked if life changed after May, her response was, "Maybe we were a little happier, because we had more money. We were able to travel afterwards." For Danappe, this was victory enough.

The belittling of salary demands and wage gains continues to be a feature of accounts of May from the left, as it was from the moment of the strike's end. Many argued that the value of the wage gains hardly made up for the workers' sacrifices and the loss of income they had incurred by striking for several weeks. The settlement was in large part the work of Communist union officials and they loudly supported it; and for that reason, leftists had to portray it as a defeat. But it is clear that, for the workers, the pay raises had been worth fighting for. That, from the first, was a primary focus for the PCF, along with an end to Gaullist power. That the salary hikes were obtained thanks to an uprising that included far more radical demands is an irony of history. Meeting the second aim was another matter, and de Gaulle only left power a year later when he resigned after his proposed change in rules governing the Senate and local government were defeated in a referendum. It would not be wrong to view this rejection of de Gaulle as a delayed effect of the previous year's revolt, but the result was a government headed by his former prime minister, Georges Pompidou—so it was a defeat for the general, rather than Gaullism itself.

For the Communists, broader demands were simply foolhardy, given the forces in play. Likening the situation in 1968 to the general strike of 1936 was an ahistorical error of political analysis for someone like Guy Texier, a CGT leader at the naval shipyards of Saint-Nazaire. The gains obtained in the 1930s, such as paid vacations, were granted under Léon Blum's Popular Front government—a socialist administration—and, he said, "in May '68 we didn't have that." In Texier's view, the Communist assessment was correct: "We didn't accept that the movement in support of the workers' demands follow after the political movement. There was no prospect… at the time for a left-wing policy." The Communists may have been poor revolutionaries, but they were politically astute. They knew the workers, knew what they would fight for, and got them what they wanted.

The far left dismissed the parliamentary elections held in June after de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly on May 30 as "*trahison*" (betrayal) and a "*piège à cons*" (a fool's game). But elections in a democratic society do serve as signs of the political climate, and they were a smashing victory for de Gaulle. For a Communist high school student like Dominique Barbe, the overwhelming vote to return to work and the election results both "validated our position that there was no political alternative at that moment."

Even so, Wally Rosell, a third-generation anarchist and another child of refugees from the Spanish Civil War, told me about what he considered one of the positive long-term effects of May: "The fall of Communism and Marxism, at least in Western Europe, dates to May '68. It's the first time that a Communist Party was overtaken from the left and was seen to be a traitor." He nuanced this point by saying that it still took some time for that betrayal to become clear—in fact, in 1969 the PCF increased its share of the vote in the presidential elections (after de Gaulle's resignation) to 21.27 percent, up from 20 percent in the post-May 1968 legislative elections.

Rosell is certainly correct that 1968 was the definitive proof, if such proof were still needed, that the Communist Party had no interest in seizing power through revolution. But it also demonstrated that in this, the PCF was the perfect image of the class it represented, and vice versa. Cornelius Castoriadis, a progenitor of Socialisme ou Barbarie and still a man of the far left, wrote in an essay published during the events:

> In France in May '68 the industrial proletariat was not the revolutionary vanguard of society, but rather its ponderous rear guard. If the student movement attacked the heavens, what stuck society to earth… was the attitude of the proletariat, its passivity in regard to its leadership and the regime, its inertia, its indifference to everything that was not an economic demand.