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Looking Back at France, May 1968

The Basic Story

Summer, 2018

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The Basic Story

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Fifty years ago France was on the verge of social revolution, with millions of workers on strike, factories occupied, and students striking and occupying universities and high schools all over the country. Anarchists and anti-authoritarians were deeply involved in this massive movement which took many, but not all, by surprise.

On March 20, 1968, students from Nanterre University were arrested during an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in Paris. In response, two days later, 150 student radicals occupied the school's administration building, supported by some faculty. This is where the March 22 movement, an eclectic group with significant anarchist participation, came together. During a meeting in the occupied building, they denounced class discrimination in French society and the political bureaucracy controlling the university.

The Nanterre administration called the police. Although the building was cleared with no arrests, some of those deemed to be protest leaders were summoned to the University's disciplinary

committee, threatened with expulsion; and the administration closed the campus on May 2 to curtail continuing protests.

As a result, the situation began to heat up. On May 3, students congregated at the Sorbonne campus of the University of Paris to protest the closure of Nanterre and the disciplinary hearings. The Sorbonne administration called in the police and closed that campus as well.

When the students attempted to leave, several of those labeled leaders were arrested. In response, many more students rushed to the Sorbonne to join the fight against the police.

In the following days university and high school students, teachers and supporters protested police invasion of the university. The police responded with more brutality. Demonstrators built barricades, in the tradition of resistance in Paris going back to the 19th century, while others dug up paving stones to hurl at the cops. Hundreds of marchers were arrested and many injured.

Live radio and TV coverage of police brutality against demonstrators incited many workers and others to strongly sympathize with them. This all occurred in the context of labor unrest and ongoing wildcat strikes across the country demanding pay increases and improved working conditions.

On May 11, the government switched tactics in an attempt to dampen the rising anger among the population. The police were temporarily held back, the arrested students were released and the Sorbonne was reopened.

Students occupied the Sorbonne and declared it an autonomous “people’s university,” a place for anyone who wanted to express themselves.

In the auditoriums and lecture halls of university buildings, General Assemblies, based on equal participation and direct democracy decided on topics relevant to daily life. Action committees established contacts with striking workers, encouraging them to do the same in their workplaces.

Four hundred student-worker action committees in schools and enterprises in Paris and elsewhere, tackled issues important to them in factories and universities. They refused to continue the elite, hierarchical command form that administers daily life in capitalist society.

Workers occupied roughly fifty factories by May 16, and eleven million were on strike by the following week—approximately two-thirds of the French workforce at the time. These strikes were organized by the workers themselves. The established labor organizations, on the other hand, tried to contain this spontaneous outbreak of militancy by channeling it solely into a struggle for higher wages and other economic demands. But at least for a while, workers formulated their own broader, more political and radical goals than those put forward by the unions. In some cases, they began self-management in factories, refusing to accept either company or union bosses.

In order to retain some semblance of control over the workers and divert energies away from revolutionary possibilities, official union leaders called a national general strike on May 13 to protest against police violence and repression. At least a million people filled the streets demanding the resignation of the government, especially the president, Charles de Gaulle.

On May 24 there was a demonstration in Paris of 30,000 which marched toward the government buildings. But demonstrators were turned away by a combination of riot police and leftist organizations which judged the time was not right for attacking those buildings. The various anarchist groups were indecisive and too weak to take the initiative to occupy the ministries and stop them from functioning. So no actions to dislodge the government were made by anyone.

President de Gaulle went on TV on May 24 to urge the end of the occupations and strikes, promising to grant more self-management in work places and schools.

On May 25 and 26, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, leaders of the major unions, and the employers association attempted to negotiate a settlement, known as the Grenelle Agreements, which specified that occupations would end and everyone would return to work in exchange for some wage and economic gains. But this settlement was decisively turned down by the workers, and strikes and occupations continued.

De Gaulle decided that more drastic steps were necessary for his party to survive and avert a revolution. On May 29, he flew to the headquarters of the French military in Baden-Baden, Germany, to consult with top military officials about ending the insurgency. The next day he returned to Paris and appeared on television announcing that he was dissolving the National Assembly and calling for elections within forty days.

He also ordered workers to return to work, threatening to declare a state of emergency if there was resistance. Immediately after this speech, 800,000 Gaullist supporters marched in Paris.

During the first weeks of June, there were massive police actions to break strikes and occupations in all the major cities of France. Workers were injured and even some killed. At the same time, due to the lack of contact and coordination between workplaces, the unions were able to manipulate decision-making processes, end strikes and occupations in one workplace after another, and thereby collapse the movement.

On June 12th the government banned street demonstrations, outlawed the active anarchist and leftist organizations, and arrested many of their members. Police re-took the Sorbonne on June 16.

People were told that the only alternative remaining was the electoral arena. When elections were held later in June, the Gaullist party won a major parliamentary victory, taking 353 out of 486 seats.

The question of why things ended the way they did lingers.

Some anarchists blame the outcome on the lack of contact and coordination between different strikes and occupations through-

out the country. Others feel that if anarchist groups had been stronger and more connected with each other they might have been able to help find a way to push things forward to replace the old authoritarian regime, including the communist union leaders, Stalinists and Trotskyists. Still others think it was the inability of so many to transcend the idea that everything depended on the working class and the resulting generally-accepted isolation of workers from students.

Nevertheless, the events of May '68 in France continue to inspire hope because they clearly demonstrate that revolutionary possibilities can emerge when least expected.

SK lives on the west coast of Turtle Island. She is one of those who, in 2018, still believe that anything can happen!

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