

**Bruno Astarian**

**The French strikes of  
May-June 1968**

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## Author's introduction to the Spanish edition

What happens when a massive work stoppage takes place and capitalism ceases to function? It was for the purpose of answering this question that I undertook a detailed study of the strikes of May-June 1968. I thought that I would encounter a vast revolutionary efflorescence, but a distinction rapidly emerged. Behind the romanticism of the students and apprentice politicians who talked about revolution, there was a massive strike, but one that was above all a passive strike, and very few of those heroic historical deeds that the students invoked in order to situate themselves in the role of October-style leaders actually took place. Since then, during every year that ends in “eight”, we are overwhelmed by their commemorations,<sup>1</sup> images, photos, testimonials and analyses to remind us of the fact that before they were important and powerful people, they were apprentices of politics, of the workplace and of management, whom their elders compelled, for a brief moment, to live in poverty. Their revolt is of no interest to us.

If my research is useful for drawing conclusions from the past, this should be the first one: we must distinguish between the two May '68s that took place in France. My

research is exclusively focused on the strike of the workers. It shows us, among other things, the extent to which relations between the political/student movement and the worker/strike movement were lacking. Separated in action, the two movements remained, generally, separated in the *post-festum* analyses. The students and intellectuals who, during the first few years following the strikes, published their eyewitness accounts and analyses, rarely went beyond recounting what they saw or experienced by adapting it to the political positions they held at the time. They conferred an exaggerated importance upon what happened in the universities and the leftist groups, without subjecting this material to historical criticism, thus allowing “revolutionary” myths to spread, such as, for example, the myth of self-management at CSF in Brest. For their part, militant workers published, for the most part, monographs that described what happened in their workplaces. But after all the commotion, the dust settled and it must be admitted that hardly anyone is interested in the workers strikes in May and June of 1968.

It must be acknowledged that the French strikes of '68 did not cultivate revolutionary romanticism. It has been said—although I have not been able to confirm this—that sales of home improvement goods were quite brisk

during May and June of 1968. Did the factory workers and office employees, who scarcely participated in the occupations at their workplaces, take advantage of the free time made available by the strike wave to work on home improvement projects? Be that as it may, it was primarily at the beginning and the end of the strike wave that all the trade union, political and police authorities endeavored to get the workers to go back to work, when the movement (especially at Flins and Sochaux) outside the confines of the Latin Quarter briefly caused the images of confrontations and barricades to flare up again, images upon which the ideology of the leftists battened. In this connection, the latter observation leads us to the second lesson that should be derived from the movement of May '68: far from having embodied a second edition of the Paris Commune or the October Revolution, the strikers, as evinced by both their absenteeism and by their violent refusal to return to work, announced the end of the identification of the revolution with the positive affirmation of labor. This message, already present in other conflicts, would undergo rapid development during what was called the crisis of Fordism, with the revolts of the assembly line workers, the strikes without demands, sabotage, etc.

The failure of working class politics (the Communist Party, the leftists and the ultra-left taken as a whole) and the affirmation, via the anti-work attitudes of the specialized workers (in fact, those workers who possessed no particular skills), of the need for the simultaneous abolition of capital and *the proletariat*, are the new components of the theory of revolution after May 1968.

After the extraordinary weeks of May and June of 1968, the return to normal was sometimes very difficult for those who had thought that the sudden appearance of the old mole heralded the start of a new revolutionary epoch. The passage of several years was necessary to make it possible to view the events from a sufficient distance and to begin to understand that we were actually entering a counterrevolutionary period in the sense that, since the end of the 1970s, capital was able to impose its terms much more easily on the proletariat. This was necessarily accompanied by the deepening of class contradictions, although in a subterranean way: the “years of ‘68”, and not just in France, caused us to enter a phase of capital accumulation in which the preconditions for that simultaneous abolition of the two classes we mentioned above were being prepared. This

called for a very important renovation of the communist perspective.2

As usual, this preparation is taking place in the entrails of capitalist society and is not perceptible to the superficial observer. And just as was the case in 1968, there will be a great deal of surprise when the old mole reappears. It will not show up, of course, either where we expect it, or in accordance with the commonly accepted views concerning its habits—regardless of the choices that have to be made by this or that individual. Can we stress one tendency in the incessant everyday unfolding of the class struggle? This would be very risky, and would only capture one aspect of that process: the revolt of the specialized workers against the assembly line, which took place in the West during the 1960s and 1970s, forced capital to engage in extensive relocation, especially to the East. While the Western proletariat entered a phase of defensive struggles, most of which would be defeated, the Eastern proletariat was faced with the gradual formation of the conditions that led to the type of revolt that had just been defeated in the West. After a few years of “economic development”, an event like the one that is described below is almost an everyday affair in China:

## **Riot in a Maersk container factory, at the port of Machong (January 2008)**

Quote:

*A migrant worker jumped over a fence in order to cut ahead in the line to the cafeteria because he had been kept on the factory floor too long by his foreman and did not have enough time for lunch. Two guards saw him and fined him 200 yuans (his monthly wage is unknown, but it is not more than 1,500 yuans). Every time he refused to pay, they increased the fine. It finally reached 1,000 yuans. Ultimately, the worker went to eat his lunch without paying the fine, but upon returning from the cafeteria the guards were waiting for him and gave him a beating. With his face covered with blood, the worker returned to the cafeteria for help. His comrades emerged from the cafeteria with improvised weapons. The guards fled, except for one who was wounded by the workers. When the police brought the two wounded men to the hospital, the workers picked up some bricks and broke all the windows they could find. They had been angry for some time due to wage reductions, speed-ups and compulsory overtime. The riot continued until the next morning.*

A struggle of this kind (one example among many) would have provided the occasion, during the 1970s, for triumphalist commentaries on the topic of the refusal of work, the lack of respect for the instruments of labor, and the hatred of the assembly line. Today, such an event passes almost unnoticed. The routine nature of this kind of struggle is welcome. I think that this tells us something about how the view gradually develops that will lead the proletarians, once the moment has arrived, to consider “their” factories as something that must only be destroyed. And if this kind of revolt has, for the moment, temporarily disappeared from the Western landscape, the suffering endured in work that has replaced revolt, as a result of the fear of unemployment, will lead the workers to the same conclusions; about that we may be certain. Gradually, since the crisis phase of the decades of the 1960s and 1970s (and the French May ’68 was nothing but a small step in this direction), capital is generating the conditions for a communism that will no longer be the affirmation of the associated workers and planning, but the negation of the proletariat and the supersession of the economy and labor.

*B. Astarian*

*March 2008*

- 1.Spanish-speaking readers are probably not as overwhelmed by this 'old soldier' literature as the French public [the author engages in a play on words by using the expression 'old combatants', which is employed in France to denote the veterans of the First World War, but especially those of the Second World War—Spanish translator's note].
- 2.See Bruno Astarian, "Le travail et son dépassement" (Labor and Its Supersession), Paris, Senonevero, 2001; published in the anthology, *Rupture dans la Théorie de la Révolution. Textes 1965-1975*, with an introduction by François Danel, Paris, Senonevero, 2003.

# Part 1. An account of the events

## Preface

The pages that follow are not intended to be a history of the strikes of May '68. In order for them to comprise such a history it would have been necessary to pursue my research much further than I was capable of in this instance. It is instead a sort of compilation of the information provided by the texts listed in the bibliography, which are easily accessible, concerning the question of the strike movement as seen from one particular perspective: that of the rank and file. *A fortiori*, it is not a history of May '68 that recapitulates the entire political dimension of that moment in French society, much less a history of the interpretations of May '68. A real history of the strikes would have also necessitated the detailed verification of every single bit of information by consulting different sources. This has not always been possible. I would be very interested in any errors the readers of this book may be able to bring to my attention.

The bibliography does not contain a systematic account of the strikes of 1968. It is actually quite surprising to see

that while there are so many interpretations and points of view with respect to the May movement, it is still hard to discover, with any degree of accuracy, just what happened in the factories and offices during those four or five weeks. I therefore believe that my recapitulation could be very useful for those who want to know what the wage workers and employees did during the great strikes of May '68.

B. A.

May 2003

# 1. The Beginning of the Strike Wave

## May 13

After May 3, the student movement that began in Nanterre spread to the streets of the Latin Quarter (QL),<sup>1</sup> and to many provincial university cities. This student movement is outside the scope of our investigation. But it cannot be completely ignored, since it certainly had an influence on the beginning of the strikes in the factories.

### *Chronology of the student demonstrations from May 3 to May 10*

**Friday, May 3.** The police clear the courtyard of the Sorbonne that had been occupied by students, especially those from Nanterre, who had come to the Sorbonne to attend a meeting. They arrested some of the students, and this led to protests on the part of the others. Six hours of violence ensued, culminating in 600 arrests.

**May 4.** Some of the people who were arrested are sentenced, some to imprisonment. Eight of the sentences will be overturned on appeal.

**May 5.** The Sorbonne is closed.

**Monday, May 6.** At dawn, the police close off the Latin Quarter. From the first few hours of the morning (while the university's disciplinary council was in session to consider the cases of eight students, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit), demonstrations and rallies take place on the Boulevard Saint-Michel. These led to confrontations with the police. The multitude of small, scattered groups coalesced in a rally of 6,000 people in the Halle-aux-Vins (with the slogan, "against repression"). UNEF<sup>2</sup> called for a demonstration at 6:30 at Denfert-Rochereau.

Meanwhile, a large part of the 6,000 people marched in a demonstration that returned to the Latin Quarter after passing through the Right Bank. In the Rue des Ecoles there were indiscriminate and violent police rampages. The students respond in kind, and construct barricades. It was at this time that the UNEF demonstration was beginning in Denfert. It ran into the police on the Rue du Four. There were more violent clashes, and elaborate barricades are built. At dusk, there were more demonstrations, which were very violent in the Latin Quarter (500 injured, 400 arrested). There were also demonstrations in the provinces; the one in Grenoble was violent.

**Tuesday, May 7.** A rally was held at 6:30 in Denfert. Columns of demonstrators marched through Paris (where they were not prevented from doing so by police roadblocks) for four hours: Les Invalides, Quai d'Orsay, Place de la Concorde, Arc de Triomphe (9:30). And when they returned toward the left bank, they ran into a police roadblock at the intersection of Rue de Rennes and Rue d'Assas. There were 50,000 demonstrators. The confrontations that followed were more scattered and sporadic than those of the night before. The police engaged in a festive display of great violence.

**Wednesday, May 8.** A rally was held in Halle-aux-Vins and a demonstration made its way down the Boulevard Saint-Germain towards the Senate and Place Edmond-Rostand. Some communist deputies wanted to lead the demonstration. They were sent back towards the main body of the demonstration. The Sorbonne was inaccessible. The UNEF maintained control of the demonstration and managed to bring it to an end without any confrontations.

**Thursday, May 9.** No demonstrations took place. Assemblies were held at the Mutualité (convoked by the leftists, the March 22 Movement,<sup>3</sup> the UJCML,<sup>4</sup> the

JCR5...) and at the Cirque d'Hiver (convoked by the Communist Party and the UEC6).

**Friday, May 10.** At nightfall, the demonstrations that took place during the day concluded in a march up the Boulevard Saint-Michel towards the Luxembourg, where they were more or less stalled. Then the first “night of the barricades” began: barricades were quite numerous at Sainte-Geneviève, without any strategic plan whatsoever, especially at the Place Edmond-Rostand, Rue Soufflot and in the alleys that lead to the Contrescarpe. The cops launched their attack at night, at about two in the morning. They retaliated violently. Solidarity on the part of the local residents and a vast current of sympathy towards the demonstrators characterized public opinion.

During this period of student demonstrations, contacts were initiated, in different ways and at different levels, between two worlds: that of the students and that of the workers. At the highest levels, the bureaucrats of UNEF and the central committees of the Trade Union Federations did some mutual ass kissing. Among the rank and file, the young workers displayed lively interest in the demonstrations of the students. This was not at all to the liking of the bureaucrats.

On May 3, in *L'Humanité*,<sup>7</sup> the Communist Party, through the pen of Georges Marchais,<sup>8</sup> directly attacked the students of Nanterre and denounced the “German anarchist”, Cohn-Bendit. But the communist militants did not unanimously accept this condemnation that was intended to keep them away from the movement. Rioux and Backmann refer to the case of an official of the Young Communists who had “enormous difficulties holding back his colleagues, who had become uncontrollable. A simple order from the party and they would have poured into the Latin Quarter. The order never came, and some comrades ... secretly joined the demonstrations”.<sup>9</sup> He also cited the case of a trade union official who confirmed the existence of a tense atmosphere among the communist comrades and the “real crisis of absenteeism” that he observed to prevail among the young factory militants during the days of the major demonstrations.

On the night of May 6, at the Hispano-Suiza plant in Colombes (Hauts-de-Seine),<sup>10</sup> thirty night shift workers went on strike. Among them, some trade union members wanted to go to the Latin Quarter with the CGT flag.<sup>11</sup> Finally, they left without the flag after encountering “the hesitations of the others” (we assume that this refers to the other trade union members). On

May 10, some of them returned to the Latin Quarter and participated in the construction of barricades.<sup>12</sup> In their account of the “night of the barricades” (May 10-11), Rioux and Backmann discuss the case of the barricade at Rue de l'Abbé-de-l'Épée, built by young workers, whose origins were unknown, and who proved to be quite ingenious. They draped wires across the street at various heights in order to defend their ten-foot high barricade. Nor was it only the CGT that had trouble maintaining discipline among its troops. At the Rhône-Poulenc factory in Vitry, a CFDT<sup>13</sup> pamphlet dated May 8 states: “Students and workers, the same struggle”. On May 9, a pamphlet signed by “workers of all tendencies” took this slogan issued by the trade union federation literally and appealed to the workers to join the student demonstrations. Immediately the CFDT published a pamphlet entitled, “put out the fire”, announcing a joint trade union-UNEF demonstration for May 11.<sup>14</sup>

According to Jacques Baynac, the first barricade of the night of May 10 was erected on Rue Le Goff by young workers who proclaimed that even if the students’ three demands<sup>15</sup> were met, they would be fooled again.

These facts are merely a few of the indications that the workers, especially the young workers, were interested

in what was happening among the students. The trade unions were not unaware of the fact that the student struggles incited a lively current of sympathy, but they were still, of course, very mistrustful and suspicious. After the invectives hurled at the students by Marchais, however, *L'Humanité* gradually changed its tune and the UEC finally announced its solidarity with the “good students” (but not with the violent ones who were only playing the game of big capital). During the week of May 3, various meetings were held between the trade union central committees and UNEF, which culminated in the proposal to hold a solidarity demonstration on May 14.

After the night of the barricades and the enormous wave of sympathy that had emerged in favor of the students and against the repression, the date of the demonstration was changed to May 13, and reinforced with a call for a general strike. At first, the demonstration of May 13 had been rejected by the Communist Party, which considered it to be too “political”.<sup>16</sup> Did the Communist Party and the CGT change their minds because they were afraid of being left behind by the movement? It is known that it was the pressure of numerous party cells, that led *L'Humanité* to publish, on the morning of May 11, a special issue on the night of the barricades, which also explains why certain cells had

already begun to distribute leaflets protesting against the repression without waiting for orders.<sup>17</sup>

According to Adrien Dansette, the strike called for May 13 was “universally observed in the public services, SNCF,<sup>18</sup> RATP,<sup>19</sup> and EDF,<sup>20</sup> but less so in the private sector”.<sup>21</sup> In any event, this strike would lead to gigantic demonstrations, both in Paris and the provinces. Unfortunately, we possess less information about what happened that day in the factories.

At Hispano-Suiza, which we already mentioned above, the strike pickets formed at dawn, with the participation of students. They are “very solid, very strong.... As for the [trade union] apparatus, it was totally taken by surprise”. According to one account, “until 11 in the morning, there was one hell of an interesting discussion” between workers and students.<sup>22</sup> Then a small demonstration was organized which marched around the neighboring streets. Later, it went to the Place de la Republic, in Paris, the staging point for the main demonstration.

At Renault-Billancourt, 80% of the workers participated in the strike, but only the workers who were members of the trade unions joined the demonstration. At Thomson (Bagneux and Gennevilliers [Hauts-de-Seine]) the rate of

participation in the strike was between 60 and 65%. At the Research Center (CEA) in Saclay (Essonne), participation was almost total, as it was at Chausson (90%).<sup>23</sup> At the Rhône-Poulenc Vitry subsidiary (Val-de-Marne), 50% of the workers participated in the strike. These few figures are indicative of the tense situation that prevailed at the factories. In fact, it had been a long time since a “trade union action” had enjoyed such success. It was undoubtedly the same tension that incited the management of Citroën-Levallois to decree a lockout to keep the workers out of the factory, even though they had not joined the strike.

In the provinces, the strike call was widely heeded. At Peugeot, at the Sochaux plant (Doubs), the factory was actually shut down because its electricity was cut off, which shows just how much the strike affected the EDF.<sup>24</sup> Among those enterprises that will be the objects of so much discussion later in our text is Sud-Aviation in Bouguenais, near Nantes. In fact, for the last several weeks this factory had been the site of an almost uninterrupted conflict, and the strike of May 13 was just one in a series of actions, sometimes violent, that had begun in the beginning of April. At the Renault plant in Cléon (Seine-Maritime), another factory that was rapidly

engulfed by the May-June strike, 50% of the workers participated in the work stoppage.

At Lyon, at the end of the demonstration, a delegation was sent to Rhodiaceta (in the Vaise district of the city), a factory that had experienced an intense labor conflict a few months before. The 2,000 demonstrators assembled in front of the factory and this gave rise to encounters and discussions that the CGT was unable to prevent (it was to have more success later). It gets better: that same day, the CFDT incited the students to invade the factory to “prevent a lockout. The management was afraid. Then we entered into negotiations with the management, but not without remembering to ask the students to stand in front of the door of the room where we had our meeting. The managers rapidly forgot their decision to decree a lockout, and we returned to work”.<sup>25</sup>

These few accounts help us to understand the fact that, just as the student demonstrations and barricades had an obvious impact on the factories, the May 13 strike set the stage for the explosion that would come later. According to Claude Durand, the trade union members of the eight factories that he studied were unanimous in saying that the strike and the demonstrations of May 13 were the detonators for the subsequent events. There

were 600,000 demonstrators in Paris, 150,000 in Marseilles, 40,000 in Toulouse, 35,000 in Lyon, etc. Everywhere, delegations of students met with workers, not always with harmonious results. Everywhere, however, these delegations were surprisingly large and well attended. The demonstrations had served to crystallize the diffuse feeling of having had enough. Situated halfway between the first days which had been dominated by the sympathy, and even the admiration, of “public opinion” for the students, which seemed to have a major effect on the Gaullist regime, and the massive work stoppage that would subsequently take place, the strike of May 13 revealed to the workers movement its own potential power.

## **The first week: spontaneity?**

*Tuesday, May 14*

One often reads that it was the workers of Sud-Aviation of Bouguenais (Loire-Atlantique) who began the May '68 strike movement. This is not entirely correct. First, because this factory in the Nantes region had already been embroiled in conflict for several weeks, a conflict that had met with the clear indifference of the rest of the workers movement. Second, because other factories also

witnessed a burst of conflict after May 14, and this was the case independently of what was taking place at Sud-Aviation that day (taking the factory director hostage and occupation of the factory).

In January 1968, Sud-Aviation Bouguenais employed 2,682 wage workers, of whom 1,793 were hourly workers working alongside 831 technicians and employees who were paid a monthly wage. Starting in February, the management proposed to cut back on hours due to the economic recession. It announced its plans in April and it was the insufficiency of the compensations and indemnifications for the lost hours that unleashed the conflict.

### *The conflict at Sud-Aviation Bouguenais in April-May 1968* 26

**Tuesday, April 9.** Work stoppage from 4:45 to 5:45: general assembly in front of the cafe, *L'Envol*. The CGT proposes different actions by the different sections of the plant. FO27 agrees. They resolve to hold a vote28 regarding the action on April 10.

**Wednesday, April 10.** No work stoppage. The vote was inconclusive (31% of those eligible to vote participated).

**April 16-18.** No work stoppage. Three pamphlets distributed by the trade unions (which display differences of opinion).

**Tuesday, April 23.** Work stoppage from 4 until 5.

**Wednesday, April 24.** Work stoppages from 10:10 until 11:15, and from 5 to 5:30: processions through the workshops ... assembly in front of the *L'Envol* cafe....

**Thursday, April 25.** Work stoppage from 5 until 5:45. Rallies “under the *weathervane*”.

**Monday, April 29.** Work stoppage from 4:45 to 5: Yvon Rocton (a Trotskyist militant of the OCI<sup>29</sup> and secretary of the FO section of hourly workers) proposes an occupation. His proposal is rejected.

**Tuesday, April 30.** Work stoppage from 9:45 to 5:45. Assembly in front of the plant office building. The delegates are received by the factory director, Duvochel. The workers invade the offices. Duvochel escapes and goes to the restaurant at the airfield. Pursued by a group of workers, he is cornered in the restaurant, until he manages to take refuge in an office near the control tower, and finally leaves in a car with the delegates and

goes back to the factory. The crowd of workers follows on foot. The management proposes a meeting in Paris on May 3. Rocton calls for the formation of a strike and occupation committee. The CGT and CFDT call for everyone to return to their homes and to postpone any decisions until the next day. It is decided to hold a demonstration on May 2.

**Thursday, May 2.** Work stoppage from 10 until 5:45: a delegation leaves in a car for downtown Nantes. Demonstration proceeds through the city.

**Friday, May 3.** Work stoppage from 3 until 5:45.

**Monday, May 6.** Work stoppage from 3 until 5:45: the FO proposes to occupy the factory: the proposal is rejected.

**Tuesday, May 7.** Four half-hour work stoppages: “Almost constant processions”.[30](#)

**Wednesday, May 8.** All-day work stoppage (actual duration: nine and a half hours), within the framework of a regional day of action in all of western France.

**Thursday, May 9.** Four work stoppages of a half-hour each.

**Friday, May 10.** Work stoppage from 10:30 to 11:30 and then from 4 until 5. The CGT proposes to conduct the strike outside the factory,<sup>31</sup> and the FO proposes to conduct the strike by means of an occupation of the factory. That evening, the CGT reverses course and proposes to continue the actions in their current form.

**Monday, May 13.** All-day strike (actual duration: nine and a half hours): nationwide general strike.

**Tuesday, May 14.** Work stoppage from 2:30 to 3 and from 3:30 to 4. Assembly “under the *weathervane*”, processions through the workshops. The delegates have obtained no results. The doors of the factory offices are broken down. The workers who are paid on a monthly basis go on strike. Duvochel is cornered in his office. He awaits a response from Paris. The delegates blockade the exits to prevent the workers from leaving. *De facto* occupation. Duvochel remains cornered in his office until May 29.

This chronology summarizes the events of a conflict that is concretely composed of consecutive work stoppages

each day and processions through the workshops. These marches or processions often begin with meetings that are held “under the *weathervane*”. The unfolding of events makes it clear that the decision to occupy the factory was not made all at once, and that when it was made, it was a natural outgrowth of the conflict. Already, on April 30, the factory director was blockaded in his office (and then in the airfield restaurant; and then once again in an office in the control tower). On several occasions, prior to the outbreak of the May 14 strike, the secretary of the FO hourly section, Yvon Rocton, called for an occupation, but always unsuccessfully. Finally, the occupation took place more or less spontaneously on May 14, when the workers blockaded the director in his office in order to get an answer from him with regard to the compensations they were seeking in exchange for the cutback in hours that went into effect in early April. We may characterize this action as one that was more or less spontaneous because, even if some of the workers were determined to wait however long it took to get an answer, other workers sought, right up to the end of the May 14 action, a way to get out of the factory. And it was in order to prevent this desertion that the trade unions barricaded all the doors and guarded them against any possible escape attempts.

According to François Le Madec, the reason for the conflict was as follows: the management announced in February that starting in April, the work week would be reduced from 48 hours to 46 ½ hours, and then to 45 hours starting on July 1, 1968. Pay would be proportionately reduced with only a compensation of 1% of the total wage for everyone, in the paychecks for the hours actually worked. Le Madec estimates that the compensation should have varied from 3.75% to 7.5%. If today one might be surprised at the ferocity of the conflict considering the rather minor stakes, it must be recalled that during that era, wages were increasing by 6% to 7% annually due to “natural increase”. It is also noteworthy that the anti-Duvochel song (dedicated to the director) accused him of taking money away from “the indebted workers”. Does this mean that the decline in the standard of living had already begun before that time and that until then it had been disguised by the resort to consumer debt?

Thus, it was almost by chance that it was on that day that the workers of Sud-Aviation held the management hostage in their offices and that they should have continued to occupy the factory during that night—waiting for Duvochel to obtain authorization from the

Paris executive office for the satisfaction of the workers demands.

Other enterprises connected the nationwide general strike of May 13 with the “great strike” of May-June 1968. Two cases of enterprises in the provinces that were affected by the May 13 strike are documented. They are the agricultural supply company, Claas, in Woippy (in the vicinity of Metz, in eastern France) and the BTP Corporation [Public Works], Duc et Mery de Toulouse. According to Roger Martelli,<sup>32</sup> during the evening of May 14 [the 500 workers of Claas] decided to extend the strike of the day before. There is also the case of La Villette de las Nouvelles Messageries de la Presse Parisienne (NMPP) in Paris:<sup>33</sup> “The boys arrived that morning and decided not to work. The CGT delegate requested that they return to work so that the trade union could negotiate with the management of the company. His words were coldly received by the strikers who stayed on strike and democratically elected a strike committee”.<sup>34</sup> Immediately thereafter, the plants at Bobigny (Seine-Saint-Denis, 2,000 workers), Charolais (District 12 of Paris, 400 workers) and Paul-Lelong (District 2 of Paris, 500 workers) joined the movement. In the SNCF there was a strike on May 13 at the railroad station at Badan (near Lyon). Two workers were

immediately fired. On the next morning, May 14, the railroad workers prevented their boss from leaving his office. They held out on their own until the movement spread to the rest of the SNCF.<sup>35</sup>

On the night of May 14 there were therefore dispersed—sectorally and geographically—conflicts. In the press, the conflict at Sud-Aviation was only mentioned in a few articles buried in the back pages of the newspapers. On May 15, *L'Humanité* devoted only nine lines on page 9 to Sud-Aviation. *Le Monde* and *Les Echos* were just as laconic.<sup>36</sup> *A fortiori*, the other conflicts passed almost unnoticed.

### *Wednesday, May 15*

This was the date of a long-planned day of action by the trade unions against the recently announced Social Security reforms.

In the spring of 1967, the government asked Parliament to grant it a series of special powers. The result was the new decree. Parliament had itself abdicated its power by voting to authorize the government to make executive decisions—with regard to certain economic and social questions, and for a period of six months at the most—that were normally within the purview of the legislative

branch. The government thus wielded “special powers” that it sought to implement in five areas: the reconversion of the workers and the struggle against unemployment, participation in the results of growth,<sup>37</sup> the reform of the Social Security system, the increase of enterprise competitiveness, and the modernization and restructuring of economic sectors. This led to 34 rulings, among which were some that affected Social Security.<sup>38</sup> These rulings projected, among other things, an increase of .5% in contributions from wage workers. But above all they inaugurated a new way of appointing the administrators of the Social Security funds<sup>39</sup> that entailed the marginalization of the CGT and the rise of the FO to the presidency of the National Pension Fund and to the presidencies of one-third of the primary funds. Starting in August 1967, the trade unions had been trying to mobilize the workers as part of an attempt to repeal these measures. It is understandable that the CGT should have been particularly motivated with regard to this issue. On the eve of the strikes of May-June 1968, however, they had hardly had any success in mobilizing the workers around this issue. Did they use the pressure of these strikes for the purpose of this campaign? Not at all! We shall see below that the strikes generated so much fear in the CGT that, even though the moment of victory had seemingly

arrived, it would shamefully renounce this demand that was so “fundamental” only a few months before.

On May 15, therefore, at Renault-Cléon,<sup>40</sup> the trade unions made an effort to sound out the attitudes on the shop floor in order to see if they could take advantage of the success of the May 13 strike to exercise pressure to obtain the repeal of the Social Security reforms. They reached an agreement to stage successive one-hour work stoppages by different parts of the plant. In the account written by the collective of the militants from the strike committee shortly after the strike,<sup>41</sup> we observe that the work stoppage that next day was very militant. The workers, led by particularly combative young workers, marched through the workshops to incite those who had not yet joined the strike to stop work and to force the trade unions to extend the work stoppage for another half hour. They called for the formation of a strike committee and hardly even mentioned the topic of the Social Security reforms in their propaganda. It required all the diplomacy of an official of the CFDT to make the workers return to their posts, where, however, they frequently interrupted their work for discussions and to inform recent arrivals of the current status of the strike.

When the evening shift arrived for work, the same scenario of work stoppages prevailed, but “due to pressure from the young workers, a march was organized. At its head, there were 200 young workers who chanted slogans under the windows of the managers’ offices. There they congregated, and pushed their astonished union delegates forward and asked for an interview with the factory director [the director refused]. In the offices, the management personnel became apprehensive and barricaded the doors with iron bars”.<sup>42</sup>The workers, once they saw this, ordered the management personnel not to leave their offices until they agreed to meet the strikers’ delegates. At six p.m., no one was working and the workers voted in favor of occupying the factory amidst general enthusiasm.

The occupation was therefore forced upon the trade unions, which had to comply with the wishes of the strikers and had by no means foreseen this development. In an attempt to regain control of their troops, the trade unions created a workers’ patrol to organize the occupation—whose job consisted principally in protecting the machinery—and submitted a list of demands that was distributed, in the form of a leaflet, at 11 p.m.: “Reduction of the work week to 40 hours without any decrease in pay; minimum wage of 1,000

francs; lower the age of retirement; transformation of the temporary contracts into indefinite contracts; increase trade union freedom”.

The question of the Social Security reforms was conspicuous due to its absence. This list of demands, approved by a narrow majority, was presented at midnight to the management. The latter declared that it had no authorization to negotiate such demands, which had to be referred to Paris. In response, the workers declared that they would not free the 12 executives who were blockaded in their offices until their demands were satisfied.<sup>43</sup>

We can thus note the similarity of the Renault-Cléon case with that of Sud-Aviation. In both cases, very angry workers confronted a management that took refuge in its offices. The testimonies we have quoted emphasize the fact that between the day shift and the evening shift, the news of the occupation of Sud-Aviation had spread, and took it for granted that the workers on the evening shift already knew about it; but this is not entirely certain, when one takes into account the fact that very little publicity had been devoted to the conflict at Nantes that was taking place at the same time; and it does not necessarily explain why the workers at Cléon had the

same idea as those at Nantes: the momentum of the conflict and the increase of tension easily led on their own to this kind of development.

At the end of the May 15 action, Roger Martelli writes, the movement at Cléon spread like wildfire in Seine-Maritime, and reached the Kléber-Colombes Elbeuf plant, and la Roclainne at Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray. He tells us nothing, unfortunately, about how the conflict started. Was it also the result of the uncontrolled outcome of an action against the Social Security reform? We do not know. On May 15, the 1,800 workers at Lockheed in Beauvais (Oise) would also go on strike.

Is it not true that this information, as partial as it may be, allows us to verify the spontaneous character of the strike? The examples of Sud-Aviation and Cléon enable us, in any case, to contribute a little more precision to the meaning of the term, “spontaneous”. What in both cases appeared to be spontaneity was actually the manifestation of the anger of the workers and the loss of control this implied for the trade unions. But—and this is crucial—the trade unions never lost contact with the beginning of the struggles. If one can therefore speak of a loss of control, this is only to indicate that the trade unions were dragged towards other goals than those they had initially supported (the Social Security reforms)

and towards other methods of struggle different from those they advocated (a few hours of work stoppages). If there was friction, it was situated as much between the rank and file of the trade unions and the bureaucrats as it was between the mass of the workers and the trade unions. It is surprising, for example, that at Sud-Aviation, the section of the FO hourly workers, which was led by a militant Trotskyist, had issued several appeals to occupy the factory prior to May 14. On each occasion, its appeals met with no response. When the occupation finally took place, it seemed to have been decided upon in a very informal manner, in the midst of an undisciplined crowd in a hallway in front of the factory director's office.<sup>44</sup> It was, however, immediately implemented by the trade union delegates, who locked the factory doors to prevent the workers from leaving the factory (in the case of Sud-Aviation) and who in general asserted their authority in the practical organization of the occupation.

Claude Durand provides support for this interpretation when he writes, concerning his interviews with trade unionists after the strike, that "while the high level officials in the trade union organizations rejected the idea that the rank and file had escaped their control, the account of the beginning of the strike provided by local trade union officials gave a distinct impression of a loss

of control over the rank and file, especially the young trade union members—and even among the unorganized—and that the reestablishment of discipline [...] was more or less difficult according to the situation”.<sup>45</sup>

*Thursday, May 16*

We shall continue to focus on the Renault plants. On the night of May 16, all of them were on strike.

At Flins (Yvelines),<sup>46</sup> on the morning of May 16, the trade unionists of the CFDT were informed of a meeting that was going to be held to discuss the implementation of the union’s directives with regard to the Social Security reforms. Before he went to the meeting, one of the members of the CFDT received a telephone call informing him of the fact that the factory at Cléon had gone on strike indefinitely with an occupation, and that the executives were being held hostage.<sup>47</sup> In response, the CFDT members decided to approach the CGT with a proposal to stage a one-hour strike at 10:15. Two-person teams of trade unionists (one from the CFDT and one from the CGT) circulated through the workshops to spread the word. At the designated time, approximately 500 workers ceased work and gathered outside the

factory buildings. Then they went back to the workshops, marching in a procession, to encourage the other workers to down tools. At 11:30, a much larger group of workers gathered in the cafeteria. The two trade union officials of the CFDT and the CGT explained what had taken place at Cléon, and proposed that they stage an indefinite strike. The proposal was approved and planning immediately began for an occupation of the factory. At first, this consisted of assigning groups of pickets and compiling lists of the names of volunteers to participate in the pickets. Before dispersing for lunch, they made an appointment to meet again at 2:00 in order to organize another assembly for the evening shift. This assembly also approved of the principle of an indefinite strike with an occupation. At 3:30, the management shut down the factory. This version of the events was provided by a member of the CFDT.

At the assembly held the next day, the main topic for discussion was how to act in solidarity with Cléon. In the afternoon, the trade unions presented a list of demands: “40 hour work week without any reduction in pay; 1,000 francs minimum wage; retirement at 60 (55 for women); a fifth week of holiday for young people; repeal of the Social Security Reform decrees; trade union rights”.

According to another account, also provided by J.-Ph. Talbo, there was a two-hour work stoppage on the day before, as soon as the news from Cléon was publicized. It was at Cléon where the motors for the cars were manufactured, and the factory only had enough in stock for a half day of operation. If that was true, then this was certainly the work stoppage that made the ICO write that the strike at Flins broke out spontaneously before the strike at Billancourt.<sup>48</sup> The testimony set forth above does not depict a spontaneous outbreak escaping trade union control.

Starting on the next day, the young workers of Flins traveled all over the region, trying to instigate other factories to join the strike.

We must admit that the two accounts set forth above concerning the beginning of the strike complement one another. The first does not give the impression that the workers had a very combative attitude, but were rather more inclined to follow the initiatives of the trade union. The second account explained the nature of this initiative: the work stoppage on the night shift of May 15 allowed the trade unions to perceive the pressure from the rank and file. And this was confirmed by the fact that, starting on May 17 the young workers of Flins set out to

canvass the region to incite the other factories to join the strike. They did this “without being encouraged to do so” by the trade unions, according to a trade union militant quoted by Talbo. The latter pointed out (p. 13) that at Ciments Français, “the beginning was absolutely flat and tepid; the management was on the verge of regaining control over the situation when the young workers of Renault and the militants from Cellophane entered the fray”.

At Billancourt,<sup>49</sup> in the accounts provided by Jacques Frémontier, it is hard to get an exact idea of how the strike started.<sup>50</sup> He quotes various testimonies (an anarchist from the CFDT, two Trotskyists—one of them from the CFDT, one from the CGT), with an obvious bias in favor of the CGT, seeking to prove that the latter did not lose control of the situation. It can be discerned from these accounts that the strike began during the first hours of the afternoon in Department 70. The anarchist militant, who had discovered that morning that Cléon had been occupied, proposed that a meeting should be held at 2:00 p.m., in front of the offices of the department manager. The meeting took place, but the manager was not in his office. The workers then proceeded towards another department, and then, with the workers of Department 55 joining their procession

along the way, they went to Seguin Isle. Once there, the march was joined by a group of highly skilled workers from Department 37. There, they met with Halbeher and Sylvain, secretary general and adjunct secretary general of the CGT, respectively, who proposed that they postpone making a decision about going on strike until the next day. This was rejected by the workers, who called for an immediate indefinite strike and occupation. The two trade union officials gave them the green light. It was 5:00 p.m. During this assembly, which took place at the intersection of Rue Zola and Rue Kerman, a Trotskyist militant wanted to address the crowd, but the CGT cut off the sound. The workers chanted: “All for the strike, indefinite strike”. Another account quoted by Frémontier, is that of the CGT member Hillibert, who admitted that the strike in Department 70 started without CGT authorization (“a group of young people assumed leadership”).

François de Massot, of the OCI, offers corroborating testimony.<sup>51</sup> On the same day, at around noon, two rival assemblies were held at the Place Nationale in Billancourt: one under the auspices of the CGT and the other under those of the FER,<sup>52</sup> a Trotskyist student organization affiliated with the OCI. Throughout the afternoon, discussions in the various departments caused

interruptions in the work process. At 3:00 p.m. delegations from the workshops arrived at the offices of the CGT, where they were met with an indefinite response. At 4:00, several hundred workers gathered in front of the CGT offices; one of the CGT officials then suggested that they should continue the discussion later and that they should wait until that evening's trade union meeting, where the decisions would be made. His proposal was met with jeers of derision. At 5:00, the trade union made an abrupt change of course, and assumed leadership of the strike and began to organize for the occupation.

If these accounts are more or less accurate, it must be emphasized that the beginnings of the strike were more indicative of a divergence between the rank and file trade unionists and their leaders than one between the masses and the trade unions. This aspect must be taken into account, above all in a factory of this size, when we hear that the "trade unions had lost control". And when Hillibert says "without CGT authorization", he did not say "without the involvement of trade unionists". On the other hand, it must also be emphasized that the strike did not arise on the basis of concrete demands concerning that particular plant, but on the basis of the reasoning that if "Cléon has gone on strike, we have to

join them". The justification of "forward with everyone" did not seem to require long debates. The beginning of the strike responded to a long accumulation of frustrations and unsatisfied demands, which burst through the breach opened up by the student movement during the national strike of May 13, and, above all, by the strikes at Sud-Aviation and Renault-Cléon.

Frémontier highlights this frustration when he mentions the serious conflicts of the preceding months, during the course of which numerous work stoppages took place. He reports on 90 conflicts that took place in two months, that is, at an annual rate that is more than double that of the period from 1963 to 1967 (234 work stoppages per year). It is also necessary to point out that the strike did not particularly emphasize the issue of solidarity (with the students, with the first strikers), but broke out on the basis of its own, although hardly explicit, issues.

At Renault-Sandouville (Seine-Maritime),<sup>53</sup> the strike began on May 16. We possess the testimony<sup>54</sup> of a member of the factory committee, who would later be elected to lead the strike committee. During the events of May 16, he witnessed the shouts and the protests of the workers, which he found annoying and unfortunate. It was not until the end of the day, when the mass of the workers had gathered in front of the management

offices, that he joined the movement, because he had come to understand that “it was a spontaneous revolt of people who have been pushed too far”. But he was still very afraid, because he did not see what could be done with this revolt in such a huge factory.

The other Renault factories also went on strike on that same day, May 16. That night, the trade unions had to deal with a strike that affected the entire Renault group. Other strikes had broken out in the shipyards at Bordeaux, at L'Unelec in Orléans, at Saviem in Caen.... The size of the enterprises that were shut down was enough to convince them that they were facing a broad-based movement that threatened to drag them along with it.

On that same day, for example, the first reaction on the part of the trade unions that evinced their awareness of the danger of the strikes was directed at the SCNF. On May 16 and 17, the CGT sent official delegations to the SCNF headquarters. They called for work stoppages on the basis of corporative demands. At an intersyndical meeting, the CGT and the CFDT reached an agreement on the necessity of maintaining control over a movement that had already begun.<sup>55</sup>

According to the very incomplete information that we possess, on the night of May 16, there were approximately 90,000 workers on strike, of whom 60,000 were employed by Renault.

### *Friday, May 17*

The movement gained momentum on Friday, May 17. On the one hand, the rail network of SCNF was totally shut down. At around noon, the depot at Achères (Yvelines) began a strike and occupation under the leadership of the CGT. At 4:00, the CFDT announced that it would support its trade unions if they joined the strike (that is, without the contractual advance notice). Immediately afterwards, the movement spread like wildfire in Paris and its environs: Montparnasse, Saint-Lazare, Montrouge. At the end of the day, a confederal meeting of the CGT was informed of these developments. This was the signal for adjourning the meeting, for everyone present understood that if the SCNF had joined the strike, the movement was serious, and everyone had to make haste to be at their posts. At 5:45, an inter-federation meeting of rail workers took place, whose minutes indicate that the CGT wanted to “follow the example of the metal industry” and that the CFDT had decided to “participate in the movement in order to

maintain control over its course”.<sup>56</sup> FO agrees to join the movement, including the occupation of the workshops. On Saturday, May 18, the entire rail network is shut down by the strike. The first joint intersyndical communiqué is published, with the following demands: “Trade union rights, 40 hours, increase of wages and pensions, defense of nationalized enterprises,<sup>57</sup> repeal of the Social Security decrees”.

This turn of events in the SNCF allows us to highlight two points. On the one hand, a great deal of tension was observed among the rank and file. Since the publication of the Nora Report on the public enterprises, everyone knew that the SNCF would be converted into a competitive enterprise. This augured restructuring, staff reduction, and other measures that would permit the SNCF to compete with the trucking industry. On the other hand, we must acknowledge how sensitive the trade unions were with regard to the movements of the rank and file workers. J.-M. Leuwers cites a typical example: “Workshop complex X of Nîmes employed about 500 workers. One Friday night [May 17], at about four in the afternoon, we received a telephone call that notified us, the militants of the organization, that the workers in these shops had suddenly stopped work, and that they did not want to work to the end of the shift,

which normally ended at five; the guy from the CFDT who had answered the phone call, called the guy from the CGT, and they held meetings in the workshops and told the fellows: ‘if you do not want to go back to work, it is up to you to democratically decide on this by holding a vote [...] And in one hour, the strike pickets were assigned’.”<sup>58</sup>

The SNCF strike therefore began with the “accompaniment” of the trade unions. During the night of May 16, they had already made their choice. The beginning of the strike at SNCF thus marked the end of the early stage of the more or less spontaneous strikes that escaped the control of the trade unions.

On the other hand, the strikes spread to RATP. The CFDT chose lines 2 and 6, of the National network, to launch a work stoppage. The choice of these two lines was due to the presence of Trotskyist militants of the OCI. But the movement was otherwise held in check.

At the Hispano-Suiza plant, in Colombes, the strike began while the trade union officials were consulting the rank and file about what they should do. It is a pattern that we have already seen in action. The trade unions wanted to propose a work stoppage of one hour for discussion. But the movement started without authorization.

According to an account in a Trotskyist newspaper, “on all sides, the workers proceeded as if they had been waiting for this moment for a long time. ‘What do we do? I have been left behind. This happened too quickly for me’ confessed one trade union delegate, ‘I am afraid’”.<sup>59</sup> That afternoon the CGT restored its control over the situation by holding a vote on the question of the strike and occupation, but not without also trying to propose a work stoppage of a few hours, and even 24 hours, in response to those present who shouted “40 hours and retirement at 60”; these were the same demands, only slightly reinforced, that had been the object of agitation since January, despite the fact that the trade union proposed the demand of a 45 hour week at 48 hours pay and early retirement. The trade union also had to prevent the kidnapping of the director, saying that he was not there and anyway, the workers at Sud-Aviation had already released their director; both these statements were lies. At 5:00, the factory doors were closed after various contradictory orders. Guards were posted, and women were kept outside. The great peaceful force could express itself.

The Dassault plant<sup>60</sup> in Saint-Cloud (Hauts-de-Seine) also joined the strike on May 17. The day before, student militants from the Censier Action Committee had been

given a warm welcome, even by the CGT; or at least this was the case according to the reports of the students who went there to pass out leaflets.<sup>61</sup> According to Ronan Capitaine, the CGT branch at the factory was not very pleased to see the students and refused to have any discussions with “leftists”. The CFDT was more receptive.<sup>62</sup> The plant had undergone a serious social conflict in late 1967, in which the workers indisputably won significant reforms. Wages were increased by 7% and bonuses raised as well. And the workers’ share in the profits of the firm was also increased. Two extra days off each month and a monthly wage for those who were previously paid by the hour, completed the list of conquests. Months later, the combativeness of the workers does not appear to have abated as a result of these conquests. This was the situation when, on May 17, the CGT and the CFDT metal workers federations convoked an assembly in the cafeteria. The local trade union leaders advocated waiting until Monday (May 20), but the rank and file, including a CGT militant, a CFDT militant and the communists, insisted on beginning the strike immediately with an occupation. The CGT, although caught somewhat off-guard, immediately assumed the leadership of the movement by taking responsibility for organizing the occupation: compiling rosters of the strikers, forming groups to administer the

occupation, etc. The demands were the same ones that were not satisfied in 1967: the workweek and retirement. According to Rioux and Backmann,<sup>63</sup> the entire aeronautics division went on strike on May 17.

Another case involving metal workers in the Paris region is that of the Somafor-Couthon plant in Courneuve (Seine-Saint-Denis, 300 wage workers). On May 16, two trade unionists of the CGT were written up for having circulated a petition the previous week in opposition to the Social Security reforms. On May 17, the CGT responded by calling for a one-hour work stoppage during which the indefinite strike and occupation were approved. In this case, as in the previous one, it can be seen that the trade unions assayed the situation, and although they were not fully in touch with the combativeness of the rank and file, they adapted to the latter as its seriousness became evident to them.

In Lyon-Vaise, Rhodiaceta also went on strike on May 17. Vaise was one of the plants operated by this producer of artificial textiles. It employed 8,000 wage workers, of whom 1,200 were temporary workers. Like the other plants owned by Rhodiaceta, it went through a period of reduced hours, mostly due to the expiration of the patent for producing nylon in 1966. Up until that time,

the company was known for its social benefits (higher than average wages and numerous social perquisites). The plant experienced two strikes in 1967. The first lasted from February 28 until March 23; it began as a gesture of solidarity with another plant (Besançon), apparently against “work on the battlements”; an expression that denotes a kind of technical unemployment, where the management decides from one day to the next if there is any work for this or that worker on that day. According to one witness, “it was done at the door, one by one: ‘This one stays, this one goes’”.<sup>64</sup> Before the strike, those who were sent packing were not paid.

At Vaise, which also used the “work on the battlements” method, the conflict broke out when the management sought to deny entrance to the factory to a delegation from the Besançon CFDT. The Vaise workers then gathered in front of the gates to prevent a truck from entering the plant compound. The strike unfolded outside of the factory. It was ratified every day at 2:00 p.m., at an assembly held in front of the factory. This strike benefitted from the solidarity of the residents of the nearby neighborhood. For 24 hours a day and throughout the duration of the strike, the workers blocked the factory’s three gates, from the outside.

Numerous witnesses insist on the importance of this “socialization of the strike” in the vicinity of the factory. Outside the factory, picket duty allowed for many encounters between the employees who did not have the chance to get to know each other during the usual work day, and the pickets were also points for the expression of the solidarity of the neighborhood residents, who, for example, brought hot food to the pickets.

The workers returned to work after accepting a contract that included a 3.8% pay increase.

In September 1967, the management announced a reduction in the workweek from 44 to 40 hours. This reduction entailed a corresponding reduction in pay. There was no reaction from the workers. On December 6, the management announced the reduction of the Christmas Bonus (from 19.5% to 9% of the annual wage) and the layoff of 2,000 employees before the end of 1969. Immediately, “spontaneous strikes broke out, mostly outside of the control of the trade unions”.<sup>65</sup> On December 7, a demonstration was improvised to march towards the Guillotière neighborhood. The demonstration successfully broke through one police barricade, before being stopped by the second one that prevented it from crossing the bridge to Guillotière. The

march was punctuated by violent clashes. During the following days, the strikers stayed in the factory. On one of them, during the night of December 14-15, there were incidents. On the next day, the trade unions warned the strikers against “thoughtless actions that could play into the hands of management”. On Friday, December 15, the management announced a lockout, to go into effect at the end of the week. On Monday morning (December 18) the management announced the firing of 97 workers for continuous absenteeism. All of them were union members, and some were active militants. On December 20, the entire plant went on strike. In Vaise, there were only about 1,000 workers still on the job. But the movement lost momentum during the Christmas break. Upon returning to the plant, in January, the management announced the layoff of 360 employees throughout the first half of 1968.

After the intense conflicts of 1967, the beginning of the strike in May 1968 had a more bureaucratic aspect than it did in the other enterprises. A militant of the PC/CGT recalls: “Renault was decisive, they began the show, we joined on the next day”.<sup>66</sup> The other French factories of the industrial group went on strike the same day.<sup>67</sup> In Vaise, in any event, the demands revolved around the question of wages, a fourth week of paid vacation and

trade union rights. They were also focused on the coefficients that defined skill levels—which would be revised after the strike.

On May 17, the Thomson plants at Chauny (Aisne) and Sartrouville (Yvelines), and the Alcatel plant at Montrouge, also went on strike. That afternoon, the 7,000 workers of Creusot Forge also went on strike and occupied their workplaces.<sup>68</sup> The workers at the uranium mines of Saint-Priest-La-Prugne (Loire) also joined the strike.

By the end of the day, it is estimated that between 500,000 and 600,000 workers were on strike, almost half of whom were employees of SCNF.

### *Saturday, May 18*

On Saturday, May 18, the strike wave reached Houillères du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais (16,000 wage workers). That morning the total number of strikers approached one million. The postal workers joined the strike that night. The air traffic control employees also joined the strike. In Saint-Ouen (Seine-Saint-Denis), the sanitation workers of SITA (garbage collectors) also went on strike, along with the 2,800 wage workers at Imprimerie Lang. By the end

of the day, the number of strikers had reached two million.

*Sunday, May 19*

After the sanitation workers at Saint-Ouen went on strike, the rest of the SITA workers joined them on Sunday morning. They complied with the appeal of the trade unions, after secret votes at Ivry, Romainville, Pantin and Issy.

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Ever since the day after the demonstrations of May 13, we have witnessed an overwhelming wave of strikes. We observed, a few pages back, the similarity in the concatenation of events at Sud-Aviation and at Renault-Cléon. There is, however, a big difference with regard to the scale of the demands. While the workers at Sud-Aviation had been in a constant state of rebellion for several months, in response to a very concrete problem linked to the economic slowdown in their sector, the workers at Cléon went on strike without any clear reason, without concrete demands that would have apparently made more sense at that time than they did two months or even two years before. On the other hand, in the first case, the trade unions led the

movement during its entire course, while in the second case they lost control of the movement, both with regard to the goals, and with regard to the methods of action. At Renault, but also more generally throughout all the Fordist industries, the accumulation of grievances over chronic problems, such as payment according to the job, the level of pay, the rate and conditions of work, provoked the explosion on that day, in the favorable conditions of the general social context of the country as it was manifested on May 13. Sud-Aviation, Dassault, and all the other enterprises of the aeronautics sector, which went on strike that first week, are not, in this case, Fordist examples. Their workers, however, were active and determined participants in the strike. For them, the problem was directly that of job security.

Sud-Aviation-Bouguenais, Renault-Cléon: we recall that these two enterprises that began the movement of May-June 1968 are emblematic of the basic problems that triggered the crisis: on the one hand, the end of the great prosperity of the thirty glorious years<sup>69</sup> and the return to precarious conditions and, on the other hand, the limits of Fordist exploitation. We shall return to this topic in the second part of this book.

There has been much discussion about spontaneity. This discussion would situate the workers movement at the same level as the student movement, in an alleged generalized contestation against the structures of the old world. The term is, of course, applicable to the angry and impatient reactions of the workers against management, including the management of the trade union federations. It describes the powerful pressure exercised by the rank and file of the trade unions on the bureaucratic apparatuses of the unions. In general, however, this “spontaneity” did not express—contrary to the beliefs of the leftists—a determination to get rid of the trade unions, and to break out of their straightjacket. The May movement was not a movement of wildcat strikes, properly speaking. The reactions of the rank and file against the trade unions were limited to spurring them a little to get them out of the rut of routine in which they had become mired. And the trade unions were not slow to get the message.

Already, by the end of the first week, and even more so during the following week, the trade unions recovered the initiative and controlled the outbreak of the subsequent strikes. Of course, the pressure from the rank and file, much more than trade union initiative, explains the mass appeal of the movement. It is well

known that the trade union appeals were often inconsistent. But in May '68 the trade unions quickly came to understand that the strike would proceed, regardless of what they did, and immediately realized, as we have seen in the case of the SNCF, that they might lose control of the entire movement. They therefore put themselves at the head of the movement and made plans to divert it into a political channel. With the strikes at Renault and the Paris metal factories, the trade unions and the Communist Party put their weight behind the strike, and tried to use its power to benefit their political strategy. After May 15, some pamphlets of the CGT called upon the workers to join the strike for the purpose, among others, of helping to form a popular government. If, on that date, these pamphlets did not necessarily accord with national directives,<sup>70</sup> by the end of the week, the writing was on the wall: the strikes must be encouraged for the purpose of bringing about a change of government and the weekend must be utilized to plan for the extension of the strikes.

The trade unions knew from experience that the strikes might prove to be more damaging than helpful if they exceeded the bounds defined by the series, "work stoppage-negotiate-return to work". This had been demonstrated recently, in January 1968 at Fougères and

Caen, where strikes and demonstrations culminated in riots. Perhaps they also perceived the extent to which the violent social conflicts that broke out in Italy were a result of the degree to which the trade unions had lost touch with the rank and file. At Pirelli, in February, all the trade unions triumphantly signed a contract that was so bad that it was immediately rejected by a broad-based movement of workers who, for their part, organized and structured their movement in the form of unitary base committees. It took the trade unions several months to absorb this structure that had so energetically threatened their power. In April, 5,000 workers at the Marzotto textile plant likewise rejected a contract that had already been signed and fought with the police for an entire day.<sup>71</sup>

The French trade unionists were therefore resolved to do whatever was necessary to prevent their losing control of the strike movement. The second week of the strike wave undoubtedly put some of their fears to rest in this regard. But subsequent events, after the signing of the Grenelle Accords, demonstrated that their task was not an easy one.

## **The Second Week. Generalization of the Strike.**

*Monday, May 20*

On the afternoon of Monday, May 20, the number of strikers was estimated to have surpassed 6 million. The incredible growth of the previous week was thus transformed into a veritable tidal wave. It is therefore impossible to provide a detailed account of the movement's expansion. The eyewitness accounts we have been able to consult show, however, that numerous forces converged in the movement and that the spontaneity of the first wave of strikes led to a snowball effect that did not exclude a certain degree of passivity on the part of the new strikers. This passivity would benefit the trade unions that now became embroiled in the strikes.

On that day, Georges Séguy, the general secretary of the CGT, delivered an important speech before the workers at Billancourt. His argument was two-fold:

--On the one hand, the strike must remain on the terrain of specific demands and "any irresponsible, adventurous or provocative slogans which call for insurrection only play the game of the government and the employers". And when the CGT refers to demands it is not talking

about “vague formulas like co-management, structural reform, promotion, etc.”. This delivers one blow aimed at the leftists, and another blow aimed at the CFDT, which had adopted self-management as one of its demands.

--On the other hand, it is of pressing importance to unite the left parties and the trade unions to defend “a joint government program with a socially progressive content”.<sup>72</sup>

The message is therefore, let us strike for our “just demands” but not go beyond that point, except for a new government that we will put into power one way or another. The question was, however, who actually believed this.

Of course, not all of the strikes that began on that Monday were purely and simply obeying the political calculations of parties and trade unions. We must point out once more that the strikes were not merely dragged along behind these little power games except in response to the impulse of a rank and file social movement that made the parties and trade unions apprehensive. For example, in the headquarters of Assurances Générales de France (AGF), a pamphlet was distributed, with the support of the March 22 Movement, that called upon the personnel not to join the strike but ... to go beyond the strike: “The strike has been superseded, we have to go

back to work to start all over again and we have to do it ourselves". The protagonists of this initiative were primarily young workers, not all of them members of the trade unions, and the trade union bureaucrats prudently abided by this suggestion. Two days later, the executives went on strike, too, and thanks to the realism they would subsequently introduce into the numerous meetings and debates that the strikers organized to elaborate and formulate their demands for self-management, they would help the trade union cadres to reestablish their control over the movement.<sup>73</sup>

And there were no trade unions at all, and for good reasons, in one machine shop in the Paris region, because its old owner, a self-made man, had always known how to get rid of troublemakers.<sup>74</sup> On Monday, May 20, however, his sixty wage workers refused to work. They held a debate about the strike that was spreading everywhere and they decided to join it. They even discussed holding the owner hostage but refused to do so. Two workers petitioned the CGT local to get help and support, fifteen remained to occupy the factory and the rest went home.

This is a good example of the independent power of attraction exercised by the movement after it had

reached a certain amplitude. Another case is that of the Clamart firm of Schlumberger, where no employee made less than 1,200 francs per year. Its 477 employees, of whom 85 were engineers and 180 were technicians, voted to go on strike and occupy the factory on May 20, with some demands that called for the reform of hierarchical relations and a change of government.<sup>75</sup> This example demonstrates the extremely powerful propensity to strike that prevailed among the salaried population, and even among those persons who enjoyed relatively privileged positions. This propensity is the basis for trade union activism—and not the other way around. On that Monday, on May 20, the initiative of the trade unions was ubiquitous because otherwise they ran the risk of missing the train that was already leaving the station.

At the Lainière factory in Roubaix, the trade unions launched the strike “on Monday [May 20], out of fear that someone might get the jump on them and start the strike without them”.<sup>76</sup> At another textile factory in the provinces (with 100 employees), on the evening of Sunday, May 19, a trade union meeting was held by the CFDT, and the central committee “assigned us the mission of generalizing the strike since it had begun in the automotive sector”.<sup>77</sup> On Monday, May 20, the

strike began in the late morning at the initiative of a militant of the CGT, who immediately took advantage of his lunch hour to “go to the neighborhood church to tell the story of these events to the Lord and to ask him to give me strength and to make me brave after the great inspiration that led me to organize the first strike in the A[...] company. Not even in 1936 did the A[...] company go on strike”.<sup>78</sup>

Everywhere, the days of Saturday and Sunday, the 18th and the 19th, were devoted to trade union meetings to prepare to join the strike on Monday. We shall take as an example one social welfare office with 200 employees. On Saturday, a member of the CFDT received an appeal from his federation. He transmitted it to all the other trade union members and on Sunday afternoon paid a visit to a colleague from the FO. The latter had not yet received any instructions, but he agreed with the idea of an indefinite strike. On Monday, May 20, at 8:00 a.m., the personnel, meeting in an assembly, voted with raised hands in favor of a strike and occupation. After the vote, most of the employees went home.<sup>79</sup>

The same kind of preparatory meeting was held at an Air France maintenance complex (1,000 wage workers). The CGT had prepared everything in advance and “the actual

procedures of the action were planned right down to the minute”. The indefinite strike and occupation were approved by a vote of raised hands.<sup>80</sup>

At CSF in Brest (1,100 salaried employees, of whom 600 were blue collar workers), preparations for the strike had also been made during the weekend. It must be pointed out that these salaried employees had already shown their receptivity to the appeal from their trade union leadership of May 16, which called upon them, in solidarity with the students, to create “democratic structures based on self-management” in their enterprise. We shall discuss below the question of just how far this enterprise actually was from attaining any kind of self-management—according to the formula employed by Alain Touraine—and we shall also see what is meant when this term is invoked. Meanwhile, “Saturday and Sunday [May 18 and 19] were devoted to detailed preparations for the strike and occupation (action program, contacts with the inter-trade union CSF-CFDT, composing a series of demands). On Monday the 20th at 8:00 a.m., the strike call is overwhelmingly obeyed”.<sup>81</sup>

At the Citroën plant at Levallois (5,000 workers, of whom 2,500 are immigrants, and 18 of whom are members of

the CGT) had not experienced any strikes in 19 years. On May 13, the workers did not go on strike because the employer closed the factory at 10:00 a.m. On the 20th, the militants of the CGT were outside the factory distributing leaflets at 5:00 a.m. But it would not be until 11:45 a.m. when the workers opened the doors to two trade union representatives from outside the factory. It took the entire morning to convince the doubters and to fend off the pressure of the guards, who went out onto the street to attempt to make the workers who were still engaged in discussions return to the factory. The occupation began immediately.<sup>82</sup> We may assume that the action had been prepared the evening before by trade unionists from both within and outside the factory.

We have better documentation regarding the state of affairs that prevailed when the strike began at the Citroën plant located in the wharf district of Javel in Paris. Officially—that is, according to the trade unions—the strike began on Monday, May 20. We know, however, from the report of some members of the Student-Worker Action Committee (CATE) of Censier who worked as moulders that the factory was already on strike as of May 17. A group of workers got in touch with the CATE. A leaflet was prepared for distribution on Saturday, May 18, at the factory gates. The leaflet was

distributed, but on that day the CGT was already there, calling for a strike to begin on the following Monday morning.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, an Action Committee was formed at the Citroën plant. On Monday morning, at the factory gates, this Action Committee encountered the CGT. The militants of the trade union federation, just like some of those who were handing out leaflets on behalf of the Action Committee, did not work at the factory, and really could not justifiably ask the militants from outside the factory to leave. All the more so insofar as the Action Committee was accompanied by people who spoke Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish who were recruited from Censier, and it was these individuals who helped the CGT convince the immigrant workers to go into the factory to occupy it. Up until that time, many immigrant workers were reluctant to join the occupation. In this manner, the militants of the Action Committee put their resources at the service of the CGT. The next day, however, they found the factory gates bolted and barred; the trade union members refused to allow them to enter: no provocations!

We shall now examine another example from the automotive sector, the case of Peugeot-Sochaux (25,000 wage workers). On Friday, May 17, a trade union leaflet called upon the workers to “be prepared”. On Monday

morning, an intersyndical assembly voted overwhelmingly for strike and occupation. Immediately, the majority of the wage workers abandoned the factory as if it was enough for them to know that the strike wave had reached the Doubs [the border with Switzerland—Translator’s Note].

It was also on Monday, May 20, that the CEA of Saday voted to go on strike. But during the previous week the workers at the center had spent almost all their time discussing the recent events and one could not say that productivity there was very high during that period.

Sometimes, the trade unions demonstrated an extraordinary militancy when it came to spreading the strikes. Not only because, as we have already seen, they had instructions to do so, but also because they sought to compete with the other trade unions to convince—and to enroll—the new strikers. We refer to the testimony of a member of the departmental union of the CFDT of Elbeuf:

Quote:

*In Elbeuf, we were not very well prepared. The local union was composed of militants who were quite old, and a little out of touch with reality. We did not know what to*

*do or what positions to take at the beginning [...] All the more so when the Rhône-Poulenc factory joined the strike. Then a militant from EDF appeared who was the district chief for Elbeuf and who came from Paris. I asked him, "Are you available?". And he responded: "Yes, if you can use me". I said, "good, then take control of the strike here in Elbeuf". He was well provided for since he had a car with a radio antenna from EDF. He had the power to pull the rug out from under the feet of the employers. He spent the entire night, from Sunday to Monday, summoning all the factories to join the strike. As for those that resisted, he gave them a warning shot: he cut off their electricity. To carry out his mission, he even mobilized the students. The CGT employed even more radical methods. They had a truck. They drove up to a factory, and told the people there that they should stop working, loaded them into the truck and brought them to the local (of the CGT) and then gave them their union cards. Using this method, they combed the factories. There was a group of longshoremen and some even brought pick handles, and how they went at it! They were very busy. Throughout the entire day they went from one non-unionized factory to another in Elbeuf, except for Rhône-Poulenc. Then, we too gave it a try and attempted to sign up people for the union, and to infiltrate into the factories in order to create sections. Right away we did it*

*with seven or eight factories. Afterwards, it was necessary to organize all of this. It was not easy. By June, these gains had begun to slip away.*

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Does this same kind of trade union competition explain the way the strike began at Rhône-Poulenc-Vitry?<sup>85</sup> Towards the end of the day on Friday, May 17, the trade unions called an intersyndical meeting to hold a vote on the question of strike and occupation. The rate of participation was on the order of 50-60%. The result of the vote was a majority of 60% in favor of an immediate strike and occupation. Since the trade unions' rules regarding such votes set a minimum of two-thirds to approve a strike, the vote was postponed until Monday. On Saturday, however, an intersyndical meeting decided to begin the strike and occupation on Monday. The CGT then proposed to the other trade unions that the occupation should be structured in the form of base committees led by a central committee, a structure that appeared to be the most democratic—later we shall examine this issue. This surprising proposal from the CGT was designed to undercut the other trade unions. One democratic meeting followed another, and during the course of an intersyndical meeting on Sunday, May 19, where the CGT had a majority, the CGT discreetly added to the base committees an executive committee

composed solely of trade unionists and to which no members of the central committee were appointed. The CGT justified this executive committee with the argument that the employers only wanted to talk to the trade unions. As we have seen, the preparations for the strike were very meticulous. All the machinery of democracy was set in motion: the institutions of collective decision-making and the institutions that would circumvent the former. On Monday morning, the strike and occupation went into effect.

We must repeat that all these trade union maneuvers do not explain the spread of the strike or how quickly it spread. They are simply an indication of the fact that, on this occasion, the trade unions did not take action against the strike and each trade union had its own reasons to actively support it. Undoubtedly, the trade unions sometimes committed errors. In the CGCT plant (1,500 wage workers), the CFDT and the CGT proposed a fifteen-minute work stoppage! The workers who participated in the assembly of Monday, May 20, carried a motion in favor of an indefinite strike.<sup>86</sup> At the Nord-Aviation plant (Châtillon-sous-Bagneux, Hauts-de-Seine), the trade unions opposed the strike and occupation on Friday, May 17. On Monday, May 20, they put it to a vote.<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, however, the trade unions

took the growing wave of strikes in good stride, especially since the wage workers were monitoring the spread of the strikes from minute to minute on the radio. The sales of transistor radios soared to 400,000 in one week, whereas the annual average was 250,000!<sup>88</sup> And, at the beginning of the second week of the strike, the trade unions enthusiastically got involved in the strike. Rioux and Backmann provide various examples of this relation between the initiative of the rank and file and the role of the trade unions.<sup>89</sup> On Monday, at 1:00 p.m., in a large factory where numerous workers were already absent due to the impact of the strike on the transportation network, the trade unions called a meeting of the personnel and advocated joining the strike. The vote endorsed this position and everyone went home. At an electronics factory, the CGT and the CFDT held a meeting of the personnel on Monday morning. They explained their demands and called upon the workers to join the strike. “No one spoke against it.... Then, we set a guard over the equipment, and we began to organize for the occupation.”

We could cite many more examples. The Michelin factory at Clermont-Ferrand and the Dunlop factory at Montluçon went on strike. Even the salaried employees of the Plaza Athénée hotel (Avenue Montaigne, 8th

Arrondissement) joined, and managed to convince the King of Jordan to sign a petition in support of the strike, and respectfully asked the clients of the hotel to support their action. The slaughterhouse workers of La Villette, in Paris, the Bank of France, the 35,000 metal workers of Saint-Etienne, 19 of the 21 iron mines of Lorraine, the coal mines of the Loire, and the Houillères de l'Aveyron also went on strike on Monday.

In Paris, at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, a general assembly presided over by François Périer voted for an indefinite strike by all the theater workers to start on that same day, Monday, May 17. Only Jean Ferrat (in order to give the box office proceeds to the strikers) and Alain Delon would act onstage that day in the capital.<sup>90</sup>

That Monday, the extension of the strike wave thus became obvious to everyone.

*Tuesday, May 21*

It continued on the following day. The 500 wage workers of Sapelem, in Paris, participated in a strike that they understood to be “purely demand-based”, but by which they meant the rather maximalist demand of the “humanization” of social relations.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the 530 salaried workers of the insurance company Winterthur

voted to join the strike, and set the date of May 27 for a meeting to determine whether or not it should be extended.<sup>92</sup> At Assurance Mutuelle de la Seine et Seine-et-Oise (AMSSO, 700 salaried employees, of whom 200 are executives, with salaries starting at 650 francs): “The tension was increasing in the service sector. Some stopped working and engaged in discussions of the recent events. They proposed going on strike. In the hallways, the delegates were encouraged to take action. In the cafeteria, the excitement reached its peak; the delegates were swept up by the general enthusiasm and decided to hold a meeting in the assembly hall. A delegate of the CFDT spoke and proposed to go on strike immediately”. The vote was in favor of his proposal and “a group of employees was appointed to accompany the delegates to speak with the management. Our demand was 150 francs for everyone”.<sup>93</sup>

On that same day, the Grands Moulins plants in Paris, Pantin, Corbeil and Bobigny all joined the movement.

A few days earlier, a general assembly of the personnel of ORTF<sup>94</sup> was held in Buttes-Chaumont. The assembly voted in favor of a strike of all categories to start at midnight, May 20. On the 21st, only the journalists and

the information technicians were working, and they handed over their salaries to the strike committee.

Finally, it would be at around this time, but especially on May 21, that the trade unions would call upon the government employees to go on strike, which would imply a very significant increase in the number of strikers.

*Wednesday, May 22*

Eight days after the movement began, the last wave of strikers joined: the teachers—who had actually already stopped working at many locations—officially went on strike after receiving the strike appeal of the FEN,<sup>95</sup> raising the number of strikers to eight or nine million. The salaried workers of the meteorological institutes, the major department stores, and even the musicians of the Paris Opera joined the movement. Even the Paris gravediggers went on strike, and occupied the cemeteries. When the morgues reached capacity, the prefect requested that the gravediggers bury the excess corpses.<sup>96</sup>

Along the same lines, on this Wednesday contestation—even more than the strike itself—affected the liberal

professions: young doctors and architects fought to eliminate the most glaring archaisms from their professional structures.

By the end of the day, the strike movement had reached its peak. What did this enormous strike “do”; what were the characteristic features of its activity? This is the question we shall now examine. But before we do so, it is necessary to highlight two points:

- On the one hand, in 1968 France had 7.3 million blue-collar workers and 3 million office employees, out of a total working population of 15.6 million people. The figure of 8 or 9 million strikers that we gather from our sources is more than enough to paralyze the entire economy. But even if we accept the high estimate of nine million strikers<sup>97</sup> there were still significant numbers of non-strikers. We possess hardly any information concerning these non-strikers. Nicolas Hatzfeld<sup>98</sup> calls attention to the cases of Simca-Chrysler in Poissy, Citroën in Rennes and Peugeot in Mulhouse, in the automotive sector. The explanations he gives for these cases (essentially, an immigrant labor force directly recruited by the employers, corporative trade unions) are not entirely convincing within the context of the impact of the strike movement. In any event, it is not surprising that the non-strikers have not been studied

systematically—not even the strikers were studied systematically.

- On the other hand, disregarding for the time being the question of the non-strikers, there is no doubt that this was a generalized strike. But can we speak of a general strike in the sense this expression has been used in the tradition of the workers movement? The general strike is the strike in which all the workers stop work at the same time for the purpose of forcing the employers to their knees and advancing to socialism or else for the purpose of preventing war. We shall see below that the strikes of 1968 remained, precisely, *just so many separate strikes*. At no time did the trade unions decree the general strike and they made special efforts to make this clear when the strike became generalized. On the pretext of democratically leaving the initiative to the local level, to the workers in their workplaces, they carefully managed to destroy the unity of the movement. They were particularly insistent on not unifying the demands on one single platform, which would have *ipso facto* converted them into a political platform and would have prohibited a piecemeal return to work, which is what finally occurred.

- 1. *Quartier Latin* in French [translator's note]
- 2. UNEF, the National Union of French Students, a student trade union.
- 3. The March 22nd Movement, founded at Nanterre on March 22, 1968 during the occupation of the University administration building.
- 4. UJCML, the Union of Marxist Leninist Communist Youth, a Maoist splinter group.
- 5. JCR, Revolutionary Communist Youth, a Trotskyist group (Fourth International).
- 6. UEC, Union of Communist Students, a group loyal to the Communist Party.
- 7. Daily newspaper of the French Communist Party.
- 8. Georges Marchais, Secretary of the French Communist Party from 1970 to 1994 as well as the leader of the reformist current known as Eurocommunism.
- 9. Lucien Rioux and René Backmann, *L'explosion de mai*, p. 218. For detailed references to the works cited herein, see the bibliography.
- 10. Whenever the author refers to a city, he also adds the *department* where it is located, one of the 95 political-administrative units that are smaller than a province, into which France is divided.

- **11.**The CGT, the General Confederation of Labor, the leading trade union federation in the country, dominated by the French Communist Party.
- **12.***Ouvriers face aux appareils. Une expérience de militantisme chez Hispano-Suiza*, p. 172.
- **13.**The CFDT, the French Confederation of Labor, the second largest French trade union federation, originally a Christian trade union, which during the 1960s recruited workers dissatisfied with the CGT, and especially many militants of the extreme left.
- **14.**Jacques Baynac, *Mai retrouvé*, p. 73.
- **15.***I.e.*, the evacuation of the Latin Quarter by the police, an amnesty for all arrested students, and the reopening of the Sorbonne.
- **16.**It was, after all, the tenth anniversary of Gaullisme.
- **17.**According to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Le grand bazar*, p. 123.
- **18.**SNCF, the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français*, the state enterprise that managed the French national rail network.
- **19.**RATP, *Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens*, is the public enterprise that manages the network of urban transportation, including the network in the vicinity of Paris.
- **20.**EDF, *Électricité de France*, the largest publicly owned hydroelectric company.

- 21. Adrien Dansette, *Mai 68*, p. 136. Dansette also writes (p. 175) that the strike at the SNCF was only observed by “about 90,000” employees out of a total of 320,000.
- 22. *Ouvriers...*, op. cit., p. 173.
- 23. Statistics provided by Claude Durand, in Dubois *et al.*, *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques*.
- 24. See Nicolas Hatzfeld, in Mouriaux *et al.*, 1968, *exploration du mai français*, p. 52.
- 25. Account (without giving a precise date) included in the collection, *Histoires d’une usine en grève. Rhodiaceta 1967-1968*, Lyon, 1999, p. 122.
- 26. See François Le Madec, *L’Aubépine de Mai*, p. 50.
- 27. FO, *Force Ouvrier*, the third largest trade union federation, formed in 1948 from a split within the faction of the CGT opposed to PCF control over the union and which advocated trade union independence. For a long time it was under the dominant influence of the socialists, although it also included Trotskyists and even Gaullists.
- 28. The vote was not carried out by raised hands, in the assembly, as is tradition in the workers movement.
- 29. OCI, Internationalist Communist Organization (Trotskyist).
- 30. These marches, or processions, took place within the factory.

- 31. By surrounding the factory.
- 32. Roger Martelli, *Mai 68*, p. 93.
- 33. La Vilette de las Nouvelles Messageries de la Presse Parisienne (NMPP) is the delivery and courier company employed by the Parisian press.
- 34. Jacques Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 35. François Massot, *Mai 68*, p. 85.
- 36. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 37. Gaullist labor legislation enacted after World War Two included a certain degree of profit sharing in favor of the workers.
- 38. See Pierre Vianson-Ponté, *Histoire de la république gaullienne*, Vol. II, p. 319.
- 39. Initially implemented in 1936 after the victory of the Popular Front, it absorbed and unified the existing powerful workers insurance funds, the foundations of class trade unionism. They were restructured as a federation of relatively autonomous insurance funds according to productive sectors—the primary funds—that in turn formed the financial basis of a common central fund—the national fund. Since they participated in its design and creation, the trade unions—most of which were part of the General Confederation of Labor, the largest trade union federation at the time—had enormous power and influence, and controlled a large part of the national fund. It was this privileged

situation, which granted the CGT enormous power over all the workers, which the government sought to change with the new decree.

- 40. The factory was relatively new (1958) and was built in a rural area. It employed 5,000 wage workers, among whom 750 were term contractors (CDD) [a form of temporary contract work, as opposed to the more widespread CDI, which involved contract work of indeterminate duration, that is, stable and indefinite contracts]. The rate of trade union membership was 18% (the national average was 22%). 11% of the workforce was composed of immigrants and 1,600 of the workers were under 25 years of age. Most of the workers were “OS”, or specialized workers [despite the name, this is the lowest and least skilled status in the workplace hierarchy], and there were 95 different hourly rates [wages were paid by the hour and not by the month, not including fines or any other deductions].
- 41. *Notre arme c'est la grève*, Paris, 1968, p. 16.
- 42. Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
- 43. The CGT would later try to free the executives on May 17, but was forced to abandon its attempt in the face of an avalanche of protests against its proposal. It finally succeeded on May 18 or 19.
- 44. François Le Madec, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

- 45. Claude Durand, in Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Paris, 1971, p. 32.
- 46. Built in 1952 as an “anti-Billancourt” [an enormous Renault plant on the outskirts of Paris, which also included an island in the Seine, an emblematic stronghold of the CGT and the PCF, whose strategic geographic location allowed the workers to blockade the capital in case of strike or other labor conflict], the Flins complex, which recruited its employees for the most part from rural regions, has the reputation of being subject to the total control of the management. It was at this plant that Renault first implemented the principle of wages varying with the particular job, prior to enforcing it in all their plants. According to this principle, a worker is paid according to the job he does rather than his skill level. Paying wages according to the job thus has a two-fold effect: an infinite division of the particular situations of the workers, and the reinforcement of the power of those who are responsible for transferring a worker from one job to another as a form of punishment or promotion. The factory employed approximately 10,500 people.
- 47. J.-Ph. Talbo, *La grève à Flins*, Paris, 1968.
- 48. Information Correspondance Ouvrière, *La grève généralisée en France*, 1968.

- 49. The Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt [one of the emblematic factories that symbolized the great struggles of the French proletariat, due to its long history and its combativity. In this respect it is like the factory at Fasa Renault in Valladolid or Seat in Barcelona or the Altos Hornos in Vizcaya or the Asturian mines] employed more than 37,000 workers (ca. 1969):

--Skilled workers, 4,260; contractors for Renault (paid by the month), 4,370; specialized workers [assembly line workers, the least skilled category], 15,900; young specialized workers, 205; specialized workers paid by the month [although most of the specialized workers are paid by the day, this category was paid by the month, which is more advantageous, because it includes pay for days not worked due to illness, shutdowns, shortages, strikes, etc.], 2,292; janitors and laborers, 170; apprentices, 208. The total number of wage workers (including 900 interns): 27,405.

--Executives and mid-level managers, 2,011; draftsmen and designers, 723; foremen, 711; technicians, 292; clerical workers, 3,512. The total number of employees of this category: 9,878.

Unlike Cléon, this plant had a rather high average age (38.5 years). The plant employed 17,500 immigrant workers, of whom 9,500 were from North Africa and of whom almost 17,000 were specialized workers.

- 50. Jacques Frémontier, *La forteresse ouvrière: Renault*.
- 51. Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 52. FER, Federation of Revolutionary Students.
- 53. The factory opened in 1964 with approximately 5,000 workers. It is on the outskirts of Le Havre, and its workers come from rural Normandy. In order for the workers to get to the factory, 195 bus routes are required and up to 80% of the workforce relies on the buses. These bus lines cover the entire region and the longest route is a 174 kilometer-long round trip. The wages offered at the factory are significantly higher than the local average, and the rural exodus had certainly been accelerated by Renault's plant in Sandouville.
- 54. L. Géhin, J.-C. Poitou, *Des voitures et des homes, les vingt ans de Renault-Sandouville*, Paris, 1984, p. 167.
- 55. See G. Ribelli, "SCNF, une grève dans la tradition de la corporation du rail", in Mouriaux, *et al.*, 1968, *exploration du mai français*.
- 56. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

- 57. That is, against the privatization of public enterprises.
- 58. J.-M. Leuwers, *Un peuple se dresse. Luttes ouvrières en Mai 68*, Paris, p. 64.
- 59. *Ouvriers face aux appareils*, p. 174.
- 60. A large French aeronautics corporation with a significant military component.
- 61. Jacques Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 62. Ronan Capitaine, "Dassault Saint-Cloud, les grèves de la continuité", in Mouriaux, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 73, *et seq.*
- 63. Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 282.
- 64. *Histoires d'une usine en grève*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 65. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 66. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 67. Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 282.
- 68. Christian Charriere, *Le Printemps des enrages*, p. 126.
- 69. This refers to the three decades after the Second World War, characterized by uninterrupted economic growth and full employment.
- 70. The demand for a popular government was present from the very first days of the strike. Adrien Dansette, *op. cit.*, p. 174, relates the account of a meeting between the CGT and the FGDS (that is, the non-communist left that supported Mitterand) that

took place on May 16. The CGT asked the FGDS for its political support in order to help the strike lead to the collapse of the government, particularly by cutting off electricity and telephone service (which the CGT never actually carried out). The matter was not pursued, Dansette tells us, because the FGDS did not believe the CGT could do it. Dansette does not quote any sources for this and perhaps the question should be considered as one more right-wing fantasy of a conspiracy. We should also call attention to the internal divergences between the components of the PC/CGT alliance, since on that very same day the meetings between communist and socialist leaders did not even mention this topic.

- [71](#). On the Italian movement, see certain details provided in the first text included in the Appendix to this book.
- [72](#). Quoted in “Positions and Actions of the CFDT during the events of May-June 1968”, special edition of *Syndicalisme*, p. 19.
- [73](#). ICO, “La grève généralisée en France”, supplement to No. 72, June-July 1968. The text is reproduced in Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: the Left-Wing Alternative*, AK Press, San Francisco, 2000.
- [74](#). Cited by Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 283.
- [75](#). *Le Monde*, supplement of May 2, 1998.

- 76. Testimony quoted in J.-M. Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
- 77. *Ibid.*
- 78. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- 79. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 80. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 81. Vincent Porhel, “L’autogestion à la CSF de Brest”, in Dreyfus-Armand *et al.*, *Les années 68*, Paris, 2000, p. 384.
- 82. J.-M. Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
- 83. Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 135 *et seq.*
- 84. Quoted by Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 85. Cohn-Bendit, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- 86. Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- 87. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 88. Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 319.
- 89. *Ibid.*, p. 283 *et seq.*
- 90. Charrière, *op. cit.*, p. 231 *et seq.*
- 91. *Le Monde*, Supplement entitled “May 68”, May 2, 1998.
- 92. Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- 93. Testimony provided to the author by a former employee of AMSSO. On May 30, the strikers obtained a 120 franc raise and an increase of the base salary to 750 francs.

- 94. ORTF, acronym of the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française, which was at that time 100% publicly owned.
- 95. FEN, Fédération de l'Education nationale, a federation of trade unions in the education sector.
- 96. Dansette, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
- 97. Pierre Karil-Cohen and Blaise Wilfeit, in *Leçon d'histoire sur le syndicalisme en France* (PUF, 1998), estimate that there were 7 million strikers and 3 million workers who could not get to work because of the transport workers' strike.
- 98. In Mouriaux *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 353 *et seq.*

## **Part 2. The occupations movement**

Throughout our account we have seen that the two precursors of the movement were the occupations at Sud-Aviation and Renault-Cléon. In each case, the occupation was decided in the heat of the struggle and in a way that was entirely dependent on circumstances. Because the workers, in response to the developing situation, felt that they had to hold their managers hostage in order to force them to give a rapid response to their demands, they decided that they were not going to return to their homes at the end of the day, but, to the contrary, that they would try to carry on with the negotiations throughout the night. And in order to make it perfectly clear that the executives had not been seized by a few militants who stood above the rest of the workers, it was natural that it would be the entire mass of the workers who, although not always to the same degree, would spend the night in the factory. At Sud-Aviation, among the trade unionists, the first concern was how to prevent the workers from abandoning the factory. Immediately, a system of guards was set up, but not to defend the occupation from external aggression ... but rather to prevent departures. And those who tried to escape were quickly caught.

The occupations movement spread rapidly, like wildfire, but this was not true of the kidnapping and holding hostage of managerial personnel. What were the reasons for these occupations? If a factory went on strike, the goal of the occupation was to prevent the employer from resorting to scab labor. But is this explanation still valid when the number of enterprises affected by the strikes is such that it is no longer clear just where these scabs will come from—especially during a time of very low levels of unemployment? Furthermore, in most cases, the occupations were maintained by such small numbers of the workers that it would have been easy to evict the occupiers. Our examination of the activities carried out during the strikes leads us to conclude that the occupations immobilized, isolated and divided the workers. Allowing for some degree of simplification, we may describe this activity from the perspective of five aspects: 1) occupy, assume responsibility; 2) safeguarding the tools of labor; 3) drawing up a list of demands; 4) discussion; 5) go home or barricade ourselves inside?

## **Occupy, Assume Responsibility**

In May 1968, there were very few instances where the workers displayed mass, long-term participation in the

occupations of their workplaces. The very low average level of participation in the occupations is one of the most important characteristics of the movement. The workers voluntarily went on strike, but they wanted free time, vacations and no worries. We have already pointed out that the sales of home improvement goods notably increased during the weeks of May-June 1968. This merits closer examination. In any case, regardless of how many of them remodeled their kitchens, or went fishing, the strikers clearly demonstrated little desire to return to their factories or offices. Generally, the occupiers were the core trade union militants. These occupiers would be joined once a day, or sometimes less frequently, by a much larger mass of workers who would attend the general assembly (see below).

The Citroën factory in Paris (the Javel wharf district) was occupied by 100 trade unionists, on the one hand, and by 50 or so Maoists, on the other, whereas it ordinarily employed 10,000 workers. And we have already seen that, at Peugeot-Sochaux, on the morning of Monday, May 20, the majority of the personnel went home after voting for a strike and occupation. “‘Why stay?’, cleverly asked one worker, ‘the machines aren’t going anywhere’.”<sup>1</sup> The same thing happened at the Lainière facility in Roubaix, and in a social services office for the

distribution of family subsidies, cited by Leuwens,<sup>2</sup> where most of the workers went home after having voted in favor of the strike and occupation. The occupation, in other words, is the trade union's job.

At the enterprises where the strike was most energetic, the percentage of workers involved in the occupations was much higher. In the sample of enterprises, we analyzed it is clear that this was the case of Rhône-Puolenc-Vitry, CEA in Saclay, Sud-Aviation, and, to a lesser extent, Renault-Cléon. Claude Durand utilized the distinction between the old/new working class as the key to his analysis in his study of the strikes of May '68.<sup>3</sup> He claims that the percentage of workers who participated in the occupations was higher in the technical sector (CEA, ORTF, Thompson, CNRS) than in the sector of traditional labor (automation). He likewise maintains that the proportion of occupiers was higher among the professional workers than among the specialized workers.

Whether their numbers were great or small, one of the first tasks that confronted the occupiers was "defense" against the outside. Shutting and locking the gates, identification of the strikers who worked at the enterprise, assigning guard duty, and the preparation of

systems of defense against possible police attack, are the themes that were immediately discussed in most enterprises. Where the occupiers were most numerous, this preparation for self-defense was a “way of keeping the comrades busy”. We shall see below that, towards the end of the strike, these defense measures did not prove to be very effective. There would be pitched battles against the CRS<sup>4</sup> in Flins and Sochaux, but they would take place outside the factories. In Flins, when the CRS attacked, “some comrades wanted to throw bolts at them. Then they were told, ‘No, comrades, we have not done anything wrong, there is no reason for them to hit us’. We were not looking for a fight”.<sup>5</sup>

At Hispano-Suiza, the doors were locked only after a series of contradictory orders. It seemed that there were doubts about what to do: quarantine the factory, or open it to the outside? Finally, however, the factory was closed to the outside, and it was divided into nine geographical sectors that simultaneously served as electoral constituencies for the strike committee. At Sud-Aviation, one could only be impressed by how thoroughly the workers had shut themselves off from the outside world. All the roads surrounding this factory in the midst of open countryside were covered with barriers, and more than 20 guard posts, staffed around the clock, guarded

the 1,800-meter long wall that surrounded the factory compound. Each post had its chief, and all the chiefs of the various posts met once a day with the trade union delegates who composed the strike committee.

At Renault-Cléon, the trade unions, which had been taken by surprise on the evening of May 15, managed to get the occupiers to elect a strike committee on the first night of the occupation. The committee included hardly any of the young workers who had initiated the strike: it was essentially a CGT-CFDT intersyndical committee. Immediately, security measures were implemented: identification of the strikers, periodic patrols, and the creation of eight guard posts with eight-hour shifts for the guards. “Organization within the factory is almost military.”[6](#)

And, just as in military barracks, boredom soon made its presence felt. For this reason, the organization of entertainment was a constant preoccupation of the trade unionists—at least in the factories where there were not many debates or discussions, that is, in most of them. We shall first examine the case of Renault-Sandouville, because it is exceptional. On the first night of the occupation, the young workers had some fun with the cars. The president of the strike committee related, many

years later: “The first night? It was tragic. You have to understand: they were fed up, which was in turn accentuated by the fact that the workers produced valuable goods which they were not allowed to enjoy; so when they finally had the chance to get in the driver’s seat of an R-16, which they could own for just a moment, they took advantage of it. They set up obstacle courses and staged races around the factory, there were some fender-benders, but this did not last long, because we put all the keys to the cars in a safe and the damaged cars were repaired by the strikers themselves”.

To put the damper on pleasure to such a degree is a real accomplishment. But we must point out that this strike leader, with a permanent position on the factory committee, did not welcome the prospect of a revolution. “When May broke out, I was nervous and worried, hearing the protests and the shouts in the factory. This uneasiness made me irritated and a little upset.... It was a spontaneous revolt of people who had been pushed too far! I was very afraid because I could not see what could be done in such a large factory.”[7](#)

There would be no more obstacle courses in the parking lots at Sandouville. The strikers were bombarded with spectacles staged by volunteer political artists. “Not a

day or a night passed without some kind of activity: movies, spectacles, singing, exhibitions of painting followed by debates, demonstrations of boxing or judo.... We had our game rooms to occupy our leisure time....”[8](#)One young occupier held out for ten days. “For me, it was too serious. I wanted to fool around a little, too”.[9](#)

The dissident young communists of Hispano-Suiza in Colombes also displayed the same lack of enthusiasm for the popular artists. They would have preferred to produce these spectacles themselves, just as their fathers had in 1936. And they also would have preferred to disobey the instructions of the strike committee: “No women onboard, in 1936 it was chaos”.[10](#)

At Cléon, one witness especially recalled two meetings about family planning that generated so much interest that the workers requested that a permanent office of family planning be created in the enterprise after the strike.

At Billancourt, the CGT boss proudly recalled the “good behavior at the gates [of the factory]: there was never one alcohol-related incident. I had to take action twice in five weeks ... because a woman tried to get into the

factory. It was an extraordinary experience.”[11](#) What an exciting atmosphere! According to François de Massot, “the factory is divided into zones—immediately there appeared people wearing red armbands with the words, ‘Strike Committee’ emblazoned on them, they are all members of the PCF—and the guard units were set up not so much in anticipation of the possibility of an attack on the factory, as to keep an eye on the workers in the factory. Whenever a small group formed or a discussion began, a ‘strike warden’ rapidly appeared on the scene”.[12](#)

The occupation of the factories proved to be a milestone in the history of the popularization of lawn bowling. At RATP, the strikers went so far as to spread sand on the platforms of the Metro in order to engage in this sport.

The occupation of the factories had a strong symbolic resonance—as its minimum impact. At the moment they took possession of the factory, the strikers confronted the employers or the managers. The cases where the latter were held hostage were very rare indeed. In general, the strikers were content with making the managers leave, which the latter took with more or less aplomb. At Dassault, in Bordeaux, the seizure of the factory by the trade unions was the object of

negotiations with the management with respect to the question of the establishment of a security service. According to the testimony of a member of the CFDT, however, it was always a “bitter pill” for the bosses to see the workers take over the plant. Numerous eyewitness reports testify to the pride the workers exhibited in taking possession of “potential collective property”. It might be more correct to speak of the pride of the trade union members, since the rank and file workers as a whole seemed to be more interested in going home than in exercising their new potential right to ownership.

At Somafor-Couthon, in La Courneuve, the management tried to engage in an intimidating maneuver at the beginning of the occupation, and tried to deal with the workers in each department separately. “The workers refused, saying [...] that the situation was new and that it was no longer management that summons the workers to a meeting, but that it was the workers who summon the management to a meeting. We therefore had the sense of experiencing something that was totally revolutionary: we sought to indicate with this response that the factory in fact belonged to us [...] the idea of and the desire for collective ownership of the means of production was quite clear in the minds of the guys”.[13](#)

At the SNCF in Tarbes, the trade unionists “went to the various stations of the city and invited the station managers to hand over the stations”. The managers, who seem to have received orders to avoid incidents, withdrew. “Only one station manager wanted to resist and he saw how a strike picket squad made itself at home in his office. After a little while, he preferred to leave”.<sup>14</sup> At the maintenance center of Air France, the intersyndical strike committee declared to the dismissed management, that it was now responsible for the enterprise. The director was given authorization to come to the enterprise for one hour each day.

### **Safeguarding the Tools of Labor**

The pride felt in taking control of the workplaces took the form of a fastidious dedication to protecting the tools of labor whose success was confirmed by the management’s expressions of gratitude regarding the good condition of their facilities when work resumed. The trade unions, especially the CGT, took exquisite care of the machinery and tools. “The historical period when the machines were smashed has passed. To the contrary, we take care of them, we protect them, at least where the workers have an advanced class consciousness”,<sup>15</sup> explained one communist. This

attitude at least partly explains the tranquil response of the employers to the occupations. As Léon Blum once said, “the worker occupies the factory, that is true, but meanwhile the factory also occupies the worker”.[16](#)

At Renault-Cléon, “the first concern of the occupiers is to assure the security of men and materiel [...] Between two thousand and three thousand machines were no longer operating [...] The temporary shutdown of such an infrastructure entails a mass of minor technical problems. Very regular patrols detected the most minor leaks of air, of water or of oil, which led to immediate intervention to resolve the problem, however trivial it may have been [...] which required, at times, the competent presence of a supervisor who did not participate in the strike. This supervisor worked under the surveillance of a member of the security patrols”.[17](#)

The management at RATP was first of all concerned to make sure that, once the strike was over, commuter traffic would be instantly resumed. In addition, the interest in maintaining the machinery was itself a bridge between the management and the trade unions. This was also true at Dassault-Saint-Cloud, where the trade unions had no objection at all, quite the contrary, to displaying to the management the condition of the

departments after one week of occupation. The management took advantage of this opportunity to obtain authorization for 20 people to go back to work. And the Christian trade unionist of Dassault-Bordeaux thought that “the occupation of the facility has made the workers aware of the seriousness of their action by placing the means of production in their hands; their first reaction was to guarantee its safety and maintenance....” [.18](#)

The safeguarding of the tools of labor is also their protection against theft or sabotage. The security of the machinery is one of the explanations offered by the CGT for keeping the students out of the workplaces. Thirty years later, a former worker at Rhodiaceta still shuddered at the very idea of students getting into the factory: “When we saw that the students were beginning to arrive, we said to ourselves: ‘Already! We have to be careful, we have to occupy the factory as soon as possible, or else there will be sabotage and they will accuse the workers of having sabotaged the factory’”. Another worker tells us, simply, that they “occupied the factory because we knew quite well that it was a general movement, and we did not want the machinery to be damaged” [.19](#) It was important, above all, to prevent certain kinds of kilns or furnaces from being turned off. If

they were turned off, it would take several weeks to restart them after the end of the strike and this would entail a further hiatus in production.

This respect for the machinery, as we have already seen, did not cause the average worker to lose any sleep. If he did not remain in the factory in order to participate in auto races, he went home and abandoned the factory to its sad fate. For the trade unions, however, this was by no means the case. They are or wanted to be the privileged interlocutors of the employers, and had to prove that they operated on the same terrain, that of the exploitation of labor. From the very beginning of the strikes they were thinking about the return to work, of productivity, of discipline. All of this would take place all the more smoothly the more carefully the machinery was maintained. There are numerous accounts regarding the pleasure felt as a result of the employer's acknowledgment of this maintenance. "When the strike ended", said the chief of the strike committee at Sandouville, "we received the thanks of the management for having maintained the machinery and for having returned a clean factory". We saw above that the leaders were somewhat timid, but even so one cannot but be stunned by this attitude befitting a well-trained lapdog.

## **Drawing Up a List of Demands**

It has sometimes been said that the strikes, at least the first ones, broke out despite the trade unions and without any demands, out of the pure exasperation of the workers against work. This was not true of the strike at Sud-Aviation, where the demands, which had been well defined for some time, were very precise.

The demands revolved for the most part around the issue of compensation for the working hours lost due to the reduction of the working week, itself a result of the reduction in the number of orders placed for the company's products. Here, therefore, the exasperation that led the workers to hold the management hostage (which was not, on the other hand, their first act of violence) had nothing to do with an anti-work impulse, but was the result of the obstinate refusal of the management to satisfy a wage-related demand.

In other strikes, especially during the first days of the movement, it is true that the workers' first reaction was not to proclaim any concrete demands. At Renault-Cléon, and at Hispano-Suiza, the strike broke out while the trade unions were polling the personnel regarding the advisability of engaging in an action against the Social Security reforms. The workers probably did not care

about the Social Security reforms, against which the trade unions had been trying to organize mobilizations for several months. They went on strike because of the general climate generated by the student movement and its repression. Here we see the beginning of strikes without specific demands. The trade unions did not take long to present them. These demands comprised one of the elements required for taking control of the strike.

Demands always crop up during the course of discussions, especially in the large enterprises. The trade unions then had a list of requests or demands at their disposal. Sometimes this was not enough to quell the enthusiasm of the workers, and they “upped the ante”. At Hispano-Suiza, for example: when the trade union leadership proclaimed the demand of “48 hours pay for 45 hours work, and early retirement”, the enraged workers responded with shouts of “40 hours and retirement at 60”. This raise in the stakes of the demands posed no problem for the trade unions. We shall see below that they never had any problem with renouncing, when push came to shove, demands made as conditions *sine qua non* for the resumption of work, and even non-negotiable conditions for opening negotiations. In the SNCF, where the trade unions were more interested in reasserting their authority than in

recovering control over the process, an intersyndical pamphlet was distributed which presented the demands (trade union rights, 40 hours, wage increase, defense of public services, repeal of the Social Security reforms).

There were, then, outbreaks of strikes full of rage and exasperation, and strikes in which specific demands were not the motive force of the paralysis of the work process. There were other strikes without specific demands, but also without rage. This was especially the case with the strikes that took place during the second week, when the process that led to going on strike was characterized by a more or less sheep-like passivity. The trade unions said that the workers had to stop working, and the workers stopped. The specific demands of each strike were undoubtedly formulated and disseminated, but they had less of an impact than the national movement that, with each passing day, saw hundreds of thousands more workers go on strike. And while there was hardly any rage in these work stoppages, this could be due to fatigue, which would also explain the workers' indifference with regard to demands. "At the end of the day, they are completely empty. One feels so tired. When you get home, you only want one thing, to go to bed. And you don't want to hear anything; you don't want to see anything. You have no desire to do anything.

Totally emptied from head to toe. With a leaden exhaustion that nails your feet to the ground”.<sup>20</sup> This testimony from Sandouville undoubtedly helps to explain the ease with which, once the movement had crossed the threshold of a certain critical level, once a certain number of strikers had been reached, the movement had no need for specific goals in order to become generalized. The workers, exhausted by working hours that were among the highest in the industrialized world, by constant speed-ups, by inadequate transportation and housing, took a few vacation days, even if they were not paid vacation days. Who could blame them, except for militants?

At the enterprises where there was active participation in the occupation and where there were multiple debates, the drafting of lists of demands was carried out by work commissions or subcommittees of the strike committee. We have already referred to the case of Rhône-Poulenc-Vitry. The CGT proposed to the other trade unions that the strike should be managed by means of a pyramid of commissions based on 39 rank and file committees that would elect 176 delegates, of whom half would be required to be permanently in session, in a central strike committee, supported by an executive committee. The rate of participation was high,

and one of the commissions was made responsible for drafting the list of demands.

At the little Frimatic subsidiary in Puteaux, there were no trade unions. At the beginning of the second week, on May 20, a petition circulated among the 60 wage workers with several basic demands: minimum wage of 1,000 francs, across the board 150 franc wage increase, 40 hour work week without any reduction in pay, and an enterprise committee. This proposal only received 28 votes, but this increased to 38 votes on the following day, and the strike was proclaimed.

We can summarize the thousands of lists of demands that were drafted in accordance with a structural schema that distinguishes between quantitative demands and qualitative demands.[21](#)

[Chart could not be reproduced in this format--  
Translator's Note]

- *Economic and Social Demands*
- *Wage Increases*
- *Types of Wages*
- *Integrate Bonuses into the Base Wage*
- *Reduction of Working Time*
- *Working Conditions*
- *Pace of Work*

- *Workplace Environment Across the Board (Flat Rate) or as Percentage of Wage?*
- *Rejection of Pay Based on Specific Type of Job Performed*
- *Without Wage Reduction, Lower the Age of Retirement*
- *Trade Union Rights*
- *Official Recognition of the Trade Union Section in the Enterprise, Protection of Delegates*
- *Repeal of the Social Security Reforms Increase in the Number of Hours Allowed for Trade Union Business, Authorization for the Sale of Bonds, Freedom to Distribute the Trade Union Press in the Enterprise....*
- *Demands Related to Issues of Control Self-Management, Co-Management Involvement of the Trade Unions in Decision Making Process, Trade Union Control over Working Conditions, Pace of Work and Accounts*

The difference between quantitative and qualitative demands is not a theoretical construct. It was defined in the heat of the struggle, by way of quite animated polemics, especially between the CGT and the CFDT. It was also evidenced in the battles at the end of the strikes at Flins and Sochaux. The wage demands (which are by definition quantitative) were more or less satisfied (we

shall discuss this issue below), but the qualitative demands against the hierarchy of wage rates were not. A demand for an equal flat rate increase across the board for all workers (rather than a percentage increase) is, from this point of view, qualitative. The same was true of the opposition to the principle of payment according to specific work performed.

At the very beginning of the movement (May 16), the confederal secretary of the CFDT raised the issue of self-management, which had been the topic of debate for working committees and previous Congresses of the Federation of Chemical Workers. It is true that he did so in a somewhat abstract way: he called for the replacement of “the industrial and administrative monarchy [...] by democratic structures on the basis of self-management”.<sup>22</sup> The term covered a mass of ideas that spanned control by the trade unions over the pace of the work process to German-style co-management, proposing, for example, to involve the trade unions in participation at the highest levels of the corporate structure. The CFDT then sought, by means of the strike, to make progress towards certain results that would raise it to a relation of partnership with the employers where, it thought, it could manage affairs more efficiently than the other trade union federations. We

must point out that the formula of self-management figured in some lists of demands, such as, for example, the demands put forth at CSF of Brest, where the CFDT (whose members comprised a majority of the workers in the factory) called for, among other things, the “democratization of the enterprise in the framework of self-management” and financial control over the plant and the company.[23](#)

It must be recalled that on May 20, George Séguy had summarily rejected any idea of self-management. However, the distinction according to which the CGT=quantitative demands/CFDT=quantitative and qualitative demands, is only approximately true. In some cases, a local trade union followed a course of action that did not necessarily conform to the official position of its confederation. This could be due to factors such as individual inclinations or the sector involved, as we have seen with regard to Rhône-Poulenc, or as the result of trade union rivalries.

Furthermore, quantitative demands in themselves are not all the same. Should wage increases be based on a flat rate, across the board increase? The CFDT generally thought so, while the CGT was opposed to this kind of demand. This was the case at Thomson, for example.

Obviously, however, it is with regard to demands concerning control functions where the two confederations were most at loggerheads. In reality, the question did not often arise in the factories with a minutely articulated division of labor, in the sector referred to by the defenders of the theory of the new working class as that of the “traditional worker”. Generally, the CGT enjoyed overwhelming numerical superiority in this kind of enterprise, which is understandable. The specialized workers, as we pointed out above, were hardly interested in managing the strike or the assembly line (there were exceptions—CSF; we shall return to this topic below), and the CGT could thus tranquilly defend its position that, as long as the factories are not nationalized under the control of a popular government, this kind of demand is useless. The CFDT came up against a brick wall in its attempts to agitate in favor of self-management at the Renault plant in Billancourt. At the Cléon plant, it wanted to create workshop committees that would control the pace of the work process and promotions. The strike committee was opposed to this idea. At the Berliet factory in Vénissieux (Rhône), it wanted to dissolve the hierarchy of wage rates in the enterprise. The CGT directly opposed and boycotted this kind of demand.

At Somafor-Couthon, the list of demands was “elaborated with the participation of all the comrades” who put the highest priority on the qualitative demands of the kind that called for the democratization of the enterprise. This enterprise, employing 300 wage workers, is one of the rare cases where it is known that the CGT factory section—which was, however, the only confederation with any representation there—would be overruled by the bureaucrats of the CGT district office, who called the militants of the enterprise leftists and revolutionaries. The demands were presented in the following manner: “Priority to ‘democratizing the enterprise’; major increase in pay for the lowest wage scales, and a lesser increase for the highest wage scales; reduction of working hours; monthly wage; sliding scale; etc.” [.24](#)

We must immediately point out that this strike would have exceptional results, both with regard to trade union rights as well as with regard to wages (uniform increase rather than percentage-based increase, reduction of the working week without any reduction in pay, compensation for half the hours consumed by the strike without any penalties, monthly wage on attaining seniority, flexible wage rates).

Finally, just what did the strikers of May '68 want? A little of everything, as we just saw, but not all of them wanted the same thing. The various demands spanned the entire range of capitalist exploitation, but they were not unified in a single program, even one that was merely a specific list of demands. This is the great delusion of François de Massot<sup>25</sup> who would have wanted, with the OCI, to see a national central strike committee formed that would have united the entire working class behind a finally political program. The Group for Liaisons for Workers Action (GLAT) also had the same idea, despite its strident anti-Leninism. If such a committee was not formed, this is not because the OCI did not work to create it or because the CGT had effectively sabotaged the idea, but because there was not enough pressure for it from the rank and file, particularly with regard to the issue of unification. We shall see below that the workers who wanted to break out of the isolation imposed by the trade union control of the occupations comprised a tiny minority. There is no way around it: it must be admitted that, while the workers often pushed their trade unions further than the trade unions would have wanted to go during the first days of the strikes, they placed their fate in the hands of the trade unions once the occupation was approved. In other words, the demands of the rank and file were not so pressing that the strikers felt the need to

scrutinize and activate the combativeness of the trade unions. It is true that there was friction when the strike ended, when the strikers saw how meager some of the conquests of the strike actually were (we shall discuss this below), but here as well, generally, the trade unions would impose their points of view without great difficulties—in any event, without any problems that could compare with the situation in Italy that we briefly summarized above.

## **Discussion**

“I don’t think there was ever so much talk as there was during these strikes. In the factories, at the intersyndical meetings, at the rallies, at the demonstrations, at the assemblies, the practice of dialogue was constant. We went a long way, since dialogue leads automatically to study, to research and to reflection.”[26](#)

It was not just in the universities that May ’68 was the occasion for an immense flow of words. And it is quite normal that, when work stops, the separations imposed by its organization, its rhythm and its discipline should be erased and that the workers should enjoy the pleasure of speech. In the factories where the occupation was most active, there was constant discussion and it embraced all

possible and imaginable themes. The elaboration of demands, as we have already seen, but also the political situation, the problems of revolution, society in general, everything was addressed.

Most of the factories, however, were almost devoid of occupiers, and in these factories the discussions took a less folkloric turn. In most of the enterprises, the strike committee was in fact an intersyndical committee.

Whether the trade union delegates co-opted themselves or were elected to the strike committee, the usual procedure was for them to assume responsibility for the strike, and often for the occupation itself. Discussions, generally, were therefore limited to the periodic general assemblies—frequently held on a daily basis—where the workers listened to the trade unionists present a report on the situation and voted to extend the strike. This was the most common scenario in the traditional working class sector of the factories employing specialized workers. A CFDT militant had this to say of Billancourt: “In the morning we opened the doors; the traditional assembly was held: we shepherded the people towards the Seguin Isle. We made some short speeches to them and that was that; there was no discussion, there was no political dialogue. Then we let them go home. In this way life revolved around the strike pickets, that is, the trade

union activists.... There was music almost all day long. There were games of handball; we bowled, and a lot of people played cards in the workshops, and listened to the news reports, obviously, since the strike was spreading day by day”.[27](#)

At the Citroën factory in Javel, where the core group of the occupiers was composed of about one hundred trade unionists, the strike committee held general assemblies that were nothing but information sessions that culminated with a vote to extend the strike. There were no debates; there were no commissions. Actually, in this factory there was a second core group of occupiers: about fifty young workers organized by the Maoists of the UJCML. They criticized the CGT but there was no discussion between the two factions, which pursued separate occupations.

At Renault-Sandouville, the strike committee held two assemblies each day. Our witness does not make it clear what he means by “decisions democratically made” except that, as usual, “we were always opposed to people coming from the outside to rile up the masses”, regardless of who they were. The same was true of the discussions! Similarly, at the Lainière facility in Roubaix, where the strike committee had unilaterally appointed

its own members on the eve of the strike, the 100 occupiers (out of 5,800 wage workers) had the “constant preoccupation” of keeping the workers informed by means of “pamphlets, posters, speeches and regular meetings”,[28](#) according to the testimony of one member of the CFDT. The reader will note that we are once again confronted by a very biased testimony.

At Dassault Saint-Cloud, there was a constant series of meetings every morning. A communist leader spoke first, then someone from the CGT, then the CGT-SNCIM (the trade union of executives and middle managers) and then someone from the CFDT, and finally a representative of the CGC.[29](#) It does not appear that there were many debates, and there were no more than four votes held. It is true that students sometimes were granted the right to come and hold debates in the cafeteria.

Another typical feature of what was commonly understood to be a democratic debate: no confrontation. The CFDT enthusiast we quoted above recounts that the meetings of the intersyndical strike committee were the scenes of heated debates between the CGT and the CFDT, “but at all times there was a solid willingness to avoid public confrontations”.[30](#) You do not fight in front

of the children. This was also the case at an SNCF facility in the south of France (with 1,050 workers). And there were two general assemblies each day! Dialogue was focused above all on information and propaganda. The same situation prevailed at an Air France maintenance complex, where “the strike committee submitted information updates to the entire personnel every day in a general assembly where the officials of each organization, one after the other, spoke”.

Of course, this unique kind of dialogue did not prevent the workers from having discussions among themselves. But this was true only when they had the opportunity, the free time to do so. But this is not the same thing as a strike that is conducted by a permanent institution for debate characterized by real interactive relations. This took place sometimes. There were enterprises in which the occupations were controlled by the mass of the workers, and not just by the trade unionists, where the organization of the strike was based on elected bodies, responsible to a general assembly that held real debates. These enterprises almost always belonged to the “advanced sector” of the economy, the one that employed Serge Mallet’s “new working class”. Alain Touraine writes that, “most of the enterprises whose workers were most involved in the strike were

technically advanced enterprises. It is in these enterprises where the workers not only stopped working or even just occupied the buildings as in June 1936, but who also asserted their willingness to engage in self-management and set up autonomous strike committees or rank and file committees that escaped the control of the existing trade union organization".<sup>31</sup> And he cites the following enterprises, businesses or subsidiaries: Sud-Aviation in Bouguenais; EDF in Cheviré; Antar in Donges; Hispano-Suiza in Colombes; Thomson in Bagneux; Rhône-Poulenc in Vitry; Massey-Ferguson; Pechiney; CSF in Brest.

An examination of the relation between the “technically advanced” situation of these enterprises and the tendency of their workers to support self-management would take us too far afield. We shall content ourselves with an attempt to elucidate what Touraine means when he says that the workers “went a long way in the strike” or “evolved towards self-management”. We possess information about some of the enterprises he mentions. Touraine himself provides no details and proposes that we take him at his word.

**Sud-Aviation-Bouguenais:** it is true that the workers “went a long way” but not in the direction of self-

management; the strike was run from the beginning to the end by the trade unions. The workers went a long way because they did not hesitate to use violence (holding the boss hostage), but, except for occasional outbursts, they did not break free of the control of the trade unions. In the eleven pages that Le Madec devotes to the occupation of the factory, nowhere does he mention the issue of self-management, not even studies on self-management. To the contrary, he tells us that in one case an entire intersyndical meeting was focused on the question of whether or not to celebrate Mass in the factory on the first Sunday of the occupation. This was the CFDT's proposal. The CGT was not opposed, but the FO-hourly workers were against it. They went a long way indeed in that debate!

**EDF-Cheviré:** this electric power plant owned by Loire-Atlantique, near Nantes, generates electricity by burning natural gas from Lacq. It must first be pointed out, that in every sector of EDF, the CGT exercised great care to make sure that electricity was available to the population throughout the strike, even if it was severely restricted. As Dansette says, “the central strike committee [of EDF] is all the more determined to proclaim its power insofar as it is incapable of carrying out the purpose implied by its own title” .[32](#) The trade unions imposed their will by

impeding but not preventing the operation of the installations, without any orders from the managerial chain of command, but with its technical cooperation when necessary. According to the testimony quoted by ICO, it was no different at Cheviré, where the CGT asked the workers to “be responsible”—that is, work under the authority of the CGT.

**Hispano-Suiza (Colombes):** the dissident young communists, who are our sources for information on this enterprise, bitterly relate how they let themselves be fooled, from the very start, by the old Stalinists. The latter easily manipulated the situation and got themselves elected to the strike committee. By the end of the week, the CGT apparatus was in total control of the strike committee. The occupation, however, was punctuated by debates. On the one hand, the middle managers and foremen held various meetings to criticize the breakdowns in the chain of command. This led to the formation of a trade union section of the CGC, which would be briefly tempted to take a leftist position rather than follow the corporatist line of the confederation. On the other hand, at least there was a debate in the factory about the role of the action committees. Some of those who participated in this debate wanted to attribute the action committees with a managerial role at the level of

the workshop. But this took place on May 30. That night, DeGaulle called for elections and the whole party machine answered the call: “Present”. The very fact that they could do so is more than enough proof that they did not go “a long way”.

**Rhône-Poulenc-Vitry:** we recall that, at the initiative of the CGT, the occupation was implemented here with a structure of 39 rank and file committees, a central strike committee and an executive committee. During the first two weeks of the strike, there was “an extraordinary enthusiasm for these rank and file committees [...] The workers who participated in them saw this form [of organization] as totally natural”, we are told by the Cohn-Bendit brothers.<sup>33</sup> They also tell us that, at first, “all proposals were given a hearing, discussed, and the best were voted on.... The principle topics for discussion concerned the reform of the factory’s design (exploratory discussions for ways to apply self-management...) and the structures of the rank and file committees. Discussions in the cliques or caucuses were focused more on political topics (on the strategy of the PCF, for example), the question of strike demands (elaborating a list of demands) or the role of the trade unions”. After the weekend of Pentecost, however, the occupation became more passive, and came to more

closely resemble the card game-bowling model of occupation.

**CSF-Brest:** in most writings about May '68, the CSF plant in Brest is cited as an example of a case of almost totally realized self-management. "The strike evolved towards self-management", writes Alain Touraine with regard to CSF-Brest. But we shall see that, in fact, although self-management was much discussed in this enterprise, it was a myth, even as a tendency. The various work groups that formed at the beginning of the occupation were, according to Vincent Porhel, study groups devoted to topics such as factory operations, the history of the workers movement, the Social Security reforms or the issue of pensions. On May 24, these groups assumed the name of workers commissions, and proclaimed their purpose to be "putting an end to the hierarchical structures of power in their current forms".<sup>34</sup> According to ICO, the workers commissions were first created to serve as tribunals to pass judgment on the upper and mid-level executives. This is not compatible with Porhel's version, which indicates that the trade unions thought that a confrontational attitude towards the middle level managers creates "a climate of distrust that leads to a lower level of profits which, ultimately, is a threat to the employees". Rapidly, the "tendency towards self-

management” is revealed in all its glory: the trade unions wanted co-management because they thought that the managers and executives sent from Paris were not running the factory efficiently enough to ensure its survival. Throughout the conflict, self-management was the perspective of the most politicized CGT cadres, but for the rest of the trade union members the term merely served as a synonym for co-management. For most of the workers there, the report that the Brest CSF plant was under self-management would have been news to them. This myth was concocted on the basis of information published in *Le Monde* on May 30, 1968, which was then amplified and confirmed by different persons, but never by anyone from Brest. The myth was so effective that some students came to the plant during the strike to ask the self-managed strikers for some walkie-talkies. Ernest Mandel made the self-management of Brest official by writing in the *New Left Review* that the workers produced walkie-talkies to facilitate the defense of their position.[35](#)

**CEA-Saclay:** Touraine should have added the case of the CEA, another hotbed of the new working class of Mallet and company. “At the Center for Nuclear Research [CEN] at Saclay [one of the research centers of the CEA], they did not talk about self-management, they practiced it”,

we are told by Jacques Pesquet.[36](#) Let us take a closer look:

Quote:

*We got hold of a truck, some money and gasoline and went to the farm cooperatives to look for the chickens and the potatoes we needed to feed the immigrants in a nearby slum.*

The hospitals needed radioactive materials: the part of the plant that produces these materials was put back to work.

What we really needed was gasoline. The strike picket at Finac, in Nanterre, sent us 30,000 liters.

When the students took casualties, we raided the local stocks: surgical gloves, oxygen tanks, hospital garments, alcohol, bicarbonate, everything was sent to the mini-hospital at the Sorbonne.

[37](#)

And that is all! Instead of self-management, it would be more appropriate to speak of an active strike, solidarity in the heat of the struggle, but there was not the least evidence of the practice of self-management during the strike at Saclay. It is true that the personnel of CEN called

for self-management. They even got it, more or less, in the form of elected unitary councils, allegedly responsible for the facility's operations. But by the middle of July, the Saclay "soviets" were engaged in a hopeless struggle against internal bureaucratization and the intrigues of the mandarins.

What can we conclude from these few examples? That the strike was, in effect, clearly more participative in some enterprises than in others. The occupiers, who were numerous and capable of intervening in the assemblies, were not, however, fanatical proponents of self-management. It is the post-68 ideology that bestows upon them a role that they did not exemplify, even in the best cases, except verbally.

This was also true with respect to Claude Durand's "advanced" enterprises.<sup>38</sup> Durand emphasizes two points: first, that discussions were much more interactive in the advanced enterprises (as opposed to the traditional working class sector with its assembly lines); and second, that the practice of opening up the floor to speakers, the structuring of the occupation by general assemblies and work commissions, were for the most part the "ideas" of the mid-level executives and managers, even in the traditional sector. At Flins and Cléon (Renault), there were no work commissions. At

Berliet, in Vénissieux, the only work commissions were in the research department. Durand thought he found an exception in the Peugeot plant at Sochaux, where the daily meeting was gradually transformed into a general assembly. But it was not really an assembly. Nicolas Hatzfeld relates that this general assembly characteristic was due to the fact that some leftists had disrupted the daily trade union Mass which, in any case, did not attract more than a hundred people (out of 25,000 wage workers). He also tells us—and this, too, contradicts Durand’s classification scheme—about some mid-level managers who were members of the CFDT of Sochaux who had a plan to run the factory themselves.[39](#)

## **Go Home or Barricade Ourselves Inside?**

Up to this point, we have examined a dual movement of advance and retreat. On the one hand, we have seen workers, especially young workers, take advantage of the initiative of the students in order to shatter the daily grind and the routine of work, in order, at best, to go to the universities, to display their lack of discipline to the party and the employer in the workplaces, and to pull the rug out from under the feet of the trade union leaders. The latter, on the other hand, had perceived the power of the strike. It must be acknowledged that they had no

problems putting themselves at the head of the movement in order to channel it into the dead end of separation and isolation. All of the commentaries insist on the separation of the workers from the students. In fact, however, it was above all the separation of the workers from each other that was most important and upon which the power of the trade unions was based.

The factory occupations, whether characterized by lots of talk or by silence, resemble a process of self-confinement. When the movement attained a certain degree of generalization, the fear of an employer's lockout became completely implausible. And the factory occupation, which at first was nothing but an *ad hoc* measure imposed on the trade unions in order to fight against the employer in particular well-defined circumstances, rapidly became a basic trade union slogan: "The workers in the factories, the students in the universities!"; that was the slogan of the CGT. There were, of course, workers who went from one factory that was on strike to another that was not yet on strike. When the biggest local factory went on strike in a city, the workers from that factory went to the other, smaller enterprises in order to encourage their workers to go on strike, too. But "solidarity" did not extend beyond this gesture, which, starting at the end of the first week,

responded to the tactic of the trade unions that sought to drive the situation towards a generalization of the strike in order to put themselves at the head of the movement. And when the strike was on firm ground, the CGT engaged in systematic efforts to erect an iron curtain around every occupied factory. We have already referred to examples of CGT efforts to prevent contacts between workers and students. We shall once again refer to the case of Somafor-Couthon, where certain strikers wanted to join the students and encountered a formal prohibition from communist militants. They ignored the ban and formed an action committee with students and professors from the Sorbonne. But the wall built by the CGT and the PC would also separate one factory from another. Massot cites the case of the Renault-Billancourt plant, where strikers from the Renault-Flins plant were denied entrance until June 6 on the pretext that they did not belong to the same enterprise![40](#) Also at Billancourt: a member of the CGT named Tomasi received a visit from the delegate of a Swedish solidarity committee who brought a monetary contribution. Tomasi told the Swedish delegate that the strike was a French affair that did not involve other countries. Tomasi thought that the French workers had made great progress and that they had enough money. He said it was much harder for the

immigrants, but at this time no contact can be made with them due to the strike.[41](#)

It was not just the immigrants who did not actively participate in the occupations; most wage workers did not occupy their factories or offices and were content with periodic visits to the workplace. In this respect as well, as we have just seen, their isolation and separation served as a guarantee of the trade unions' power. A large number of strikers peacefully stayed home, mobilizing only for an occasional demonstration. The workers in the factories, the students in the universities and most of them isolated in their cubicles. The occupation of the factories was characterized by the tactic of divide and conquer—and this tactic would prove to be very effective when the time came to return to work, as well.

In the movement as a whole, this tendency was undoubtedly predominant. Efforts were made, however, by both students and workers, to break through this CGT wall. When these efforts were successful, they were almost always accomplished with the help of the CFDT.

On May 13, a worker-student action committee (CATE) was formed at Censier. At first, it only had about ten members, five of whom were workers. This committee grew rapidly from its very first day of existence. On the

one hand, it became an outlet for student militants who rejected both the university reform proposed by UNEF as well as the rebuilding of the great workers party advocated by the various leftist currents. On the other hand, the committee was supported by workers who “came to take a look” and were looking for help. We have already cited various examples of this kind of committee.<sup>42</sup> Some members of the Censier CATE were very interested when they discovered that Cléon had gone on strike. On the morning of the 16th, they distributed flyers at the gates of the Billancourt plant. At that hour, Baynac tells us, “the CGT leaders were still in bed”<sup>43</sup> and they made contact with the workers easily, so easily that they managed to set an appointment for a meeting later at the Place Nationale. At one in the afternoon, a meeting took place, organized by the trade unions, but which was also attended by numerous leftist workers and CATE militants. At the conclusion of the (tumultuous) meeting, there were indications of the beginnings of discussions between workers and students, leftists and trade unionists, but the CGT was still in control of the situation. This would be demonstrated that night, when a group of students brought by the UJCML came to the factory around 11:00 p.m. They brandished ornate placards reflecting their cultural revolution and announcing, “the workers will take from the fragile hands

of the students the flag of struggle against the unpopular regime”. According to Hamon and Rotman, it was a quote from Stalin! But the factory was hermetically sealed, and the group had to be content with marching around the plant singing *The Internationale*. The trade unionists thanked them, via the factory public address system, for their support and explained that it was not possible to open the gates because the management would use the presence of outsiders as an excuse to call the police. The students returned to the Sorbonne.

On the next day, another demonstration was organized. This time, it was led by Geismar (SNESup) and Sauvageot (UNEF). Krivine<sup>44</sup> and the JCR were also involved. The demonstration had been announced long enough in advance for the CGT to have enough time to publish a communiqué sincerely “urging the sponsors of this march to call it off”.<sup>45</sup> In a pamphlet distributed that day, the CGT expressed its refusal to “accept any external interference”. The CGT also had posters put up all around the vicinity of the factory. The workers were warned against those who wanted “to discredit the working class” with their “dirty tricks” and who “have earned a good paycheck for their services to the employers”.<sup>46</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of this violent attempt to make them keep their distance, there

were some workers waiting for the march outside the factory. A delegate of the CFDT joined Krivine in expressing his outrage at the CGT pamphlet. There were discussions and a few beers. Essentially, however, the UNEF-SNESup march met with the same reception as the one of the previous night: locked doors and gratitude expressed via the public address system. A few conversations were pursued over the walls or through the chain link fences. But nothing took place that would lead one to believe there was any threat to the domination of the CGT over this particularly peaceful and disciplined occupation. It is obvious that some people inside the factory were in favor of opening the plant to the outside. From the beginning, it was necessary to keep them in a minority position and by all means to keep them restricted to Billancourt—but this did not turn out to be very difficult.

Later, during the course of the strike, opposition to opening the gates of the occupied factories to the outside would be a standard policy of the CGT. Where the CFDT was capable of counteracting the influence of the CGT, there were discussions and clandestine debates with people who were not members of the factory personnel. But this did not happen often. Dassault-Saint-Cloud was an exception, since the PC and the CGT

exercised total control over the occupation, although they displayed their openness to the militants of the Censier CATE. And Ronan Capitaine points out that the students were admitted to the debates in the cafeteria of the factory.<sup>47</sup> This exception to the usual attitude of the CGT is similar to that we have already observed at Rhône-Poulenc-Vitry. But the CGT's liberalism in the latter enterprise came to an end before the end of the strike. On May 28, workers from Rhône-Poulenc went to Censier to ask for help and to oppose a bureaucratic reconquest by the CGT. The trade union hierarchy of the chemical workers federation of the CGT went to the factory to reestablish order among the rank and file CGT members. The strike committee finally allowed two militants from the Group for Workers Liaisons and Action (GLAT) to attend the general assembly, but only on the condition that they not speak! In the end they spoke, because the workers who were present, most of whom were CGT rank and file, asked questions which the bureaucrats of the speaker's platform did not want or were unable to answer: and they opened the floor to the militants from Censier!

We see, then, that, while the students tried in vain to enter the occupied factories, there were workers who left the factories and went to the universities, often on

their own individual initiative, in order to see if it was possible to get help to escape from the straightjacket of the dignified worker-occupier. In the Paris region, these individuals usually went to Censier, with regard to which Baynac's testimony is most useful. But they also went to other universities. At the Sorbonne, Viénet points out that some workers from NMPP came on the morning of May 17 to ask for reinforcements for their strike pickets. There were also some workers from Renault who came to establish the contacts that the trade unions had prevented the night before.[48](#)

On May 22, three workers from RATP came to Censier to ask for help in forming an action committee.[49](#) On the 23rd, this action committee was created and began to seek contacts in RATP by way of the distribution of leaflets that were, for the most part, confiscated and destroyed by the CGT immediately after their distribution. In the Appendix, we have included the testimony of these militants whose activities had hardly any effect on the return to work decreed by the trade unions. Censier gradually became the convergence point of various worker-student action committees. Baynac points out that during the first few days of June, the galaxy of action committees at Censier included the following groups:

- Inter-enterprise Committees: Rhône-Poulenc; Sud-Aviation; Nord-Aviation; Thompson Houston, CSF; Schlumberger; PTT;
- Worker-Student Action Committees: RATP; Simca; BTP; Citroën; NMPP; Renault; Saint-Ouen; provincial committees;
- Coordination Committee;
- Action Committees for Contacts between City and Countryside;
- Worker-Student Action Committee.

The Inter-enterprise Committee was founded by GLAT after the dismal reception its orientation report garnered at the Censier general assembly of May 21. Not at all triumphalist, this report concluded that although “it is unfortunately likely that the strike will stagnate and decompose, it is quite possible that there will be disturbances when the trade union leaders want to try to make the workers go back to work and a more or less

significant part of the strikers may prolong the strike and make it more combative. The fact that the situation is not totally lost demands our intervention” .[50](#) After this attempt to get its point of view accepted, GLAT formed the Inter-enterprise Committee to popularize the Rhône-Poulenc-Vitry model of occupation.[51](#) There was an action committee in that factory, founded by technicians and members of the CFDT, which presented the occupation model followed at their enterprise to the general assembly at Censier on May 20.

The action committees at Censier were not eager to join an attempt at a general regroupment of the action committees of the Paris region. By the term ‘action committee’, we mean any organization of workers and/or students that did not belong to any of the major trade union federations or to any of the major parties. In principle, it was a rank and file group that sought to regroup militants, regardless of their political views, for concrete action. In reality, the name often was used to describe the “rank and file” apparatus of the Leninist splinter groups, and it was for the purpose of demarcating itself from the latter that the action committee of Censier rejected the proposal for a general regroupment. The ultra-left attitude of the action committees at Censier was in fact incompatible with the

Maoist hysteria which, at the end of May and the beginning of June, sought an outlet in the neighborhood committees, for the most part. However, as we have seen in the cases of Citroën and Rhône-Poulenc, the action committees of Censier were actually incapable of doing any better than the others: which amounted to playing the role of gadfly to the “great tranquil power” of the CGT. Whether composed of workers or students, the action committees never had a chance to directly participate with full rights in the factory occupations. Their goal was to facilitate the passage from a passive strike to an active strike, but they could only pursue this goal by means of propaganda and a smattering of noteworthy but infrequent actions, such as the ephemeral attempt to establish distribution networks for food products brought from the countryside. The action committees also tried to make contact with the workers of different subsidiaries or branches of the same enterprise. The trade union occupations essentially left the occupiers in the dark with regard to what was happening elsewhere. At the general assemblies that were conducted like solemn church services, the bureaucrats told the workers only what served their interests, and the isolation in which the workers were maintained allowed the bureaucrats to lie shamelessly.

This would become apparent when the workers returned to work.

Even at the beginning of the movement<sup>52</sup> GLAT distributed an appeal for the formation of a general committee for the strike, from which we excerpt the following statements concerning its purposes:

Quote:

*The strikers themselves should make the decisions; but to do this they require an organization of their own.*

This organization is the gathering of all the strikers, **whether or not they are members of trade unions**, in a permanent general assembly. The assembly can elect delegates, **but only for the purpose of carrying out a particular task**: to organize pickets, to assure supplies, to prepare demonstrations.

Such organizations can and must be formed at the enterprise level. But since the movement has become generalized, it is at the national level that the decisions concerning how to conduct the strike must be made. The factory assemblies must therefore elect delegates who will meet at a regional level or according to industrial sectors, and these must in turn elect delegates to a **strike general committee**.

Only such a central strike committee, composed of both trade union members and unorganized workers, elected with a specific mandate, can lead the strike in defense of the interests of the strikers.

*Group for Workers Liaisons and Action.*

*Worker-Student Action Committee of the Sorbonne.*

Likewise, the Trotskyists of the OCI agitated for the formation of a national strike committee, and on May 24, in a general assembly, the workers of FNAC called for the formation of “complete delegations elected by all the strikers of each enterprise [who] must meet in a general assembly of workers and students to debate the future of the country”.[53](#)

All of these attempts would demonstrate their real power when the action committees tried to oppose the return to work, concretely, by trying to publicize the reality of the resistance movement against the return to work. In actuality, the national strike organization, the coordination between regions and industrial sectors, did indeed exist, but it existed within the trade union bureaucracies. The attempt to cancel their influence by other organizations of the same type but less bureaucratic did not go much farther, unlike what happened in the case of Italy, for example.

- 1.Quoted by N. Hatzfeld, in Mouriaux *et al.*, p. 53.
- 2.J.-M. Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- 3.In *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques?*, *op. cit.* The distinction refers to the analyses of Serge Mallet and Alain Touraine, who distinguished an advanced sector, called the technical sector, where work was more highly skilled and the workers more sympathetic to the idea of self-management; and a sector of traditional labor, where the specialized workers were concentrated and where quantitative demands were of paramount importance.
- 4.*Compagnies républicaines de sécurité*, CRS, Security Squads of the Republic, is a corps of the French national police that performs a role similar to that of the *Unidades de Intervención Policial* in Spain; it is commonly viewed as an anti-riot force.
- 5.Quoted by J.-Ph. Talbo, *La Grève à Flins*, p. 31.
- 6.*Notre arme, c'est la grève*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- 7.Testimony quoted by L. Géhin and J.-C. Poitou, *Des voitures et des homes*, Paris, 1984, p. 167.
- 8.*Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 9.*Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 10.*Ouvriers face aux appareils....*, p. 179.
- 11.Frémontier, *op. cit.*, p. 359.
- 12.Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

- 13. Testimony of a Christian militant of the CGT, quoted in Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
- 14. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 15. Laurent Salini, *Le Mai des proletaires*, p. 47.
- 16. Charrière, *op. cit.*, p. 303.
- 17. *Notre arme, c'est la grève*, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-36.
- 18. Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
- 19. *Histoires d'une usine en grève*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 20. In Géhin and Poitou, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
- 21. According to Claude Durand, "Ouvriers et techniciens en mai 1968", in *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques?*, *op. cit.*, p. 61 et seq.
- 22. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 23. Vincent Porhel, "L'autogestion en la CSF de Brest", in *Les Années 68, le temps de la contestation*, Brussels, 2000, p. 385.
- 24. Leuwers, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.
- 25. Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 113 et seq.
- 26. A trade unionist of the CFDT, quoted by Leuwers, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 27. Quoted by Durand, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
- 28. In Géhin and Poitou, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
- 29. General Confederation of Managers.
- 30. *Op. cit.*, p. 79.
- 31. Alain Touraine, *Le Mouvement de mai ou le Comunisme utopique*, Paris, 1968, p. 167.

- [32.](#) Dansette, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
- [33.](#) Cohn-Bendit, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- [34.](#) “Notre combat, journal de la grève de la CSF, 24 de mai 1968”, quoted by Porhel, *op. cit.*, p. 391.
- [35.](#) Porhel, *op. cit.*, p. 391 *et seq.*
- [36.](#) Jacques Pesquet, *Des soviets à Saclay?*, Paris, 1968, p. 28.
- [37.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- [38.](#) Durand’s examples include four “advanced” enterprises (Thomson, CEA, CNRS, ORTF) and four “traditional” enterprises (Renault, Peugeot, Berliet, Chausson).
- [39.](#) Hatzfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 57 and 58.
- [40.](#) Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
- [41.](#) Testimony of the Swedish delegate published in the form of a pamphlet, dated June 8, 1968, quoted by M. Lippolis, *Ben venga Maggio...*, p. 274.
- [42.](#) Concerning the Censier CATE, see the interesting testimony of Jacques Baynac in *Mai retrouvé*. This is the only work in which I have found a presentation of the activity of the militants of the ultra-left during May and June. René Viénet’s book (*Enragés et situationnistes...*) is much less instructive with respect to activity in the factories.
- [43.](#) Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

- [44.](#) Alan Krivine, born in 1941, joined the Young Communists of the PCF in 1955. From 1958 to 1965, he was a member of the National Committee of the Union of Communist Students of France and the secretary of that group for the Sorbonne. In 1966 he was excluded from the PCF for having refused to support the candidacy of François Mitterand, and for his Trotskyist positions. In 1965, he participated in the formation of the Revolutionary Communist Youth, dissolved by the government in 1968. One year later, when he was called up for military service, he ran as a candidate in the presidential elections—he obtained 239,106 votes (1.06% of the total, the lowest of seven candidates). He participated in the formation of the Communist League—which the government would dissolve in 1973—for which he would be a spokesman. In 1974 he became a member of the political bureau of the Revolutionary Communist League and of the executive committee of the Fourth International. As a candidate in the presidential elections, for which purpose he had founded the Revolutionary Communist Front, he obtained 93,990 votes (0.37% of the total, ranking 9th out of 12 candidates).
- [45.](#) Charrière, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
- [46.](#) Quoted by Hamon and Rotman, *Génération*, Paris, 1989, Vol. I, p. 520.

- [47](#). Ronan Capitaine, in Moriaux *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- [48](#). René Viénet, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, Paris, 1968, p. 98.
- [49](#). Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
- [50](#). Quoted by Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 163. Baynac provides an extract of several pages that allows us to judge the foresight of the authors of this report—foresight that was ill received during those days when the strike wave had reached its zenith. The Appendix contains the entire text provided by Baynac, as well as an assessment of the achievements of the CATEs and the Inter-enterprise Committees elaborated by GLAT one year after the strike.
- [51](#). Since it was the CGT section of the enterprise that had proposed this model, the workers of RP-Vitry thought that all the factory occupations were implemented the same way. They were surprised when they went to Censier and found out that this was not at all the case.
- [52](#). Prior to May 18, since it was on this date, according to Baynac (*op. cit.*, p. 161), that GLAT left the Sorbonne for Censier. The GLAT appeal would be published in *Lutte de classe*, June-July 1968.
- [53](#). Quoted by M. Lippolis, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

## Part 3. Grenelle

### Negotiation

The Grenelle negotiations were attended by the trade unions, the employers and the government. They were given this name because the offices of the Interior Ministry, where the meetings took place, were located on Rue de Grenelle. They began on Saturday, May 25 at three in the afternoon and ended on Monday, May 27, at seven in the morning. They were the culmination of a series of contacts between employers, the government and the trade unions. A few days earlier, the National Council of French Employers (CNPF) had carefully noted Séguy's [1](#) May 20th speech at Billancourt. We will recall that the CGT at that time rejected the CFDT's demands for co-management. The CNPF let the CGT know that they were always open to discussion. For his part, Jacques Chirac, the Minister of State for Social Affairs, met with Magniadas of the CGT at Anvers Square and spoke with Krasucki [2](#) over the phone.

During the course of one of the first meetings, the CGT requested that the government repeal the Social Security reforms as a gesture of good will, in order to generate the right atmosphere for the negotiations. [3](#) And the CGT also made it known that payment for all the days of the

strike and the sliding scale for wages were preconditions for any negotiations. Pompidou<sup>4</sup> did not respond. Then they addressed the question of the SMIG (guaranteed inter-professional minimum wage). The three parties (State, employers and trade unions) agreed upon an immediate significant increase in the level of the SMIG. After that point, however, most of the topics of negotiation remained deadlocked. And this deadlock lasted until the second night of the negotiations. According to Adrien Dansette,<sup>5</sup> Séguy declared at midnight on Sunday, that the negotiations had reached a dead end. But he met with Chirac around four or five in the morning in a *tête á tête* in a lounge in the Ministry. During the course of this interview, Séguy withdrew his demands for the repeal of the Social Security reforms and for the sliding scale.<sup>6</sup> Chirac took notes of their conversation and brought them to Pompidou. As a result, the negotiations would continue and all parties agreed on the text of the protocol that we shall now examine.

## **The Protocol of Agreement**

This agreement was not signed but its preamble indicated that the parties involved in its elaboration were: the CGT, the CGT-FO, the CFDT, the CFTC,<sup>7</sup>the

CGC,[8](#) the FEN,[9](#) the CGPME,[10](#) and the CNPF. Its 14 points were as follows:

1. An increase in the guaranteed inter-professional minimum wage of three francs per hour, effective as of June 1, 1968;

2. Salaries of civil servants and similar categories: the discussions were to be ongoing;

3. Wages in the private sector: an increase of 7% in June 1968. This percentage included the increases already granted since January 1, 1968. The increase was to be ramped up to 10% on October 1, 1968;

4. Reduction of the working day: an agreement between the employers and the trade unions on the principles for an agreement to reduce the hours of labor “with the ultimate goal of a 40 hour week”. Before the end of 1970, a reduction of two hours for those who worked regular 48 hour weeks, and a reduction of one hour for those hourly workers whose work week varied from 45 to 48 hours;

5. Revision of labor contracts: a commitment on the part of the negotiating parties to meet to amend the

contracts to conform with the results of the Grenelle negotiations;

6. Employment and training: the negotiating parties resolved to come to an agreement in order to improve the guarantees of stable employment, reclassifications of job categories, and training;

7. Trade union rights: the government made a commitment to submit legislation on trade union rights in the enterprise. For the time being, an agreement was concluded with respect to trade union sections in the enterprise and the hours granted to the delegates for conducting trade union business;

8. Social Security: reduction of the co-pay<sup>11</sup> [*“ticket moderador”*] from 30% to 25%. Agreement on the need for an immediate parliamentary debate on the ratification of the Social Security Reform Laws;

9. Family Aid: establishment of support services for families with three or more children, single mothers and one-income families;

10. Old Age: an increase (without specifying any figures) of the minimum level of support for indigent elderly, to go into effect on October 1, 1968;

11. Taxation: commitment to implement fiscal reform measures for the purpose of reducing taxes on wage workers;

12. Purchasing Power: commitment to hold a meeting between the government, the employers and the trade unions in March 1969 in order to discuss the decline in purchasing power during 1968;

13. Prices: the CNPF requested that price controls not be as strict as the controls imposed in the other countries of the Common Market;[12](#)

14. Days Lost to the Strike: these were to be made up for. The employers would advance 50% of the wage bill, reimbursable with hours of labor that would be made up for. Should the hours not be made up for before December 31, 1968, the balance would fall to the worker.

We shall now examine the principle points of the agreement.

There was a whole series of points that were nothing but promises or commitments. This was the case with

respect to Point 5 on labor contracts, Point 6 on training and Point 11 on Tax Policy. Point 12 was just a promise, too: to discuss the consumer price index and the wage levels in March 1969. This promise was all that remained of the “non-negotiable demand” of the sliding scale.<sup>13</sup> Point 4, on the reduction of working hours, was a firm commitment but was to be implemented in stages, for those hourly workers who worked 45 to 48 hours per week, and only stated that the parties agreed as a matter of principle to return to the 40 hour week.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Point 10 on the minimum retirement age represented a commitment with regard to the date when it would be lowered, but not how much it would be lowered. So far, then, there is nothing very substantial.

Point 8, on social expenses, was more meaningful and beneficial: the co-pay would be reduced from 30% to 25% (which means that the government reimbursement would increase from 70% to 75%). This was not trivial, but it was all that remained of the non-negotiable demand regarding the repeal of the Social Security reforms. It announced a parliamentary debate on the issue, to make this setback easier to swallow.

Point 7 was more concrete ... for the trade union members, but perhaps not so much for the workers as a whole. At the same time that the government made a

commitment to submit legislation on trade union rights, the employers and the trade unions immediately agreed on a certain number of measures that allowed the trade unions to operate in the enterprises. This was a just reward offered by the employers for the good work done by the trade unions with regard to the regimentation of the strikers. There was, of course, an entire sector of the employers that was violently opposed to trade unions, above all those employers organized in the PYME. This was a feature that would characterize the entire Protocol: the “conquests” of the wage workers were much more annoying and worrisome to the small employers than to the large ones, and the large employers thus entertained the hope of driving some of their smaller competitors out of business.[15](#)

There remains the question of wages.

Point 1 pertained to the SMIG, which was increased by 35% (in Paris). This increase affected approximately 7% of the wage workers. It was above all a readjustment, since the gap between the SMIG and the average wage took years to build up. As we said above, this measure was especially irritating to the PYME, and thus had a favorable restructuring effect from the macroeconomic point of view.

Point 2 affected civil service workers. It said nothing about wage increases, but simply proclaimed that the question remained open to further negotiation.

Point 3 announced a 7% increase in wages for the private sector to go into effect on June 1, 1968, followed by a supplementary increase of 3% on October 1. Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>16</sup> carried out the following calculation: the two-stage increase meant that measured on a per-year basis, the total increase was no more than 7.75%. This figure must be compared with that of the natural decline of wages during this period, which varied from 6% to 7% per year. The strike therefore won a wage increase of between 0.75% and 1.75%. And since only half the hours of labor lost to the strike were to be paid (Point 12), the work stoppage cost between 3% and 4% of the annual wage (if the duration of the strike is assumed to be between three and four weeks). Castoriadis thus thought the outcome was negative.

As a whole, the agreements were very unsatisfactory. They had no similarities whatsoever, concretely, with the Matignon Agreements of 1936, where the workers “had immediately obtained the 40-hour week and two weeks of paid vacation, considerable trade union rights and a substantial increase in real wages—the total increase is

estimated by Alfred Sauvy as equivalent to a raise of 35% to 49%”.[17](#)

Thus, the wage increase was in most cases derisory. But the accords said nothing more about the form this increase would assume and the reform of pay scales. The increase was therefore hierarchical, as the CGT desired above all. And nothing was said about the methods of payment, such as piecework or pay according to the type of job. It is a well-known fact that the latter is a weapon that in the hands of the foremen can wreak havoc on assembly line workers. A great deal of the dissatisfaction of the specialized workers was connected with this problem. The Protocol of Grenelle said nothing about it, and it is not surprising that the Protocol did not get a warm reception in the factories where specialized workers were most numerous.

## **The Rejection of the Protocol of Agreement**

We may therefore ask why the trade unions thought it was possible to present this document for the approval of the wage workers. Three answers are possible: either the trade unions, especially the CGT, were content with the protocol. In which case, they had to present their about-face to the workers of Renault-Billancourt, where

Georges Séguy and Eugène Descamps<sup>18</sup> (CFDT) went on Monday morning, May 27, after leaving Rue de Grenelle. Or Séguy knew that the Protocol was bad, and in this case he wanted it to be rejected by the workers. Or else he hoped he could get the workers to swallow it. In the latter two cases, the decision to go to Billancourt was correct. For if the goal was to make sure the Protocol was rejected, the workers at Billancourt would oblige, since they did not gain much by it; and if the goal was to impose it by force, and if Billancourt went back to work, the rest of the working class could be dragged back to work, too.

The accounts of what happened at the famous ceremony-rally at Billancourt on Monday morning, May 27 are not very informative. The rally had been planned before the beginning of the Grenelle negotiations, as part of the regular routine of the trade unions. Nonetheless, obviously, this day generated a great deal of expectation: the day would be more exciting than usual, since the big bureaucratic bosses had spent the weekend in negotiations and were coming to visit the rank and file.

Walking down the stairs after leaving the Ministry, around 7:30 a.m., the big bosses did not seem to be dissatisfied with their work during the night. Séguy

declared that, “there is still much to do, but an important part of our demands has been taken into consideration and what has been resolved is by no means insignificant”. For his part, Eugène Descamps, of the CFDT, felt that “we have obtained results that we have been demanding for years.... The gains thus achieved are important”.<sup>19</sup> But both of them said that the decision to accept or reject the agreement had to be made by the workers assemblies. A little later, when Séguy arrived at Billancourt, the rejection of the Grenelle Agreement and the extension of the strike had already been approved, after a speech by Halbeher, the secretary of the CGT. In order to entertain the personnel until the arrival of Séguy, Frachon<sup>20</sup> spoke for three-quarters of an hour. He evoked the “appreciable gains” amidst an inauspicious silence. He was followed by Séguy, whose speech was greeted with many shouts and catcalls. For some, it was Séguy who provoked the boos and derision directed at the Points of the Agreement that were unsatisfactory. For others, it was the workers themselves who protested against the Points that Séguy was trying to get them to accept. Various testimonies provide concrete evidence that it was the proposal to make up for the hours of work lost to the strike that provoked irate protests. Séguy evidently finished his speech by approving the continuation of the strike.

We shall now focus on the alternatives that were posed. We could address the issue in a different way. Why did Séguy so abruptly change his position, renouncing the preconditions for negotiation and accepting an agreement that did not correspond with his previously announced intentions? On Sunday afternoon, in the midst of the negotiations, Séguy declared that he was under “imperative orders” to obtain the sliding scale and the repeal of the Social Security decrees.<sup>[21](#)</sup> He even left the session in order to tell the radio reporters what he had just declared. But later, during the night, after a telephone call, he renounced these two demands, as we have seen. Why? In any case, the explanation is not that Séguy obtained in exchange positions for the CGT in various international organizations like the European Commission or the BIT,<sup>[22](#)</sup> since these posts had already been promised by the Prime Minister himself in a private meeting on that same morning.

At this point we must pursue a brief detour from our account in order to review the petty internal politics of the left. Throughout the night, Séguy had probably been kept informed of the backroom scheming on the part of the non-communist left. According to Baynac,<sup>[23](#)</sup> during the night of May 26-27, there was a meeting between

the PSU (Rocard, Martinet, Huergeon), the CFDT, the FO, the UNEF and the SNESup. This alliance sought to promote a Mendès-France<sup>24</sup> government (Mendès-France was also present at the meeting). Baynac also says that the PCF was immediately informed of this development. This would therefore be the reason for Séguy's reversal, and Séguy would have therefore been instructed to conclude a pact at any price. The degree of urgency responded to the seriousness of the threat posed by Mendès-France to the PCF. For Mendès-France had the support of the other two major trade union federations, the students and the universities, as well as the support of all kinds of left wing and right wing personalities (Lecanuet,<sup>25</sup> Isorni,<sup>26</sup> and two-time former Government Minister, Couve de Murville<sup>27</sup> ).<sup>28</sup> The threat was simply that a center-left government was being planned without the participation of the PCF! We know that Séguy conferred with the party on that famous night. Did he receive the order to sabotage the agreement in order to get the workers to reject it and to aggravate the crisis; or did he just want to rapidly reach an agreement in order to pull the rug out from under the feet of the non-communist left, by putting an end to the strike?

We shall not answer this question in this book. Evidence in favor of the first hypothesis is the fact that, while Séguy was negotiating with Chirac, *L'Humanité* was on that very same night getting ready to publish a special edition headlined, "The Strike Continues". Prior to the end of the negotiations, the CGT of Renault distributed a pamphlet with the same message. In that case, Séguy had no other choice but to bear the catcalls and the abuse at Renault with good grace. The strike would continue, the social crisis would become political. Such would have been the plan of the PCF according to this scenario.

The other hypothesis assumes that the right hand did not know what the left hand was doing due to the fact that different factions within the Stalinist bureaucracy were at loggerheads over the question of how to deal with this complicated problem: according to this version, while Séguy was negotiating an agreement that he thought was acceptable (even to those who were giving him orders from the Central Committee?), *L'Humanité* and the CGT had rejected it in advance and were stoking the flames of the strike at Billancourt, which forced Séguy to make the best of a bad situation.

Our sources do not tell us anything about how the other important enterprises rejected the contents of the protocol that same morning on May 27. On the very same day, Renault-Cléon, Renault-Le Mans, Berliet, Sud-Aviation, Rhodiaceta, Snecma and Citroën-Paris voted to continue the strike. This list<sup>29</sup> is not, of course, complete. In some enterprises, the workers went back to work but changed their minds when they saw that most of the other workers were still on strike. By the afternoon of May 27 there could be no doubt about it: the strike had obtained a new impulse.

Nothing had changed, nothing had happened? Wrong! For, whatever explanation may be offered for Séguy's behavior, the result of the Grenelle negotiations, even though the agreement was a dead letter, was the liquidation of the little unity the movement had displayed up until that time. Throughout our account up to this point, we have drawn attention to the efforts of the trade unions—principally the CGT—to limit and to control the unification of the movement. The unified action of the trade union hierarchies, sanctioned at the highest levels by the opening of negotiations with the government and the CNPF, were counterbalanced by efforts to perpetuate the separation of the rank and file. Now, the failure of Grenelle did away with even this

bureaucratic form of unity. Negotiations, and thus the strikes as well, and above all, the question of a return to work, were relegated to the level of the industry or the enterprise. Because it was at this level that the employers and the trade unions situated the framework for seeking to revise the Grenelle Protocol in such a way as to allow a return to work. It became quite clear at this time that the revisions would be the outcome of a struggle that would take place at the level of the individual enterprise or the industry, rather than at a national level. While it is true that the return to national negotiations was excluded by neither the CGT (with regard to the issue of the sliding scale) or by the CFDT (with regard to the issue of trade union rights and the Social Security Reforms), such declarations, broadcast after the announcement of the elections, were hardly capable of generating any illusions.

- 1. Georges Séguy was born on March 16, 1927 in Toulouse. A laborer, typographer, printer and trade unionist, he was a member of a Partisan network during the Second World War. In 1944 he was arrested and deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp. After the “Liberation”, he was active in the railroad workers trade union in Toulouse from 1946 to 1949, and was general secretary of the CGT from 1967 to 1982. Today he is the honorary president of the CGT Institute of Social History (HIS-CGT). He was also a member of the political bureau of the PCF from 1960 to 1970.
- 2. Henri Krasucki was born on September 2, 1924 near Warsaw, Poland, to a family of militant communist workers, and died on January 24, 2003. He went to work at Renault in order to complete his professional training. A member of the Jewish Resistance, he was a member of the Immigrant Labor Section (MOI) of the PCF. He was arrested in 1943 and deported to the Jawischowitz concentration camp, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, and then to Buchenwald. After the war he was a leader of the PCF, but he retained his membership in the CGT. In 1949 he was elected secretary of the Departmental Union of the Seine. In 1956 he became a member of the PCF central committee—until 1996—and in 1964 he became a

member of the PCF political bureau. In 1961 he became a member of the confederal bureau of the CGT. In 1967 he was a candidate for the leadership of the CGT, but G. Séguy was elected. He would be elected secretary general of the CGT and would serve in this position from 1982 to 1992. During the late 1980s, he defended the most hard line positions of the PCF.

- 3.Charrière, *op. cit.*, p. 306.
- 4.Georges Pompidou, born in 1911 in Montboudif (Cantal), died on April 2, 1974. He was the second President of the Fifth Republic and the nineteenth President of the French Republic from June 20, 1969 to April 2, 1974. From 1962 to June 1969, he was DeGaulle's Prime Minister and one of his most faithful supporters.
- 5.Dansette, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- 6.Other sources provide testimony concerning Georges Séguy's abrupt about-face. See Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
- 7.The French Confederation of Christian Workers was created in 1919 for the purpose of forming a counterweight to the all-powerful CGT in working class areas. In 1964, the majority of the members of the CFTC, led by the "Reconstruction" group, decided to secularize the trade union confederation and officially endorse the class struggle, thus giving birth to the CFDT, while the other members of the union chose to

remain in the rump CFDT in a minority split—which attracted approximately 10% of the membership.

- 8. The General Confederation of Executives, one of the five trade unions recognized as generally representative, was founded in 1944 and is considered to be the ally of the employers and under the influence of the right wing parties.
- 9. National Federation of Education was a federation of trade unions embracing the French education system, research and culture that existed from 1945 to 2000. Actually founded in 1948, when the General Federation of Teachers—created within the CGT in 1929—refused to take a stand—in order to preserve its unity and not to disappear as a separate organization—with regard to the internal controversies that gave birth to the CGT-FO. Its neutrality led it to separate from the CGT. At its peak, during the 1960s, the FEN claimed to have more than 500,000 members.
- 10. General Confederation of Small and Mid-size Enterprises.
- 11. “*Ticket Moderador*” refers to the part of health expenses that must be assumed by the patient. The other part is reimbursed by Medical Security. Medicines, for example, are reimbursed at 35% for those usually intended as treatments for illnesses or conditions that are not critical or chronic. The

reimbursement is increased to 65% for the other medications and 100% for medications recognized as indispensable and particularly costly. In the case of the strikes of May '68, what the trade unions' negotiations aimed at was to get the State to contribute 75%, rather than 70%, of medical expenses.

- [12.](#)The Common Market was one of the first steps towards the creation of the European Union, and consisted in a free trade zone. The first effective move towards the construction of the European Union was the signing of the Treaty of the CECA, the Economic Community of Coal and Steel, in 1951. This agreement allowed for the liberalization of exchanges of coal and steel between France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. It was an irreversible commitment to economic integration that implied the creation of independent institutions.

In 1955 the governments of the CECA countries decided to extend the agreement to the entire economy. This simultaneously implied a general standardization of the customs policies with regard to third countries, the harmonization of general policies with regard to economic issues, the coordination of monetary policies, the free circulation of labor, the creation of common rules for competition, the creation of an investment

fund for the less developed countries, and regulatory harmonization on the social terrain and its standardization. Based on the acceptance of these conditions, the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957, which created a customs union embracing France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. This was the beginning of the European Common Market or the EEC (the European Economic Community).

- [13.](#) Of wages.
- [14.](#) In France, the 40-hour workweek was established in 1936 after a wave of strikes and factory occupations that began on May 26. On June 7, an agreement was signed by the CGT, the State—the Popular Front had just come to power—and the employers (the Matignon Agreements) and on June 11 and 12 social reform legislation on the extension of labor contracts, increase in wages, paid vacations and the 40-hour week was enacted.
- [15.](#) Another example, the CGPME (General Confederation of the PYME) requested compensation or subsidies for the increase of the inter-professional minimum wage, in the form of low interest loans or other special measures (see Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p 396).

- [16.](#) Under the pseudonym of Coudray, in *Mai 68, la brèche*, Paris, 1968, p. 122.
- [17.](#) Coudray, *op. cit.*, p. 122. In fact, the paid vacations and the 40-hour week would be the result of laws that were passed after the strike.
- [18.](#) After the “Liberation”, Eugène Descamps led the leftist minority, grouped around the “Reconstruction” tendency, which sought to loosen the links with the clergy and secularize the French Confederation of Christian Workers, the CFTC. This tendency became the majority faction and in 1964, during an extraordinary congress, the CFTC became the CFDT, which declared that it endorsed the class struggle, and moved towards socialism, particularly the Unified Socialist Party under Michel Rocard.
- [19.](#) Quotations excerpted from *Positions et actions de la CFDT...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
- [20.](#) Benoît Frachon was born in 1893 to a family of miners, and became a metal worker when he was 13 years old. He was an important working class leader, trade unionist and PCF militant; he was a member of the PCF political bureau since 1956. In 1933 he was elected secretary of the CGTU, and would be a high level leader of the CGT after the latter’s reunification, and would serve as its secretary general, along with Léon Jouhaux, after 1945. In 1967 he was elected to the

honorary position of president of the CGT; he was the only survivor of the 1936 movement to participate in the Grenelle negotiations. He died in 1975.

- [21](#).The repeal of the Social Security decrees was also a precondition for negotiation established by the CFDT. But there is less discussion of the CFDT because most of the negotiating was done by three parties (government, employers, CGT), and the other trade unions were largely excluded from the proceedings.
- [22](#).International Labor Office. This is the permanent secretariat of the International Labor Organization (ILO), a branch of the UN responsible for promoting labor rights, improvement of working conditions and the fight against unemployment.
- [23](#).Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
- [24](#).Pierre Mendès-France (1907-1982), a member of the Radical Party since his youth, formed a government from 1954 to 1955 for the purpose of negotiating the independence of the French colony of Indochina after the defeat of the French Army by the Vietnamese guerrillas. During the late 1950s he joined the Independent Socialist Party, which later merged with the Unified Socialist Party, and supported the candidacy of Mitterand in the presidential elections of 1965. In 1968, for reasons that included his opposition to any compromises with the PCF, he appeared as one

of the possible replacements in case of a collapse of the Gaullist regime.

- [25.](#) Jean Adrien François Lecaunet (1920-1993) was the president of the Popular Republican Movement—the MRP—a center-right Christian democratic political party that existed between 1944 and 1967. In 1965 he was a candidate for the presidency of the Republic.
- [26.](#) Jacques Isorni (1911-1995), a very prestigious lawyer and independent right wing deputy.
- [27.](#) Maurice Couve de Murville (1907-1999) was Foreign Minister from 1958 to May 1968, Minister of Economy and Finance from May 31 to July 10, 1968 and Prime Minister and chief of state from July 10, 1968 to June 31, 1969, with DeGaulle as President, in a transitional government that replaced that of Georges Pompidou.
- [28.](#) Dansette, *op. cit.*, p. 310.
- [29.](#) The list is provided by the CFDT in *Positions et actions de la CFDT...*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

## **Part 4. The Strike Disintegrates**

If the rejection of the Grenelle Protocol provided indisputable evidence of the power of the strike movement, it was no less indicative of its decline, even though more than three weeks would have to pass before all the strikers would return to work. As we just pointed out, the movement was no longer a national movement, and had become a collection of separate strikes at different enterprises or in different industries. This fragmentation of the subsequent negotiations was one of the reasons for the defeat of the strikers.

The bibliography we have relied upon to construct this account is much less informative concerning the end of the strike than about its beginnings. The sources do, however, bring to light numerous focal points of resistance to the return to work, and not just in the metal industry, with the battles of Flins and Sochaux.

### **From May 27 to Pentecost<sup>1</sup> (June 2-3): The Strike Continues**

On May 27, enterprises were still joining the strike. This was the case with Batellerie de la Seine. There were also cases where the strikers returned to work, particularly in

the provinces. At the same time, negotiations were underway, especially in certain public offices or enterprises. This was the case, for example, at Charbonnages,<sup>2</sup> where negotiations were held between May 26 and May 28, culminating in more favorable terms than were offered by the Grenelle Protocol. This made a return to work possible on the 29th, just as some people had desired. The strike, however, according to those who were in favor of a return to work, was extended by the PCF and the CGT, for political reasons; when they tried to go back to work, the workers found the gates bolted and barred.<sup>3</sup>

There was actually a partial aggravation of the strike, and this was not in contradiction of the generalized movement towards its decline. For the two days after Grenelle were a period of high political tensions, when the left began to believe that it could force DeGaulle to resign, and the right began to fear that the time for his departure had actually arrived. It is not the purpose of this study to once again retrace all the vicissitudes of the subtle political game that unfolded at the time. But some notes are in order.

On Monday, May 27, a rally was held at Charléty.<sup>4</sup> It brought together UNEF, the CFDT and the non-

communist left and gave a very warm welcome to Mendès-France (who nevertheless refused to address the crowd). We have already discussed his role in this affair. On May 28, François Mitterand proclaimed his candidacy for the presidency of the Republic and proposed Mendès-France for the post of Prime Minister. On May 29, the PCF organized a large demonstration to remind the non-communist left that it was still a force to contend with. On the same day, DeGaulle “disappeared”. Without informing his own government, he went to Baden-Baden, Germany, to see general Massu.<sup>5</sup> This unexpected visit may have been for the purpose of testing the army’s loyalty.<sup>6</sup> Massu bolstered DeGaulle’s morale, after DeGaulle had some doubts about his fate, but now he felt better, and went to stay at Colombey, his personal residence in the Haute-Marne. From there, he called Pompidou, his prime minister, in order to tell him that he would return to Paris the next day and that he would address the nation over the radio. On May 30, in a radio broadcast, DeGaulle energetically proclaimed the legitimacy of his power, renounced the referendum that he had announced the previous week, dissolved Parliament and announced elections and reforms. At the same time, a right wing demonstration at the Champs-Élysées, which had been planned for quite a long time, was unexpectedly successful, at least in part, with

300,000 people<sup>7</sup> covering the avenue in a sea of tricolor.<sup>8</sup> On May 31, the electoral campaign began.

We shall now return to the strike movement. As we have seen, in the case of Charbonnages, the hardliners of the CGT had been pushed in the direction of aggravating the strike, in spite of the fact that a favorable agreement had been concluded. On May 27, 28 and 29, it also seemed to other elements that the strike had become more determined, especially in the EDF, where the first interruptions of electric power took place since the movement began. These interruptions were primarily carried out for the purpose of demonstrating the dangerousness of the CGT and the PCF to the supporters of the Mitterrand-Mendès-France project. The strike also became more embittered in the printing industry, and this had the effect of obstructing the printing of the CFDT's newspapers. On May 29, there was also an interruption in telephone service in the Trudaine sector, the location of the CFDT headquarters. At first, the CGT assured everyone that it was a technical problem, but backed down when the CFDT offered to send a group of technicians to make repairs.<sup>9</sup> It will therefore be understood that one must take this alleged resurgence of CGT militance with a grain of salt.

On the other hand, however, with the announcement of the dissolution of Parliament the atmosphere changed. DeGaulle and the right wing clearly reassumed the initiative, and the prospect of elections gave the PCF and the CGT a new pretext: the elections, and no longer the strike and its demands, were the struggle that they now considered to be of paramount importance. It is hard to believe that both of these organizations were unaware of the political analyses that demonstrated that the voters were much more conservative than public opinion in general, due to the over-representation of the provinces and the rural districts, and the under-representation of younger voters. And if they were indeed aware of these analyses, then their position was to more or less preserve the *status quo ante*, reserving for themselves a central role in an opposition without any significant ability to affect the course of the capitalist modernization of France. The essential point is that the new tendencies that had been manifested during the previous weeks (the explicit challenge to the legitimacy of the PCF, the attack on the trade union bureaucracies by the young workers, the apparently unstoppable resurgence of the non-communist left, and even the rise of leftist militantism, even if it was still quite marginal) would be forgotten thanks to a return to “normal” political life. In the June 4 issue of *Le Figaro*, Raymond Aron<sup>[10](#)</sup> commented: the

government was right to rely on the support of the Party, since, “within an hour after the President’s address, it defused the bomb and consented to participate in elections that it can hardly hope to win”.[11](#)

On May 31, at least two events were indicative of the return to normal and the more moderate positions of the trade unions. It was the Friday before the Pentecost holiday weekend. In the historical accounts, we read that this was the day that the government decided that the supply of gasoline to the gas stations would be resumed—as if it was the government that had blocked the distribution of fuel. This decision, of course, meant that it was sending the riot police and the army to “liberate” the stockpiles of gasoline. This decision was made just after DeGaulle’s speech of May 30, at night, in such a way that the gas stations began receiving shipments of gasoline on the morning of May 31.

Dansette does not provide any details regarding how the government “managed to get the striking truck drivers to return to work”,[12](#) and the CFDT, in its history of the movement, is content with mentioning the fact that “the riot police dispersed the pickets who were guarding the various stockpiles of gasoline”.[13](#)In short, this effort to reassert control over gasoline shipments generated no

resistance on the part of the strikers in this sector, nor did it generate any solidarity actions on the part of the rest of the movement.

Elsewhere, the Ministry of Telecommunications and Postal Services began to evict the strikers from the post offices and telephone exchanges on the night of May 30. The CFDT is just as uninformative with regard to this issue as it is with regard to the matter of the gasoline stockpiles. According to Rioux and Backmann,<sup>14</sup> the trade unions advised the strikers not to offer any resistance to the police. At Rennes-Chèques, however, the eviction led to violence.<sup>15</sup> At Paris-Chèques, Paris Central and other provincial offices and centers it was the Committees for the Defense of the Republic (CDR)<sup>16</sup> that attacked the strikers. In every case, the strike continued.

The fact that gasoline was made available was a political coup. The traffic jams that resulted were evidence of the return to normal. In Telecommunications and Postal Services, it was more of a social coup—on the pretext that the Postal Services are necessary to organize the announced elections, an attempt was made to force a return to work. At the same time, during the Pentecost holiday weekend, various hasty negotiations were begun,

underpinned by the idea of a generalized return to work on Tuesday, June 4.

In reality, we shall see that the government and the PCF would have much greater difficulties than any they had encountered so far in their attempt to obtain a generalized return to work. The violent evictions at Telecommunications and Postal Services were not as effective as the seizure of the gasoline stockpiles. The postal workers did not go back to work *en masse*, not during the holiday weekend, and not on Tuesday morning. There were other attempts to force them to go back to work. The case of the SNCF in Alsace is well known, where the Strasbourg station was occupied by the police and some trains ran from the night of Saturday, June 1, to Sunday, June 2. These trains were stopped at Mulhouse, and the Strasbourg station was reoccupied by the strikers.

### **After Pentecost: The Hard Road Back to Work**

It is certainly true that on Tuesday, June 4, the atmosphere was undoubtedly redolent of a return to routine. That morning, the Bank of France reopened for business, and so did the Charbonnages, the EDF and the arsenals. The same was true of numerous small and

medium size enterprises where those who earned the minimum inter-professional wage worked—these workers had obtained a substantial raise with the Grenelle protocol. But there were numerous focal points of resistance, against which the trade unions would resort to multiple strategies. These would entail 48 hours of very intense activity, during which time they tried to get the rank and file to accept the results of the negotiations held over the Pentecost holiday weekend. We shall examine a few cases:

**Telecommunications and Postal Services:** the negotiations between the Ministry and the trade unions would last until the end of the day on Tuesday, June 4. On the night of June 3, however, the leaders (not the militants!) of the trade unions called for a vote to be held on Tuesday morning on the question of returning to work. This led to a tumultuous meeting where, of the 600 workers present, only 25% voted in favor of a return to work. François de Massot notes that those who voted in favor of a return to work were generally members of the PCF. In the Paris region there was a regional strike committee for the Postal Service which, since its inception, had tried to oppose the compartmentalization of the strike by offices and distribution centers. On June 4, at 5:00 p.m., this committee met at the Bourse du

Travail.[17](#) Immediately, the trade union leaders announced that this meeting would be the last one—which implied that the workers would have to return to work on the following day. This announcement met with such vehement opposition, including opposition from the trade union militants themselves, that the leaders were obliged to hold another meeting on the following day. This time, they were better prepared, and also benefited from the absence of the militants from the other distribution centers who were opposed to returning to work. These militants had not attended the meeting either out of discouragement or out of fear of unleashing an internal conflict in their trade union. Thus, the vote was in favor of a return to work. On Saturday, June 8, however, the strike resumed, in the post offices in the train stations of the Paris region. The government would then make new concessions on working conditions.[18](#)

**RATP:** the resumption of commuter transportation service in the Paris region was obviously an important step towards a general return to work. We shall recall that the decision by the transportation workers to join the strike had been underpinned by a strong impulse and the consolidation of the work stoppage. Thus, during the Pentecost holiday weekend, the government and the trade unions made as much haste as possible in their

negotiations, which culminated in a text that was submitted for the approval of the personnel, on Sunday, June 2, that is, in the middle of the holiday weekend. The agreement was rejected, however, above all because the concessions were insufficient with respect to the question of days off. The personnel wanted a system of rotation of 6/2 (6 days of work, 2 days off). On Monday night, the negotiations had made some progress with regard to the question of wages and work schedules, and the trade unions thought they could present a new text to the personnel. According to J.-F. Naudet,[19](#) the progress was actually minimal (in fact, the 6/2 rotation would not go into effect until 1972, and the same was true of the 40 hour week, another central demand of the strikers of 1968). In any event, the vote on the return to work was held under stormy circumstances. It was held by sections (workshops, offices, depots), and the trade unions, on June 5 near the end of the day, tabulated the results at the Bourse du Travail. Some workers who were mistrustful attended in order to help count the votes and this led to fights with the CGT thugs and so much confusion that the count could not proceed at all.[20](#)

In the appendix to this book one may read the account of the events provided by the militants of the RATP action committee. This account makes it clear that the trade

unions tried to take advantage of the separation of the different sections, and that they spread the rumor, for example, that 80% of the strikers at the Lebrun depot voted to return to work, when it was actually the case that 80% of them had voted to continue the strike (Lebrun was a depot where the strike was particularly active). It was necessary, in all the sections, for the bureaucrats to do everything in their power to assure a resumption of work on Thursday, June 6. Nonetheless, the return to work was so incompletely complied with that the trade unions broadcast an order to return to work on Thursday afternoon that was disseminated throughout the transport network thanks to the management's communications system. As Caprenet, a leader of the CGT, admits, with reference to the metro stations 2 and 6 on the Nation line, "I generously let them boo and hiss. I was even on the verge of getting a punch in the nose, but nonetheless they returned to work on the next day".[21](#) And he was visibly proud of this fact. It was, however, necessary to resort to the riot police in order to evict the strikers from the offices of that line during the night of June 6-7. We may also read in the testimony of the RATP action committee, how the scandalous conditions of the return to work had led certain militants to consider that it was possible to form a rank and file committee in RATP.[22](#) This attempt failed,

however, after the general assembly of June 10 failed to approve a proposal to resume the strike. Thus, on Thursday, June 10, commuter transportation was reestablished.

**SNCF:** rail transport was another central point of the generalized resumption of work. As was the case with other public services, the Pentecost holiday weekend was devoted to non-stop negotiations. On Sunday, June 2, the Minister of Transportation offered a package of 1,200 million francs, as opposed to an estimated trade union demand for 2,000 million. Two meetings were held to attempt to reach a compromise on Monday, June 3. In an unofficial conversation with the CGT, the assistant director of personnel asked: “How much more do you need to go back to work?” The CGT responded that it needed 200 million francs, as a bluff. According to the confession of the federal secretary himself, he could just as well have asked for 50 or 500 million. After consultations with the government, the management offered 200 million, and the subsequent negotiations were held mainly between the different affected trade unions for the partition of the 1,400 million among their various demands.<sup>23</sup> An agreement was finally concluded on the morning of Tuesday, June 4. It was not signed by the central committees of the trade unions, but an

intersyndical communiqué was issued that called for an immediate return to work, which triggered heated opposition from the rank and file. For its part, the CGT called for a return to work starting on the night of June 4. Compared to the gains achieved by the workers in other industries, the results were very favorable. The railroad workers obtained a 10% wage increase, two extra days of paid vacation, and a one and a half hour reduction in the workweek.

Throughout the day of June 5, debates continued among the rank and file. In the strongholds of the CGT, the return to work proceeded without any problems. Thus, in Achères, where Massabiaux himself (the federal secretary) testified: “There were no problems, we marched behind the red flag, which we lowered from the water tower”. But in his examination of the official account provided by the CFDT of the various workplaces, G. Ribeill concluded that most of the personnel were opposed to the return to work.<sup>24</sup> According to him, opposition was particularly focused on the question of being paid for the days they were on strike. And this opposition was powerful enough to cause the trade unions to attempt to obtain assurances from the management on this question. What kind of assurances is unknown. But at the end of the day on June 5 they

gave the order to return to work, concluding that, “the railroad workers have democratically decided, in the majority of the rail centers, to return to work”. The results of the votes by the work centers were announced by telex in each center as soon as they were certified. But sometimes the referendums were held again after the first result was negative, as at Le Mans, Vierzon and Orleans. In Lyon, on June 5, a rally was held by the trade unions to celebrate the end of the strike. The PCF was greeted with boos and catcalls and cries of “betrayal”.<sup>25</sup> On June 6, however, rail traffic was operating more or less normally.

**Social Security:** the CGT and the CFDT presented a rough draft of the agreement<sup>26</sup> to the personnel on June 4. Of the 16,000 who cast votes (a 42% rate of participation) less than 25% were in favor of returning to work. On June 6, the two trade union federations issued the “official” order to return to work. But the strike continued in certain locations until June 11. According to François de Massot, this made it possible to obtain improvements over the original agreement, particularly with respect to larger wage increases for the non-supervisory sectors of the workforce.

**Education:** a meeting between the trade unions and the Ministry was held on June 4. The negotiations were concluded on June 5. The general secretary of the FEN declared that he was “relatively satisfied”, but the strike continued until June 7 in the secondary schools. High school teachers in the Paris region carried a majority vote in favor of continuing the movement. In the elementary schools, the SNI<sup>27</sup> ordered a return to work. There were protests (in the North, in Vancluse and other departments), but there was a clear tendency for the teachers to heed the call of the trade union and return to work.

Many EGB and secondary school teachers—often members of the Emancipated School current of the FEN—were not satisfied with their trade union representatives. In the Paris region, they compelled them to hold an explanatory meeting on Saturday, June 8, at the Bourse du Travail. 1,500 teachers attended, but no trade union representatives were present. The teachers, once they realized no trade union representatives would attend the meeting, marched to Rue Solferino to the headquarters of the FEN, which they discovered to be vacant. They temporarily occupied the headquarters and published a pamphlet calling for the teachers to stay on strike and announcing an assembly for Monday, June 10.

Although several thousand teachers attended this assembly, they were unable to prevent the return to work.[28](#)

**Miscellaneous:** other cases are known where it was not easy to get the workers to go back to work, especially in the major department stores. In Paris, there were confrontations and the strikers used fire extinguishers in the Galeries Lafayette in an attempt to prevent the supervisors and executives from returning to work. In this sector, the CGT issued the order to go back to work on June 4, but the trade union sections in the Paris region voted to continue the strike. There were certainly many other similar situations, but it was in the metallurgical sector where the greatest difficulties were encountered in the attempt to get the workers to return to work.

We can thus see that the return to work did not take place automatically. Certain authors, however, such as François de Massot, exaggerate the significance of the resistance. They seize upon the existence of this resistance in order to accuse the trade unions of having betrayed a possible revolution. It is true that the irregularities with regard to the voting procedures, the rumors that were spread intentionally and manipulations

of every kind were numerous. But their effectiveness was only matched by the resignation and exhaustion of the mass of the strikers. In the public and nationalized sectors, at least the government had made a certain number of concessions in order to facilitate the return to work. In this case the return to work was expected to take place on Tuesday, June 4, but it would not be until Thursday or Friday when the return to work was more or less total. It was not these few days that made the movement of May-June '68 a revolution that was betrayed by the bureaucrats—if that idea makes any sense at all.

## **Renault-Flins**

In metallurgy, the employers adopted a hard line attitude and refused to negotiate any demands not set forth on the Grenelle Protocol. Is this why the government did not try to enforce a return to work at Renault-Flins?

During the Pentecost holiday weekend, the executives, managers and foremen at Flins made personal visits to the homes of the workers in order to encourage them to assert their “right to work”. And on Tuesday, June 4, the management of Flins held a vote that the trade unions only made the weakest attempts to obstruct, although up to this time they had proclaimed that they were

categorically opposed to any attempt on the part of the employers to separately consult the workers. Only an attack by the “leftists”, who seized the ballot boxes and burned the ballots, prevented this vote from being successfully held. The trade unions did not proclaim their support for the continuation of the strike until after these events took place. But on the night of June 5-6, the police demolished the fence around the factory, evicted the occupiers and took control of the plant. This factory was chosen due to its rural location. Jacques Baynac points out that, “the factory was occupied from the very first hours of the strike by workers who were often not members of the trade unions, or else they were members of the CFDT, but rarely members of the CGT”.<sup>29</sup> This may be another reason why this plant was chosen. The CFDT thought so.<sup>30</sup> In any event, if the employers’ organization, the UIMM (Union of Metallurgical and Mining Industries) was steadfast in its refusal to negotiate, this was also for the purpose of forcing the government to do its job of repression and thus secure a return to work without any further concessions. We shall see below that, since this repression did not have the hoped-for effectiveness, the government would turn against the employers of this sector in order to force them to make concessions that would allow work to resume.

The workers having been evicted, the factory opened under the protection of the police. Even the executives, the middle managers and the immigrant workers (over whom the threat of deportation always loomed) refused to return to work.

On that same morning of June 6, a rally was held, attended by between 2,000 and 3,000 people, with speakers such as the communist deputy for the electoral district and the socialist Mayor of Les Mureaux (the city just to the east of Flins). That same evening, another rally was held, this one attended by 5,000 people, but it did not result in any clear proposals. It concluded in an atmosphere of confusion and discouragement. On the night of June 6-7, despite police surveillance, several hundred students arrived from Paris. On the morning of June 7, they participated in the meeting that had been initially intended by the trade unions to be held in Les Mureaux, but was later transferred to the Place de l'Etoile de Elisabethville (a city bordered by the Renault factories on the west), because it was in the latter city where most of the workers resided. It should be mentioned that Geismar attended this meeting, the former general secretary of SNESup, now a Maoist militant, although they sat quietly in the audience. The

CGT denounced the presence of the students and warned the workers against provocations. On the previous day, the CGT had issued a communiqué making its “complete disagreement” with the intention of the students and professors to march to Flins perfectly clear.<sup>31</sup> But the crowd did not agree and finally succeeded in having Geismar address the meeting.<sup>32</sup> Geismar very modestly made a short speech on the topic of “serving the people”, which apparently convinced the workers. When the meeting came to an end, and when some groups approached the factory defended by the riot police, the latter attacked them without any warning. This was the first of a series of extremely violent confrontations.

For several days, the police would impose a state of emergency on the entire region. The repression was deliberately indiscriminate. The cops attacked ambulances and pursued the strikers and the students through the parks and the fields, with the support of helicopters. It was enough to be a student in order to get a beating. It was enough to have a car with a license plate from outside the Department to have your tires punctured. The objective was to terrorize the population, which for the most part did not cooperate with the police and sometimes gave refuge to fugitives and concealed

them from the police. On June 10, a unit of special mobile policemen<sup>33</sup> located several young people sleeping on the banks of the Seine, on a small island near the bridge between Meulan and Les Mureaux. The police attack was deliberately carried out by surprise and was well planned, and the young people had no other choice but to jump into the water. One of them, Gilles Tautin, 17 years old, a militant of the UJCML, drowned. Only the account of Christian Charrière points out that three policemen stripped off their uniforms and jumped into the water to try to save him.<sup>34</sup> The incident took place shortly before nightfall. During the night, the police units withdrew from the area.

On Monday, June 10, the management at Flins called upon the workers to return to work. Only a few showed up. The trade unions had no problem convincing them not to enter the factory. But on the following day, Tuesday, June 11, work was partially resumed. Among those who returned to work were some members of the “Proletarian CGT”, allies of the Maoists. As they entered the plant, they renewed the occupation and raised the red flag. According to the trade union reports of what happened that day, the trade unions did not arrive at the factory until the evening. The CFDT sought to convince the strikers to evacuate the factory. The CGT did not

commit itself either way. To prevent the other workers from joining the strikers, the management declared a lockout. The police surrounded the factory where, at the end of the day, there were no more than a “hundred determined comrades”. It is assumed that they evacuated the factory during the night.

On Wednesday, June 12, negotiations began at the level of the RNUR (Régie nationale des usines Renault)<sup>35</sup> as a whole. They ended on the 15th, and the results were presented to the workers. FO published a negative analysis, for the entire bargaining unit. The CFDT entitle its pamphlet, “Not Good Enough”. The Proletarian CGT of Flins was also opposed.

These reactions are understandable if one compares the two charts that we shall set forth below. The first shows the demands presented to the workers of Billancourt by A. Halbeher on the morning of May 27, prior to the arrival of Séguy, and in defense of which he called upon the workers to vote in favor of prolonging the strike. The second is the one that Halbeher presented when he called upon the workers to return to work on June 17.<sup>36</sup>

[Chart would not reproduce in this format--Translator's Note]

Demands of May 27 Conquests of June 17

Payment for all days on strike Payment for 50% of strike days

Across the board wage increase Wage increase of 10% in 1968

No wage less than 1,000 francs/month

40 hours work for 48 hours pay Reduction of the work week by one and a half hours

Retirement at 60 Nothing about retirement

Monthly paycheck for wage workers Monthly paycheck for wage workers over the age of 55

Guarantee of trade union rights in the workshop

“Extended and greater” trade union rights

Suppression of the anti-strike clauses in the payment of bonuses Quarterly bonuses; partial abolition of the anti-strike clause

Suppression of temporary contracts for immigrants

We may add that the agreement made no reference at all to the reduction and limitation of wage differentials.

The Proletarian CGT of Flins emphasized this in a pamphlet that compared “what we demanded” and what “the employer is proposing to give us”.[37](#)

The CGT of Flins, of course, considered the results to be satisfactory and called for a return to work “tomorrow”.

At the same time, however, it called for the workers to “hold discussions in each workshop of the list of demands, focused in particular on the work rates and the working conditions”.<sup>38</sup> This indicates that even after the strike and the negotiations there were issues that remained unresolved. At Flins, the vote held on June 17 showed that only a slim majority of 58% of the workers was in favor of a return to work. This means that there were, out of 8,300 votes cast, approximately 3,500 that were still not satisfied.<sup>39</sup> It is therefore not surprising that on the 19th, the first day of the return to work, a work stoppage took place. Various foreign workers had been fired for having gone on strike, and the work rate had been increased from 32 to 36 cars per hour.<sup>40</sup> This episode is emblematic of the causes of the strike and of the problems that would still not be resolved for many years.

## **Peugeot-Sochaux**

The resistance to the return to work was even more violent at Sochaux than it was at Flins. The negotiations between the trade unions and the management began on May 31. They did not obtain any results that day. On the following day, the management made some slightly more favorable offers. In vain. On June 4, the

management held a vote. The strike committee called for a boycott of the voting. 42% of the workers participated in the vote and 77% of those who voted wanted to return to work. The trade unions considered the vote to be null and void and did not respect its results.<sup>41</sup> They held another vote on June 8. 5,279 workers participated in the voting this time (a 20% rate of participation) and the proposal to go back to work won by 49 votes.<sup>42</sup> The three trade unions agreed to consider this vote to be binding. They put an end to the occupation and evacuated the factory during the course of the evening.<sup>43</sup> On the morning of Monday, June 10, the company buses began to circulate through the area to pick up the workers and work resumed in the factory; it must be said, however, that this work was conducted in a very lethargic manner. The workers abandoned their work stations to hold discussions, and two rumors rapidly made the rounds: that the work rates would be increased and that the management would force the workers to work 17 Saturdays in order to make up for the time lost to the strike. At ten in the morning the strike broke out in the body shop section of the plant. There were CFDT militants involved in the beginning of this strike, which spread like wildfire. At three in the afternoon, 10,000 workers voted to go on strike and to occupy the factory.

Several hundred of them organized to spend the night in the plant.

The order to evacuate the factory came immediately from Paris. For its part, the management of the plant made it known by radio that work had resumed on Monday, and that the company buses were running and would continue to operate. At three in the morning, the riot police appeared at the gates of the factory and ordered the workers to evacuate the premises.

Meanwhile, other riot police had climbed over the fences on the other side of the plant and invaded the factory, which they unceremoniously cleared, with seemingly deliberate violence. By the morning, the riot police had occupied the factory compound, while the workers had gathered on Avenue Helvétie, which divides the factory compound in two. They built barricades and began to reconquer the factory buildings by throwing bricks at the riot police who were inside the buildings. The riot police left the buildings and engaged in bitter fighting with the strikers until the end of the day. Strikers and non-striking workers who were arriving in the company buses to go to work joined in the battle. Workers from other enterprises also joined the fight. Other factories in the region also went on strike. The battle claimed two fatalities: Henri Blanchet, who was thrown off a bridge by

the blast of a tear gas grenade and died from a skull fracture, and Pierre Beylot, who died as a result of three shots fired at him by a policeman. The police went berserk and committed terrible outrages. They were evacuated from the region around nine in the evening, and while leaving continued to puncture the tires of cars and fire tear gas grenades indiscriminately and at random. After their departure, the workers invaded the building that had served as the police headquarters, the Peugeot club-hotel, where the factory directors and executives customarily met and where the management held receptions for VIPs. The place was ransacked.[44](#)

On Wednesday, June 12, the factory was still closed. And it would remain closed until June 21, the date set for the return to work. For a week, the management and the trade unions were unable to reach an agreement. Finally, on June 19, and after government intervention, a representative of the Paris headquarters of Peugeot arrived at Sochaux with new proposals. In a few hours, an agreement was concluded.

## **The last metal workers return to work**

The government put the same kind of pressure on Citroën. Like the management of Peugeot, the

management of Citroën was betting on the collapse of the strike and thought that the Grenelle Accords were more than sufficient. An agreement was finally concluded, and the leaders of the CGT appeared before the personnel at Javel to defend the agreement. This took place on June 21. But they were opposed in the assembly by a strong contingent of young workers, who brandished placards advocating prolonging the strike, and this led the CGT leaders to decide that there was not a sufficient quorum present at the assembly and that it would be preferable to postpone the vote. This took place on the 24th, that is, after the first round of the elections; the return to work was set for the 25th.

The employers in the metallurgical sector displayed the same attitude as those at Peugeot and Citroën. This is why it was this sector that was the last to go back to work. The trade unions did everything they could, but the workers resisted. We possess the testimony of the dissident communists of Hispano-Suiza.<sup>45</sup> During the second week of June, the CGT first managed to get the workers to accept the principle of the secret ballot. Then, it held a vote in which it made the entire personnel vote, including those who had not actively participated in the strike or the occupation. But this divide-and-conquer tactic was not enough: the majority was in favor of

continuing the strike. The trade unions then proposed that the issue of the return to work should be discussed again in the respective trade union sections.

Immediately, the CGT organized an assembly of all its members (the first such assembly held during the strike). The meeting was tumultuous, and the leaders had to hold several votes before obtaining a majority in favor of a return to work. On Monday, June 17, at a general assembly of all the personnel, the CGT spoke of going back to work, but only if certain conditions were met by management—a position it would abandon the next day. On Tuesday, June 18, during the last meeting of the strike, the leader of the CGT considered the return to work to be a *fait accompli*, and folded up the red flag solemnly, declaring that it would fly again someday. Then he called upon the workers to go back to their work stations. No one moved. A moment of great confusion ensued. Some entered the factory, but only to resume their activities as part of the occupation. Most remained in the square in front of the factory. The CGT caused the factory siren to sound in order to get those who had entered the factory to leave. As the factory was evacuated, the doors were closed on a plant that was vacant, except for the CGT leader who continued to speak on the factory public address system, asking the

workers to trust him. Some of the workers wept. Work in the factory would resume on June 19.

Saviem<sup>46</sup> went back to work on Friday the 21st, but Usinor did not resume work until the 26th. At Caterpillar in Grenoble, Paris-Rhône in Lyon and at Bourgoin (Isère), the return to work would take place even later.

- 1. Pentecost is the feast day that is celebrated fifty days after Easter, and commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the activity of the Church. In the Catholic liturgy it is the most important feast day after Easter and Christmas. The Monday after Pentecost is a holiday in France.
- 2. *Charbonnages de France*, Coal France, an enterprise created in 1946 after the nationalization of the private mining companies.
- 3. O. Kourchid, E. Eckert, “Les mineurs des houillères en grève: l’insertion dans un mouvement national” (“The miners of the coal basin on strike: their insertion into a national movement”), in *1968: Exploration du Mai français*, p. 105.
- 4. A rally convoked by UNEF, PSU and the CFDT that was attended by between 30,000 and 50,000 people.
- 5. Jacques-Émile Massu (1908-2002) was the French general in command of the paratroopers who were sent to fight against the FLN in the Algerian War that culminated with Algerian independence. Born into a family with a long history of military service, he served in Africa during the Second World War with the Free French Forces. In September 1945 he was sent to Saigon, where he participated in the reconquest of the city and of southern Indochina. A brigadier general in 1955, he commanded the 10th Parachute Division,

which he used to “win” the Battle of Algiers by using the most brutal methods, including, among others, systematic torture. He participated in the Algiers coup d’état of May 13, 1958, whose goal was to discredit the socialist government, which was considered to be too soft, and to ensure that Algeria remained in French hands. This coup also ensured the return of general DeGaulle to the center of the political stage. In 1960, after having criticized the policies of president DeGaulle, he was dismissed from his position as commander of the army in Algeria. His departure led to the outbreak of fighting and barricades in Algiers for a week. In 1966 he was appointed as commander in chief of the French military in Germany.

- [6.](#) P. Viansson-Ponté has expressed his doubts about this explanation for DeGaulle’s trip to Baden-Baden. According to him, the trip was a “purely cold-blooded, tactical and long-planned” bluff. See *Histoire de la République gaullienne*, Paris, 1971, Vol. II, p. 552.
- [7.](#) This figure was provided by the police. The figure that is commonly cited is one million. See Viansson-Ponté, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.
- [8.](#) This refers to the colors of the French flag.
- [9.](#) See Dansette, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.
- [10.](#) Raymond Aron (1905-1983), French philosopher, sociologist and political commentator. In the words of

Edward Shils, Aron abandoned socialism during his youth in order to become “the most persistent, most severe and the most well informed critic of Marxism and the socialist social order—or more precisely communist—of the 20th century”.

- [11](#). Quoted by Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
- [12](#). *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- [13](#). L. Salini, of the PCF, in *Le Mai des prolétaires*, does not mention this fact.
- [14](#). *Op. cit.*, p. 471.
- [15](#). Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
- [16](#). CDR: created after the televised address of May 24 by general DeGaulle, by Charles Pasqua and Pierre Lefranc, these “committees” of thugs appeared in organized formations at the big demonstration of May 30 at the Champs-Élysées.
- [17](#). The Bourses du Travail are local trade union centers of a typically French character, a legacy of the first structures of working class mutual aid and the foundations of French trade unionism. Sometimes owned by the municipality—all the major French cities had one, financed in part by the municipality—sometimes owned by the trade unions, today they are public buildings where the trade unions can hold their activities: meetings, information, cultural events, etc. But they are not properly speaking the headquarters of

any trade unions. They are currently used by social movements as well.

- [18](#).According to Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
- [19](#).In Mouriaux *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- [20](#).The manipulations of the CGT were so blatant that the CFDT immediately protested, without challenging the results of the vote count.
- [21](#).Quoted by Naudet, in Mouriaux..., *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- [22](#).Concerning the rank and file committees and their role in criticizing the trade unions, see the account of the Italian case in the appendix.
- [23](#).According to G. Ribeill, in Mouriaux *et al.*, p. 133, and Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- [24](#).*Ibid.*, p. 135.
- [25](#).Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- [26](#).The FO in this sector was under the control of the OCI and rejected the agreement. See Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
- [27](#).SNI: National Syndicate of teachers of EGB.
- [28](#).Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
- [29](#).Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
- [30](#).Talbo, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- [31](#).On June 7, the CGT of the Paris region published another denunciation of the student initiatives which disrupted “the consultations being held prior to the

return to work” of the metallurgy sector (see Talbo, *op. cit.*, p. 42).

- [32.](#) On the following day, June 8, during the course of a meeting in Les Mureaux, the CGT disconnected the sound system when the pressure from the crowd forced it to yield the podium to the students. This provoked an irate protest against the CGT, until a rank and file trade union member went to find a sound system to replace the one disabled by the CGT. Then an unofficial meeting was held, after the official one had finally come to an end.
- [33.](#) The equivalent of the National Guard.
- [34.](#) Charrière, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
- [35.](#) National corporate center of the Renault factories.
- [36.](#) According to Frémontier, *op. cit.*, pp. 368 and 373.
- [37.](#) Quoted by Talbo, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- [38.](#) Pamphlet distributed on Sunday, June 16, quoted by Talbo, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- [39.](#) Billancourt voted 78% to 22% to go back to work, Cléon 75% to 25%, Le Mans 79% to 21%, while at Sandouville the vote was almost unanimous in favor of a return to work. Data provided by Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 589.
- [40.](#) J.-Ph. Talbo, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97.
- [41.](#) Hatzfeld, in Mouriaux *et al.*, p. 54.
- [42.](#) Figures cited by Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

- [43](#). Likewise, at Berliet on June 18, a return to work was favored by 50% vs. 49% of the votes; the majority was not decisive, and the trade unions withdrew from the factory without issuing any directives or instructions whatsoever.
- [44](#). Rioux and Backmann, *op. cit.*, p. 573 *et seq.*
- [45](#). *Ouvriers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 197 *et seq.*
- [46](#). Saviem: Société Anonyme de Véhicules Industriels et d'Equipements Mécaniques (Industrial Vehicle and Mechanical Equipment Corporation).

## Elements of analysis

The account of the strikes of May-June 1968 that we have just elaborated depicts an enormous strike movement, which arose in a very short period of time, in a situation where no one expected it, and which nonetheless ended without any significant victories. How do we analyze it, how do we define it? We may concentrate some elements of analysis around two themes that we have already mentioned: the reappearance of unemployment and the crisis of assembly line labor.

Starting in the mid-1960s, we witnessed a reduction in the rate of capital accumulation in most industrialized countries. We shall not examine the details of that which, while at first sight appearing to be a shift within the general trend, was in fact the end of an era. What was at first interpreted as a short-term cyclical oscillation was actually the turning point of a long cycle.<sup>1</sup> This period witnessed the first signs of the entry into a long period of recession, whose inception is often dated to the so-called oil crisis of 1974, a recession that is still with us. The period that came to a close at the end of the 1970s, sometimes referred to as the thirty glorious years (1945-

1975), began after the end of the war and was characterized by:

- An almost complete disappearance of unemployment;
- Steady growth of wages and buying power;
- A sustained rate of accumulation, thanks to large increases in productivity linked to the development of assembly line labor.

The collapse of these three pillars lies at the heart of the social crises of the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and not only in France.

## **The end of full employment and the stagnation of buying power**

For the sake of convenience, we shall examine the first two points together, and we shall focus only on the case of France.

Faced with the slowdown of post-war growth, which was already visible before 1968, the capitalists attempted to increase the rate of exploitation. This led to a resurgence of struggles, with very hard-fought strikes that could barely be controlled by the trade unions and violent demonstrations, especially in the provinces. The cause of these struggles was the attempt, on the part of the

employers, to reduce wages, and to do this they most commonly utilized two methods:

1. On the one hand, there are various conflicts that broke out because the employers reduced the number of working hours without increasing the hourly pay of the workers who were paid by the hour. We have already seen an example such as that of the workers at Rhodiaceta in March 1967 and the example of the factory at Sud-Aviation in Bouguenais, near Nantes, in April 1968 (See Part One, Chapter 1). In April 1965, however, the same situation arose at Peugeot. The uncompensated reduction in working hours also constituted, in the latter case, the loss of a concession that had already been won in a previous struggle. Ever since 1955, a fund that was contributed by the employer compensated, at least in part, for the financial losses caused by the reductions in wages as a result of curtailments in working hours.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the new policy led on this occasion to a long conflict, with unplanned work stoppages and strikes in alternation. The management responded by firing 2,700 strikers, and the conflict ended with the defeat of the workers.

We also have information concerning the case of Saviem in Caen (5,000 employees, of whom 3,500 were

specialized workers). In June 1967, the workweek was reduced from 47.3 hours to 45 hours with a corresponding reduction in the weekly wage. On January 23, 1968, the workers at the factory went on strike at the initiative of the CFDT; this strike spread to two nearby factories, Jaeger and Sonormel. On January 24, a demonstration culminated in very violent confrontations with the police. On January 26, a rally took place that was attended by 10,000 people, including students and teachers. The FEN was booed when it called for calm and dignity. The trade unions lost control of the situation and the demonstration that followed the rally ended with street clashes in the neighborhood of the City Hall. The young workers distinguished themselves by their aggressiveness. They broke windows, set fire to gasoline tanks and used slings and ball bearings as weapons. The battle lasted all night. On the 29th, the riot police invaded the factory. Work resumed on February 5; none of the demands of the Saviem workers had been satisfied. The workers at the other two factories obtained a partial satisfaction of their grievances.[3](#)

In these three examples (Peugeot, Saviem, Sud-Aviation) the violence of the workers' reaction to a wage reduction that may seem minimal thirty years later, is indicative of an abrupt transformation in the environment of class

relations. It was not a case of the workers being “objectively” unable to bear a reduction in their buying power. The following years unfortunately proved this. But what happened was that the concessions won during the period of growth were being attacked for the first time, and the workers’ reaction is a barometer of the workers’ shock.

2. On the other hand, the restructuring that was applied, in all sectors, for the inauguration of the Common Market, led to layoffs and shifts in job assignments that highlighted the end of full employment and the return of precarious conditions. Once again, we refer to the case of Rhodiaceta. It is true that, in September 1967, when the company announced a reduction of the workweek from 44 to 40 hours, there was no reaction from the workers. When, however, in December the management announced a reduction in the Christmas bonus and 2,000 layoffs before the end of 1969, the reaction was violent and escaped the control of the trade unions. To no avail, however.

Another example: Pierre Viansson-Ponté<sup>4</sup> recounts what happened on January 26, 1968 in Fougères (Ille-et-Vilaine). In this peaceful subprefecture, the trade unions organized a demonstration to protest the closings of enterprises that had been taking place for years. Once

the demonstration reached city hall, it turned violent. Some youths' broke windows, and knocked down the traffic signal posts. Then they climbed the walls of the city hall compound, tore down the tricolor flag and trampled it in the dirt. When the police tried to disperse them, the youths turned and fought. For that time, in the context of the provinces, their reaction seemed to be totally savage.

This same characteristic would typify other instances of the expression of the desire to “work in the country”, to live and work in the region where one was born, which was particularly strong in the west of France. This inclination would be the reason for the success of the events of May 8, 1968. On that day, all the personalities of the political and social life of the region, including the priests,<sup>5</sup> gathered together to request action to bring jobs and economic activity back to the economy of the West. The movement was significant. In the demonstration at Angers, one could read slogans like, “Displace the factories, not the men” or “No to the Deportation of Labor”.<sup>6</sup> This was a direct response to the concern of the employers and the government to take advantage of the geographical mobility of labor power.

In 1965, French capitalism entered into a period of rapid restructuring. A law passed in July 1965 provided impetus for this trend with beneficial tax breaks. With its planning, the government sought to take advantage of the potential of restructuring the principle sectors around one or two enterprises that could attempt, due to their size, to compete on an international level. For example, in the aeronautics sector, complicated maneuvers were undertaken to bring about the formation of the SNIAS.<sup>7</sup> In 1965 the employers announced a planned reduction of the work force by 15,000 employees; that is, 15% of the jobs would be lost. One of the concerns of the government in this context was to make the labor market flexible in order to favor migration towards other industries due to the factory closures. It was with this goal in mind that the ANPE<sup>8</sup> was created in 1967.

The unemployment rate in France (in percent, from 1962 to 1985)

[Graph would not reproduce in this format--Translator's Note]

With twenty years of hindsight, the unemployment rate of 1968 may seem rather insignificant, and this leads us to ask how and why it managed to arouse such anger. It

is true that it had registered a strong increase, from 200,000 unemployed in 1964 to 300,000 in 1967. This is a very large increase, but the rate of unemployment was still low. The curve on the above graph might lead one to think that the alarming declarations about the growth of unemployment between 1966 and 1967 were hardly justified. To the contrary, they were totally justified. Since what appeared above all as a minor mathematical increase in the rate of unemployment was actually the appearance of a new kind of unemployment.

Starting in the late 1960s, unemployment ceased to be a momentary and exceptional lack of employment. It also became an instrument at the service of the modernization of French capitalism. According to André Gauron, demographic factors alone do not explain the growth of unemployment. The economy had created numerous jobs. But “between 1965 and 1970, the mobility registered for the various categories of labor showed a 50% increase over the period extending from 1959 to 1964”. It is this mobile labor power which, in search of other jobs due to the effects of restructuring, explains the growth of unemployment, and which caused wage levels to decline by replacing the older workers with young ones, and Parisians with provincials,<sup>9</sup> men with women, French workers with immigrants. Gauron

concludes that, “much more than the wage policy, the mobility of labor has been the primary weapon of a global devalorization of labor power...”[10](#)

The discussions to which Georges Pompidou, at that time prime minister of France, invited various social figures in 1967, pointed in the same direction. At the moment when the debate over the Social Security Laws was beginning to take shape, Pompidou proposed discussions to include the three parties—the government, the employers and the trade unions—that would address five points:

1. Increase in the unemployment insurance payments.
2. Creation of joint commissions to survey the restructuring and its consequences.
3. Establishment of a minimum period of advance notice for mass layoffs.
4. Special measures for mergers.
5. Compensation for partial unemployment.

The fact that a right wing government had proposed an increase in the unemployment insurance payment is an indication of the level of rigidity the labor market had attained after thirty years of accelerated accumulation. After that phase of full employment, this measure was necessary to buy a little flexibility from labor power. With

this procedure, the capitalists utilized unemployment to announce the return of precarious conditions and to reassert the principle of the proletarians' condition: to work, they have to sell their labor power. There is no right to work, but only a relation of forces between buyers and sellers of labor power, and the balance was tipping in favor of the capitalists. This process did, of course, take several years and, in the early 1970s, it would be significantly camouflaged by the ideological discourse concerning the recomposition of labor, which was allegedly destined to overcome the crisis of assembly line labor. Meanwhile, the workers almost immediately perceived the precariousness of their situation. The plans to cushion the social impact of unemployment did not pacify them, and the demand to work in the region where they grew up must be understood in connection with this trend.

The return to this fundamental truth, that the labor market is the arena of the precariousness of the proletariat, after the thirty glorious years, is, in my opinion, one of the basic elements that explain the power of the social movement of 1968. It is this factor that explains the anger of the workers at Sud-Aviation, their enraged rejection of a reduction of the workweek that was not fully compensated for by an increase in the

hourly wage. These workers did not work on the assembly lines and their activism did not have its origin in the “anti-work” attitude of the specialized workers (we shall examine this issue below). Its origin is the insidious return of precariousness by way of part time work, restructuring and the relocation of the workplaces from the Paris region towards the provinces. It was not yet a situation, as it is now, characterized by the ubiquity of unemployment in society, but these developments did constitute perceptible signs of the advent of such a situation. For example, it was this same return of precariousness that explains the appearance of marginal proletarians (young hoodlums and juvenile delinquents and all kinds of people with nothing to do) who would constitute an active factor in the radicalization of the movement from the moment of the outbreak of the very first student demonstrations.

Of course, the end of full employment also had an impact on wages. Here, too, the complaints and grievances had been accumulating for years. The austerity plan implemented by the government in 1963 to control inflation did not prevent the buying power of wages from rising, although at a constantly diminishing rate. The buying power of the average wage rose 6% in 1960, and 5% in 1963. In 1967, it did not rise by more than

2%.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this increase was distributed in an increasingly more unequal way between the high and low wage employees. The gap between them had been widening for years.... The difference between the average wage of a high-level executive and that of a worker grew by 6% between 1962 and 1967.<sup>12</sup> But it was above all the difference between the minimum wage and the average wage that was most shocking in 1968. Between 1955 and 1967, the buying power of the average wage rose from 129 to 197 (1950=100), while that of the minimum wage had stagnated around 120.

This widening of the wage gap was at the root of an egalitarian demand that was frequently expressed in May 1968. Wage increases by percentages were often rejected by the strikers in favor of across the board, flat rate increases that were equal for everyone. This demand was only partially satisfied, since the CGT took a strong stand in favor of the wage hierarchy and against egalitarianism.

To summarize, the slowing of accumulation at the end of the 1960s took us back to normal capitalism. The exception of the thirty glorious years had come to an end. Everywhere, but especially in France, where archaisms were more prevalent, the extraordinary

profitability of capital of that era was being exhausted. This profitability was bound to the introduction of assembly line labor into a society in which, at the start of World War Two, Taylorism had not yet become generalized, and in which the reserves of potential productivity gains were therefore immense. They were so immense because they were based on “the profits from ‘classical’ Taylorist and Fordist principles added to the profits resulting from the utilization of industrial automation”.<sup>13</sup> Immense but not inexhaustible; for the Fordist organization of labor seemed to be reaching its limits, too. This is the third characteristic element of this period.

## **The limits of assembly line labor**

The scientific organization of labor (SOL) made its appearance at the end of the 19th century, first in the United States. The SOL analyzed the gestures of skilled workers, and broke down their skilled jobs into a succession of elementary tasks that required the smallest possible number of physical motions. Its goal was, quite clearly, to prevent the worker from using his knowledge as a shield to protect any attempt on his part to withhold or slow down his productive activity. At the same time, it also sought to increase productivity and raise the volume

of production thanks to the massive utilization of cheap, unskilled workers—or workers who can be taught the requisite skills in a few days.

Shortly before the First World War, the Taylorized workers were linked together by a kind of transport system: they became assembly line workers. This procedure was first implemented by Ford, in the United States.<sup>14</sup> It was not universally applied, however, until after the end of World War Two, especially in Europe and Japan. The difference between the assembly line and Taylorism lies in the fact that by using the assembly line the capitalist goes even further with regard to the elimination of down time or unproductive time and “shirking”. The assembly line eliminates a large part of the labor of supervision and above all it imposes its work rate on workers who each carry out an elementary operation on one piece that is moving past them. These are the unskilled workers, the specialized workers of the era of May 1968.

Taylorism and Fordism were thus two essential moments in the de-skilling of labor, of the second dispossession of labor. In the first dispossession, it lost all ownership of its means of production. In the second, it lost all skill: *speed*

*as a skill* [in English in original—Translator’s Note], this is what the time study engineers were seeking to impose.

Starting in the mid-sixties, the exploitation of assembly line labor underwent a decline in effectiveness. The employers sought to compensate for this decline by reducing wages and making working conditions worse. We have seen how the conflicts that heralded May ’68 had features in common with the “revolt of the specialized workers” (particularly at Caen). In May-June 1968, the signs of the revolt of the specialized workers also appeared in the strike movement: at first with the activism of the young workers (Renault, especially), and above all at the end with the resistance to the return to work (Flins and Sochaux). This having been said, we must point out that the crisis of the “scientific organization of labor” which arose at that time was not a new phenomenon.

According to Georges Friedmann, “the Second World War played, in the history of the organization of labor, an almost revolutionary role by compelling American industry to abruptly reconvert its facilities, under the impact of urgent demands for armaments, to new production techniques, with labor power that was often unskilled”.[15](#)

The reconversion that Friedmann is talking about is not the introduction of the SOL, which had already been implemented in the United States before the war, but the overcoming of its limits. Wartime conditions were such that, during this period, one may speak of the limits of the assembly line. Friedmann insists on the fact that the questioning of the organization of labor according to the most advanced models of the era was never in response to a humanitarian intention to seek to alleviate the burden of the workers with regard to their many repetitive tasks, but exclusively for the purpose of responding to the needs of profitability and efficiency. Of course, the efficiency of labor presupposes a minimum of cooperation on the part of the workers, and it was around this question that factory managers and industrial psychologists would collaborate to define solutions that were supposed to generate this minimum of cooperation.

Georges Friedmann tells us about the tanks that were manufactured by Cadillac. Two factories, using the same machinery to make the same products, exhibited a significant difference in productivity. The first, entirely conceived in accordance with the canons of the SOL, was ultra-modern. The second, which was forced to

improvise in unsuitable circumstances, was compelled to continuously resort to ingenuity. It was obviously the latter that was more efficient: it found a way to obtain the cooperation of the workers. He also cites a case of job enrichment<sup>16</sup> applied at an IBM assembly line in 1943. The result was higher quality products, a more satisfied workforce (which, we must point out, received higher than average pay) and lower overhead costs.

These lessons learned from wartime conditions were to be extended and developed after the end of the war. They did not, however, spread so fast and so far that the problem of the limits of the SOL seemed new in the decade of the 1960s.

In fact, despite the enthusiasm he expresses for job enrichment and job rotation, Friedmann does not conceal the limits of the application of “job enrichment”. He admits that its future lies particularly in the development of the polyvalence of workers who will be the servants of automated machinery and that this latter situation cannot at all be described as an instance of “job enrichment”. And he reports that in 1950, in the United States, job enrichment in the classical (non-automated) Fordist industries could only be economically justified for 500,000 workers, despite the conclusive experiences of

the war. According to his data, there were 11.7 million specialized workers and 3.8 million unskilled laborers. Since it is clear that the application and development of solutions that would replace the pure and simple SOL would not become a reality until the employers perceived benefits for themselves—including the issue of finding an effective response to workers resistance—it must be concluded that, given this limited spread of the “new SOL”, the latter was not really profitable.

Returning to our discussion, we have therefore established the fact that, during the late 1960s in France, the limits of the SOL were already evident. Nonetheless, there were still millions of workers who were performing the “impoverished” assembly line labor advocated by Taylor and Ford. Nothing better had yet been discovered to increase productivity.

In a crucial analysis of this moment of the technical-economic limits of assembly line labor and the decline of the accumulation of capital, Benjamín Coriat identifies two main reasons that explain why the SOL had encountered an objective limit:

Quote:

*“On the one hand, an over-developed division of labor increases the transport and transfer time between one work assignment and another, which is unproductive. Labor is subdivided in order to suppress down time generated by workers’ shirking, but this down time is multiplied by an endless extension of the assembly line. ‘And it turns out that after a certain level of “losses”, it becomes useful to ask oneself about just how much real economy of time has been achieved’.”[17](#)*

*“On the other hand, the more numerous the separate work assignments, the longer the assembly line and the more difficult and complicated it is to reach equilibrium. By equilibrium we mean the coordination of multiple individual tasks according to their order in the assembly line and the corresponding duration of their specific cycle of tasks.”*

We shall therefore recall that after a certain level of the division of labor has been attained, problems of scale arise, and that a beneficial restructuring of tasks was supposed to solve these problems. To a large extent, this “logical” solution would not go beyond ideological

discourse, emphasizing the value of certain concrete and pertinent experiences. Because at the end of the sixties, the predictions of the sociologists and other experts like Friedmann had been able to discover no other solution for the reduction of productivity gains than ... speed-ups. The fact that this “solution” is no solution at all is proven by the revolts of the workers in the strikes of May 1968 and, above all, the struggles of the following years, in France as well as other countries. In May 1968, it is from this sector of the working class that a large part of the strike impulse arose (Cléon, Flins). It was in this sector that the most ferocious battles against the return to work ordered by the trade unions took place. These battles were the signal that would then open up a period that witnessed a temporary halt to the increasing rate of exploitation of assembly line labor. They formed the basis of what has been called the anti-work movement. The conditions of exploitation were such that the specialized workers (especially the young workers) refused to continue playing the game of forfeiting their lives in order to earn a living. The “rejection of work” was primarily characterized by the spread of absenteeism and high rates of job *turn-over*,[18](#) [in English in the original—Translator’s Note] and more carelessness on the job, when not actual sabotage. All of which entailed higher and higher costs, and soon (after the beginning of the

1970s) the experts focused their attention on the problem of the assembly line, and on finding the solutions that were urgently required in order for both costs and productivity to reach levels that would allow for the general profitability of capital. They generally advocated the fragmentation of the assembly line by forming separate cells that would serve as shock absorbers, making the workers work in groups and/or recombining the separate tasks that had been excessively fragmented by the SOL. These recommendations were not much more effective than those offered by Friedmann and company.

Benjamín Coriat rejects the idea of a “rejection of work” (in general)[19](#) and thinks that the wage conditions of the specialized workers comprised the primary reason for their revolt. Referring to a report of the economists of the 6th Plan, he thinks that the objective basis of their dissatisfaction with manual labor was due to:

- The absence of a contract that covered these workers, who were not paid monthly.
- The level of their pay: with the exception of the Italian working class, the French working class was, according to him, the worst paid in Europe during this period.
- The excessive share represented by overtime pay in

their incomes, which was often subject to temporary economic oscillations.

What he says is that the specialized workers would not have rebelled:

- If they did not live under such precarious conditions and if they had been paid on a monthly basis.
- If they had been paid more.
- And if their higher wages had been more regular.

It is true that the specialized workers of May 1968 had been demanding to be paid on a monthly basis, that they had been demanding wage increases and the integration of bonuses into the regular wage (which would have the same effect as stabilizing wages by including overtime). And it is possible that, if these demands had been conceded at Grenelle or afterwards, there would have been a peaceful return to work. But this does not obviate the fact that, historically, the “solution” of the problem of the specialized workers went in precisely the opposite direction of the demands of the specialized workers as well as the recommendations of the experts: more precariousness, less buying power and more flexibility with regard to both hours and wages. And, of course, in the short term what took place was a no less painful process, quite the contrary, for the jobs that had not yet

been eliminated by the automation of certain assembly line operations. Comparing the situation of the workers in an auto factory after the passage of twenty years (1974 to 1994), Christophe Dejours was surprised to discover that the experts should have thought that there had been a radical transformation of the methods of work. According to him, “to the contrary, there is an indisputable similarity between yesterday and today ... Labor, as activity (in the ergonomic sense of work), is ultimately not so very different than it was twenty years ago, [except] that down time has disappeared, that the ‘dedication rate’ (the time devoted to the direct tasks of manufacture, assembly or production, measured against the total time that the worker spends on the assembly line [that is, once you subtract the time spent getting to the line, meals and breaks]) is much more burdensome than it was in the past, and that now there is actually no way for the worker to use his wits to beat the rate of the assembly line....”.<sup>20</sup> The question that arises is therefore why worse conditions than those of the past have not given rise to revolts on the part of today’s specialized workers. The explanation lies in the growth of unemployment.

The end of the decade of the 1960s was a turning point in a long cycle. Up until that time, capital appeared to

possess an irresistible power of expansion; it seemed to have an insatiable need for fresh labor power. After crossing this threshold, the opposite took place: growth slowed, immigration became problematic, and unemployment increased without remission. It was the particular character of this turning point which caused the revolt of the specialized workers to be expressed with such clarity and violence: their revolt was based on a situation of relatively high wages and a labor market that still needed labor, which facilitated their protest against the first signs of a reversal of the tendency towards expansion—a slowdown in the automatic wage increases, an acceleration of the speed of the assembly lines and a deterioration of working conditions, and partial unemployment.

One issue must be clarified: was unemployment one of the causes of the strikes of May 1968? Could we even say that the end of full employment and the appearance of unemployment generated fear and caused the workers to be more likely to join the strike, and that the absence of massive unemployment allowed the specialized workers to go on strike without fear of losing their jobs? Yes, because unemployment had not yet appeared in a generalized form. It was more obvious in certain sectors that were threatened by the restructurings (mining,

aeronautics...), and it was clearly less of a threat in the industries dominated by specialized workers. With reference to the automotive sector, Jacques Vincent even thinks that at the beginning of the 1970s it was getting more and more difficult to run the assembly lines with specialized workers.<sup>21</sup> Between 1962 and 1969, French automobile production increased by 60% but the number of workers it employed only increased by 24%. The 6th Plan foresaw a 36% increase in the number of employees for the period 1970-1975. This represents 73,000 workers, of whom 56,000 are specialized workers. Thus, during this period the labor market was favorable for the specialized workers.

It would take several years before the strikes of the specialized workers would express all of their potential for revolt and contestation and would end in defeat due to the development of mass unemployment and automation.

May '68 was just the beginning of this transition period between the end of the thirty glorious years and the start of the long recession of the end of the century. The specialized workers of 1968 rebelled against the fact that they were being forced to compensate for the reduced rate of profit with speed-ups and deteriorating working

conditions. To protest against this imposition, they had a strong foundation: full employment and the fact that they were irreplaceable. In May 1968 and during the subsequent years, this was the power upon which their revolt was based. Capital therefore sought to undermine this foundation of their power by means of automation, precariousness, unemployment, illegal immigration, etc. Just how effective this effort was can be gauged by a comparison between the different factories of the Toyota group that are today run by the same management. The latter estimates that the French, Thai and Indonesian workers are 20% more productive than their American counterparts, since the latter “are rather well off and therefore do not want to work so hard”. In France, “there are many unemployed and [those who still have jobs] have a tendency to work harder”. The Japanese “slack off and dawdle” and do not work as hard as they used to. Japanese productivity is higher because they do not use certain machines outside of Japan in order to prevent their competitors from copying their designs.<sup>22</sup> And J.-P. Durand observes, with regard to the automotive industry, that the conduct of the conscientious worker “is no longer compensated for as it was in the past (with a wage increase) [...] [but instead] he matches the production quotas without getting anything in return, except for keeping his job”.<sup>23</sup>

## **The conditions leading to a non-insurrectional general strike**

The return of unemployment and the slowdown in wage increases, the limitations of assembly line labor and the beginning of the revolt of the specialized workers: we have identified the principle manifestations of the decelerating tempo of capital accumulation at the end of the 1960s. They constitute the basis and are the deep-seated causes of the strikes of May-June 1968, whose proximate causes were probably the crisis of the universities and police repression. But what happened to these factors in the paradox of May '68, during this generalized strike that only led to the most insignificant results? Our investigation has shed light on a massive, hard-fought strike—so massive that it necessarily entailed friction with the trade unions and the left wing parties. A bitterly contested strike, which had the energy to reject Grenelle and demand more, but which never broke, except occasionally, with its representatives, almost always allowing them to speak in its name; a strike that did not invent modalities of struggle that would have allowed it to achieve something significant with regard to wages and working conditions. It is this contrast between the massiveness of the strike and the

negligible results it obtained, which makes it hard to define the movement. For the lack of anything better, I define it as a generalized non-insurrectional work stoppage. One would expect that 10 million striking workers would create an insurrectional climate. Is it possible to understand why this was not the case?

In *Il va falloir attendre* [We will have to wait], Gilles Dauvé and K. Néšic claim that “the proletarian assault will take place when a cycle of production reaches its peak and begins to enter into crisis. A dynamic proletariat presupposes a dynamic capitalism [....] After 1960, the worker could criticize work because he had the security of an almost permanent contract [....] It is by rejecting the wealth offered or promised and not imposed poverty that makes a social movement assume communist forms”.<sup>24</sup> The reference to the crisis of work and the 1960s would lead one to think that this general observation is also applicable to May '68. But this is not in fact the case, since at the end of their text, the authors point out that “1968 was not a revolutionary crisis for either of the two basic classes. In the developed countries, unlike what took place after 1917 [another peak of a cycle] a tacit agreement united the proletarians and the capitalists whereby each party agreed not to go too far”. Was this an exception? Dauvé and Néšic do not

tell us whether it was or not. In any event, their discussion of the position of a social movement within the context of a cycle is interesting.

A brief historical examination of the uprisings of the proletariat shows us that such uprisings occur at various moments of the long cycles of capital accumulation.<sup>25</sup> This leads one to think that the revolutionary crises of the history of the proletariat respond to numerous circumstantial factors that are not all cyclically bound. It is true that the German crisis of 1918-1919 took place at the culminating point of a cycle, but this was not the case with respect to the revolution of 1848, or the French Popular Front in 1936, or the Spanish Revolution (also in 1936). A detailed study of this topic has yet to be undertaken. But, in any case, “the communist affirmation of the proletariat” —assuming that by this term we must understand, in the absence of “communization” properly speaking, a critique in acts of the capitalist social relation<sup>26</sup> —can only be realized under the effect of the “poverty imposed” by a major crisis, which, by interrupting immediate reproduction, could lead to a mass movement of the proletariat towards communism—such as it is defined in every period of the capitalist mode of production (CMP). This major crisis may take place during the peak of a cycle

(the Commune, Germany in 1917), but due to very particular circumstances (military defeat and its consequences).

More comprehensible as an example, in the general “theoretical” model, of a working class crisis that occurred at the culminating point of a cycle, the May movement owed its limitations to the years of prosperity that preceded it and whose gains, taken as a whole, were still far from being threatened. The convergence of the slowdown in wage increases, the reappearance of unemployment and the problem of the specialized workers provoked the wave of demands, but did not generate a revolutionary situation. And there was no tacit agreement between the classes not to go too far. There was an explicit agreement between the employers, the trade unions and the government to manage as effectively as possible a situation that was undoubtedly difficult but also favorable for the resolution of the bottlenecks, with regard to concrete policies, that resulted from ten years of Gaullism.

It was also the position of May '68 at the culminating point of the cycle that allows us to understand a surprising and largely unexamined aspect of the strikes, that is, the very low rate of participation in the factory

occupations. We have seen that in many cases the wage workers clearly displayed reluctance to linger at their occupied workplaces while the strike was being decided. Did they go on strike or did they let the other workers go on strike for them?

It is evident that the workers were effectively on strike, in the sense that they did not show up at their workplaces, thus forfeiting their wages. But they stayed home, and only a minority of them attended the general assemblies and the periodic demonstrations organized by the trade unions. This mass of “passive” individuals watched this historical moment unfold from the sidelines, living off their savings and uninterested in the day-to-day affairs of the strike. Their participation in the strike was minimal. They neither wanted nor made any attempt to follow the progress of the movement; we suppose they were waiting to be called upon to return to work, or to vote on going back to work, leaving to the trade unions the elaboration of what they were supposed to think about all of this and not at all interested in the alleged political dimension of the strike (the democratic alternative to Gaullism, popular government and communist revolution).

This absenteeism of the strikers has a dual significance:

- On the one hand it means that the workplace (factory or office) no longer had the central function, which it had in other times, with regard to the affirmation of the class. The life of the workers in the work process is not the locus of the affirmation of their identity. Even the specialized workers, who demonstrated at the end of the strike that important questions were at stake, did not occupy the factories. They fought, they even gave their lives, in order not to return to work defeated. At Sochaux, on the morning of June 11, those who arrived in the company buses to go back to work immediately proceeded to join the battle against the riot police together with those who had remained in the factory overnight and who were evicted by the cops. The enormity of the frustration of having to return to work without any gains worthy of the name was clear, as far as their demands were concerned. They did not think, however, even from the very beginning of the strike, that the occupation of the factory would increase their chances of achieving their demands. Similarly, the fiasco of Grenelle clearly demonstrated that the workers “wanted more”. But after Grenelle, the occupations did not gain reinforcements—quite the contrary;
- On the other hand, the absenteeism of the strikers, insofar as it was a manifestation of their withdrawal to

private life instead of a *struggle outside the workplace*, displayed the existence of reserves, of a crisis situation that was not profound, of the possibility of hoping and having faith (more or less) in their representatives. We may contrast this situation with the struggle for survival during the recent crisis in Argentina, where the space outside the workplace was the scene of important struggles (neighborhood assemblies, blockading highways, looting supermarkets).

The low rate of participation in the occupation of the factories had the same basis as the anti-work attitudes of the specialized workers: work was no longer the basis of class identity, the factories and the offices were nothing but places where one earned money. This was a huge message that was sent by the strikers of May-June 1968, and one that has yet to be taken into account. We may assume that in a similar situation, if the workers were to engage in a mass strike today, they would once again display the same absenteeism. But this time, there would be less reserves, and the withdrawal to private life, already precarious before the strike, would be more difficult. Absenteeism would no longer be, or would only be with difficulty, the dispersion of individuals and the socialization of the strike, ultimately, will be more difficult than it would have been in May-June 1968.

Today, when we are in the midst of a downward phase of a long cycle, all the parameters for a revolt of the specialized and precarious workers (since this is what they have become) are present. Work is even more distressing than before, the pay is lower and does not lead to any kind of social “recognition” or prestige, such as Benjamín Coriat sought at the end of the 1960s when he called for monthly pay for the specialized workers. This revolt will therefore take place, if necessary, despite and against the threat of unemployment, without being able to rely on full employment or on private life. The workers and the unemployed will have to find within themselves the power, the foundation of support, which is no longer granted to them by capitalist socialization. This means that, if the revolt is to seek to go beyond the status of a brief riot, the strike activity will have to be much more imaginative than it was in May-June 1968. This also means that the game will be much more difficult for the trade unions.

- 1. Four long cycles of approximately fifty years each, known as “Kondratieff” waves, mark the rhythm of the history of capital since the end of the 19th century.
- 2. G. Lefranc, *Le mouvement syndical, de la Libération aux événements de mai-juin 1968*, Payot, 1969, p. 189.
- 3. P. Viansson-Ponté, *op. cit.*, p. 421, and G. Lange, in *1968, Exploration du mai français, op. cit.*, p. 224.
- 4. *Op. cit.*, p. 421.
- 5. “At best we are still just a few people who feel the underemployment and unemployment as ... a kind of scandal”, declared the bishop of Angers. Quoted by Marc Bergère in *Les Années 68, op. cit.*, p. 316.
- 6. *Ibid.*
- 7. The National Industrial Aerospace Corporation, usually known by the name of Aerospatiale after the 1970 merger of three other enterprises in this sector.
- 8. The National Employment Agency is a public institution under the control of the Ministry of Economy, Finances and Employment, which serves as a centralized bureau for the collection and organization of data concerning people looking for work and available jobs, maintains statistics on the number of job applicants and manages resources to help the latter. Together with the UNEDIC and other institutions, it forms part of the public services for employment.

- 9.The wage differential between the Paris region and the provinces was estimated to average 19% during this period.
- 10.A. Gauron, *Histoire économique et sociale de la V République*, p. 102.
- 11.See INSEE [National Institute for Economic Data and Statistics], *Données sociales*, 1987.
- 12.J.-F. Eck, *Histoire de l'économie française depuis 1945*, Paris, 1988, p. 139.
- 13.Benjamín Coriat, *L'atelier et le chronometer*, Bourgois, Paris, 1979, p. 219.
- 14.Hence the term, Fordism. In fact, it is likely that Henry Ford himself had copied procedures that he saw being used by the slaughterhouses in Chicago.
- 15.Friedmann, *Le Travail en miettes*, p. 91.
- 16.As opposed to repetitive labor, this “new” category of labor included other tasks that were not so repetitive, such as the supervision and maintenance of the machinery, which consequently implied an increase in the responsibilities of the worker.
- 17.Benjamín Coriat, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- 18.The rapid changing of jobs, which is the opposite of the traditional conception of a “job for life”.
- 19.It is true that he sees in the revolts of the specialized workers a “working class program ... a working class perspective on the organization of labor in the factory

of the future” [*op. cit.*, p. 189], which tells us something about the limits of Coriat’s own perspective.

- [20](#). Christophe Dejours, *La Souffrance en France*, Paris, 1998, pp. 63 and 60.
- [21](#). Jacques Vincent, “Les problèmes de personnel dans l’industrie automobile a l’heure du 6 Plan” [Personnel problems in the automotive industry under the 6th Plan], in *Le Mouvement social*, No. 81, Oct.-Dec. 1972.
- [22](#). *Financial Times*, March 3, 2003.
- [23](#). J.-P. Durand, in *L’Avenir du travail à la chaine*, Paris, 1998, p. 35 *et seq.*
- [24](#). Gilles Dauvé and K. Nésic, *Il va falloir attendre*, p. 2. Arhedis, BP 20306, 60203 Compiègne Cedex.
- [25](#). See, for example, “Périodisation du MPC, Histoire du capital, histoire des crises et du communisme”, in *Hic Salta*, 1998, ADES, 7, Impasse du Jardin-des-plantes, 13004 Marseille.
- [26](#). The formation of the CUBs in Italy is one example for the period in question. The rejection of parliamentary elections would have been another in June 1968, had it taken place....

## Epilogue

From the very moment that they began to call for a return to work, that is, after the announcement of the dissolution of Parliament and the plan to hold new elections, the CGT and the PCF never failed to invoke the workers' "second chance". By electing a left wing Parliament, the workers would be able to put political forces in the government that would easily correct the imperfections that marred the agreements on the basis of which the trade unions had appealed for a return to work. For example, *L'Humanité* of June 6 admitted that, "not everything has been resolved. No one says otherwise.... But, by having compelled the government, with all the other strikers, to hold elections, [the railroad workers] have crafted a second chance to ensure that what they have won by their struggle is guaranteed. This second chance must not be compromised".<sup>1</sup> Thus, even *L'Humanité* admitted that the "victories" of the workers were by no means secure. If they needed a second chance, it would probably be for the sliding scale of wages, or for the suppression of the payment of wages according to the job, or for the control over the work rate, etc.

As for this second chance, the elections gave an unprecedented majority to the right wing parties. As we said above, the political leaders of the PCF must have known that the second chance was either a slim possibility—or else they did their job very badly. Regardless, the workers, for the most part, obeyed. According to François de Massot,<sup>2</sup> the majority of them voted for “their class parties” and only 500,000—especially PCF voters—abstained. This amounts to approximately 10% of the total traditional electorate of the PCF, or about 5% of the strikers.

How can we summarize everything we have?

Just reviewed concerning the movement of the strikes of May-June 1968? We have observed one of the most massive work stoppages in the history of industrial France, and its final result was rather paltry. The popular image of May '68 is that of a period replete with every kind of excess, a phase of social insanity, but we have seen workers who were for the most part passive. The leftists of '68 have been evoked as dangerous revolutionaries, and we have seen that they hardly made a dent in the weighty domination of traditional structures. And none of the different tendencies managed to do any better than the others; therefore, it is

not a question of a false or a correct policy, Leninist or ultra-leftist or anarchist. The occupations of 1968 are compared with those of 1936, but in fact the factories were almost vacant in 1968.

And despite the weak militancy of the strikers, despite the meager influence or impact of radical elements, the strike continued and work was not easily resumed. When they returned to work, this was due almost entirely to a defeat of the workers. All of this reflects a kind of paradox, between the powerful assertion of a class and its lack of initiative, between the power of a strike and its submission to a few apparatuses that would betray it even at the most elementary level of the strike demands. In the second part of this work, we shall attempt to explain this paradox. The reasons for this particular configuration of the workers movement must be sought in the characteristics of the transformation of the epoch, which brought an end to the decade of the 1960s.

- 1.Quoted by Massot, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
- 2.*Ibid.*, p. 282.

# Appendix

## 1. The beginning of the “Rampant May” in Italy

In order to acquire the elements for comparison concerning the manner in which, taken as a whole, the French trade unions managed to maintain a significant degree of control over the May movement of 1968, we shall examine the case of Italy. We shall not summarize here the history of the very agitated years of 1968 and 1969, but we shall instead review certain aspects of the beginning of the year 1968 which may have attracted the attention of the French trade unions and influenced their attitude during the strike movement of May 1968.

Did the French trade union leaders pay attention to the events taking place in Italy? If they did, they would have understood the price that could be paid for losing sight of the concerns of the rank and file. In February 1968, the Italian trade unions signed a new labor contract with Pirelli. They triumphantly presented it to the workers, who were not at all satisfied. The agreement provided for an increase in wages, which had been almost frozen since 1964, but did not address other issues that would prove to be, during the course of the events of the following years, of crucial importance for employer-labor

relations. Two points provoked strong protests from the workers. On the one hand, the agreement did not include a clause for the reduction of the burden of production bonuses, which the workers wanted to see standardized. On the other hand, the workers were furious because they were not consulted before the signing of the contract. On the same day it was signed, a pamphlet was distributed under the signature of “a group of workers” of the Bicocca factory: “We demand a democratic relation between the trade unions and the workers so that it will be the latter who can make the decisions about demands and the course of negotiations, through democratic rank and file modalities such as assemblies open to all the workers”.[1](#)

On that basis the Unitary Base Committee (CUB) would be formed in the next few weeks. Grisoni and Portelli<sup>2</sup> summarize the demands set forth that spring by the CUB of Bicocca as follows: 1) wage and production bonus increases; 2) a reassessment of piecework rates; 3) re-categorization of all the workers in higher categories; 4) fixing the speed of the assembly lines at a rate determined by the workers; 5) job security and control over the job by the workers; 6) reduction of the workweek.

Another example of the lack of sensitivity of the trade unions is provided by the case of Valdagno in April 1968. After the signing of an agreement with the employer at Marzotto (textiles), the workers were not at all content and fought with the police for a whole day.

Thus, numerous CUBs would be formed, which relentlessly harassed the trade unions, which required two years in order to adapt to the new situation, recover and absorb the militancy of the CUBs for their own organizations. But before they could do this, we witnessed a profound challenge to the trade unions and their manner of operation. This is precisely what did not take place in France, except in a very marginal way. It is true that the French trade unions are more firmly entrenched in the enterprises than the Italian trade unions, where the employers' deeply ingrained antipathy towards trade unionism facilitated the rise of the CUBs.

It would not be until 1969-1970 that the trade unions would win two victories that would reestablish their credibility. These were the metal workers agreement (December 1969)—which would be extended to various other industries—and the Labor Statute (May 1970). The first was based on wage increases, a reduction of the hours of labor, the reduction of the number of wage levels, and the acceptance of trade union rights in the

enterprise. The second was a law that recognized and reinforced the powers of the trade unions, with regard to both the reactionary employers and the dissident groups. Most significantly, this law contained an Article 18 that protected the workers against gratuitous firings, an Article that the Berlusconi government tried to repeal in 2002.

## **2. The RATP Action Committee<sup>3</sup>**

On May 22, three workers from RATP went to Censier. They were looking for students to help them form an action committee. One of them had “built” barricades with the students (he was a young worker), but the three workers were motivated by a desire to “do something”, which seemed to them to be impossible within the trade union organizations that “are just pimps”<sup>4</sup> (the three workers were members “in good standing” of the trade union).

The action committee was created on May 23. The problems it faced were numerous, due to the fact that the 36,000 workers of RATP were extremely dispersed geographically: 22 bus garages, 17 maintenance facilities and 14 metro stations, not including substations. They decided to start by writing a pamphlet (which would be

distributed on May 24 by the students) that called upon the comrades who would like to join an action committee to get involved. The pamphlet was moderate in tone: it did not address the problem of the trade unions.

Workers from various bus routes and commuter rail lines joined the action committee over the course of the following week (Balard, Ligne de Sceaux, Nation 2 and 6, Lebrun). Most of them had joined from their own initiative since they had never heard of our pamphlet (the pamphlet was generally confiscated by the CGT wherever it was distributed, since the trade union officials could easily guess what the pamphlet was intended to accomplish).

The principle discussions, which very debatable “tactical” considerations caused us to refrain from elaborating in our pamphlets, focused on the following problems:

- How to overcome the intransigent opposition with which the trade unions respond to any attempt at communication (between workers and students, etc.), in accordance with the old adage, “divide and conquer”?
- How to reveal the real nature of the strike that the trade unions, specialists in bargaining and the sale of the

labor power of the proletariat, seek to by all means maintain within the limits of a handful of demands?

- How to organize solidarity with the strikers in a way that would not appear to be charity or a “spectacular gesture”?

- Analysis and denunciation of the role of the trade unions, whose HIERARCHICAL form of organization condemns them to be nothing but instruments of power.

- How should the proletariat organize to take its fate into its own hands without delegating its powers to anyone? (See the rank and file committees of Rhône-Poulenc.)

Over the course of the week, our actions fell far short of the goals we set in our discussions, because our first concern, which took a long time to achieve any results, was how to multiply our contacts. So our committee, which set itself the goal of becoming a liaison committee, remained an action committee with thirty members, operating in a closed circuit.

Taking over from the students, the workers assumed the task of distributing the pamphlets in order to avoid the

clashes that regularly took place between students and the trade union delegates who were concerned with preventing “any provocations”. For these same reasons, which were very debatable, the contents of our pamphlets did not address the themes we set for our discussions, but were focused instead on:

- Information: there is an action committee for RATP.
- The attempt to draw attention to scabs by making ironical comments about the “freedom to work”.[5](#)
- The rejection of derisory demands and the insistence on minimal demands (qualitative, not quantitative).

The Grenelle Agreements, the announcement of votes to be held at the depots and garages, and the reduction in the number of sites being picketed and the number of workers volunteering for picket duty, which augured an imminent return to work, led us to work with more determination. On June 4 we distributed a pamphlet in which we called for the continuation of the strike, written on the initiative of the workers at the commuter rail networks of Nation 2 and 6.[6](#)

Posted at the entrances to the stations, the watchdogs of the trade unions redoubled their vigilance: while they are absent, contacts are numerous, fruitful and fraternal, but when they return, everything falls apart: at the Hainault station, they accused two comrades of the Sceaux commuter rail line (one of them with twelve years of service behind him) of being agents provocateurs who had never worked for RATP and succeeded in getting the workers, who had been deceived by these lies, to throw them into the street. (A delicious detail: these comrades are, or rather WERE, members of the CGT.)

On the following day, some fifty workers showed up at the Bourse du Travail, Rue Charlot 15, in order to discover the results of the vote held by the RATP network and to get information about an intersyndical meeting that had just taken place there. A brawl ensued and they were denied entry (the CGT spared no efforts to spread calumnies, which are on the other hand mutually contradictory, and which generated an atmosphere that justified the action of the “manual workers” who stood guard at the door: we were in the pay of the United States, of the police, of the government, of the CFDT, etc.). We immediately set about writing several pamphlets that we distributed on that same night.

The first pamphlet denounced the reception given to the workers by the CGT and their thugs, the maneuvers undertaken to influence the result of the vote and the way the vote was rigged when those maneuvers proved insufficient, but above all the unfair use of the monopoly, possessed *de facto* by the trade unions, of the means of communication between the workers, thanks to which the trade unions made preparations to impose the return to work against the will of the majority of the workers. The other pamphlets, signed by those who had decided to continue the strike despite the threats of the CGT (which had announced that as of June 6<sup>7</sup> at eight in the morning, it would no longer provide strike pay to any workers who remained on strike), called upon the comrades in every terminal and every station, to adopt similar resolutions: continue the strike.

On Thursday, June 6, despite THE ORDER issued by the trade unions, the strike continued in various sectors and regions. As this fact became publicized, the trade unions ordered their bigwigs to reestablish order in this intolerable situation. Despite the historical headline of *L'humanigaro*<sup>8</sup> on the 6th (“Victorious, Unified Return to Work”), it quickly became known that the resumption of normal operations had encountered difficulties in Gonesse, Ivry, Lilas, Croix-Nivert, Clichy, Montrouge,

Lebrun, Nation 2 and 6, etc. Attempts to start new strikes multiplied, breaking out a little everywhere, and the workers had regrouped with a view to action.

With affairs proceeding in this manner, on Friday, June 7, some fifty comrades of the Croix-Nivert station held a meeting (at a bar, despite the proposal of a comrade from Lebrun to meet at Censier, because, influenced by their trade union delegates, many workers still refused to have any open contact with the “leftists and student provocateurs”). In the face of the anger and the bitterness of the questions and answers from “their” rank and file, two delegates of the CGT who had come to defend the shitty electoralist positions (as subsequent events would show) of their trade unions, decided, since they had realized that their positions had become indefensible, to withdraw on the pretext that the workers were anti-trade union (an attitude proper to the virtuous priest who, faced with blasphemy, covers his ears: “I prefer not to hear”). The workers were then free to go to Censier. The result of the discussion was: the convocation, via a pamphlet, of a general assembly of the workers of RATP to take place on the following day.

The pamphlet would be distributed throughout the morning of Saturday, June 8. The assembly took place;

the workers of the Lilas station announced that they had just formed a workers committee (or rank and file committee, or workers council, or soviet, or labor council, etc.). Those present asserted that it was the same everywhere: when the workers, pressured by the trade unions, did not reluctantly vote for a return to work, the delegates, falsifying the results of the vote, issued THE ORDER to resume work in the name of the “unity of the working class in struggle”. (An example: Lebrun voted 80% in favor of continuing the strike, but due to a curious snafu, the CGT announced, in the other stations, that Lebrun voted 80% FOR THE RETURN TO WORK.) In these conditions, it seemed possible to resume the strike, but there were not enough of us; we published another pamphlet calling for another general assembly to be held on Monday, June 10.

Monday, June 10: almost total success; at the assembly, there are representatives from 11 stations, 9 commuter lines and 1 repair shop. All of them provide accounts of the conduct of the strike in their line or station: the facts are clearly convergent: it is the lack of contacts between the workers that has allowed the strikers to be deceived and this is what made the strike fail. It was decided to form a liaison committee, which would include two comrades from each work unit who had attended the

assembly. But during the course of the debates that were focused on questions of the organization of workers in action committees that were to lead to the formation of rank and file committees, and while the comrades of the liaison committee had retired to a nearby house to write a pamphlet calling for this form of action, another tendency was manifested: some of the comrades, most of whom were young, declared that they were tired of “words” and demanded immediate action. They proposed to immediately resume the strike in some stations, to be carried out by the most determined comrades who should easily be able to convince the rest of the workers to join the strike. This tendency, which was not, however, incompatible with the other position, finally ended up victorious in the midst of a certain amount of confusion that could be held responsible for a double fiasco.

On the one hand, the organizational proposals, which were the fruit of the understanding of the real role of the trade unions, remained in the background when they could have led to positive results; on the other hand, the attempt to resume the strike was incapable of delivering such results, since, having been resolved in the midst of an atmosphere of enthusiasm by an assembly of 400 or

500 persons, many resolutions were incapable of standing the test of reality.

### **3. Report on the Current Situation Presented at the General Assembly at Censier on May 21, 1968<sup>9</sup>**

[...] Faced with the generalization of the struggle, the ruling class was capable of implementing two policies: the first is that of direct repression (reconquest of the occupied enterprises by armed force and arrest of the strikers). But in fact, this procedure did not seem plausible: The State apparatus is showing signs of decomposition that aggravate its inability to confront such a broad based movement at the same time and all at one stroke.

The second policy, which is more likely to succeed, consists in negotiating with the political leadership groups and above all with the trade union leaderships, which are in fact the only ones who are capable of bringing about an evacuation of the factories and an end to the strike.

To achieve this, the bourgeoisie will have to make concessions that would modify the structure of contemporary capitalism to one degree or another. Some of these concessions will be made to the trade union

bureaucracies as such and as soon as possible (recognition of the trade union section in the enterprise, more responsibilities for the enterprise committee, and more posts for the minor chiefs of the trade unions in the administrative councils), in return for the role played in the deactivation of the current movement by the trade unions after having arrogated its official leadership to themselves.

But it is also true (as it was in 1936 and 1945) that they will have to respond to some of the workers' demands. With regard to this issue the position of the French capitalists is a difficult one: in part due to the competition of foreign capital, but above all, because they need to continue to accumulate capital, which will be slowed in the short term by an increase in real wages.

Nonetheless, we are by no means saying that the current demands cannot be assimilated by modern capitalism. The latter will always be able to concede wage increases that it will recoup later (and, with respect to this issue, once again as in 1936), with inflation, devaluation, and the increase of productivity.

This policy will obviously be complemented by parliamentary and governmental initiatives. At this level, the bourgeoisie can avail itself of particularly ample

possibilities. It will not hesitate, if necessary, to form a left wing government with the participation of the Communist Party. The experience of 1945 is most reassuring for it in this regard.

All these capitalist policies have even more possibilities of success when we consider the serious weaknesses exhibited by the current movement: except in some places like Sud-Aviation-Nantes, where the movement began, the strikers who are occupying the factories appear to be very few in number. Despite the very sparse information on this topic, we may state that nowhere have the workers elected a really democratic strike committee. The leadership of the strike seems to have been relegated to the hands of the local trade union bureaucrats. Furthermore, while the discontent with or at least the lack of confidence in the trade unions is evident, the majority of the workers do not have any idea of any other form of organization besides the party and the trade union.

However, although we should not succumb to a sanctimonious optimism, we must also take into account the positive characteristics of the ongoing movement: its spontaneous character, the determination shown by some of the workers, especially the young workers, and

the continuous extension and spread of the strike, which has not undergone any retreats whatsoever.

On the other hand, we must take into account the fact that the only bureaucracy that is really capable of exercising any influence, that is, the Stalinist bureaucracy, is very weak. Its current policy of “the peaceful road to socialism” prevents it from assuming the revolutionary guise that had for so long been its strong suit. The disagreements between the bureaucratic countries prevent it from expressing the monolithic front that during its heyday had so impressed numerous workers. In addition, the recent repression in the countries of the East (the students in Warsaw, the Moscow trials, etc.) have not helped it to recover its lost prestige, not to speak of the repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the memory of which is still fresh in the minds of many people.

To be more precise, we may propose that the apparatuses of the PC and, consequently, of the CGT, are apparatuses in crisis insofar as they have been devoted for many years to an attempt to transform themselves from Stalinist bureaucracies to bureaucracies of the classic social democratic type.

Currently, there is no certainty at all that big capital will be able to carry out its plan of breaking the movement. Although it is unfortunately likely that the strike will stagnate and decompose, it is quite possible that there will be disturbances when the trade union leaders want to try to make the workers go back to work and a more or less significant part of the strikers may prolong the strike and make it more combative.

The fact that the situation is not totally lost demands our intervention. [...]

#### **4. The Committee for Inter-Enterprise Liaisons. A Balance Sheet.**

(Text originally published in *Class Struggle*, June 1969)

Contrary to what the convergent propaganda of the PCF and the bourgeoisie would have us believe, the occupation of the universities in May '68 was not just a folkloric festival.

While the Sorbonne was abandoned to orators who were more concerned with dazzling their audience than with participating in an anonymous and often unrewarding action, while on all sides the eternal reformists expatiated on the role of the ideal university (whose only defect is not to have existed in a capitalist regime), on

the third floor of the Censier building a committee for worker-student liaisons was formed whose main purpose was to support the striking workers.

In this committee, workers, mostly young, who discovered the political dimension of the movement and sought support against the paralyzing dictatorship of the trade union bonzes, joined with “leftists” of various tendencies, whether students or non-students, militants with many years of experience or people who had been recently motivated to take action.

These encounters led not only to discussions, which were themselves often very interesting. A frenetic activity animated the hallways of Censier and spread far beyond, towards the working class neighborhoods and the enterprises of the “red belt” of Paris.<sup>10</sup> From the duplicating machines seized from the administration a continuous flow of pamphlets emerged that propagated all kinds of things, from revolutionary proclamations to simple demands of the workers who had, for the first time, the chance to freely express themselves.

Delegations went to occupied factories, easily breaking the *cordon sanitaire* established by the Stalinist apparatus; which subsequently led to often tempestuous debates in which the bonzes—more accustomed to

hitting people than to arguing with them—did not make a very good showing.

Not everything proceeded perfectly in this revolutionary Tower of Babel, however. Most of the participants had neither experience nor training in politics, and even the more or less hardened militants lost their footing in the biggest strike that capitalism had ever known up to this time.

Besides, it was not easy to rid oneself of the dregs accumulated by decades of Stalinism. One current, in a minority but still very loud, persisted in confusing the working class with the trade union apparatuses that had the effrontery to speak in its name. Some of these comrades were, furthermore, representatives of groups that had the pretension of “leading” the workers to revolution and which, not having done anything but drag along after the tail of the movement, only saw the activities at Censier as an occasion to look for new recruits.

But if the maneuvers of these backward disciples of Lenin occasionally succeeded in preventing action and even discussion, the main danger derived, in fact, from the anti-bureaucratic mystique that characterized the overwhelming majority of the student-worker liaison

committee. Literally traumatized by the repressive role of the political and trade union apparatuses, ignorant or hardly aware of the realities of the class struggle, these comrades came to believe that all forms of organization were by nature bureaucratic. Any attempt to clearly formulate the objectives of the movement encountered indifference or open hostility. As a political organization, it took the form of a daily general assembly, in which hours and hours were lost in discussions without rhyme or reason, which would have bored the most indulgent listeners. Not to speak, in these conditions, of arriving at any kind of collective conclusion: voting on precise proposals would have been just as inconceivable as a striptease held in the town square by the novices of a convent.

The inevitable counterpart of this madcap spontaneity is that, somehow, decisions were made, but by minorities that acted in a more or less clandestine manner and who then presented the rest of the assembly with a *fait accompli*. Cliques were formed, more or less organized groups that monopolized the contacts with the more important enterprises (the most unfortunate case was that of Renault-Billancourt, where a cohesive group of micro-bureaucrats acted as a screen between the workers and the more principled “leftists”). It is true that,

amidst this cacophony, the voice of the revolutionaries was sometimes heard; but it was, certainly, only by way of debatable methods.

It was only during the final phase of the strike, when the retreat had already begun, that the committee could really begin to make its influence felt. Abandoning the general assembly to its sterile chatter, the workers from about ten large enterprises (specifically, Rhône-Poulenc, Thomson-Houston, Nord-Aviation and Sud-Aviation) or important economic sectors (such as the postal service or RATP) formed, with political militants with whom they were in contact, the Inter-Enterprise Committee.

Meeting daily to evaluate the situation and to make democratic decisions about what action should be taken, the Committee performed a propaganda role that, despite having been undertaken too late in the strike, at least had the merit of clarity. Its pamphlets, distributed by the tens of thousands throughout the streets of Paris and at the gates of the factories, revealed the bureaucratic mechanism set in motion to suffocate the strike and called upon the workers to organize themselves at the rank and file level, following the example of the Rhône-Poulenc factory at Vitry. Until the end, the militants of the Inter-Enterprise Committee

tried to oppose the cessation of the strike, or strove to get the workers to go back on strike, whether in their own enterprises or by helping their other comrades.

Once the strike was over and the university buildings were reoccupied by the police, the Committee decided to continue its activity, and met once a week. Despite the vacation season the meetings took place as planned, sometimes with even more than one hundred participants. But in the autumn, the signs of a crisis began to appear.

Once the illusions regarding an immediate resumption of the general strike had dissipated, the Committee faced the alternative of either disappearing, or else defining tasks and objectives that transcended the immediate situation. Unfortunately, most of the participants would prove to be incapable of dealing with such a situation.

The meetings revolved around the reports in which, on the pretext of bringing the other Committee members up to date, workers from different enterprises related, one after the other, that nothing of note was happening in their factories. Sometimes a discussion began, occasionally about an important theme of revolutionary theory, but it soon came to an end due to a lack of interest and of seriousness on the part of the

participants. There is no doubt that the Committee contributed a certain amount of material aid to the militants in the enterprises, for the printing and distribution of pamphlets. But this activity did not in fact involve more than a minority of those who attended the meetings.

All the attempts on the part of the Inter-Enterprise Committee to elaborate a formulation of the political foundations of its action, and the definition of this action—for example, the publication of a bulletin, the organization of a series of discussions, etc.—ran into a veritable wall. However, the meetings continued to be held in an environment of increasing unease, the number of those who attended the meetings inexorably declined, and increasingly larger numbers of comrades posed the question of the usefulness of the Committee.

In one last gasp effort, towards the end of February, the Committee marshaled enough initiative to decide that, in mid-March, it would host a discussion concerning these basic problems on the basis of texts prepared by the participants themselves. But, on the day of the announced meeting, there was only one text, presented by the comrades grouped around *The Class Struggle*. The other comrades not only failed to make any proposals, but acted as if they had completely forgotten the

decision that we had previously arrived at and, after a pathetic attempt to conduct the meeting in accordance with the usual practice (“in my enterprise, nothing is happening”) they purely and simply refused to talk. There was nothing left to do except to affirm the demise of the Committee during what was, effectively, its last meeting.

For their part, the comrades of *The Class Struggle* decided to take their text as the starting point for a platform on which their subsequent action would be based (the final draft of this text was soon completed). They also decided to reassume the name of “Group for Liaisons for Workers Action” (GLAT) under which some of them had been active—based on the same political positions that they currently held—during the years before May ’68.

The objective of GLAT was and still is the theoretical and practical definition of an anti-capitalist activity (and therefore anti-bureaucratic activity as well) that for us is identified with the organization of the workers at the rank and file level (rank and file committees, according to the terminology of May). Unlike the pseudo-revolutionaries who presented themselves as the future leadership of the working class, we think that the

working class cannot be led in a revolutionary sense except by itself. Unlike the liquidationists of revolutionary organization, we think that this principle must be propagated systematically by militants organized for this purpose.

It seems clear to us, effectively, that the course of the general strike could have been modified in a relevant way if, from the very first days, an organization had intervened, even a tiny one, that did not seek to “lead” the movement, but to make as many workers as possible aware of the forms of struggle adopted by the most advanced part of the workers themselves—specifically, the rank and file committees of the Rhône-Poulenc factory at Vitry. Propaganda of this kind was carried out by militants from Censier, but with very limited means.

Intervening from the beginning and with more effective distribution, this organization might have been able to tip the balance at the decisive moment, a moment that might never recur.

Those who today refuse to learn any lessons from the fiasco of May, those who reject the organization of revolutionaries (not the organizations that say they are revolutionary, but those that are ready to fight for the power of the workers assemblies), bear a heavy

responsibility towards the working class. No strategy confers the certainty of victory. But the strategy that consists of throwing away our weapons before the battle even begins does not even leave us the opportunity of escaping from an ignominious defeat.

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- 1.Quoted by Yves Benot, *L'Autre Italie*, Paris, 1977, p. 107.
- 2.Grisoni and Portelli, *Luttes ouvrières en Italie de 1960 à 1976*, Paris, 1976, p. 131.
- 3.After the end of the strike, militants of the RATP action committee published a pamphlet. What follows is the text of the excerpt from this document quoted by Jacques Baynac in *Mai retrouvé*.
- 4.When referring to the mainstream trade unions, the author uses the French word, *retape*, in an obvious play on words on RATP.
- 5.This refers to the discourse in favor of the freedom to work, with which some thought to justify the “right” of the scab to take the place of the strikers at work, a right that the pickets attempted to constrain.
- 6.This is where the strike began at RATP.
- 7.This is an error: June 6 was a Thursday.
- 8.A play on words that combines the names of *L'Humanité*, the daily newspaper of the PCF, and *Le Figaro*, the daily newspaper of the right wing whose politics are similar to the Spanish *ABC*.
- 9.Excerpts published by Baynac, *op. cit.*, p. 161 *et seq.*
- 10.All the outer neighborhoods of the greater Paris region were, during this period, composed of industrial zones and neighborhoods inhabited by workers. There,

the hegemony of the PCF was incontestable, on the municipal level as well.