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France

The meaning of May 1968

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“What’s important is that the action took place, when everybody believed it to be unthinkable. If it took place this time, it can happen again...”

Jean-Paul Sartre (1968)

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Mai68.jpg>]

Since 1968, each anniversary has been the occasion for a new challenge, generally by reducing the May events to various anecdotal aspects, when they are not accused of being at the origin of all our society’s ills. In this field, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has been the most radical: “... it is about whether the heritage of May 68 should be perpetuated or should be liquidated once and for all. I want to turn the page on 1968” he proclaimed at the final meeting of his presidential electoral campaign. In one sense, we understand him. In May-June 1968, the mobilisation of an initially very limited fraction of youth was capable of unleashing the biggest general strike in France’s history. And it certainly did not amuse the denizens of the presidential palace when thousands of high school students went onto the streets this year with placards reading “1968... 2008: the dream continues”.

The dominant class like the government are not fond of situations in which a powerful mobilisation defeats their plans and challenges their power, even in a limited way. Forty years later, this experience is first of all a confirmation: a massive movement of the people can go beyond the traditional apparatuses of the left and the workers’ movement, and shake the established order. It is also a lesson: in itself, this cannot offer an outcome capable of changing the situation in a durable fashion. For that a political tool is need, of a type which is rarely built amidst the fires of such events.

The simultaneous nature of the youth movements across the world in the late 1960s corresponded to a generalised challenge to the political order established after the Second World War: the division of the world into zones of influence within the framework of peaceful coexistence. These youth and particularly student movements affected different countries in a very variable manner. There were certainly good reasons to rebel! Even the somewhat privileged youth of a country like France could recognise it. The miracle of television, now present in most households, made it possible to follow the programmed death of hundreds of thousands of people in Biafra (in Nigeria), victims of a merciless war waged by the British and French oil monopolies. It was also possible to follow the US bombing of Vietnam day by day.

A small fraction of the student youth became politicised radicalised in the years which preceded 68 in this context, that of imperialism and the Vietnam War in particular. Vietnam was a source of indignation, but it was also a source of hope for those who aspired to a better world. In February 1968 there was the Tet offensive, a veritable insurrection organised by the FLN throughout South Vietnam. For a few hours, Saigon seemed to be in the hands of the insurgents and the prestige of the US took a terrible blow. At the same time there were other examples of peoples in the Third World who seemed prepared to confront imperialism. Starting with Cuba where in late 1967 Fidel Castro organised the Tricontinental, a conference to affirm the solidarity of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America against imperialism. Che Guevara launched vibrant appeals to create 2, 3, 4, 10 Vietnams if necessary. At the same time the “Cultural Revolution” reached its height in China and seemed to give an example of a revolution which had become permanent where the students seemed to have come to the fore, little red books in hand, supposedly to “serve the people”.

In the East there was the Prague spring, the beginning of a political liberalisation and mobilisation in a state under the Soviet grip, which gave hope to the possibility of a democratic socialism. The struggles of the oppressed peoples of

the third world found an echo at the very heart of the United States. Since 1965, the black movement had radicalised. "Black Power" gained influence, affirming the necessity of a violent struggle, proclaiming the solidarity of black people with the Vietnamese people against the same enemy. Political violence resurged almost everywhere: in Japan with the Zengakuren, a highly politicised student union; in Germany where an extra-parliamentary opposition developed through the SDS, the Socialist Students Federation led by Rudi Dutschke.

In this radicalisation, the notion of internationalist solidarity, the sensation of being involved in a common combat with all who fought imperialism was a striking feature. But it had limits: the temptation for short cuts, the belief that revolution, or radical change, was possible independently of profound political changes in the working class, particularly in the imperialist metropolises.

The French situation

In France, as in most developed capitalist countries, the number of students grew. The capitalists could no longer choose their qualified labour, the management they needed, from their own privileged milieus and the middle classes. They had to broaden recruitment. Children from humbler backgrounds began to arrive at university. They refused to play the role of capitalism's watchdog and their radicalisation linked up with that of the youth who rejected the moral order of Gaullist society. Undoubtedly because the Communist tradition was more alive than elsewhere, numerous small far left groups appeared. The first breaks with the Parti communiste français (PCF), the dominant organisation on the left, took place during the Algerian war. Having refused to take the part of the Algerian people, the PCF was in low repute among politicised students. In 1966 the Union des étudiants communistes, the PCF's student organisation, fell apart, with the departure of the Maoists who went mainly to the UJC(ML) and the PCMLF, and the Trotskyists who formed the JCR (Alain Krivine), both groups rejecting the PCF's support for the presidential candidacy of a centre left candidate, François Mitterrand.

The politicisation of the movement broadened around solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution. After that of Liege in 1966, the demonstration in Berlin in February 1968 was an opportunity to compare the experiences of different countries, and to note that nearly everywhere youth were linking up with a certain revolutionary tradition, with revolutionary communist ideas that had been thought completely forgotten, indeed bypassed. Yet before 1968, these groups were only a handful, with a very relative influence on their milieu. The May events would propel them to the forefront.

The post war boom was a period of uninterrupted growth of the capitalist economy, all the more appreciated in that it followed the crisis of 1929 and the disaster of the world war, as well as a difficult period of reconstruction, where there had been several years of belt tightening and rolling up of sleeves. In France the parking lots were full as were the shopping trolleys. The workers had a right to cheap public housing "with every comfort": certainly some depressing miles of concrete, but it was progress for the time. Some shantytowns remained, but they were for the immigrants of Nanterre or la Courneuve. Of course, the consumer society excluded some: one in two French people had no car, and 50% of housing lacked hot water, showers or internal toilets, and sometimes all of them. But things could only get better, it was thought.

Gaullism had allowed capitalism to accelerate the restructuring of the productive apparatus. The number of employees had increased rapidly, and the number of industrial workers in medium and large unites reached a record level in the 1960s. Industrial production grew by 50% in ten years. But at what price? To achieve all this, workers had to accept the fragmentation of tasks, shift work and stepped up rhythms, all the charms of Taylorism, with an average of 46 hours work per week and an armada of little bosses to sweat out the profits. Work was more tiring, more dangerous also: there were 2.5 million work accidents per year for 16.5 million employees.

Unemployment was certainly marginal: 200,000-300,000 people. But in one year, the figure had nearly doubled,

prompting some concern.

As for growth, it remained nonetheless badly shared out. It is possible to live in a rich country and see its standard of living increase, but have the justified impression of being cheated when profits increase faster than wages. Meanwhile, the unions did little. In 1967-1968 however, the social climate changed a little. There were some genuine strikes, notably in enterprises employing young workers on assembly lines. In February 1967, workers at Rhodia in Besançon extended their strike to the whole group and occupied their factories. There had not been any occupations in a long time. Some months later, conflict surged at the factory in Lyon, accompanied by confrontations with the police. Another example was the strike at la Saviem in Caen in January 1968. When this factory of 4,000 people was occupied there was an immediate intervention from the CRS riot police. The next day workers marched in the city and briefly confronted the police. The day after that, workers and students were shoulder to shoulder during a day of rioting that left nearly 200 wounded. So there were some “tough” conflicts, but before May, the impression which dominated was that not much had happened since the big miners’ strike in 1963.

France's then President, Charles De Gaulle, had come to power in 1958, borne by a right wing insurrection in a context of sharp crisis during the Algerian war. He appeared then as a sort of supreme saviour, a Bonaparte, who wished to build consensus around his person, while being the chosen man of the big capitalists. The National Assembly passed the general's laws, virtually without discussion. The opposition did not have much perspective. There was of course the “radical” Pierre Mendès-France, or François Mitterrand who was not yet a socialist. But the Socialists had little credit since their volte-face in 1956 in relation to the Algerian war. As for the PCF, the most significant left party at the time, it had remained isolated from the other parties since the beginning of the Cold War. The PCF had pleaded for some years for a “government of democratic union” but nobody was interested, least of all Mitterrand. In 1968, then, society appeared as above all blocked, without perspective of real change.

The beginnings of the movement

The movement began on March 22, after the arrest of Xavier Langlade, a student at Nanterre and a militant of the JCR, suspected of having participated in a demonstration which had attacked the head office of a US company (“American Express”). Confrontations with the far right were the pretext for the closure of the university on May 2. On May 3, a protest meeting was held at the Sorbonne, attracting around 500 militants. That wasn't a lot of people, but confrontations with the police followed. The beginning of the May movement had something fortuitous about it. For some weeks, elements of the press had identified political groupuscules as the source of disharmony. The solution seemed quite simple: it was enough to arrest the groupuscules to restore order. On May 3, Grimaud, the prefect of police, was satisfied he had rounded up the groupuscules at the meeting. But thousands of students joined them, in fist fights with the police. They did not yield to the repression, and were determined. The CRS charged and attacked indiscriminately, and within a few hours the students had become veritable “enragés”.

On May 3 there were nearly 600 arrests. On May 6, 16,000 demonstrators took to the street. By May 7, there were 45,000 chanting “We are a groupuscule!” There were several hundred wounded here and there. Demonstrations followed every day: 20,000 on May 8, 20,000 to 30,000 on May 10. On that day, there were dozens of barricades in the Latin Quarter. It was a turning point which immediately placed the Gaullist regime on the spot. The decision to erect the first barricades was not formally taken by any organisation. The militants of the JCR had however played a significant role in the taking of this initiative, unlike other revolutionary organisations who decided that the barricades built and defended by thousands of students were a “petty bourgeois adventure”.

Of course, even a very determined student movement cannot by itself undertake a test of force with the Gaullist government with the hope of winning, without the support of the working class. But in a context of erosion of the Gaullist regime, of radicalisation of the working class, and of democratic legitimacy of the student movement, what

could have been a simple demonstration of “violence outside of history” became an essential initiative. This was also a decisive factor for the audience of the JCR in the weeks and months that followed. The police violence was terribly shocking and mobilised a public opinion which had the impression of having directly lived through the “événements”, thanks to the radio notably. It was said that the police had turned on isolated and sometimes wounded demonstrators, throwing tear gas grenades into the apartments where some had sought refuge, indeed into ambulances. All that is true. What is shocking above all is the lack of synchrony between all this violence and the known demands of the students: the rejection of archaic rules which forbade mixing of the sexes in university accommodation or for some the laws concerning holding a political meeting at the Sorbonne. For the first time in history, student youth appeared as a social force which played a central role at the political level.

The movement spread outside the capital: demonstrations against the repression in Paris, repression, demonstration against the new repression, further repression... the cycle of demonstrations took off at full speed. Universities like Strasbourg declared themselves “autonomous”. A “student power” established itself and stated that it had broken ranks with the bourgeois state, taking as its model the “critical universities” of the German students.

The strike begins

On May 11, the prime minister Pompidou gave way on all points: the Latin Quarter would be evacuated by the police on Monday May 13 in the morning and the Sorbonne opened without conditions. The students who had been sentenced would be freed by the appeal court: the judges, independent of the government as we all know, thus had to work overtime on Sunday afternoon to deliver a judgement which had already been announced by the government. The government wanted to calm things down. As Pompidou would put it later, he wanted “deal with the problem of the youth separately”. But it was too late.

The trade union organisations were obliged to react and organised on May 13 a one day strike and demonstrations throughout the country to protest against the police violence. The success was considerable: hundreds of thousands of people in Paris, 450 demonstrations throughout France. Something had changed in the consciousness of the workers. The youth had succeeded in drawing some tens of thousands of their comrades behind them, they had fought, they had resisted, and they had even forced the government to back down, delivering a sharp blow to De Gaulle’s personal prestige. For some years, the workers’ organisations, with the PCF at the head, had argued that it wasn’t possible to do anything because of this regime.

De Gaulle had had the pretention of “bringing all French people together” around his person; he was henceforth in the process of creating unanimity against him, thus throwing a bridge between the students and the workers. From May 13 slogans hostile to De Gaulle appeared: “De Gaulle to the archives!”, “10 years is enough!” On May 14 at the Sud-Aviation factory near Nantes, young workers influenced by the far left went on strike, occupied the factory, and seized the managers and the director of the factory. The next day, the movement reached Renault-Cléon. And this despite the union leaderships. On May 16 it was the turn of Renault-Billancourt. At this time 200,000 workers were on strike, around fifty factories already occupied, above all outside Paris.

The growth of the strike across the country was extremely rapid. 200,000 strikers on May 17, 2 million on May 18, between 6 and 9 million on May 22 (there were 15 million employees at this time). It was three times more than in 1936. More than 4 million were on strike for three weeks, more than 2 million for a month. It was certainly a key movement in the history of the class struggle. First because a general strike with occupation of enterprises, is much more than a day of action which lasts longer. Daily oppression disappears, human relations come to the fore, and speech is liberated. You talk everywhere about everything with everybody, in the occupied factory, of course but also in the neighbourhood, in the street.

Then because this strike affected all layers of the working class. It was first engineering, the big industrial workplaces which went on strike, then the tertiary sector. All categories were affected, blue and white collar workers, managers, but also footballers, actors, the press, the justice system... the movement affected all employees in a society where for the first time they represented 80% of the active population. Yet it was in the industrial concentrations that it would be at its most powerful and it was there that the major events were played out. Occupation was a general phenomenon, but with very diverse realities. Sometimes it was only a few delegates, sometimes it was much larger. An embryo of social life began to be organised in and around the enterprises: mass meetings of workers, a day left open for the rest of the population, popular dances also, and solidarity organised here and there with traders or farmers to guarantee food supplies. For the main trade union federation, the CP-controlled CGT, occupation was also the way to keep control over the strikers, sometimes there were even pickets against the "leftists and students". The union leaderships wished to control everything and were obsessed with avoiding possible exchanges and meetings, even between the workplaces of a given group. Thus the inter-union delegation at Renault-Flins had to negotiate for several days to enter Renault-Billancourt and meet their comrades!

The strike committees, when they existed, were made up of trades unionists and rarely the non-unionised. They were most often inter-union, meetings of delegates, of militants linked to the apparatuses and responsible solely to these apparatuses. A study in the North and the Pas-de-Calais indicates that they existed in 70% of cases, but that they were elected in only 14% of situations and recallable by strikers' meetings in only 2% of cases. Despite this, from May 17, CGT leader Séguy confirmed on the radio the refusal to coordinate the existing strike committees. Commissions were sometimes set up, notably in enterprises where technicians, or indeed managers, played a significant role. There were in some places action committees, grouping the most combative workers, the working class left, employees who were attracted to the student model, which often had an anti-union dynamic. The general meetings were places of information rather than discussion. There were no or very few examples of workers' control. They appeared only in specific sectors: the press, hospitals, with the best known example being the Atomic Energy Sector at Saclay.

At Nantes, because the paralysis of the country rapidly posed serious material problems, trade unionists created a central strike committee so as to ensure the functioning of certain indispensable services: distribution of fuel or fuel coupons, collection of rubbish or organisation of points of sale of basic necessities for the strikers and their families. In its breadth and length, the strike provoked a veritable political crisis. De Gaulle attempted to defuse it on May 24 by proposing a referendum putting his own person at stake: "Me or chaos!" That same day a student-worker demonstration in Paris of 100,000 people set fire to the stock exchange, and besieged and looted two police commissariats. Violent demonstrations took place in Lyon, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Strasbourg and Nantes.

It was impossible to break the student movement which conserved all its strength but also met its limits: the students had said they were in solidarity with the working class, but remained de facto outside what happened in the factories. The government thought it possible to end the strike by encouraging the employers to negotiate at the corporatist level, with Pompidou playing a kind of arbiter role. The union leaderships accepted this offer, allowing De Gaulle to emerge from the impasse. To negotiate under the arbitration of his government at this time was necessarily to restore his legitimacy at the very time it was being most contested.

The negotiations at Grenelle on May 25 yielded nothing on the sliding scale of wages, the age of retirement, the return to 40 hours or the abrogation of the orders concerning Social Security. They gave guarantees to the union apparatuses with the creation of workplace trade union sections, and specified significant wage increases (35% for the minimum wage and 10% for other wages) and payment at 50% for strike days. The CGT tested the results with its secretary general Séguy, accompanied by the negotiator of the Matignon agreements of 1936, before the workers of Billancourt. They demonstrated their burning indignation. The opposition of the workers was expressed in their will to continue the strike, but the capitulations were not massively disavowed at the base. For the CGT there was no question of renegotiating Grenelle. It now undertook negotiations on this basis at the level of the branches and enterprises, breaking the unity of the general strike.

The political crisis

In the immediate however, the rejection of Grenelle by the workers only rendered the political crisis more acute. On May 27 there was a meeting at Charletty stadium with 50,000 people, called by the UNEF student union, with the support of the FEN teaching union and the (non-CP) union federation the CFTD, in the presence of Pierre Mendès-France. The student movement, incapable at this stage of proposing a real political alternative, turned to the left. Mendès had nothing to offer.

Mitterrand, conscious of the political vacuum, sought an institutional alternative: he announced his candidacy for the presidency of the Republic and proposed Mendès-France as prime minister. Mendès agreed to lead a government of the united left. Mitterrand opened the door to the participation of the PCF, for a reason that he would later explain: "I estimated that the Communist presence would reassure more than it would cause concern.... I knew that neither their role, nor their number in the leadership team would frighten reasonable people who, at that very time, saw in the CGT and Séguin the last ramparts of a public order that Gaullism had shown itself impotent to protect against the blows of the devotees of revolution." [1] The PCF said that "there is no left politics and social progress in France without the aid of the Communists", and spoke of a "popular government".

On May 29, the CGT organised a huge demonstration (500,000 people) in favour of this "popular government". On this demonstration, the JCR chanted "Popular government, yes, Mitterrand Mendès-France, no!" a slogan taken up by a number of demonstrators. But this slogan did not settle the basic questions: a government to do what, responsible to whom? Simply, it tried to indicate a solution which was not resigned to impotence at the political level, while continuing to explain the traps of the institutional mechanisms in which Mitterrand and others wished to confine the movement. The absence of the regime was not only symbolic. These few days between May 27 and 30 were the culminating point in the political crisis. The strong Gaullist state was temporarily incoherent and paralysed. The confrontation with this state was posed without the movement being capable of developing an alternative politics.

For their part, the reformist leaderships attempted to propose a solution in the framework of the institutions. But they did it solely because the situation appeared totally blocked to them, without necessarily wishing that the process should go to the end.

De Gaulle disappeared on May 29, and a veritable atmosphere of everybody for themselves reigned among right wing politicians, to such a point that Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a future president, said: "The government which, despite a deferral, has not succeeded in re-establishing the authority of the state, nor in putting France back to work must itself go". De Gaulle left to consult general Massu at Baden-Baden. On May 30 he retook the situation in hand. At 4.30 pm in a pugnacious and incisive speech, he announced that he would not withdraw, nor change prime minister and that he would dissolve the national assembly, leading to early elections.

Among his partisans, the joy was equal to the great fear that they had experienced. From 6 pm to 8 pm, at the call of various Gaullist organisations, joined by the far right Occident movement, the mercenaries, the former combatants of "l'Algérie française", some hundreds of thousands of people marched along the Champs-Élysées, giving the impression of a veritable tidal wave. There were similar demonstrations nearly everywhere. It was a real cold shower for all those who had believed he would resign. A certain drift began to spread among the strikers, and even a certain discouragement. It was then that negotiations at branch or enterprise level began to really spread, with the hope now of emerging from the crisis at least cost.

In announcing on May 30 that he would stay and that there would be new parliamentary elections, De Gaulle not only struck a blow at the morale of the strikers. He allowed the union apparatuses to retake the initiative after the setback of Grenelle, arguing that it was possible to resume work without having obtained satisfaction on everything, or even on very much, when in any case a left government would settle things after elections. It was necessary than to return

“in order and in unity”. Yet the resumption was not so simple. The state made an effort to resume work at the enterprises that depended on it, in coal, EDF (electricity), RATP/SNCF (rail). But there were still 6 million strikers on June 5, 3 million on June 10, more than a million on June 15. At Renault-Billancourt work only recommenced on June 17. From June 7-10, workers and students were shoulder to shoulder at Flins. There was one death, a youth who drowned while trying to escape the police. The next day, there were riots at Sochaux around the Peugeot factories. Two workers were killed. The CGT closed its eyes, desperate to end it all

At the elections, De Gaulle won an absolute majority in parliament. His party, the UDR, realised its best score ever. The movement had been directed against the right; it was the right which benefited from its defeat and the return to order.

A revolutionary crisis?

The JCR at the time saw the events as above all a “dress rehearsal” a first stage in the revolution. The far left, even adding all the different groups together, was obviously not in a position to organise decisive sectors of the population, and Charléty showed the limits of the movement, the absence of political perspective. We were far from a situation of dual power: that is why the JCR preferred to speak of a “revolutionary situation”. The question should nonetheless be considered, taking up the major characteristics outlined by Lenin in relation to a revolutionary situation: when those above can no longer govern as before, and those below can no longer bear their government as before.

The administrative sector was affected by the strike, even if it was shorter than in industry. Media, communications, transport, energy production were affected. We now know there was uncertainty among some sectors of the police, and the government had even called up the police reserves. But the armed forces remained largely outside the crisis. The political leaders seemed to have been bypassed, even De Gaulle, who was ready for massive repression, unlike his prime minister.

Yet what is remarkable was the force and lucidity of the state apparatus in relation to the weakness of most of the politicians, the capacity to appreciate the real relationship of forces. Pompidou, prime minister and banker, preferred to make the choice of absorption rather than confrontation, resting on the division between youth and workers. The heads of the repressive apparatus, following this analysis, made considerable efforts to avoid any fatalities during the confrontation. For them, clearly, it was a student revolt, not a workers’ revolution, and the police response adapted to this level. The three dead were killed in front of the factories.

As for the military leaders, Massu at their head, they simply advised De Gaulle to return to Paris, because for them this was not the time for a military intervention. For 4 to 6 weeks, the movement was such that the state apparatus could not govern as before, but it could still intervene. One can speak of political crisis to the extent that there was an absence of government for several days. But there was no absence of power.

And those below? It was the biggest general strike in French history. The initiative came to a large extent from combative young workers, with in a certain number of places a liaison in the street between young students and workers. For a month, the whole country lived to the rhythm of the strike. In this festive ambiance, millions of strikers expressed much more than economic demands: their rejection of De Gaulle and of society. Finally the problems of the exploited and oppressed were discussed and, while the “actually existing socialism” of Eastern Europe was increasingly discredited, utopianism acquired a new legitimacy, accompanied by a radical critique of all the workings of capitalism.

But this movement lacked a real capacity to carry through this project in terms of power. May-June 1968 was not a

revolutionary situation: even if the government vacillated, those above kept power; and those below, even if they were highly mobilised, were far from replacing them by something else. This movement did not have any democratic form of representation, still less of centralisation, among the students or the working class. If the discussions were permanent in the faculties and some open places, they were not reflected in decisions, a process of designation of democratic representatives of the movement. In the factories, there were rarely genuine general meetings, and virtually no self-organisation, structuring of strike committees, or experiences of workers' control, even partial. In the absence of democratic representation of the strike movement, the question of its centralisation was not even posed.

The working class vanguard which still existed was splintered, divided, atomised. It was then unable to orient the millions of strikers on political perspectives. The weakness of the revolutionary far left and its extreme dispersal in multiple small and often very sectarian groups did not transcend this situation. There was then a distance between the strength of the movement and its content. Such a situation could have changed but for that a political force was necessary, dramatically absent in 1968. The rejection of the betrayal of this strike expressed in the continuation of the movement was not reflected by significant breaks with the reformist apparatuses. A phenomenon which should be placed in the limits of an objective situation where, after a long period of growth, nothing vital was at stake for the population.

What remains of 1968? This major event of the class struggle profoundly changed French society, while having significant effects beyond France's frontiers: it is one of the key dates of the recomposition of the European workers' movement at the end of the 20th century. There are profound reasons for this.

Against those who see 1968 as the last workers' strike of the 19th century, we understand that it was the first general strike of a society where 80% to 90% of the population are wage-earners. It showed that in an advanced capitalist country, a movement of such breadth, which affects all the layers of the population, which challenges the authority of the state and transcends bourgeois legality, is possible. It shows the forms of struggle of the working class spreading to other sectors of society.

May 1968 was the catalyst for the emergence of a new political and social generation. The profound modification of the relationship of forces between the classes produced direct effects until the mid-1970s. A process of politicisation in the working class allowed the appearance of currents which crystallised to the left of reformism. The relationship of forces inside the workers' movement began to change, the hegemony of the PCF began to founder. A revolutionary current appeared to the left of the PCF and acquired legitimacy, even in the workplaces. Without however being capable of changing the givens of the situation: electoral illusions in the common programme of the Union of the Left dominated the 1970s; then there was the disillusionment of the Mitterrand years and the rise of the far right in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, the situation is again different. Years of management of capitalism have considerably reduced the credit which social democracy, and still more the PCF, disposed of. On the basis of a global decline in the consciousness and combativeness of the proletariat, a new generation began to renew links with struggle, breaking with the traditional apparatuses of the left and the workers' movement. The far left has begun to represent an alternative, certainly still modest, but this is an inestimable gain in the perspective of the coming and still more decisive struggles.

For at a time when the majority of the population believes that future generations will be worse off than the preceding ones, where the social and ecological disasters of an unbridled capitalism plunge millions of workers into poverty, then revolt is not only possible, but much more justified than was the case forty years ago.

[1] 1. François Mitterrand, "Ma part de vérité: De la rupture À l'unité", Payard, Paris 1986