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A breach has been opened, now let's widen it!

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May 1968 in France – the student revolt and the general strike which followed the combats of the youth in the Latin Quarter of Paris – was the culminating point of the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-bureaucratic mobilisations throughout the world from the Tet offensive against the US occupiers in South Vietnam, via the student revolts in Poland and Yugoslavia, the Czech “Prague Spring”, the anti-war and anti-authoritarian mobilisations in West Germany, Britain and the US, the rise of the black movement for equality in the US, the beginning of feminist struggles in North America, West Germany and Britain, the student revolt in Mexico, the struggles of youth in Japan and so on.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mai68b.jpg>]

Paris, May '68. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, bottom right

The old world, established by the Yalta agreements between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, this world which had allowed the establishment or consolidation of authoritarian regimes and strong and stable states, both East and West with the collaboration of the Communist and social democratic parties, and had repressed the aspirations to self-emancipation that the Russian revolution had raised, cracked everywhere.

Despite some defeats – the crushing of the student revolt in Yugoslavia, Poland and Mexico and the “normalisation” of Czechoslovakia – the year 1968 sounded the death knell for the stability of the authoritarian regimes. It opened a period of renewal of anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic resistance, with the appearance of a new left, critical and radical, in the capitalist countries and a dissidence which would distance itself from Marxism, identified massively with the out of context quotations embodied in the wooden official language of the countries of “actually existing socialism”.

The proletariat returns

In the 1960s a new generation, which had not known the exhaustion of the Second World War and the disappointments of uncompleted “liberations”, emerged on the political and social scene. The rejection of colonial wars (Algeria, Vietnam and so on) radicalised it. It was not satisfied with self-limitation, either in the name of the dangers of defeat, always possible, and of “fascism” (a very present fear inside the older militant generations), or in the name of the hope still incarnated by the idealisation of “actually existing socialism”. Playing on these fears and dreams, Stalinism, cast out of the governmental institutions of the capitalist world during the Cold War, had succeeded in some more developed countries in maintaining a powerful working class identity, veritable counter-societies with their symbols and culture, opposed to capitalism and attached to the myth of the Soviet Union, while muzzling it and cutting its claws. Elsewhere, this role was played by social democracy, capable of redistributing the crumbs from the long period of growth in the context of the “Fordist” compromise.

For the traditional workers' movement, it was time for peaceful coexistence and the peaceful road to socialism which would surely come (and would be better than the Soviet experience because it would be “French” or “Italian” and therefore more civilised and less “Asiatic”).

The Cuban revolution, which the imperialist blockade had not yet succeeded in subjecting to the demands of the Kremlin, had indicated another road. The assassination of Che Guevara in 1967 in Bolivia, instead of signifying the impossibility of struggle against an omnipotent imperialism, was perceived as an example to follow, a symbol of a consistent struggle for justice, equality and liberty, an example of genuine revolutionary commitment by somebody

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who, as leader of a victorious revolution, minister and statesman, had died weapon in hand in the distant mountains, thirsty, starving and sick, but trying to create "one, two, many Vietnams!", while the Kremlin hierarchs sat in their soft chairs, inviting the leaders of the Communist parties to rest in the Crimean sun.

In spite of the triumphant press releases of the US army of occupation in Vietnam, the FLN, which should have been liquidated (on their account) numerous times, launched the Tet offensive at the very time that the US announced that it had dropped more bombs on Vietnam than it had on Nazi Germany during World War 2. And the imperialist military police could not even defend the US embassy in Saigon! And then in Paris, the students "a small minority of the population" resisted the powerful Gaullist state and mounted the barricades! And the repression, instead of quenching the fire, lit the reflexes of solidarity!

Breaking with social-democracy and the pro-Moscow CPs, a new Marxist left, present above all in the student movement, appeared in the course of the 1960s. It was reduced and divided. The idealisation of the "cultural revolution", envisaged above all though its anti-bureaucratic dimension led a significant part of those who challenged the "mausoleum Marxism" of the Kremlin towards the dead end of Maoism. The Trotskyist organisations, despite the reunification of the Fourth International in 1963, remained weak and divided. In France, for example, there were some hundreds of activists on the divided revolutionary left, some thousands if you added those of the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU), compared with hundreds of thousands in the Communist Party and tens of thousands in the old SFIO (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière – French section of the workers' international, the ancestor of the Socialist Party). In the trade union movement far left militants were virtually absent. The role played by these small groups in the unleashing of May 1968 is all the more impressive.

Anti-bureaucratic revolts

In the countries of actually existing socialism there were the somersaults of de-Stalinisation, a profound transformation of the mode of bureaucratic domination which, from the time of Stalin, rested on the uncertainty of the future of each member of the social élite, capable from one day to the next of losing their privileged place at the whim of the leader and ending their career in the labour camps. Between a quarter and a third of the Soviet population then suffered this form of forced and unpaid labour. The revolt in the camps at the announcement of Stalin's death obliged the bureaucracy to retake control of the apparatus of repression and management of the camps, capable of terrorising society from top to bottom and supplying it with a labour force according to its growing needs.

De-Stalinisation meant the end of this form of terror and an attempt to guarantee the domination of the bureaucratic elites in a less bestial manner, in other words the social stabilisation of a society by definition unstable, because it was not based on new relations of production. From 1956 in Poland and in Hungary the abandonment of brutal terror (but not repression) opened up the main contradiction of this type of society: the unstable marriage of state ownership, presented as collective ownership, of the means of production and their private management by an illegitimate elite, incapable of guaranteeing the realisation of social needs, because of its privileged status, cut off from the masses.

In Hungary the brutal repression which followed the Soviet military intervention in November 1956 crushed and atomised working class spontaneity for a long time.

In Poland, normalisation was slower, based on the division between the workers "rapidly brought into line and repressed" and the intelligentsia which benefited, for a time, from greater intellectual freedom. In March 1968 this normalisation came to an end and the student movement rose up against the liquidation of the last spaces of freedom. Isolated from the workers, it was brutally suppressed.

In Yugoslavia, which since the break with the USSR had followed a non-Stalinist road and where the working class enjoyed a limited autonomy at the level of the enterprise through self-management, the regime also decided to put an

end to the enlargement of this autonomy when the students in June 1968, demanded political liberties which threatened the position of the dominant bureaucracy.

In China, where the Mao faction had played with fire in the inter-bureaucratic conflict which followed the break with Moscow, by leaving the student youth to settle accounts with the privileged layers in the first phase of the Cultural Revolution – with an often incredible brutality as witnessed by the public lynching of local leaders, forced to make self-criticisms before being liquidated – the army had already suppressed the autonomy of the Red Guards.

In Czechoslovakia where the Communist Party leadership had put a brake on liberalisation and de-Stalinisation after seeing their results in Poland and in Hungary in 1956, the lock had been released. The Prague Spring began, restoring hope in a socialism with a human face and again publicly challenging the Stalinist counter-revolution. The military intervention by the Warsaw Pact countries on August 21, 1968, which the Dubcek leadership of the CP would support to guarantee “normalisation”, put an end to this hope.

The role of the apparatuses

If in May-June 1968 the deeply conservative apparatuses of the old workers' movement could not prevent the generalisation of the strikes, they were powerful enough to negotiation on the back of the longest general strike in the history of France to atomise the factory occupations and block the self-organisation of the workers. The general strike was not equipped with its own leadership, elected in general assemblies and centralised through local, regional and national committees. Thus, in the highly industrialised region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, “there were elected strike committees in only 14% of cases, strike committees including non trade unionists in only 23% of cases, strike committees recallable to general assemblies in only ... 2% of cases” (see Jacques Kergoat, “Sous la plage, la grève,” in A. Artous, D. Epszajn, P. Silberstein (dir.), “La France des années 1968”, Syllepse, Paris 2008, p. 71). Tailism, the delegation of tasks to “specialists” (trade union full timers and political leaders) and confidence in them still reigned.

The experience of the strike of May-June and its result – gains beyond what was achieved in 1936 and the Liberation whereas the strike was longer and more massive – would open the first breaches, in particular among young workers, in the hegemony of the Communist Party and of the trades unions under its control.

During the 1970s the revolutionary groups, strengthened after 1968 – thus the French section of the Fourth International saw its forces grow tenfold from 1969 – would strengthen their presence in the trade unions, pushing the latter towards struggles, favouring experiences of self-organisation and trade union unity, challenging the traditional division of tasks whereby only the full timers were active and could negotiate. Among youth, on the other hand, in France at least, the old left would lose its hegemony. The PCF would be henceforth incapable of taking the head of youth mobilisations – in 1973, during the big movement against the Debré law, a member of the French section of the Fourth International was one of the spokespersons for the movement.

But the weight of the traditional apparatuses remained important. Thus in France, the PCF, then the new Parti socialiste, would be capable of coming out of 1968 strengthened, by also recruiting numerous youth. It was only under the pressure of the neoliberal offensive and in capitulating to it that the apparatuses of the old workers movement would weaken and be won to social liberalism. Moreover, the parties originating from Stalinism passively witnessed the implosion of “actually existing socialism” and the restoration of capitalism and where they decided to react – in Italy for example – they sought to preserve their apparatuses by integrating themselves into the bourgeois state institutions and dumping their ideological baggage – or they turned inwards on themselves and on an ideology which borders on religious attachment (the Portuguese CP or the Greek KKE).

Rebuilding an authentic workers movement

Forty years after 1968 the workers' movement is, then, profoundly weakened. Its bureaucratic apparatuses, attached above all to their own self-preservation, have let defeats accumulate when they have not actively organised them – from this point of view the destruction of the bastions of steelmaking in Europe, and in France in particular, because it took place under a government with socialist and communist participation, was exemplary. The patient construction – with a great investment of far left activists – of new trade unions in southern and Eastern Europe, has not compensated for this weakening. So far as the political left is concerned, in the East in particular, there is a vacuum. In Western Europe we also observe an open space, as witnessed by the small electoral successes of the non-institutional left. But forty years after 1968 what was at the heart of the workers' aspirations – rejection of authoritarianism and the demand for democracy, the need for equality and the conditions allowing its self-realisation, rejection of capitalism and its wars – remains a burning actuality. The world of 2008 is more brutal, more unequal, more famished while being much richer than the world of 1968. What led to the general strike in France in May-June 1968 is still present. A single spark can still start a prairie fire.

What has changed is the capacity of control of the apparatuses. The relationship of forces has changed – not with capital, which dominates and strengthens its authoritarian domination, in particular by building the absolutist para-state institutions of the European Union – but inside the workers' movement. The Stalinist millstone no longer exists, and nor does the hegemonic control of social democracy. Some potentially alternative trade unions have made their appearance. New left parties are beginning to appear to the left of social democracy. And the imperialist control of the world is cracking again, above all in Latin America – a radical nationalist new left governs in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Certainly, the revolutionary forces remain weak, including in Latin America. The anti-capitalist movements seek a strategy, oscillate and can collapse. The illusion that it is possible to change the world by employing the bourgeois state institutions still remains largely dominant.

It is in such a framework that the idea of a new anti-capitalist party emerges. A “new party” that has nothing in common with the Stalinist conception: a democratic organisation, not dominated by bureaucrats, having no other interests than those of the exploited – the proletariat, the wage earners, the working class, who today make up the immense majority of the world population – and capable of indicating to them the best means of building their struggles and their victories, which the old “parties” have not done.. An “anti-capitalist party”, which says loud and clear that it rejects the system where capital dominates, that it fight for another society, egalitarian and democratic, founded on a collective responsibility for its management.

The construction of such a party is on the agenda not only in France. The manner of building it will undoubtedly differ – the national histories, the national relationships of forces differ. In Poland for example, the initiative of building the Polish Party of Labour (PPP) has been taken by an alternative and combative trade union. In Germany the weakness of the revolutionary forces has left the initiative for the occupation of this political vacuum to left reformist forces. It is probable – even if it is not desirable – that certain attempts will not succeed, or not immediately and that in some countries the new formations, in the image of the ex-PSU in France, will only be transitory.

But the space exists for the construction of new anti-capitalist parties and that is the main difference with 1968.