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Interview with Alain Krivine

# **“We must start a new May 68”**

- Features -

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**At the 2018 Congress of the Fourth International, Krivine was invited to give the opening speech, with the theme “50 years of May 1968”. Below, we present the interview with him conducted on that occasion by Israel Dutra General Secretary of PSOL, a sociologist and member of the party’s National Directorate and of the Socialist Left Movement (MES) along with João Machado, an economist, a professor at PUC-SP, a militant of the Fourth International and a leader of the Communist-PSOL current.**

Alain Krivine was one of the leaders of the May 1968 movement in France. At the time he was 27 years old and one of the leaders of the JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth), an organisation formed two years earlier by militants expelled from the PCF (French Communist Party) and the Communist Students’ Union.

The radicalisation of a part of the communist youth, around themes such as opposition to the war in Algeria (i.e. opposition to the imperialism of their own country), solidarity with the struggle of the Vietnamese people, and criticism of the bureaucratisation of the PCF, was part of the process of radicalisation of young people that culminated in May 1968.

While still a member of the PCF, Krivine had become a member of the Fourth International. The JCR had about 300 activists before May, and had a rapid growth thereafter.

Because of his activism, Krivine was arrested in July 1968, and released a few months later. In 1969, he was one of the founders of the Communist League (which unified the JCR militants with the “adult” militants of the Fourth International). The LC was dissolved in 1973 by the French state and recreated in 1974 under the name of the Revolutionary Communist League.

The LCR was for several decades one of the main organisations of the Fourth International (and of the far left in general), and Krivine one of its main leaders. He was a candidate for President of France twice (in 1969 and 1974); elected to the European Parliament in 1999, he served his 5-year term.

In 2009, the LCR dissolved itself to push for the creation of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

Krivine published an autobiography in 2006, to which he gave the ironic title “Ça te passera avec l’âge”, which we can translate as “You’ll grow out of it”. For him, “it” - the revolutionary conviction, the dedication of his life to communist activism, internationalism, solidarity with all humanity, confidence in building a society free from all exploitation and oppression - was something he never grew out of.

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**Today, there is a debate not only in France, but all over the world, about the relevance and impact of the French May in history. Please tell us how you see this.**

**Alain Krivine** - I think that this event has left a very positive legacy, because it represented something so fundamental as a huge social explosion of the kind we saw in France and in many countries around the world. Even if France and Italy were exceptions because of the stronger link between students and workers, while elsewhere we saw essentially an explosion of youth and students. Firstly, this event showed that a big anti-capitalist social explosion is always possible; secondly, when there is a social explosion and a movement as big as this (there were 10 million strikers with red flags in the streets of France), people become, as Trotsky said, unrecognisable from one day to the next. So this cultural, sexual and artistic revolution challenged many things, even if much of it did not last and even if not all the new social movements we see today were born in 68 (but after 68 and thanks to 68). We have the idea that a social explosion is still possible. For me, today, anti-capitalism is stronger. I believe that the title of an article written by the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde* at the time, weeks before the outbreak of the general strike, “France is bored...”, means that anything is possible. In any case, it is necessary to start a new May '68, but under different conditions and this time so that it develops on all fronts, which was not the case with that explosion.

**Regarding the beginning of the rebellion, tell us a little about the factors that contributed to that May becoming an undeniable turning point in the 20th century. What were the immediate circumstances and the first stirrings that would culminate in a global event?**

I think it started as a combination of two different phenomena: one was the arrival of many new students at universities in France and all over the world, and the other was the questioning of the bourgeois university as it existed with its traditional courses. This was no longer acceptable because of the arrival of these tens of thousands of new students - not from the popular strata, but from the middle classes - at universities all over the world, which were no longer the preserve of the upper classes of society. Therefore, there was a questioning of the bourgeois university, a questioning of its composition. Furthermore, there was an enormous politicisation of young people in France and throughout the world, young people, but not only young people, as a result of the Vietnam War and the demonstration in Berlin in February 1968 with the German socialist leader - who would later be shot - Rudi Dutschke. That event in Germany in February 1968 would serve as a lesson for us later on when the general strike was called, just as we learned slogans that made Che Guevara or Ho-Chi Minh more acceptable and brought them into our schools.

**Regarding the global impact of this event, your articles always highlight that 1968 was the unity of different realities in an explosion that affected different countries (Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Italy, USA, Brazil, Tunisia, Argentina, etc.). Explain to us a little more how this synchronisation came about.**

I think there were youth uprisings in most of the countries in Latin America, in the United States, Czechoslovakia and other countries in Europe, each with its own particular character. The two exceptions were France and Italy, where there was a strong alliance between workers and students. I believe that the explanation for this explosion, especially among the student youth, as I have already said, is the arrival at the university of new social layers and the questioning of the classic university. There was also the politicisation that was linked to that and which increased rapidly as a huge number of people took a stand against the war in Vietnam. Both elements influenced the youth explosion all over the world, including in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. A huge explosion of youth in all these countries, but more closely linked to the workers' movement in France and Italy.

**Speaking particularly of France, what role did Stalinism and the Communist Party play in this process?**

I believe that for both the CP (Communist Party) and the CGT (General Confederation of Workers) it was the beginning of a crisis, even though this was not very visible at the time. At that time, both were still very powerful. Stalinism had thousands of militants and many parliamentary posts, they ran the country's main trade union, the CGT. However, in certain working class sectors, where there was a new working class, the Stalinist leadership began to be questioned, although this questioning never appeared in a massive way in 1968. This questioning would appear

many years later or dozens of years later, but at that time it came down to the trade union opposition, whom they called “gauchistes” [left-wing radicals]. The CGT's attitude was ambiguous. They did not call a general strike, but they did call a series of other strikes. When the state disappeared for a week when De Gaulle was in Germany, it was the unions that guaranteed the movement of goods and so on. In Provence, it was the joint unions that delivered food to the shops because there was no more food. So, depending on the particular region, the unions played a role sometimes of support, sometimes of opposition. But the national leadership of the French Communist Party and the leadership of the CGT were very annoyed with a movement that they did not control and that they did not want to take over. And when the question of power was posed, it became clear that the people and the working class trusted Alain Geismar, Jacques Sauvageot and Daniel Cohn-Bendit (who were the three best known leaders) to lead the demonstrations, but not to govern and take power. Then there was a first offensive, which was unsuccessful, on 28 May, when Pierre Mendès France and François Mitterrand put themselves forward as candidates. There was then a second offensive by General de Gaulle calling for the dissolution of parliament and calling new elections - which would take place in June and which he would win since at that point the CP readily accepted the elections. And we drew up a slogan which was fair at that precise moment, but not globally, which was “Élections, pièges à cons” [Elections, trap for the stupid], since it was a way for the Communist Party to bury electorally an extra-parliamentary movement.

**2018 also marks the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International. In concluding this conversation of ours, we would like to ask you about the involvement of youth and student leaders, linked to Trotskyism and the JCR, in the unfolding of May '68. Tell us a little about that and the relationship of your comrades to the struggle of the working class.**

We can say two things. In the first place, the Fourth International helped us materially. When there was the strike in the fuel sector, it was the German, Belgian, Italian sections that supplied us with petrol. We filled up the cars thanks to the petrol coming from these sections of the Fourth International. That may not sound like much, but it was a huge help. You even had to hide when you filled up a car with petrol so that it wouldn't be stolen. Secondly, since we had been expelled two years earlier from the Communist Party and the Communist Students, we created, in a somewhat arbitrary way, with the Belgian Trotskyist Ernest Mandel, the Revolutionary Communist Youth. It brought together at the beginning of the movement somewhere around 600 people, and perhaps 900 people at the end. But it played a decisive role in the stewarding and security service. This means that in all these demonstrations, every night there was a gathering of thousands of students in Paris, around the Denfert-Rochereau statue, and there were two groups that led the process: that of Cohn-Bendit who said where the masses should go, they were the ones who decided that, and the JCR down below, who guided people to where they wanted to go. Neither was democratic, but the general assemblies with thousands of people were no more democratic. So the Fourth International and the JCR took on an important role, despite their size, in the space of just a few days. I'll give an example: when Cohn-Bendit was expelled, we all cried, tens of thousands of us, “we are all German Jews”. We would never have shouted that before. If we had done, two months earlier in the universities, people would have thought we were crazy, because they were neither Jewish nor German.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [revista movimiento](#).*

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