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The Situationists and May 1968

Miguel Amorós

July 30, 2017

May '68 was the biggest mass upheaval in the history of France and the concurrent wildcat general strike was the most important strike in the history of the European workers movement since World War Two. Nowhere else was the rejection of the new model of consumerist life more profound, or so closely linked with the class struggle. Its impact reached every social category, wage earning sector, region and city in France, and lasted for years. A whole literature of agitation and a long series of anti-authoritarian conflicts testify to this fact. It had repercussions in all the highly-developed and developing capitalist countries, and, to judge by the precipitous haste that characterized the actions of the ruling classes in setting up intelligence services devoted to monitoring the new forms of subversion, and also by repeated attempts to disparage, conceal and assimilate it on the part of sociologists, historians, militants of the left-wing of the civil society movement and other exegetes of order, its influence is still felt today. Its survival in memory, however, was its only major victory; our contemporary society is not its offspring, but rather the product of the defeat of the working class, the enormous growth of the State and the efforts to recuperate it engaged in by a whole

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Retrieved on 11th May 2021 from libcom.org
Published in *La Linterna Sorda*. Translated in September 2017
from the Spanish language text provided by the author.

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generation of university intellectuals. A myriad of interpreters have tried to establish an official history of the “May events”, manipulating and distorting the historical material, when not inventing it *ex nihilo*, since the intellectual climate of domination demands counter-truths that function in the variable conditions of statism and globalization. To penetrate to the real history, one must proceed in a different way, by reading the texts of those who were part of the movement and were capable of expressing its nature and its aspirations better than anyone else. In this respect, the writings of the situationists stand head and shoulders above the rest. They provide, with more precision than others, the keys of the May revolt, or as the “situs” themselves called it, the “occupations movement”.

For most observers, including card-carrying leftists and anarchists, May '68 was a totally unforeseen event, spontaneous, practically unexpected. Capitalism had overcome the most destructive aspects of its crises, the economy was firing on all cylinders and the contracts negotiated with the employers by the trade union bureaucracy, often promoted in parliaments by party leaders, assured a comfortable existence for the majority of the wage earning population. Its children were beginning to attend the universities. The social question had not been posed in revolutionary terms since the Bolshevik counterrevolution and the defeat of the Spanish revolution. The struggle of the workers for their emancipation from capital ran up against the walls of alienated life, and even more so against the workers' bureaucracies, experts in deactivating these struggles. It seemed that the working class was living in a happy world, closed off in its everyday concerns, cheerfully represented by political and trade union executives and abundantly equipped with every kind of object. Nothing was more foreseeable for the situationists, however, than that revolt, that rejection of the realm of the commodity that was so cogently proclaimed in their publications. They had predicted the coming of a time of disorders, although, of course, without setting an exact date for its onset. There

ing role in this regard from day one proves more than any other evidence that the May movement was a revolution.

New problems had to be addressed, problems that the situationists, closed off in themselves, would never pose. First of all, why the reign of normalcy was restored despite the sporadic, although increasingly more numerous, riots; and why the walls of bureaucratic containment remained so stable despite the obvious erosion of Stalinism. Why hadn't situationist theory, which was now so well known, become a sufficiently practical force? Or, to put it another way: why hadn't the proletariat manifestly appropriated the critique of modern society? Where were the sovereign rank and file assemblies and the councilist organizations? Later, there would be talk of the "reflux" of May, of a regression. Contrary to the assertions of the SI, the modernization of capitalism and the general proletarianization of the population that it entailed did not produce new, broader, and more intransigent forces of denial. The much-denigrated society of the spectacle and of consumption subjugated its antagonists by manipulating their desires and the satisfying false needs. Mercenary thinkers finished the job. In short, the society of commodity abundance was capable of deactivating the threats that its advent unleashed by preventing its contradictions from harming it in its essence. The split between the condition of the wage earning population and the class spirit became insuperable. The same fate befell the American "counterculture", the Portuguese "revolution of the carnations", the Spanish assembly movement, Italian autonomy, and Polish "Solidarity". Just like the other revolts, May '68 was not repeatable. Anyone who placed their hopes on its return would be disappointed. History does not repeat itself. The tasks that remain to be carried out so that the social question will once again emerge, were of too great a magnitude compared to the ones that the last of the Internationals, the Situationist International, had so effectively performed. No public or secret collective, however, capable of fulfilling these tasks could be formed.

had already been some ominous signs that anticipated it, which were very clear for those who knew how to read them. The militants of leftism, brainwashed by Maoist China, by the resplendent image of Red October, by the mystified past of the CNT, or by the illusions of guerrilla war, did not know how to read them.

In the years leading up to 1968 there was a considerable amount of unrest among the French working class, which, going beyond the framework established by labor negotiations, took to the streets. The trade union leaders were bypassed by the workers, who disobeyed their directives and fought the police, sometimes with the help of students. It was possible to discern behind this changing attitude of the workers in the factories, offices, mills and mines, the decomposition of the pseudo-communist bureaucracy. In addition, the rejection of capitalist modernization foreshadowed a critique of life subjected to the imperatives of production and consumption. This is not to say that the workers had become dialecticians by reading the Situationist International, which is very unlikely, but that situationist ideas were present in the atmosphere of latent confrontation that everyone was breathing and they were understood correctly enough. The "situs" had only attempted to establish relations between their ideas and this environment of latent confrontation within a coherent and total critique of reality that began to be surprisingly communicable. In fact, the return of the concept of revolution cannot be restricted to France. Similar processes provoked violent riots in the East as well as the West. In the United States, with the Free Speech Movement, the struggle for civil rights and protest against the war in Vietnam; in Europe, with anti-bureaucratic struggles, student unrest and workers struggles in various countries (especially in Spain); and also in Japan and Mexico, etc. It was precisely in France, however, where the ideal conditions were present, more so than anywhere else, for the encounter between the arms of critique and the critique of arms, the historical conjuncture that could unify the access to consciousness of individuals with the joint action of the class. It

was therefore in France that the workers movement crossed the threshold in order to come face to face with its authentic goals and to embark upon a radical struggle, criticizing with actions alienated life, capitalism, ideological religion and the State. And just what concrete role did the SI play in all of this?

The Situationist International was founded with the objective of formulating a revolutionary program within the domain of culture. The cultural revolution, understood as the subversion of everyday life under capitalism, was the creative complement of the social revolution. Once it was convinced of the impossibility of any autonomy in the artistic and cultural sphere, the SI would abandon its previous experimentalism and would then devote its efforts to theoretical work in accordance with the models established by the Marxist-Hegelian method, seeking its application on the terrain of class struggle. From that point on, it would cease to regard itself as an artistic vanguard and would define itself as a revolutionary organization. Its work was almost confidential, underground, with a very limited reach, enveloped in a dense fog. It did not go entirely unnoticed, but the priests of the world of the intellect preferred to pirate its ideas while simultaneously silencing it, a characteristic procedure that would be rapidly terminated by a sensational scandal. In 1966, in Strasbourg, the funds of the local section of the student union, UNEF, in the hands of legitimately elected sympathizers of the SI, were used to print a spectacularly critical pamphlet that subjected the little world of the university to a cruel and precise X-ray, while at the same time offering a situationist analysis of modern class society. The title of the pamphlet could not have been more explicit: "On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy." The wave of indignation that it aroused in the bourgeois and Catholic press, and among the authorities of the university departments and bureaucrats and Stalinist politicians, was only exacerbated when the local section of UNEF, which was responsible for publishing the pamphlet, de-

The trade union bureaucrats managed to control a wildcat strike that had resisted all their maneuvers to isolate each workplace, preventing radical elements from outside the factories from entering them. The workers could not express themselves directly, in their own name, since trade union mediation was always forewarned. While the Stalinists had allowed the strike to continue in a fragmented way, they also liquidated it piece by piece. In opposition to them, there was no direct coordination that would have made general agreements possible, nor were Workers Councils formed. Having started again from a very low level after half a century of defeats, without knowing its past or having any clear goals, with all its enemies well-equipped and deeply entrenched, the proletariat could not proceed beyond the spontaneous and dispersed phase. Its revolt had few chances of victory and the situationists did not propagate any false hopes in this respect.

The situationists not only insisted on the revolutionary will of the workers, although they never possessed the means to proclaim this publicly, they also did not hesitate to define May '68 as a revolution. Unfinished, incomplete, without having fully unfolded all its content, without explicitly laying claim to this title, but it was, when all is said and done, a revolution after all. It is true that the State was not overthrown, but the same can be said of other revolutions. Without going too far afield, we need only mention the case of the Spanish Revolution. The principal characteristic of a revolution is, on the one hand, the sufficient interruption of the economic and social order combined with the inability of the political powers to respond, and on the other hand, the radical transformation of conduct provoked by the eruption of new ideas about work and life, along with an appreciable number of radical innovations that put these ideas into practice. This is really what happened. If this is not convincing enough, however, the definitive proof was provided by the unprecedented efforts mobilized by the Stalinists to defeat the occupations movement, a role that historically corresponds to the vanguard of the counterrevolution. The fact that they took a lead-

journal was published. Its first article, “The Beginning of an Era”, was entirely devoted to a summary of the meaning of the May movement.

The text began with a description of the meaning of the victory of May, the first wildcat general strike in history, the verification of the revolutionary theory of our time and even, momentarily, its partial realization, in short, it was the greatest experience of a modern proletarian movement that arose everywhere. The proletarian nature of the movement was particularly emphasized, and the text goes to great lengths to prove that, except for its very beginning, it was never a student movement, despite the fact that the first radical outbursts had taken place in the universities. In any event, it was a *handicap* [in English in the original] that the most advanced nucleus of the proletariat, unorganized and violent, could only express itself on the terrain of the students, at the barricades of the Latin Quarter, when the students were no longer a majority. The May movement meant the return of the proletariat as a “historical class”, its second assault on class society. It believed it was making history and it felt that nothing would ever be the same again. It was the critique of all alienations, all ideologies, the commodity, specialization, the parties.... The rejection of work, of sacrifice, of authority, of the bureaucracy, of sociology, of the State.... The most extensive manifestation of the desire for dialogue, of the taste for community and festival, of the liberation of customs.... The affirmation of woman as the protagonist of her life. If the situationists had one merit, it was that of having predicted and veraciously asserted what would happen and what was happening. They knew how to read the anticipatory signs of a crisis that had little to do with the economy, and they had indicated the points where the lever of modern revolution had to be inserted. The most important thing to do now was to point out the mistakes and the weak points of the movement, which only partially and momentarily found its historical consciousness. It needed to generalize dialogue, which did not exist except in a fragmented form, within the separate assemblies.

nounced the fraud of student unions and called for the dissolution of UNEF. The pamphlet went through one print run after another, and it was soon being distributed throughout all of France. Its sudden popularity attracted a multitude of readers in search of back issues of the journal, *Internationale Situationniste*. The publication on October 11, 1967 of issue No. 11 of the journal, along with the release shortly thereafter of *The Society of the Spectacle* and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* [original title: *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*]*—the objectivity of historical thought and the point of view of radical subjectivity, respectively—put the theoretical corpus of the situationists on center stage. Celebrity came suddenly and seemed to know no limits. Soon, hundreds of people were seriously considering a project of subversion that would have been dismissed as unrealistic and vicious on any other occasion.*

In the meantime, the tide was rising. On the one hand, there were the workers, who coordinated their activities outside of the trade unions, ignored their usual demands for reform and wage hikes, and looted supermarkets and organized general strikes. On the other hand, there were the students, who questioned dormitory regulations, shut down the offices of campus psychologists, brandished red and black flags, and occupied university administration offices and tribunals. A group had formed at the progressive university of Nanterre in early 1968 which called itself the “Enragés”, named after the extremists of the French Revolution, which set itself apart from the usual run of leftists, with no other purpose than to put an end to the university system by way of the continuous sabotage of its operations. Its members distributed ingenious leaflets in the classrooms, produced by the former members of the disbanded “Anarchist International”, most of whom were illustrators, in their free time; they insulted the professors and composed songs; and finally, they painted provocative phrases on the walls. This was a style of agitation that infringed upon and ridiculed the propagandistic rules of the little leftist groups, a style that was much favored by the situationists, who soon contacted the group, but it was not

to the liking of the communist daily newspaper *L'Humanité*, which, in its March 29 issue publicly denounced the “commando actions” of an enigmatic group of anarchists and “situationists”. The activities of no more than forty people forced the university to close, and the university’s judicial inquiry initiated against a handful of agitators unleashed a series of protests with fateful consequences for the forces of order. The dance began on May 3 with the uprising of the Latin Quarter. The first barricades were built with bricks and burned cars on May 6. The street skirmishes continued during the following days, along with the burning of vehicles and the looting of stores. Workers, high school students and hoodlums from the outskirts of the city eagerly joined the fray. These elements soon outnumbered the university students. On the night of May 10, once all the stalling maneuvers of the new leaders and the old organizations had failed, more than sixty barricades were built. The leftist “vanguardists” vanished. Many young people waved black flags. Violent confrontations with the police attained such a scale that there were hundreds of arrests and injuries. On the following morning, the trade unions, which until then had condemned the movement, proclaimed a general strike so that it would not be declared without their consent and conducted outside of their control. The French government wanted to adopt a wait-and-see attitude and withdrew the police from the Latin Quarter, thus facilitating the occupation of the Sorbonne. On May 13, after a demonstration attended by one million people, an open Sorbonne was converted into a stage for assembly democracy, where all questions were supposed to be debated. Later that same day, a “detournement” of the saying by the priest Meslier, “humanity will not be happy until the day when the last bureaucrat is hung with the guts of the last capitalist”, was painted on one of the big frescos adorning the walls of the Sorbonne, which caused a scandal. The spontaneous graffiti that successfully drew everyone’s attention made their appearance. On May 14, the Enragés-S.I. Committee was formed, and immediately drafted several posters for mass distribution; one warning

The trade unions gradually managed to convince the workers, exhausted and discouraged, to return to work, but not without constant demonstrations and clashes. On June 13, the government decreed the dissolution of various left-wing organizations. The Sorbonne and the other buildings were retaken by the repressive forces of the State. On June 15 the CMDO dissolved. On June 18, the last striking factories were back to normal. The movement was over.

The CMDO disbanded when the wave of repression was imminent. It was every man for himself as the members of the CMDO abandoned the National Educational Institute. Their next rendezvous would be in Brussels. More than a dozen irregulars arrived there in trains, cars and buses, and some even traveled on foot. In Brussels they decided to document their testimony of what had been done and what needed to be done. In the last three weeks of July they collectively drafted, reviewed and corrected the book entitled, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement*, a kind of memorandum that is still the best text on the action of the situationists in May '68, the culminating point of their intervention in history. The book, full of illustrations, was soon published by Gallimard under a pseudonym, and it enjoyed well-deserved success. The SI augmented its ranks with new members without any special gifts for theory, but who had demonstrated ample merits with respect to action. In the press, which had previously steered clear of the situationists, all kinds of crazy speculations about the SI appeared, truly idiotic statements, scornful commentaries, all sorts of lies, etc., and enough laughable nonsense to fill a book. The situationists were riding the crest of a wave, they were at the top rung of the revolutionary social ladder, which increased its audience, but which also fomented a certain amount of complacency and internal paralysis. Their theses circulated in a more or less truncated form, while the group repeated itself and did not advance beyond what they had already achieved. A whole year passed before issue No. 12 of the

revolution. Too late. If, between May 16 and 30, in a single major factory, the workers were to have expelled the bureaucrats from the assembly, organized its self-defense and constituted a Workers Council, then a different rooster would have crowed. All that would have been necessary in that case would have been to issue an appeal to the other factories, contact their delegates, and act in unison. The occupations movement would have then been proceeding towards the final battle. This was more or less the core message of the "Address to All Workers" of May 30, signed jointly by the Enragés-SI Committee and the CMDO. Apart from these communiqués, which the striking print-shop workers produced by the thousands, the CMDO also printed and distributed about a dozen posters in black and white that would subsequently be extensively imitated, with the slogans, "Destroy the University", "Occupy the Factories", "What Can the Revolutionary Movement Do Now? Everything", along with false letters from the employers, more than fifty comics and a few songs like the "Song of the CMDO", copied from the Song of the Siege of Rochelle by the Stalinist Louis Aragon. In 1972 these songs would be recorded and distributed on vinyl, under the title, "To Put an End to Work. Songs of the Revolutionary Proletariat. Volume I".

State power had been on vacation for two weeks. After De Gaulle's speech, the ruling class mobilized and the supporters of order took to the streets. The conformist middle class breathed a sigh of relief. Reactionary France stood unanimously together to uphold the State and a pitiless wave of repression was unleashed. Right-wing figures close to power were prepared for executions. On June 6, the Stalinists succeeded in breaking the unanimity of the strikers by getting the bank employees and railroad workers to return to work. The workers at the Renault factory in Flins, who resisted the pressure of the CGT to return to work, were evicted from the factory by the CRS, the riot police, but soon reoccupied the factory. The CMDO issued a leaflet entitled, "It's Not Over!", which denounced the role played by the Stalinists in this affair.

against the illusion of direct democracy circumscribed within the walls of the classrooms, and another warning of the presence of "recuperators"; another denouncing art and "separation"; and finally, another poster called for the de-Christianization of the Sorbonne, which aroused the anger of various believers who were present. On the same day the first general assembly of the occupation was held.

The Maoist and Trotskyist leftists easily dominated the assemblies; they were specialists in rhetorical manipulation and were capable of neutralizing, almost without effort, any critical opinion that was not to their liking. The situationists, numbering no more than four persons, were not orators, and registered their conclusions concerning the possible directions the movement might take in the circular, "From the SI in Paris to the Members of the SI and the Comrades who have Declared Themselves in Accord with our Theses": either the movement would wear itself out and disappear, or it would succumb to repression due to its inability to win the active support of the working class, or it could unleash a revolution. Their positions were defended by an "enragé" tribune: Freedom for all those who had been arrested (including looters), abolition of wage labor, classes, "survival" and the "spectacle". For this tribune, and for the situationists, the university question had been superseded by the events themselves and the future of the movement depended on its continued participation in the struggle at the side of the workers, and keeping abreast of the manipulators. He warned of the attempts of the Stalinists to liquidate the movement which did not take long to take shape, and concluded by calling for the absolute power of the Workers Councils. His speech aroused a great deal of opposition; he was nonetheless elected to serve as a member of the "Occupation Committee". Other universities were occupied, following the example of the Sorbonne, in Paris and in the provinces. The Committee was not welcomed by the leftists, who rendered it ineffective by constructing various parallel committees that assumed responsibility for the needs of the occupation: defense, logistics, allocation of office space, press, maintenance of

order, etc. An unelected Coordinating Committee was then foisted on the assembly as an auxiliary of an Occupation Committee without any ability to execute its directives; in response, the “enragé” delegate denounced the obstructionist tactics of the bureaucrats and successfully forced them to back off. On the morning of May 16, echoing the simultaneous strikes of the workers, the Occupation Committee issued an appeal for “the immediate occupation of all the factories in France and the formation of Workers Councils”. Without any means to disseminate its appeal, it was forced to call a meeting of a number of revolutionaries and ask them to spread the word with leaflets and bullhorns, and via telephone. Numerous volunteers read the Committee’s appeal in the auditoriums of other universities and notified the local press agencies and radio stations of its contents. As it turned out, contrary to all bureaucratic expectations, it was heard by the workers, and the wildcat occupation was approved in their assemblies. That evening, disregarding the orders of its trade union representatives, the working class of France declared its support for the movement. The communiqué issued by the Committee was followed by a series of pamphlets, proclaiming the sovereignty of the assemblies, denouncing the censorship carried out by manipulators, and spreading the slogans, “Destroy the University”, “Down with the Spectacular Market Economy”, “All Power to the Workers Councils”, etc. Then came the telegrams expressing solidarity with the workers. The counter-attack of the leftists, and especially that of the Trotskyists of the FER, was ferocious. The convergence of the interests of the Trotskyists with those of UNEF, the CGT and the PCF, which were engaged in strenuous efforts to prevent any contact between students and workers, was complete. At the general assembly of May 17, using deceptive parliamentary ruses, they successfully prevented debate on the prerogatives of the Occupation Committee, so the latter abandoned the Sorbonne along with its supporters. The new Occupation Committee never submitted its decisions to debate by the assembly, but merely bypassed the latter. The bureaucrats had

won their battle against autonomy, eliminating the first attempt at direct democracy.

A group composed of “enragés”, situationists, former members of the Anarchist International and sympathizers of the deposed Occupation Committee, about forty people in all, occupied the National Educational Institute on Rue d’Ulm and set to work, calling itself the Council for the Maintenance of the Occupations, the CMDO. It was not a permanent councilist organization, but an immediate response to the situation of general strike and factory occupations, and therefore of a temporary nature. Numerous strikers, delegates from the action committees and agitators from the provinces were showing up at the CMDO offices, and they managed to improvise an effective network to distribute the materials produced by the CMDO. The building façade was adorned with red and black flags. The first document debated in the CMDO assembly, published on May 19, was a “Report on the Occupation of the Sorbonne”. The second, “For the Power of the Workers Councils”, called attention to the crucial issue of the struggle that pitted the workers against the political and trade union bureaucracies, and outlined three possible solutions to the crisis: the continuation of the Gaullist government with the support of the PCF and the CGT in exchange for economic concessions; the formation of a “left-wing” government that was more capable of demobilizing the movement; and the victory of the proletariat that would entail the formation of Councils. On May 26, the Stalinists, the employers and the government signed a compromise agreement, known as the “Grenelle Agreements”, which stipulated that the workers were to return to work in exchange for a substantial wage hike. The workers refused to ratify this agreement and in view of the Stalinists’ wait-and-see attitude, De Gaulle, in a speech broadcast to the nation said that the choice was a new round of elections or civil war. The proletariat had no other option than to accept the Grenelle Agreements or take over the economy and freely reconstruct the social life of the country. Either defeat, or Council