

May 1968

a look at the historic events

Anarchist Communist Federation

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1968 was marked by numerous events- the huge demonstrations throughout Europe and America against the American intervention in Vietnam, unrest in Czechoslovakia, riots in the black ghettos of the USA and student occupations in Britain. What surged to the fore in that fateful year was the events of May-June 1968 in France.

Today, in a period which seems the opposite of 1968, it seems hard to realise that a vast movement of struggle, with youth at its forefront, shook the world. But 1968 was prepared for on a number of fronts- counter-cultural as well as political. Beatniks, hippies, drop-outs of all sorts refused the restraints of bourgeois life, and emphasised mutual aid, community life, and sexual liberty. This large counter-cultural movement flourished above all in the United States, but also in Northern Europe. By 1968, however, this movement was beginning to run out of steam. Its most politicised form, the Dutch Provos, inspired by a number of anarchists, had attempted to break through apathy on both cultural and political fronts, with some success. But it dissolved itself in May 1967.

Mexico

In the USA the Students for a Democratic Society, coming after the civil rights and disarmament movements, mobilised against the war in Vietnam, both inside and outside the country. Similar movements emerged in Japan with the Zengakuren student movement, in West Germany with Rudi Dutschke at its head, in France, Italy and Great Britain. There were student movements in countries ruled by the old dictatorships, like Franco's Spain, and in the Third World, like Mexico with very large student demonstrations, leading up to the massacre by the military in Mexico City in September 1968.

However, it is too easy to point to a world movement that had inevitable consequences in the events in France. Before May 1968, tiny minorities were engaged in agitation, and these tiny minorities were ignored by practically every political observer in France. One inquiry published in a book before the events, described young people as completely depoliticised and eager to integrate as quickly as possible into work and "adult life", which was never questioned. (The White Book of Youth by Francois Missoffe) This is not that far off the appearance of young people in France and indeed in Britain today!

Obsolete Communism

It was at Nanterre University where the March 22nd Movement formed with libertarian students like Danny Cohn-Bendit and Jean-Pierre Duteuil, as well as the tiny Enrages group of situationists with Rene Reisel. These groups led off the occupation of the admin block after the arrest of militants of the Vietnam Committees. This agitation came together with that led in the university living quarters against sexual repression and the segregation of young women and young men. It also points to the influence of Anarchism and dissident Marxism through the politics of groups like Socialisme ou Barbarie, the neo-anarchism of the group around the magazine Noir et Rouge and the radical ideas of the Situationists. This was directly admitted in the book jointly written by Gabriel Cohn-Bendit and his brother Daniel- Obsolete Communism-the Left Wing Alternative. Also of importance were the ideas coming out of the sociology department at Nanterre with Henri Lefebvre- Marxist sociologist and philosopher, close at one time to the Situationists, with

his critique of everyday life and “the bureaucratic society of directed consumerism”. This concept was simplified by various spokespeople of the movement as the “consumer society”. Lefebvre, Jean Baudrillard, Rene Lorau in the sociology department all had their influence on the student movement there.

But the originality of May-June 1968 was down, not to the student revolt, but to the generalisation of struggle, and the entrance onto the scene of the workers, from 15th May. Indeed before that, young workers, in particular blousons noirs, those belonging to street gangs, were joining the students on the barricades. The participation of the workers gave the events an importance far beyond the ferment in Germany and the United States, where workers regarded radical students with little sympathy.

Strike

If the libertarian and situationist students lit the first spark of revolt, it was at Nantes, the day after the great demo at Paris and the occupation of the Sorbonne on the 13th May, where the revolt spread to the workers. The Sud-Aviation Bougenais factory was occupied by the workers, among whom were a number of Trotskyists and anarcho-syndicalists. This movement spread through the region, and across all of France. From the 15th May, a strike began at Renault-Cleon at Rouen. The industrial workers, followed by those in the public sector, set off a chain of events that spared few sectors of society. So action committees were set up among film-makers, architects, in the high schools and teaching faculties, the banks and offices, each offering a savage analysis of the institutions and where the Sorbonne was the most eloquent example of discussion and debate between different sectors of society.

However, except at Nantes, where students were admitted to meetings of the strike committee, co-ordination between students and workers was difficult. The union bureaucrats, many in the Communist Party, exploited the differences between the “adventurism “ of the students and the “realism” of the workers. Many workers perceived students as spoilt children of the bourgeoisie who could reject what they themselves had never had the privilege to experience. But equally there was little sign of revolutionary tendencies among workers to go beyond the limits set by the union bureaucrats. The thousand workplaces occupied and open as forums for free discussions were not seen as ways of moving forward. Soon, the occupations were abandoned by the majority of workers who left only the Communist Party and the union central it controlled, the CGT, running things. As for realism, the bureaucrats fixed a deal of vague promises on retirement payments and conditions and family payouts, and a pay rise that was swiftly wiped out by a galloping rate of inflation. This was in the context of a movement of factory occupations three times that of those in June 1936 which had secured much greater gains in terms of holiday allowances and other concessions.

The Anarchists in the May Events

May 1968: Demonstrations in the street with tens and hundreds of thousands of participants, millions of workers on strike, pickets in front of occupied factories even in very small towns, the nights of barricades and the attack on the Stock Exchange, the red and the black flags everywhere,

the old revolutionary songs which re-emerged, the universities and high schools occupied, the Odeon as a key centre, the old organisations as well as the new like the 22nd March.

And the anarchists in all this? They were there of course, leading lights often enough, but the apparent resurgence of the anarchist movement was very ephemeral. Or so it seemed...

What anarchist movement?

The militants were present in all the struggles but their number was in total very small, and they had different ways of operating.

The Federation Anarchiste of May 68 members were in the demonstrations but it often limited itself to holding conferences and bookstalls at the Sorbonne. On the night of the barricades of 10–11 May, it held its annual gala (benefit concert) at the Mutualite close by, despite the insistence of its activist tendency, inspired by platformism, the Organisation Revolutionnaire Anarchiste, to cancel.

Nanterre

In fact, the majority of the FA made only sporadic appearances, on different struggle fronts, whilst the ORA was in the street with other libertarian communists, those of the Jeunesse Anarchiste Communiste, ex-members of the old Federation Communiste Libertaire, militants of the Union des Groupes Anarchistes Communistes, and the 22nd March Movement, a unitary body at Nanterre University which had absorbed various pre-existing libertarian groups like Noir et Rouge.

Anarchists were present in the occupations of the universities, not only at Nanterre and the Sorbonne, but also at Lille, Rennes, Nantes, Toulouse, Marseilles, Tours, Poitiers, Strasbourg. Not to call for a redefining of teaching or exams, but to call for the coming together of student and workers struggles in a revolutionary perspective. The JAC, notably, condemned all reformist illusions and played a major role in the creation of the CALS (High School Action Committees) In the workplaces, in the strike movements, there were often libertarian communists or anarcho-syndicalists who had an important role. This was the case, not only in western France, at Nantes, Saint-Nazaire, Lorient and Brest, but also at Tours where railworkers and metalworkers of Schmidt and SKF and textile workers of Indreco were in the forefront; at Auxerre with the CNT, at the Renault plant at Billancourt, at Cleon, Courbevoie, and at Paris among the proof-readers in the printing industry.

The Comites d'action revolutionnaire also sprang up in many places. The CARs gathered together Trotskyists, Maoists, dissidents of the Communist Party, with the principal activists being libertarian communists. This was particularly true at Tours which was in contact with the leading anarchist communist at Nanterre, Jean-Pierre Duteuil, the situationists of Paris and Nantes, with Jussieu University (in the centre of Paris and with a proportionately higher working class intake than elsewhere). It had contacts among the peasants and soldiers. But it was above all among the railworkers that it played a very important role, with a real grip on the lines and stations and with the beginnings of self-organisation of the service.

And the Communist Party?

“Everybody could recognise among those digging up cobble stones and the builders of barriers, baptised barricades, the scum of Bordeaux: pimps, thieves and wanted criminals, commandos of ex-paratroopers, fascists of every sort” (Gironde Federation of the Communist Party, May 1968)

“ We were told ‘but these are revolutionary militants’. In truth, they had nothing to do with the revolutionary movement. This isn’t the first time that unscrupulous agitators have concealed their infamies under the noble flag of the revolution. The fascists have also always pretended to be revolutionaries”. (Georges Marchais, Communist Party leader).

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