The May–June Events in France

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Two chapters from "Post-Scarcity Anarchism".

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the May–June events in France: the events, even the memory
of them, challenge all their tenets, programs, and strategies.

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1. France: A Movement for Life
The Quality of Everyday Life

The 1968 May–June uprising was one of the most important
events to occur in France since the Paris Commune of 1871.
Not only did it shake the foundations of bourgeois society in
France, it raised issues and posed solutions of unprecedented
importance for modern industrial society. It deserves the clos-
est study and the most thoroughgoing discussion by revolu-
tionaries everywhere.

The May–June uprising occurred in an industrialized,
consumption-oriented country—less developed than the
United States, but essentially in the same economic category.
The uprising exploded the myth that the wealth and resources
of modern industrial society can be used to absorb all rev-
olutionary opposition. The May–June events showed that
contradictions and antagonisms in capitalism are not elim-
ninated by statification and advanced forms of industrialism,
but changed in form and character.

The fact that the uprising took everyone by surprise, includ-
ing the most sophisticated theoreticians in the Marxist, Situa-
tionist and anarchist movements, underscores the importance
of the May–June events and raises the need to re-examine the
sources of revolutionary unrest in modern society. The graffiti
on the walls of Paris—“Power to the Imagination,” “It is for-
bidden to forbid,” “Life without dead times,” “Never work”—rep
resent a more probing analysis of these sources than all the the-
etorical tomes inherited from the past. The uprising revealed
that we are at the end of an old era and well into the beginning
of a new one. The motive forces of revolution today, at least in the industrialized world, are not simply scarcity and material need, but also the quality of everyday life, the demand for the liberation of experience, the attempt to gain control over one’s own destiny. It matters little that the graffiti on the walls of Paris were initially scrawled by a small minority. From everything I have seen, it is clear that the graffiti (which now form the content of several books) have captured the imagination of many thousands in Paris. They have touched the revolutionary nerve of the city.

The Spontaneous Majority Movement

The revolt was a majority movement in the sense that it cut across nearly all the class lines in France. It involved not only students and workers, but technicians, engineers and clerical people in nearly every stratum of the state, industrial and commercial bureaucracy. It swept in professionals and laborers, intellectuals and football players, television broadcasters and subway workers. It even touched the gendarmerie of Paris, and almost certainly affected the great mass of conscript soldiers in the French army.

The revolt was initiated primarily by the young. It was begun by university students, then it was taken up by young industrial workers, unemployed youth, and the “leather jackets”—the so-called “delinquent youth” of the cities. Special emphasis must be given to high school students and adolescents, who often showed more courage and determination than the university students. But the revolt swept in older people as well—blue and white-collar workers, technicians and professionals. Although it was catalyzed by conscious revolutionaries, especially by anarchist affinity groups whose existence no one had even faintly supposed, the flow, the movement of the uprising

The Trotskyists? Which ones—the FER? The JCR? The other two or three splits? The FER played an overtly counterrevolutionary role at almost every decisive point, condemning all the street actions that led to the general strike as “adventuristic.” The students had their hands full with them in the street-fighting before the Sorbonne, where they tried to get the students to go home, and in the barricade fighting on the night of May 10, when they denounced the students as “romantics.” Instead of joining the students, they held a “mass meeting at the Mutualité. All of this did not prevent the FER from politicking like mad in the corridors and assembly meetings of the Sorbonne—after the students had succeeded. As to the JCR, more often than not they dragged their feet and created a great deal of confusion in the Sorbonne assembly with their politicking. Toward the end of the May–June events, they held back the movement and accommodated themselves to the non-Stalinist electoral left.

What was “missing” in the May–June events? Certainly not “vanguard” Bolshevik parties. The revolt was afflicted with these parties like lice. What was needed in France was an awareness among the workers that the factories had to be worked, not merely occupied or struck. Or to put it differently, what the revolt lacked was a movement that could develop this consciousness in the workers. Such a movement would have had to be anarchic, similar either to the March 22nd Movement or the action committees that took over Censier and tried to help the workers, not dominate them. Had these movements developed before the revolt, or had the revolt lasted long enough for them to develop an impressive propaganda and action force, events might have taken a different turn. Anyway, the Communists combined with de Gaulle to deflect the revolt and finally destroy it.

In my opinion, these are the real lessons of the May–June events. In reading what I have written, it becomes very clear why Marxist-Leninists in America devote little discussion to
the French revolution aries in the face. All that was necessary was for the workers to work the factories and turn their strike committees into factory committees. This decisive step was not taken; hence the people were not armed and the bourgeois system of property relations was not shattered. The Stalinists shrewdly deflected the revolutionary movement into political lines by calling for a Communist-Socialist coalition cabinet. Thus the struggle was channeled into an election campaign on strictly bourgeois grounds. For these reasons and others, the revolt receded and in so doing produced a “backlash” from the mass of people who were watching and waiting. These people might have been won to the revolution had it succeeded. They seemed to be standing by and saying; “Let’s see what you can do.” Once the revolt failed, however, they voted for de Gaulle. De Gaulle at least had reality; the revolution, on the other hand, had been vaporized by failure.

How did the Maoists and Trotskyists, the “vanguard” Bolshevik parties and groupuscules, behave? The Maoists opposed every demand for workers’ control. (Some of them, after the revolt receded, began to revise their views and are now called “anarcho-Maoists”!) Chairman Mao had opined that workers’ control is anarcho-syndicalism—hence a “petty bourgeois deviation.” The job of the workers, cried the Maoists, was to “seize state power.” Thus, in the name of “Bolshevik realism,” the only basis for a social revolution—the occupation of the factories—was subordinated to abstract political slogans that had no reality in the living situation. Let me give you an example: marching to the Billancourt plant of Renault, the Maoists carried a big banner which read “Vive the CGT!”—this at a time when the most revolutionary workers were carrying on a bitter struggle with the CGT and were trying to shed the bureaucratic apparatus with which the labor federation had saddled the workers. What the Maoists were saying was “put us in control of the CGT.” But who the hell wanted them?

was spontaneous. No one had “summoned it forth”; no one had “organized” it; no one succeeded in “controlling” it.

A festive atmosphere prevailed throughout most of the May–June days, an awakening of solidarity, of mutual aid, indeed of a selfhood and self-expression that had not been seen in Paris since the Commune. People literally discovered themselves and their fellow human beings anew or remade themselves. In many industrial towns, workers clogged the squares, hung out red flags, read avidly and discussed every leaflet that fell into their hands. A fever for life gripped millions, a reawakening of senses that people never thought they possessed, a joy and elation they never thought they could feel. Tongues were loosened, ears and eyes acquired a new acuity. There was singing with new, and often ribald, verses added to old tunes. Many factory floors were turned into dance floors. The sexual inhibitions that had frozen the lives of so many young people in France were shattered in a matter of days. This was not a solemn revolt, a coup d’état bureaucratically plotted and manipulated by a “vanguard” party; it was witty, satirical, inventive and creative—and therein lay its strength, its capacity for immense self-mobilization, its infectiousness.

Many people transcended the narrow limitations that had impeded their social vision. For thousands of students, the revolution destroyed the prissy, tight-assed sense of “studenthood”—that privileged, pompous state that is expressed in America by the “position paper” and by the stuffy sociologese of the “analytical” document. The individual workers who came to the action committees at Censier 1 ceased to be “workers” as such. They became revolutionaries. And it is precisely on the basis of this new identity that people whose lives had been spent in universities, factories and offices could meet freely, exchange experiences and engage in common actions

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1 The new building of the Sorbonne Faculty of Letters.
without any self-consciousness about their social “origins” or “background.”

The revolt had created the beginnings of its own classless, nonhierarchical society. Its primary task was to extend this qualitatively new realm to the country at large—to every corner of French society. Its hope lay in the extension of self-management in all its forms—the general assemblies and their administrative forms, the action committees, the factory strike committees—to all areas of the economy, indeed to all areas of life itself. The most advanced consciousness of this task seems to have appeared not so much among the workers in the more traditional industries, where the Communist-controlled CGT exercises great power, as among those in newer, more technically advanced industries, such as electronics. (Let me emphasize that this is a tentative conclusion, drawn from a number of scattered but impressive episodes that were related to me by young militants in the student-worker action committees.)

**Authority and Hierarchy**

Of paramount importance is the light that the May–June revolt cast on the problem of authority and hierarchy. In this respect it challenged not only the conscious processes of individuals, but also their most important unconscious, socially conditioned habits. (It does not have to be argued at any great length that the habits of authority and hierarchy are instilled in the individual at the very outset of life in the family milieu of infancy, in childhood education at home and in school, in the organization of work, “leisure” and everyday life. This shaping of the character structure of the individual by what seem like “archetypal” norms of obedience and command constitutes the very essence of what we call the “socialization” of the young.)

The mystique of bureaucratic “organization,” of imposed, formalized hierarchies and structures, pervades the most radical
with working for the state. These people could join their brothers and sisters in productive jobs, thus drastically shortening everyone’s work week. In this new system, the producers and the community could jointly manage the economy from below, coordinating their administrative operations through factory committees, councils of factory committee representatives, and neighborhood action committees—all directly accountable to the plant and neighborhood assemblies, all recallable for their actions. At this point, society takes direct control of its affairs. The state, its bureaucracy, its armies, police, judges and jails, can disappear.

You may object that the old system of production and distribution is still centralized structurally and based on a national division of labor. Agreed; you are perfectly correct. But does its control have to be centralized? As long as policy is made from below and everyone who executes that policy is controlled locally, administration is socially decentralized although the means of production are structurally fairly centralized as yet. A computer used to coordinate the operations of a vast plant, for example, is an instrument for structural centralization. However, if the people who program and operate the computer are completely answerable to the workers in the plant, their operations are socially decentralized.

To pass from a narrow analogy to the broader problems of administration, let us suppose that a board of highly qualified technicians is established to propose changes in the steel industry. This board, we may suppose, advances proposals to rationalize the industry by closing some plants and expanding the operations of others in different parts of the country. Is this a “centralized” body or not? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, only in the sense that the board is dealing with problems that concern the country as a whole; no, because it can make no decisions that must be executed for the country as a whole. The board’s plan must be examined by all the workers in the plants that are to be closed down, and those whose operations are to

movements in nonrevolutionary periods. The remarkable susceptibility of the left to authoritarian and hierarchical impulses reveals the deep roots of the radical movement in the very society it professedly seeks to overthrow. In this respect, nearly every revolutionary organization is a potential source of counter-revolution. Only if the revolutionary organization is so “structured” that its forms reflect the direct, decentralized forms of freedom initiated by the revolution, only if the revolutionary organization fosters in the revolutionist the lifestyles and personalities of freedom, can this potential for counterrevolution be diminished. Only then is it possible for the revolutionary movement to dissolve into the revolution, to disappear into its new, directly democratic social forms like surgical thread into a healing wound.

The act of revolution rips apart all the tendons that hold authority and hierarchy together in the established order. The direct entry of the people into the social arena is the very essence of revolution. Revolution is the most advanced form of direct action. By the same token, direct action in “normal” times is the indispensable preparation for revolutionary action. In both cases, there is a substitution of social action from below for political action within the established, hierarchical framework. In both cases, there are molecular changes of “masses,” classes and social strata into revolutionary individuals. This condition must become, permanent if the revolution is to be successful if it is not to be transformed into a counterrevolution masked by revolutionary ideology. Every formula, every organization, every “tried-and-tested” program, must give way to the demands of the revolution. There is no theory, program or party that has greater significance than the revolution itself.

Among the most serious obstacles to the May–June uprising were not only de Gaulle and the police, but also the hardened organizations of the left—the Communist Party that suffocated initiative in many factories and the Leninist and Trotskyist groups that created such a bad odor in the general assem-
bly of the Sorbonne. I speak here not of the many individuals who romantically identified themselves with Che, Mao, Lenin or Trotsky (often with all four at once), but of those who surrendered their entire identity, initiative and volition to tightly disciplined, hierarchical organizations. However well-intentioned these people may have been, it became their task to "discipline" the revolt, more precisely, to de-revolutionize it by imbuing it with the habits of obedience and authority that their organizations have assimilated from the established order. These habits, fostered by participation in highly structured organizations modeled, in fact, on the very society the "revolutionaries" profess to oppose—led to parliamentary maneuvering, secret caucusing, and attempts to "control" the revolutionary forms of freedom created by the revolution. They produced in the Sorbonne assembly a poisonous vapor of manipulation. Many students to whom I spoke were absolutely convinced that these groups were prepared to destroy the Sorbonne assembly if they could not "control" it. The groups were concerned not with the vitality of the revolutionary forms but with the growth of their own organizations. Having created authentic forms of freedom in which everyone could freely express his viewpoint, the assembly would have been perfectly justified to have banned all bureaucratically organized groups from its midst.

It remains to the lasting credit of the March 22\textsuperscript{nd} Movement that it merged into the revolutionary assemblies and virtually disappeared as an organization, except in name. In its own assemblies, March 22\textsuperscript{nd} arrived at all its decisions by the "sense of the assembly," and it permitted all tendencies within its midst to freely test their views in practice. Such tolerance did not impair its "effectiveness"; this anarchic movement, by the common agreement of nearly all observers, did more to catalyze the revolt than any other student group. What distinguishes March 22\textsuperscript{nd} and groups such as the anarchists and Situation-
as action committees to perform the administrative tasks of the neighborhood assemblies. They too would form an administrative council, which would work with the factory committee council, the two meeting together periodically to deal with common problems. One of the most important functions of the neighborhood assemblies—the new “sections”—would be to recycle employment from nonproductive areas of the economy (sales, insurance, advertising, “government,” and other socially useless areas) into productive areas. The goal here would be to shorten the work week as rapidly as possible. In this way, everyone would benefit almost immediately from the new arrangement of society—both the industrial worker and, say, the ex-salesman whom the worker trains in the factory. All would get the means of life for a fraction of the time they devote to work under bourgeois conditions. The revolution would thus undercut the position of many counterrevolutionary elements who, from time immemorial, have argued that the old conditions of life were better than the new.

What is essential here is not the fine detail of this structure, which could be worked out in practice, but the dissolution of power into the assemblies, both factory and neighborhood. In the past, very little attention has been given to the role and importance of unmediated relations and popular assemblies. So strongly was the notion of “representation” fixed in the thinking of revolutionary groups and the people that the assemblies, where they existed, arose almost accidentally. Apart from the Greek ecclesia, they emerged, in most cases, not as a result of conscious design, but rather of fortuitous circumstances. Ordinarily, the various councils and committees in earlier revolutions were given enormous powers in formulating policy; the demarcation between administrative work and policy decisions was murky at best, or simply nonexistent. As a result, the committees and councils became social agencies exercising enormous political powers over society; they became a nascent state apparatus that rapidly acquired control over society as a

ists from all others is that they worked not for the “seizure of power” but for its dissolution.

The Dialectic of Modern Revolution

The French events of May and June reveal, vividly and dramatically, the remarkable dialectic of revolution. The everyday misery of a society is highlighted by the possibilities for the realization of desire and freedom. The greater these possibilities, the more intolerable the everyday misery. For this reason, it matters little that French society has become more affluent in recent years than at any time in its history. Affluence in its highly distorted bourgeois form merely indicates that the material conditions for freedom have developed, that the technical possibilities for a new, liberated life are overripe.

It is plain, now, that these possibilities have haunted French society for a long time, even if unperceived by most people. The insensate consumption of goods graphs, in its own warped way, the tension between the shabby reality of French society and the liberatory possibilities of a revolution today, just as a sedating diet and extravagant obesity reveal the tension in an individual. A time is finally reached when the diet of goods becomes tasteless, when the social obesity becomes intolerable. The breaking point is unpredictable. In the case of France, it was the barricades of May 10, a day which shook the conscience of the entire country and posed a question to the workers: “If the students, ‘those children of the bourgeoisie’, can do it, why can’t we?” It is clear that a molecular process was going on in France, completely invisible to the most conscious revolutionaries, a process that the barricades precipitated into revolutionary action. After May 10, the tension between the mediocrity of everyday life and the possibilities of a liberatory society exploded into the most massive general strike in history.
The scope of the strike shows that nearly all strata of French society were profoundly disaffected and that the revolution was anchored not in a particular class but in everyone who felt dispossessed, denied, and cheated of life. The revolutionary thrust came from a stratum which, more than any other, should have “accommodated” itself to the existing order—the young. It was the young who had been nourished on the pap of Gaullist “civilization,” who had not experienced the contrasts between the relatively attractive features of the prewar civilization and the shabbiness of the new one. But the pap didn’t work. Its power to co-opt and absorb, in fact, is weaker than was suspected by most critics of French society. The pap-fed society could not withstand the drive for life, particularly in the young.

No less important; the lives of young people in France, as in America, had never been burdened by the Depression years and the quest for material security that shaped the lives of their elders. The prevailing reality of French life was taken by the young people for what it is—shabby, ugly, egotistical, hypocritical and spiritually annihilating. This single fact—the revolt of the young is the most damning evidence of the system’s inability to prevail on its own terms.

The tremendous internal decay of Gaullist society, a decay long ante dating the revolt itself, took forms that do not fit into any of the traditional, economically oriented formulas of “revolution.” Much had been written about “consumerism” in French society to the effect that it was a polluting form of social stabilization. The fact that objects, commodities, were replacing the traditional subjective loyalties fostered by the church, the school, the mass media and the family, should have been seen as evidence of greater social decomposition than was suspected. The fact that traditional class consciousness was declining in the working class should have been evidence that conditions were maturing for a majority social revolution, not a minority class revolution. The fact that “lumpen” values in dress,

What an astonishing development! And this demand was precisely the key to the whole situation. The workers had occupied the plants. The economy was in their hands. Whether this sweeping movement would become a complete social revolution depended upon one thing—would the workers not only occupy the plants, but work them? This was the barrier that had to be surmounted. Had the workers begun to work the plants under workers’ management, the revolt would have advanced into a full-scale social revolution.

Let us now try to imagine what would have happened if the workers had actually surmounted this barrier. Each plant would elect its own factory committee from among its own workers to administer the plant. (Here the workers could have counted on a great deal of cooperation from the technical staff, most of whom would have gone over to the revolution.) I emphasize “administer” because policy would be made by the workers in the plant, by an assembly of the workers on the factory floor. The factory committee would merely execute and coordinate these policies. Here you have true revolutionary democracy, and in the arena of production, where the means of life are made.

Let us go further (and what I shall describe was absolutely possible). The factory committees of all the local plants could now link together to form an area administrative council, whose function would be to deal with whatever supply problems exist. Each member of this council would be rigorously controlled by the workers in the plant from which he or she came and would be fully accountable to the factory assembly. The tasks of the council, I must emphasize, would be entirely administrative; many of its technical functions could be taken over by computers, and membership on the council would be rotated as often as possible.

Together with these industrial forms of organization, there would also be neighborhood organizations—assemblies corresponding to the French revolutionary sections of 1793, as well
nally, the CGT official cries out in anger: “Tell me, damn it! I am your representative!” And the strikers answer with a huge cry. “We want the revolution!”

To a very large extent, this response is accurate. The cartoon expressed a sentiment which was still very diffuse, of course, but was nevertheless quite real. That is why the cartoon was so popular in France when it came out. It expressed what many workers (especially young workers) felt in a vague way—and perhaps not so vaguely.

The student barricades of May 10 precipitated the general strike, the largest general strike in history. The workers (mainly the young workers) said to themselves, “if the students can do it, so can we.” And out of the Sud-Aviation plant in Nantes, a city with the strongest anarcho-syndicalist tendencies in France, came the general strike. The strike swept into Paris and brought out almost everybody, not only industrial workers. Insurance employees went out, as well as postal workers, department store clerks, professionals, teachers, scientific researchers. Yes, even the football players took over the building of their professional association and put out a banner that proclaimed, “Football belongs to the people!” It was not only a workers’ strike; it was a people’s strike that cut across almost all class lines. You must understand this, for it is a very important fact about the possibilities of our time. At Nantes, peasants brought their tractors into the city to help the movement and longshoremen emptied the holds of the ships to feed the strikers. The most advanced demands, I should emphasize, were raised in the newer industries—for example, in the electronics plants. In one such plant, a firm composed largely of highly skilled technicians, the employees declared publicly, “We have everything we want. We won large wage increases and longer vacations in negotiations we conducted last month [April]. We are now striking for only one demand: workers’ control of industry—and not only in our plant, but for all the plants in France.”

音乐、艺术和生活方式正在法国年轻人中传播。这应该表明，“混乱”及其直接行动的潜力已经在传统的政治抗议背后的面纱下成熟起来。通过一个令人惊讶的辩证法的讽刺，一个“去阶级化”的过程正在形成，而法国正在达到前所未有的物质富裕。不管卢尔德的个人受欢迎程度如何，一个去制度化的过程正在进行，而国家资本主义似乎比近来任何时候都更深植社会结构中。社会现实的残酷和解放可能性的增加正在同时发生，而法国社会似乎比近来任何时候都更为平静。一个去同化的过程正在进行，而它似乎比近来任何时候都更为可靠的“正统社会”的秘密性。经验本身（而不是“先锋派政党”和“经过实践的公认计划”）成为了革命的动员力量和创造力的源泉。5月—6月的起义。这是当然的。不仅一次起义的爆发是自发的——历史上所有伟大革命的一个特征——而且它也自然地按照其自身的进程展开。这并不意味着革命团体在事件面前保持沉默。如果他们有想法和建议，他们的责任是提出它们。但是，使用革命创造的社交形式来操纵目的，秘密地站在革命的后面，不信任它，并试图用“光荣的政党”来取代它，是极不道德的。

The point is that the issues that make for social unrest had changed qualitatively. The problems of survival, scarcity and renunciation had changed into those of life, abundance and desire. The “French dream,” like the “American dream” was eroding and becoming demystified. Bourgeois society had given all it could give on the only terms it was capable of “giving” anything—a plethora of shabby material goods acquired by meaningless, deadening work. Experience itself (not “vanguard parties” and “tried-and-tested programs”) became the mobilizing agent and source of creativity for the May–June uprising. And this is as it should be. Not only is it natural that an uprising breaks out spontaneously—a feature of all the great revolutions in history—but it is also natural that it unfolds spontaneously. This hardly means that revolutionary groups stand mute before the events. If they have ideas and suggestions, it is their responsibility to present them. But to use the social forms created by the revolution for manipulatory purposes, to operate secretly behind the back of the revolution, to distrust it and try to replace it by the “glorious party,” is wantonly criminal.
and unforgivable. Either the revolution eventually absorbs all political organisms, or the political organisms become ends in themselves—the inevitable sources of bureaucracy, hierarchy and human enslavement.

To diminish the spontaneity of a revolution, to break the continuum between self-mobilization and self-emancipation, to remove the self from the process in order to mediate it with political organizations and institutions borrowed from the past, is to vitiate the revolution’s liberatory goals. If the revolution does not start from below, if it does not enlarge the “base” of society until it becomes the society itself, then it is a mere coup d’état. If it does not produce a society in which each individual controls his daily life, instead of daily life controlling each individual, then it is a counterrevolution. Social liberation can only occur if it is simultaneously self-liberation—if the mass movement is a self-activity that involves the highest degree of individuation and self-awakening.

In the molecular movement below that prepares the condition for revolution, in the self-mobilization that carries the revolution forward, in the joyous atmosphere that consolidates the revolution—in all of these successive steps, we have a continuum of individuation, a process in which power is dissolved, an expansion of personal experience and freedom almost aesthetically congruent with the possibilities of our time. To see this process and articulate it, to catalyze the process and pose the next practical tasks, to deal unequivocally with the ideological movements that seek to “control” the revolutionary process—these, as the French events have shown, are the primary responsibilities of the revolutionary today.

Paris
July 1968

2. Excerpts from a Letter

The Making of a Revolution:
What Happened...
What Could Have Happened...

You ask how the May–June revolt could have developed into a successful social revolution.¹ I shall try to give you my own views as clearly as possible. My answer applies not only to France, but to any industrialized country in the world. For what happened in France could be regarded as a model of social revolution in any advanced bourgeois country today. It astonishes me that there is so little discussion about France in the United States. The May–June events are the first really clear illustration of how a revolution can unfold in an industrially developed country in the present historical period, and they should be studied with the greatest care.

The general strike, let me point out, occurred not only because of the wage grievances that were piling up in France, but also—and mainly, in my opinion—because the people were fed up. Intuitively, unconsciously, and often quite consciously, the strikers were disgusted with the whole system, and they showed it in countless ways. A cartoon published in France after the May–June events shows a CGT official addressing the strikers: “What do you want?” he shouts. “Better pay? Shorter hours? Longer vacations?” Each time this Stalinist hack asks one of these questions, the strikers respond with silence. Fi-

¹ This is an excerpt from a letter written shortly after the May–June events.