

The ghost of May 68 still hovers above the international Radical Left, although the struggles which happened in Italy or in Portugal during the early '70s were certainly much more important. Therefore I am often obliged to explain to "foreign" comrades that France may not be the vanguard of the forthcoming world revolution...

Will it be a new "May '68"?

25 March, 2006 -

Is France facing a new May '68 [when student protests eventually sparked a ten million strong general strike]?

Today (20 March), I would say no – but everything can change if the working class (and especially the private sector workers) starts to move. Tonight the unions rejected a general strike in favour of a "day of action" in a week's time – a perfect technique to bury the movement.

There are a number of differences with 1968.

Students are divided about their methods of action. Not all those who oppose the CPE approve the occupation and blockading of the universities. The media and the Right are attempting to convince the more moderate anti-CPE students that these forms of direct action are not good because only a minority of students participate and voting is public; and because the poorest students will be most affected if they miss lectures, exams, etc.

The strikers say that the only way they can encourage students to come to the general assemblies, discuss and take part in voting is to blockade the universities (this is also true of the secondary schools). The students also want to involve their lecturers and teachers. Obviously, if they were engaged in a general strike, the university system could not function.

Another difference is that in 1968 only 12% of young people had the "baccalauréat" (end of secondary school exam). Today 70 % have the baccalauréat. So the danger of being integrated into the so-called middle classes is very small; but the risks taken by the students are much greater.

In 1968, the Far Left, anarchists and all sorts of libertarians succeeded in dominating the student movement. They could talk for hours about revolution and be taken seriously, or at least not be seriously contradicted. They did not call for university reform: they wanted the disappearance of the university system, the end of the division of labour, and so on. They had an anti-authoritarian rhetoric and at least struggled to control the content of the classes, to introduce revolutionary pedagogical methods, to organise alternative classes. As they said, they did not want to be the "foremen" of the capitalist class.

Almost 40 years later, sections of the Far Left have become notorious for their ability to manipulate general assemblies and use movements for their own political aims. Already, by the mid-1980s, it was obvious that radical students were no longer criticising the ideological content of their curriculum, did not mind about of the reactionary pedagogy of their teachers. They did not want to change society and were looking for good jobs. They wanted more grants, more teachers, bigger classrooms, etc.

But there was something positive and new: they did not want to be manipulated and they have tried to create democratic procedures in the general assemblies, even if this has not always succeeded. They created "coordinations" which were supposedly independent from the parties and trade unions.

The National Student Coordination meets in a different town each time, and the number of delegates has doubled in size, from 200 to 400. The delegates are not always elected in the most democratic way and are the results of compromises between various political forces, the student unions and the independent students. In other words, the delegates are more often chosen than really elected by the general assemblies.

The coordination of Poitiers, for example, has withdrawn from the National Coordination because it strongly criticizes its internal democracy.

The demands of the national coordination concern not only the CPE, but also a general amnesty for all the persons condemned in the November 2005 "riots," the repeal of all laws promoting casualization, etc. The university students are trying to build links with high school students but also with groups of precarious workers.

Today most university students do not have “wealthy” parents. Yet, contrary to the propaganda of the Right, it’s generally the wealthiest students who are most opposed to the occupations and the poorest who are most ready to take risks. Meanwhile in Tours, law and economics students, until now dominated by a highly reactionary union, have gone on strike, organised assemblies etc. Nonetheless, this is a minority movement. Many students are still hesitating, unwilling as yet to jeopardise their studies and their future “careers.” This even though the majority of universities are mobilised in one way or another.

Today fear of unemployment dominates young people, even among the teenagers. There is a growing feeling of insecurity, a feeling which did not exist in 1968. This element fuels the movement (both for the children of workers and of the middle classes who do not want to become workers) but can also limit it.

Next year is an election year. If the government is intelligent enough to withdraw the CPE and start discussions with the unions, the “left” (Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens) will tell the youth to wait a year and rely on the ballot box. This is exactly what they did after the October-November riots, when the most “courageous” of the reformists came to the suburbs and campaigned for the youth to register to vote. Whether this political trick will work remains to be seen. The government seems confident the peak was reached last Saturday and that the movement will decline.

What is the law that has provoked this movement?

The “Contrat Première Embauche,” recently passed by the French parliament, allows the bosses to fire workers under 26 without providing any reason during their first two years of employment. In other terms it’s a first breach of the Labour Code.

In France, there are many kinds of contracts, but the model, the norm is called a CDI (“Contrat à durée indéterminée,” Unlimited Length Contract). During the last thirty years, the number of people enjoying a CDI has progressively diminished. Those who “benefit” from these contracts are basically between 30 and 50. Those under 30 tend to be employed on all sorts of temporary contracts, justified by the difficulty of their “integration into the labour market.”

Among the over ‘50s, the mass of those on temporary contracts are those who have been collectively sacked from companies which are bankrupt, externalise their production, merge and downsize their staff, etc.

What are the differences between this new law and the old one they had tried to pass in 1994, which was also met with mass protests?

Thirty-five different measures concerning youth unemployment have been enacted in the last thirty years. The CIP was presented by Prime Minister Edouard Balladur in 1994. It was aimed at young people under 26 who had a baccalauréat or two-year university diploma but had difficulties finding a job. The bosses were allowed to pay 20% less than the minimum wage if the employees had a “baccalauréat” or a two-year university diploma, or even more than 20% less if the young employees had no diploma at all.

Recently the government has passed two new laws concerning the CPE (First Job Contract) and the CNE (New Job Contract). The CPE covers companies with more than 20 employees, the CNE companies with less than 20 employees. The CPE covers people who are less than 26 and the CNE all wage-earners. Companies who hire a certain number of people with a CNE or CPE won’t pay taxes for three years!

Those still training after three months will be paid a minimum of 360 euros a month – but even this is a fraud, as most young people who do a training period in a company, do so for less than three months...and for free.

Until the CPE and CNE the law was rather vague about the “trial period” during which you are tested by your employer and essentially on probation. By extending the trial period to 24 months the government is giving a lethal legal tool to the bosses.

The CPE is blatantly a way of entrenching casualization (“précarité”) among the youth – both inside the company (to accept the bosses’ discipline, not to strike, to accept dangerous working conditions, speed up, etc.) and outside the company (it will be difficult during the two years to leave your parents and probably impossible to rent a room or a flat).

What is the class composition of the demonstrations?

The movement started in the universities, then spread to the high schools (both the “lycées d’enseignement général” which send people to the universities, and the vocational/technical “lycées techniques”). The tactics of the student unions have been to look for support among organisations of

casualized workers as well as from the wider trade union movement. The unions organised a day of action on 7 March, mobilised heavily for the 18 March demonstrations and will hold a second day of action on 28 March – but have failed to call a general strike.

What about the occupations of universities and secondary schools?

Up until mid-March, there was relatively little activity in the secondary schools, but after the 18 March demonstration, there seems to be a growing willingness to act. According to the government, 139 schools are now blockaded and 174 have experienced “disturbances.”

In both the universities and the schools, the occupation is not voted by all the students in a secret ballot, but determined by the majority of those who turn up to the general assemblies. The presidents of the universities are starting to panic and more and more of them have asked the government to withdraw its law. They claim to be concerned about tensions between strikers and non-strikers and the safety issues this raises!

This “fear” has no basis in reality, except in Toulouse where Far Right students expelled the occupiers of the local small university. In reality, the university managers are worried by the political consequences of the occupations. The Interior Minister Sarkozy, a vicious right-wing neoliberal, has the same fear and would like to avoid a repeat of 1986, when the cops beat up a young man called Malik Oussekin and he died of a heart attack. The government was obliged to withdraw its proposals not long afterwards.

Will the government be forced to back down?

If the Prime Minister and president were intelligent, they would withdraw the law. The Socialist Party, Communist Party and all the trade unions are against the law; meanwhile, each new national day of action draws in more people. I do not know if the movement has reached its peak, but many people have compared the 18 March demonstrations with 2002 demonstrations against Le Pen between the two rounds of the presidential election. The left in the broadest sense is nationally mobilised against the law, involving all generations. But it seems that, for the moment, the Right does not want to make any compromise.

What is the attitude of the kids from the poor suburbs who rioted a few months ago towards the demonstrators?

This is only a guess. But most of the “banlieue” kids were mainly engaged in an “anticop” struggle, against racist discrimination, targeting state institutions (schools, post offices, kindergartens, public transport, etc.) or state forces of repression with no political, trade union or autonomous organisations and no political demands. As individuals they may well join the protests, but as organised groups or “gangs” they should not be accepted.

When such people clash with the police, the cops take advantage of the situation to arrest revolutionaries who were not involved in the fighting (seven anarchosyndicalists from the CNT were arrested on the Metro, for instance).

In the suburbs themselves, there are contradictory signs. On one hand, protesters at several high schools have been attacked by local gangs. On the other hand, in the suburb of Drancy, near where the violence began last November, about 400 pupils at the Eugene Delacroix High School gathered for an anti-CPE demonstration and clashed with the police.

What about the unions?

They want a “real discussion” with the government. Their basic demand is a government-financed training fund throughout the wage-earner’s life. Their model is flexi-security like in Denmark or Sweden. They do not criticise flexibility, which they think is “imposed by globalization,” but they also want the state to provide a security net for all wage earners from their first job to their last. They also want subsidies or tax breaks for companies which will hire the 20% of youth with no qualifications on a permanent contract (CDI).

Because the government did not even pretend to consult the trade unions and student unions before presenting its law, it has pushed the most moderate unions (CFDT, CFTC) to unite with the more “radical” ones (CGT, FO, UNSA, Groupe des Dix which includes the SUD unions). This second group is not radical at all from our point of view, but these unions sometimes use a radical language and have a radical image among the public. Their traditional ties with the Communist Party (CGT) or with the Far Left (Groupe des Dix) or their demagoguery lead them to call for one-day strike actions more often than openly right-wing unions.

These “radical” unions are rooted in the public sector and better able to organise a relatively effective one-day strike.

Y.C.

Spontaneist and pro-Situationist myths about November “riots” and anti-CPE struggle

It's impossible today to talk about Situationist group in France but there are obvious strong “anti-organization” feelings in the student milieu. Today, in France, one uses much more often the words “pro-situs” or “post-situs” than “situs” (abbreviation for Situationists). There are different minute circles which pretend to continue the Situationists' efforts (mainly on paper), but what is most striking is a more confused and vague influence of situationism or post-situationism among anarchist sympathisers and rebellious students who just want to do something and are fed up with everything capitalism “offers” them.

To sum up the elements of this confused and heterogeneous spontaneist ideology, which is partly influenced by the Situationists, I can quote:

- * the primacy of the satisfaction of individual “desires” (today, struggles must be “festive,” a permanent joyful activity, a feast),
- * the illusion that one can build isolated alternative islands inside capitalist society (communes, squats, etc.) which would make it possible to transform inter-individual relationships (a direct return to the '60s),
- * the permanent denunciation of the leaders of the extreme left and permanent contempt for rank and file militants, considered as alienated individuals and potential bureaucrats,
- * the defense of so-called exemplary actions, street fighting, stealing and plundering with no analysis of the relation of forces and their legal consequences for the individuals concerned when they are caught by the cops and condemned to heavy jail sentences,
- * an underestimation of the role of the working class which goes together with a glorification of an abstract revolt of the undifferentiated masses, the “precariat” being a sort of vanguard replacing the working class,
- * the refusal to think about the construction of political organizations regrouping those who not only “desire” a social revolution but want to prepare it concretely,
- * the illusion that one can build another world at once, without any transitional stage,
- * a frequent contempt for demands, because material demands are seen as the expression of a will to kill social movements,
- * the refusal to participate in the “coordinations” (non-trade union groups organized for a specific student or even workers struggle). These coordinations are considered as a nest for future bureaucrats. At the same time the partisans of “autonomy” want to build alternate “autonomous” bodies. The result is that the coordinations remain in the hands of the reformists, Stalinists and Trotskyists, and the official student trade unions appear as being representative of the mass of the students even if they are, in fact, bureaucratic grouplets.
- * A confused opposition to democracy and democratic procedures (voting, even raising hands in an assembly, is already considered as a betrayal)
- * The myth of May 68 as a wildcat general strike (if it's true the trade unions did not call a general strike, at the same time they bureaucratically organized the occupations of most factories; the mass of the workers occupied neither their places of work nor their neighborhoods in May-June 1968: and the young workers went to the universities, or to the local action committees or to the demonstrations, to have some fun fighting the cops).
- * The myth of November 2005 described as an “insurrection”
- * The romantic and falsified presentation of so-called “street fighting.” In fact, these so-called fights mainly consisted in throwing some rocks and then running away as quick as possible in order not to get caught by heavily-equipped cops (today a cop needs ten minutes and the help of a colleague to put

on all the elements of his equipment!).

* The manipulative theme of a nuclear or ecological apocalypse: during the Cold war, the nuclear threat was used as a supposed stimulus to push people to act against capitalism; today there is an additional apocalyptic menace: the ecological threat. This propaganda about capitalism's barbarism has positive effects but also potentially negative ones: it may reinforce individualism and individual solutions (from mysticism to cynical attitudes towards climbing in the social scale: after all, if the world is going to disappear soon, why should not I take advantage of everything offered to me right now?) It can favor terrorist actions supposed to wake up the "alienated" masses; or it can lead to the illusion of creating a counter-culture or a counter-society.

* The abstract support to the small minority of suburban kids (a few hundred) who attacked isolated students on the sidelines of the mass student demonstrations in 2006. This abstract support is much more linked to the "white man's guilt complex" than to any concrete action of solidarity and political work with the "banlieue kids" on a day-to-day basis. Those who defend this position justify their support by saying that the small groups who attacked the "petty bourgeois" demonstrators were victims of racism and came from the suburbs. The problem with this fairy tale is that it covers up the reality that tens of thousands of young kids from the working class suburbs and of all national origins demonstrated **inside** the student demonstrations!

* The combination of many of the above quoted ideas may lead to a false appreciation of what happened during and after the anti-CPE struggle; this is why people like the Situationist Ken Knabb can write that thousands of people continued the struggle after the CPE was suppressed; that workers in some places were starting to escape to the control of the trade unions; and that there was a solidarity movement between the students and the workers, retired people, migrants, jobless and precarious people. All these minute-scale phenomena – unfortunately – are presented in such an exaggerated and, at the same time, vague form that they offer a fantasist vision of what happened in France. (2007

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