

# DARE TO FIGHT!



## *Jackie Cleary explains why we raise the* **call FOR A GENERAL STRIKE**

sharpest point of the struggle, while all the time striving to generalise the industrial action, can now be an alternative to abandoning all hope of smashing the I.R. Act.

### THE GENERAL STRIKE

A general strike means a head-on collision between the practical power of the bosses and their state, and the usually latent social and economic power of the working class. The collision could lead to a passing over from a

limited mobilisation of the class for limited goals (such as the smashing of the Industrial Relations Act) to a full scale political confrontation in which the workers' struggle is extended into a conscious struggle against the state and capitalist society itself, ending either in serious defeat or decisive victory.

Such a contest is always implicit in a general strike.

Clearly then the general strike is not a weapon to be played with, and the call for it is not a slogan to be raised light-mindedly. If a strike, especially a sit-in strike, poses the question of power in a single factory, the general strike poses it in the whole country. If a strike can lead to limited clashes with the police, then a general strike can lead to full scale confrontation and civil war.

The idea of the general strike was first conceived in Chartist times, in the 1830s, as the ultimate weapon of the working class. The Great Holiday, as it was called, was to be the full scale proof of the ultimate dependence of society on the working class.

The idea entered the arsenal of the Social Democratic parties at the end of the nineteenth century. It was then seen as the ultimate threat the labour movement could make to be used to stop wars, force a general franchise, etc.

And it was used, for example in Sweden in 1893.

History shows us two basic types of general strike or mass strike: those called by the official leaders of the workers' organisations, and those which well up spontaneously.

### THE PLANNED STRIKE

The period of the decisive domination of the labour movement by the reformist or Stalinist bureaucracies has seen a series of strikes organised from above.

A) Strikes for reformist goals, in which the leadership is genuine in its adherence to the stated goals, and maintains control of the working class. The best examples are the series of general strikes from the 1890s to World War I in Belgium, which won universal manhood suffrage.

B) Token strikes for the purpose of

demonstrating some point or protesting, with, once again, the reformist or Stalinist leadership keeping rigid control.

The French Communist Party was infamous for playing this game way before 1968 (when it got more than it bargained for) by holding one day general strikes, half day general strikes, and even half-hour general strikes on all sorts of issues.

C) Strikes in which the leadership or a large section of it agree in advance with the bourgeoisie to play the Grand Old Duke of York and to head off militancy — so demoralising the working class and dissipating its energies that the workers are led to defeat.

The most notorious example of this is the 1926 British General Strike.

The result depends as usual on the relationship of forces. In areas like Durham, for instance, the movement almost got out of the hands of the TUC. If the young Communist Party had not naively supported the T.U. traitors "from the left" the strike might have escaped TUC control entirely.

SOME READERS have queried our call in the last issue of *Workers Fight*, for a general strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act. (\*)

The dead weight of 1926 lies heavy still, half a century later, on the British labour movement. The bitter memories of that defeat and its terrible aftermath amidst the conditions of the Great Slump have bred a deep distrust for the idea of the general strike weapon. 1926 appears as a great pitched battle and a great defeat — which indeed it was. And the conclusion in many people's minds is that the workers should avoid pitched battles.

But 1926 is not the only general strike that ever occurred. There is very rich arsenal of Marxist thinking on the general strike and an even richer experience up to the present time. Here we attempt no more than a brief discussion of some of the issues raised by the immediate situation of the working class in Britain today.

The Tory Government grows bolder with each failure of the Union leaders to react to its challenge. Faced with the escalating legal sanctions, only a counter-escalation by the workers' side could hope to smash the Industrial Relations Act.

The only immediate response possible is generalised economic action — that is, a 'general strike' use of the social and industrial strength of the working class. (The perspective of a Labour Government to repeal the Act in the long term — if that: remember *In Place of Strife* — means acquiescing to the bosses NOW.)

Only the continuation of the fight to mobilise on the industrial front, at the

## SPONTANEOUS

History also of course shows us spontaneous mass strikes of the working class, mass self-mobilisations, usually drawing in much larger sections of the class than are organised at the beginning.

For instance in Russia, as the revolutionary workers' movement took shape at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, the organised socialist movement helped and supported the mass strike wave with which the working class fought Tsarism. But, for all that, they were largely spontaneous: what Rosa Luxemburg called the elemental form of the self-movement of the working class.

Sometimes the class mobilises spontaneously or half-spontaneously to meet some threat, getting at best grudging after-the-event endorsement from a reformist leadership.

In 1920 the right-wing Kapp took power in Germany for 3 days by means of a putsch. But this aroused, and was defeated by, a semi-spontaneous general strike.

In Spain the revolt of the fascist generals in 1936 was stopped by strikes, mobilisations and self-arming of the workers after most of the official labour movement and the Popular Front government had virtually caved in to the fascist demands.

Lastly there is the situation where the class, whose leadership proclaims socialism but does nothing about it, grows frustrated and impatient. The militants initiate direct action, drawing massively greater sections of the working class into the movement – indeed, often being propelled forward by these fresh sections.

The factory seizures in Italy in 1919 were a conscious challenge to the rule of the bourgeoisie. But they failed to find a comparably revolutionary leadership in the sphere of politics. The indecisive left-talking Socialist Party failed the working class and left it wide open to being smashed later on by fascism.

Thus the 1936 general strike in France. And thus, too, 1968, where the French working class, long frustrated by the misleadership of the Communist Party and the CP trade union, the CGT, long tired of low wages, sham fights and half-hour general strikes (with the CGT bureaucrats attempting to conduct the working class and its movements like a well-disciplined orchestra) suddenly rose and seized control of France.

In this situation of course the 'leading' bureaucrats of the labour movement ran to catch up with the movement, straddled it and stopped it from smashing the bourgeois state – although the



Renault 1968: listening, thinking....and arguing.

bourgeoisie was forced to give massive concessions.

### AFTER A STRIKE

After a general strike there is a variety of possible situations.

There might be a period of quiet with the bourgeoisie generally on top, having clearly defeated the working class.

Or there might be a new equilibrium, based on there being an expanding economy enabling the granting of concessions

to the working class, with the reformist leadership still in control.

Alternatively, the strike can be an episode in a continually explosive situation: after it the bourgeoisie mobilises, goes on the counter-offensive, and the struggle continues – as in Italy after 1919. This obviously depends on the objective possibilities – the background and relationship of forces, the role of the labour leadership and its ability to control and to manipulate the working class.

Further permutations are of course possible based on these possibilities.

## 1926 EXPERIENCE

The experience of 1926 in Britain was an example of the first variant above. Most of the leaders were renegades, agreeing in advance with the Conservatives to head off the strike and betray it. It was growing in strength and determination. More men were out on the last day than on the first.

Calling it off was an outright betrayal of a magnificent mobilisation of the working class by a leadership which with some honourable exceptions (like A.J. Cook) did not even have reformist goals for the strike.

The defeat resulting from the betrayal was serious but not catastrophic. But its effects were soon compounded by the heavy follow-up blow to the working class of the Great Depression with its mass unemployment.

If the Depression hadn't come so soon after, if the revolutionary socialists of that time, the young Communist Party, had been able to use the renegacy of the leaders of labour to discredit them and gain working class leadership for itself – then the outcome could have been very different.

Neither the outcome of the strike itself nor even the effects of betrayal and defeat were anything like inevitable.

Today a general strike could do to the Tories' Industrial Relations Act what the miners and their allies did three months ago to their 7% pay Norm. Such a strike could smash the Act. And in the process of mobilising, the class would begin to create and toughen its sinews and muscles in preparation for the battles – intense and bitter – that would surely follow any partial defeat of the capitalists by the workers.

## REVOLUTION ?

Those 'revolutionaries' who argue that the general strike demands so much serious preparation that it is irresponsible to advocate it unless and until there has been "adequate preparation" are caught in a vicious trap. They have learned little from recent, particularly French, experience.

They see the General strike as a synonym for the revolution, leading always either to decisive defeat or decisive victory. With the labour movement helplessly bureaucratised, they therefore see the call for such a strike as deeply irresponsible: as if we were calling for the revolution, to be led by Vic Feather!

Therefore, they say, we must simply make long term propaganda about an eventual general strike, and meanwhile wait until we have prepared, until we have a mass revolutionary party, and are ourselves the leadership of any

general strike which we call for. Thus once again the general strike becomes a synonym for the revolution. (Moreover, all the talk about 'preparation' is a heaven-sent alibi for the Union leaders' inactivity.)

Such pedantic comrades usually rely on the quotation mines, from which they dig out Trotsky's 1935 warning to the Independent Labour Party, who were threatening to call a general strike – as a sort of punishment to the ruling class in the event of war.

Yet they ignore Trotsky's very important appreciation of the 1936 strike in France and its effects on the working class. (Not to mention the experience of 1968)

"The strike has everywhere and in every place pushed the most thoughtful and fearless workers to the fore. To them belongs the initiative. They are still acting cautiously, feeling the ground under their feet. The vanguard detachments are trying not to rush ahead so as not to isolate themselves. The echoing and re-echoing answers of the hindmost ranks to their call gives them new courage.

The roll call of the class has become a trial self-mobilisation. The proletariat was itself in greatest need of this demonstration of its strength. The practical successes won, however precarious they may be, cannot fail to raise the self-confidence of the masses to an extraordinary degree, particularly among the most backward and oppressed strata.

That leaders have come forward in the industries and in the factories is the foremost conquest of the first wave. The elements of local and regional staffs have been created. The masses know them. They know one another. Real revolutionaries will seek contact with them.

Thus the first self-mobilisation of the masses has outlined and in part brought forward the first elements of revolutionary leadership. The strike has stirred, revitalised and regenerated the whole colossal class organism. The old organisational shell has by no means dropped away. On the contrary, it still retains its hold quite stubbornly. But under it the new skin is already visible!

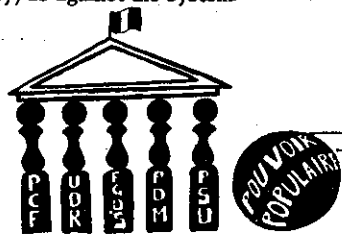
## ULTIMATE WEAPON ?

In essence the attitude of the pedantic revolutionaries is a variant of the old west European Social Democratic conception of the general strike as the well-orchestrated ultimate weapon controlled and directed from above. It is not a conception of the self-mobilisation of the working class.

Since their conception makes the general strike impossible, or only a prelude to betrayal, it follows for them that the slogan for a General Strike cannot be used.

This ignores the experience of the

mass strikes of which 1968 is the most important: welling up from below, directed as much against the labour bureaucrats (though not necessarily consciously) as against the system.



French poster, 1968: workers' power threatens Establishment. Among its props, the 'Communist Party'.

Since this is the major experience of the mass strike and of the general strike throughout most of its history, to ignore it is to ignore the real history of the working class. It is thus tantamount to preventing the revolutionary organisations from bringing the lessons of that history, in the form of propaganda, to the working class in this country.

It ignores the fact that the mass strike and the general strike and the struggle for the general strike, can play a major role in shaking and ultimately smashing the control by the bureaucrats of the labour movement, and in helping to build the revolutionary movement – without which there will never be a full and final victory over the capitalists.

Thus it is the job of revolutionaries to make propaganda for the general strike, to promote and propagandise for a mass strike and for immediate solidarity strikes on every level.

We therefore say a general strike can smash the Industrial Relations Act. We advocate it as a tactical weapon for this limited goal. In the present situation it could win such a goal. We raise the demand that the leaders of the unions prepare and call a general strike.

Even when used as a tactical weapon for limited gains, the general strike still implicitly raises the basic question: who rules in society? Whatever the specific goals of the general mobilisation its logic and its potential is the struggle for state power.

This is not merely an abstract logic but a very practical logic. A general strike necessarily poses the creation of organising committees of the working class and of new organisational and administrative responsibilities for those stewards, councils and trades councils now existing.

It makes necessary the creation of broader workers' committees, street and area committees and councils; and of workers' self-defence organisations in the event of clashes with scabs and state personnel. That is, it would pose the question of the elaboration of the

rudimentary organs of a potential working class state.

The outcome would be decided as a struggle between two perspectives within the mobilised working class – the reformist and the revolutionary. ALL THE EVENTS OF THE STRIKE, the very fact of the working class moving into action, would favour the revolutionary perspective, as does any real mobilisation of the working class into self awareness.

Whether the strike was initiated by rank and file militants or by the official leadership, the revolutionary perspective would have to be fought for, and a series of concrete immediate steps elaborated to take the class continually forward.

## WORKERS' COUNCILS

Revolutionaries would popularise the idea of workers' councils of self-administration, to organise the life of the country and begin to elaborate a counter-state leading to dual power as in Russia between February and October 1917.

The starting point would be the factory committees thrown up by the strike, which in many cases would already be taking decisions not normally taken by workers. These would be generalised into local, regional and finally a National Council of workers' representatives – thus opposing an embryonic workers' state to the bourgeois state.

A revolutionary organisation would advocate that workers who have taken over factories, services etc. should begin to run them, under the control of the workers' councils, enabling services to be restored to the workers and their organisations, while the 'owners' were still excluded. Thus the bosses' property, instead of merely being immobilised and held, would be turned increasingly against them, giving the workers an increasing store of power.

The revolutionary party would begin to form workers' militias, initially from among its own cadres, drawing in militants from all the factories – thus arming the workers for an uprising to disarm and suppress the paralysed organs of bourgeois power and establish the workers' state. A revolutionary party should in any case advocate and work for this in advance of such a situation. But even in the middle of the strike such a programme of action would galvanise the workers, and could at least lead to a period of dual power.

Finally, revolutionaries in such a situation would raise the slogan of a workers' government as the immediate objective of the strike, and move to co-ordinate and consolidate the organs of workers' administration and defence into a counter-state which could challenge and decisively smash the bosses' state

and establish a workers' state.

Such a prosecution of the strike movement by a party with a mass working class following could have taken a situation like that of May-June 1968 in France to a state of dual power – and from there to the revolution.

But even a struggle that does not end with the working class taking power can be an invaluable experience. New leaders and often new forms of organisation are thrown up. These can – even if the movement is for the time being repulsed – serve the class in future struggles.

\* In addition there are objections to the General Strike call by people who consider the whole question of 'making calls to action' and putting 'demands' on leaders as false, diversionary and irrelevant. Thus the International Marxist Group in its new period of maximalist, passive-propagandist politics.

Calling for a general strike, they say, won't make one happen, nor even help prepare for it – only a 'deepening of the struggle' will do that. And we can't affect that either. If a general strike happens – it will happen. If not – not. You are either born a genius or you are not born a genius – so who needs to go to school.

This approach is based on a misreading of Lenin on agitation and propaganda in *What Is to Be Done*, where Lenin attacked Martynov's 'Economist'.

Martynov had added an additional category (that of calls to action) to the Marxist Plekhanov's categories of Propaganda and Agitation. Lenin insisted on an organic unity between theory, programme, propaganda and agitation. He therefore rejected the notion of 'calls to action' as being a separate category – something that doesn't arise organically either from agitation or from propaganda (which are in turn governed by theory and principle.). In Martynov's scheme these 'calls to action' did not flow from the body of Marxist theory.

As Lenin sarcastically put it, Martynov thus 'rendered Plekhanov more profound.'

The IMG theorists guard against this sort of dislocation by simply eliminating 'calls to action' altogether. Perhaps that way they hope to avoid the kind of unprincipled separation of propaganda and agitation exemplified by the

This was true of the Soviets of 1905 which really came to the fore in 1917. It was likewise true of the Irish Citizen Army which was created in the strike movement of 1913 and became the cornerstone of the Easter Rising of 1916.

It is in this sense that Trotsky and Lenin thought of the 1905 revolution as the 'dress rehearsal' for 1917.

And it is in this sense that all the strategies above must be put forward in any general strike situation, so that even if it is not the final showdown the best lessons will be learnt.

International Socialist Group in 1969, when they made abstract propaganda against the British troops in Northern Ireland, but refused to call for their removal.

Where Martynov dislocated the practical 'limbs' growing out of the body of Marxist theory, the IMG proposes to chop them off to save them from being dislocated. (See Red Mole, Supplement to No 40)

In this view the party is not a many-sided entity with organs analogous to a brain to cogitate and an active body to organise and administer.

Rather, the party can have no administrative function. 'It is a brain and a voice' – no more, says the Red Mole, blinking in the blinding light of new 'insights'.

What this leads to in practice could be seen in the following Red Mole. Its front page carried the slogan NO RECOGNITION (of the NIRC). This was published right after the TUC policy of 'non-recognition' had led to capitulation to the NIRC.

The Red Mole, depriving itself of calls to action which give direction to the struggle (including demands on official leaders, around which militants can gather and organise), was left still mumbling the useless sham policy of the TUC.

Not to make demands on Feather or calls to action to the class, meant mimicking Feather's old policy just as it had demonstrated its bankruptcy.

Not only were the awesome theoreticians of the IMG capable of rendering Plekhanov more profound. But they quickly topped this feat with the even more dizzying one of rendering Vic Feather more stupid!

FROM WORKERS' FIGHT No. 7, MAY 25th, 1972

# 1919-1926

how the Tories prepared their

## VICTORY OVER THE WORKERS

**THE YEARS 1919—1926** marked a decisive period in the history of the British labour movement.

An understanding of this period is of immense importance to workers today.

Like today, it was a time of growing class conflict where every struggle became sharper than the one preceding it. This sharpening of class struggle derived from a profound dual crisis of British capitalism.

Firstly, Britain, the first capitalist state on the world arena had entered a phase of irreversible decline, her economic predominance being challenged and displaced by the other imperialist states.

The First World War itself had, in part, been a product of this decline. Germany had begun to encroach upon and capture large chunks of the British share of the world market to the extent that this loss could only be redressed and a redivision of the world market effected by military means.

But far from the war providing a remedy for the chronic

overall problems of British imperialism, it actually deepened them, opening the way for an even mightier challenge from the USA.

### ORGANISED

Secondly, the period was characterised by a cyclical crisis of capitalism. The post-war boom, which had been based upon a demand for industrial goods, ended abruptly in mid-1920 when the inflationary bubble well and truly burst.

And these were not the only difficulties which faced the bosses. The post war boom had registered tremendous changes in the outlook of the working class, which had taken advantage of the inflationary situation to assert its strength. To wrench wage concessions out of the employers, the workers had to resort to their only weapon: organisation.

Trade union membership grew in leaps and bounds from 5½ million in 1917 to 8½ million in 1920. The changes in consciousness in the working

class produced by the sharpness of the struggle helped in turn to intensify the problems of the ruling class, giving it very little room to manoeuvre.

### EUROPE ABLAZE

Equally vital in its impact was the example of the Russian October Revolution in 1917. As Marxists have always emphasised, revolutionary developments are never purely national in scope, and constitute an international phenomenon.

The early twenties exemplified this. All Europe was ablaze. There had been revolutionary waves in Germany, France, Italy, Hungary and Ireland.

In Britain, too, there were revolutionary developments taking shape in every sphere of society. There were strikes in every industry, disorder in the Army and even a strike by those custodians of capitalist property and legality, the police.

Thus, the position of the ruling class hardly provided a foundation for optimism. Yet, there was only one way out — a relentless attack on the living standards and rights of the working class, which prepared to meet this challenge in the only way it knew, by developing and strengthening its own organisation.

This explains the drive towards the amalgamation of trade unions which took place in the immediate post-war period. In 1921, the AEU (now AUEW) came into existence as a result of the amalgamation of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and nine smaller unions.

Similarly, in 1922, the T&GWU emerged out of the shell of the old Transport Federation. Two years later came the GMWU.

Parallel with this, the pre-war agreement for a Triple Alliance of Transport, Railway and Mining Unions to stand and act together, was revived.

### RAILMEN WIN

Both sides were getting into battle formation and the first major shots were fired in the

late summer of 1919, following closely upon the tail end of the boom. The Tory-Liberal Coalition provoked a rail strike by attempting to impose a statutory wage cut.

Despite the strenuous efforts of the railwaymen's leader, J.H. Thomas, to betray the strike, the government folded up at the threat of the Triple Alliance being invoked.

Workers' militancy was on the upswing, and the struggle was reaching unprecedented levels to the point where industrial action became a political weapon.

This was demonstrated particularly by the "Jolly George" incident, in which the dockers in London refused to load weapons destined for use against the Red Army by the counter-revolutionary Polish Army in 1920.

To stress the point, Councils of Action were formed under the leadership of union leaders like Bevin, to spearhead the struggle against British imperialist intervention in Russia if that became necessary.

The next round of struggle involved the miners, who demanded a wage increase and called upon their partners in the

Triple Alliance to throw their weight behind them. The coal-owners refused the increase and on 16th October there began a strike.

The threat of solidarity action by the Transport Workers and Railwaymen created a panic in the ruling class which, while buying time, also pushed through an Emergency Powers Bill which virtually restored its wartime anti-strike powers and foreshadowed the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies.

In reality the decisive struggle was only postponed for six months. The ruling class had bought time to prepare a counter attack.

By 1921, 2½ millions were unemployed. The "shake-out" had begun. Next in the firing line were the workers in the vital export industries — shipbuilding, mines, engineering —

Thomas — "begged and pleaded..."



where chronic problems of lack of investment and surplus capacity existed along with what the employers considered high wages.

## BLACK FRIDAY

The mines were destined to be the first battlefield for the bosses' attack. By April 1921 the coal-owners demanded a wage cut and, this being rejected, locked out the miners. It was now class against class.

Amidst tremendous support for the miners in the working class, the Triple Alliance was invoked, a sympathetic strike being called for 16th April 1921.

The Tory-Liberal Government was now on a civil war footing with the Emergency Powers Act implemented, reservists mobilised and troops posted to industrial areas. The union leaderships surrendered at once.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Thomas of the NUR and Williams of the Transport Workers backed out and left the miners to fight alone. Betrayed and

deserted, the miners fought on for two months and were forced to concede defeat.

This monumental betrayal went down in history as Black Friday and was a colossal demonstration of the cowardice of reformism. Moreover, it served to demoralise whole sections of the working class.

## STEWARDS

Section by section, the employers dealt with the unions and, in the wake of Black Friday, defeat followed defeat.

The employers had drawn strength from their victory over the miners. They took on the engineers and virtually smashed the remnants of the massive war-time Shop stewards movement.

Following on this, they inflicted defeats on the dockers, building workers and textile workers, to the extent that they could boast of having slashed war-time pay increases by 75%.

These defeats had the effect of dampening down the class struggle. Large numbers of workers drifted out of the unions. The tide of class struggle had begun to ebb. The only force which stood up against these developments was the infant Communist Party, which fought resolutely inside the unions to draw out clearly and understand the lessons of Black Friday.

## MINORITY MOVEMENT

By early 1924, the workers began to regain their fighting spirit. This was reflected in the rise in the number of strikes, which rose from 576 in 1922 to 710 in 1924. This steady increase reflected, in turn, the determination of workers to resist attempts at wage cutting, whether at the behest of a Labour Government or the Tories.

It was clear that the working class was going to stand its ground, despite the treachery of the reformist leadership — "left" or right.

This resolve gave new heart and courage to the militants



*Special Constables — taking up the cudgels*

who began to organise anew for class battle. The Communist Party launched the National Minority Movement, a mass rank and file organisation to co-ordinate the militants.

Functioning essentially as a broad alliance of militants, it embraced a quarter of the organised trade union movement at its height. Through its activity A.J. Cook was elected as secretary of the Miners Federation of Great Britain.

The policy of the National Minority Movement was an offensive one, aimed at turning the tide of struggle into an all-out assault on the employers and their state.

The policy of the trade union leadership was, however, purely defensive, and aimed at consolidating their positions amidst tremendous rank and file criticism by being seen to be doing something.

This line, of course, only created the conditions for further treachery. At a time when capitalism could not afford half-measures, this leadership of

J.H. Thomas and Co. were prepared to act only on the basis of such half-measures.

Criminally, they dissipated the will of the class to fight and covered the coming struggle in a smokescreen.

### RED FRIDAY

The capitalists saw things quite differently. They knew what was in store and prepared for it. They began by demanding new wage cuts in the pits and threatening a lockout.

Owing to the low stocks of coal available, this was a premature move. Recognising their advantage, the miners rejected the coal-owners demands, and in July 1925 forced the Tory Government to back down by granting a subsidy to maintain wage levels for nine months.

This was a partial victory. The Tories had retreated — strategically. It became known as "Red Friday".

The Tories were quite clear on what they had done. As Churchill put it — "The Government was impressed with the

fact that the country as a whole was not sufficiently informed about the character and consequences of such a struggle. We therefore decided to postpone the crisis in the hope of averting it or, if not averting it, of coping efficiently with it when it comes." Or, as Baldwin put it more succinctly "We were not ready."

Their intentions were quite clear to everyone except the trade union and labour leaders. The whole crisis of the coal industry determined the bosses' and Tories' outlook. The return to the Gold standard had forced British export prices up and put coal out the running in a market flooded with cheaper German and Polish coal.

The employers and their government were now intent as never before on cutting miners' wages. To do this involved the capitalist state in preparations of a most detailed character.

### THE O.M.S.

In September 1925, they began in earnest to prepare for a —

revolutionary situation. They set up a body "unofficially" with the object of maintaining communications and supplies in the event of a general strike. This was the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies.

It was made up of middle class Tories who wished to do their "patriotic duty". It was joined by students and such gutterwash as the (pre-Mosley) Fascists.

The government encouraged the OMS and set about preparing its own forces. It divided the country into ten regions, each under a Civil Commissioner. 88 Voluntary Service Committees were set up to keep local services in operation.

The police force was enlarged through a massive recruitment of Special Constabulary and the armed forces were mobilised to guard the docks, railways and telephone exchanges.

Warships were anchored in the Mersey, Humber, Tyne and Clyde, while troops armed with gas were moved into the capital and the main industrial centres.

The bosses meant business.

True to form, the trade union leaders did nothing to meet the challenge.

A Royal Commission on the Coal Industry reported, demanding that the miners accept a wage cut and a longer working day. The coalowners declared a lockout for May 1st, 1926 unless the miners accepted these conditions.

In response the miners raised the slogan: "Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day. No district agreements."

On April 20th a state of emergency was declared and the Special Constabulary was mobilised. On April 29th the

Executives of the Unions met in a special TUC Conference, and frantic efforts were still being made by 'leaders' like J.H. Thomas and J.R. Clynes to avoid a confrontation.

On May 1st, the miners were locked out. Simultaneously the TUC Conference took a poll of the trade unions on their attitude to a General Strike to defend the miners. 9,659,527 voted for a General Strike; 49,911 were against.

But still the union leaders prostrated themselves before the Government, begging the cabinet of "hard-faced men" not to push them into a fight. "I never begged and pleaded like I begged and pleaded all today," confessed Thomas.

Finally the dithering leaders' had their hands forced for them — in the middle of a conference with the Cabinet — by unofficial direct action by the NATSOPA chapel of the Daily Mail, which refused to continue printing a viciously anti-union editorial.

Baldwin, hearing the news, jumped up from the conference table and broke off the negotiations.

Even now the trade union leaders were still grovelling, and tried to disown the printers. But the Government felt that it could beat an army led by such generals and, moreover, it needed to take on the workers and defeat them. So the strike was on.

The union leaders were terrified. In fact, they agreed with the Daily Mail — "Two Governments cannot exist within the same capital. One must destroy the other, or surrender to the other." The labour "leaders" thus felt that a working class defeat was an enticing prospect, because fundamentally they feared the workers more than the employers.

They deliberately held back the workers even after the strike was declared, leaving whole groups like the engineers at work until the very last day of the strike. Throughout the strike they maintained contact with the Gov-

ernment.

Finally they called off the strike "so that negotiations could begin", even though the determination and activity of the workers was increasing and a whole new wave had started to move into action.

Victory had been possible. But the miners were left to fight alone for 6 months, when they were forced back to work with their wages cut, hours lengthened and national agreements scrapped.

Thus the ruling class was able to inflict a decisive defeat on the working class. This was soon followed by the mass unemployment of the "Great Depression". And it took more than a generation for the labour movement to recover from the defeat.

The only force which could have provided a principled alternative leadership was the Communist Party, whose leaders had been jailed before the strike and which, following the lead of the Stalin leadership of the Communist International, was tied hand and foot to the so-called lefts on the General Council of the TUC. Their slogan of "All power to the General Council" effectively made them indistinguishable from the trade union Lefts.

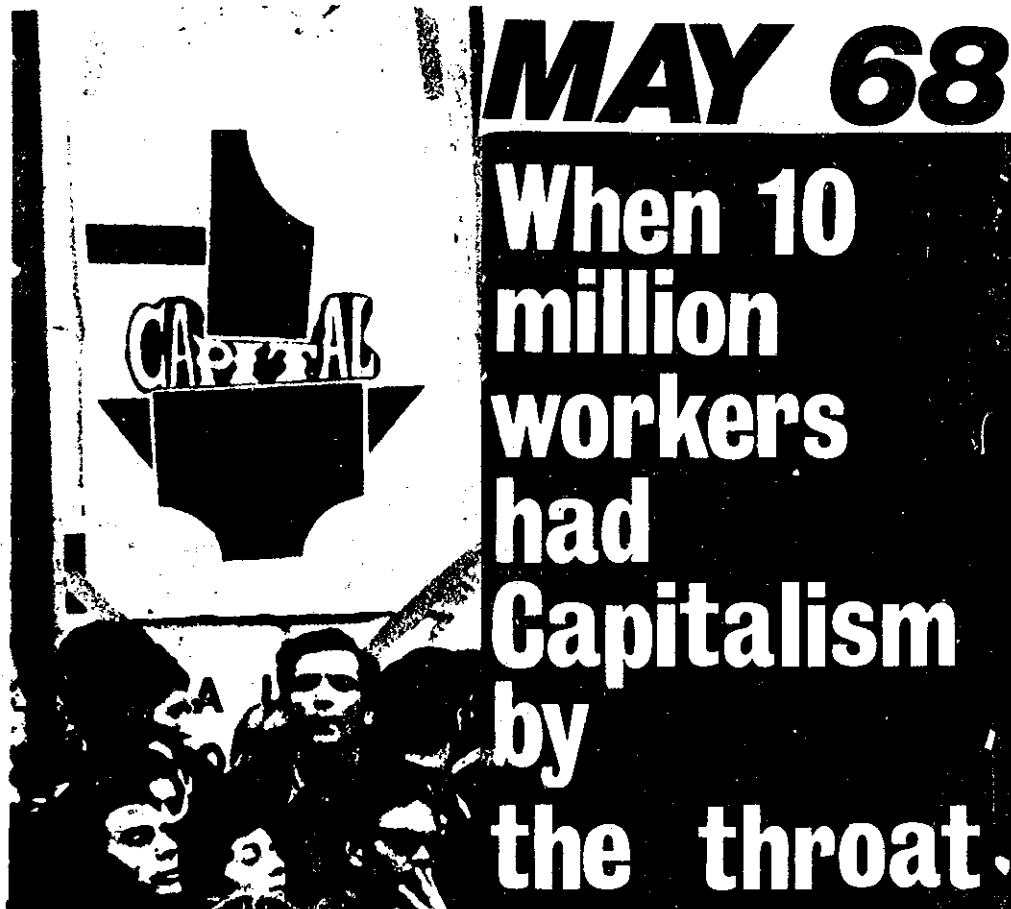
In the absence of revolutionary leadership, the class was defeated and demoralised, not so much by the preparations of the enemy but by the eagerness of its own "leaders" to throw in the sponge.

This is the central lesson of 1919-1926 for today. Neither Feather, nor even Jones and Scanlon, will take the responsibility of leadership in a serious fight, as Feather's scurrying to and from Downing Street, and Jones' and Scanlon's conduct in the docks and engineers' struggles show.

Today, the Tories are buying time and preparing behind the scenes. 1926 must not repeat itself.

WF June 24/July 7 1972





The British ruling class last week heaved a big sigh of relief, as the House of Lords and the Official Solicitor pulled their chestnuts out of the fire.

Since the end of the War, as Western Capitalism prospered and workers won better standards, it was generally put about that the industrial working class was dead as a revolutionary force. Students might demonstrate; the 'third world' might take up arms; but the European workers were satisfied with their cars and TV sets.

But in 1968 in two short weeks the workers of France swept all that complacency away, and put the European workers back on the revolutionary map.

With little warning, in May 1968, the French working class rose to its feet, pulling its trade union leaders — "Communist", "Socialist" and Catholic — and political leaders helplessly behind

it.

Effortlessly, it brought the country to a standstill. By instinct, without any real leadership — and initially against the 'leadership' — it seized and held the productive forces of society which it had wrenched from the powerless hands of the capitalists.

Factories, mines, docks, ships at sea and in port, theatres, offices — all were swiftly occupied and placed under the control of workers' committees.

Everybody joined in. Grave-diggers and chorus girls, footballers, bank clerks and taxi drivers, trade unionists and non-unionists: the whole of the French working masses were in action. Journalists refused to lie to order, and printers censored their employers' press. Farmers joined in. So did schoolchildren, who took over the schools. And they were joined by their teachers! In the vanguard

were the workers of the giant Renault car plants.

Unlike last week's strikes in Britain, which never quite got past the defensive stage, the French General Strike was from the very start a vast, angry offensive against the system. And yet, despite that, despite the participation of 10 million and the existence of a mass party calling itself revolutionary, the system remained intact. Why was this so?

The answer to that question is of vital concern to militants and revolutionaries in Britain today. For this reason we reproduce an edited version of an article published immediately after the strike in *Workers Fight*, in June 1968, which examined the objective possibilities for a workers' victory, and the factors which led instead to a capitalist victory.



"I hate the revolution like sin!" said the hangman of Germany's 1918 revolution, the Social Democrat Ebert. Less direct, but equally

clear after the events in France, is the recent statement of the parliamentary leader of the Communist Party of France, Robert Balanger: "When we talk about the revolution we now think in terms of a political struggle in which our party agrees to fight the bourgeoisie with their own weapons."

The PCF leadership does not, of course, openly hate the revolution. Its feelings are repressed, producing a sort of 'hysterical blindness'. It simply refuses to see the revolution, even when it looms suddenly in front of it.

There was, we are told, no revolutionary situation in France: only ultra-lefts say there was. Since what is ultra-left at any given moment is determined by the current stance of the PCF, which is forever shifting to the right, the ultra-left gets bigger all the time. It now includes those bourgeois journalists who have depicted the real situation and the actual roles of the participants in events.

In 1920, for the benefit of some real ultra-lefts, Lenin defined the cardinal conditions for revolution: "For revolution it is necessary that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. Only when the 'lower classes' do not want the old, and when the 'upper classes' cannot continue in the old way, then only can the revolution be victorious. This truth may be expressed in other ways: revolution is impossible without a national crisis, affecting both the exploiters and the exploited. It follows that for revolution it is essential, first, that a majority of the workers (or at least a majority of the class conscious, thinking, politically active workers) should fully understand the necessity for revolution and be ready to sacrifice their lives for it; secondly, that the ruling classes should be in a state of governmental crisis which draws even the most backward masses into politics (a symptom of every real revolution is: the rapid, tenfold and even a hundred-fold increase in the number of hitherto apathetic representatives of the toiling and oppressed masses

capable of waging the political struggle), weakens the government and makes it possible for revolutionaries to overthrow it." (Left Wing Communism, p.56.)

Which of the above conditions obtained in France? Was there an objectively revolutionary situation in France? If so, how and why did it develop and what happened to it?

## THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

In 1967 the standards of the French workers were seriously cut: social security charges were raised by £250 million, extracted from the workers. Consumer prices had already in ten years risen by 45%. And wages? Whereas national wealth since 1958 had risen nearly 50%, workers had benefited little. One fifth of the total industrial labour force had a take-home pay of less than £8 a week.

Despite expansion, France's economy is sick: the only west European country in which the share of employment in manufacture has declined. With a decline in industrial investment, France finds herself at the bottom of the league for industrial expansion. Stagnation in the building industry has led to the most chronic housing shortages in Western Europe.

Against this background, the deflationary cuts of '67, merging with the world economic slackening generated the highest level of unemployment in 15 years. In January 1968 it was half a million, having increased in 12 months by 32% (51% in the Paris region, and 59% in the run down northern mining areas.) Most indicative of a sick economy, and a sick system, is that 23% of the total unemployed are youths — many of whom have never had a job.

The first spectacular explosion was among the students. Not integrated into a bureaucratised, domesticated routine of day-to-day struggle, and sensitive to ideological movements, they were the first to respond to the growing crisis. Already in the early 60s they had been the main force of solidarity with the Algerian revolution, and lately the Vietnam issue had produced another militant mobilisation.

## THE LEFT

France's labour movement is marked by a revolutionary temper expressed in spontaneous outbursts of class action going right back to the first workers' state, the Paris Commune of 1871, and also in the allegiance of the workers to what

they have regarded as the revolutionary party.

Already in 1936 a similar wave of sit-in strikes engulfed France, to be hoodwinked by the bourgeois Popular Front government and the Communist Party. In 1944 the armed communist workers of the resistance started to take over the country. They had disarmed the Paris police and begun to take over the factories, only to be again deflected from their purpose by the leaders of the Communist Party, who entered the bourgeois coalition government and disarmed the workers, helping the capitalists to rebuild their state. Again in 1947 a mass strike wave hurled back the advance of de Gaulle's then neo-fascist party.

Traditionally the CPF is the workers' party, and gets 25% of the total vote. Thorez, its late leader, claimed primacy in developing the theory of peaceful roads to socialism. After its expulsion from the government at the beginning of the Cold War, it again assumed the role of an old social-reformist party in opposition, biding its time and the workers' time too. It differed from an ordinary social democratic party only in its allegiance to Moscow and in its rigidly undemocratic internal regime.

The CPF has, partly because of its unrestrained methods, effectively retained control of the working class, using demagoguery and smashing down with violence of various types and degrees on any opposition to its class-collaborationist policies. It suppresses the sale of Trotskyist literature to this very day by systematic thuggery, which increased sharply in the last year as the tension built up.

Besides the CP, there is a variety of bourgeois and petit bourgeois 'left' parties, some gleaming workers' votes. In the last three years efforts at unity have led to the formation of a Federation of the Radical and Socialist Left, comprising the Socialist Party, Republican Clubs, and the rump Radical Party (worn-out bourgeois liberals).

Essentially a re-alignment of the parliamentary riff-raff of the 4th Republic, the Federation is led by one Mitterand (11 times a Minister, Colonial Minister in 1950-51 and a defence witness for OAS leader Salan at his trial). They plan finally to merge into a social democratic party, with a predominantly petit bourgeois base. Collectively they dispose of 4½ million votes, but that is no match for the amalgam of Rightist groups making up de

Gaulle's party.

And so the Left Federation's eyes have turned to the pariah party, the CP.

The CP also wants unity. Not revolutionary unity for struggle in factories and streets with the followers of the Federation — but a parliamentary unity with the cynical scoundrels like Mallet and Mitterand who dupe and betray the petit bourgeois and the non-Communist workers.

The CP supported Mitterand for President in '65, as a gesture of goodwill without making demands. In the '67 election they formed an alliance against the Gaullists, collectively gaining 59 seats. Rochet (CP Secretary) made it clear that their policy was neither for communism nor socialism — but for "an end to the regime of personal power" and "a little bit more justice for the working man": mild reformism indeed!

Both the Left Federation and CP in fact accept the de Gaulle constitution imposed 10 years ago by the army — they merely wish to cut 'bonaparte' down to the size of a strong president by revoking Article 16. The biggest practical difference between the CP and LF is that one looks east to Moscow and the other west to Washington. And that means, ironically, that the CP supports de Gaulle's foreign policy, whilst the LF opposes it.

But necessity makes strange bedfellows. Sharing a perspective of a peaceful, endless road to an impossible 'socialism' the CP and LF have a lot in common: to be precise, 49% of the vote in 1967.

With a growing bond of mutual utility, things were looking bright. Time would smooth out the disagreements on foreign policy. Meanwhile the electoral margin would grow, the General would get older and maybe one day die; all was well and getting better.

But then the bloody workers went and spoilt it all by taking things into their own hands. For them, of course, things had been bad and were getting worse.

## THE UNIONS

Not more than 30% of France's workers are unionised, split into three blocks: Force Ouvrière ("Socialist"), 600,000 members; CFDT (Catholic), 750,000 members; and the biggest and most important, the CGT ("Communist"), 1,900,000. (It had 5 million at the end of the War)

The colours of the CGT banner

are red and yellow: red for the workers and their aspirations, yellow for the stalinist bureaucrats and their way of life.

Were the CP and CGT revolutionary, with a realistic perspective of mobilising the workers in class struggle, then the discontent of the French workers would have developed openly in mass struggles. But the antics of the CGT in day to day industrial issues have made them past masters at repressing the militancy of the workers, paralleling industrially the CP's role politically.

Thus the CGT deliberately divides the workers, factory from factory, grade from grade, conducting separate, isolated, limited strikes instead of serious struggles. Such demoralising tactics as half-hour strikes in a single shop, token one-day general strikes and extreme timidity in demands (with one fifth of the workers on less than £8 a week) have contributed to the explosive frustrations and led to the fall-off in membership since the War.

As unemployment grew, as social shortages like housing remained chronic and social benefits and real wages were cut, the meanderings of the CGT only masked and disguised the resentment and thus prepared the violent and sudden character of the explosion.

Last Autumn they called for a general strike against the cuts, a token strike like so many others. There was little response. This must have encouraged the bureaucrats to explain their own behaviour in terms of working class apathy. They forget, these bureaucrats who are accustomed to commands from above, that the working class isn't an orchestra to play to order, that it must develop confidence in itself and in its leaders before it will respond — and there have been too many token strikes in France.

The whole behaviour of the CP and the CGT since 1944 and earlier, and particularly the industrial antics of the CGT, had been designed to destroy any confidence in their own ability to win. They needed a fighting lead, the prospect of a struggle rather than a charade, to rouse them with the hope of winning.

This hope the student movement, with its magnificent struggle on the barricades and in the streets — in the great tradition of the Commune itself — gave them.

## STUDENT GUERRILLAS

The students, free from the restraint of an ingrained loyalty to the CP, were responsive to revolutionary propaganda (Trotskyist, Castroist, Maoist) which helped them develop the revolutionary élan to face the state in pitched battles.



Top C.G.T. Bureaucrat  
George Seguy

When they stood up courageously in protest against police occupation of the Sorbonne, they were joined on the Night of the Barricades (May 10th) by many unemployed youth, attracted by their militancy. According to the Assistant Editor of L'Express these fought most bitterly and, of the 30,000 on the barricades, were the last to retreat.

The heroism of students and unemployed against the brutal police riveted the attention of the workers, who loathe the police, especially the strike-breaking CRS. A wave of sympathy swept through the working class.

To head off moves for serious solidarity action the unions called a one-day token general strike — one more token strike. But the response on May 13th was anything but token. 10 million workers, three times and more the number organised in trade unions, struck. Meanwhile the students' insurrection, and the very threat of a general

strike, had forced the Government to retreat: it capitulated — the students had won.

And the workers, who had earlier ignored the call for a futile pseudo-struggle, under the baton of the CGT bureaucrats, suddenly had found a blueprint for their own needs — they too would go out to win. The single spark of student action had landed on dry tinder.

Meant by the leaders as a safety valve, May 13th only convinced the workers of their own strength. Immediately an aggressive mood built up. In spite of the general return to work ordered for May 14th, some strikes continued. From May 16th the takeovers began. Workers seized Sud-Aviation; the students seized the universities. The workers in the most militant factory in the country, Renault at Billancourt, took control.

By the weekend a million workers throughout France had seized the big plants. The Red Flag was hoisted over the means of production. The strikers demanded wage rises, shorter hours and "a real policy to deal with unemployment". A great wave was rising, one which placed in question the very foundations of the capitalist system: its property.

## REARGUARD OF THE ADVANCE

This was entirely spontaneous. CGT and other unions had reined in the background. Now the CGT endorsed the strikes and takeovers, moving quickly to catch up with the runaway workers. But it made it plain that at that stage, with only a million out, it was not calling a general strike.

But still the strikes continued to spread like a grass fire. Desperately now the CGT fought for control of the workers' movement. "The behaviour of the Communists has been fascinating to watch. From the beginning of the crisis they have been more concerned to crush the guerilla challenge of their left than to overthrow M. Pompidou's government." (Observer, 26.5.68)

The students, who had detonated the workers' revolt, were the first target in its campaign to reassert its control. At the beginning of the upsurge L'Humanite (the CP's daily paper) had denounced them; now it resorted to damogogy about outsiders interfering in the affairs of the workers. The student leader Danny Cohn-Bendit was consistently referred to in their usually chau-

vinist press as "the German".

Students were refused the right to participate in workers' demonstrations. When on May 17th they marched to Billancourt they were refused access by CGT officials (but the workers came out over the road to greet them).

Later, the only official CGT posters at Renault were numerous warnings against... sellers of 'ultra-left' literature! A student



Farmers joined in

plan to march on the Radio building on the 18th to protest against Government news control had to be cancelled because the CGT denounced it as a 'provocation' and warned all workers against taking part.

Yet despite all this, the CGT and CP had to run very fast just to keep up with the growing wave of workers' action. "The paradox which underlies this controlled chaos is that the Communist Union and the Gaullist government they appear to be challenging are really on the same side of the barricades... only in this way" (i.e. by endorsing strikes) "can the apparatus which leads the Communist unions retain its control and protect its base from contamination. Economic dislocation and incredible incon-

venience are the price which French society is having to pay to head off an insurrectionary movement which no one saw coming and few have yet understood." (Observer, 19.5.68)

By mid-week 23rd May the peak of the wave was reached with 10 million workers in possession of the factories up and down the land: control seemed to have slipped out of the bourgeoisie's hands.

## TWO PERSPECTIVES

By its scope, tone and temper the mass strike was insurrectionary — the workers' drive was clearly for a total reconstruction of society. It raised inescapably the big question: which class is to rule? A choice of two perspectives faced the workers: keep physical control and take over entirely and go forward; or else settle for big concessions by way of ransom from the powerless bourgeoisie, which would — for the moment — gladly make them.

To attain workers' power the necessary steps were:

- To prepare organs of workers' power by generalising the factory committees (already taking many decisions not normally taken by workers) into local, regional and finally a National council of workers' deputies — thus opposing an embryonic workers' state to the bourgeois state.
- Begin to actually run the factories, under control of the workers' councils.
- Decisively smash and dismantle the bosses' state and consolidate the new order as a workers' state.

Was this physically possible? What was the relationship of forces?

The workers had the factories. On 23rd the Police Union declared itself in sympathy with the strikers, and unwilling to be used against them. The unknown quantity was the army: because of military discipline the only way to test the conscript soldiers is to confront them with a struggle which forces them to choose — and gives them an opportunity to cross over.

In The Times Charles Douglas Home (Defence Correspondent) wrote: "In an extreme emergency the troops could be brought into operation, but it is appreciated that they could be used only once, and then only for a short while, before the largely conscript army was exposed to a psychological battering in a general campaign of subversion which it would probably not



withstand." (31.5.68) This would confirm all past revolutionary experience.

The nominal armed strength of the bourgeoisie was: 83,000 police including 13,500 CRS; 61,000 gendarmes; 261,000 soldiers in France and Germany. In a clash they could only firmly rely on a few battalions of regular soldiers, and presumably the CRS.

But there were 10,000,000 strikers, and over 400,000 members of the CP alone.

Yet the CPF and their apologists say the workers would have faced massive defeat had they attempted revolution.

In fact it is clear that with a minimum preparation, during the mass strike, the bourgeois state could have been smashed and dismantled. The strongest element of 'material' force that protected the bourgeoisie was the reformist, social democratic routine, the anti-revolutionary legalist-pacifist theory, and plain funk of the CPF leadership.

A party aiming at leading the working class to power in that situation would face the following tasks:

- 1) to raise the slogan of a workers' and farmers' government, as the immediate objective of the strike;

- 2) popularise the idea of workers' councils of self administration to organise the life of the country and begin to elaborate a counter-state, leading to dual power such as that in Russia between the rise of the workers' councils (soviets) in February and their victory in October 1917;

- 3) it would begin to form workers' militias, initially its own cadres, drawing in militants from all the factories — thus arming the workers for an uprising to disarm and suppress the paralysed organs of bourgeois power and establish the workers' state.

A revolutionary party would have propagated this long before the upsurge. But even in the middle of the strike, such a programme of action, by a party with the ear of the masses, would have galvanised the workers — and at least led to a period of dual power.

## ROCHET'S "REVOLUTIONARIES"

But the "revolutionary Party" chose a different course: Initially it did not even dare pose the resignation of de Gaulle and his govern-

ment as an objective of the strike!

Amidst the greatest workers' movement for decades, and France's biggest ever general strike, the CP/CGT concentrated on getting wage concessions.

Running hard to keep control of the workers and to isolate the students and revolutionaries, the CGT and CFDT from the start of the upsurge demanded talks with the Government. (The Morning Star, 25.5.68, took Pompidou to task for being slow to reply!) Even the Catholic CFDT went further than the "Communist" union in demanding structural reforms to the system, as well as bread-and-butter concessions; and in fact they remained consistently to the left of the CGT!

By the morning of May 27th they had got their 'Big concessions': 10% all round increase; 35% rise in minimum wage; progress to a 40-hour week; social security cuts rescinded, etc. (By way of a tip, CGT leader Georges Seguy was promised that henceforth the CGT too would be eligible for government subsidy for the training of its officials...)

The size of these concessions is the measure of the bosses' desperate need to enable their labour lieutenants to placate the workers.

The happy band of bureaucrats, smiling and giving the thumbs-up sign for the cameras, hurried to Billancourt, symbol of Labour Militancy, to bring the glad tidings — and call off the strike.

But the proletariat is an ungrateful class. Seguy and Franchon the CGT bosses were shouted down, and their 'big concessions' scorned.

All over France the same thing happened: the workers refused to call off the strike. They wanted more — in fact they wanted everything. But the CP and its union — built over decades on talk of socialism — stood four-square across their path, diddling and wriggling.

And so, instead of advance, there was stalemate.

And now? Who could control the workers and end the bosses' period in limbo?

The General seemed eclipsed, and there was nothing remotely resembling a government in sight. The students and revolutionaries, despite the CP's anathemas, were gaining: "The incredible success of the student leaders was to rally ... thousands of young workers disgruntled with the stick-in-the-mud unions..." to a mass rally on the 27th. Despite a number of CP counter-meetings 30,000 attended, demonstrating the chasm that separated the timid

leaders from large sections of the workers.

But what was to be done? Mitterand on May 28th hurried in with a solution to harness the workers' energies in the best interests of capitalism and of ... Mitterand: a Provisional Government to supplant de Gaulle immediately — headed by Mitterand, with Mendes-France as Premier.

Naturally the CP agreed — but it had to haggle with these bourgeois politicians in whose small shadow it chose to walk, for a promise of a place in the new Government.

A mass demonstration for "a change of policy opening the way to progress and democracy" covered Paris, 2 miles long, on the 29th. It looked as if by sheer strength of the mass movement the Left leaders and the CP would be lifted into the saddle — despite their earlier reticence.

But then de Gaulle came back on stage, having met General Massu and arranged for CRS reinforcements and tanks to converge on Paris. On 30th May he made his second, beligerent speech, drawing confidence from the proven timidity of his opponents and their ability to dupe and confuse the masses, rather than from any other real strength he and his class possessed.

Recognising that the strike must end either in insurrection or collapse, he said in effect to the cowardly social democrats of the "Communist Party": 'Attempt to take power, or put your hands up!' Knowing his opponents, and perhaps preparing their retreat, he announced a General Election.

## THE VANGUARD OF THE RETREAT

Within 2 hours of the ultimatum, in a situation where they were not merely strong enough to boycott any capitalist election but could actually prevent it being held, the heroes of the CPF announced that they accepted this election, stage-managed by the Gaullist state!

"There was (in de Gaulle's speech) also an element of bluff: had he really the power to break the strike it is continued and made elections impossible? ... (How in any case could (the election) have been organised in a country paralysed by strikes — who would have printed the voting slips?)..." (Observer 2.6.68).

De Gaulle could safely bluff. He was aware of one great asset: the inbred social-democratic inertia and



Red Flags in the Streets, and Renault occupied



fear of action of the CP, who had publicly proclaimed their intentions by maintaining their dog-tail relationship with Mitterand and Co.

Their demand for de Gaulle's and the government's resignation, so belatedly adopted, was now dropped like hot contraband. The other 'lefts' followed, with varying degrees of protest, where the CP led: "Even before the cabinet had announced its promise to respect last weekend's wage increases, the trade unions, disassociating themselves from the students, were engaged in back to work talks with their employers." (Ibid)

With de Gaulle's speech and the non-response of the workers' parties, his supporters raised their heads: "Paramilitary Committees of Civic Action" rang up here and there across the country, in one or two areas celebrating their legitimised thuggery by firing a few shots at trade union or CP office buildings. . . ."

The police, which had vacillated now regained its loyalty to the force which appeared strongest, in face of the CP's feebleness: "at least we now know where we are" was the general police reaction to de Gaulle's speech, as reported in

The Times (31.5.68). And the Gaulists took to the streets, 500,000 strong, some chanting: "Cohn-Bendit to Dachau". (He had habitually been referred to in the bourgeois press as "the German Jew"; in reply the students and young workers took up the slogan "We are all German Jews" and young Algerians, making a distinction which many 'lefts' have yet to perceive, between Jews and the reactionary State of Israel, chanted that they too were "German Jews").

Having accepted the elections, the CP again ignored all but bread-and-butter issues. It explained to its militants, as it did the latest summersault, 'we have not changed — life has'!

Meanwhile the police began to break up the strikes, starting with the post offices, radio, TV and fuel. The CP stood on the sidelines — warning against 'ultra-left provocateurs'. The Morning Star reported as follows, on June 1: the statement of the CPF: "(it) warned today that General de Gaulle had threatened to use 'other means than the elections'". . . . Yet "the Communists would enter the electoral battle with confidence and (the CPF) called on everyone to guard against giving any opening to provocations wherever they might come from. . . . Cancellation of last year's social security cuts will not now be part of the present settlement, because the government has said the issue should be discussed in the new National Assembly."

Lack of shame or self-consciousness is one major asset these people possess!

Thereafter the CP, guided no doubt by the notorious injunction of their late leader Thorez that "one must know how to end a strike" energetically set about getting the workers back to work, splitting up their unity (by instructing everyone to return to work as soon as their separate settlements were made) and isolating the hard core to face the now increasing violence of the police, which was to result in several deaths.

The Party's mind was on the coming elections, as that 'ultra-left high-Tory paper the Sunday Telegraph put it: "Now there can be elections. The energy and violence generated by the upheaval can be canalised into a campaign for votes" (2.6.68). That is, of course, pretty much what Balanger said in the first place.



"Return to normal" — one of a space of posters

## WAS REVOLUTION POSSIBLE?

Between May 16th and 30th, as we have seen, and even after that, there was a mass working class movement openly striving for more than just wage concessions. There was active support from the petit bourgeoisie in town and country. (Western farmers offered the workers cheap food for the duration.) The state was almost totally paralysed — even the police wavered.

Objectively, had the movement developed in accordance with its own drives, the ruling class would no longer have been able to rule, and in fact their rule was momentarily suspended. There was a deep, long germinating national crisis, an eruption of 20 years of working class frustration. The deepest layers of the normally unorganised masses were brought into action by the struggle. Conditions were uniquely favourable for a relatively

easy takeover by the workers.

One element was lacking to transform a revolutionary upsurge into a revolution: the 'subjective' factor.

The organisations of the working class of all shades and stripes held it back, derailed it, split it up and allowed the bourgeoisie to ride out the storm, regain the power of its political limbs and re-establish its suspended control. The workers' organisations were not merely passive or negative, but actively hostile to the interests and the drives of the working class. The decisive role in maintaining the bourgeoisie in power fell once again to the Communist Party of France.

The Paris correspondent of The Economist described it thus: "The French Communists did everything in their power to control the revolutionary wave, and once the General had made it plain that he would not abdicate, to direct it back to electoral channels. On the night of May 30th there was a risk of confrontation between the armed forces and the army of labour. Next morning the risk had vanished because the army of strikers had been dispersed. M. Seguy, the boss of the Communist-dominated CGT, could not demobilise his followers. But, followed by other trade union leaders, he divided his troops into separate battalions, each seeking additional gains, particularly in wages, from its employers. What had begun to look like a frontal attack on the state, rapidly became a series of individual skirmishes.

And L'Humanite, the Communist Daily, started to use the language of an election campaign. ... The Communist decision to call a retreat and the General's speech marked the turning point in the crisis. They were more decisive than the big Gaullist demonstration that followed the General's speech on May 31st." (8.6.68)

Instead of focussing the movement of the workers on the goal of workers' power, the most extreme demand the CP dared make was for a change of bourgeois regime, removing the mild bonaparte de Gaulle and putting in Mitterand as President and Mendes-France (Premier when the Algerian War started) as Prime Minister.

Instead of workers' soviets, they put pressure on the bosses' parliament (which pressure drove the centre to the Right). Instead of revolutionary leadership, traitorous manoeuvring to frustrate the workers' desires. ("Behind the smoke-

screen of public polemics M. Pompidou and France's Communist leaders established a secret link at the very beginning of the strikes. Messages were exchanged every day and it is known who the contacts were and how they operated." New Statesman, 7.6.1968.)

Instead of unity of workers, students and farmers in action, deliberate attempts to divide them and confine "unity" to the parliamentary tops.

Instead of a workers' militia, the most cringing self-abasement and cowardice before even the threat of the violence which it was by no means certain de Gaulle could inflict.

Instead of being the left party, the CP and CGT were usually to the right of both the Catholic unions and Force Ouvriere — and even of the bourgeois radical 'socialist' Mendes-France.

And the final infamy: the government's ban on the Trotskyist, Maoist and Anarchist groups which sparked the movement didn't even call for a whisper of protest from the CP or CGT.

What could have been a great revolution looks like ending as a lost election, with the bourgeoisie and de Gaulle strengthened. There is a cruel dialectic during such periods in the relationship of the three main classes in society. The petit-bourgeois rallied to the workers, propelled by their own dissatisfaction. Had a revolutionary momentum been maintained they could have been taken along even to the point of struggle for power. But many may now rally behind the entrenched Party of Order in disillusion with the Party of Revolution which did not even dare put forward a policy.

Again let the Paris correspondent of the Economist, who shames the pseudo-marxist apologists of King Street, explain: "A general strike is a tactic for seizing power, not for persuading voters. If the Left had seized power, it would now be the new order itself; but it stopped half way — after frightening many floating voters amongst the middle classes" (8.6.68).

If they lose the elections they will naturally say it proves there was no revolutionary situation. The point however is that to let capitalism canalise revolutionary energy into the rigged channels of its institutions; or to see 'Revolution' only through the reversed telescope lens of the bosses' legality; or to try to filter an explosive mass revolutionary ferment through the slit

In a bourgeois ballot box is to forego forever the prospect of workers' power.

These institutions are specifically designed to prop up capitalism – not to knock it down.

## REGENERATION

Nevertheless the mass strike, the self-mobilisation of the masses, is the 'natural' regenerative process of a stagnant labour movement.

Writing in 1936 of the French workers' upsurge then, Trotsky's description of this process is still alive with meaning for us today: "The strike has everywhere and in every place pushed the most thoughtful and fearless workers to the fore. To them belongs the initiative. They

are still acting cautiously, feeling the ground under their feet. The vanguard detachments are trying not to rush ahead so as not to isolate themselves. The echoing and re-echoing answers of the hindmost ranks to their call gives them new courage.

"The roll call of the class has become a trial self-mobilisation. The proletariat was itself in greatest need of this demonstration of its strength. The practical successes won, however precarious they may be, cannot fail to raise the self-confidence of the masses to an extraordinary degree, particularly among the most backward and oppressed strata.

"That leaders have come forward

in the industries and in the factories is the foremost conquest of the first wave. The elements of local and regional staffs have been created. The masses know them. They know one another. Real revolutionaries will seek contact with them.

"Thus the first self-mobilisation of the masses has outlined and in part brought forward the first elements of revolutionary leadership. The strike has stirred, revitalised and regenerated the whole colossal class organism. The old organisational shell has by no means dropped away. On the contrary, it still retains its hold quite stubbornly. But under it the new skin is already visible."

## POSTSCRIPT, AUGUST 1968: THE "ELECTION OF FEAR"

Of course the Gaullists won. Their opponents got no thanks at all for allowing the elections to take place: and they failed to win the electoral support of many petit bourgeois and even some workers who had actively supported the movement in May.

Any party which abandons its fortified position to fight on its opponents' ground is bound to get the worst of all possible worlds.

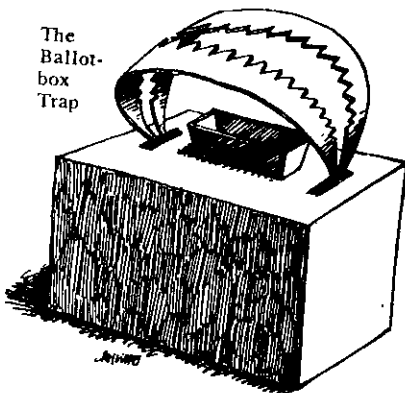
The Gaullists fought on a slogan of **NEVER AGAIN** – cashing in on the inability of the workers' parties in May to go beyond the necessary anarchy of the strikes. And this slogan appealed to many who during the strikes had seen the anarchy as a prelude to something better, but who in disillusionment now saw them only as an interlude of anarchy leading to possible repression.

The CP and Left Federation, remaining silent at the CRS re-occupation of the Sorbonne and the brutality of the police, took the same line and thus endorsed the Gaullist propaganda: "Keep the Gaullists and there may be a bigger explos-

ion later!"

But the Left's respectability was easily outdone by the persuasion of fear so lavishly used by the Gaullists. "Hopelessly torn and bewildered by the revolutionary crisis" the Left "was permanently on the defensive, trying to prove that it had nothing to do with riots and barricades. Whether this was true or not turned out to be irrelevant. As a champion of established law and order M. Waldeck Rochet could not compete with M. Pompidou." (Economist 29.6.68)

The  
Ballot-  
box  
Trap



Finally the CP and Left Federation succeeded in getting less vote than the number on strike in May. Only the small opportunist PSU of Mendes France, which defended the students, made any gains.

Many workers and petit bourgeois who could have been led forward in May step by step in conflict with capitalism and its state – given revolutionary leadership – were simply not ready in the cold anti-climactic atmosphere of the election to vote for those who had stood in their way. Many didn't bother to vote at all. On the other hand, the Right and Centre rallied to de Gaulle. The CP lost 39 seats out of 73, and the L.F. 61 out of 121.

The parliamentary cretins foresaw nothing of this. They were trying to force the heat of revolution onto the 'cross' square of a ballot paper. Instead they succeeded only in hurling back the advance of the masses and alienating from revolutionary activity many who were beginning to be educated in class action.

Revolutionary parties which sell out revolutions rarely win the elections or plebiscites called by those in power to put the seal on their victory!

Sean Matgama

WF Aug 6/20 1972



# "DEFEND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION"

AN OPEN LETTER FROM WORKERS' FIGHT TO MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

THE TREMENDOUS EXPLOSION OF RANK AND FILE revolt now engulfing France was detonated by a handful of Trotskyist, Anarchist and Maoist students. Fanned by the violence of police brutality, the flames of revolt spread to the workers, amongst whom discontent had been accumulating, without outlet. This spontaneous explosion amongst the rank and file shook the Establishment to its foundations. Given leadership it can erase those very foundations and begin the construction of a socialist society. Whatever the outcome in France, a new era has dawned for the labour movement in Europe. The crowing of the Gallic Cock heralds a new day that will see the working class in power in the advanced countries of the world.

In France only a couple of million workers are in trade unions. Yet over the last week 10 million have joined the general strike. This more than anything else testifies to the depth of the movement in France. The seizure by the strikers of some of the country's key factories adds a more significant depth and dimension to the strike. Completely ignoring normal respectable methods, they have resorted to the stay-in strikes not used since the 1930s. By seizing the property of the capitalists (and of the capitalists' state) the French workers have placed in question the key issue in bourgeois society: ownership and control of the means of production.

Not only are manual workers active; the movement in France has embraced large sections of white collar workers in banks and insurance companies. The farmers, traditional prop-in-reserve of the establishment, are active with their own demands and have also demonstrated against the government. The French state is almost paralysed. The regular police have shown themselves, indeed declared themselves, to be unreliable. The army is an unknown quantity, but it is no doubt affected, as a conscript army is bound to be.

The proletarian revolution is placed on the immediate agenda by the largely spontaneous movement of the masses. The logic of a general strike is to raise the question of state power: **who is master?** In the case of a planned working class strategy, it is logically followed by an armed uprising to smash the paralysed state of the bourgeoisie. Workers' power is an immediate possibility in France. Only timid reformists and scared bourgeois journalists can attempt to

deny this. We are hardly likely to see conditions more favourable than those which now prevail.

The spontaneous movement of workers having already immobilised the state machine, what remains to be done is:

1. Decisively smash the bourgeois state power.
2. Prepare organs of workers' power - soviets.
3. Begin to turn the present occupation of the factories into workers' administration to run the factories.

A Leninist Party in France must face the following tasks squarely:

a) It must pose the demand for immediate workers' power and an end to capitalism as the natural objective of the present movement of the workers.

b) It must therefore raise the slogan amongst the striking workers of soviets, i.e. that the factory and area strike committees should organise themselves into local and national workers' councils and assume the responsibility for organising the life of the country. This action would begin the creation and elaboration of organs of workers' power in opposition to the partially paralysed organs of the bourgeois state. Such a situation of dual power would resemble that in Russia between February and October 1917.

c) It must begin the formation of workers' militias, the arming of the proletariat, and thus prepare the workers for an armed uprising to disarm and suppress the remaining organs of bourgeois power and take power for the soviets.

The revolt of the French workers, objectively and even consciously challenging bourgeois society, makes all this an immediate practical necessity. The only alternative is equally clear from past experience of similar situations: the current strike wave, leaderless and without a perspective of class power, will be allowed to run into the ground. The student/petty bourgeois/worker alliance will be broken. The students and advanced revolutionaries will be isolated and suppressed. The workers will be tricked and cheated by concessions - the government and employers, faced with the loss of everything, will make big concessions to buy time for themselves: and then they will prepare a reactionary weapon to bludgeen the workers and reclaim the 'concessions' which capitalism cannot permanently give to the workers. The unreliable police will be supplemented by fascist thugs

(rightist groups have been in evidence already). Instead of the easy victory which is now possible, a protracted, bitter struggle would face the workers, with the possibility of decisive defeat for the working class. Such a defeat would be a terrible setback for the workers of the whole world.

The responsibility of a revolutionary party in France is decisive. The Party which calls itself Leninist in France, the French Communist Party, has the chance of leading the most important revolution in 50 years. Carrying out a Marxist policy of struggle for workers' power it could easily succeed. How does it measure up to the task? Did they initiate the current workers' action? No! Did they even suspect that such a movement could follow on from the polarisation to left and right that was shown by the last elections? No! Either they didn't realise the explosive discontent that was building up for lack of any active leadership throughout the whole past period, or they were consciously determined to ignore it.

The CPF violently denounced the student movement which sparked off the strike wave. It did not initiate the workers' support for the students which began spontaneously but jumped on the bandwagon in order to control the workers and channel the movement for its own petty-reformist parliamentary ends. Thus they called a one-day token general strike to keep control. They did not call the unlimited general strike. This spread spontaneously and was belatedly 'recognised' by the CGT, in the same way as our own top bureaucrats recognise a strike in order to be able to sell it out. In short the Party has not led but has been pulled along as a dead weight by the working class.

Nonetheless the CPF, the main workers' party in France, is the only existing 'leadership'. How is it leading the workers? Has it called for workers' power, soviets or a workers' militia? NO. In alliance with a bunch of discredited parliamentary whores such as Mitterand and Mollet, it has raised the slogan not of workers' power, but of an end to the 'personal rule' of De Gaulle, and of a government of an unspecified 'People': i.e. back to the bourgeois 'democratic' regime of pre-'58, substituting Wilsonism for De Gaulle. What an elevated goal to set before such a tremendous movement of the working class!

According to the pattern of the 'Peaceful Road' their faces are turned to Parliament as a focal point of the struggle, with the workers' activity as a mere pressure on it. But last week the pressure from the streets pushed the parliamentarians to the Right, giving De Gaulle an increased major-

ity. Still the Party insists on a legalistic, peaceful road, perhaps believing that it is better to travel endlessly than to arrive.

The CGT from the beginning offered to negotiate with Pompidou, thus aiding Pompidou to split the workers from the students and advanced revolutionaries. Lance Sampson in the *Morning Star* (25.5.68) takes Pompidou to task for being slow to reply in France as for Vietnam they advocate negotiation rather than a struggle for victory, and in this case negotiation means a suspension of the struggle, leading to a defeat, which in turn renders the negotiators powerless.

The current role of the CPF is a continuation of a long history of treachery, the record of which has important lessons for CP members here. After 1945 the workers could have taken power — but the CP disarmed the resistance workers and allowed the bourgeoisie to re-establish their state (because of Stalin's agreement with Churchill and Roosevelt to this effect). The CP entered the bourgeois government where it remained until 1947 — being therefore actively responsible for the start of the Vietnam war. In 1955 it voted the money Guy Mollet needed to finance the Algerian war, and throughout that war the Party did nothing to help the Algerians. In 1958 they let De Gaulle come to power without a struggle, and ever since then they have confined themselves to peaceful agitation and parliamentary horse-trading to gain a return to the pre-1958 regime which they didn't lift a finger to defend.

Today in face of the most important workers' movement of the last three decades it has the same ludicrous policy — a programme of a return to bourgeois 'democracy' in a modern imperialist country. For them as for all reformists, socialism is always looming in the future — and never something to fight for here and now.

All that is lacking for a workers' revolution in France is a genuinely Leninist party. Rank and file members of the French CP will learn this lesson and begin the construction of such a party in the immediate struggle ahead, in alliance with the Trotskyist workers and students, some of whom sparked off the current movement and now form its vanguard. Communist workers in Britain and Ireland will best aid these comrades and the French working class (and thus our own working class in future struggles) by placing themselves in active solidarity with the revolutionaries who fight for workers' power in France.

MAY 26TH 1968



*Jailing of union leaders  
sparks off*  
**QUEBEC  
GENERAL  
STRIKE**

by PAUL ITIZÉ

If you didn't know that two months ago there was a general strike in Quebec in reply to the jailing of 50 union leaders, then don't think yourself particularly ignorant. The British press, which revels in such trivialities as the bear-hugging of Princess Anne by a patriotic admirer, hasn't found it in itself to even mention the eruption of class war in Quebec. It is little wonder that the press found the whole affair too hot to handle — the parallels with this country are far too close for comfort. But for workers the experience of the class struggle in Quebec provides valuable lessons: lessons which need emphasising and which justify a detailed examination even at this late date.

In April of this year Quebec's 200,000 government employees came out on strike. They were demanding a minimum wage of \$100 a week, job security, and better working conditions. The fact that it was a strike of government employees, which was lead to a general confrontation between the Quebec working class and the state, is in itself significant.

## THE STATE

Increasingly, the state is becoming not just a committee for the administration of society in the interests of the ruling class, but the vanguard of the ruling class. The government decides for the whole ruling class to keep down the living standards of the whole working class. To achieve this it tries to inflict a decisive defeat on one section of the working class, and it chooses a battle field where it can directly dictate the tactics. That is the government consciously picks a show-down between the state and the state employees.

The pattern is the same in Britain. Over the past few years practically all the major strikes have involved either public employees or workers in nationalised industries — the miners, the postmen, the dustmen.

In Britain, the response of the state employed workers has been fragmented. Each union lines up in turn for its struggle with the government. During the miners' strike the leadership of the ETU actually delayed (and eventually called off) industrial action by the power workers, saying that with the miners out on strike as well, it

would cause too much disruption. After all, the labour lieutenants of capitalism must keep to the rules of the game, and having two sections of government employees out at once just isn't cricket.

In Quebec (where cricket is not a popular game), all government employees came out together — teachers, hospital workers, transport, the lot. The strike involved a common front of 900 unions affiliated into three major federations.

Naturally in a battle of these dimensions the common front had to have a 'high command'. This high command rested essentially on three men: Marcel Pepin (Confederation of National Trade Unions), Louis Laberge (Quebec Federation of Labour) and Yvon Charbonneau (Quebec Teachers' Union). These three personified the left wing of the Quebec trade unions. The strike was fought with a common strategy and a solid front of all the unions.

## SOLIDARITY

Not only that, but the front called successfully for solidarity strikes from other workers. As mines, factories, docks, and construction sites came out in solidarity, the province of Quebec was crippled.

As was expected the provincial government invoked the 'cooling-off period'. This is almost a run-of-the-mill affair in Quebec 'industrial relations', and the union leaders called on their members to ignore it, which they did.

The government then passed emergency legislation to deal with the strike. This legislation, Bill 19, was unparalleled in its viciousness. It outlawed strikes by government employees and ordered an immediate return to work, with fines of between \$50 and \$100 a day for individual workers who stayed out on strike and \$50,000 a day for unions which remained out. It also provided for compulsory arbitration and an imposed settlement if no agreement was reached by June 1st.

## STRIKE OFF

A 65 per cent majority of union members voted to ignore the legislation and continue the strike. But the three union leaders decided to call it off, and there was a return

to work after 11 days of strike. However, they refused to return to the negotiating table.

Quite clearly, by calling off the strike the union leaders had given the government the upper hand. No strike action together with no negotiations was clearly a non-sense, and as June 1st approached the common front began to weaken. As the right wing in the unions (which had been against disobeying the original injunctions) grew more vociferous, the civil servants union decided to negotiate a separate agreement, fearing that the alternative would be to have one forced on them.

If things had been left there, then in all probability more union leaders would have chickened out as June 1st approached, and the common front would have been left in tatters. However, things weren't left there. The government decided to bring charges against the fifty union leaders who had disobeyed the original injunctions. Among the fifty were Marcel Pepin, Louis Laberge, and Yvon Charbonneau.

## CONTEMPT

The three top leaders' first appearance in court was on Thursday May 4th. They waited around for half an hour, without the case starting, and then left complaining about

waiting and about the presence of police with anti-riot equipment. They were sentenced to one year's imprisonment, the maximum sentence for contempt of court.

On Tuesday May 9th the three leaders voluntarily handed themselves over to their jailers. A problem was created by the leader of the jail guards union, who urged his members not to accept the three men into prison. "It is the deputies who should be in their place", he said. But, eventually, someone was found to take the men into custody.

By the end of the week, the reaction of the working class to the imprisonments had so shaken the whole of Quebec that ministers were threatening to resign and the Quebec government was close to toppling.

It all started in Sept-Îles, a small heavily industrialised town with a population of 18,000 and a highly unionised working class.

The day after the imprisonment of the union leaders a spontaneous strike broke out which rapidly involved the whole of the labour force. A demonstration led to clashes with the police who were bottled up in the police station. To prevent reserves being brought in, the workers blocked the main road, took over the airport, and jammed all the telephone lines.

The Quebec Minister of Justice complained that the workers had taken over the town and he was quite correct. The local radio station was occupied by the strikers and used to spread the news of the strike.

The workers even forced the mayor to plead with the provincial government for the release of the three union leaders. The premier of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, sarcastically lectured the unfortunate mayor on the principles of a bourgeois democratic constitution and on how the legislature couldn't override the judiciary. (Remember Heath gave similar lectures on constitutional niceties to London dockers.... just before the miraculous intervention of the Official Solicitor).

Within days the strike had spread, to a greater or lesser extent, to every town and city in Quebec, and seven more towns had been taken over by striking workers. In effect, there was a general strike.

## GENERAL STRIKE

From the rest of the Canadian union leaders the workers of Quebec received at best luke-warm verbal support, liberally laced with warnings about the dangers of anarchy. Donald Macdonald, President of the Canadian Labour Congress (equivalent to the TUC) warned workers against a general strike, declaring his positive distaste for this form of struggle because "they're not strikes, they're revolutions".

Strictly speaking, of course, he was incorrect, but nevertheless he does have a point. In the normal run of capitalist society, the capitalist state takes over a whole series of functions which are essential to the running of any civilised society. Education, hospitals, information and news-services, traffic control, 'law and order' all become the near-monopoly of the State.

Now there is no God-given rule

which says that these activities cannot exist independently of the class struggle, but, in capitalist society, the ruling class takes over these functions (which in themselves are nothing more than aspects of civilised society) and turns them into instruments of class rule. Education and information (TV and radio) are obvious examples. They are constant weapons in the hands of the ruling class, which uses them to strengthen its own ideological hold over the working class.

In a general strike, however, the state is stripped of all these institutions, both in as much as they are instruments of class rule and in as much as they are legitimate, useful aspects of civilised society. The state is left bare. Bare, that is, except for what is most essential to it - its "bodies of armed men", the police and the army.

Equally, in a general strike, just as the state is stripped of these functions, so the working class is forced to take them over. The strikers must create their own police force, their own health inspectorate, their own information service. Moreover, in taking over these functions the workers turn them into weapons against the capitalists. The necessity is forced upon the working class of creating its own embryonic state-machine to carry out the necessary functions of public life and to protect the strike from scabs, right wing gangs and the forces of the capitalist state machine.

However, this is not as yet a revolution; it is the establishment of dual power - a revolution comes when the working class becomes conscious of the need to smash the old capitalist state machine and replace it by its own "bodies of armed men".

The General Strike in Quebec gives ample examples of the beginnings of these organs of working class power, the embryonic form of a workers' state. In September the shops and stores were only allowed to open by consent of the strikers, who imposed rigid price control (something which is quite impossible for a normal, that is a non-corporate, non-fascist, capitalist state). A rudimentary police force was formed to patrol the streets and also to keep an eye on the state police. Elsewhere newspaper offices were broken into and the

papers were censored. Anti-strike editorials were taken out and replaced by union notices. At least a dozen radio stations were taken over and used to strengthen the strike.

The strike reached its zenith by the end of the week. Midway through the following week it began to decline, although the union leaders were still imprisoned.

## 'VIGILANTES'

While the strike was gaining strength, the forces of reaction were also gathering. With the encouragement of the Liberal Party, vigilante groups of 'respectable' middle class citizens were formed.

More important, the right wing in the unions engineered a split, setting up a new breakaway Confederation. In Montreal pro- and anti-strike building workers fought it out with pick-axe handles.

The result of the strike was not (as it has been presented) outright victory. The demands were for the release of the three union leaders and the repeal of the anti-union legislation. The Government had always insisted that the union leaders would be released if they appealed against the sentence. The union leaders refused to appeal, saying that this would be equivalent to admitting that there was justice in Quebec. In the end, however, with the strike subsided, they decided to appeal in order to get out and deal with the right wing threat in the unions.

For its part, the Government made the conciliatory gestures of letting them go without having to pay bail and of sacking its old negotiating team.

In these terms the strike was neither an outright victory and certainly not a defeat. But the real, durable gains of the strike lie in the fact that it has given the Quebec working class its first taste of self-reliance, independent organisation and independent political struggle. Although a centralised organ of dual power was not created, in dozens of towns workers partially or completely took over the administration of society.

It was an experience that won't be forgotten.

FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION by Andrew Hornung

# ROSA LUXEMBURG THE GENERAL STRIKE

From April to May 1902 Rosa Luxemburg wrote a series of articles and analyses of the General Strike. They show her at her most characteristic — rejecting even the least schematism and always open to what was new and rich in the class struggle. In this piece, part two of "YET AGAIN ON THE BELGIAN EXPERIMENT", written fully four years before the experience of the wave of mass strikes in Russia allowed her to write her classic "Mass Strike", Luxemburg bases herself on the real experience of the then just defeated Belgian strike.

Two points stand out. Firstly, she sees that the Belgian "experiment" was something new, that the term General Strike, though traditionally referring to the anarchist model which made the strike equivalent to the revolution could cover other new tactical methods, and also that General Strikes for limited aims could be undertaken.

Secondly, though still somewhat enmeshed in views of parliamentarianism that prevailed before the Russian Revolution, she saw how the subordination of the spontaneity of the strike to parliamentary-type alliances brought disaster.

The most important development in the history of the practice of the General Strike, however, has taken place since this article was written. The working class has added the spontaneous General Strike — as in France 1936 and 1968 — to its tactical armoury.

We publish this article not as a set of recipes, but so that we can learn, most of all, from the brilliant richness of her method, its clarity and freedom from stale preconceptions. This we must learn to apply to the General Strike experiences of our times, including the present struggle for a GENERAL STRIKE TO SMASH THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT.

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT that the General Strike is one of the most time-honoured slogans of the modern workers' movement; certainly it is one of those over which there has been the hottest and most frequent debate within the ranks of socialism.

If however one avoids having nothing but the *word* (1), the mere sound, ringing in one's ears and tries to get at the *essence of the matter*, then it will be clear that the term General Strike is applied in various cases to cover quite different things and consequently receives quite different appraisals.

It is obvious that Nieuwenhuis' (2) famous idea of a General Strike in the event of war is quite a different thing from the international general strike of miners that was being planned in England at the beginning of the 'nineties and for which Eleanor Marx sought to gain the support of the French Socialist Congress in Lille in 1890.

It is clear that there is just as great a difference between October 1898 in France when the attempted General Strike in favour of the railway workers by other sections met with bitter failure and the brilliantly successful General Strike of the North Eastern Railway workers in Switzerland. Likewise that

the successful General Strike in Carmaux in 1893 as a protest against the special powers assumed by the mayor, the ex-miner Calvingac, has nothing in common with the "Holy Month" decided upon by the executive of the Chartists as long ago as 1839, etc. etc.

In a word, the first precondition for an examination of the question of the General Strike is that one makes a distinction between national and international General Strikes, political and trade union ones, sectional and generalised, those that are motivated by a particular event and those which derive from the general strivings of the proletariat, etc.

One only has to cast one's eye over the variety of experiences of this form of struggle and one will see how mindless is any stereotyping, summary dismissal or glorification of this weapon.

Let us turn our attention in particular to the *political* general Strike, and exclude the straightforward trade union sectional strike which in most countries has become a daily event making any "theorising" superfluous.

## ANARCHIST

We see here what in our opinion are two different conceptions of the operation of this means of struggle: the *anarchist* General Strike (3) and the *political* mass strike (4) as we shall for the moment call it.

In the first category we find above all the national General Strike undertaken with a view to its ushering in the socialist order, which has been the traditional hobby-horse of the French trade unionists, the Broussists (5) and the Allemanists (6).

This conception was clearly expressed for instance in the periodical "L'Internationale" of May 27th 1889 where we find written: "When the strikes spread and link up one with another they are very close to becoming a General Strike; and a General Strike linked with the ideas of emancipation which currently prevail must end with a great cataclysm that would consummate the social upheaval."

The Congress of French Trade Unions which met in Bordeaux in 1888 resolved likewise: "Only the General Strike or the revolution can bring about the liberation of the working class."

As a characteristic rider to this another resolution was accepted by the Congress in which the workers were encouraged to "make a clean break with the politicians who betrayed them."

The same basis underlies the French resolution which was supported by Briand (7) and opposed by Legien (8) at the last International Socialist Congress, held in Paris in the summer of 1900 (9).

This urges "the workers of the whole world to organise a General Strike, should it be possible to use this organisation as a simple means, a lever, whereby that pressure could be exerted on capitalist society which is unavoidable for the introduction of the necessary political and economic reforms, and if the situation presents itself as favourable, for putting the General Strike at the service of the social revolution."

In the same category we find on the other hand the idea of utilising the General Strike as a means against capitalist wars. This idea was expressed as long ago as the International Socialist Congress in Brussels in 1888 and once again was taken up and propagated in the 'nineties by Niewenhuis (10) in Brussels, Zurich and London. (11)

## PANACEA

In one as in the other the characteristic thing in the conception is the belief in the General Strike as a panacea against capitalist society as a whole, or, which is the same thing, against certain of its essential functions; the belief in an abstract, absolute category of the General Strike as the method of the class struggle equally applicable and equally successful in all countries and at all times.

The bakers stop delivering their wares, the street lights remain unlit, the rail and tramways do not run — the cataclysm is at hand! Worked out on paper like this the plan was as valid for all times and countries as any groping in a fog.

This averting attention from the specifics of time and place, from the concrete political situation of the class struggle in each country as well as from the organic connection between the decisive battle for socialism and the daily struggles of the proletariat, the patient work of education and organisation — all this was the typically *anarchist* feature of this conception.

The other side of the coin of the anarchist was the *utopian* aspect of this theory, and with its emergence ... emerged the necessity to fight this conception of the General Strike with the utmost vigour.

## UTOPIAN

Thus we have for decades now seen Social-Democrats (12) fighting the utopianism of the General Strike. The tireless struggles of the French Labour Party against the French trade unions were based on exactly the same principles as the invariable disputes of the German delegation at the International Congresses with Niewenhuis.

In this the German Social-democrat-

earned for themselves the special merit of having not only given the scientific arguments against the utopian theory but particularly of having counterposed the *practice* of day to day political struggle at the level of parliamentarism to the speculations of a once and for all, decisive, battle "with arms folded" against the bourgeois state.

That is the extent — no further — of what is called often the Social-democracy's struggle against the idea of the General Strike. In fact it is only against the absolute, *anarchist* theory of the General Strike that the critique voiced by the advocates of scientific socialism was addressed. And it was only against this that it *could* have been addressed.

The political issue General Strike which the French workers have from time to time engaged in for specific political ends, as in the already mentioned case of Carmaux; and which the Belgian workers in particular often engaged in as part of the struggle for universal suffrage, shares only the name and the technical form with the *anarchist* General Strike theory. Politically however they are two quite separate conceptions.

While the anarchist General Strike slogan is based on an abstract general theory, the political strikes corresponding to the second conception occur in particular countries or simply in particular towns and regions as the product of a definite political situation and directed towards a specific political outcome. There can as a result be no denying the efficacy of this weapon in general or a priori since the facts, the victories in France and Belgium, prove the opposite.

## CONSCIOUSNESS

But further, the entire argument that proved so effective against Niewenhuis or against the French anarchists does not in the slightest hold against the political General Strike of a local character.

The contention that the ability to carry out a General Strike presupposes the existence of a stage in the education and organisation of the proletariat that makes that very General Strike superfluous and the taking of power a simple matter of course — this masterly rapier thrust by the old Liebknecht (13) against Niewenhuis ... is completely inapplicable when it comes to local and political issue General Strikes. For these the only necessary preconditions are popular political demand and a favourable balance of forces materially.

In fact quite the contrary: no doubt can be cast as to whether the Belgian General Strikes undertaken in the pursuit of universal suffrage invariably saw more people in action than can



be said to be consciously socialists in the real sense.

The political strike in Carmaux worked in exactly the same way and brought about such a rapid and thorough raising of the level of consciousness that after the campaign was over, even a deputy of the right wing admitted to the socialists: "If you wrest many more victories like this one in Carmaux you will have already gained the upper ground, for the peasants always rally to the side of the stronger force and you have proved that you are stronger than the mining company, than the government and the Chamber." (14) (Almanach of the Workers Party 1893 - RL)

The Nieuwenhuis or the French-anarchist General Strike ideas form an inescapable closed circuit of on the one hand the degree of socialist consciousness necessary for a General Strike, and, on the other hand, seeing that socialist consciousness as the outcome of the General Strike.

But the political issue General Strike on the contrary relates to aspects of the day to day political life which are deeply felt and excite lively interest. At the same time it serves as an effective medium of socialist agitation.

In the same way the contradiction construed between day to day political work, in particular parliamentary activity, on the one hand, and this category of the General Strike on the other is pure tilting at windmills. For, far from wishing to replace parliamentary and other day to day work, the political General Strike serves as another link in the chain of methods of agitation and combat.

In fact it serves directly as a tool in the parliamentary struggle. Significantly all the political General Strikes to date were attempts either to preserve or gain parliamentary rights: the one in Carmaux for the local franchise (15), the one in Belgium for universal equal suffrage.

## SPECIFIC

If political General Strikes have not occurred in Germany and have only been used in a few other countries then it is certainly not because of a supposed contradiction with some "German method" of conducting the struggle.

The simple reason is that it takes certain specific social and political conditions to be able to use the General Strike as a political weapon. In Belgium the high level of industrial development in conjunction with the small area of the country makes it quite simple to effect a rapid spreading of the strike movement. Also it requires what in absolute terms is not a very

large number of strikers, say 30,000 (16) to paralyse the economic life of the land.

Germany as a big country with far flung industrial regions separated by vast stretches of agricultural land and an absolutely huge number of workers is in this respect in an incomparably unfavourable position. And the same applies to France seen as a whole, not to mention larger and less industrially centralised countries.

But what also constitutes a vital aspect of this is the existence to some degree of the right of combination and democratic norms. In a country — like Upper Silesia — where striking workers are simply driven to work by the police and gendarmes and where agitation amongst "those who are not work-shy" leads straight to the jailhouse if not penal servitude there can be no talk of a political General Strike.

Thus if the General Strike has so far only been used as a political weapon in Belgium and partly in France it is by no means the mark of some imaginary superiority of the German Social-Democracy or a momentary aberration of the romance countries. Rather it is these factors — more a testimony to our semi-asiatic backwardness as far as politics is concerned.

## ENGLAND

Finally there is the example of England where to a large degree all the economic and political preconditions for a successful General Strike exist but where this mighty weapon never gets used in its political life.

This example spotlights yet another important precondition for its utilisation — the internal coalescence of the trade union and the political workers' movement. In Belgium the economic struggle and the political function as an organic whole, the trade unions and the party finding themselves side by side in every important action, working hand in glove with one another.

In England however the narrow craft and therefore also divisive parish-pump politics of the trade unions together with the lack of a strong socialist party excludes their combining in a political General Strike.

A closer study also shows that all absolute judgments of the General Strike and condemnations made without taking the concrete circumstances in every country into account, nominally basing themselves on the practice in Germany, amounts to nothing but national conceit and thoughtless schematism. And this same question shows one other thing: that when the advantages of a "free-hand" in socialist tactics is so eloquently advocated to us, the

advantages of "keeping-your-options-open" or of adapting to the variety of the concrete, it is in the last resort always no more than the freedom to engage in horse-trading with the bourgeois parties.

When on the other hand it is a question of mass action, some means of struggle distantly resembling a revolutionary tactic, then these devotees of the "open options" immediately turn into the dourest dogmatists. They then try to force the class struggle the whole world over into the mould of the so-called German tactic.

If this recent General Strike in Belgium has been unsuccessful, this fact cannot constitute grounds for a 'revision' of the Belgian tactic, because it is well known that the General Strike was neither prepared for nor was it used politically. In fact it was paralysed by the leadership, and before it could accomplish anything dispersed.

Because mass action was not contemplated by the political — or, to be more precise — parliamentary

leadership of the movement, the striking masses stood in the wings waiting for their cues with no connection with what was going on on stage until they were finally shunted off to the dressing room. The failure of the Belgian campaign succeeded in proving the pointlessness of the General Strike as little as the surrender of the military defences of Metz by Bazaine (17) proved the pointlessness of military defences as such or as little as the parliamentary collapse of the German liberals proves the pointlessness of parliament.

Quite the contrary. The fiasco of the latest action of the Belgian Labour Party must convince everyone who knows how it was prepared, that only a General Strike — one that really takes the field — could have achieved anything. And if there is any need to 'revise' the tactic of our Belgian comrades then it seems to us that it should be in the direction we indicated in our previous article in this periodical (18). The April campaign after all showed one thing clearly: that a strike indirectly against the church but directly against the bourgeoisie is a complete waste of time the moment the fighting proletariat is politically tied to the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie turns from being a means of pressure on the government into a ball and chain that lames the steps of the proletariat.

(19) The most important lesson of the Belgian experiment speaks out not against the General Strike as such but on the contrary against a parliamentary alliance with liberalism which condemns every General Strike to fruit-



lessness.

We must oppose with the utmost sharpness, however, just reacting to the very mention of the word 'General Strike' with the old threadbare clichés once, but no longer, useful to combat the ludicrous ideas of Nieuwenhuis and the anarchists. The same applies to

any attempt to 'revise' the Belgian tactic simply on the basis of the most superficial confusion as to what happened in Belgium, because not only the Belgian workers, now as then, but also the Swedish (20) stand poised to wield the weapon of the General Strike in the battle for universal suffrage. It

would be a pity if even a tiny handful of militants in these countries let themselves be led astray in their search for a strategy by means of forms of speech and lured by the preferability of the so-called 'German' methods of struggle.

## NOTES

(1) All emphases are Rosa Luxemburg's including those within quoted passages.

(2) Nieuwenhuis: Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846–1919). Leader of the Dutch Socialist Union; went over to anarchism later; advocate of anarchist General Strike and 'ethical socialism'.

(3) By this is meant the General Strike which is really synonymous with 'the revolution', advocated by anarchists and later syndicalism. Bakunin was its great advocate in this period.

(4) Rosa Luxemburg is evidently not too happy herself with this terminology. The point is that the strike is planned and relates to specific goals short of a revolutionary overthrow. In no. 7 of *Workers' Fight*, page 4, what is called type (a) under the section PLANNED STRIKE is about the equivalent although as Rosa Luxemburg makes clear the leaders might still betray as in (b) and (c).

(5) Broussists – followers of Paul Brousse (1854–1912). After the destruction of the Paris Commune Brousse worked with Bakunin. In 1881 he appeared as the leader of the Possibilist faction in France advocating reformist gradualism and decentralisation, particularly use of local councils.

(6) Followers of Jean Allemane (1843–1935), also Possibilist. Like Brousse in favour of world wide as well as

nationwide general strike.

(7) Aristide Briand. French socialist, left Party in 1904. Later a minister and Prime Minister in France.

(8) Karl Legien (1861–1920). Opponent of General Strike. Right wing Social-Democratic President of German Trade Union Commission.

(9) International Socialist Congress, Paris 23–27 September 1900 (see Rosa Luxemburg: *The Socialist Crisis in France*).

(10) Compare with Trotsky: *The ILP and the Fourth International*; in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1935–36*, page 64–69.

(11) The International Socialist Congresses took place in Brussels from 16–22 August 1891, in Zurich from 6–12 August 1893 and in London from 27 July – 1st August 1896.

(12) Social-Democrat was the term used before 1914 for what we would now term Marxist.

(13) Wilhelm Liebknecht was the father of Karl Liebknecht the great revolutionary who was murdered with Rosa Luxemburg in 1919.

(14) By Chamber the deputy was referring to the French Parliament.

(15) In France, unlike Germany, it was difficult to get socialists in Parliament but easy to get them on local and departmental councils. It was for this reason that the Broussists stressed local elections and that the local franchise was a real issue in Carmaux.

(16) Actually over 300 000 took part in the strike.

(17) Achille Bazaine (1811–1888) was the French general forced to surrender at Metz.

(18) The reference here is in fact to a whole series of articles in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* 14 April, 15 April, 21st April, 22 April, and, particularly, *Die Neue Zeit* Yr. 20 1901/2 vol 2 pp 105–110. In these articles she shows how the alliance with the liberals defeated the General Strike.

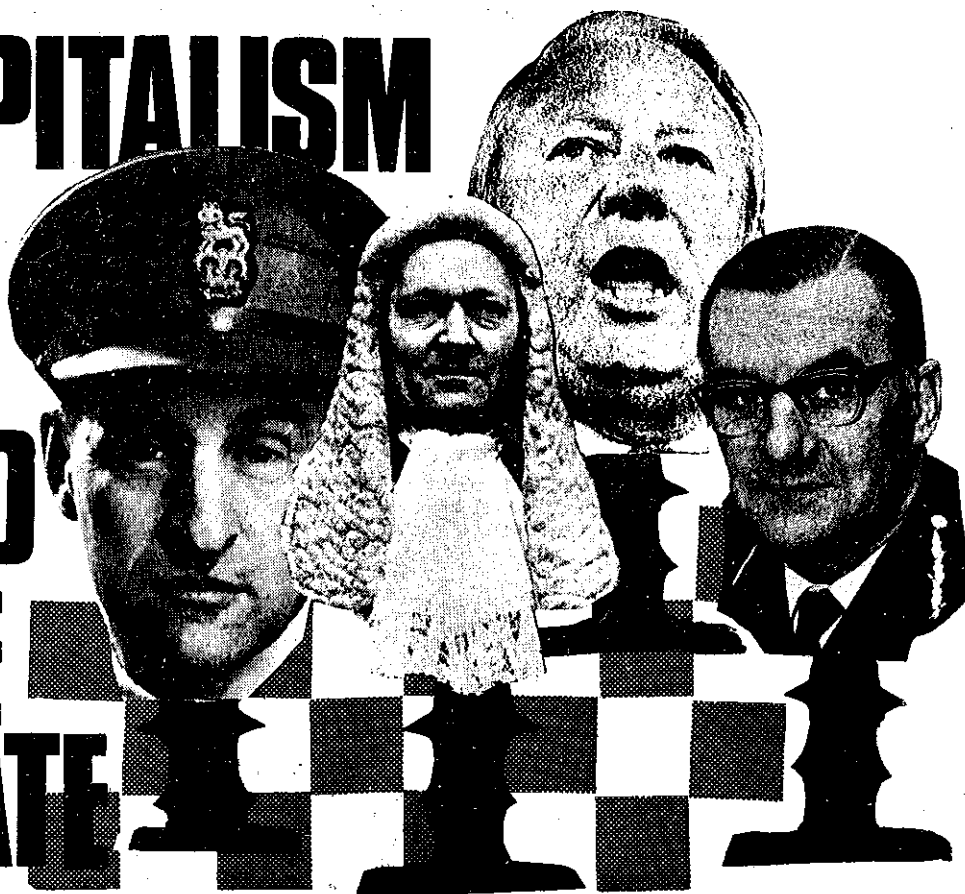
(19) On the question of the reform of the franchise in Belgium at this time the principal opposition was the Catholic Church. The position of the Social-Democrats expressed in their paper 'Peuple' was this: "Stand firm" it told the strikers, "so that at least the legal channels for public opinion (ie Parliamentary elections – trans.) will be opened to you by means of the pressure being exerted by the liberal bourgeoisie and all the official representatives of trade and industry". This faith in the 'pressure' of the bourgeoisie determined the alliance of the socialists and liberals which shackled and then smashed the whole strike movement.

(20) The Swedish strike timed to coincide with a parliamentary debate was called off on the promise of universal equal suffrage. The government, however, prevaricated, and it was years before Sweden achieved it.

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# CAPITALISM

# AND THE STATE



ON ALMOST EVERY MILITANT working class demonstration today the main cry is 'Heath Out'. But it is not just Heath that the demonstrators are protesting against. They know that the National Industrial Relations Court has been one of the bosses' main weapons against the labour movement. Those who have been involved with the Social Security recently, particularly strikers, will know about its mean and oppressive ways.

Detailed plans have been drawn up for army intervention in case of serious strikes. All the various parts of the bosses' State are appearing more and more openly in the class struggle.

In this situation a book which carefully takes up and demolishes the established theories about the State is particularly useful. Ralph Miliband's book **THE STATE IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY** (first published 1969) is the only substantial study of the State from a Marxist point of view to appear in recent years in Britain.

The established views go as follows. The State apparatus – civil service, army, police, the judges and the Courts – is regarded as a neutral mach-

ine, non-partisan, which serves society under the control of the democratic will of the people'.

Different views exist on how this democratic will is exercised. Some defenders of the present system argue that parliamentary elections lead to democratic control of society. But many important public decisions – to say nothing of the private decisions of big capitalists which affect millions of ordinary people – are made without even formal democratic consultation. Take as examples the bringing in of 'In Place of Strife', or the new Immigration Act, or the cutting of school milk.

The widespread cynicism about elections and parliamentary politicians is only a natural reaction to the rigged nature of the whole system. At best the 'democracy' of elections amounts to a few minutes spent voting every five years or so – perhaps half an hour of democracy in a lifetime.

## 'PLURALISM'

Many apologists for capitalism have now retreated from the view that elections amount to a democratic running of society.

Their 'pluralist' view is summarised by Miliband. They admit "that there are elites in different economic, social, political, administrative, professional and other pyramids of power. But these elites altogether lack the degree of cohesion required to turn them into dominant or ruling classes. In fact, 'elite pluralism', with the competition it entails between different elites, is itself a prime guarantee that power in society will be diffused and not concentrated. In short, the State, subjected to a multitude of conflicting pressures from organised groups and interests, cannot show any marked bias towards some and against others: its special role, in fact, is to accommodate and reconcile them all. In that role, the state is only the mirror which society holds up to itself."

The labour movement, in this view, is supposed to be one of the many competing pressure groups, and a powerful one at that. For the orthodox theorists you, the reader, have as much power as Lord Thomson – in fact, perhaps more since you probably have a vote and Lord Thomson hasn't.

Miliband points out that the 'pluralist' view doesn't recognise the enormous inequalities in society. In Britain



5% of the population own 75% of all private wealth (1960 figures) and 1% own 81% of all privately owned company shares.

The various dominant 'elites' are all closely allied with the wealthy class — usually they are the same people, at the very least they have close personal connections and closely similar attitudes. And in fact State policies do follow the general interests of the wealthy class.

Miliband explains these points carefully and so his book is worth reading.

### MIRROR

But the main drift of Miliband's argument is summarised thus: "as a pressure group, vis-a-vis the state, business enjoys a vast degree of superiority over other groups and interests". He writes: "the legislative element of the state system, like all the other elements which have been considered previously, has normally remained, notwithstanding universal suffrage and competitive politics, much more the instrument of the dominant classes than of the subordinate ones, even though it is now rather less exclusively their instrument than in former days".

This approach accepts completely the basic assumptions of the 'pluralist' view, and questions it only as if it's a matter of whether the capitalist class has 40% of the power or 80% ....! Miliband doesn't really break from the view of the state as mirror-reflection of society. He simply sees the social and economic power structure in society before he holds the mirror up to it.

Miliband says little in the way of a positive general theory of the State other than to quote the famous statement of Marx and Engels from the 'Communist Manifesto' — "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie". This polemical statement is, surely, one-sided and partial if considered as a comprehensive definition of the State.

If the State is just the committee of the bourgeoisie, then what is the difference between the State and the employers' Confederation of British Industry? How do we account for such cases as Fascism, where a political movement establishes, as Miliband writes, "a dictatorship over which they (ie. the privileged classes) have no genuine control at all"?

Miliband's approach leads to the following answer to these questions. "The dominant economic interests in capitalist society can normally count on the active good-will and support of those in whose hands state power lies .... But these interests cannot, all the same, rely on governments and their

advisors to act in perfect congruity with their purposes". That is, the 'committee of the bourgeoisie' may be unreliable.

That doesn't explain much. There should be another definition of the State added to the statement that it is the 'committee of the bourgeoisie'. The State is also specifically the organ responsible for the general administration of society, and the arbitration of social conflicts. The arbitration is, of course, done in capitalist terms of reference, and based on a concept of the 'national interest' which regards the capitalist class as the 'nation'. But the State includes, for example, the legal system.

This legal system is not in the least an expression of eternal justice, free from class bias — it regards the hungry man who steals from a supermarket as a criminal, and the big capitalist owner of that supermarket, who grabs thousands of pounds from his underpaid workers in the normal course of business, is a fine upstanding citizen.

However, "In a modern state, law must not only correspond to the general economic condition and be its expression, but must also be an **internally coherent** expression which does not, owing to inner contradictions, reduce itself to naught. And, in order to achieve this, the faithful reflection of economic conditions suffers increasingly. All the more so the more rarely it happens that a code of law is the blunt, unmitigated, unadulterated expression of the domination of a class — this in itself would offend the 'conception of right'" (Engels, 1890).

An example of this point is given by the recent Appeal Court decision over the T & G's £55 000. The Court's motivation was to preserve the coherence of legal precedents on the question of 'principal' and 'agent'. This preservation, considered in a long-term, historical perspective, is definitely a capitalist policy. But it was not necessarily in line with the immediately perceived interests of the capitalist class.

And Marx's discussion, in 'Capital', of the Factory Acts is another example. He shows that these laws, enforcing certain safeguards on working conditions, were necessary from the point of view of capitalist production. However, a good many leading capitalist spokesmen opposed the Acts, and much of the Parliamentary support for the Acts came from backward-looking opponents of industrialism.

A positive theory of the State cannot be discussed properly without a **historical** study of the first appearance of the State, of the formation of nation States, and of the various developments of the State under modern capitalism. But even without being able to go

into that historical study, we can indicate a number of political consequences

### VARIETIES OF POWER

Working class militancy takes different forms. A basically negative, defensive militancy which stresses the advancement of the working class as an estate or interest-group within present-day society, is different from a positive militancy which sets its aim as the **transformation** of present-day society.

The same differences of form apply, though with modifications and less sharply, to the 'militancy' of the capitalist class. Individual capitalists and even employers' federations tend to steer their course by short-term sectional interests. The political arm of the capitalist class, the State, has to operate more in terms of comprehensive strategy.

For example, the employers' offensive which has developed since the 1960s has depended crucially on definite government measures — Incomes Policy, anti-union laws, racialist laws and so on.

It is a general **employers'** offensive and not just the policy of particular governments. The Labour government pioneered all the Tories have done, and many government measures were directed towards servicing industrial attacks on the working class — for example, the Prices and Incomes Board and productivity dealing; the Redundancy Payments Act and redundancies. However, the government cannot be described as a **passive** reflection or servant of the employing class.

If we look at the State this way, then we see the inadequacy of Miliband's reply to 'pluralism'. The point is not **only** that the working class has **less** power than the capitalist class. The real reply to the 'pluralists', and also to the reactionaries who say "the trade unions have too much power", is that any power the labour movement has within the present system is a **different sort of power** from the capitalists' power. It is a negative, defensive power, a power to obtain partial reforms within a hostile total society.

We may gain unemployment benefit; but, within capitalism, we still have unemployment. We may gain wage increases; but we still have exploitation. We may have a vote; but only for capitalist alternatives. We may be able to halt or hinder some capitalist plans for rationalisation and redundancy; but the basic direction of industry is still determined by the capitalist priority of profit.

### CONTRADICTION

The State, Engels wrote, "is the admission that this society has become

entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel." As the contradictions of decaying capitalism become sharper, so the intervention of the State increases.

Capitalist free enterprise leads to the elimination of the weak in competition with the strong, and thus to the negation of that free enterprise, the concentration of production in huge monopolies. The State promotes mergers, and takes over basic industries (communications, fuel) when private enterprise can no longer run them at all adequately. This indicates the bankruptcy of capitalism. But the intervention of the capitalist State is in no sense socialist.

Indeed, the recent experience in Britain has been of the public sector workers being used as the first target of the capitalist offensive. In general the trade unions now "have to confront a centralised capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. Hence flows the need of the trade unions - insofar as they remain on reformist positions, ie. on positions of adapting themselves to private property - to adapt themselves to the capitalist state and contend for its cooperation". (Trotsky 1940). In 1931-2 there was only one Government committee on which the General Council of the TUC was represented; in 1934-5 there were six; in 1954, 81 - and the number is still increasing. Pay arbitration boards with Government and union representatives are a commonplace in advanced capitalist countries.

This development must not, however, be interpreted as a merging of State and civil society. The relations between the state apparatus and the capitalists may be closer; but the distinction between the two is not reduced.

The theoretical mistake of merging the two can lead to disastrous results. Syndicalists see the struggle in industry as being the crucial power struggle in capitalist society. But in 1936, in Spain, the working class of Catalonia actually took power in civil society. They controlled the factories, they controlled the distribution of supplies, the bourgeoisie did not dare show themselves in the streets.

But the workers' anarcho-syndicalist leaders did not undertake the task of thoroughly smashing the old bourgeois State - the central banks, the administrative machine, etc - and building a new democratically-controlled workers' state. Within months, "the proletarian conquests in the economic field (were) slowly whittled down. Controlling the treasury and the banks, the government was able to force its will on the

workers by the threat of withdrawing credits".

The State is the product of civil society; the capitalist economic structure dominates capitalist politics in the last analysis. But it is the conquest of State power which is the crucial problem for changing society.

A theoretical merging of the State and civil society leads to a belief that State intervention in sectional struggles necessarily makes them 'political'. But the fact that the State and the capitalist are involved together does not mean that the question of the State, of the general administration of society, and the sectional questions are the same question, in reality or in people's consciousness.

The true conclusion to draw from the increasing intervention of the State is not that sectional struggles are therefore 'political', but, on the contrary, the crucial need to go beyond syndicalism, and the negative, defensive form of militancy. When, for example, the State uses racialism to attack the working class, the basic syndicalist reaction of "let's forget all this black & white business and unite to fight the bosses" is not enough. It amounts to an attempt to forget racialism; but when the State is on the offensive the only real alternatives are to fight racialism or to accept it. And a fight against racialism demands a political offensive, which must include unconditional support for black militants organising themselves to resist.

Therefore any positive political programme, any programme to go beyond the losing battle of bargaining within the system, must relate to the question of the State. Otherwise we are merely going along with the political fatalism which is widespread in the working class, the feeling that "all politicians are the same", "you'll never change society". We confine ourselves to, at best, an attitude of non-cooperation and intransigence towards capitalism - which is necessary for any genuine working class militancy, but certainly not enough.

Now it is easy enough to raise the question of the State by saying 'Smash the State'. But this slogan is simply an abstract panacea. It doesn't promote militant struggle - in fact, it can even hold it back, by fixing people's eyes on the big struggle to 'smash the State' sometime in the future instead of the actual possibilities for immediate action now.

Marxists have approached this problem through arguing for the slogan of a **workers' government**, and linking this with proposals for state measures - nationalisation under workers' control, statification of the banks, ensuring work or full pay - to resolve the crisis into

which capitalism drags society.

The government is not the same as the State, though it is its chief leading element. Likewise, "workers' government" is not the same as "workers' state". The idea of a workers' government involves calling on the established organs of labour movement to take power and carry out the necessary socialist measures. In a situation of massive working class militancy, it can thus clear the decks for the established leaders to be exposed as the traitors and fainthearts they are, for revolutionary ideas to come to the fore in the labour movement, and for the genuine achievement of a workers' state.

However, it is possible for the 'workers' government' slogan to be used as an abstract panacea just as much as 'Smash the State'. To be meaningful, it must be used in specific situations of the class struggle, where the question of government is to the fore, and where it is possible to be precise about the organisational form of the workers' government.

Today, from the beginning of the article, the question of government is certainly to the fore. But the question of organisational forms is not clear. The majority of the British working class still see political alternatives as parliamentary alternatives. At the same time, many workers have a hard-learned distrust of the Labour Party.

To fail to support the kicking out of the Tories, necessarily in favour of Labour, would be to collapse into the political fatalism of negative, 'syndicalist' militancy. But to present, today, any immediately likely Labour government as a workers' government would be to make a mystical equation between Labour Party and labour movement. It would wilfully obscure the lessons of 1964-70.

We raise the call for a **General Strike to Smash the Act** - an attacking slogan which we do not reduce to panacea by linking it in advance with the slogan of a workers' government, though its realisation would open the way for raising the question of a workers' government quite concretely. It is a specific call, for a specific situation. Other situations will require other ways of relating to the problem of the State.

John Sterling.

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