

How close was France to a socialist revolution?

One of the most amusing reports to come out of France during the recent unrest was of one panic-stricken capitalist, convinced that his class was about to be expropriated, who loaded his car with over £1 million in cash and made a dash for the Swiss border. But his terror, ridiculous in retrospect, was matched by a corresponding euphoria in left-wing circles. Anyone accustomed to thinking along Bolshevik or anarchist lines was convinced that "a revolutionary situation" had developed and, in Britain at any rate, there were several groups declaring that the socialist revolution had started. Already May 1968 is part of the mythology of the left and there is a generally accepted explanation of why the agitation seeped away and why the strikers drifted back to work. The French workers are supposed to have been ripe for revolution and all that was missing was "a large revolutionary organisation capable of giving direction to the demands of the working class".

This raises the whole question of what constitutes a socialist revolution. The Socialist Party of Great Britain argues that it is not enough to have thousands of demonstrators on the streets or even millions of workers occupying the factories. Above all the working class must have a clear understanding of what Socialism entails and what methods are effective in overthrowing capitalism. A grasp of socialist principles by the vast majority of the workers is a minimal condition for going forward to Socialism and no party, no matter how religiously it follows the Bolshevik tradition, can substitute for this.

If this is accepted, then we can estimate how close France came to a socialist revolution by taking a look at the demands which the workers advanced during the period of upheaval. Most prominent were the usual claims for higher wages, better working conditions, shorter hours and security of employment. (There are between two and three million workers on the minimum wage level of less than £8 a week and at least four million earning under £11 a week.) Such demands have the full support of the Socialist Party--but we must emphasise that there is nothing revolutionary about them. In fact, the wage increases that have been secured need to be put in perspective. They seem to be averaging out to a general rise of about 13 per cent (on the basis of a 10 per cent all-round increase and a 3 per cent rise in the minimum wage) but this needs to be set against the fact that *nominal* wages have been rising by 6 per cent annually over the last few years anyway. Although these increases will naturally cut into profits, the international capitalist class hastened to reassure itself that the outcome would be far from a disaster. As the Economics Editor of the *Sunday Times* put it:

The pay settlement will not be wholly adverse for France's economy. The big increase in the minimum wage will help send the poorer French firms to the wall, releasing workers for the big, profitable ones--which pay well above the minimum.

Yet the strikers did not restrict their demands simply to these issues. At numerous plants there were calls for "a radical change in the power structure" and for "participation of the workers in the running of the factory". A leader of Force Ouvriere (the social democratic trade union federation) pointed out his members were agitating for "genuine workers' participation in the policy of industry" and a senior

Renault shop steward came out for nationalisation of key sectors of the economy, including all the car firms, the chemical industry and the banks. Understandably, demands such as these were greeted with rapturous delight by all those who imagine Socialism as a system of nationalisation under workers' control; but the Socialist Party rejects this view. For socialists nationalisation, whatever its trimmings, is nothing more than state capitalism. The policy of workers' control does not pose a threat to the capitalist system as long as those workers are still committed to capitalism and have not understood the socialist alternative. That this was the case in France is made clear by the fact that even the most extreme elements, such as Cohn-Bendit, went no further than the old utopian demand for equal wages. Who was urging the abolition of the wages system and an end to the market economy? For this reason, we cannot accept the claims of one young activist in St. Nazaire:

The long-term outlook is uncertain, but not hopeless.
On one tier, there are the traditional union claims, which must be met immediately. On another, the government and the regime itself are in question. There is the challenge of capitalist society, of social orders based on private property.

Obviously there was a challenge to the government and the Gaullist regime but capitalism remained secure throughout.

For all that, the Socialist Party recognises that there are vital lessons to be drawn from the recent struggles of the French workers. One of the most important is the complete bankruptcy of the "communist" parties, as demonstrated by the PCF. Another striking feature was the way in which the factories and universities were organised while the employers and authorities were temporarily eliminated. Although there was no production during the strikes, all the factory services had to be maintained. At the Renault plant at Billancourt, for example, the factory hospital was still functioning, the firemen and security officers had to keep patrolling, food had to be prepared—and so on. Even more impressive was the Sorbonne, with the students in control. A hospital service, treating those injured in the riots, was centred on the Medical Faculty and it was estimated that a daily average of 10,000 posters and hand-outs were being produced by the Fine Arts School. Yet all of this was done by unpaid, voluntary labour, by people cooperating for a common purpose. Too much should not be made of this (we are not suggesting it represented "socialism in action") but it does at least disprove the often-heard objection to a socialist society that, if the coercive pressures of the wages system were removed, nothing but chaos would result.

Another important aspect was the role of the police and armed forces. Although vast publicity was given to the brutality of the CRS, there was less on the discontent which was building up among the ordinary police forces over their use as government thugs. Already by May 18 there were reports from the police unions of "extreme tension" in the forces. Some of the police were also adopting the tactics of the strikers themselves. An article in the *Times* mentioned that the branch dealing with intelligence on student activity had been deliberately depriving the government of information about student leaders in support of an expenses claim! This indicates that the majority of those who make up the police and armed forces are subjected to the general pressures which act on all working men and women.

As for the army, General Fourquet—the Chief of Staff—made it clear that it would obey any constitutionally elected government—even a "communist" one. Whether Fourquet and the general meant this or not is largely immaterial for, when we are in a position to establish Socialism, the bulk of the armed forces (as with the rest of the working class) will be socialists and will understand that their interest lies not in fighting their fellow workers but in freeing mankind as a whole by stripping the capitalist class of its wealth.

If there were a working class committed to Socialism in France the correct method of achieving political power would be to fight the general election on a revolutionary programme, without any reforms to attract support from non-socialists. In fact, the first stage in a socialist revolution is for the vast majority of the working class to use their votes as class weapons. This would represent the transfer of political power to the working class. We adopt this position not because we are mesmerised by legality and not because we overlook the cynical and two-faced double-dealing which the capitalists will no doubt resort to. We say, however, that a majority of socialist delegates voted into the national assembly or parliament would use political power to coordinate the measures needed to overthrow the capitalist system. Any minority which was inclined to waver would have second thoughts about taking on such a socialist majority which was in a position to wield the state power.

But since the workers in France are still convinced that capitalism is the only viable social system, the immediate task must be for genuine socialists to concentrate their efforts on spreading socialist ideas among the working class. For this purpose an independent socialist party, which does not compromise its principles or dissipate its activity in attempts to reform capitalism, is indispensable.

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