

# Revolutionary situation in France 1968: Which road for the mass struggle?

written by Sam Marcy  
December 21, 2018



*This year marks the 50th anniversary of the May 1968 uprising of workers and*

*students in France. In light of the Yellow Vests protest movement shaking France today, and the continued relevance of the lessons of 1968 for anticapitalist struggles, Struggle—La Lucha is publishing a series of articles written at that time by Sam Marcy, one of the leading Marxist thinkers of the second half of the 20th century. This piece originally appeared in the May 23, 1968, issue of Workers World newspaper.*

May 22, 1968 — There can be absolutely no doubt that as of this writing, France is in the throes of one of the deepest and most profound of revolutionary crises. And France, it must be remembered, has had more of them than any other Western nation to date.

What gives this truly great revolutionary upheaval exceptional and extraordinary significance is that it has the very real potential — more than previous crises — not only of ousting the de Gaulle government, but of overturning the entire rotten edifice on which the French capitalist system is built.

Such an event, of course, would not only change the character of the international situation, but would also light the flames of a new revolutionary conflagration that inevitably would sweep all of Western Europe. This in turn would surely mean a reforging of the bonds of class solidarity between the Western proletariat and the revolutionary struggles waged by the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Those bonds, first forged by the victorious October socialist revolution in Russia and the Western proletarian uprisings that followed, were brutally severed by the triumph of opportunism and liquidationism which now hold sway in the USSR, Eastern Europe and most of the Communist parties.

When one considers the rising tide of rebellion in the U.S. today, along with the momentous resurgence in Europe, it is inconceivable that the revolutionary contagion would not also greatly affect the mood as well as the direction of the rank-

and-file white American worker and cement a genuine alliance with the Black liberation movement against the U.S. imperialist establishment.

The above prognosis, our cynics will tell you — and they are an international breed — is a revolutionary pipe dream that won't come true. Perhaps. It is instructive to remember, however, that these very same cynics were telling us only yesterday how stable, prosperous and safe from any revolutionary disorders capitalist France was, under de Gaulle, and that the French workers had become so thoroughly bourgeois that they were beyond revolutionary redemption.

Now, it is plain to see that the French working class, in alliance with the revolutionary students and other social groupings, have what amounts to de facto power in their hands. They have not only paralyzed the economic life of the country — they virtually have it in their hands.

The real issue is whether what they have in their hands will be returned to the absentee owners. This class of ruthless exploiters, a tiny minority of the French people, is now literally at the mercy of an aroused and revolutionary people.

### **Danger of Popular Frontism**

And yet, the ruling classes of Europe and America, while greatly alarmed at the magnitude of the social and political upheaval, seem confident that even if the de Gaulle government is eventually forced out, a new set of leftist politicians will take over, grant a minimum of concessions, a maximum of false promises, and through the medium of the French Communist Party leadership, return the plants back to their "rightful" owners and the workers to exploitation.

A long and protracted parliamentary crisis will then ensue with the cabinet being shuffled and reshuffled and bourgeois, radical, socialist and communist ministers going in and out of the cabinet as through a revolving door. In the end it will be just

another case for the French bourgeoisie “doing business as usual during alterations” of their government.

Such a prognosis would have much to recommend it if viewed strictly in the narrow framework of the historical precedent of the 1936-1939 Popular Front period, and also the period immediately following the end of World War II. The French proletariat was armed and might have taken destiny into their own hands were it not for the Socialist Party and Communist Party leadership which disarmed them and returned them back to capitalist slavery.

The present confidence of the French bourgeoisie is based on its conviction that substantially the same type of leadership of the French working-class movement will do a repeat performance and thereby save the bourgeois social order (of which the Communist Party and, to a less influential extent, the Socialist Party are considered to be firm pillars). So much are these working-class parties considered part of the capitalist establishment that the world press, including some of the French, openly and unashamedly speak of them in such terms.

This certainly is a possible variant of development, especially in the light of the two terrible historical precedents referred to.

However, if we look at the revolutionary situation in France today in the light of the entire historical development of the class struggle of the proletariat in France against the bourgeoisie, through all the preceding significant stages, and not merely the last two, one can project an entirely different prognosis.

Such a different prognosis is reinforced when the struggle in France is viewed in the concrete historical context of world relationships as they exist today and not as they existed in 1936-1939 or 1945. Aside from anything else, while the French workers in those two phases of the previous struggle seemed or actually were more revolutionary or more class conscious, they certainly were less well organized than

they are today. This is absolutely incontestable.

And as a class — not merely as an economic category in the bourgeois system of economics — the working class has a lot more popular support and sympathy from other class strata and groupings than it had in previous times. Enjoying such support in a revolutionary period is extremely valuable. Hence, the sense of isolation with which the leaders tried to frighten the masses in the earlier periods is certainly not a factor today.

Finally, the sense of dependence on the leadership is no longer an overriding factor as it was then. The unstinted and unquestioning devotion of the very best sons and daughters of the French working class to the Communist Party leadership has given way to healthy skepticism, if not yet to open resistance on a mass scale.

Moreover, a proletarian revolution which seemed so much like a utopian dream in the previous period, must now, after the great Chinese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution and the heroic example of the Vietnamese people, seem not merely a possibility, but an attainable objective entirely within its grasp.

Every French worker knows that there are at least 13 nominally Socialist states even if the political leadership of some of them is as questionable as their own party and union heads. The sense of isolation felt during the Popular Front period when the Soviet Union was an isolated fortress and all of Europe lived under the shadow of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco is not at all a factor today.

## **Role of the working class**

Whereas the confidence of the French bourgeoisie in maintaining their system of exploitation rests almost exclusively on naked terror and on the ability of the Communist Party and Socialist Party leadership to return the masses to the domination of the capitalist establishment, the confidence of the working class, on

the other hand, is instinctively based on larger and more significant historical factors.

The role of the working class as a producer, as the key factor in the system of social production, is what in the final analysis has given the French workers, as it will ultimately give all workers, the boldness and audacity to storm the citadels of the bourgeoisie. Even if the class consciousness and revolutionary élan has been watered down by the systematic corruption of the leadership, the working class has gained so much numerically and in other ways that it cannot help but sooner or later emerge as the decisive force in society, become its organizer and its master.

In this connection, it is very important to note that the French proletariat is a unique detachment of the Western working class. The French working class historically has fought its wars against the class enemy always to a finish. True, the battles were lost in the end, but they were fought valiantly with courage and determination.

This is even true of the Great French (bourgeois) Revolution of 1789-1793 to the extent that the French working class was involved at the early period. It was also true in the proletarian insurrections of 1848 and, needless to say, in the Paris Commune of 1871.

The long period of so-called peaceful capitalist development that followed in France after 1871 has as its political foundation the decisive defeat of the heroic Paris Communards who literally fought to the last worker.

But the great struggle of the late 1930s in France and the revolutionary situation that it ushered in were never fought out to the finish with the bourgeoisie. This is a fact of pre-eminent importance. The Popular Front, which was nothing but a new name for an old bourgeois coalition, merely paralyzed the workers but did not end in a decisive defeat of the working class by the bourgeoisie.

In this very important respect, the situation of the French proletariat differs markedly from the decisive defeats which occurred in Spain, Austria and Germany. In these latter countries, fascism triumphed completely by destroying the working-class organizations and ushering in an epoch of historic reaction from which they have not yet significantly recovered.

The French working class maintained its confidence in itself and retained its political organizations and trade unions. The struggle which began with the great strikes of 1936 have only been interrupted and muffled but not really finished. They have now re-emerged apparently stronger than ever.

Bourgeois scholars may not see anything at all in the unique character of the French working class as compared to that of the German, the Spanish, the Austrian and even the Italians. But those French working-class leaders whose objectives are proletarian revolution cannot fail to appreciate its deep significance.

### **Prosperity and stability based on fraud**

During the Popular Front period, the extreme right seemed far, far stronger than the rightist elements of today, whose man incidentally is de Gaulle. In 1936-1939 it was the Popular Front politicians who discredited the cause of the workers by their failure to accomplish anything worthwhile. The right capitalized on the political bankruptcy of the Popular Front. Today, however, it is the right that is discredited because it has, in the person of de Gaulle, held power for ten long years and brought nothing but misery to the broad masses of the people.

The so-called prosperity and stability that the de Gaulle regime brought to France has proven to be a gigantic fraud. De Gaulle has only been able to paper over the crying class contractions inherent in French capitalist society. Not only has he been unable to resolve them, but on the contrary, he has brought these acute class contradictions to the bursting point.

Certainly there has been prosperity for the capitalist class, but, as all of the capitalist newspapers now virtually admit, it has been a prosperity based upon more intensive exploitation of the working class, the city lower middle class and the rural poor. The domination of a handful of monopolists has served as the base from which de Gaulle has sought to mount "greatness" in imperialist French foreign policy.

What it has meant all along, as far as the French working class and the poor and deprived are concerned, is more armaments taken out of their hides. Because the working-class leaders kept quiet about it and refused to heed the grievances of the masses, the bourgeois lie that the workers are "satisfied and happy with their lot" was taken for good coin.

It wasn't so long ago that Southern senators in the U.S. would get up on the floor of Congress and roundly denounce anybody who so much as hinted at the oppression of the Black people by repeating the lie that "the Negro people are happy with their lot." Just as the great mass rebellions in the Black communities gave the lie to the talk about the "happy lot" of the Black people in this country, so the revolutionary upheaval in France today has given the lie to all the propaganda of the bourgeoisie, the social democrats and their lackeys.

It is said that all the French workers want is the rectification of some grievances and that their demands are only economic and do not go beyond the limits of the present bourgeois order of society. True enough. But this is the least of all the significant factors in the situation. The demands of the Russian workers and peasants of 1917 were even more modest. Their slogan was bread, land and peace.

Any important strike is an embryo revolution. That is a basic teaching of Leninism.

### **Relationships of classes in French society**

The scope and breadth of the current strike in France, encompassing as of today

eight to ten million workers, poses a truly revolutionary threat to the existing social order. It is not the modest character of the demands that is decisive but the manner in which the workers seek to get them achieved. And the manner in which they have gone about it thus far, with speed and with such utter spontaneity, makes it truly characteristic of a revolutionary situation.

However, no revolutionary situation can be considered fully as such unless one also takes into account the situation of the capitalist class and of the reciprocal relationships between all the classes of contemporary French society. The French ruling class is confronted by a series of economic demands just at a moment in its history when the political representatives of the ruling class were seeking to further encroach on the living standards of the people.

It is as though the workers in a certain factory came to the conclusion that their situation was so intolerable that they demanded an immediate raise in pay just at a time when the boss had decided that what was needed was a further cut in pay instead. Economically speaking, this is the situation that prevails on a nationwide scale in France.

Gaullist economists, radical and bourgeois politicians, and the misleaders of labor have all done their share in hiding the true anatomy of class relations in present-day France. That is what is so incredibly wonderful about the manner in which the French working class has put an end to this gross deception. In no other way could it have been brought to the attention of world public opinion, or to the French public generally.

As has happened so many times in history, it took the students to spark the movement, but the students alone, no matter how heroic and self-sacrificing, cannot accomplish the fundamental social change that the workers can, because it is only the workers who operate the basic machinery of society. The student struggle is a symptom of the developing general struggle.

In a true sense, the students acted as a vanguard and initiated the splendid class action of the whole French working class.

But now the question is: How can the struggle be resolved? By parliamentary trickery? By a new bourgeois coalition of left-wing politicians in alliance with the Communist Party and the Socialist Party a la Popular Front days?

This is to tread the old beaten path, the path of treason to the French working class. A call for a so-called referendum embodying some token concessions while maintaining the old system would be a fraudulent device no less vicious than the corrupt political maneuvering of the National Assembly.

### **Real alternative to capitalist power**

Even as these words are being written, the news comes over the radio that the cynical and unrepresentative Assembly refused to censure de Gaulle (May 22).

The failure to pass even a censure vote in the Assembly will reinforce the conviction of the workers that the Assembly is nothing but an instrument of the ruling class and should be completely ignored — that they, the workers, should move on toward resolute, determined mass action to insure their victory.

And some already sense that if the general strike ends without an attempt to politicize and validate the power they have won, if the general strike remains only a general strike, it will end in mere disruption for French capitalist society and frustration for the French masses.

“The entire people is aroused,” says Waldeck-Rochet, the French Communist Party leader. True! What then should be done since “the entire people,” as Waldeck-Rochet puts it, “is aroused”?

Galvanize them to keep the power they have already seized and declare themselves

to be the political power of the country — or bring them back to the fraudulent politics of the National Assembly, which is a dead-end street for the working class?

If “the entire people is aroused,” the Communist Party-Socialist Party leaders should ignore the National Assembly and declare the aroused people to be the power in the country through a New National Assembly, composed of workers, students, the rural poor and the lower middle class of the cities.

The students (if the newspapers in this country report it correctly) put forward a call for a “New Estates General.” This may not be exactly what is necessary for the French working people, but it seems to be an attempt to call for a new political power to replace the old one.

Everybody in France knows that it was the Estates General that acted as a rallying point against the established royal power and ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Convention as the revolutionary power — the real power — in the country. But the very idea of posing an alternative to the reactionary bourgeois parliamentary power today has not even been mentioned by the leaders of the Communist Party or Socialist Party.

The alternative that is needed is a national organization of workers’ councils, peasant councils, poor people’s councils, and student councils. That is the real alternative to the discredited National Assembly.

That would be a true Popular Front of the masses, a true coalition of the various strata of the oppressed and exploited peoples — and not a coalition with the bourgeoisie, as Waldeck-Rochet proposes. That would be dual power, and only “dual” as long as the old regime of the exploiters could survive it.

The masses have to establish independent organs of power to validate the possession of the means of production that are presently in their hands and take

over the political destiny of the country. Only in this way will they put an end to the reign of the monopolies which breed poverty, reaction and imperialist war.

---

Part 2 - [Decisive question in France 1968: Revolutionary or reformist leadership?](#)

