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Tactics after 1968 uprising in France

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When is it correct to boycott rigged elections?

The year 2018 marked 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 anti-capitalist 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 July 5, 1968, issue of Workers World newspaper.

It seems only yesterday that the entire structure of capitalist France was tottering and on the verge of utter collapse. The ruling class was reeling under the blows of

the student rebellion as well as the most massive and most widespread general strike in Western European history.

Has the so-called landslide election which gave the Gaullists a sweeping majority changed all this? Indeed not! Only those who are victims of parliamentary cretinism, only those who view the truly great revolutionary significance of the May-June class struggle of the French workers as some sort of psychological aberration can take the election figures for good coin or as a true reflection of the living reality of France today.

None of the deep-seated economic issues have in any way been resolved, nor is there any reason to believe that they will be in the future. The so-called “massive” wage increases, which everyone is talking about, are of purely nominal character and are at the mercy of a galloping rise in the cost of living (which, of course, [Prime Minister Georges] Pompidou promises to “control”). The acute class antagonisms which are at the bottom of the struggle and which broke violently through the surface in May can at best be muffled for a short period of time but can never be eradicated or resolved.

Of course, the massive majority whipped up by the Gaullists has significance, but only if it is properly understood in the light of the living struggle of class forces. Gaining a parliamentary majority became the issue in France only because the Communist Party of France—General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leadership permitted de Gaulle to take the initiative of calling for elections without a struggle. Naturally, the bourgeoisie would triumph in an election rigged by the Gaullists.

However, the issue should not have been whether the police dictatorship of de Gaulle could muster a majority of the electorate to vote for his regime, but whether it was proper for the leadership of the CP and CGT to urge the masses to participate in a farce whose outcome was a foregone conclusion.

But was there an alternative choice left open to them? Yes, indeed. A boycott of the elections, even if it went badly, could scarcely have caused as much damage as did the participation in the electoral fraud in which the masses were dragooned to cast their votes for de Gaulle. To begin with, the CP-CGT leadership and its allies among the masses had every legal right to boycott the election and disrupt the election machinery.

Election held under military threat

Why? First of all, this was not a general election in accordance with the constitutional provisions. It was a special election decided upon by de Gaulle himself. Moreover, and this is far more important, the election was called and arranged by de Gaulle under duress and the threat of the use of force. Nothing could fly in the face of bourgeois legality more than the threat of the use of force on the eve of an election. Such an election is considered rigged. Participating in such an election is validating a fraud.

It is instructive to recall the manner in which de Gaulle prepared for the election while the events are still fresh in the minds of the millions. At a time when the revolutionary strike wave was at its height with the economy virtually in the hands of the workers, de Gaulle suddenly disappeared. Where did he go? He went to confer with one of his principal co-conspirators in the military, Gen. Jacques Massu. He is the general who commands the French forces in Germany and who worked with de Gaulle during the Algiers period as a captain. De Gaulle's departure to meet Massu and other fascist generals was deliberately leaked to the press to threaten and intimidate the leadership as well as the masses with military force.

The holding of an election under these circumstances is constitutionally illegal. The CP-CGT leadership and its bourgeois allies among the politicians pride themselves on standing for "law and order."

Well, the conspiracy of de Gaulle and his military chiefs in Taverny was a most flagrant breach of bourgeois legality. Why didn't the CP-CGT leadership take advantage of that? This breach became open and most impudent when he began to move tanks toward the capital. If this is not conducting an election under duress, then nothing is. From then on the CP-CGT leadership had every right, on the basis of elementary bourgeois law, not to submit to military threats by a conspiracy of the fascist generals with de Gaulle at its head.

The case for denouncing de Gaulle's election maneuver will be more easily understood by U.S. readers who know contemporary American labor history and the struggle of workers to win collective bargaining rights. It has now become well settled law governing U.S. labor relations that a collective bargaining election which takes place during a period when the employer uses threats, coercion, intimidation and duress is invalid and the union has every right not merely to boycott the election but to call a strike to avoid casualties and demoralization in the plant.

Employers do not want collective bargaining elections when the spirit of the workers is high. Rather they seek to dampen that spirit by the use of all foul methods including bribery and intimidation of the leaders to demoralize the workers and then have a rigged election. How many times has this been repeated in contemporary labor history in the U.S.?

Lenin and 1905

Marxist tactics and strategy governing boycotts of parliamentary elections were discussed by Lenin almost fifty years ago in his famous book "Left-Wing Communism" and are considered ABC today. Lenin gives two pertinent examples from Russian history relating to parliamentary elections: when to boycott and when not to boycott.

The boycott of the parliament in 1906, said Lenin, was a mistake because no

extraparliamentary struggle of great dimensions was taking place at the time. On the contrary, there was a definite recession of the struggle. However, says Lenin, the boycott in 1905 was correct.

“When, in August 1905,” says Lenin, “the Czar announced the convocation of an advisory ‘parliament,’ the Bolsheviks — unlike all the opposition parties and the Mensheviks — proclaimed a boycott of it.” What was the objective situation in 1905 according to Lenin? It was “one that was leading to the rapid transformation of mass strikes into a political strike, then into a revolutionary strike and then into insurrection.”

Commenting on this later, Lenin says: “We see that we succeeded in preventing the convocation of a reactionary parliament by a reactionary government in a situation in which extraparliamentary, revolutionary mass action (strikes in particular) was growing with exceptional rapidity.”

Of course, the situation in Russia in 1905 and the situation in France in May-June 1968 are different in many respects. However, the essential characteristics of an objective situation making a boycott not only desirable but obligatory prevailed in France in May-June 1968 just as in Russia in 1905.

In other words, the Czar, like de Gaulle, decided to convene the parliament in the midst of a revolutionary situation. The Bolsheviks, even though they felt that the revolution might not be successful, decided to boycott the elections because the main struggle was in the street and around the factories. All the other parties, including the Mensheviks, participated, thereby showing their preference for bourgeois parliamentarism over revolutionary struggle.

Had the CP-CGT leadership tried “to prevent the convocation of a reactionary parliament” by the reactionary de Gaulle government in a situation in which there was so much absolutely unprecedented revolutionary mass action, de Gaulle would

not be where he is today.

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