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## Vive le Proletariat: The 1968 Revolt of French Workers and Students

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# Vive Le Prolétariat

## The French Worker Student Revolt of 1968

By Jack Duhan

Special Thanks to Dr. Eli Rubin and Dr. Bryan Machin

## I. Introduction

...The country and especially the capital moved to a life without trains, subways, buses or money... *Paris Match*, June 1968

1968 was a watershed year in terms of social change across the world. While countries behind the iron curtain like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary were fighting for more reasonable government, western countries such as Germany, Italy, the United States, and France all dealt with uprisings from communist student groups.

The unique aspect of the French Revolt of 1968, versus similar revolts in places such as The United States, or Germany, was the relationship between college students and members of the French working class.

It was the multiplicity of organizations-established ones ... as well as the spontaneous ones, such as the hundreds of committees of action, the workers' strike committees-which defined the French revolt. It was the collectivity of actions from the occupation of the factories, through the barricades in the Latin Quarter, to the mass marches of half a million, which was the index of the French Revolt.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from eyewitness observer Eugene Walker manifests the unique aspects of the French revolt in 1968.

University lecture halls became forums where one could learn "l'art de fabriquer le cocktail Molotov"<sup>2</sup>. The surrounding neighborhood, the Latin Quarter, was filled with student made barricades where the students, whose faces were

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Walker. *France, Spring '68: Masses in Motion, ideas in free flow: an Eyewitness's Critical Report*. (Detroit: News and Letters, 1968): 2

<sup>2</sup> Les Journees Historiques Des Barricades Aux Elections." *Paris Match*, June, 22, 1968, 67.

covered with lemon juice to repel tear gas, flung cobblestones at police officers. But, what really gave teeth to the events of May 1968, was the largest conducted worker strike in the country's history where 9 million "cheminots, postiers, métallurgistes, ouvriers de batiment qui paralyseront tout la France".<sup>3</sup>

There are many misconceptions surrounding the events of May 1968 in France, and for this essay I will focus on a misconception highlighted by historian Kristin Ross who in her book, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, eloquently argues that the events of May are often a victim of "temporal reduction" which can result in May appearing to be a gentle "youth revolt" or "life style reform"<sup>4</sup>. The idea of May simply being a youth revolt or life style reform significantly undermines the actuality of the movement as May was not a spontaneous "movement [that] started in the universities"<sup>5</sup> and erupted on May 3<sup>rd</sup> after the suppression of peaceful student demonstrations at the Sorbonne, which prominent physicist Jean Pierre Vigier claimed in an essay written shortly after the conclusion of May. The events of May were a culmination of years of dissatisfaction towards French society, by groups larger than just youth or students.

The temporal reduction especially limits the role of the working class in the events of May. Throughout the 1960s workers had used anti-union wildcat strikes as a means to gain more control over their workplaces. These factory occupations

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<sup>3</sup> Les Journees Historiques Des Barricades Aux Elections." *Paris Match*, June, 22, 1968, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Kristin, Ross. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 8

<sup>5</sup> Jean Pierre Vigier "'": *Reflections on the Revolution In France: 1968*. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970): 150

would prove to provide an example for the student demonstrations of May 1968, as the students began to occupy university buildings in order to gain more control over their education. If one limits their view to the temporal sense of May, meaning only the 31 days of the month, it becomes impossible for them to truly understand the significance the working class played in the events.

In the eyewitness account of events *Worker-Student Action Committees* by college professor Fredy Perlman and his colleague Roger Gregoire. The authors begin their work with the close of Nanterre on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

“The workers continue to be controlled by the unions...However, the students’ refusal to recognize the legitimacy of any external control, their refusal to be represented by any body smaller than the general assembly, is continually transmitted to the striking workers by the Students and Workers Action Committees”<sup>6</sup>

Perlman is writing about the student desire for direct democracy in their universities as they felt the present system was unfair and how they transmitted this desire for more control to the workers, however through this essay I will provide examples of the working class fighting for more control over their workplace before May, 1968.

The hundreds of action committees that Eugene Walker referred to were largely made up of three groups, the indigenous working class, the immigrant working class, and the students. To understand some of the problems, the action committees were revolting against; in French society I first highlight important aspects of the presidency of Charles De Gaulle and the consumer culture that was

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<sup>6</sup> Gregorie Roger and Fredy Perlman. *Worker-Student Action Committees, France '68*. (Detroit: Black and Red Press 1970): 6.

growing during the era. Both the working class and immigrants were generally excluded from the consumer culture because they were members of the lower class. These working class groups, especially the immigrants were generally ignored by French middle and upper class society. Wanting not only better living conditions, but also an increased role in society both groups began protesting; albeit in very different ways. The indigenous workers began with anti-union wildcat strikes; however, the immigrants had no union representation and were actually exploited by the factory owners to break the strikes.

Although the students were not excluded from the growing consumer culture, they felt they were being ignored by the university system, which not only failed to keep up with the growth in population, but distributed exams that students felt were “qui ne sont plus que des exercices de mémoire” (nothing more than exercises in memory).<sup>7</sup> Until 1968 the students generally ignored the domestic working class, but I will highlight how student leftist slowly became more aware of the problems of the working class and how the then popular ideology of Maoism lead the students into the factories during the revolt. As the students began to realize the similarities between themselves and the working class, student-worker action committees began to form. These action committees held meetings on how to conduct the revolt, and they also began to include immigrants.

### I. Les Ouvriers

The political hegemony of President Charles De Gaulle throughout the years 1958-1968 is pivotal to understanding the events of May 1968. As the Fourth

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<sup>7</sup> Les Journees Historiques Des Barricades Aux Elections.” *Paris Match*, June, 22, 1968, 67.

French Republic was crumbling during the Algerian war, the man who 18 years earlier called for permanent resistance to Germany found his way back to political prominence. In 1958 De Gaulle dissolved the fourth republic, and wrote a new constitution that granted more power to the executive branch.

This constitution was similar to De Gaulle's 1946 constitution that was voted down. Because of the chaos of the Algerian War in 1958 De Gaulle's new constitution received 80 percent of the vote. Historian Richard Wolin argues that De Gaulle's form of government was conceived during the 3<sup>rd</sup> republic but enacted only during the 5<sup>th</sup> making it drastically out of sync with French society and a root cause for the actions of May.

Another root of the events of May was that for some, the period between 1945-1975 can be described as "les trentes glorieuses" (the thirty glorious years) a period of extreme economic growth and the advancement of consumer society. During this 30-year period, France's population grew from 42 million to 56 million and the country's once large agrarian society shrunk drastically in the place of a "hypermodern, postindustrial polity". However, these 30 years were far from glorious for the industrial sectors like mining, and metallurgy as they would suffer a decline, and unskilled labor would become preferred to skill labor in these fields. <sup>8</sup>

The demand for unskilled labor along, with poverty around Africa and Europe would lead to the 1960s becoming a peak period of immigration, as nearly two million immigrants came to France to fill vacancies in the car and building

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Wolin. *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution and the Legacy of the 1960s*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010):44

industries during the zenith of post war economic boom.<sup>9</sup> Many Algerians, Portuguese, Moroccans, Tunisians, and Yugoslavians sought refuge in France, as there was little opportunity for work in their home countries. In the case of the Algerian immigrant when they arrived in France often they did not find living conditions much better, as like in their home country they were forced into slums. In Algeria the slums were created as war forced many of the inhabitants out of the city, in Paris the large wave of immigration and the inadequacy in meeting the housing demands of a growing population resulted in the creation of slums.

The low quality of life and isolated locations of the slums created a great deal of danger for the inhabitants. Alcohol consumption was rampant,<sup>10</sup> cultural disputes often arouse as a result of many different immigrant groups being forced to live together.<sup>11</sup> The lack of sanitation also allowed tuberculosis to become prevalent and also fires often broke out in the decrepit buildings.

Across France, the indigenous workers also found themselves in difficult living conditions as well. The postwar baby boom was another reason the population was increasing and many French cities saw the population grew faster than adequate housing. In the 7 townships of the Northern *Departement*, the population increased 12.2% between the years of 1936-1956, which signifies 2,200 more people every year. For the housing construction to keep up with that rate 200,000 new homes would have had to been constructed over the course of 20

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel A. Gordon. *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 & the Rise of Anti-Racism in France*. (Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 2012): 39.

<sup>10</sup> Minces, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Martine Segalen, "L'esprit de famille à Nanterre," *Vingtième Siècle Revue d'Histoire* 14 (Apr-June. 1987): 41.



years. Lacking such construction in the Northern city of Lille, many workers were forced into slums.

The housing in these neighborhoods in Paris and the North provided a sharp contrast to surrounding neighborhoods. The Parisian shanties often lacked running water, access to a sewage system, and electricity. In the case of the North the new houses that were constructed were often too expensive for the workers to afford as workers of The North received some of the lowest salaries for the industrial regions of France.<sup>12</sup> Although the North had a large amount of industry there was little to no manufacturing. So the hard items were shipped out of the North to be manufactured and sold elsewhere losing two potential areas of profit for The North.

The necessity to work and the cost of education kept many students out of school and both the Pas-de-Calais and Le Nord had a lower rate of school enrollment than the other under developed parts of France. Less than half the students in the region received some form of secondary education. The schools were also unable to keep up with the growing number of students that were enrolling in school.

Lack of school enrollment along with the already poor living conditions and low wages of many members of the working class filled the slums with despair. A large number of the immigrant workers that filled the slums were single fathers who sent their wages back to their families in their home country: this loneliness would further the despair and problems amongst the working class. These feelings of despair would become another root cause for the events of May.

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<sup>12</sup> Juliette Minces. *Le Nord* (Paris: Maspero Press, 1967): 32.

The upper and middle classes often ignored life in the slums. Excepting the mayor of Nanterre's request for decent housing in September 1961, little noise was made by politicians to assuage the hardships of the immigrants. Politicians likely ignored immigration because it provided the country's businesses with a cheap source of labor. Time and time again, the government overlooked the fact that many immigrants remained in the country illegally after entering as tourists or clandestinely. Without citizenship, the foreign workers became "dehumanized" fearing deportation they were willing to work for lower wages.<sup>13</sup>

The exploitation of the immigrant workers made them a threat to the indigenous workers because they were willing to work for less pay in worse conditions. The foreigners did not receive representation from the CGT (communist party) because; their work contracts, if they even had them, were temporary, and they could not vote. Because of these reasons, factory bosses were easily able to manipulate immigrant workers and use them to break up strikes. Since many immigrants did not speak French, they were often unaware of their rights, and subsequently received lower salaries than the indigenous citizen workers. An immigrant was also at a higher risk of deportation if it became obvious that they no longer had any money to spend in France. Since immigrants already worked for lower wages, and not having any money increased the threat of deportation, factory managers were able to easily manipulate them into working longer hours in poor

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<sup>13</sup> Gregorie Roger and Fredy Perlman. *Worker-Student Action Committees, France '68*. (Detroit: Black and Red Press 1970): #?

conditions.<sup>14</sup> These factors added to threat that the immigrants already posed to the indigenous working class.

Although the immigrant and indigenous working class suffered through similar problems such as life in the slums and lack of education, because the immigrants created such a potential threat to the working class there wasn't much solidarity between the groups. The groups separately protested their living and working conditions using different means and achieving different results.

When the Algerian immigrants attempted to protest their low quality of life they were met with one of the most horrific events in Parisian history. On October 17, 1961, nearly 30,000 Algerian immigrants peacefully left the slums to protest an unfair curfew act that was placed solely on them and forced them in doors after 8:30 PM. The well dressed and unarmed Algerians were brutally massacred by the police who under the direction of police prefect Maurice Papon, clubbed, drown, and murdered men, women, and children. Under the office of Papon, a statement was released the next morning stating that the Algerians opened fire forcing the police to attack and tailed the death total at two (a number that was later increased to three). However, from the testimonies of two police officers, right after the events we know that

At one end of the Neuilly Bridge, police troops and on the other, CRS riot police, slowly moved toward one another. All the Algerians caught in this immense trap were struck down and systemically thrown into the Seine. At least a hundred of them underwent this treatment. The bodies of victims floated to the surface daily and bore traces of blows and strangulation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Perlman, 7

<sup>15</sup> *Ratonnades à Paris*, 52 From Kristen Ross. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 43

In 2006 historians, Jim House and Neil Macmaster, estimated the death toll to be over 120.

Through the testimony of an Algerian immigrant, Daniel Gordon argues that the Algerian gathering in Paris on October 17<sup>th</sup> was not just to protest the new curfew, but also to demand a normal life in France. “Never does a European say a word to us outside work and, however, I’d really like sometimes to speak with some, but they don’t even look at us.”<sup>16</sup> This quote exemplifies the alienation and loneliness that accompanied the despair in the slums. The feeling of alienation was likely escalated by the false police reports.

Although the massacre of October 17<sup>th</sup> didn’t gather a huge response from the French, reports of the massacre appeared in unlikely sources such as *the Figaro*: a conservative newspaper. A film, albeit censored, was created and shown in The 1962 Cannes film festival, and historian Jim House estimates that around 189 demonstrations and protests took place following the massacre. On October 21, some 2,000 students met at the courtyard of the Sorbonne and protests happened for the two days following. These strikes all took place despite the fact that they were illegal at the time.<sup>17</sup>

Compared to the reaction from October 17<sup>th</sup>, the number of people who responded to the Charonne incident was much greater. The Charonne incident occurred on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1962 when nine French Communists demonstrators were trampled to death on the stairs of the Charonne metro station while trying to flee police who were breaking up an anti-OAS demonstration. Close to one million

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<sup>16</sup> *Verité Liberté*, November 1961. From Daniel A. Gordon: 26.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon, 28.

people showed up at the funerals of the French communists, which created the idea of a racist double standard where the official parties did not care about the immigrants. The fact that the Charonne incident also has a specific name compared to October 17<sup>th</sup> also furthers the notion of a racist double standard.

The reactions to these events began to show that the French public was, albeit slowly, starting to notice the problems of the immigrant working class. In fact, the poor living conditions of the working class immigrants in Paris caused immigration to become an issue in the early 1960s. In the 1960s, the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (Confederation of Christian Workers) (CFTC), who previously ignored the problems of immigration, was undergoing a reformation that would result in the renaming of the group into the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) in 1964. The CFDT became very supportive of the immigrants.<sup>18</sup>

Because the immigrants lacked citizenship, they were more dependant on action from the trade unions than the indigenous workers. In 1964 the CFDT presented the defense of immigrants as a constant national policy, where they would attempt to fight racism towards immigrants, give them a voice in government and the work place, and increase their living conditions and wages. In order to accomplish its goals, the CFDT began placing immigrants in different working positions in the unions, positions such as seats in the union councils or federations. Racism; however, posed a serious threat to the efforts of the CFDT's new policy.

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<sup>18</sup>Laure Blévis and Elvis Pezet. "CFCT/CFDT Attitude Towards Immigration in the Parisian Region," *Journal of Urban Studies* February Vol. 49 no. 3 (2012): 690-691.

### III. We Will Win Because of Solidarity...

Although the indigenous workers had higher wages and better living conditions than the immigrant working class, they still felt isolated from society. Because of their citizenship they were able to protest in a different manner than the immigrants, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the indigenous workers fought back against the unions who they felt were failing to represent them. Beginning with the Miners' Strike of 1963 these strikes were an embodiment of the workers disdain towards their living conditions and questioned the social structure of society. These strikes were the first time since 1936 that workers began to occupy their factories. The strikes posed a threat to the De Gaullist government, highlighted a strong sense of solidarity held by workers across France, and exposed weaknesses and separations amongst the leftist trade unions.

The 1963 miners' strike in the North was the first major labor conflict in the Fifth Republic<sup>19</sup> and the government hoped that crushing it would set an example for some time to come. However, both the Government and Unions were unable to predict the actual depth of discontent amongst the miners. The Government allowed the strike to continue hoping a strike induced energy crisis would turn public opinion against the workers. However public support for the workers remained strong throughout the conflict. The miners' strike lasted 35 days and ended when the government conceded a 12.5 percent pay increase and a fourth week of paid vacation.

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<sup>19</sup> George Ross. *Workers and Communist in France: From The Popular Front to Eurocommunism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press 1982): 127-134.

The 1963 strike, characterized as the first strike of the Fifth Republic, inspired two other strikes: the Lacq natural gas workers in the southwest and the iron-workers in Loraine during the same period. Following these strikes several other strikes occurred in the mid 1960s; in 1964 a strike broke out at the Renault factory; in 1966 strikes broke out in Nantes and Lyon; in 1967 a strike occurred in the Rhodiaceta factory in Besançon, and in January 1968 in Caen a riot broke out where students, farmers, and workers engaged in several hours of street fighting with the police.<sup>20</sup>

In 1967, Chris Marker created a film about the worker strike at the Rhodiaceta plant titled *A Bientot J'espere* (Be Seeing You, I Hope). From viewing the film it is initially clear that the strikers wanted more than material demands. During an interview in the film one of the workers exclaimed:

“just as the right to bread and lodging we claim access to culture. We lead the same fight for culture as for the union or in the political field. The management uses the word culture...Culture is for them, they have it, so they can talk about it.”<sup>21</sup>

The culture that the workers were being excluded from was more than the growing consumer culture, but it was being able to participate in living a normal life. One of the workers of the Rhodia factory commented how he rarely had time to spend with his wife because both of them had to work to make ends meet. The couple also had a child who spent most of his or her time with a babysitter because both of the parents were working. The worker noted that when he does have time to spend

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<sup>20</sup> Ross, 32.

<sup>21</sup>Chris Marker, *A Bientot J'espere*

with his wife he is usually tired subsequently bad tempered. This is one of the examples throughout the film where the workers feel they are being excluded having culture or living a normal life.

During the film another worker exclaimed: "We eat when the electronic brain says there's a lull in production" which furthers the idea that the workers don't have a normal life. Not only are they told when to eat by a non-human device, but also they are only allowed to eat when productivity drops. This reduces the act of eating into something that is only done as a means to increase productivity at work.

In the Rhodiaceta strike the workers demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity. One of the workers stated that one of the tactics used by the management was to first give out raises, then to lay off workers; however the workers at the factory refused the raises unless the people that were laid off were re-hired. The workers at Besancon also demonstrate unity with workers from across France, by sending their wages to workers that were recently laid off in the Lyon region.

One of the workers stated: "we will win, because of a solidarity they know nothing about". This almost adversarial quote foreshadows the events of May. Furthering this adversarial foreshadowing is the entire title of the film, *A Bientôt J'espere* (Be Seeing You, I Hope). The film ends with the title appearing on the screen as almost a threat to factory owners and managers who were guilty of exploiting the working class.

These labor strikes would touch nearly every region of France. As in Rhodiaceta they began to demand more than material needs as well. During 1964,



workers at the Renault began to demand a shorter workweek. Like in the North the question of Gaullist society was challenged, and workers began to question the power structure of unions as well. At the factory meetings in Rhodiaceta, led by George Marivaud, workers would discuss strategy for the strike and how they felt about current union representation. The strikes in the Lyon and the naval shipyard of Nantes demonstrated disconnects between workers and the unions, as they were so violent trade unions wanted no association.<sup>22</sup>

The miners' strike in the North can be used to highlight the rifts that were beginning to grow with the trade unions. The CGT called for a two-day solidarity movement, while the CFTC encouraged an unlimited strike to begin on February 1<sup>st</sup>. The unions not only failed to agree with each other, the CGT thought a full strike was irresponsible, which resulted in the CFTC withdrawing the idea. They failed to reach any agreement during mid-February meetings with the government and called for another strike on March 1<sup>st</sup>. As in the February strike, the CGT only wanted it to last for 48 hours, whereas the CFTC along with the FO (worker force) called for another unlimited strike.

George Ross argues that this strike was a huge victory for militancy groups as the concession made by the government was not only humiliating but it demonstrated the power of the organized unions.<sup>23</sup> Despite the success of the unions, evidence suggests that many of the workers were still unhappy with the result of the strike. An article published about the strike by the *Harvard Crimson* on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1963, said the miners were "deeply dissatisfied with the settlement" and

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<sup>22</sup> Kristen Ross, 32.

<sup>23</sup> George Ross 127-134.

that they only ended up receiving a wage increase of 6.5 percent. The article also points out how the workers felt the terms of the agreement were dictated rather than negotiated.<sup>24</sup> Furthering the idea of discontent towards the unions, Kristen Ross wrote that the workers violently opposed the attempts at appeasement by the unions.

The 1960s were not the first time the working class conducted strikes and occupied their factories. In fact, the June issue of the Paris Match wrote

“C’est le retour que l’on croyait impossible des images de 1936. Les ouvriers de chez Renault passent la nuit dans l’atelier qu’ils occupent.” (This is the return of the impossible images from 1936 that one can’t believe. The workers of the Renault plant spend the night in the workshop they occupy.) “La France en grève retrouve son visage de 1936” (The strike in France found face in 1936)

The 1936 strikes provided a model for the strikes in Rhodioceta. “We should do it as in 1936, that’s the only way” a worker from the Rhodioceta factory in Bescancon exclaimed during an interview in *A Bientot J’espere*. When asked about what happened in 1936, the worker responded that “union is the main thing...the only way to win.” referring to the unification of the CGT and the CGTU that won more rights for the workers in 1936.

Like the immigrant working class, the indigenous working class fought for more than just material concessions, they fought albeit in different ways for a normal life or culture in France. As the indigenous workers strikes touched every region in France and directly fought the Gaullist society that was ignoring them. Because of that the workers received a large amount of attention that created empathy. The immigrants began to receive attention because of their poor living

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Lerner. “French Miners Bitter Over Terms Of Imposed Government Settlement” *Harvard Crimson*, April, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

conditions from the trade unions. They also received sympathy as a result of the October 17<sup>th</sup> massacre from various student groups and protests.

Compared to the solidarity built up by the indigenous workers across France, there is little evidence to indicate that the immigrant working class was able to build up a similar solidarity. It is more likely that because of language barriers and different ethnic ties that the immigrant groups remained disconnected from each other and from the rest of society. From Freddy Perlman we know that before May 1968 immigrants were seen as the largest threat to indigenous working class in the Citroen Plant.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV. Démocratisation de l'Université

For many of the student activists of May '68 the French (both immigrant and indigenous) worker was initially over looked. Although at the time some students were becoming increasingly involved in the Algerian struggle and had been since the catastrophes of the early 1960s, most students had their focus on problems in with their university system and international issues including the war in Vietnam, the Algerian War and the revolutions in Latin and South America.

The increasingly large population resulted in massive overcrowding in many universities. Between 1955 and 1967 the student population increased by 300 percent<sup>26</sup>. The overcrowding in universities, namely in the humanities departments like sociology, began to create the notion that universities contributed to the larger problems in society.

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<sup>25</sup> Perlman, 6

<sup>26</sup> Wolin, 51.

“The university has, in fact, become a sausage machine which churns out people without any real culture, and who are incapable of thinking for themselves, and instead trained to fit into the economic system of a highly industrialized society.<sup>27</sup>”

This quote by March 22<sup>nd</sup> Movement leader, Daniel Cohn Bendit, demonstrates the idea that the universities were contributing to the larger problem in society by training people to passively participate in a society that exploits lower classes. Students began to believe that activism was necessary to fix the problems of the universities but the problems of society in general.

To fix these problems the students needed more autonomy in the university system, something they felt they lacked as the university system dictated everything from class sizes to dorm visitation rules between opposite sexes. In 1967 protests at the university of Nanterre began to erupt over the shabby working and living conditions. In 1964 when the Nanterre opened there wasn't a single functioning library and the students viewed the campus as an impersonal “glass and steal wasteland”.

Protests over the strict rules of dorm visitation hours also began. Protests repeatedly broke out at a university on the outskirts of Paris, Antony, over visitation rights between male and female dorms. Male students could not visit female dorms after 11:00 PM and women could only visit men's dorms if they were 21. To enforce these rules guardhouses were placed throughout the campus. In 1962 frustrated students destroyed one of these guardhouses and when some of the participants were expelled a new wave of revolts erupted: this time protesting the harsh

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<sup>27</sup> Wolin, 83.

punishment of the original protestors. These events would provide a microcosm for the student protests of the Sorbonne in 1968.

As tensions between the students and the university system were growing, in January 1968, in an attempt to appease the students the university at the Sorbonne built a swimming pool. However, the construction of this pool furthered an idea that the students weren't being taken seriously which hurt their desire for more autonomy. Daniel Cohn Bendit criticized the construction of the pool saying that it ignored the reasons the students were unhappy. The French minister of youth responded to Bendit's complaint by saying "if you have sexual problems, go jump in the pool!" This response, which clearly ignored the problems of the students further escalated the mistrust between students and workers.

#### IV. Nous Sommes Tous Indésirables

Like the workers, the students were fighting for their own culture and more autonomy or control in their own environment. But until the events of May 1968, the students and workers were fighting separate battles. The students who weren't already active in the earlier protests of the 1960s began to become more aware of the problems of working class by studying leftist philosophies. Through the readings of various leftists doctrines, most notably Maoism, students found a justification to form coalitions with the both the indigenous and immigrant working class.

Those militants who were not already involved in the movement discovered the workers, through film, and literature. François Maspero's bookstore, Le Joie De Lire, became the center of many student militants' lives as it provided them with

access to many censored periodicals, banned books, state documents, and otherwise hard to find foreign documents. Maspero referred to his store as the “the meeting place for all the contradictions of the left”.

As student focus slowly turned towards the focus of the domestic workers, in 1966 Maspero declared his desire to publish more works analyzing French society:

“If I wish, I repeat, to publish more analyses on French social and political life, I still think that “everything is linked”, and that one cannot analyze Gaullism, capitalism, or syndicalism in the France of 1966 as though it were a phenomenon isolated from the rest of the world.”<sup>28</sup>

In 1967 Juliette Minces published *Le Nord* through the François Maspero press. Focusing on the industrial workers in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais *departements*, Minces highlights the inequalities between the working and upper classes. In the introduction Minces writes the media uses examples of the highest paid workers to show that all of the “prolétariat” is gentrified while in reality many workers live without electricity, or heat.

In February 1967, *A Bientot J'espère* premiered on antenne 2 and was subsequently shown again a number of times at clubs around the university Nanterre. Kristin Ross argues that the film provided insight to many militants on the politically unstable atmosphere of the work place.

The first important thing that happened to me, a little before May '68 was the discovery of the workers' exploitation. Through school I happened to do some training for three months working in a coal mine. I lived with miners. I discovered their habits, even how they ate-something I knew nothing about. It really had an effect on me.

Around the same time I saw a Chris Marker film on TV about the Rhodiaceta strike. It was very important to see that film at the same time, because I could have said to myself, well, miners, that's something special, an older working class. But Rhodia was one of the foremost branches of capitalist accumulation, and that strikes

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<sup>28</sup> Maspero cited in Held Interview, in Kristen Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 86.

brought with it demands and forms of struggle that prefigured May and post-May especially.<sup>29</sup>

This quote demonstrates how the students began to understand the problems of the working class, which laid the foundation for the unification between students and working class during the events of May. The unity that the workers found in May can also be noted in the movie when one of the states: “revolution in the only way, small strikes are useless”. The workers’ desire for revolution would serve as another commonality between the students and workers during May 1968.

From these examples students began to not only read and learn about leftist doctrines, but the problems and struggles that many members of the working class faced in France. They also began to learn the history of the working class strikes, and how similar the earlier wildcat strikes were to the student demonstrations of 1968. The workers that the students made contact with during the month of May had much in common with each other. The workers who met with the students were generally young, educated, highly politicized workers who sought autonomy in the factories, much like the students who wanted autonomy in the workplace. George Marivaud (from *A Bientot*) is an example of one of these workers.

The President of the CFDT, Andre Jeanson, believed that the student demonstrations held in the Sorbonne mirrored the revolts against union leadership that the working class had been conducting throughout the 1960s as the students

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<sup>29</sup> Alain, an engineer, cited in Giorgini, *Que Sont mes amis devenues* in Kristin Ross, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 33.

sought more autonomy.<sup>30</sup> With the realization of the working class struggle was only one the steps the students took to realize that “nous sommes tous indésirables” (we are all indeseireables): a phrase found on a poster with the face of Daniel Cohn-Bendit. The other large step in realizing the commonalities between the students and the workers can be found in communist teachings, more specifically the theories of Mao.

In 1967 French journalist, Emmanuel Astier de la Vigerie, said:

Communism is the only organized force in France, besides the De Gaulle phenomenon. What is it? A hope for a major part of the working class and a refuge for the dissatisfied people.<sup>31</sup>

This quote is a near prediction of the events of May, as the students and workers would use communism as a common link to fight against the society that was ignoring them.

More specifically, the students used the philosophies of Maoism as justification to unite with the workers. The idea of third worldism also called the students attention towards the immigrant working class. The Maoist believed in a new form of intellectualism were one must dissolve his or her identity and go to the people. The immigrants could not be pawns used to break unions, they had to be active revolutionaries who were in control of their own destiny.<sup>32</sup>

Maoism was popular to many students as they often pointed their attention to the struggles of the third world, especially Vietnam. For student activists, the

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<sup>30</sup> Andre Jeanson “”: *Reflections on the Revolution In France*: 1968. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970): 144

<sup>31</sup> Chris Marker, *A Bientôt, J'espere*

<sup>32</sup> Perlman, 54.



American war against Vietnam evoked sentiments of both anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism as the increasingly powerful United States tried to exert its capitalist ideals on the peasants of Vietnam. The theories of Maoism provided the students with a loose justification for anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist notion as it preached: "All revolutionaries are involved in the same struggle." The French students felt connected with the third-world workers of Vietnam in their struggle against the capitalist, (and perceived imperialist) United States. Maoism was also important to the student movement as Maoist China provided a tangible example of a third world country turning to socialism that lacked the problems of the Soviet Union. During the struggles of May Maoist leaflets were distributed and pictures of Mao backed by red flags hung in front of the Paris Panthéon near the Sorbonne.

The increase in military operations preceding May '68, especially the American bombing of Hanoi in December 1966, caught the attention of many of the student militants who then perceived the Vietnamese peasant as the embodiment of the working class. This perception often ignored the French striking workers; however, the Vietnamese fighter provided a transitional figure between the Algerian peasant of the early 1960s and the French worker during 1968.

During the time Marker was making *A Bientot*, he was also simultaneously making a film called "loin du Vietnam" (Far from Vietnam), and he premiered the two films back to back for workers at the Besancon factory. Before the film started, George Marivaud took the stage and compared their struggle to the struggle of the Vietnamese by saying "In Vietnam two powers are in conflict that we all know too

well: the rich and the poor, force and justice, the rule of money, and hope for a new world.”<sup>33</sup>

The Vietnamese cause was a uniting factor amongst many of the militant groups active in 1968. Vietnam did more than just link student militant groups it provided the link between students and workers as the students began to make the connection between under represented third world worker and under represented domestic worker.

This connection between the third world worker and the students created a link between the student groups and immigrant workers who hailed from third world countries. There are several examples of action committees strengthening the bond between the foreign and indigenous workers. Efforts were made to reach the foreign workers at their homes, which was necessary as foreign worker relied on transportation from the factory owners in order to get to work. The strike committee at Nanterre used classrooms to teach French lessons to Yugoslavian workers. Other groups helped foreigner learn how to protect themselves from abuses by landlords. Food trucks began to deliver free food to Parisian ghettos. Third worldism is evident throughout these actions. The foreigners were also encouraged to not allow the factory managers use them as a weapon anymore. <sup>34</sup>

During the strikes of May 1968 there was greater participation from the immigrant working class. Gordon notes that because of the immigrant role as strike breakers, trade unions were apprehensive to allow them to participate. The trade unions feared that Spanish and Portuguese secret police were operating in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ross, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Perlman, 16

factory manipulating the foreigner into voting yes to end the strikes by using ballots they could not read. Once the May 16<sup>th</sup> strike was underway in the Billiancourt factory, a factory that employed over 60 different nationalities, the foreigners quickly joined in.<sup>35</sup>

The events of May were put into full swing as tensions in the university rose and, fearing a student demonstration the decision was made to close the university of Nanterre on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. This decision forced the students out of the universities and into the suburbs. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> Daniel Cohn-Bendit met with nearly three hundred other students in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. When the police arrived the students agreed to leave, but the police began to arrest the students despite their cooperation. These arrests prompted students to begin pelting stones at the police, which subsequently lead the police to use teargas and the clubs they were armed with, sometimes mistakenly hitting innocent bystanders. André Jeanson, the then leader of the CFDT wrote that the arrests of the students at the Sorbonne was link between worker student solidarity as the working class often found itself at odds with the police.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> student and workers took over the French national theater, the Odeon, and planted red and black flags on the dome to proclaim “the end of a culture limited to the economic elite of the country”.<sup>36</sup> The red flags were of course a symbol of communism and the black flags represented anarchy.<sup>37</sup> Two days following the take over of the Renault plant, the students and workers organized a 6-mile march

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Perlman, 6.

<sup>37</sup> “Les Journees Historiques Des Barricades Aux Elections.” *Paris Match*, June, 22, 1968, 60.

to demonstrate solidarity between workers and students. The demonstrators all followed behind a red flag and many of them sang, *L'Internationale*, a French song synonymous with socialist while other demonstrators yelled "Down with the police state", "Down with Capitalism", and "This is only the beginning: continue the struggle".<sup>38</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The unique formation of the worker action committees was held together by the desire for more autonomy or control in a country that they felt was ignoring them. The action committees were formed at a time while media outlets, notably radio stations, were claiming that students were exclusively concerned with final exams and workers were exclusively concerned with higher wages.<sup>39</sup> While in reality the students and workers were calling for a revolution so they could gain more control over their lives.

When one looks at May in the temporal sense it is impossible to see the reasons for unity between the students and the workers. Wildcat strikes throughout the 1960s created attention and exemplified the disdain of the working class. The struggle of the immigrants was also gaining more attention and would serve as another piece of groundwork for revolt of May. When one views May in the temporal sense it is also impossible to understand the Presidency of Charles De Gaulle, who had been in power overseeing all of these problems for ten years at the point of 1968.

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<sup>38</sup> Perlman, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Perlman, 6.

In the 1960s the workers provided a direct example on how to protest for more control in their workplace. The students who began protesting university conditions in the 1960s, slowly became more and more aware of the problems of the working class, both immigrants and indigenous and in May when their situation in the universities escalated, they were able to use their knowledge of communist philosophies to find commonalities between themselves and the working class.

The unity between workers and students may not have been present before the events of May 1968, but the reasons they were able to form such a bond during the month of May was because of their perceived history of repression in the years before May 1968.

“...the movement came as a complete surprise. The CFDT was not particularly surprised by the events. For many years it had denounced the paralysis and inadaptability of the nation’s political, economic and social institutions. Through its declarations and resolutions the CFDT pointed out the governmental, political and managerial authority were contrary to the legitimate interests of the working class and to the requirements of a viable modern democracy.”<sup>40</sup>

This excerpt from an essay written by CFDT President Andre Jeanson shows that for someone who understands the history of France during the 1960s, the May movement was not a surprise. Perhaps no one understood the 1968 better than the CFDT as during the 1960s the group it worked closely not only with the striking workers, but with the immigrant workers as well. The CFDT also encouraged activism between students and workers, during May 1968. The revolt of May was not simply a youth revolt that erupted in May; it was a culmination of years disdain felt by different social classes, and generations in France.

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<sup>40</sup> Andre Jeanson, *Reflections on the Revolution In France: 1968*. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970): 146

