

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 6—The centrist line of the OCI (2)

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This is the sixth in series of articles dealing with the events of May/June 1968 in France. Part 1, posted May 28, deals with the development of the student revolt and the general strike up to its high point at the end of May. Part 2, posted May 29, examines how the Communist Party (PCF) and its associated trade union, the CGT, enabled President Charles de Gaulle to regain control. Parts 3 and 4, posted July 5 and 7, examine the role played by the Pabloites; parts 5, 6, 7 and 8 examine Pierre Lambert's Organization Communiste Internationaliste (OCI). Part 5 was posted September 4.

The slogan of the “central strike committee”

In 1935, Leon Trotsky proposed the slogan of “committees of action” to his French supporters. At that time, a rapid radicalisation of the working class was developing, which was, however, largely under the influence of the Popular Front, an anti-revolutionary alliance of Stalinists, Social Democrats and bourgeois Radicals. Under these circumstances, Trotsky regarded the committees of action as a means of weakening the influence of the Popular Front over the masses, encouraging their independent initiative.

“The leadership of the People’s Front must be the direct and immediate reflection of the will of the struggling masses. How? Very simply: through elections,” he wrote. “Each two hundred, five hundred or thousand citizens adhering in a given city, district, factory, barrack and village to the People’s Front, in time of fighting actions, elect their representative to the local committee of action. All the participants in the struggle are bound by its discipline.” [14]

The slogan of the “central strike committee,” which was at the centre of the intervention by the OCI in 1968, was derived from Trotsky’s proposal. OCI statements contain a number of formulations that are taken almost verbatim from Trotsky’s writings. But, as in the case of the united front tactic, the OCI robbed this slogan of any revolutionary content.

Many of its statements were limited to a bureaucratically precise enumeration of the different levels of the hierarchical structure on which the national strike committee should rest. A typical example is the statement headed “Yes, Workers Can Win: Let’s Forge the Weapon of Victory—THE CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE!” It was published on May 23 and distributed widely in the midst of the general strike as a special issue of *Informations Ouvrières*.

The statement contains the passage: “How can the general movement of workers and youth be united into a single, unbeatable and victorious force? There is only one answer to this question: Organisation of local strike committees into inter-professional strike committees; at the department level, delegates must create departmental and regional inter-professional strike committees. At a national level, the federation of strike committees and workers’ organisations must establish a central

strike committee.

“Every activist who takes part in a strike committee, every worker who belongs to a picket must take up the initiative in such a manner. The leadership and the decisions of the broad masses of the class movement must be drawn together in the inter-professional strike committees, which have emerged from the company strike committees. The meetings of strikers within companies, the meetings of all strikers from all companies in a specific location must constitute the collective deciding power.”

Not only the language, but also the content of this statement has more in common with the bureaucratic mentality of an accountant than with the fighting spirit of a revolutionary worker. Its aim is to overcome the divisions between the mutually hostile bureaucratic apparatuses, and not the liberation of the workers from the stranglehold of *all* bureaucratic apparatuses. Where Trotsky had written that the committee of action is “the only means of breaking the anti-revolutionary opposition of party and trade union apparatuses,” for the OCI, the central strike committee was the “highest expression of the united front of the trade unions and workers’ parties.”

Trotsky regarded the committees of action as forums of debate and political struggle: “In relation to parties, the committees of action may be called the *revolutionary parliament*: the parties are not excluded but, on the contrary, they are necessarily presupposed; at the same time they are tested in action and the masses learn to free themselves from the influence of rotten parties.”

For the OCI, the central strike committee served to establish the “unity” of workers with the rotten trade unions and parties.

The OCI even abstained from linking the slogan of the strike committees with a programme of transitional demands. For the OCI, the strike committee *was* the programme, as the following paragraph from de Massot’s book makes clear: “As one can see, linked to the question of the central strike committee is the fate of the general strike itself. This aim brings together organisationally—i.e., at the highest political level—all the aspects of an organisation which corresponds to the needs of the movement: The aspect of the definition of the basic aims of the general strike and its political consequences, the aspects of the unification of the strike, the aspects of the realisation of the united workers’ front...” [15]

This “organisationally—i.e., at the highest political level” clearly expresses the centrist outlook of the OCI. For Marxists, the highest political questions are questions of perspective. For centrists, they are organizational questions. But as the 1968 general strike and innumerable other experiences of the international workers’ movement have shown, the call for organizational unity cannot answer the complex questions that are connected with the socialist transformation of society. That requires a political perspective and a clear demarcation from the bourgeoisie and its reformist and centrist agencies.

The conceptions of the OCI are strongly reminiscent of those of Marceau Pivert, a notorious centrist whom Trotsky attacked explicitly in his article on the committees of action. “No matter how much the centrists babble about the ‘masses,’” Trotsky wrote, “they always orient themselves upon the reformist apparatus. Repeating this or that revolutionary slogan, Marceau Pivert subordinates it to the abstract principle of ‘organizational unity,’ which in action turns out to be unity with the patriots against the revolutionists. At the time when it is a life and death question for the masses to *smash* the opposition of the united social-patriotic apparatuses, the left centrists consider the ‘unity’ of these apparatuses as an absolute ‘good’ which stands above the interests of revolutionary struggle.”

Trotsky concluded his analysis by once again clarifying his conception of the committees of action: “Committees of Action will be built only by those who understand, to the end, the necessity of *freeing the masses from the treacherous leadership of the social-patriots*. The condition for the victory of the proletariat is the *liquidation of the present leadership*. The slogan of ‘unity’ becomes under these conditions not only a stupidity, but a crime. *No unity with the agents of French imperialism and of the League of Nations*. To their perfidious leadership it is necessary to counterpose revolutionary Committees of Action. It is possible to build these committees only by mercilessly exposing the anti-revolutionary policies of the so-called ‘revolutionary left’ with Marceau Pivert at the head.” [Emphasis in the original]

The OCI during the general strike

While the forces of the OCI were relatively modest in 1968, they were still more powerful than those of the Pabloites. The OCI had its own student organization, the Fédération des étudiants révolutionnaires (FER), and unlike the Pabloites, the OCI also had supporters in a number of factories.

The FER rejected the conceptions of the Pabloites and the New Left, which attributed the role of “revolutionary avant-garde” to the students and uncritically supported the students’ adventures. The FER fought for an orientation to the working class and won numerous new members on this basis.

But this orientation was based on centrist foundations, remaining limited to organizational initiatives. It acted within the framework of the OCI’s “united front” policies, i.e., it mainly consisted of appeals to the trade unions to call large-scale joint demonstrations of workers and young people, bound up with calls for a central strike committee. The FER did not conduct a systematic offensive against the policy of the Stalinists and social democrats and against the theories of the New Left, which would have been decisive in the universities, the breeding ground for bourgeois ideology.

In his book, de Massot describes the intervention of the FER at a meeting on May 8 held by the Pabloite Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire (JCR) in the Mutualité in Paris during the street battles in the Latin Quarter. A JCR speaker was applauded by the anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and went on to speak against a clarification of the political line, claiming this would split the movement. Instead, he insisted, it was a matter of finding topics on which all could agree. “In the absence of a revolutionary party, the real revolutionaries are those who fight the police,” the JCR spokesman declared.

This position was opposed by representatives of the FER, who proposed concentrating all the students’ efforts on the implementation of the slogan “for a central demonstration of workers and youth.” The struggle had to be “expanded further, coordinated and organised through the building of strike committees and a national strike committee supported by the UNEF [the central student organisation],” the FER argued. Two days later, the FER held its own meeting under the slogan “500,000 workers to the Latin Quarter.” Tens of thousands of flyers bearing this slogan were distributed

in the factories. [16]

A few days later, on May 13, the unions were forced to call a one-day general strike and joint demonstrations of workers and students, who participated by the millions. The movement was spinning out of their control. In the following days, the general strike spread over the whole country, with a wave of factory occupations in which tens of thousand of workers took part, completely paralyzing France.

But the OCI and FER maintained their syndicalist course. They now concentrated entirely on the demand for a national strike committee. On May 13, the OCI published a flyer—exceptionally, in its own name—which was distributed by the thousands at factories over the following days.

The flyer contained barely twenty lines of text and avoided making a single political statement. It consisted of a collection of hollow clichés (“The struggle has begun,” “Long live unity,” “Victory,” “Forwards,” “Workers and students united, we can win”) and general slogans (“Down with de Gaulle,” “Down with the police state”).

As if the tone was not strident enough, most of the text was placed in capital letters and bold print. The flyer culminated with the words: “Workers at Renault, Panhard, S.N.E.C.M.A, workers in all factories, offices, workshops—victory depends on us. We must stop work, demonstrate, elect our strike committees.”

There was no attempt to analyse the new situation, to formulate political tasks or explain them to workers. Faced with a rapidly developing revolutionary situation, all the OCI had to offer were general calls for joint action. Not a word about the role of the Communist Party and Mitterrand’s FGDS; no warning about the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy; not a syllable on the question of a workers’ government.

Two weeks later, on May 27, striking workers rejected the Grenelle accord, negotiated by the government, the employers’ associations and the unions. The question of power was openly posed.

De Massot is clear about this. He writes, “All at once, the millions of strikers have shaken the state apparatus. The carefully crafted plans agreed between government, business and the leaders of the workers’ movement have been swept aside... Now, the question of power arises directly... To meet the demands of the general strike, the government must be swept away.” [17]

Meanwhile, the OCI was tail-ending events. In a flyer it issued under the auspices of the *Comités d’alliance ouvrière* (Committees of the Workers’ Alliance), which was distributed in great quantities, nothing was said on the question of the government.

“Do not sign!” it repeated five times in capital letters and in bold text over half a page. Any talk of signing the Grenelle accord at this time was, in any case, futile. After the Renault workers’ hostile reception for CGT boss Georges Séguy, the union got cold feet and temporarily backed down.

The OCI flyer culminated with the demand: “Leaders of the CGT, CGT-FO, FEN [major union federations]: You must establish a united class front with the UNEF against the government and the state.”

On the same day, a mass meeting of the reformist PSU (United Socialist Party), UNEF and CFDT union took place in Charléty stadium, Paris, which was to smooth the way for an interim bourgeois government under Pierre Mendès-France. In hindsight, de Massot describes this meeting as a “carnival of ambiguities” which prepared “a double-edged political operation.”

“First,” he continues, “the aim is to ‘reclaim’ that combative part of the general strike, in particular the youth, over which Stalinism has lost control... Moreover, and in direct connection with the first goal, the ground must be prepared for a bourgeois solution to the cabinet crisis. Mendès-France... is presented as the man of the hour...” [18]

But here as well, the OCI adapted itself, even though it had ample opportunity to make its point of view clear. Pierre Lambert appeared as a

speaker at Charléty. He spoke to the 50,000 students and workers present—not in his capacity as OCI leader, but as a trade unionist, in the name of “the trade union board of the employees and cadres of the Force Ouvrière social insurance,” for which he worked.

He declared “that the crucial battle is approaching; that the general strike has placed the question of government in the foreground; that the government of de Gaulle and Pompidou cannot fulfil the strikers’ demands.” From de Massot’s report, it appears that he failed either to warn of the dangers of an interim bourgeois government or address the question of a workers’ government. Instead, Lambert limited himself to calling for the setting up of local strike committees as well as a central strike committee, which he presented as the way to victory. [19]

Meanwhile, on the streets, the call resounded for a “people’s government.” The workers’ demands were clearly more advanced than those of Lambert.

De Massot writes: “Demonstrations take place on May 27 throughout France, where the implications of ‘Don’t sign!’ are translated into political terms, referring to the government and the state... ‘For a people’s government!’ chant the demonstrators, expressing the fact they want a government that will respond to the aims of the general strike. ‘De Gaulle must resign,’ ‘Down with de Gaulle’ is shouted everywhere by tens of thousands of people, who are clearly showing that what is at stake is the fate of the regime.” [20]

The OCI made no attempt to fill this call for a “people’s government” with political content. Above all, it did not explain who should form such a government and what its political programme should be. This enabled the Stalinists of the PCF and CGT to raise the slogan of the “people’s government” themselves, although they never contemplated taking power and instead were negotiating behind the scenes with Mitterrand about participation in an interim bourgeois government.

As explained in part 4 of this series, the demand for a government of the PCF and CGT would have had great political effect at this time. It would have disrupted the manoeuvres of the Stalinist leaders and intensified the conflict between them and the working class.

Trotsky had suggested such a tactic in the “Transitional Programme.” Basing himself on the experiences made by the Bolsheviks in the course of the Russian Revolution, he wrote: “The demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and the SRs: ‘Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!’ had for the masses tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and SRs to take power, so dramatically exposed during the July Days, definitely doomed them before mass opinion and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.” [21]

The OCI never raised such a demand, and instead supported, without criticizing the Stalinists’ duplicity, the big demonstration of the CGT on May 29, which took place under the slogan “For a people’s government.”

The OCI attacked the UNEF and the CFDT because they did not take part in the demonstration (on the grounds of the CGT’s refusal to condemn the expulsion of Daniel Cohn-Bendit from France). Retrospectively, the OCI claimed that a joint demonstration of all trade unions, independently of the aims of the CGT, would automatically have opened the way for a workers’ government. “Uniformly, organized by all trade union organisations, this would have opened the way for a government that rests on the general strike, on the workers’ organizations,” de Massot writes. [22]

The flyer issued by the *Comités d’alliance ouvrière* at the May 29 demonstration equated the “central and national strike committee” called for by the OCI with a workers’ government: “It is the only government, the workers’ government, that can fulfil all the demands of the workers, students, farmers and youth,” the leaflet declared. [23]

Did this mean that the OCI regarded the strike committee as a kind of workers’ council or Soviet, on which a workers’ government could rest?

The formulations used in the flyer suggest this. But this remains an isolated example. The OCI was obviously undecided on this question.

Moreover, strike committees and workers’ councils do not resolve the problem of revolutionary leadership. They are an arena in which a political struggle against Stalinism can take place, but are not a substitute for this struggle. The OCI flyer, however, contained not a critical word about the PCF and the CGT. They were not even mentioned.

On the day after the CGT demonstration, which in Paris alone saw over a half million people on the streets, President de Gaulle addressed the nation by radio and announced the dissolution of parliament. The PCF and the CGT welcomed the announcement of new elections and promised to ensure their orderly conduct, which equated to a call to abandon the general strike.

The OCI reacted with the demand to continue the strike and appeals to the unions: “Everything depends on our immediate answer! Everything depends on the call from the union headquarters and the workers’ parties! The general strike will defeat the police state.” [24]

This remained the political line of the OCI in the ensuing days: Appeals for unity, to carry on fighting and not back down were all addressed to the very trade unions and parties that were suffocating the general strike.

On June 12, the interior minister banned the OCI, together with a dozen other organizations, including the OCI’s student and youth organisations.

To be continued

Notes:

14. This and the following quotes from Trotsky, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from: Leon Trotsky, “Committees of Action—Not People’s Front”(November 26, 1935).

15. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 123

16. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 48

17. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 188

18. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 195

19. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, pp. 196-197

20. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 197

21. Leon Trotsky, “The Transitional Programme”.

22. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 203

23. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 304

24. François de Massot, “La grève générale (Mai-Juin 1968)”, p. 248

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