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# The Neglected History of the May '68 Uprising in France - At heart, a working-class rebellion

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**We remember the students, the generational conflict, the cultural explosion—but we forget that it was, at heart, a working-class rebellion.**

On the morning of June 10, 1968—a couple of weeks after French labor unions signed an agreement with Prime Minister Georges Pompidou to put an end to a crippling general strike—workers at the Wonder battery factory in the northern Parisian suburb of St. Ouen voted to return to the job.

Later that afternoon, as union representatives conferred outside the factory gates with the rank and file, an amateur camera crew captured the scene. The group's 10-minute film, *Wonder, May '68*, focuses on a young woman who has drawn a crowd around her [\[1\]](#).

"No!" she barks at her union rep, fighting back tears and shaking her head as he tries to console her by listing management's modest concessions. "I'm not going back inside. I'm not putting my feet back in that prison."

The woman has the unmistakable glow of raised expectations, that special energy that comes from successful collective action. When you convince yourself you're capable of changing the world by banding together with your co-workers, the feeling of power that results doesn't fade easily. In France, during the months of May and June 1968, millions of other workers caught the bug: Between 7 and 9 million went on strike. Hundreds of thousands of them did so while occupying their factories, as at Wonder in St. Ouen.

The fact is all too often neglected, if not outright forgotten, today. The unprecedented wave of protests and strikes that swept across France for a few weeks in 1968—known today simply as "May '68"—was, at its core, a workers' movement. This was the largest wildcat general strike in the history of capitalism: a mass revolt against low pay, poor working conditions, and the hierarchical, dehumanizing organization of the capitalist workplace itself.

Events in the Left Bank of Paris simply provided the spark. Ironically, they've since become better known than the actual strike movement. On May 3, hundreds of college students gathered for a general assembly in the courtyard of the Sorbonne University. Administrators responded by calling the riot police—the infamous CRS—who subsequently marched onto campus and arrested hundreds of protesters, including student leaders. This, in turn, enraged the burgeoning student movement, culminating in nighttime skirmishes with the CRS known as the "Night of the Barricades." On the morning of May 11, French people woke up to images of smoldering barricades in the heart of Paris, of overturned cobblestones, of riot cops beating students.

Then, the most important phase of the revolt kicked off.

On May 13, France's two largest unions—the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT)—joined students in solidarity marches across the country, decrying police repression. While unions themselves didn't call for further action, workers took initiative on their own, launching strikes and occupying factories across France. First, the Sud-Aviation factory outside of Nantes; eventually, plants belonging to Renault, Citroën, and the state-run energy company; soon, the postal service, the public rail company, and the entirety of the country ground to a halt.

The strike wave lasted for weeks. As it peaked by the end of May, union and government leaders gathered for negotiations. This proved a turning point. It is not unreasonable to posit that the revolt might have continued to grow under different circumstances. Had the CGT and the closely linked Communist Party thrown their full weight behind the workers' movement, France might have drawn closer to full-scale political change. Instead, the country's two largest left-wing organizations encouraged an end to the crisis. Enticed by a national agreement that ensured enhanced union rights, a 35 percent hike in the minimum wage, and a 7 percent pay raise for everyone else, millions of employees gradually began to return to their jobs. In a May 30 radio address, Charles de Gaulle announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and the organization of new legislative elections. A few weeks later, the Gaullists emerged with an even larger majority.

**May '68 is simply too large** of a historical fact to ignore in France today. As such, this year's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary saw a host of museum exhibitions, TV specials, radio programs, and new books to commemorate the uprising. Rather than focus on the strike movement, though, most highlighted the familiar pillars of what has since become the dominant narrative of 1968, in France and abroad. According to this version of events, May was, alternatively, the product of a cultural rebellion and intergenerational clash; the outburst of privileged students feeling trapped by a centralized education system; the result of Parisian kids reliving their favorite Victor Hugo novels by playing revolution; or, at its best, a protest against the social conservatism of postwar French society. All of these things may be true, but they miss the bigger picture.

Even Tony Judt, the masterful historian of Europe, fell victim to these tropes. His magnum opus *Postwar* devotes just a few pages to May '68. It contains no mention of the millions of workers who went on strike. In their place, Judt makes note of the "tight red corduroy pants and fitted black shirts" apparently worn by some Parisian protesters.

Ironically, the chronological proximity of May '68 may be partly to blame. Since the events are still part of the recent past, a relatively small bunch of well-connected politicians, artists, and writers who participated in the events have been able to disproportionately shape collective memory. Since these unofficial experts of '68 tend to speak from both personal experience and positions of authority, they receive an unusually generous benefit of the doubt. Other critics have observed as much [2]. Rather than history, the general public is treated to a series of their interpretations treated as fact.

Of course, many of these former radicals have, by now, spent the bulk of their careers as either centrists or right-wingers: people like Alain Finkielkraut, the ex-Maoist who became an anti-communist "New Philosopher" alongside Bernard-Henri Lévy (commonly called BHL) in the mid-to-late 1970s; Romain Goupil [3], a filmmaker and ex-Trotskyist who supported the American war and occupation in Iraq; or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the emblematic anarchist-leaning student leader who was later elected to the European Parliament and now backs Emmanuel Macron [4]. Not only does their version of May '68 nicely reflect today's dominant ideologies—recasting May as a cultural rebellion avoids uncomfortable questions like the exploitation of labor and the distribution of wealth—but the life stories of BHL and company have the added benefit of fitting a media-friendly trope: the fiery young idealist who grows up and turns rightward.

While prominent ex-radicals have spilled much ink on '68, they tend to avoid much talk of the workers' rebellion. This makes sense from their perspective. For true believers in the liberal capitalist order, May '68 is much easier to understand this way. After all, it is a profoundly unsettling thought that millions of people could be so unhappy with the supposedly democratic society in which they live—so enraged at what they put up with on a daily basis at work—that they're willing to put their jobs on the line to change things. May '68 retains its subversive aura because of what it suggests about the stability of our advanced Western societies: Possibilities for revolt are much greater than they appear on the surface.

**As any trade unionist worth** his or her salt knows, there is no such thing as a “spontaneous” job action. An unexpected development can sometimes trigger a movement, but workers act together only under certain conditions. They have to share grievances, for one. But just as importantly, they must trust one another and have confidence they can win the struggle they embark upon. France in the late 1960s encouraged this sort of thinking: Left-wing parties and labor unions were deeply present in the lives of the working class, supplying wage-earners with a culture of solidarity and a well-known history of resistance, from the Paris Commune to the Popular Front to the Maquis to mass strikes following the Liberation. At the same time, French employers were especially antagonistic, seeking to hit government-imposed production targets by maintaining tightly organized workplaces and downward pressure on wages.

Pay wasn't so good. While the trend pales in comparison to the United States since the 1970s, Thomas Piketty's research has shown that income inequality in France reached a postwar peak around the years 1967 and 1968 [5], hitting its highest levels since the 1930s. Although unions and employers engaged in nationwide collective bargaining at the time, they often failed to lift up those at the bottom of the ladder.

In addition to subpar compensation, workers often had little say on the job, with few chances of career advancement and effectively zero input over the production process. Employers maintained strict classification schemes that left the lowest-paid categories of the work force, the ironically termed specialized workers, feeling disrespected and ready to lash out. Understandably, the strikes of May-June gave life to far-reaching critiques about the soul-crushing nature of work itself. And to more than a few moments of vengeance in the form of “boss-nappings.” At the occupied Sud Aviation factory, workers locked their boss in his office and forced him to listen to the “Internationale” on loop.

Immigrants and women advanced their own workplace grievances alongside those of their white male French counterparts. At Renault's flagship auto plant in Boulogne-Billancourt, North African, Spanish, and Portuguese workers came up with their own list of demands, calling for an end to discrimination and for equal union rights. French law barred most foreigners from serving as union representatives until 1972—a change brought about thanks to worker activism in 1968 and subsequent years.

The strike movement in May swelled thanks to the mass, working-class base of the labor movement and the left. About a fifth of the French work force belonged to a union at the time [6]. This was a sign of significant influence. Unlike in the United States, union membership in France doesn't confer additional job benefits. To hold a union card in France is to be a workplace activist, to adhere to a certain set of values. In 1968, most unionized employees belonged to the Communist-tied CGT, whose program plainly endorsed the class struggle [7] and the nationalization of key economic sectors. In certain workplaces—especially in the auto industry and in heavy industry—union density was higher than 20 percent, and non-members were often sympathizers. While labor leaders didn't call for May's strike wave and CGT officials sought to bring it to an end, it is inconceivable to imagine the movement's taking root without a base of union activists.

By the same token, the dominant force on the left was the French Communist Party (PCF). Party leaders were famously critical of the student movement in 1968, and justifiably mocked for their outmoded political vision. Still, the PCF's presence fueled a working-class political consciousness matched in Europe only by Italy, where the Communist Party carried similar weight. French Communists had received the second-highest vote total in the previous year's legislative elections, just behind the Gaullists. While many critics emerged to the party's left in the 1960s, nearly all remained attached to the Marxist tradition. Thousands of these Maoists, Trotskyists, and anarchists fanned the flames of rebellion in 1968.

Once the fire started, then, it was hard to put out.

**In March 1968**, *Le Monde* ran a now-legendary column titled "When France Is Bored." [8] The writer lamented the apparent calm reigning over France, just as the United States rioted, Vietnam burned, and China was swept by the Cultural Revolution. It's a reminder of how the vast majority of the French intellectual establishment didn't see May '68 coming. Of course, an Algerian autoworker or a public-sector union activist would have written a very different piece.

Fifty years later, in a world that has increasingly little to do with de Gaulle's France, this seems the most striking lesson of May '68: Working-class discontent often runs far deeper than elites perceive—or, frankly, care to understand. When teachers went on strike this spring in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky, subsequent headlines often betrayed the ignorance of the political and media establishment. Journalists called the protests "spontaneous." [9] Republican legislators who had spent years slashing state education budgets were similarly caught by surprise. To the West Virginia teachers working side gigs to make ends meet and regularly lamenting the state of public education at union meetings, the movement was anything but spur-of-the-moment.

In the aftermath of '68, left-wing activists endlessly debated the revolutionary character of the movement: Were striking autoworkers who raised the red flag over their plant truly intent on overthrowing capitalism? When workers booed union leaders encouraging them to go back to work, were they ready for political change? These debates won't be settled soon. What's clear, in any case, is that the discontent ran deep. And for a few weeks, millions of people let it be known, almost bringing down the government in the process.

Nearly 30 years after May 1968, director Hervé Le Roux set out to discover the identity of the young woman at the center of the Wonder factory film, capturing the quest in a documentary of his own, *Reprise*. Le Roux does manage to track down some of her colleagues, but the end of the film is disheartening. Not only does nobody seem to know what came of her, nobody even knows her name.

**Cole Stangler**

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**P.S.**

• THE NATION. AUGUST 3, 2018 :

<https://www.thenation.com/article/neglected-history-may-68-uprising-france/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] ESSF (article 44756), [Un événement majeur du cinéma militant en Mai-Juin 68 : La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder, de Pierre Bonneau et Jacques Willemont.](#)
- [2] <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3644914.html>
- [3] <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3644914.html>
- [4] <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3644914.html>
- [5] <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fichiers/public/Piketty2003b.pdf>
- [6] <http://dares.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2016-025.pdf>
- [7] <http://dares.travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2016-025.pdf>
- [8] <http://langlois.blog.lemonde.fr/2018/03/14/15-mars-1968-quand-la-france-sennuie/>
- [9] <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2018/03/07/arizona-teachers-wear-red-talk-strike-low-wages/401831002/>