

## French Riots May 1968

In May 1968 (in this context usually spelled May '68) a general insurrection broke out across France.

It quickly began to reach near-revolutionary proportions before being discouraged by the Stalinist oriented French Communist Party, and finally suppressed by the government, which accused the Communists of plotting against the Republic.

Some philosophers and historians have argued that the rebellion was the single most important revolutionary event of the 20th century because it wasn't participated in by a lone demographic, such as workers or racial minorities, but was rather a purely popular uprising, superseding ethnic, cultural, age and class boundaries.

It began as a series of student strikes that broke out at a number of universities and high schools in Paris, following confrontations with university administrators and the police.

The de Gaulle administration's attempts to quash those strikes by further police action only inflamed the situation further, leading to street battles with the police in the Latin Quarter, followed by a general strike by students and strikes throughout France by ten million French workers, roughly two-thirds of the French workforce. The protests reached the point that de Gaulle created a military operations headquarters to deal with the unrest, dissolved the National Assembly and called for new parliamentary elections for 23 June 1968.

## Graffiti attacks CRS French Riot Police

The government was close to collapse at that point (De Gaulle had even taken temporary refuge at an airforce base in Germany), but the revolutionary situation evaporated almost as quickly as it arose.

Workers went back to their jobs, urged on by the Confédération Générale du Travail, the leftist union federation, and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), the French Communist Party.

When the elections were finally held in June, the Gaullist party emerged even stronger than before.

Most of the protesters espoused left-wing causes, communism or anarchism. Many saw the events as an opportunity to shake up the "old society" in many social aspects, including methods of education, sexual freedom and free love. A small minority of protesters, such as the Occident group, espoused far-right causes.



## The events of May

Following months of conflicts between students and authorities at the University of Paris at Nanterre, the administration shut down that university on 2 May 1968. Students at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris met on 3 May to protest the closure and the threatened expulsion of several students at Nanterre. Prominent student activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit stepped into the limelight.

The Sorbonne administration responded by calling the police, who surrounded the university and arrested students as they tried to leave the campus. When other students gathered to stop the police vans from taking away the arrested students, the riot police responded by launching tear gas into the crowd. Rather than dispersing the students, the tear gas only brought more students to the scene, where they blocked the exit of the vans. The police finally prevailed, but only after arresting hundreds of students.

On Monday, 6 May, the national student union - the UNEF, 'Union Nationale des Etudiants de France, the largest student trade-union in France, still today - and the union of university teachers called a march to protest against the police invasion of the Sorbonne. More than 20,000 students, teachers and supporters marched towards the Sorbonne, still sealed off by the police, who charged, wielding their batons, as soon as the marchers approached. While the crowd dispersed, some began to create barricades out of whatever was at hand, while others threw paving stones, forcing the police to retreat for a time. The police then responded with tear gas and charged the crowd again. Hundreds more students were arrested.

High school students started to go out on strike in support of the students at the Sorbonne and Nanterre on 6 May. The next day they joined the students, teachers and increasing numbers of young workers who gathered at the Arc de Triomphe to demand that:

(1) all criminal charges against arrested students be dropped, (2) the police leave the university, and (3) the authorities reopen Nanterre and the Sorbonne. Negotiations broke down after students returned to their campuses, after a false report that the government had agreed to reopen them, only to discover the police still occupying the schools.

On Friday 10 May, another huge crowd congregated on the Left Bank. When the riot police again blocked them from crossing the river, the crowd again threw up barricades, which the police then attacked at 2:15 in the morning after negotiations once again foundered. The confrontation, which produced hundreds of arrests and injuries, lasted until dawn of the following day. The events were broadcast on radio as they occurred and the aftermath was shown on television the following day.

The government's heavy-handed reaction brought on a wave of sympathy for the strikers. The PCF reluctantly supported the students, whom it regarded as adventurists and anarchists, and the major left union federations, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and the Force Ouvrière (CGT-FO) called a one day general strike and demonstration for Monday, 13 May. Over a million people marched through Paris on that day; the police stayed largely out of sight. Prime Minister Georges Pompidou personally announced the release of the prisoners and the reopening of the Sorbonne. The surge of strikes did not, however, recede.

When the Sorbonne reopened, students occupied it and declared it an autonomous "people's university". Approximately 401 popular "action committees" were set up in Paris and elsewhere in the weeks that followed to take up grievances against the government.

In the following days workers began occupying factories, starting with a sit-down strike at the Sud Aviation plant near the city of Nantes on 14 May, then another strike at a Renault parts plant near Rouen, which spread to the Renault manufacturing complexes at Flins in the Seine Valley and the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt. By 16 May workers had occupied roughly fifty factories and by 17 May 200,000 were on strike. That figure snowballed to two million workers on strike the following day and then ten million, or roughly two-thirds of the French workforce, on strike the following week.

These strikes were not led by the union movement; on the contrary, the CGT tried to contain this spontaneous outbreak of militancy by channeling it into a struggle for higher wages and other economic demands. Workers put forward a broader, more political and more radical agenda, demanding the ousting of the government and President de Gaulle and attempting, in some cases, to run their factories. When the trade union leadership negotiated a 35% increase in the minimum wage, a 7% wage increase for other workers, and half normal pay for the time on strike with the major employers' associations, the workers occupying their factories refused to return to work and jeered their union leaders, even though this deal was better than what they could have obtained only a month earlier.

On 29 May several hundred thousand protesters led by the CGT marched through Paris, chanting, "Adieu, de Gaulle!"

While the government appeared to be close to collapse, de Gaulle chose not to say adieu. Instead, after ensuring that he had sufficient loyal military units mobilized to back him if push came to shove, he went on the radio the following day (the national television service was on strike) to announce the dissolution of the National Assembly, with elections to follow on 23 June. He ordered workers to return to work, threatening to institute a state of emergency if they did not.

The events of June

From that point the revolutionary feeling of the students and workers faded away. Workers gradually returned to work or were ousted from their plants by the police. The national student union called off street demonstrations. The government banned a number of left organizations. The police retook the Sorbonne on 16 June. De Gaulle triumphed in the elections held in June and the crisis had ended.

May 1968 in an international context

May 1968 was not an isolated 'French affair'; on the contrary, there were student protests throughout the world.

The events were preceded in the US when President Lyndon Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential campaign in March due to months of protests, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated April 4, and students occupied and shut down Columbia University April 23. In Mexico on the night of 2 October, 1968, a student demonstration ended in a storm of bullets in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas at Tlatelolco, Mexico City.

The US and German student movements were relatively isolated from the working class, but in Italy and in Argentina students and workers joined in efforts to create a radically different society.

In Northern Ireland the People's Democracy, which included lecturer Michael Farrell, Bernadette Devlin, Eamon McCann and Loudon Seth, held marches and city centre sit downs in support of civil rights in the province. As in Paris they faced rough handling from the local police forces.