

Revolt in France: Repression Unveiled

Two Members of the March 22nd Movement

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Contents

BACKGROUND OF THE REVOLT	5
ON STRATEGY	7

[The March 22nd Movement in France is an organization of militant students with diverse political orientations: Anarchist-Communist, Revolutionary Communist, Socialist. The group functions without a “leader” and tries to prepare actions which will “unveil” the repressive structures of the capitalist state. This article was prepared from an interview with two members of the Movement during a recent visit to Kalamazoo...]

The student rebellion began like at Columbia, because the U.N.E.F. (National Union of French Students) was trying to resist the transformation of the university into a knowledge factory. As happened in this country, links between the university programs, the police and the state apparatus were revealed.

At Nanterre, students demanded to discuss politics at the university and to have an auditorium in which to hold the meeting. This was refused, as well as permission to hold a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. Some militants who opposed the Vietnam war were arrested. So the students decided to occupy the administration building. It was this action which launched the rebellion because the Dean called the police.

Also, since March all over France students had been demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. Sometimes members of an extreme right-wing student group, Occident, tried to fight with the demonstrators. There had been many street fights between the extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing students. So there was an atmosphere of fighting, and often the police came.

This was the excuse given by the Dean at Nanterre for closing the university. Some right-wing students threatened to come to the demonstration against the Vietnam war, and so the Dean thought he'd avoid trouble in his university by just closing it.

A similar thing happened at the Sorbonne. Students were expecting an attack by right-wing students at a meeting which was held to protest the war in Vietnam as well as the closing of the university at Nanterre.

When you occupy an administrative building, when you break something somewhere, you disclose the links between the so-called neutral knowledge of the university (which is bourgeois knowledge) and the police, which always arrive quickly. The links between the university and the state apparatus are then very evident. In this respect, I think the students at Columbia showed exactly the same thing. It's more obvious in the slums and ghettos where the police are always around. They are there to defend the system which makes slums and ghettos possible; until recently, it was more subtle at institutions like a university.

The important thing is that after the closing of the university at Nanterre, when we were gathered at the Sorbonne, the police were called in. This was an extraordinary act, since for about 600 years, this had never happened; and it was the rector, the highest functionary of the university, who has the responsibility for doing such a thing. A crucial thing to notice here, is that instead of meeting to discuss this unexpected event—to talk about whether it was good or bad, what we should do now—instead of discussing, people immediately went into the streets, started gathering stones and began to fight the police.

This was done spontaneously; no organization arranged it. We don't know who was responsible for doing it. Probably it was people who weren't especially politically aware. It doesn't matter. Students began to fight instead of getting involved in discussions. We can't explain why it happened—except that one of the minute links in the social chain had been broken.

We think that one of the main things that capitalism can't resolve is on the knowledge level. Leaving aside economic problems, it is becoming clear that capitalism can't cope with ideological-cultural problems. Therefore, we think it can be broken at this point. And we do see a parallel

to these events with the Cultural Revolution in China and with the Cuban Revolution which emphasize ideological rather than material interests. In all these cases something more than the formal revolutionary model appears. We no longer believe in the Leninist cult of revolution which puts forward a strategy settled in advance and which depends on a vanguard.

The first reaction on the part of most of the so-called revolutionary movements in France was to ask “Who are these people who fight the police? We don’t know them! They aren’t revolutionary or politically conscious.” Their action didn’t fit into the political strategy of these organizations. And this reaction is one of the reasons why we don’t agree with the position of these so-called revolutionary organizations.

This rejection of earlier revolutionary theory is one of the important things that emerged from the struggle. No one imagined that things would happen as they did. The ordinary student was as astonished as the political organizer. This is close to the guerrilla theory of revolution which says the revolutionary organization doesn’t exist before the struggle but appears through the struggle. This explains why we’re against a certain type of institution or organization which controls or limits its own development. We also oppose certain phenomena which appear within an organization such as identification with leaders on the part of “followers.”

Why did students start fighting the police? This is hard to answer. A subject had appeared: something which had broken with the usual procedural chain, which would have involved discussions, negotiations. something new appeared, which cannot be characterized. One can only say that something new and something profound has broken the chain. We call this a “subject.”

The police could have come to the Sorbonne six months earlier and nothing would have happened. But why was it that someone didn’t back away from the police, and instead picked up a cobblestone? This is something very unusual. It was really the first time: no one fights with the police. We can’t answer precisely “why.”

When trying to analyze the reasons for large parts of the population joining the struggle, we think it is because the working class—in the sense of “employees”—has grown a lot and it is class consciousness which caused them to join us. We think that by occupying the universities and by fighting the cops, we brought out the old desire of the working class to take over the factories and to break the power of the state. By fighting police and occupying the universities, what was done was to create a situation in which the working class could express its desire to occupy factories after which they could talk their own language.

We also believe that throughout the whole country people are aware that the existing institutions no longer function as they should. And there is no way to improve them. The family, the church, the Communist Party, none of these institutions serve the needs of today. The economy appears to function well, and it was in no way an economic crisis that brought about the rebellions. That’s why we say it’s the institutions, or the ideology that people are dissatisfied with—the superstructure of the society. And at least ten million people came out to show their dissatisfaction.

Though there are poor and unemployed people in France, they are quite scattered and it wasn’t they who came out to protest.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVOLT

Already in high school, French students may have a good deal of political consciousness. One can have a good idea of Marxist theory by the time he is sixteen or seventeen. Very often he belongs to a political organization, reads Marx, and begins in high school to think about social questions.

The U.N.E.F. (the student union) before the crisis was quite a weak organization, and controlled mainly by two Trotskyist groups, the J.C.R. (Revolutionary Communist Youth) and the F.E.R. (Federation of Revolutionary Students), although there was a coalition with the socialist P.S.U. (United Socialist Party) which furnished the vice-president. These were groups who intended to work from the inside to try to take power and who believed that U.N.E.F. could be their mass organization. It was a very unstable coalition without even a president—it functioned with an interim president, Jacques Sauvageot, from the “modernist” party.

We should mention that much of the population was aware of the police brutality because on the night of May 6, Alain Geismar, secretary of the professor’s union, made a statement on radio and T.V. in which he strongly protested against the brutality. Many people in all of France were concerned by this statement, because professors are not supposed to be “dumb”. This played a big role in informing the population about the situation the students were fighting. At that time, the mass media was still letting us express our position. After the 10th of May there was a poll taken, and four out of five of the people of Paris supported us. Of course there is a tradition in France of being against the police.

Originally the Communist Party expressed the minority view, but a few days later, after the poll, they changed from calling the students “tiny leftist groups, anarchists, German Jews;” to saying, “Yes, the students are right; what they want is a democratic university.” We didn’t want a “democratic university.” That doesn’t mean anything!

Later, when the working class began to be involved, we no longer had access to the communications media and public opinion changed. For instance, sometimes when workers were fighting from 5 a.m., you’d hear on the radio news: “There are fights in France.” Nothing else. While ten days earlier, on the night of May 10th, there were first-hand reports of the student-police battles.

It may be that French workers realized before the crisis that the Communist party and the C.G.T. (General Federation of Labor, the communist union) were no longer revolutionary, but it was difficult to support such a claim. Now it’s much easier and workers have been able to see the positions taken by the party and union. One of the most important results of the crisis has been the establishment of Action Committees in the factories where the workers are able to discuss problems actually concerning them and not have them channeled through older institutions. During the next crisis such a group could easily be responsible for organizing the resumption of work in the factories, only this time to run them for themselves.

You remember that between the 24th and 30th of May the workers had occupied the factories and the power at this time belonged to them. It was the Communist Party and the C.G.T. which were responsible for returning the factories to the owners. During this period the power belonged

to the workers; the party and union again created the state by appealing to different groups of workers emphasizing the specific demands of each group and pointing out that these demands need to be directed to the management or to the state.

Instead of thinking about creating a better social system, instead of letting workers run the factories, the union atomized the struggle with various material demands. In fact, in the factories where the C.G.T. led the strike committee, the workers played cards and listened to stupid music all day long. Naturally most of the workers, in the end, did not even come to the strike meetings. They were disgusted. It became clear to almost everyone that the C.G.T. and the Communist Party use the words of the working class, but do not articulate the interests of the working class. Revolutionary concepts are used, but not put into practice. The ideas don't materialize.

When we speak about a place where workers can talk, it's not only for talking, but also acting. Workers express themselves when they occupy the factory: it's the place where they can talk. The ideas are materialized. The general strike generated such concepts as "workers' power" and "make the factories run"; these things could not have been done by the C.G.T., even though they were very important during the last week in May.

ON STRATEGY

Lenin made a critique of strict determinism which says that we just have to wait until things change: what was thought by Bernstein and Trotsky (before the Bolshevik Revolution). People think that Marx or Freud, for example, wrote that all is determined, so we just have to wait. In the long run of history, we have nothing against that: development goes on; everything is really determined. But we can never tell where it's going to go off; and that's why we criticize notions like strategy. History is like a long death. What sometimes happens, in a so-called revolutionary period, is that a subject, an agent, appears, nobody knows exactly when, or where, or why. We have to be ready for that. We have to be ready for the surprise. It's like truth coming through history, like life coming through death.

Suddenly there's a possibility for something which we don't know precisely, something about which we have no specific ideas. We don't know exactly how we have to manage with it and what we have to do. Truth, the subject, has to be reinforced. Through agitation. That's when everything falls: the state, the ideology. We must decide. That's what happened in France. It has to be reinforced by knowledge, and maybe by an organization or something like that—one which is able to interpret—and through which people can make a kind of transfer, not an identification but something like it. People then change the economic relationships. And then it's open again to another time. It's only to break things.

There is no correct "line." Radicals in the U.S. have to organize now and think of a "strategy." This might be good for a time, because here people have no critique of society, no counter-ideology, and they don't know where to put themselves. The danger in having a well-defined, long-range strategy is that people build institutions in which they are extremely confident, the way French workers are confident of "their" organizations; but then something may happen which doesn't fit the strategy, and which may threaten the survival of the organization itself.

The point we want to emphasize is that it's important for people to have control over the organizations which are supposed to speak for them. We met radicals in New York who are concerned with organizing people and creating a party. It's difficult to explain this point to them because their central problem now is one of organizing and recruiting.

It's usually thought that the first thing to do is to organize people on the local level, to involve them, educate them; then when this has been done all over the country, the work will be done. Until then, it's only coordination of the existing chapters. We don't say this isn't necessary but only want to say that people at all levels need to be aware of the danger that can appear.

If it's a question of elections, we believe that if we involve ourselves in one of the existing institutions we run the risk of becoming one of these institutions which just reinforces the system. However, there's an opposing argument to that position. If the U.S. were to become fascist, it would make enormous problems for the rest of the world. In this case we would certainly support people grouping together to deter fascism.

We consider that in France today we have a smoothly-running fascism. It's very similar to what you have here in the U.S.

The reason French people are upset by things like police brutality and Americans are not, is that you've been conditioned to think in terms of genocide: the black people, the Vietnamese, the Peruvians.

In some areas of Chicago, for instance, we saw people who have no money, and who are rejected by the capitalist society. The cops shoot. A child is killed. They talk in terms of self-defense. We don't call this strategy. This is on the level of tactics. We are against a strategy which says, "we will break the system here, or there, at such and such a moment." We don't know. We can't say how a revolution will take place, or where. The important thing is to be ready to widen the rupture. But we don't know which group will create this break. Perhaps it will be blacks, perhaps poor whites, perhaps students.

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