

IN May 1968 9 million workers brought France to the brink of revolution in the biggest general strike ever. It was sparked by something seemingly insignificant — a campaign by students at Nanterre, on the outskirts of Paris, for the right to visit each other's rooms after 11pm.

At a time when, like now, the commentators had written off the working class, the working class came to occupy factories, to join students in pitched battles with the police, in some cases even to run entire cities. May '68 gave us perhaps our best picture so far of what a working-class revolution will look like in the West and, though ultimately the movement, betrayed by the Stalinist leaders of the labour organisations, went down to defeat, what happened holds many valuable lessons for the future.

One lesson for students is that if they look to the working class, and link their concerns with working class concerns and goals, then they can play a part in changing the world.

The Nanterre protest, which began in March 1967, soon took in other issues, like overcrowding and the content of courses. When college bosses shut down the campus, the students responded by holding a protest meeting at the Sorbonne on 3 May.

The Sorbonne authorities, panicking at rumours that fascists were going to attack the meeting, called in the notoriously brutal CRS, the French riot police. Students fought the police, who eventually occupied the Sorbonne.

Students and lecturers acted to gain support. Thousands demonstrated in Paris, and mass meetings debated what to do next.

The small forces of the left argued for turning to the working class, and despite the resistance of the trade union bureaucrats and the Stalinist Communist Party — who had students beaten up at factory gates — the students' message got through.

By Friday 10th, 30,000 were marching through the streets of Paris when the police attacked and fought demonstrators right through the night.

A one-day general strike was called for 13th May — but spontaneous rank and file action went way beyond that. Workers occupied the Sud-Aviation factory at Nantes, then Renault at Cleon, then Renault at Billancourt, and so it went on — often with small demands and little political direction.

But the logic was revolutionary; a different way of running society became visible in the struggle itself, as workers occupied the factories. In Nantes, for one

week, a General Strike Committee administered the city — controlling food supplies, traffic and petrol; at Cleon workers staged plays by Brecht and Chekhov, and held debates on sexuality and contraception; in Paris the Stock Exchange was set on fire.

President De Gaulle, who at one stage fled abroad, so great was his fear of revolution, wooed support from the upper echelons of the army by releasing an imprisoned right wing general. Workers and students sought the support of rank and file soldiers: some units made public proclamations that they would never shoot workers.

And all the while, the 'socialist' and Communist Party leaderships of the labour movement were screwing down on the activity and trying to defuse it.

Against this, the movement had either to go forward or to die. But there was no organisation like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty — armed with the lessons of the past — well positioned and large enough to give the leadership that was needed.

IN July, De Gaulle called an election, and significantly increased his vote. The ruling class could offer order, the established order, and in the absence of a strong working class alternative, the French people accepted it.

But that is not to say class struggle then somehow 'died out'. In class society, it never can die out. The French working class moved again only last year, with two million strong demonstrations against Prime Minister Alain Juppé's plans to slash welfare spending. Rail strikes, college strikes, power strikes against welfare cuts may provide a model for what British workers will do a couple of years into a Tony Blair government.

Last year too, students were an important detonator in starting and escalating the events in France: it began with protests for more money for universities.

Lenin, the leader of the only successful workers' revolution in history, the Russian revolution, said that the reason students, regardless of their background, can play a part in the class struggle is that they are able to step back from society and see its dynamic. Uprooted for a brief interregnum from their often middle-class background, they have the time to study history and to think. They have the chance to see society whole with fresh unprejudiced eyes and realise how immensely tragic and unnecessary class society is.

But Lenin rightly stressed that the power to change society, to harness the productive potential unleashed by capital-



Students and A WO

**Alan McArthur looks at
involvement in wo**

ism and use it for the common good, lies with the working class, and only the working class. Students can play an important role — with ideas, with solidarity and with activism, or with inspiring struggle, as in France '68 — but they must, if they are not to get lost politically, see the working class and its organisations as central.

Long after the degeneration of the Russian revolution and the rise of Stalinism, students again played an important part in the so-called democratic revolutions that toppled the Stalinist states across Eastern

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Europe, and seriously challenged the Chinese regime.

In Czechoslovakia (as it was then) students initiated the pro-democracy movement. Occupied colleges became co-ordination centres for the opposition movement. In Poland students fought to build a free students' union (the NSZ, the student wing of Solidarnosc), in the face of massive state repression.

And in China the workers' and students' movement for democratic reform was even strong enough to take control of

a part of Beijing for a time. It scared the state authorities so much that they sent in troops to massacre the thousands of hunger strikers in Tiananmen Square.

As with France '68, here were glimpses of what is possible, but students were only able to move the forces they moved because they took their struggles to the factory gates. Everywhere, from Central America to Israel/Palestine, to the fight against apartheid in South Africa, students who stop and think, who want to fight, and to fight with the working class, can play a great part in changing the world.

And in Britain? Today, there is a low level of student political activity. The National Union of Students is run by careerist Blairites. It may be hard to see

students in Britain in 1996 in the same light as the French students of 1968. But we do not have to look that far back for a different picture. Look at what students did in the miners' strike of 1984-5, that bitter year-long fight to save jobs and communities in the face of Tory determination to smash the British labour movement.

Students collected money, visited the picket lines, ran strike support groups with trade unionists and Labour Party members. They helped build Women Against Pit Closures and Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. Some colleges were twinned with pits.

They took the fight into NUS, demanding that the union pay legal fees for students arrested on the picket lines, and forcing the leadership to agree to donate money to the striking miners.

If the miners had won, it would have given others the courage to fight. Their defeat has meant demoralisation for the labour movement for over 10 years now, and opened the way for attacks on the welfare state.

RIGHT now, class struggle in Britain is still at a very low level — last year saw the lowest level of strikes since records began — but it is reviving: this year's strike figures will be the highest in a decade. The majority of people believe that a Labour government will deliver for them, that at least Labour will restore the cuts. When they fail to deliver, as they will, two decades of working class frustration will begin to come to the surface. The bureaucrats may well have a year or so of being able to say "Give us time", but when it becomes clear they have no intention of being any better than the Tories, the working class will fight.

Because students are in a position to stand back from society and see it clearly, and because students have not suffered defeats on the same scale as the labour movement, they are likely to be among the first to move against a Blair government.

"New Labour" has already signalled its plans for students — their stooges in NUS engineered the scrapping of NUS policy for decent grants, replacing it with commitment to student loans.

But we must prepare the ground now. Everything may depend on that. A big national demonstration this autumn and activists' groups to co-ordinate action in every college will be just the start of building a movement that can win back for students everything that's been taken away. And beyond that, who knows? There is a world to win!

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