

# All together now!

By Shelley Grainger

WHEN Jacques Chirac won the presidential election in May 1995 and his RPR/French Tory party colleagues already had an 80% majority in the French parliament, they could not have imagined, six months on, through October to December, hundreds of demonstrations across France; students striking for 8 weeks; rail, underground and bus workers on all-out strike since 23 November, paralysing transport; 40% of workers in electricity and gas on strike since 29 November; 22% of workers in the post office on strike, mostly in the sorting offices — deliveries virtually ceased; a third of telecoms workers on strike; up to 63% of workers in education on strike; strikes in banks, at the Renault factories, in health.

They were striking and demonstrating against Prime Minister Juppé's plan to "reform" social security.

Because the railworkers are the backbone of the strike movement the government agreed to shelve its plans to cut their pension rights and start chopping up and privatising the railways. It was a big victory, though other aspects of Juppé's plan are going ahead.

The situation in France has obvious parallels with Britain. There are lots



Up to 2.2 million people took to the streets against Juppé

of differences too.

What made possible the initial explosion of anger and the slow but steady growth in numbers involved, are the considerable rights to organise and to be consulted of unions and workers in France. French bosses have to negotiate with workers' representatives elected in workplaces. To strike, workers' reps need only give a few hours' or

days' notice that they intend voting on action, by a simple show of hands.

The contrast with the situation in Britain, where many unions have big strike funds, and still many members, but virtually no right to organise action, emphasises the need for us to fight the anti-trade union laws. Anyone in the British labour movement who has been impressed or inspired or moved by the French example must be recruited to the fight in the labour movement, especially the Labour Party, for a positive charter of workers' rights.

Given this potential for explosion, how did the politicians miscalculate so badly? Why the gap between what the politicians think "the country" needs and what "the people" want?

In France the bourgeois papers were quite sympathetic to the strike movements and popular demonstrations. That many people who read their newspapers couldn't be wrong. But their commentators mainly carped on about style and presentation. Implicitly they all accepted Thatcher-style monetarist politics and cuts in public services, but complained about arrogance in the politicians' manner of presenting and imposing these policies. What all failed to say, was that the economics are wrong, that economics should be for people, that what these changes mean is a change in a capitalist framework. A system where a few, the bourgeoisie, rule.

The people marched and struck against the changes, not against the way they were imposed. Implicitly ↓

## The events

**Early Oct:** Start of student protests for more money for universities.

**10 Oct:** Strike against public sector wage freeze.

**15 Nov:** Prime minister Alain Juppe pushes through Parliament his plan to balance social-security budget.

**24 Nov:** Railworkers strike. Mass demonstrations across the country.

**27 Nov on:** Strike spreads to postal workers, bus and metro workers, power workers, teachers. Many other groups will join days of action.

**28 Nov:** SNCF (French Railways) presents a new company plan. Unions denounce it.

**3 Dec:** Government announces third and biggest release of

extra funds for higher education. Student movement condemns this as inadequate, but starts to dwindle. Strikes continue to spread.

**10 Dec:** Juppe concedes on all railworkers' specific demands and shelves plans to cut public-sector pension rights.

**12 Dec:** Biggest round of demonstrations across the country — unions claim 2.2 million on the streets.

**15 Dec:** Return to work begins (and will continue gradually up to Christmas).

**16 Dec:** Another two million on the streets.

**21 Dec:** Juppe holds a "social summit" with the unions and bosses — promises further talks.

**January:** First stages of Juppe's plan due to come in.



Mass meetings every day voted on the strike action

## Juppe's plan

ALAIN Juppe wanted to cut pension rights and levy new social security contributions. Potentially the worst part of his plan to fix the social security budget deficit is "fiscalisation."

France's social security budget is separate from the state budget. It is controlled not (or not entirely) by the government, but by employers' and trade-union representatives, and financed not by taxes but by social-security contributions.

Juppe wants to amend the constitution so that Parliament will have power over the social security budget — in other words, it can put arbitrary ceilings on benefits, or health spending, in order to finance nuclear tests or whatever its other priorities are.

The move is also a threat to trade-

union bureaucracies, especially Force Ouvrière's, which rely on the jobs administering the social security budget to sustain them.

France's social security system is not ideal. It reimburses only about 60% of non-hospital health spending — and leaves some people without any health cover at all — but gives great scope to doctors and drug companies to line their pockets. It leaves unemployed young people, who have built up no record of social security contributions, in the lurch. Juppe, however, wants not to improve it but to worsen it.

How far he can do this still remains to be seen. He has promised six months of negotiations on the "details" of his plan; the unions have said they will continue the battle against it, not excluding further industrial action.

they were marching against the system.

We have to put forward a workers' response, so that workers will not pay the price for European integration. We want to reap the rewards. We want the best of welfare provision across Europe for workers in all European countries.

French trade unionists warn the workers, for example, that what Juppe intends for the French health service will mean waiting lists for operations. Waiting lists! In Britain we fight over the length of the waiting list. In France it is still shocking that anyone should wait for an operation. We want that in Britain too. Supporting French workers against Juppe will help us to get it.

Across Europe we need to ask "what is society for? What is economic activity for?" If it is not to guarantee people homes, a decent standard of living, jobs, education for the children, pensions and benefits for those who cannot work, health care, and improved social and cultural life, what is it for? If it cannot guarantee those things, shouldn't the system change?

That is what we ask in Britain, and we should look for ways to link with others across Europe, including the French strikers and demonstrators who are increasingly asking this question.

One commentator described what is happening now as 1968 in a minor key. If you go on the marches, see the crowds, and their imaginative and colourful placards, you would not feel so pessimistic. In a way though, perhaps, people do feel more up against it than they did in 1968. A lot of the strikers on the rail have spoken of how they feel if they do not win this time, they despair of any future for their children. These are people who remember 1968, and were optimistic that time around.

Young people — higher and further education and school students — who do not remember 1968 need little prompting to repeat its slogans. "Une solution, révolution." Talk along these lines extends far wider than the small numbers of the revolutionary left.

We are a way off that in Britain. But we have the same political vacuum to fill.

People don't shout "revolution is the only solution" in Britain. They shout "Major, Major, Major, out! out! out!" and look forward to a Labour government. They mean, elect a Labour government and most of this will end.

In France that is not an option. People vote for politicians they do not like, who enact policies they have to resist. After the experience of a Blair government many more people will feel like that in Britain. Young people shout less and less for Labour, but they don't yet shout for revolution either. After a few years of a Blair government, they might. ■

# Solidarity regained

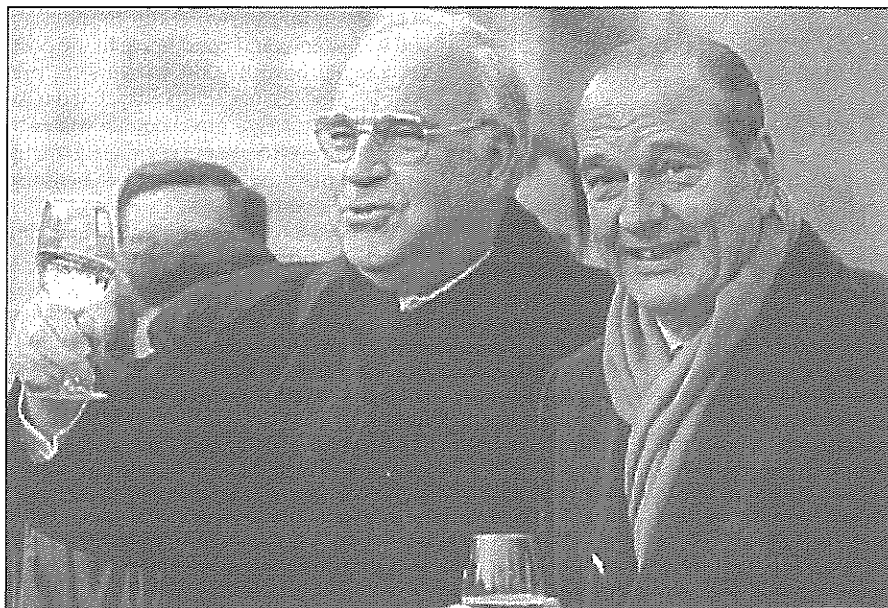
By Martin Thomas

"OUAIS, OUAIS, tous ensemble, tous ensemble." The Paris demonstrators on 16 December, at the end of France's great strike wave, chanted "All together, all together" — celebrating the rediscovery of working-class solidarity.

The much-divided trade unions had found a new unity in action. "Never since 1968 had there been so many strikers' banners carrying all the trade union titles"<sup>1</sup>. Fighting to save the welfare system, against the budget-balancing "plan" of prime minister Alain Juppé, they had drawn in and taken up the cause of all the outcasts of French capitalism. A delegation of homeless people joined the march with their own banner. As the demonstration went past the Sante prison, prisoners cheered and waved improvised flags, and the marchers applauded the prisoners.

The next Monday, Michel Renault, CGT railworkers' union secretary at the Gare de Lyon told me, "We have had support from the rail-users, contrary to the last big rail strike, in 1986, when there were rail-users' demonstrations against the strike.

"We have won on all the main issues concerning railworkers, including the plans to



Germany's Chancellor Kohl gave outspoken support to Chirac's cuts

privatise the railways, and we have beaten the Juppé plan on public-sector pensions. We have also won wage negotiations at the start of 1996, when previously the government said it would freeze public-sector pay."

The strikes had also forced the government to drop plans to increase income tax, to take some temporary and fixed-term contract workers in the public sector into permanent jobs, and to hold a "social summit" with the unions.

"But", Michel Renault continued, "we have not won on the proposed supplementary social-security contributions, nor on fiscalisation [nor on private-sector pen-

sions]. So we carry on. Our strike has finished, but we will continue the action. We will take part in all the demonstrations and work stoppages."

Patrice Pajol, secretary of the CGT Union Locale, added: "Behind the Juppé plan are the issues of wages and jobs. The movement has been as strong as in 1968. Now we need to have big struggles Europe-wide — not just messages of support. The best support is struggle. We have had action all together in France — now we need action all together at the level of the different countries."

CGT trade-unionists at the Gare de Lyon postal sorting office had a similar message.♦

## Is "Europe" to blame?

MARSEILLE, the big city where the Front National is strongest, was one of those which saw its biggest demonstrations ever, breaking the records set in 1968. In Toulon, the only sizeable city with a FN council, the 20,000 marchers on 12 December went to the town hall to join anti-FN chants to those against the Juppé plan.

Le Pen denounced the strikes, demanded a ban on strikes in the public sector, and advocated individuals buying their own insurance rather than social provision. But most FN voters backed the strikes. Le Pen tried to hold their support by scapegoating the Maastricht treaty as the cause of the trouble.

The Communist Party, too, had denounced Maastricht as an incursion of foreign capitalist principles on French traditions<sup>1</sup>. Yet during the strikes the CP kept Maastricht strictly in its small print, and the CP-led union federation, the CGT, mentioned it not at all. The CP and CGT leaders must have seen this restraint as part of their

effort not to "politicise" the strikes, an effort so strenuous that no CP member of Parliament explicitly called for the withdrawal of the Juppé plan until 12 December, two and a half weeks into the movement.<sup>2</sup>

If so, a bad reason but a good result. And, encouragingly, anti-Maastricht demagoguery was absent not only from CGT placards, but also from all the other placards, banners, posters, stickers, and leaflets, with the exception of a couple of leaflets from very marginal groups. Implicitly, at least, the demonstrators accepted the arguments of the Trotskyist weekly *Lutte Ouvrière*:

"Once we have said that the Maastricht treaty is not a good thing for the working class, should we then conclude that the French bosses and government have had it imposed on them? Not at all. They have no need of the Maastricht directives to attack the social gains of the workers... And if Maastricht were the absolute weapon against workers' rights, how could we

explain that its opponents include [right-wing] politicians like Séguin, Pasqua, De Villiers, and Le Pen?...

"To incriminate Maastricht, or Bonn and the Bundesbank, is only a way of letting the French bosses and political leaders off the hook, as if they were only applying external directives for which they were only complicit, not responsible".

Leaflets collected from the 7 December demonstration show no anti-Maastricht content. Anti-Maastricht leaflets on 16 December came from the Mouvement des Citoyens, a small splinter from the Socialist Party, and Solidarité et Progrès, the oddball populist grouping of Jacques Cheminade.

Those in Britain who present Maastricht as an attack by an *alien Europe* on the *British* welfare state should note that the Cheminade leaflet denounced Maastricht as a foul foreign imposition on France by a financial oligarchy operating from... London — just as some Belgian unions protesting on 13 December targeted "the Europe of the English."



## Why strikes did not reach the private sector

DESPITE the fact that much of the Juppé plan affects private-sector workers as much as public-sector, and despite the strikers and demonstrators constantly raising the demand for private-sector pension rights to be levelled up to public-sector conditions (rather than public-sector pensions being levelled down), the private sector went no further than one-day strikes to join the big demonstrations.

The railworkers, the spearhead of the strike movement, had voted to stay out even after Juppé had conceded all their particular demands on 10 December. But by the end of that week (15 December) it was plain that the private sector was not going to budge, certainly not before Christmas. The railworkers started to return to work, and Juppé escaped with two key elements of his plan intact: increased social-security contributions, and "fiscalisation."

On Monday 18 December I listened to a discussion on why the private sector had not made it a general strike at a Paris aggregate meeting of one of the main Trotskyist groups, the LCR. Had the trade union leaders deliberately held back? Or were the private-sector workers not confident enough, whatever the union leaders might have done?

Opinions differed; but one comrade described events at his factory, Thomson Gennevilliers. The CGT and the CFDT (influenced here by *Lutte Ouvrière*) had called a mass meeting and argued for strike action — and the workers had voted it down. The threat of closures, redundancies, unemployment weighed too heavily.

*Lutte Ouvrière* summed it up like this: "In the private sector... the strike appeared for a long time as a railworkers' strike... then as a public-sector strike, not specially concerning the workers of the private sector."

"The strike took a week to reach a part of the public sector, almost two weeks to reach the teachers. To involve the whole private sector would have taken much more time again..."

"Neither the railworkers nor anyone else could hold out for the necessary time. The strike came up against the buffers with the approach of Christmas — the teachers going on holiday, the big industrial enterprises shutting down partially or totally for a week or more..."\*

\* *Lutte Ouvrière*, 22 December, p.5.

"There is a link between the Juppé plan, and wages, jobs and conditions. In the post, we already have 80,000 workers in 'precarious' jobs [casual, temporary, fixed-term contract, etc.] The government wants to introduce private-sector type management, and even privatisation. It plans to privatise France-Telecom."

"We have fought for a different financing of social-security — trying to coalesce all the forces and push as far as we can."

Many workers felt the same. A housewife: "With their action, the railworkers have shown that people still have the courage to believe that life could be different".

A railworker: "This movement was something other than a simple industrial conflict. It had become a critique of the elites, of the liberalism [i.e. free-market regime] imposed by bludgeoning and sackings, of wealth not shared, of a society no longer made for humanity. At the point it had reached, it needed to be political. It had aroused lots of new awareness, and we did not have the right to betray that".

A bank worker: "Everyone can start with rejecting the government's plans for their own section, but the issue today is what society we choose. Either the law of the jungle and skimming people off, or a different policy which places humanity at the centre of its concerns".

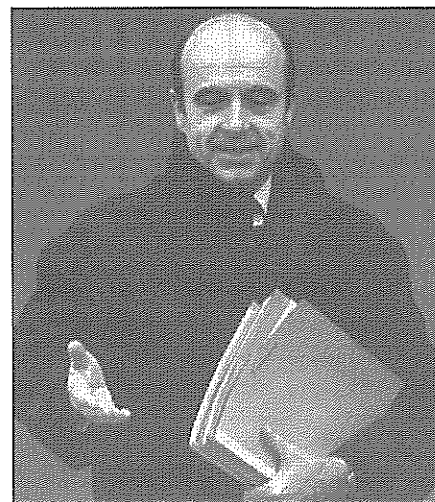
Another railworker: "This strike has something wonderful about it. Warmth, fraternity: all those disillusioned after 1986 [when there were big railworkers' and student struggles] have come together again. The best present for our children would be to stay out until Christmas".

New links were made, and new confidence gained, in the effort to extend the strike across the public sector — and to private-sector enterprises, too, for stoppages on the days of the big demonstrations, 24 and 30 November, 5, 7, 12, and 16 December. (There were countless smaller demonstrations: the city of Bordeaux, for example, had over thirty demonstrations in all). A report in the weekly *Lutte Ouvrière* from Angers, western France, gives the flavour.

"The first operation was a massive distribution of leaflets at the crossroads of the biggest industrial estate in the town, from 4.30am to 8am. There were 120 to 150 participants... railworkers... metalworkers... firefighters... teachers... There were many discussions in the workplaces covered, and some demonstrators said that they decided to come after this appeal from the strikers. It was a success, also, for the participants who, despite the snow and the early hour, had many discussions among themselves."

"Other interventions of this type have taken place in two other industrial estates. And other little groups have been formed to go and convince other sectors... railworkers and firefighters to a mass meeting of busworkers... teachers to the hospital... local government workers to the administrative offices..."

"These operations are decided and organised in a meeting of the CGT Union Locale,



Juppé: strikes wiped the smile away

opened out to all the CGT members active in the movement and convinced of the necessity to extend it. Militants of the Communist Party, of *Lutte Ouvrière*, and of the trade unions work side by side...

"30 to 60 activists now meet every day to decide and organise activities. The local committees of the CGT had been almost deserted for years: now they are filling up anew..."

Is this the same France where the right wing holds 80% of the seats in Parliament; where Jacques Chirac won the presidential election this May; where his official "left" opponent, Lionel Jospin, emphasised, throughout the strikes, that he did not oppose the Juppé plan on principle, but only the way it was done; where Jean-Marie Le Pen's fascist *Front National* has won a steady ten to fifteen per cent of the vote ever since 1984? Yes and no.

The working-class demoralisation and despair reflected in the right-wing drift of official politics have not been banished at a single blow. But the strikes and demonstrations showed that the despair is only one side of the picture. They pushed it aside for a while and let another side emerge — anger and determination to fight for "the political economy of the working class." For the months and years ahead, they strengthened the active counter-forces within the working class, against the despair.

Even as the strikes were winding down, on 14-15 December, 36% of the general public told pollsters that "they should continue inasmuch as the strikers have not obtained satisfaction." 34% thought the strikes were justified but it was time to end, and only 28% opposed them.

Parents' groups joined the demonstrations along with striking school teachers. Chirac's party, the RPR, called for transport-users to demonstrate against the rail, bus, and metro strikes, but the great majority of users supported the strikes. In Paris, a system grew up of drivers giving lifts to as many people as they could get in their cars. People were helping each other, talking, joking — often they enjoyed it more, despite the huge delays, than the ordinary process of elbowing each other aside to sit

in sullen silence on the bus or metro. One African worker, reflecting on his experience of hitch-hiking to work each day in Paris, commented: "Since the beginning of the strike, I have not met a single racist".

On the 16 December demonstration, one home-made banner read, in all the languages of the European Union, "Where is social Europe? On strike against the Juppé plan." The small solidarity delegations from Britain, Belgium and Germany were applauded and much commented on in the days following: one comrade on our delegation from Britain sold 55 copies of the Welfare State Network paper *Action*.

Luxembourg public-sector workers have struck for one day on 15 December; Belgian workers have demonstrated on 13 December, shut down the railways on 19 December, and set a cross-public-sector strike for 26 January, all on similar grievances to those in France.

In the 1970s and '80s steel workers and dockers faced a concerted European bosses' offensive, fought back country by country without any international coordination, and were defeated. Now rail workers, telecom

workers, postal workers, utility workers, and public service workers are all facing, or will soon face, very similar attacks all across Europe. They need a Europe-wide counter-offensive. The 16 December demonstration showed that French workers are open to that idea. It is up to us now to overcome the difficulties of language, culture, and trade-union bureaucracy, and make the necessary links.

There were no slogans sharply cutting against the trade union leaders on the 16 December demonstration — a remarkable fact, considering its militancy and liveliness, and the large number of "home-made" placards and banners on it. Some workers were angry that the CGT had called for an end to the rail strike as early as 15 December, but that was the extent of it. The main slogans were variants of the union leaders' demands: "Retrait, retrait, retrait du plan Juppé" [withdrawal of the Juppé plan], and "Ai oup, Juppé, ton plan il va sauter" [Juppé, your plan is going to blow up — this chanted with a skip and a jump at the "Ai oup"].

The workers had not yet come sharply into conflict with the union leaders; but that did not mean that they were happy with the timid passivity of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. A leader of the LCR told me that they had sold some 1,200 copies of their paper *Rouge* on the Paris demonstration — eight to ten times as many, he estimated, as they would normally shift on a big demonstration. All the revolutionary left groups were finding a

much-expanded audience for their ideas.

And on the demonstrators' placards, on leaflets and posters — sometimes from the left-wing trade union SUD-PTT, sometimes from Greens or the various campaigns for the jobless and homeless — were slogans pointing beyond rejection of the Juppé plan to positive alternatives, transitional demands: cut the working week without loss of pay; "travaillons moins, travaillons tous" [let's work less, let's all work]; rebuild social provision by taxing financial revenues and taxing the rich. The day before, a group of striking teachers had demonstrated at the Stock Exchange, with the slogan: "The Stock Exchange or life: we have chosen!"<sup>10</sup>.

As the railworkers' slogan at the Gare du Nord put it: "The Commune is not dead." ■

#### Notes

1. *Rouge*, 14 December, p.2.
2. Denise, a housewife in the rail town of Tergnier, northern France, *Libération*, 18 December, p.4.
3. CGT trade-unionist at the Gare du Nord, *Le Monde*, 17 December, p.6.
4. A striker from the Bank of France, at a mass meeting of railworkers at the Gare d'Austerlitz. *Le Monde*, 21 December, p.V.
5. Sylvain Briere, Rouen train driver, *Le Monde*, 14 December, p.10.
6. *Lutte Ouvrière*, 15 December, p.7.
7. *Le Monde*, 17 December, p.8.
8. *Le Monde*, 21 December, p.VI.
9. *Lutte Ouvrière*, 22 December, p.6.
10. *L'Humanité*, 16 December, p.3.

## CGT leadership under pressure

LOUIS Viannet, leader of the CGT, had the bad luck to have his confederation's congress meet in the middle of the strike, from 3 to 7 December. He faced demands for the CGT to call for a general strike, and could deflect them only by arguing that in the new, post-Stalinist, CGT: "It is not our role to decree the general strike from on high. The general strike must come from the mass meetings." The phrase "generalisation of the struggle" was agreed, though then in "the current resolutions, read out at speed by the platform... the words 'generalisation of the struggle' were absent and each time reintroduced after demands from the floor".\*

The CGT congress also ratified the deletion of "socialisation of the means of production and exchange" from its statutes, on the argument that "socialisation does not mean disappearance of exploitation" and that the CGT should instead commit itself to "combat capitalist exploitation and all forms of exploitation of wage-labour". The collapse of the USSR has convinced the CGT that what they previously saw as "socialisation" is no answer, and that there are other forms of exploitation of wage-labour than the capitalist one they know in France — but they have no positive answer.

\* *L'hebdo d'actualité sociale VO*, 8 December, p.25; *Rouge*, 14 December, p.6.

# Strikes revive the trade unions

THE structure and culture of French trade unionism is very different from British. The unions are much more divided. They have fewer members, smaller funds, therefore less ability to give strike pay. On the other hand, they have much stronger legal rights.

Unions have a legal right to represent workers, strong legal guarantees against sacking for union representatives, and legal immunity for their funds. Workers have a legal right to strike (the right belongs to individual workers, not to the unions, so there can be no question of a law demanding ballots), and legal protection against being sacked while on strike or replaced by scabs<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently French strikes tend to be short, often small, often minority action, often spectacularly militant. Often they end without a settlement, or at least without all the unions (or all the workers) agreeing a settlement.

The legal framework was set after World War 2, when the French ruling class was

very shaky and anxious to use reforms to stave off the danger of revolutionary upheaval. Each factory or office must hold elections for delegates (roughly equivalent to shop-stewards), with all the workers (unionised or not) voting, but the candidates nominated by the unions<sup>2</sup>.

Union membership then was relatively strong. But it has declined steadily since — with a recovery after 1968, and a particularly sharp fall under the Mitterrand presidency, since 1981. Today it is only five to ten per cent of the workforce.

This figure exaggerates the weakness of the unions. Since a worker can be represented by a union, and express adherence to it by voting for it in delegate elections, without joining, on the whole only activists join unions. And 50 to 100 union activists would not be bad going for a workplace of 1000 in Britain.

The strikes in November and December — as generally in France — took two forms: stoppages (*débrayages*) for the days of

action, or continuous strikes (grèves reconductibles). On the railways, for example, a mass meeting would be held each day at each depot, where, after hearing speakers from the unions, the workers would vote to continue (reconduire) the strike. The level of union cooperation in calling the mass meetings, and union activity in sending delegations from one mass meeting to another, was exceptionally high.

Workers supplemented their strikes by

occupations and other militant actions. Electricity workers stormed the power-station control rooms and set the electricity supply at cheap rates, or free for some users. Railworkers at the Gare du Nord regularly lay down on the lines to block the Eurostar service to London (operated by British drivers).

In Tours, railworkers went to the bus depot; after the bus workers had given strike notice, they demanded that in the

meantime the buses should carry the message "Withdraw The Juppé Plan" on their electronic displays. The bosses said no. The railworkers said that the buses might then end up stuck in the city centre with flat tyres. The message went up<sup>3</sup>.

With the union machines playing a militant role, there were, however, few elected strike committees. The most advanced rank-and-file organisation was in Rouen.

There, the train drivers, after voting to strike, went first to the rail workshops, then to the postal sorting centre, and so "ended up that afternoon with a united mass meeting in a crazy atmosphere. Drums, trumpets, whistles. Nothing had been organised... We tried to regularise the situation by setting up a strike organising committee... with five or six delegates from each sectoral mass meeting, plus ex officio representatives of the unions".

This organising committee then set up sectoral mass meetings every morning, and a cross-sector mass meeting every afternoon, drawing up to 1000 workers. "The atmosphere there is spectacular. It is not a strike meeting in the strict sense. It is difficult to discuss there as you do in the local meetings. It is more like a rally. But it is the heart of the strike, of workers' democracy".

The committee produced a leaflet: "All out on continuous strike! ... We will win the withdrawal of the Juppé plan. This victory will be a formidable springboard... to win on wages, the reduction of working time without loss of pay, and the abolition of unemployment... All out on continuous cross-sector general strike until victory..." It set up roadblocks on every route into Rouen and distributed it on the morning of 11 December, getting a favourable response<sup>4</sup>.

The CGT confederation (which is close to the Communist Party) and Force Ouvrière (generally business-unionist in orientation) actively promoted the strikes and demonstrations; so did the FSU (a federation

## As we were saying The power next time!

### The rising of the French workers in May 1968

SUDDENLY, like an enormous explosion, the revolt of the French working class has burst on a startled bourgeois Europe. Already it has changed the political climate of Europe as sharply as the rising of the sun after a long Arctic night.

Sparked by the militant actions of Trotskyist, anarchist and Maoist students, and fanned by the viciousness of police brutality, the flames of revolt soon spread to the working class. It led to a great conflagration prepared by the long-accumulated, bottled-up discontent and frustration of the workers.

The working class had seemed drugged and demoralised by years of relative prosperity. It had remained confused and quiescent, under the control of conservative labour leaders, through the many crises that have rocked French post-war capitalism.

Now, with little warning, it rose to its feet, pulling its trade union leaders — "Communist", "Catholic" and "Socialist" — and political leaders helplessly behind it. Effortlessly it brought the country to a standstill. By instinct, without any real leadership — and initially against the 'leadership' — it seized and held the productive forces of society, wrenched from out of the powerless hands of the capitalists. It proceeded to enact what will surely go down in history as the dress rehearsal for the French workers' revolution.

Factories, mines, docks, ships at sea and in port, theatres, offices — all were swiftly occupied and placed under the control of workers' committees.

Grave-diggers and chorus girls, bank clerks and taxi drivers, petit-bourgeois as well as proletariat, trade unionists and non-unionists, the whole of the French working masses were in action. Journalists refused to lie to order, and printers censored their employers' press. Journalists and technicians at the ORTF (television

network) revolted against the role assigned to them by the system. Even the farmers joined in. So did school children, who took over the schools, following the action of students who had seized universities. And they were joined by the teachers!

Everywhere the Red Flag was hoisted. Everywhere enthusiasm, marches, demonstrations of strength. The *Internationale*, sung too often discordantly by Stalinist functionaries, now thundered its command vigorously in its real tune in millions of voices, in every street of every city, and across the borders: "Arise, ye starvelings..." And not only the 'starvelings' arose: the vanguard were and remain the best paid of all — the workers of the giant state-owned Renault plants.

The rulers of the rest of Europe and the world have looked in horror at this stupendous demonstration of the power and revolutionary instinct of the working class. Their journals are still not sure whether or not to believe it.

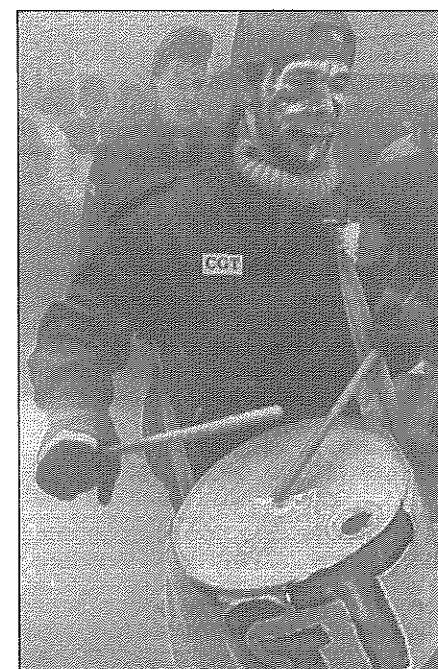
For decades now, have they not preached, have their 'thinkers' and hacks not proclaimed — and proved, no less! — that the industrial working class is dead as a revolutionary force? Had they not, as late as 12-13 May, carried articles celebrating the 10th anniversary of the army coup that raised De Gaulle to power and gave France 'stability'? Is not this western Europe, in the year 1968; is not the number of cars and TV sets growing?

Are not the capitalists in possession of a vast bureaucratic army of efficient lieutenants within the labour movement to police it and keep the working class within the banks of bourgeois society? Are not Lenin and Trotsky long since dead and buried?

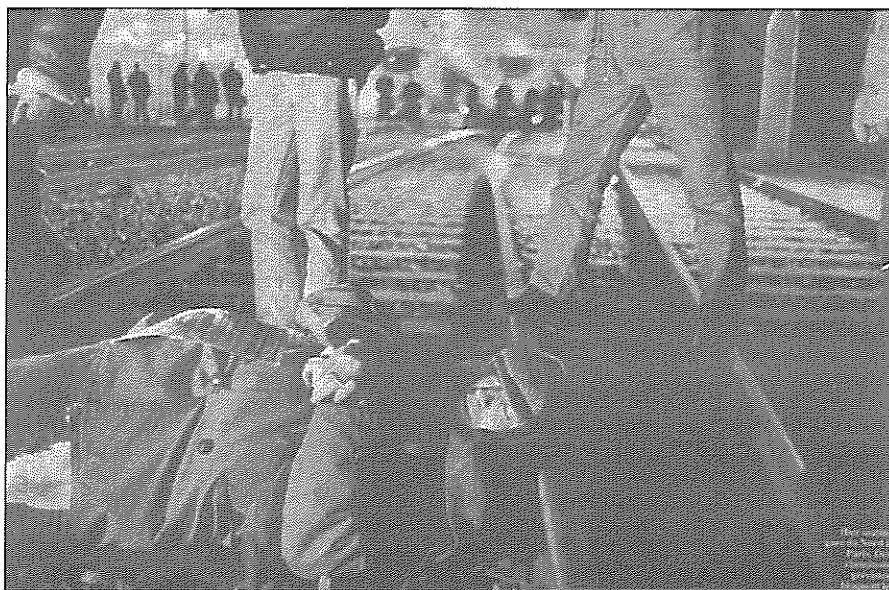
Thus it seemed. And then, before their fearful eyes, the working class rose suddenly from off its knees — and gripped French capitalism by the throat!

Given the entrenched power of pro-capitalist bureaucrats (some misnaming themselves as 'Communists') in the French labour movement, the full victory which was objectively possible was not to be expected. To achieve this goal the class will have to shake off the shackles of the labour bureaucracies and prepare a revolutionary organisation equal to its drive for control of its own life.

In France and in Britain the struggle continues!



Unions actively boosted the strikes



Rail strikers block the Eurostar trains

of teachers' unions, also close to the CP) and SUD-PTT (a left-wing union of telecom and post workers).

The CFDT — the third of the big confederations, with the CGT and FO — supported the government at leadership level, but its organisations on the railways and in many other areas actively backed the strikes. The strike movement has led to ructions both in the CFDT — with militants denouncing the leadership — and in Force Ouvrière, where a right-winger, Jacques Mairé, has set out to challenge Marc Blondel for his position as general secretary, claiming that Blondel is in the pocket of the "Trotskyists" of the Workers' Party, who hold many full-time posts in FO.

All across those unions which promoted the strike, however, the movement has generated new members and new activism. ■

#### Notes

1. Bill Wedderburn, *Employment Rights in Britain and Europe*, pp.226ff. There are loopholes in these legal rights, but they are strong enough to give workers confidence.
2. Again, there are loopholes. Some hard-line employers, notably Citroen, have nullified the law by promoting fascistic company unions.
3. *Lutte Ouvrière*, 15 December, p.7.
4. *Rouge*, 14 December, p.8; see also reports in *Lutte Ouvrière*, 8 Dec, p.9; 15 Dec, p.8; 22 Dec., p.7.

## Workers and students unite

STUDENT unions organise fewer than one per cent of France's 2.2 million university students, and even that small number is divided between two rival organisations, UNEF (close to the CP) and UNEF-ID (led by the Socialist [not-very] Left faction of the Socialist Party), claiming about 10,000 members each.

The weakness of the unions did, however, open the way for the student movement to establish a national coordination made up of delegates elected from mass meetings at all the universities on strike.

French universities have expanded even faster than British ones since the 1980s, and are now immensely overcrowded and under-resourced, with a huge drop-out rate.

The extra money granted by the

government to universities was seen by students as an inadequate sop, not a major victory, so the students ended their strike without the same satisfaction as the workers.

There were few university students on the 16 December march in Paris: one student comrade, a member of the LCR, told me that the student movement in Paris had, paradoxically, been "smashed" by the public transport strike there, which made it impossible to get large numbers of students together.

However, student revolt, which has been bubbling ever since 1986, will certainly erupt again soon.

And the prospects for worker-student unity are better than ever, with many more students coming from working-class families.

## A man's a man for a' that

Robert Burns, Scotland's great radical poet, died 200 years ago

Is there for honest poverty  
That hings [hangs] his head, and a' that?

The coward slave, we pass him by —  
We dare be poor for a' that!  
For a' that, an a' that,  
Our toils obscure, an a' that,  
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,  
The man's the gowd [gold] for a' that.

What though on hamely fare we dine,  
Wear hoddin [coarse woollen cloth] grey, an a' that?  
Gie fools their skills, and knaves their wine —

A man's a man for a' that.  
For a' that, an a' that,  
Their tinsel show, an a' that,  
The honest man, tho e'er sae poor,  
Is king o men for a' that.

Ye see yon birkie [fellow] ca'd 'a lord,'  
Wha struts, an stares, an a' that?  
Tho hundreds worship at his word,  
He's but a cuif [fool] for a' that.  
For a' that, an a' that,  
His ribband, star, an a' that,  
The man o independent mind,  
He looks an laughs at a' that.

A prince can mak a belted knight,  
A marquis, duke, an a' that!  
But an honest man's aboon [above] his might —  
Guid faith, he mauna [must not] fa' that!

For a' that, an a' that,  
Their dignities, and a' that,  
The pith o sense an pride o worth,  
Are higher rank than a' that.

Then let us pray that come it may  
(As come it will for a' that),  
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,  
Shall bear the gree [have priority] an a' that.

For a' that, an a' that,  
It's comin yet for a' that,  
That man to man, the world o'er  
Shall brithers be for a' that.