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May 31, 1968

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TO ALL ORGANIZERS

Dear Comrades,

FRENCH EVENTS

Enclosed is a copy of Tom Kerry's report to the New York SWP branch and YSA local, "The Revolt in France and the Tasks of the American Trotskyists."

Because we were sure that all comrades would want to read this report to the New York City branch as soon as possible, we are departing from normal procedure and sending out today in a separate package enough copies for distribution to the entire membership of both the party and youth in your area.

The cost of these transcripts is 10 cents each. Please return any extra copies to the N.O. along with payment for the ones distributed as soon as possible.

Comrade Kerry's report should be an aid in the campaign to mobilize all our energies for the Militant sales drive around the French events for the next few weeks.

Comradely,



Jack Barnes  
Organization Secretary, SWP

P.S. Tapes of Comrade Kerry's talk are still available to branches and locals at cost.

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THE REVOLT IN FRANCE AND THE TASKS OF THE AMERICAN TROTSKYISTS

Report to the New York City Branch of the Socialist Workers Party  
by Tom Kerry on May 29, 1968

I'm not going to discuss the French events per se; I have nothing to add to what has been published in The Militant, Intercontinental Press, The New York Times and other sources that are much closer to the events. What I'm going to do is draw some lessons from these events that are applicable for us here as well as on a world scale.

This year, 1968, is the 150th anniversary of the birthday of Karl Marx. I can't think of a more magnificent anniversary commemoration than that which the French workers, students and peasants are giving him today in France which Marx considered "the cradle of the revolution." A country with a long and honorable revolutionary tradition.

Revolutions are the acid test for all theories, programs, strategies and tactics for all those who are, or pretend to be, revolutionists. Years and years of debate and argument may ensue without reaching any general conclusions until subjected to the test of history. For almost a century, Marxism has been refuted, revised, modified in order to conform to alleged changes in historical development. All these pseudo-Marxist and revisionist ideas are also being tested today in the crucible of this revolutionary uprising. How do they stand up as against the orthodox Marxist analysis? Not too well.

According to the pundits of the New Left, the workers have exhausted any possibility of functioning as the agency of revolutionary change. So they set about seeking a new force, some elite, that would substitute for the working class.

The workers were written off, not only in France but universally in the industrially advanced countries, and especially in this country, as hopeless, as having been co-opted by the "establishment," to use their jargon. The organized working class was viewed as an obstacle, not as the locomotive of revolutionary change. Some of these people call themselves Marxists. Yet they sought to destroy what to me is the very essence of Marxism, the question of the ways and means of change. Every other sector of society was capable of undergoing radical and progressive change, it seems, except the working class, and if the workers changed, it could only be for the worse, not for the better.

Now we have witnessed in our lifetime, in your lifetime (mine's been quite a bit longer) some rather startling changes. We have seen the change in the Afro-Americans who, starting a few short years ago, achieved a revolution in consciousness, dating approximately from the year 1956 with the Montgomery bus boycott. Whereas in the previous struggles that have taken place in this country this very important section of the working class played a relatively unimportant role (they weren't part, except peripherally, of the tremendous radicalization and working class upsurge of the '30's.) This ingredient was lacking then.

There has likewise been something of a change among the young people on campus. Not so long ago, this sector of society was referred to as "the silent generation." They've become quite vociferous in the intervening period.

The Trotskyist movement has never lost its confidence in the ability of the working class to change in accord with a very essential aspect of Marxism, that the material conditions of life determine consciousness. Unless you concede that capitalism has overcome its basic contradictions, the basic contradiction between the social character of production and the private appropriation of the surplus product, among others, which is the mainspring of the class struggle, unless you concede that capitalism has become capable of granting the workers an ever increasing and higher standard of living, then you must conclude that the struggle between the exploited working class and the capitalist exploiters must continue, and become more acute, as capitalism runs into various economic, political and social difficulties.

What is really "new" about the French events has been the role of the student youth. In our experience, the student youth, though playing at times a very important role, have always played a peripheral role in mass revolutionary actions. We still consider that they can only play a subordinate role but in a special sense. The decisive sector of the mass movement capable of accomplishing fundamental social change must be the working class. But the students can be a decisive factor in sparking a mighty mass movement, one that has assumed the character of the most extensive general strike in all history. I can't recall where a general strike has achieved such depth and breadth.

How was it possible for the French students to play so important a role? One major reason is that the students were relatively free of the cancerous infections of social democracy and Stalinism. They had gone through some very important historical events. The Algerian war, the end of the Stalin cult, the de-Stalinization campaign in the Soviet bloc followed by the eruption of the East German workers against the Stalinist bureaucracy, then that of the Polish workers and the Hungarian civil war in 1956. After that came the Cuban revolution and the Sino-Soviet rift with the break-up of the Stalinist monolith. More recently, the events in Czechoslovakia where the students and intellectuals have taken the leadership in compelling the transformation of that regime.

They were familiar with the character of the French Communist Party, the most conservative, bureaucratized, Stalinized party outside the deformed and degenerated workers states. As young people capable of dealing with ideas in an atmosphere of discussion, of debate, confrontation, they rejected Stalinism and all its works as well as the reformism of the Social Democracy. That was manifested in the demonstrations themselves where the tendencies that played a conscious role in promoting the actions were the so-called "splinter" tendencies, referred to as Guevarists, Maoists, anarchists, who have suddenly emerged from I don't know where, and, last but not least, the Trotskyists.

It was especially the young militants of the JCR who invested the movement with consciousness, who had a Trotskyist program, who were able to point out the necessary road to travel, advanced the correct slogans at the right time, and, despite their meager forces, played a key role in determining the character of the movement.

A report from one of the British papers in a recent issue of Intercontinental Press says that this was the first time Trotskyism had been seen in action on the European continent in a very important revolutionary movement. This to me is the greatest accomplishment of our European movement. It justifies all the many, many years of energy, material and ideological collaboration that went into preserving this very precious cadre of the Fourth International. All that is beginning to pay off.

We learned a long time ago that more than anything they say, parties, tendencies, groups are judged by what they do, how they act. I recall an analogous situation in the early period of American Trotskyism after we were expelled from the Communist Party. We were considered to be outstanding theoreticians of the Marxist movement who knew their revolutionary history backwards and forwards, better than everyone else and who could stand up and debate all comers. As an oppositional tendency of American Communism, that was our specialty. To study the history, development and ideas of the Bolshevik revolution and its subsequent usurpation by the Stalinists and to arm ourselves with all arguments in order to stand up and do battle with what was then a very powerful machine.

"But," our critics said, "we know the Trotskyists are qualified in this sphere. What we don't know is how are they going to act when they're up against the gun. What are they going to look like in action?" This question was answered in 1934 in the Minneapolis strikes when the Trotskyists succeeded in overturning the closed shop, making Minneapolis a union town. At least it was settled to the satisfaction of those who felt an affinity for our comrades and our organization, and led, as you know, to the fusion with the American Workers Party. This was the decisive factor in facilitating the fusion of the AWP and the Communist League of America to form the Workers Party in the early 1930's.

I read with some interest in Intercontinental Press that several of the French Trotskyist groups, under the impact of the latest events, have come together, not in fusion or reunification, but for joint action, recognizing that they are all Trotskyists and seeking to hammer out a common line and approach to the problems of the revolutionary developments. In France, where the movement has been plagued by splits and splitlets, this is an indication of progress in this direction also. A regroupment, opening up a possibility for an objective discussion of differences while continuing in common action against the common foe is very important because this step is an embryo of what I think will occur in France in the period ahead.

The Communist Party of France is never going to be the same -- never! If it doesn't splinter, it will fracture. There are already important differences reaching right up to their top committee, where there are signs and acts of defection. That process is not yet concluded because the Stalinists still have the capacity for perpetrating

some monstrous betrayals. But they're not going to emerge unscathed. There is the possibility of building in France in a relatively short time a revolutionary formation essentially based upon the program of the Fourth International which will represent a regroupment of revolutionary Marxists that can provide leadership for the struggles ahead.

Many things are changed and are not ever going to be the same again. There are going to be changes not only in the objective circumstances, in the parties of the bourgeoisie or in the French Communist Party, but in the world movement of Trotskyism as well. We have had discussions over a long period of time with our cothinkers and I'm happy to say that these events in France have done more than anything any Trotskyist in the world could have said to clarify the issues before us in the advanced capitalist countries.

What are the world repercussions of the French events? No country is going to remain immune to their impact, no matter what takes place. If the result is the victorious conclusion of the proletarian revolution and the establishment of a workers' state, then, of course, the world will be turned upside down. But even if the upsurge is temporarily sidetracked and halted, the events that have already taken place are bound to have important repercussions throughout the world.

One very important effect will be on the world Stalinist movement. Especially in Latin America, where the Moscow line parties have already undergone some blows from the Castro tendency, and will incur more as the aftermath of the French events. And what effect would the developments have on Castroism? Is the ideology of guerrilla warfare the only answer to the problems of revolutionary strategy? I believe that the Cubans' susceptibility to ideas and their inclination to revise their views in the light of important developments on a world scale will lead to considerable discussion. How, for example, does this fit in with the theory which approximates those who have contended that the struggle in the advanced industrial countries is indefinitely postponed and that the imperialisms will have to be surrounded by revolutionary developments in the underdeveloped world, sort of invaded by revolution from without.

Another important aspect particularly for us is that the French events have given at least a tentative answer to the perspective of revolutionary developments in the USA. We've had discussions on this question before along this line. Will the American working class have to again undergo the experiences of the 1930's in order to achieve a degree of radicalization requisite for the organization of a movement capable of overthrowing American capitalism? That is to say, would an essential ingredient of such an extensive radicalization have to be a catastrophic depression approximating that of the crash of 1929?

The French revolution answers no. We also said before, theoretically, no, we cannot anticipate a historical repetition of the events of the 1930s, and it isn't necessary. In our view the high standard of living of the American working class can be itself a revolutionary factor. It is not evidence or proof that the working class

is becoming co-opted into the establishment and an obstacle to revolutionary change. It can turn into a revolutionary factor because we know that historically the workers will fight harder for what they've won than they will for new concessions. They'll fight harder to prevent the enemy class from taking away those things they've already enjoyed than they will for fighting for something new. This American working class is going to fight for its high standard of living, for their television sets, autos, boats, and whatever else they have. They're not going to easily surrender them under attack from the bourgeoisie. There was no crash; no economic depression anywhere approximating that of 1929 in France. France was ostensibly enjoying a period of prosperity. But like all capitalist prosperity, it was more prosperous for some than for others, more prosperous for the bourgeoisie than for the workers.

France was held up as the shining example of how capitalism can overcome its problems, its contradictions. In fact, de Gaulle was lecturing the rest of his colleagues in other countries on how they should do it, too, the way they did it in France. That's one lesson we've got to teach the American workers. The fact that they had taken away from the French workers part of their medical insurance angered and infuriated them even more than the reduction in their standard of living through inflation, which they didn't like.

The workers were discontented and dissatisfied, that's true, after ten years of de Gaulle and the kind of leadership they had both in their unions and in their political parties. But they saw no way out. They saw no possibility of conducting an effective struggle, given the kind of leadership they had, and the apparent power and strength of the Gaullist state.

It is to the everlasting glory of the French youngsters that they challenged this authority and taught the workers that was not so. They took on the French cops and the special cops, they fought them and beat them off, not only once but a number of times. The workers looked around and said, "if these kids can do it," if what the Stalinists call papa's boys can do it, "what about us French workers. We've got more power, we've got more strength, we've got more maturity." So they were tipped off that the seemingly impregnable fortress did not look so formidable and it proved to be not formidable after all. The movement spread like wildfire through the whole country.

Now, what about this country? What impact has the student movement, operating primarily through the anti-war movement, and the movement of black revolt had on our national politics? Nothing quite so sensational as France yet. But it would be a mistake to underestimate their impact upon other and very important sectors of our society. It led LBJ to throw in the sponge. It has had an effect on the Democratic Party, judging from the scramble that is taking place among the prospective nominees.

What is more important to us is what effect has it had upon the labor movement, if any? We know that a very modest protest has emerged

under the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace, a very cautious, halting manifestation of protest in opposition to Johnson's war. Of greater importance is an event which probably few of us have yet adequately estimated. That's the Meany-Reuther split. I believe the Meany-Reuther split is a direct reaction to the radicalization of the youth and the black power revolt in the Afro-American community. It doesn't make sense to accept the superficial reasons given by Meany or Reuther, who talks big about organizing the unorganized, more democracy in the AFL-CIO. Indeed, Reuther's a big fighter for democracy. That's so much hogwash.

What Reuther is concerned about and what he has recognized is that there exists a social movement of revolt which is separated more and more from the organized labor movement, over which the organized labor movement has no control; and that this movement threatens to upset the entire political structure in this country, especially the coalition in the Democratic Party. To maintain that coalition, Reuther knows he's got to have the black masses, the intellectuals, the liberals, the youth. Otherwise the Democratic Party coalition as it has existed from the time of Roosevelt is not very much longer for this world.

It is precisely these sections of society that have been completely alienated from the organized labor movement by the policy of the Meany wing of the bureaucracy, which in domestic politics stands far to the right of Johnson, and in international politics to the right of the State Department. When even a self-respecting British, French, Italian, German bureaucrat see a Meanyite, they turn and run because it's an established fact that they function as an agency of the CIA. This is what sticks in Reuther's craw. He's an advocate of the policy of re-alignment. That is, to drive the reactionaries, the Dixiecrats, out of the Democratic Party, woo the liberals from the Republican Party, and establish a genuine two-party system: a liberal and a conservative party in this country. He cannot hope to do it if the coalition goes to pieces.

Significantly, along with the announcement of their expulsion, the spokesman for the UAW announced they were going to form community councils, to compete with, or as substitutes for, the AFL-CIO labor councils on a state and local basis. Can you imagine what a community council in Detroit would mean? -- if it's actually a community council with representatives from the black community, from Wayne State University, from the student movement and other sections in revolt? He's in for a very rough passage.

I don't know how it's going to develop but this is indicative of the impact the movement in this country is having on the most conscious section of organized labor. Reuther is a clever social demagogue and if anybody in the labor movement can hope to co-opt and tame the youth, the Afro-Americans, the academic community, the intellectuals, the left-wing liberals, he's the man to do it.

Our task is clear and simple. It is to win the hegemony over the radicalized sections of the American population, primarily in the black community and among the radicalized youth -- and in the process to destroy once and for all the influence of Stalinism in the American

radical movement. The Stalinists remain our main competitor and rival. We confront them wherever we're active in the mass movement and will for some time to come. They're capable of infinite damage so long as they're able to maintain an apparatus, and they'll maintain an apparatus so long as they receive and continue to receive support from the Kremlin.

We now have four campaigns going simultaneously. This is not so formidable as it sounds because all of these campaigns are integrated into one. There's the election campaign, the anti-war campaign, the Student Mobilization Committee fight and the French support campaign. All of these items are included in The Militant, beginning with the last issue, so far as the Student Mobilization Committee fight is concerned. Make no mistake about it, that's part of the same fight. It may assume the character of a defensive struggle because we're the aggrieved party. We've been the object of exclusionary action and have been deprived of the democratic right to hold a conference to discuss policy. Maybe some of the pacifists with whom we've worked so long and so amicably became convinced that we, too, had become so peace-loving at any price that we had lost our capacity to fight when the chips were down. Our young comrades are going to have the opportunity of sharpening their claws on opponents that are not so formidable as the American capitalist class, but the experience will come in handy. We'll teach our friends a few lessons and learn a few very productive lessons ourselves.

I don't recall a national election campaign that's already achieved the results we can already record. And the campaign hasn't really begun yet. And it takes place within the framework of our total struggle around the questions of the war, Stalinism, peaceful co-existence and revolutionary Marxism.

Unfortunately, we're not yet able to extend the kind of support that I wish we could give to our French comrades in France since we're still a very small and primarily a propaganda organization. But there's one thing we can do. We can let as large a part of the American population as we can reach know what the Trotskyists are doing in France, what they have done, and the facts about the Stalinist betrayal. We can help to accelerate their social consciousness, their thinking on these questions. Nowhere will they get the kind of analysis that The Militant will carry. It's not going to do us a damn bit of good to send five comrades over to France and have them feeding us red-hot material, right off the griddle, along with the pictures, it's not going to do us a bit of good to publish a 12-page Militant unless we get the circulation, unless we get the paper out to the widest possible section of the students and the workers in this country.

I'm glad to hear what Barry read from Pete in Berkeley. Especially the response they got at the one plant where they sold the paper. We can go to the workers with the French issues. We can go to the factories, here in Manhattan to the garment area at noontime where the place is swarming with workers and sell hundreds and thousands of Militants. You can go to the factory gates and I think you'll get a response. Many workers are interested in what's going on in France because the same kind of discontents are seething in the American working class



today. Don't anybody ever make you believe that the workers are fat and contented. They have the same grievances and the same problems. Stalinist bureaucrats are not sitting on top of them, but, when it comes to bureaucratic repression, the bureaucrats made in the USA don't cede an inch to the most hardened Stalinists. Our problem is to get this paper out and get it circulated, get it sold to the workers, the students, the high school kids.

This is a great opportunity for us. I've always been told that Trotskyists do not what is possible, but what is necessary. It is now necessary for us to undertake four campaigns in one, and do the most effective job we've ever done. This is another test for us. Our capacity to respond to the call for full mobilization of our party resources in an historic campaign.

At the plenum Mary-Alice said that the YSA expects to double its membership by the first of the year. This was before the French events, before the French revolution. Now I think we have to lift our sights a bit.

We've got to do it because we are determined that, when the revolutionary eruption comes here, there will be that necessary ingredient, the revolutionary party, that can invest the movement with revolutionary consciousness, in a struggle for workers power. We have more time here, but not too much. The tempo of the French developments was very rapid. But it will be as nothing once the American workers begin to move. Then you'll see a jet-speed tempo of development because the American workers do not have the Stalinist and Social-Democratic baggage to carry that the French workers do. That will be a big advantage. They're free from this pollution. They won't have two struggles to carry on. Except for their own union bureaucracy which won't amount to so very much when the confrontation really gets going.

Our comrades in France have given us a big assist. We've often preached to our European comrades and friends the necessity of doing this or that the American way, especially in matters of efficiency and efficacy of organization. But from now on, comrades, the international slogan is going to be, not do it the American way, but do it the French way.