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solidarity

FOR WORKERS' POWER



THE POWER STRUGGLE
AT KINGSNORTH

FRANCE : the theoretical
implications

ESSEX STUDENTS IN
ACTION

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THE POWER STRUGGLE AT KINGSNORTH

This article describes the resistance to production on a vast new building site, employing some 2000 men. The variety of methods resorted to will surprise those unfamiliar with what goes on in modern industry. The author clearly shows how, through organization and struggle, an hour of labour time can be made to command a vary variable wage, at times 100% or more above the nationally negotiated rate. He also shows how the amount of work an employer can extract from the worker during the said hour is not always objectively determined. Under capitalism labour power is a commodity, but unlike other commodities labour power can influence its own exchange-value.

THE SITE

One of the biggest Constructional Engineering projects in the country is undoubtedly the Kingsnorth Power Station at Hoo, near Rochester, Kent. The main contractor is the consortium formed by Simon Carves and International Combustion Ltd. (I.C.L.).

In the past I.C.L. have concentrated most of their big contracts in the North of England. The firm came South with the avowed intention of smashing the unions. The gigantic new power station has been under construction now for over 2 years and I.C.L. have certainly attempted to carry out their threats. They've tried every dirty trick in the book and quite a few others too.

The Kingsnorth site is situated at the mouth of the Medway Basin. It is 5 miles from the nearest village and 10 miles from the nearest reliable public transport. Its isolation has influenced the form that struggles have taken there. Men travel in from all over the Kent, Essex and London areas. They can only get so far by public transport, then they have to take coaches hired by the firm to carry them the rest of the way. For most of the men there is at least an hour's journey involved each way. For many others there can be anything up to 3 hours. Once the coaches have dropped the men off on the site in the morning, they do not return, under any circumstances, until 4.15 pm.

As the coaches drive in each morning, they pass American-style gates, with uniformed security guards and dogs. High wire fences surround one side of the site, and the river marks off the other. One gets the impression of being in a concentration camp. It is impossible to think in terms of knocking off an hour early. It takes a brave man even to consider going out of the gates on strike, before the coaches return at night. The only communication out of the site is a single telephone (for about 2,000 men).

THE 'DOVER SOULS'

Methods of taking on labour have also influenced the militancy on this site. From the very beginning there were complaints from all over the Kent, Essex and London areas. Both the employers and the District officials of the C.E.U. were keeping men with militant records off the site. Skilled members of the C.E.U. were being registered for months at their District office as unemployed while men with little or no experience were being brought in from the redundant shipyards on the Kent coast. (They became known as the 'Dover Souls'.)

For the Dover Souls the seven-day week had been a way of life. £20 per week was like the answer to all their prayers. They were prepared to run from arse-hole to breakfast time for it. To the regular construction workers, overtime was out of the question until they had bonus pay doubling their basic rate. Even after that, overtime would only be worked under strict control.

WAGE EXPECTATIONS

The wages in the construction industry have in the past been based on a combination of pretty low basic rate plus high bonus and condition payments. The men have always had to depend on their own militancy to obtain the latter. The main objective of construction workers is always to get onto a long job and to get it organized quickly so as to extract the maximum amount of money and the best possible conditions out of it, in return for getting the job done at a reasonable rate. This usually takes the form of a few months of continuous struggle (strikes, restriction of effort, etc.) until the shop stewards and management are able to get together and work out a bonus system which they can both measure and agree upon. Sometimes full cooperation is given in return for double time. This has always given the workers a tremendous control over the pace of the work.

At Kingsnorth an individual gang bonus was introduced very early in the contract. This always has a dog eat dog effect. It destroys solidarity. This case proved no exception. Some gangs with a little bit of work and a lot of cunning were able to achieve individual earnings of up to £70 per week. Others, despite a lot of hard work, only produced a wage of £17 with promises of more to come, but always in the future.

The shop steward at that time was one of those employed in one of the high-earning gangs. He was only interested in maintaining the status quo. The firm later promoted him to foreman for services rendered. A new steward was elected, Melvin Taylor. He was a man with little experience, but a lot of guts and honesty. Immediately the demand went in for a collective bonus and better conditions, backed by the threat of strike action.

HUGHIE BARR BLACKLISTED

Hughie Barr, member of the C.E.U. Executive Council and once a militant, was one of the men refused employment on the Kingsnorth site. As a result of protests throughout the branches (organized by the Communist Party)* he was summoned to a meeting with Bro. Ernie Patterson, C.E.U. General Secretary.**There he was told that if he gave an undertaking not to cause any trouble at Kingsnorth, Bro. Ernie Patterson would see that he got a job.

Bro. Barr started work at Kingsnorth about June 1967. As a result of his reputation he was soon elected deputy shop steward to Melvin Taylor. Almost immediately the site went into dispute with the demand for a collective bonus. It should be emphasized that this was supported by Bro. Barr, but not initiated by him.

The dispute lasted for 11 weeks and resulted in everyone being sacked. Bro. Fred Copeman and officials of other unions negotiated the reopening of the site in August 1967. No one was quite clear what the terms for the reopening were, except that all the men were to be re-employed and that a new bonus system was to be introduced. The afternoon tea-break would have to be given up. Needless to say the terms were negotiated without consultation with the men.

Bro. Barr was elected shop steward. A tentative bonus scheme producing about time-and-a-half was introduced. Bro. Barr assured us it wouldn't be long before we were on double time.

CONDITIONS ON THE JOB

Most of the material used on a power station is prefabricated in factories up and down the country. It is then transported to the site and left in yards, sometimes for months, sometimes for years. Yard gangs load the materials as and when required onto trailers. The materials are then brought into the basement of the boiler for erection.

* The Communist Party is organized in the C.E.U. There is a Party Industrial group but it confines itself to selling the 'Morning Star' and to campaigning to get C.P. members into office.

At Kingsnorth there are about a dozen Party members mainly from South London and Gravesend. Most of them are industrial militants rather than politicians and are very disillusioned by Bro. Barr's seeming lack of militancy. Many of them take the view that Bro. Barr's position as a shop steward is subordinated to his position as an Executive Council member!

** Although men belonging to the C.E.U., Boilermakers, A.E.F., H.D.E.U. and P.T.U. are all employed on this work, the other unions leave the C.E.U. official to deal with most of the problems. The C.E.U. official for the Kingsnorth site is Bro. Fred Copeman, who has openly admitted (in Gravesend branch) that he has, in the past, blacklisted his own members. For reference see 'The Kent Dandy', a leaflet published by an unknown author in 1967.

Power stations are always dark. Men work at heights of up to three hundred feet in constant semi-darkness or half-light. Materials are left all over the place. Steel and pipes are sticking out at all levels and one must be constantly on the alert in case one either walks into something or trips over it. Men work at all levels, directly over each other's head and often in confined spaces. There are always tools and bolts dropping, especially when there is a work to rule or the bonus has been knocked on the head... or an engineer happens to be working underneath.

THE ENGINEERS AND FOREMEN

These are some of the most hated men in the country. I.C.L. dress their engineers in white and their foremen in green. Other distinguishing features are that they usually carry walkie-talkie radios and a look of complete bewilderment. The latter is due to their deep ignorance of constructional engineering and to their chronic inability to supervise the labour force. Most of them get their jobs through the 'old pal network' rather than as a result of their engineering qualifications. One foreman in charge of a steel erection gang had previously been a carpenter. An engineer in charge of integral pipe work was previously on adverts for Vitalis Hair Dressing. It is rumoured that even Mr. Yates, the Resident Engineer, was a fitter's mate, allegedly as recently as 5 years ago.

It is quite clear that most of the engineers and foremen are there for disciplinary rather than supervisory purposes. This is never more apparent than when there is a work to rule. They then become conspicuous by their absence and confine themselves to walking round the ground with little notebooks and pencils, stopping people quarters of an hour (for coming down to tea too early or for washing-up before the hooter has sounded). If it wasn't for the skill and know-how of the chargehands and tradesmen, it's doubtful if the work would ever get off the ground.

FACILITIES

In these non-permanent jobs one gets used to poor facilities. But even in relation to what one finds in this industry, the facilities on Kingsnorth are diabolical. As many as 700 men are crowded into a small hut which serves as a canteen and changing rooms. Scuffles often break out as a result of someone claiming someone else's seat. Tea and about three choices of sandwiches and rolls are served (by 4 or 5 men) to 700 others, in about 15 minutes. There often isn't enough to go round. The huts are dirty. There is no ventilation and the roofs leak. For most of these men the tea-break is the first time they have stopped work since 5.30 that particular morning. The same choice of food is offered at dinner time. Fourteen hours per day without a reasonable and substantial meal is not unusual for these men, who do very heavy manual work.

Washing and toilet facilities are also very bad. A few dirty toilets are scattered all over the site. No one is employed to keep them clean. There are about a dozen washbasins. Invariably, there is no hot water.

Clocking off is a sight to behold. About 700 men herd round half a dozen clocks waiting to clock out. To add to the confusion, the management, at regular intervals, change round the clocking stations, so that no one is sure when he clocks on in the morning at which station he will clock off that night. On many occasions, C.E.U. members have passed resolutions to refuse to clock off under these conditions. But they continued to do so after Bro. Barr's assurance that he would ensure that the management provided more clocks and better methods.

COACHES

The coaches have always been a problem. Each has its picking up points. The drivers have strict instructions to leave at a specific time regardless. After men have travelled for an hour or more by public transport, they may arrive at the picking up point a couple of minutes late, only to find the coach has gone. The alternatives then are the uncertainties of hitch-hiking to work or losing the day. There have been a number of disputes over this, mainly from the men in the London area. As a result the picking up points of the coaches have been extended to Barking.

Last year, during the snow, the coaches would at times be turned back by police when the roads became impossible. But the engineer refused to pay the guaranteed 40-hour week, even to those people who tried to get to work or even to the few who actually got there and were sent home as a result of power cuts or because of the unbalanced labour force. This resulted in a strike around the demand for a guaranteed 40 hours pay in the event of inclement weather. It lasted a week and was called off by Bro. Fred Copeman on the recommendation of Bro. Barr and the shop stewards, on the understanding that if the 40-hour guarantee wasn't forthcoming by negotiations, Bro. Barr would lead the men out until our demands were met in full. Several meetings were held with officials at all levels. The 40-hour guaranteed week for inclement weather never materialized. Neither did Bro. Barr's promise to lead us out. Most of his time was spent keeping us in.

BONUS PROBLEMS

As each bonus scheme failed to produce double-time more walk-outs took place and more work-to-rules. These resulted in more meetings with Fred Copeman and more promises from the management. There were more threats of redundancy, which of course no one took seriously - except perhaps the Dover Souls. It was during one of these periods that the case of Bro. Philo occurred. A mass meeting was called outside the gate, where bonus and transport were discussed. It was decided by the majority to withdraw labour. A couple of days later our next meeting was called, to coincide with collecting our wages. It was discovered that Bro. Philo and one other were in fact still working. One of our members attempted to talk to him about it, but Bro. Philo tried to punch him. The member

defended himself. Bro. Philo ended up on the floor where all scabs belong. Bro. Philo was then sent home for his own safety. Later at a meeting of the C.E.U. branch at Greenwich, Bro. Patterson defended Bro. Philo on the basis that the strike had been 'unofficial', whereas Bro. Philo had acted like a good union member. He was later reinstated as a chargehand, but put to work on his own. The struggle for double-time bonus continued, sometimes reaching double time, but in the main falling short.

WORKING TO RULE

This is perhaps not the best way to describe it. When Kingsnorth is working to rule production quickly grinds to a halt. Working to rule starts immediately we leave the changing huts. Normally it would take about 15 minutes to walk over to the boiler and get on to one's job. Under these special circumstances it can take anything up to an hour or more. Large groups of workers stand outside the lifts discussing West Ham or the latest bit of crumpet. Some even discuss politics. By the time many of them get up on their job, it's time to come down again. The supervision stand round, helpless.

Erection gangs are past masters at working to rule. They take the whole operation in their stride. In fact some people say that working to rule is the normal way they do things. Fitters take a bit longer to get organized. They often discover the need for mechanical tools that are in short supply. Or they will find the need for more scaffolding and stand there for days, waiting for it. Then, they will find they need something from the stores. Instead of sending their mate, they'll go for it themselves.

Perhaps the best exponents of working to rule are the welders. They are amongst the most highly skilled in the country. Each welder has to undergo a high pressure welding qualification test as a condition of employment, and every weld is tested after. When the welders are working to rule they will study each butt-weld like a surgeon his patient before an operation. They will demand that the butts be perfectly clean and polished and the chamfers perfectly distanced before they will even look at a job.

This sort of thing continues for a couple of days. Then all pretence of working (even 'to rule') is dropped. Everybody just stands around in groups talking and waiting, sometimes for weeks, until another offer of double time is forthcoming.

THE FIRE

One weekend in May 1968 a fire broke out, destroying huts, canteen, offices and clocking off stations. Men reporting for work on the Monday morning were told by their foreman that they were to report to the site every morning, book on, then return home on basic pay until normal work was resumed. We were all delighted.

After the first week a mysterious meeting was held between the management and the shop stewards. Redundancy was threatened. In order to avoid it, the stewards agreed to a phased resumption of work without insisting on the normal facilities.

We were gradually called back over the next week. A huge marquee tent had been erected as a temporary replacement for the huts. Most of us were disgusted with the stewards for agreeing to this. We felt the management were trying to turn the job into their own version of Bertram Mills' Circus.

Overalls and boots had been burned in the fire. The management agreed to replace them but couldn't get enough at such short notice. We were told they were on order and would be arriving 'any day'.

Each morning we were treated to a first class 'clown show'. The engineers and foremen would storm into the tent and order everyone out to work. Every attempt was met with shouts of 'Bollocks!' and 'Fuck off'. We were not going to work without our boots, overalls and safety helmets. The orders were soon changed to polite requests, and later pleas.

The weather was fine. Some of the lads just sat in the tent playing cards. Others stripped off and did a bit of sunbathing on the river bank. Some of the carrot crunchers brought in rifles and went duck hunting, while some of the hairy-arsed erectors went for walks along the river towards the village, hunting the other sort of game.

By the end of the week the whole site was in complete chaos. The management laid on the 'acrobatic show'. Bro. Barr was sent in to hold a meeting in the Big Top. Hughie started off by telling everyone that although he had informed all of the union officials of the conditions at Kingsnorth, none of them had put in an appearance to help with the negotiation for the resumption of work. He and the other stewards had had to do this on their own. He intended to inform Bro. Ernie Patterson about it. He then went on to say that redundancy of a couple of hundred of us was still a real threat, unless we got back to work. It wasn't only the management that was complaining but the few men who were back on the job. They were complaining that we were jeopardising their earnings by refusing to work. All in all Hughie put on a good show. We all laughed but no one took any notice. The management had turned the site into a circus, but we had become the ring masters.

The following week the boots and overalls began to arrive. The boots came in three sizes: brutal, heavy and medium. A week was spent going down to the stores trying on boots. Most of us preferred a lighter, more expensive boot than those offered. In the end, we were all kitted out. Construction workers are notoriously scruffy at work. Most of us buy our working gear second hand from the Army Surplus Stores. Now we were all walking around in nice blue overalls and shiny new boots. We must have been the best dressed construction workers in the business. Since then, although we still have no effective method of measuring our bonus earnings, the bonus has been almost consistently double time.

CONCLUSIONS

International Combustion Ltd. have not been able to carry out their threat of smashing the unions. The unions didn't need smashing. They proved only too willing to cooperate with the management.

I.C.L. have failed to break down the determination of the workers to maintain their living standards and job control. Even the Dover Souls have been integrated in the struggle.

The struggle has taken many forms (strikes, work-to-rule, non-cooperation). In fact all this is now a way of life for the workers. No amount of pressure from management, union officials or even shop stewards has been able to keep production flowing while standards drop. There is no doubt that the bonus will continue to fluctuate. But so will the amount of work produced.

There is still a tremendous amount of confusion caused by the role of the union officials. In attempting to defend their wages and conditions from the continuous attacks of the employer, the workers are forced to fight on two fronts: not only against the employer but against his first line of defence - the union official. We owe no loyalty to either unions or officials. The only loyalty should be to each other. The only union worth considering is the unity that exists between workers on the site or the shop floor.

We have learnt from bitter experience that we cannot rely on either left or right wing officials. We can't rely on their rules or procedures. None of us are under any illusions about the role of Patterson, Copeman or Baldwin. The new Messiahs of the Communist Party will become indistinguishable from their predecessors in a very short time. They will have to. They will sign the same agreements and use the same rules and procedures. They will subordinate the interests of the workers on the site to the need to maintain their positions in the union hierarchy.

As workers we must rely on our own logic and organization, regardless of union and independently of the officials. A majority vote of all those involved is 'official' enough - in any situation.

E. STANTON

CONSTRUCTION WORKERS, BEWARE!

As 'Solidarity' goes to press we hear of a £46 million merger of International Combustion and Clarke Chapman (the two main contractors at Kingsnorth) with John Thompson. The new company will be known as Thompson Chapman International (T.C.I.) and will have an annual turnover of over £40 million in its power division alone. Sir Humphrey Browne, Chairman of the new giant, has already made it clear that the first task of the reorganized management will be rationalization at site level, so that increased profits can be taken out of the skins of its employees. There is a stormy outlook ahead for construction workers at the various sites affected. NOW is the time for them to prepare, and to begin to discuss joint action. It is urgently necessary for militants to convene a meeting of delegates from the various sites.

FRANCE: THE THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

FRANCE: THE STRUGGLE GOES ON by Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall. Published by Socialist Review Publishing Co., 36 Gilden Rd, London NW5. 2/6

This pamphlet, produced 5 months after the events it describes (and some 10 days before the Bi-annual Conference of International Socialism) is not really an attempt to analyse the French events of May and June 1968. At this level - as we shall show - it epitomises the theoretical incapacity of even the more sophisticated representatives of the contemporary marxist Left. The Cliff-Birchall text is something quite different. It is a factional document, aimed primarily at influencing the discussion on the 'organizational question' now taking place within I.S. between Leninists and libertarian revolutionaries.

After a major earthquake, everyone longs for a return to order. The French events are no exception. Today the Préfecture de Police wants order in the streets. The Minister of Education wants order in the universities. The CGT and Communist Party want order in the factories. And the traditional revolutionaries want order ... in the realm of ideas.

But it is the hallmark of all truly revolutionary events that they show no more respect for established ideas than they do for established institutions. All major social upheavals in history have gone far beyond the anticipations of even the most radical revolutionaries of the previous period. Whether immediately recognized or not, they have raised new issues, thrown up new social forms and created new problems of theory and practice. The French Revolution of 1968 was no exception.

During the Commune of 1871 the Paris workers put forward the demands for a ceiling on wages and for the eligibility and revocability of all officials. These demands had not been - and could not have been - anticipated in Marx's writings. When the first soviets appeared in Russia in 1905 their significance was not apparent to Lenin or to the Bolsheviks. They had not been anticipated in any Party programme. But both Marx and Lenin were to incorporate the autonomous creations of the French and Russian workers into their own theoretical frameworks. It is a symptom of the degeneration of the contemporary Left that nothing similar has happened - or been felt necessary - in relation to recent events in France.

WHAT WAS NEW ?

The pamphlet under review is like a piece of Gruyère cheese, full of holes and with a thick and rather mouldy rind. It fails to recognize any of the new phenomena (new in themselves or new to traditional theory) witnessed earlier this year in France. It fails to grasp the tremendous

implications of the new type of issue ('self-management') around which the struggle was initially fought. The question of nationalization, plugged by revolutionaries for decades, just did not enter anyone's mind. Isn't this worthy of comment?

The traditional organizations, confronted with a human flood tide of this size, were initially swept aside. The massive influx into them, prophesied by sundry revolutionaries for years just did not materialise. In fact these hollow shells only retained any residual influence to the extent that people had reservations as to their own capacity to manage things for themselves. This isn't even sensed. Instead the pamphlet learnedly dissects the minor fluctuations of the CGT and CFDT votes, without stressing that less than 20% of French workers belong to a union of any kind - and without seeking to assess the deep significance of that phenomenon, at a time when 10 million workers are prepared to occupy their factories in the biggest general strike in history.

The pamphlet does not sense the new specific weight now to be allocated in the revolutionary process to previously marginal layers of society, to new strata of the working class or even to new age groups. For instance, never before in history has one seen massive and militant political demonstrations of school boys aged 15 or 16.

Nor does the pamphlet recognize the new dynamic through which the struggle unfurled, a dynamic which is itself a product of the increasing bureaucratisation of all social institutions under modern capitalism. In a society where everything is planned



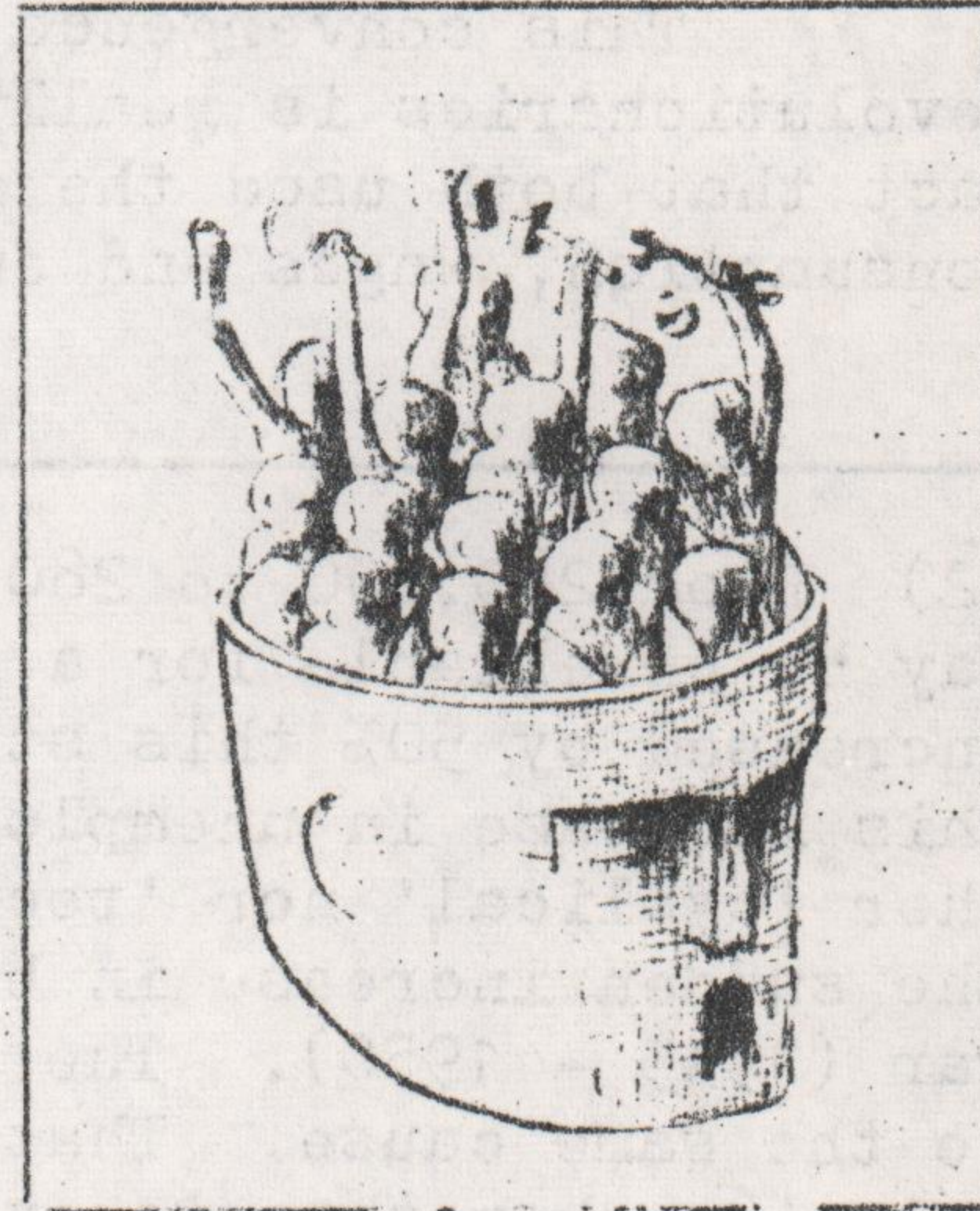
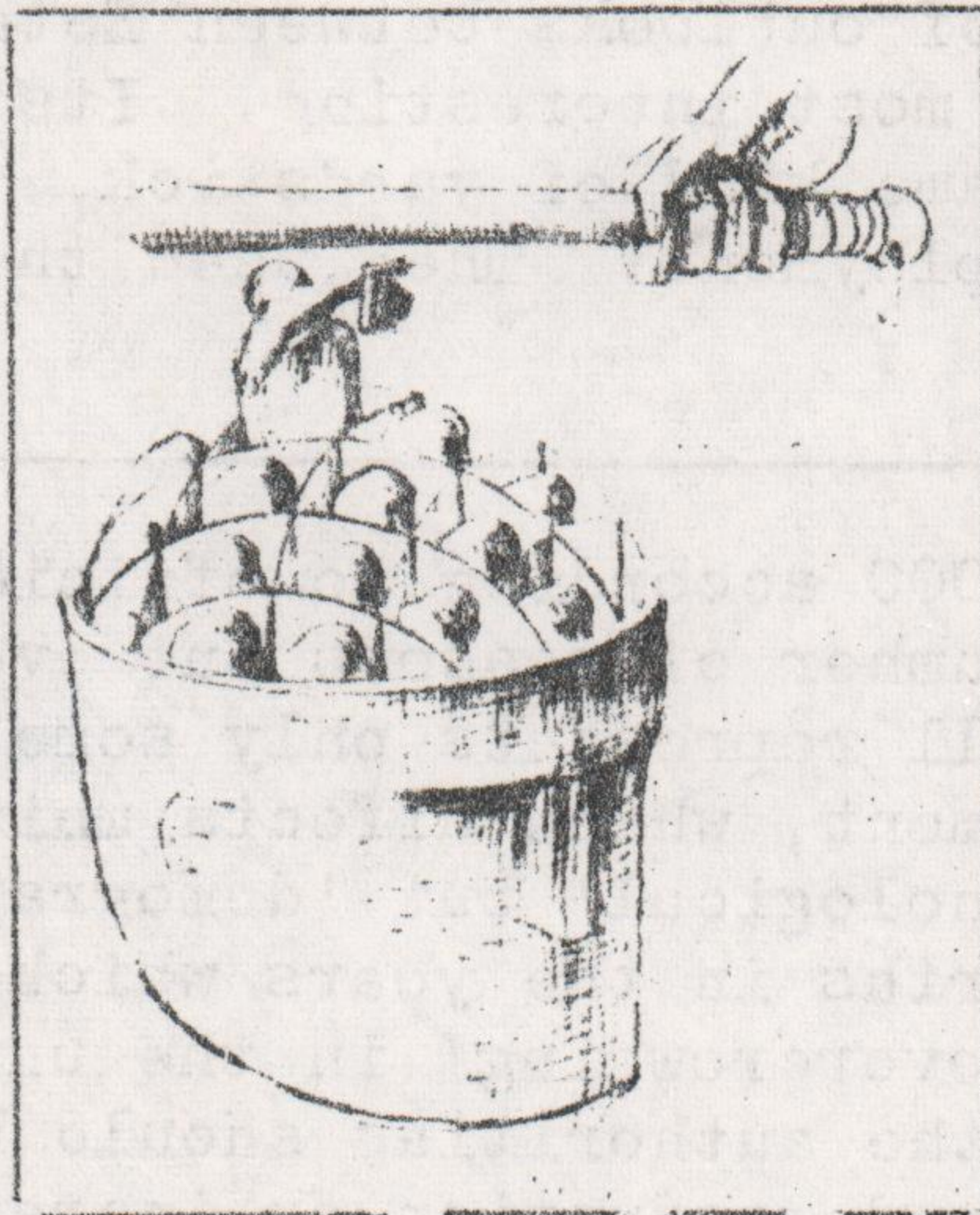
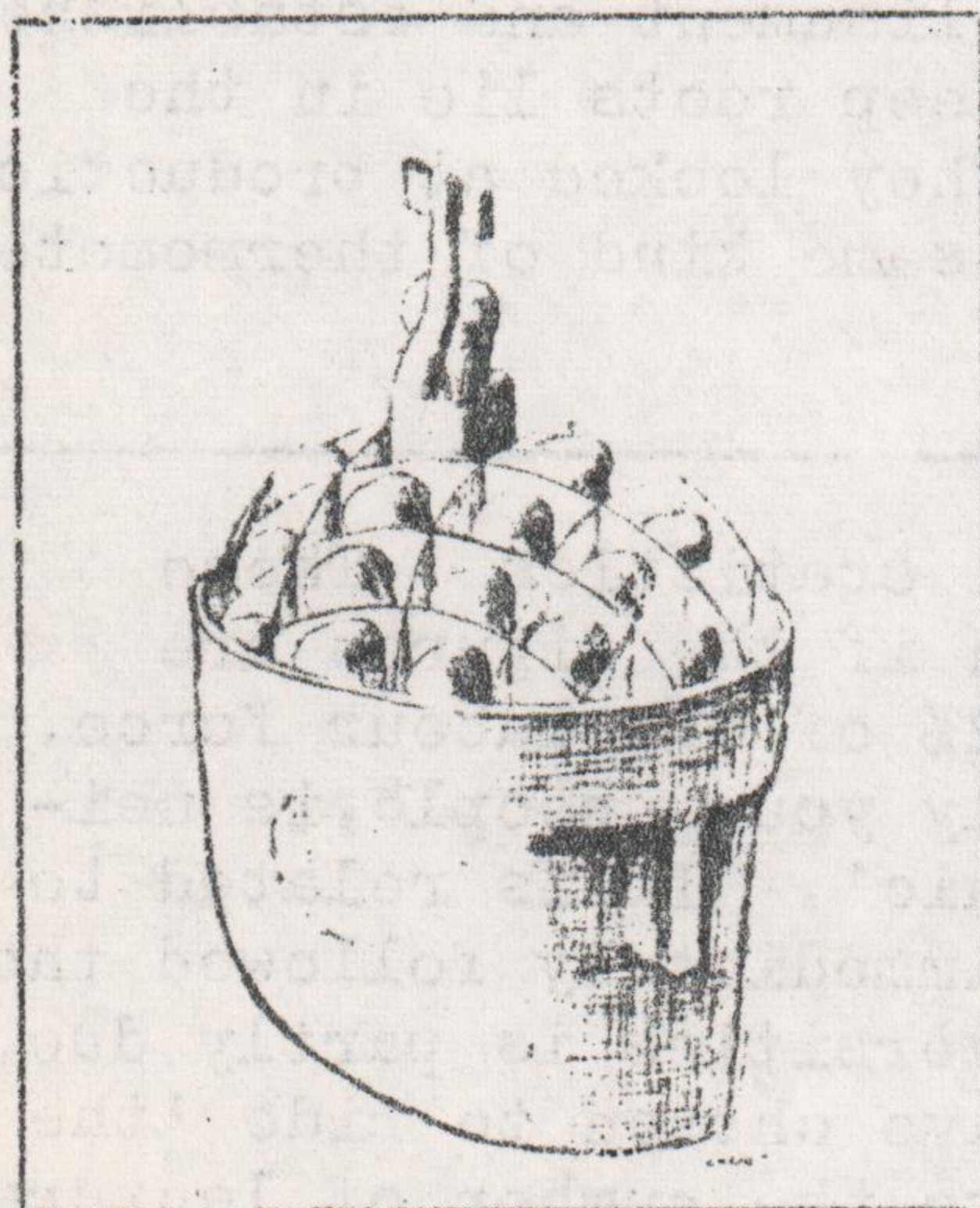
and anticipated (except that the manipulated should erupt against their manipulation) deliberate and systematic 'provocation' - like that indulged in by the March 22 Movement - can, and did, have profound repercussions. The new revolutionaries (whose ideas and style of action aren't even suspected as a new element in the situation) clearly anticipated the bureaucratic responses to their pinpricks, each of which succeeded in escalating the conflict in the desired direction.

In its conclusions, the Cliff-Birchall pamphlet goes no further than to echo what Trotsky wrote about the French events... of June 1936. (Trotsky's views were probably already out of date at that time.) In discussing, finally, what is now needed in Britain, the authors come down - yes, wait for it - for a Revolutionary Party built on the principles of 'democratic centralism', the latter defined straight out of L.D.B.'s writings of... 1924. Parturiunt montes; nascetur ridiculus mus.(1)

The French events of May and June 1968 have sounded the death knell of Western bureaucratic capitalist society. But they also herald the end of all those 'revolutionary' groups whose basic concepts of 'hierarchically structured leadership' so integrally reflect the society around them that they fail to recognize that the masses themselves have already gone beyond these conceptions. The decomposition of 'vanguardist' politics will be an integral part of the decomposition of bourgeois-bureaucratic authoritarianism in general. When this dog dies its fleas will die with it.

For revolutionaries who want to understand events (and not just tail-end them or live them as visitations from outer space) the upheaval in France has profound theoretical implications. In this article we can only formulate some of the more urgent questions which no one seems to be asking, let alone seeking to answer.

(1) 'The mountains are in labour: an absurd mouse will be born'.



NONE SO BLIND ...

1. The most clear and obvious thing about the French events is that, a month before they took place, their imminence and quality was clear and obvious to no one. Why didn't either the French Establishment - or the French revolutionaries - anticipate what was about to happen?

Gaullism was about to enter its tenth year. It basked in complacent self-confidence. It had 'modernised' the French economy, extricated France from the Algerian imbroglio, broken free of the American embrace, developed a French Hydrogen Bomb, even cleaned up the facades of the Louvre and of the Opéra. Over this period the gross national product had been increasing at an average rate of 5% per annum (in volume terms, i.e. at constant prices) and real wages by about the same amount. True, over the last 18 months, unemployment had been rising slightly (2) but by and large the economic basis of the regime seemed fairly stable. Not even the most percipient of Gaullists could have sensed the social cataclysm that lay immediately ahead.

But neither had this been sensed by the revolutionaries. A perusal of Voix Ouvrière, Révoltes, or Avant-Garde for the early months of 1968 gives no inkling of awareness that France was on the threshold of a major convulsion. The content of these papers could have been written at any time during the last 10 (or 20, or 30) years. They contained the usual denunciations of the economic policies of the government, the usual 'exposures' of the 'betrayals' of the CGT and of the Communist Party (combined with descriptions of perennially unsuccessful attempts to capture positions within these outfits), the usual prognostications as to the likelihood of slump in the more or less distant future (on account of the 'unsurmountable economic contradictions of capitalism'), the customary denunciation of the latest crime of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and the ritual epilogue: the need to build the Revolutionary Party of leninist type (of which each tendency saw itself as the sole, historically-pre-determined nucleus). Early in 1968, all this was being recited as usual, but without any special sense of urgency.

This convergence of outlooks between Establishment and established revolutionaries is really most interesting. Its deep roots lie in the fact that both used the same kind of yardstick. They looked at production, consumption, wages and employment. They used the same kind of thermometer

(2) From 240,000 to 280,000 according to official statistics. These may be unreliable for a number of reasons but even if the figures are increased by 50% this still represents only some 2% of the labour force. This increase in unemployment, which affects mainly young people, is neither 'cyclical' nor 'technological' but 'demographic'. It is related to the sudden increase in births in the years which immediately followed the war (1945 - 1950). The 'overcrowding' in the universities is partly due to the same cause. That the authorities should have chosen to ride 'the bulge' rather than to expand production or increase the number of lecture halls is another question.

to assess the clinical condition of the body politic. They both looked for the same kind of symptoms of possible disease. Neither seemed aware that new diseases might develop, with symptoms of an entirely new kind, or that the thermometer itself might now be quite the wrong kind of instrument with which to diagnose them. From opposite sides of the (then largely metaphorical) barricades they shared a common outlook on life. When Marx said that the dominant ideas of each epoch were the ideas of its ruling class, little did he foresee how deeply true this statement would one day become.

It is of little concern to revolutionaries that the bourgeoisie should have been incapable of foreseeing the crisis towards which it was heading. What should concern them, however, are the shortcomings of their own philosophy, with its bold claim to be the means 'not only of interpreting the world, but of changing it'.

We don't want to be misunderstood. Our critique is not that traditional theory failed to predict the precise moment when the upheaval would take place. It's not a question of faulty revolutionary chronometry. (Only the crudest determinists have ever attempted to use Marxism in this way.) It is a question of whether established marxist categories can now provide even an elementary insight into the kind of upheaval that is on the historical agenda. In relation to France, they clearly failed. Why? And what are the implications of this failure? What would aircraft pilots say of a brand of radar that didn't even suspect, in the immediate vicinity, the presence of a mountain 20,000 feet high?

'With the inexorability of a law of nature, capitalist production begets its own negation'.

K. Marx, 'Capital',
(Everyman Edition) p.846.



NEW CRITERIA NEEDED

2. The second lot of questions flow automatically from the first. Are the traditional criteria (level of employment, level of consumption, etc.) still adequate in assessing the social tensions within a given society and hence the proximity or otherwise of a revolutionary upheaval? Or do they need to be replaced or amplified by other criteria, more difficult to quantitate (sense of alienation, sense of dissatisfaction with the nature of work or the quality of life, rejection of established values, gap between expectations and reality, desire to break out of the proletarian condition, whatever the level of wages, etc.). The main danger here is to avoid a lapse into mysticism. But even marxists must admit that 'man does not live by bread alone'...

Both bourgeois and revolutionary historians have until now seen the preconditions of social revolution in mainly economic terms. Men have revolted because the social system has been incapable of providing them with the basic economic necessities of life. Past revolutionary upheavals have tended to occur in conditions of economic duress, or in the wake of wars, or both (Paris 1871; Russia, 1905 and 1917; Germany, 1918; Hungary, 1919; the British General Strike, 1926; the Belgian General Strike, 1961). This has never been a thoroughly satisfactory explanation of revolutionary upheavals (Spain 1936 and Hungary 1956 have always been notoriously difficult to interpret on this basis). We believe this kind of interpretation is likely to be less and less satisfactory in the future.

The French thunderbolt fell out of a fairly clear economic sky. The students whose struggle played so important a role were not starving. Over 90% of them were of bourgeois or petty bourgeois origin. The workers at Sud-Aviation and Renault, who initiated the factory occupations, were among the best paid in the country. The 'traditional' criteria do not help one understand the real nature of such events.

We don't doubt that those who are unable to develop a new idea of their own will now devote their energy and time to skillful use of the 'retrospectoscope'. They will belatedly discern in the pattern of industrial struggles in France, during the early months of 1968, the obvious harbingers of what in fact followed. The pamphlet under review does this at some length. The endeavour is rather pointless however. The man-hours lost through strikes during 1967 or during the first 3 months of 1968 have certainly been exceeded on many occasions during other arbitrary 3 or 12 month periods of the Gaullist reign. The fairly recent police violence against workers at Rhodiaceta (Lyon), Caen and Redon had had its bloody antecedents during the great miners' strike of 1949 and in the Charonne massacre of 1962. The level of unemployment may have risen from 1.5% to 2% of the labour force during the last few months but this in itself hardly represents the transgression of some critical point below which nothing happens and above which everything suddenly becomes possible (unemployment levels incidentally have been consistently higher in Britain).

One has to look elsewhere for the beginnings of an interpretation. The 'old mole of history' had been burrowing deep. The bureaucratic society had generated new tensions of its own - some of which are clearly

The pictures on the next 2 pages illustrate significant scenes of the French upheaval of May 1968. The first shows a confrontation of students and CRS in the Latin Quarter. The second shows a mass meeting being held within the Renault factory at Billancourt. The Communist Party did everything in its power to prevent contact being established between workers and students. (See Solidarity Pamphlet No.30, 'Paris: May 1968' for an eye witness account of the events.

anticipated in Cardan's 'Modern Capitalism and Revolution'.(3) The gulf between expectations and reality had been steadily widening and this not only in relation to consumption. So had the gulf between order-givers and order-takers, at all levels of society. Attitudes had been changing - even attitudes to the presence of 400,000 unemployed. Traditional values had been disintegrating. Whole new layers of society had been proletarianised, not according to the marxist model of absolute or relative pauperisation, but in the sense of a profound transformation of the nature of their work. The increasing bureaucratization of society at all levels had not only rendered the traditional organization meaningless for hundred of thousands of young people, but had also ensured that those in authority were less and less capable of understanding and controlling a reality whose real nature constantly eluded them.

It is on the basis of considerations such as these - however tenuous and inadequately defined at the moment - that one should attempt a reconstruction of revolutionary theory. Ideas cannot remain static while reality changes - nor can a new reality be grasped without a revolution in ideas. Religion may reflect a neurotic insecurity when confronted with the unknown. It is a form of false consciousness. Traditional theory is now in danger of playing exactly the same role.

But there is nothing as painful as a new idea. Some will deny the need for any kind of theoretical framework or - at most - will cling to a few primitive slogans (state: bad; self-activity: good). Others will prefer to hang on to a schema which they sense to be inadequate rather than embark on the difficult yet imperative task now confronting serious revolutionaries - that of the collective elaboration of a new revolutionary theory.

3. Why did the revolutionary upheaval start among the students? Why did they struggle with such militancy and courage? Was their revolt just a 'spark' or 'fuse' which 'detonated' the working class? Or has it a deeper significance at its own level?

Two attitudes seem to be emerging on this subject. Both are inadequate.

One attitude, epitomised in the Black Dwarf (and also put forward in some of the writings of the German SDS) sees the students as the 'new revolutionary vanguard'. It assigns to them the role assigned to the proletariat in classical revolutionary theory. It more or less explicitly puts forward the view that the working class is becoming or has become integrated into the 'affluent society' and that it has lost all revolutionary potential.

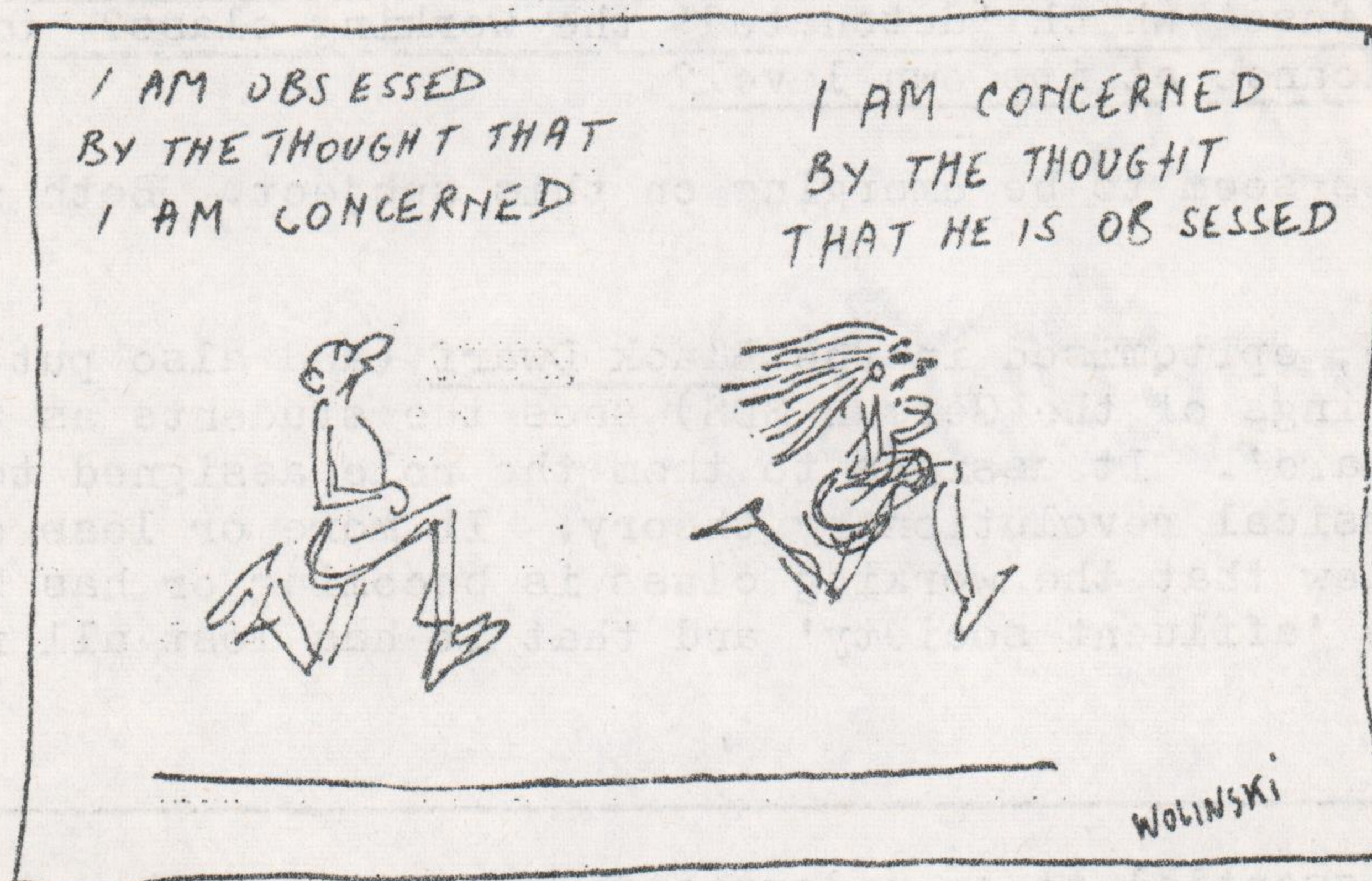
(3) This book is essential to an understanding of our epoch. A third reprinting of 1000 copies is under way. Order now (4/3, post free) from H. Russell, 53A Westmoreland Rd., Bromley, Kent.

Cliff and Birchall correctly take Wright Mills and Marcuse to task for 'denying the revolutionary potentiality of the working class' and for 'describing students and intellectuals as the main vehicle for revolutionary action now and in the future'. But it is interesting - although hardly surprising - that they fail to identify the real fount of this pernicious doctrine. In 1901 Kautsky (in his draft programme for the Austrian Social-Democratic Party) wrote that it was 'absolutely untrue' that socialist consciousness was a 'necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle'. 'Modern socialist consciousness could arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge'. 'The vehicle of science was not the proletariat but the bourgeois intelligentsia'. 'Socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian struggle from without'. (4) Lenin, in his 'What Is To Be Done' endorsed Kautsky's views on this matter describing them as a 'profoundly true and importance utterance'. (5) The ideological premise for this conclusion was Lenin's belief that 'the working class, by its own efforts, is able only to develop trade union consciousness'. (6) It requires no great effort to understand all the substitutionist practices that must inevitably flow - and have inevitably flowed - from such a conception. In their absolute rejection of the notion that the working class, through its own experiences in modern industrial society, can, does and must autonomously accede to a socialist consciousness, Marcuse and Lenin have more in common than the followers of either would like to believe.

(4) Neue Zeit (1901 - 1902), XX, I, No.3, p.79.

(5) Lenin, Selected Works, vol.II, p. 61.

(6) Ibid., p. 33.



Eros and Civilisation

The fallacy of this first attitude should be obvious. If the working class cannot come to understand socialism - and want it - there can be no socialist perspective. There can only be the replacement of one ruling elite by another. However 'enlightened' and 'revolutionary' the new elite may be, it will sooner or later come to express its own interests, rather than those of the working class.

The second attitude to students (shared by most 'orthodox' marxists) is less naive but just as short-sighted. It correctly sees the students as a minority in modern industrial society, the need for the majority to move if anything fundamental is to happen and the fact that this majority, in advanced industrial countries, is the working class. Its inadequacy is that it cannot transcend the conception of student action as just a 'catalyst', 'fuse' or 'spark', capable of igniting the powder kegs of industrial discontent but devoid of any deeper significance at its own level.

This is to underestimate the increasing importance (and increasing vulnerability) today of both the university and of education generally. Both help maintain the social cohesion of class society. Reinforcing patriarchal authority, both help perpetuate (at the ideological level) the prevailing relations of hierarchy and domination. In the long run both prove more effective mechanisms for helping the slaves accept their slavery than either police or prison. In the realm of ideas they provide the basic mechanism for the replication of bourgeois-bureaucratic society, of its values and assumptions, generation after generation. But the lycées and universities of France are now full of students, with heads full of 'subversive' thoughts. The night-long discussions of last May, in occupied schools and faculties, among young people, will leave indelible marks.

The university churns out the technologists, sociologists, industrial psychologists, computer programmers, managers, time and motion experts, in short the whole administrative personnel of the modern industrial machine. In France substantial numbers of students began to refuse the future role assigned to them as 'watchdogs of capital'. If this mood lasts (and particularly if it spreads beyond the faculties of sociology, philosophy or psychology), the effects could be profound. In May even such traditional disciplines as medicine and law were not immune from the general ferment. Closing particular faculties or even whole universities would be a double-edged weapon for the authorities, an open admission of failure, a permanent mutilation of the liberal image they have been at such pains to project.

Workers on strike can stop assembly lines. But a deep implantation of 'subversives' in universities could disrupt the mass production of conformist cadres, and prove an additional spoke in the wheels of bourgeois society. The Establishment can tolerate students demanding bigger credits for higher education. It cannot tolerate demands that the universities 'be converted into Red bases', or that they 'provide facilities for continuous political forums, open to all,' etc. Revolutionaries in

France now see the universities as permanent foci of contestation of bourgeois ideology, permanent running sores on the body of bourgeois society. The current backwardness of the student movement in Britain makes it difficult for us soberly to conceive of this here, but last year few in France would have thought it possible either. The theory of French 'exceptionalism' - based on such undoubted realities as the rigidity of official French institutions, the widespread hatred of the 'flics' (cops) in France, and the undoubted French aptitude for critical revolutionary thought - should not be taken too far.

These aspects of what the students did in May 1968 differ from what 'intellectuals' have done in previous revolutions (1871, 1917 or even in Hungary in 1956). Then, they helped articulate popular demands. Now, by making radical demands of their own, demands which cannot be encompassed by the system, they are opening a second front in the onslaught against bourgeois society. Fully aware of the dangers of being trapped in a 'ghetto' of university politics, the modern French revolutionaries also reject the false alternative of struggling for purely student demands or total and exclusive immersion in the working class fight. This new type of consciousness isn't even hinted at in the Cliff-Birchall pamphlet.

The totality of the student rejection of bourgeois society explains the totality of their dedication to the revolutionary cause and the totality of their involvement in the struggle on the streets. It was not the product of economic misery. It reflected something more fundamental. The students were being denied the right to be themselves - and had become aware of the fact. They were not risking loss of sight and limb (amid the gas grenades and batons of the CRS) for a 3% annual increase in the size of the educational budget. They were fighting for the right to reappropriate what bourgeois society was taking from them. When this dormant consciousness is aroused in other layers of the population, the effect will be irresistible. This is the real lesson and hope of the French events of May 1968.

M.B.

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THE TROUBLES IN THE VALLEY

This article describes the student upheaval at Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, in May 1968. Mike Gonzales, an active participant, discusses the inadequacy of the 'liberal' critique of the university hierarchy and points out how 'liberal' forms of action played into the hands of the authorities.

Recent events at Essex University are no isolated phenomenon. Capitalism could draw some crumb of comfort if they were. The context is one of a growing student revolt against the institutions and power structure of a bureaucratic and authoritarian society, expressed in the University and elsewhere through an administrative machine that seeks to control and mould the life of individuals.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Essex struggle was that this machinery of power was exposed, and its basis in repression made clear beyond doubt. Despite our own efforts the protest was articulated in liberal terms. It sought to use against the Establishment its own liberal mythology: the language of 'justice', of 'moral authority', of 'human error'. At this level it had no effect. The mask was torn away, to lay bare the same power relationships that characterise any institution or organization that functions within modern capitalism, be it factory, school, prison or government department.

What I shall describe is really the suicide of the liberal position, and how a profound understanding emerged among more and more Essex students. They learned that structured power, bureaucracy and 'directed progress' are the sworn enemies of direct and democratic self-administration, as much in the University as in the political system which it palely reflects.

The first demonstration

At half past four on May 7 about 150 people arrived at a Chemistry lecture given by a scientist from Porton Down, Britain's very own Chemical and Biological Warfare Centre. Few of us would normally have attended. The lecture was on a highly technical topic, but we were not prepared to allow the academic jargon to conceal the basic fact: Dr. Inch, the scientist concerned, worked within an institution whose primary object was to find more efficient means of mass genocide. (Germ warfare has an added advantage in that it destroys only people and leaves property intact!)

We had prepared a fairly dramatic demonstration, an indictment of CBW that detailed some of its effects. Dr. Inch, however, was not interested (after all, he was only a 'cog in the machine' - pace Adolf Eichmann) and he left the room. We followed him, stopped him again in a nearby corridor, and insisted that he listen to our indictment and then justify his own work in the light of it. Until then, it had been an ordinary protest demonstration.

Enter the fuzz

It wasn't easy to believe the University could be that stupid, but blue uniforms suddenly appeared at the end of the corridor. Why had the Fuzz been called? To 'protect' Dr. Inch from us? Or to protect a war machine from the curious gaze of the uninitiated, in the name of 'security' and the 'public interest'?

Last term we had gained experience when the University had tried to victimise seven students after a demonstration against the well-known liberal democrat Enoch Powell. Then, as now, their slogan had been the 'protection of academic freedom'. The students had prevented the disciplinary process to take place then. The University were taking no chances this time. So the Fuzz came.

Colchester Police aren't used to the tactics of Grosvenor Square. There were scuffles as they climbed over sitting demonstrators, broke through cordons of linked arms and faced unnerving number chants whenever they got too 'vigorous'. Later they tried a few punitive arrests, but couldn't hang on to their victims as they were pulled back again by 30 or 40 fellow students, to the tune of 'No arrests'. Finally the police left, still confused as to why they had been called. And they weren't alone. Why had they been called? To protect Porton Down? Because the University staff were genuinely panicky? Or perhaps to provoke a confrontation between students and administration and reassert the quasi-divine authority of the vice-Chancellor, who had clipped so far from the angels during the previous six months.

A senseless victimisation

The University, of course, wasn't going to let it end there. On Friday, May 10, at lunchtime, three students were told that they were to be excluded from the University for six weeks. No reasons were given. There was to be no appeal.

A meeting was called immediately. 300 people came. It was decided to occupy two sets of offices during the afternoon and to meet again at 5.30 pm in the foyer of one of the residential towers. By coincidence, the three students who were supposed to leave by 5.30 were on the 13th

floor. And we were certainly not going to let any bailiffs through to them. By 7.00 pm it was clear the University had taken the hint.

We then marched to the Vice-Chancellor's house to deliver our demand that the students be unconditionally reinstated. There must have been 250 of us at his door. Not surprisingly Sloman had run away a few minutes before. So we went back to the University, and met again to discuss tactics. We decided to hold a meeting on Monday, May 13 at 11.30 am. We would deliver our demands to a meeting of the whole University and if they were not answered, we would act immediately. Our plan was to occupy some part of the building until the University gave in. By Monday every member of the University knew about the meeting, and we were ready for mass action. But events then took an unexpected turn.

Why those 3?

What lay behind the Vice-Chancellor's action in excluding the 3 students. At its base I think was a conception of political organization as firm as it is wrong. The University had no idea of what was meant by spontaneous organization or by a leaderless group. The conspiratorial notions of Cold War politics hold fast. All political movement is met with an obdurate search for the small band of arch-conspirators without whom no movement can be explained. But Essex has no Tariq Ali! Indeed very few of the militants belong to any political grouping - a common phenomenon in the student movement. How then to explain the political activity of Essex students?

There is, in the bureaucratic mind, no room for a general political awakening, for the development within a group of a common programme and a common aim. There can be no such thing as a widespread rebellion against the forms of a capitalist society, a rebellion whose object is not to gain power like everyone else, but to destroy the very structure in which the power struggle can occur. One need only look at the press during the Essex affair to see how the paranoiac search for the 'international communist conspiracy' replaced any attempt at serious analysis. (When one looks at the actions of Communist parties in France or Britain, the concept of communist conspiracy has a particularly ironic ring!) Yet that remained the strongest conviction among the Establishment. It is this belief in 'ringleaders' that explains the senseless and arbitrary selection of three people. The next fortnight was to show how wrong the University was.

Monday morning

The meeting on Monday was enormous. We estimated over 1100 people, something like 80% of the University. The atmosphere was strangely mixed, floating between great tension and equally great elation at the efficiency of our own organization. It proved to be a mixed blessing. We certainly had support, even massive support. But it was unlikely that such a meeting

would endorse militant action of any kind, for the indignation that bound most of the audience together worked on many different levels. For some, (a substantial minority), direct action was the only solution; for others it was enough to evoke the 'laws' of natural justice and wait for the Establishment to acknowledge their validity. A small number were set on getting the Vice-Chancellor off the hook by taking a hard supporting line. It might be as well here to try to analyze the 'forces' involved and to document the language which was to identify them.

The militants

The militants probably numbered 200. Our assessment of the strategic possibilities might differ. Our unity, however, came from two basic premisses. First, 'extra parliamentarianism' (that is, the belief that bureaucratic procedures were nothing more than a mystifying weapon of the system, whereby the illusion of democracy and participation could be sustained). The language of negotiation concealed only impotence, but it was persuasive. We all recognized that the only hope for effective action lay in a determined opposition to all such forms. For us, this was fundamental. The second thing that united us was a political analysis. Our identity had been formed largely in action, and consolidated through an analysis of University problems. This analysis burst domestic bounds. It saw its objectives in terms of a political struggle within society as a whole. We recognized that the student struggle was an aspect of a wider revolutionary movement, of a total political reality. The University in a technologized Britain has a very specific function. Its structure reflected that function.

On the Monday morning, we came believing firmly that all forms of negotiation were fruitless and that only direct action could provide a meaningful challenge to the system, as well as the focus for political analysis and a sustained political activity. For in that situation we could use the language of revolutionary change, the language of collective decision-taking.

The moderates

The moderates defy identification. They range over the whole liberal spectrum. Their basic tactic was pressure and persuasion. Their objective was not to break down the system, but rather to call it to order, to reform it by example from within. They would speak of a 'moral obligation to admit to having erred'. They would call upon the Vice-Chancellor to recognize the University 'community' arrayed before him for the first time. They referred to a 'lack of communication', a 'failure to understand the needs of the majority'. They believed that although the Vice-Chancellor's action had demonstrated gaps in the system, these gaps could be repaired with the system's own available tools. To put it more clearly, they believed that the University structure could cope with the new demands for participation, for recognition of the students and staff as a meaningful pressure group. They held that the system was flexible enough to take

their views into account and adapt to them. Their error was the typical reformist error: the faults in the structure were no more than reparable omissions, and not the contradictions upon which the system as a whole was based.

The moderates were clearly a majority, though by the end of the week many of them had realised that the liberal position was riddled with contradictions. For once they had demanded to see democracy at work. What they actually saw was that the democratic slogans were a smokescreen behind which the ruling class still skulked, power still firmly held between finger and thumb.

The conservatives

There remained the 'conservative' wing, united for the status quo and 'good order', and demanding a hard line against those who would 'destroy the University'. In their scheme change equals destruction, democracy is chaos and militancy is the 'wicked conspiracy against right authority'. This view was mainly to be found among members of Senate and the Administration whose own power was at stake.

One or two brave members of the Senate defied the three line whip; one resigned later in the week, announcing to a mass meeting that 'your decisions are morally and aesthetically just and beautiful - Senate's are neither'. As for the rest, the issue was clear. Authority was under threat, the order of the University was in danger. The scheme could not be broken. Orders came from above, not below. And that was that.

A diversion

That is how the forces stood at the meeting. The student demand was clear: unconditional reinstatement. The staff rose to add their support for the reinstatement demand. They further proposed that the University should stop for two days, to hold seminars and classes into the incident itself, the structure of the University and the wider political issues. This should be called the Free University. Effectively they were proposing a total boycott of the official University until our demand was met. Up till now the language had been defiant and totally oppositionist. The Vice-Chancellor who had been asked to come did not put in an appearance.

But at this point a new and unexpected event took place, that changed the whole emphasis of the meeting and took away some of its determination to act. A member of staff had discovered that the Vice-Chancellor's action was 'illegal'. The debate now turned on the legal question, and the impetus to act was weakened. We were talking once again the language of the system, the language of 'justice' and the 'moral law'. In the naive belief that it could make a difference, a delegation was sent to the Vice-Chancellor to try to persuade him to relent in this light. This proved fruitless. A new meeting was called for that evening, when a plan for action would be presented. We were to occupy the Hexagon restaurant and remain there until our demands were realised.

Before this could be done, however, news came that the police had again been called. A section of militants rushed out of the hall in a panic to occupy and erect the barricades. The damage was done. A mistake in tactics had split the militants. Those already occupying the restaurant felt the confusion and morale dropped alarmingly. It was clear that a battle had been lost, and they came back to the meeting. It was really the last chance for mass-based direct action. In the confusion the moderates had asserted themselves. The future now appeared in exclusively liberal terms: negotiation, persuasion, 'constructive protest'. From then on we made our demands of the Senate and the Vice-Chancellor.

The crisis of the liberal position

The atmosphere that had existed within the University until then was one of a growing hostility towards bureaucratic forms. Negotiation had been seen during the Enoch Powell affair to be less effective, in real terms, than direct militant action. We had been confident that the Vice-Chancellor's arbitrary decision would confirm that frame of mind and that we could risk a call for mass action in the context of a meeting.

Our assessment was probably valid until the legal question seemed to open a new avenue within the system. We felt this misconception had already been tested to the nth. degree. For the moderates, however, it remained a powerful argument, offering hope that a liberal set-up could in fact be democratic. The language of appeal had won a tactical victory over the language of attack. At that moment we had not yet established a firm enough political position, and we were overwhelmed by the wave of support that moved from our project for direct action towards the notion of giving the 'community' and its rules one last chance to prove its flexibility.

The political gain of a confrontation with the system as a whole was lost for the time being. Yet for a whole week people had become involved in an extremely positive movement - in a new kind of collective identification. Many learned a very real lesson during the succeeding days - that it was possible to act as a group, without leaders or power enclaves, for the organization of a satisfying and exhilarating project for living. That was the achievement of the Essex affair in terms of those who took part in it. It was a profound political achievement for it linked an exposure of the power structure with the demonstration of the ineffectiveness of the liberal position.

Direct democracy

Tuesday morning (May 14) was the first day of the Free University of Essex. Telegrams of support had been arriving steadily since the Friday. They now bore a new address: the Free University. The first day was active: the Free University offered seminars on University structure, demonstrations, free speech and many other topics. The afternoon brought

a seminar on the press. It went on through Wednesday, culminating in an excellent, though terrifying teach-in on germ warfare. It would be impossible to estimate how many meetings - some tactical, some conciliatory, some informative - took place during those two days.

All the meetings were open. No distinctions were made between staff and students, or between senior and junior members. Everybody had equal voice and equal authority; even the red-faced members of Senate had to wait their turn to speak - an unspeakable humiliation! Intellectually and politically, this was an immensely stimulating time, and it brought with it the simple but profound understanding that a group of people can organize themselves, can form a new and creative relationship without hierarchies of decision-making. During that week, in one small place, direct democracy actually worked.

Meanwhile Senate met for eleven hours. The battle between hard and soft line raged again. One thing was certain: they were going to do everything they could to retain and consolidate their power. The Vice-Chancellor had refused to yield, and Senate agreed. For it was inconceivable that an institution should exist without a well-defined scheme of authority!

Senate crucifies itself

On Thursday afternoon the Free University assembled to hear Senate's decision. We had received a statement that morning which gave a résumé of Senate's position. It was a confused document, which argued that the Vice-Chancellor had been right to exclude the students, but that the Senate was prepared to set up an independent enquiry to investigate whether 'free speech' had been violated. Mind you, they had already decided what free speech was. They defined it in the light of what had happened on May 7. The Committee was to use that definition as its terms of reference. We were to be judged under a law passed after and as a result of 'the crime'. And the students were still not reinstated. Senate's document was rejected out of hand.

The Vice-Chancellor and his Senate came to the meeting to justify their decision. What followed was for many an astonishing experience. The Vice-Chancellor was called upon to explain himself, and could offer nothing but his own right to hold authority. His speech lasted half an hour or so; it was a display of unequalled obstinacy and blindness. The basic message was this: I have the authority in this institution as given by the University Charter (for Statute Right, read Divine Right). It is no concern of yours whether I was right or wrong in using it. I have the authority to blunder and not step back. You have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do. Only the Senate can do that and they have supported me.

For an hour questions came to him from all parts of the floor. Will you not recognize the proven fact that you were wrong? Can you continue to ignore the fact that the whole University is protesting, that

the whole University is sitting under your nose and demanding that you take back a fundamentally wrong decision? The Vice-Chancellor simply did not understand the questions; he could not answer them, and made no attempt to do so. A member of Senate had actually to stand next to him and explain what the questions meant. Albert Sloman, known in the University world for his 'liberalism' simply did not understand what it meant that the whole University had gathered there that afternoon. Even to his closest allies, he was exposing the clear fact that he did not understand the meaning of the word democracy. The only language he understood was that of authority and power. After each question he got back on to the rostrum looking blank and uncomprehending, to repeat the formula of divine right. After him, other members of Senate addressed the meeting. They admitted that they had insufficient evidence and that their decision was based only on the exercise of arbitrary authority. And that was all. We could like it or lump it.

For the liberals this was a tragic moment. Against Albert Sloman and the Senate they had used the liberal myths that he himself had formulated. They had used all the slogans of democracy against the so-called democrat. But he no longer understood them. He could not grasp that someone might one day take these slogans seriously and demand their realisation. Behind the myths, the reality was power and the ideology of incorporation. Where the question is important, authority asserts itself when the debate is over. That is the fact of liberal democracy. The meeting rejected Albert Sloman, and demanded that Senate meet within 24 hours and reinstate the students.

The climb down

On Friday, May 17, Senate met again and issued a further statement. The Senate meeting had been called on an unimportant pretext, but by taking place, the suspension of the three students was automatically ended (the suspension could only last until the second meeting of Senate, which would normally have been six weeks after the Vice-Chancellor's action).

The students had been officially suspended for 7 days, instead of the original six weeks. They would now be able to sit their exams and have their grants restored to them. The Senate, as was to be expected, had taken the cheapest, most opportunistic face-saving road out of the situation. They tried to cover their capitulation with a sanctimonious assurance that they would now find out what had actually happened, after three people had already been sentenced.

That night a bonfire was lit in the square, an amplifier set up and people danced until 2 am. This was a kind of symbolic affirmation that for the first time we had broken down the institutional barriers in our University life. We had taken over these empty functional buildings that compose the University. It marked in some ways the high point of collective identity, a sense of which persists even now, some weeks after the main events.

On Monday, May 20, Senate delivered its hammer blow. It announced that exams would take place at the normal times. It hoped that everyone would make the effort to catch up with their work. Senate knew that it held that ultimate weapon, especially at a moment when many people felt that the battle had been won. I haven't really space here to go into the question of exams. They are the essence of the present University, indeed educational system. They ensure that the student has learned well the language and techniques of the role he is to play in society. They are the best way of maintaining the characteristically vicious competitive atmosphere of British education, and one of the finest means of control that exists. (1) Anyway, the ploy worked. Many students went back to work, though as many others fought exams on their own ground. Several boycotts were proposed. But most of the staff support on which they were dependent had by now melted away. But that is another story.

Essex past and future

Although many of the issues that were raised during that fortnight are still being fought out - and will indeed provide a basis for future militant action - the 'Essex affair' really ended on May 20, thirteen days after it had begun.

Essex will never be the same again. This was not the last, but the very first step in a project whose aim is to change the structure of the University and of the society which it serves so abjectly. Acting upon the University, exposing the contradictions within its structure, is a small part of a revolutionary programme whose object must be to destroy those structures which in the name of the people trap and manipulate us. What was important about Essex was that it exposed at one level exactly how that process of manipulation and mystification works.

When Essex was opened by Albert Sloman four years ago it was a great experiment in liberalism. The much-publicized core of the liberal programme was the University's non-interference in the private lives of its members. There was to be no attempt to limit the social activity of staff or student. In an 'integrated' community we should simply be able to coexist without distinctions. We would be a community of scholars functioning in terms of the intellectual search with which we were all concerned. Fine. Except that, at the same time as he developed this theory of community, Sloman referred himself to the programme of study in the University and noted that it would be sensitive to 'the national need' and 'the needs of local industry'. So long as that concept of crude supply and demand policies lies at the basis of the University system, the notion of a university community is a myth and a diversion.

(1) See Tom Fawthrop: 'Education or Examinations' (An R.S.A. publication)

It is the same myth that says that 'the people' can in a real sense participate in a capitalist society. The contradiction is absolute, yet the mystification undeniably works well. If our job as militants is to break down those myths, and expose the reality of bureaucratic control, then the 'revolt of the nice kids' (the term belongs to the Sunday Times) was a success. We have now to evolve a political programme that will lead to a Free University that is both comprehensive and permanent. But for that we will have to change society itself.

* * * * *

EARLY STRUGGLES AGAINST THE RUSSIAN BUREAUCRACY

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