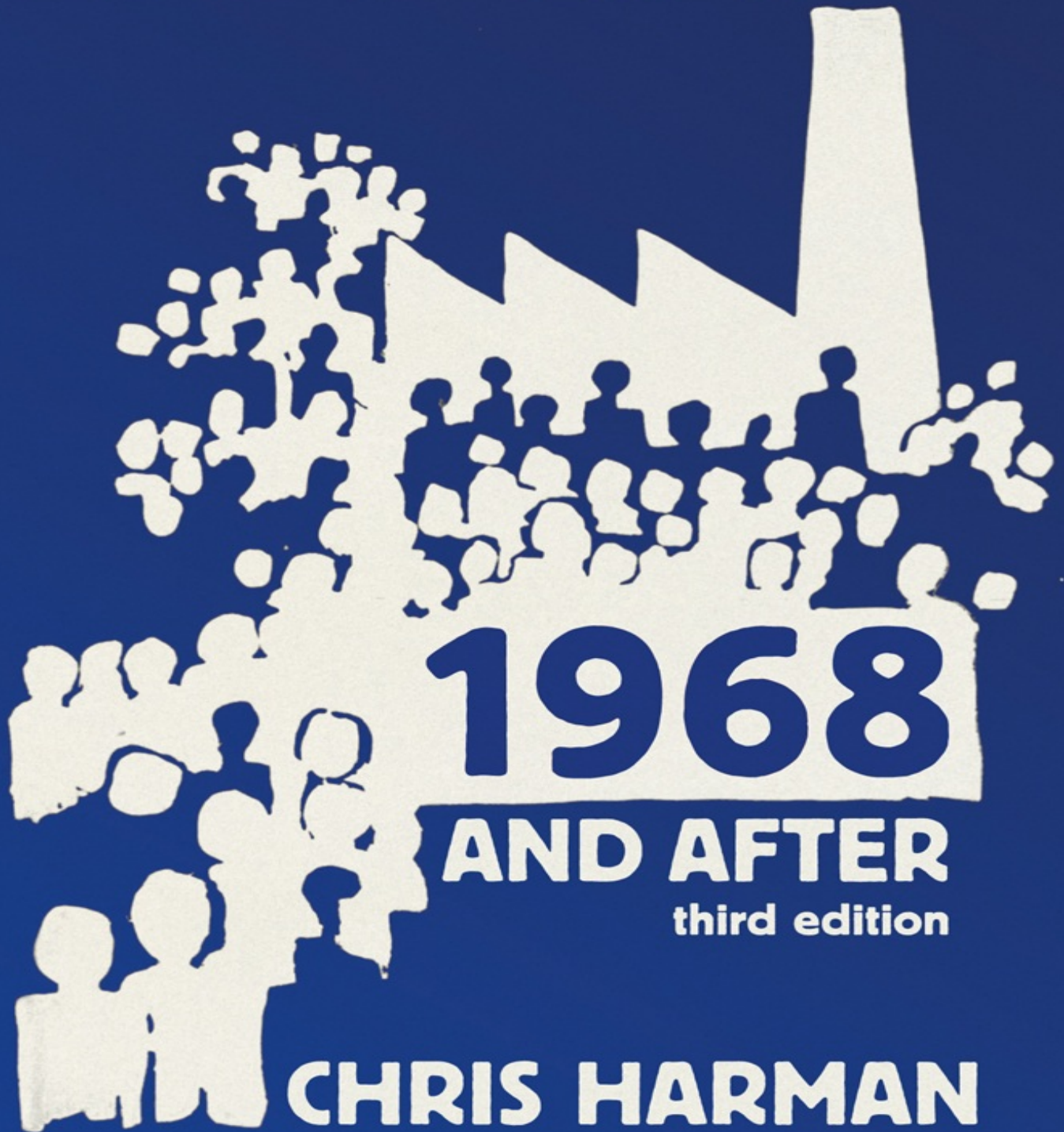


THE FIRE LAST TIME



1968

AND AFTER

third edition

CHRIS HARMAN

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*THE FIRE LAST TIME:
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Bookmarks  *Publications*

The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After
by Chris Harman

First published 1988
Second edition published 1998
Third edition published 2018

© Bookmarks Publications
c/o 1 Bloomsbury Street,
London WC1B 3QE

Cover design and typesetting
by Peter Robinson
Printed by Short Run Press

ISBN 978-1-910885-79-6 (pbk)
978-1-910885-80-2 (Kindle)
978-1-910885-81-9 (ePub)
978-1-910885-82-6 (PDF)

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Introduction to 2018 edition

To those who stayed with revolutionary politics while the going was good and have found it now convenient to get out, good riddance. To those comrades who are taking a rest, in pain, or disagreement, or from exhaustion, we'll see you again. To those who have stayed, a salute...we ain't seen nothing yet. Like the reggae singer says, 'We're going to mash down Babylon, one of these days', and we'll have May in our hearts when we do.

—David Widgery, "Ten Years for Pandora", *Socialist Review*, May 1978.¹

CHRIS HARMAN was one of those who stayed the course. Long after 1968, he continued to produce books, essays and newspaper articles, to speak at meetings, to hundreds of activists or to handfuls, to build and to attend protests, and to promote socialist ideas.² Of the mass of works he produced, *The Fire Last Time* was, in some ways, the most personal.

The book itself describes the extraordinary turn that history took in 1968. The Tet Offensive by the Vietnamese National Liberation Army, which humiliated the world's most powerful military machine, the death of Martin Luther King as anti-racist struggle raged in the US, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and, above all, the biggest ever general strike in France in May 1968—these episodes helped to set politics on a new path.

Unsurprisingly, one of the main messages contained in this book is that out of apparent apathy revolt can arrive, often surprising many of those on the left. Chris would later describe the apathy prior to 1968 as "double edged", writing that it "expressed alienation from established politics and a lack of confidence in any alternative, but also deep bitterness".³ This kind of apathy could explode into its opposite.

However, *The Fire Last Time* is not simply a chronicle of these explosions. For Chris, 1968 was just the beginning of a broader cycle of struggle. Furthermore, while the student radicals of Berkeley in the US or the Sorbonne in France are often seen in popular culture as the key figures in the rebellion of 1968, Chris traces the wider development of working class militancy in that year and through the period that followed. This includes the rising tide of industrial struggle in Britain in the early 1970s, powerful enough to sweep away a Tory government, along with the fall of the Greek and Portuguese dictatorships, and the end of Francoism in Spain.

The movements that sprang from 1968, whether directed against authoritarian dictatorships or liberal democracies in the West or against Stalinist tyranny in the East, deserve to be celebrated. Yet one of Chris's central arguments is that celebration of such movements is not enough. This book discusses not just the high points reached by these various struggles, but also how they were ultimately contained. One of the problems for the radicals in this period was that, while reacting against the sterile Stalinist politics that dominated left-wing thought, they could fall prey to what Chris would occasionally refer to as the worship of spontaneity.

It is true that political organisations that rejected revolutionary change in favour of the gradual reform of capitalism, which included the Communist Parties in the West as well as traditional social democratic parties, were caught off guard by the upsurge of protest. However, this situation would not last and by the mid-1970s a concerted effort was under way to regain the initiative and to tame workers' struggles. These efforts were reinforced by a deepening economic crisis, which demoralised workers and sapped the strength of the movements. In these conditions, revolutionary organisations were simply too small to overcome the hold of reformism and to create the space for an alternative. The result was a crisis for the revolutionary left and, eventually, a rightward shift in society.⁴

This book, then, was directed towards the goal of ensuring that the next time such a cycle of struggle erupts, the revolutionary left will have learnt the lessons of 1968 and its aftermath, and that it will be stronger and better implanted in the working class.⁵

One could read this book with only a faint awareness of Chris's own role in the struggle, for he too was a protagonist in the drama as it unfolded.⁶

When he speaks of the period in the run-up to 1968 in the chapters "The long calm" and "Slow train coming", one can almost imagine Chris as a newly radicalised socialist school student jibing at the conformity of life in Watford in 1959. By the early 1960s, he had begun studying at Leeds University, where he joined the Socialist Review Group, founded by Tony Cliff, which would later become the International Socialists and then the Socialist Workers Party. He would remain a member of these organisations for the rest of his days.

From Leeds he moved to the London School of Economics (LSE), where he studied for a PhD, never completed, under Ralph Miliband. It was at LSE, one of the storm centres of student radicalism in 1968, that he became a socialist leader of real stature. Here he participated in the LSE sit-in of 1967 against the racist regime in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which organised two huge demonstrations in 1968.

In this book Chris is characteristically modest about his own role. He presents a quote from David Widgery describing a student meeting in 1968. But Chris omits to mention, except in a buried footnote, that the student radical described speaking there is Chris himself! The original passage reads:

‘We have to be absolutely clear about this,’ said Chris Harman from the platform of the LSE Old Theatre, as he always said when starting a speech. A groan went round the theatre and Harman brandished his moped crash helmet. ‘We must be quite clear what’s happening. 1968 is a year of international revolution no less than 1793, 1830, 1848, 1917 and 1936. We are experiencing the re-birth of the international Marxist movement after over 30 years of defeat and hibernation.’ The audience of prematurely hard-bitten student lefties gathered to inaugurate the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation looked impressed. Harman, although fairly widely disliked, was also widely respected as a Marxist intransigent. When he started evoking the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Barcelona uprising, he meant it. Militants were to be seen conferring about what did actually happen in 1830.⁷

But for Chris and the few hundred members of the International Socialists drawn to the organisation, student radicalism was not sufficient. In 1970 he reflected on a new outburst of student radicalism, capturing both its vitality and its limits:

There is a good deal of life yet in the present student upsurge. It can annoy the authorities a deal more, as well as bring many more of its participants to a true comprehension of the class realities of our society. The revolutionary left must participate in it...seeing its victories as our victories. But we must also be aware of its limitations, continually pointing out that the only force for carrying through a real transformation of society lies elsewhere and that students who seriously want to solve their own problems can only do so by becoming part of a revolutionary organisation that relates to aspirations and struggles of that class.⁸

Chris did not simply play a major role in building the student movement of the 1960s, he was also crucial to reorienting many of the young radicals, directing them towards the growing workers’ movement as the force that had the power to transform society. Sabby Sagall, one of those recruited at the LSE, recalls:

Chris was...instrumental in assisting student revolutionaries make the leap from student politics to working class politics. I remember him handing me a leaflet calling for support for the Barbican building workers’ strike in 1967. It was entitled ‘Would You Scab?’ At the time, I didn’t know what the word ‘scab’ meant. But Chris patiently explained the issues involved and for many of us it was our first experience of industrial struggle.⁹

This direct engagement with the struggle powerfully informs the two chapters on Britain here: “A ripple from the storm” and “The British upturn”.

Chris took part in several meetings to mark the 40th anniversary of 1968, but, tragically, and quite unexpectedly, suffered a fatal heart attack in Egypt a year

later. Were he still alive he would, doubtless, have much to say about the global disorder now upon us. The profound instability and decay of mainstream political ideas that Chris describes in the closing chapter of the 1998 edition of this work are even more in evidence today. He would have faced that, as he always did, with an intellectual seriousness regarding the challenges for the revolutionary left.

But I have no doubt that he would also have maintained his optimism in the potential for working people to shake free of the oppression that tarnishes their lives. That unquenchable optimism was born of the period described here.

Joseph Choonara
March 2018

Prologue

EVERY SO often there is a year which casts a spell on a generation. Afterwards simply to mention it brings innumerable images to the minds of many people who lived through it—1968 was such a year.

There are millions of people throughout the world who still feel their lives were changed decisively by what happened in those 12 months. And they are not, as the media presentation today would suggest, just those who were students or hippies.

For 1968 was a year in which revolt shook at least three major governments and produced a wave of hope among young people living under many others. It was the year the peasant guerrillas of one of the world's smaller nations stood up to the mightiest power in human history. It was the year the black ghettos of the United States rose in revolt to protest at the murder of the leader of non-violence, Martin Luther King. It was the year the city of Berlin suddenly became the international focus for a student movement that challenged the power blocs that divided it. It was the year teargas and billy clubs were used to make sure the US Democratic Party convention would select a presidential candidate who had been rejected by voters in every primary, and Russian tanks rolled into Prague to displace a "Communist" government that had made concessions to popular pressure. It was the year the Mexican government massacred more than a hundred demonstrators in order to ensure that the Olympic Games could take place under "peaceful" conditions. It was the year protests against discrimination in Derry and Belfast lit the fuse on the sectarian powder keg of Northern Ireland. It was, above all, the year that the biggest general strike ever paralysed France and caused its government to panic.

The world may not have been turned upside down as it was in 1648, 1789 or 1917. But it was powerfully shaken. And the shock waves broke the fetters on the minds of many people, leading them to believe that society could be completely changed, that everything was possible.

The media account of 1968 as "the year of the students" has ignored all this and presented what happened as a "clash of generations" based on a sudden fad for long hair, drug-taking and Che Guevara posters. The image of revolution has

been relegated to the attic of historical has-beens as former student leaders tell how they have abandoned their youthful dreams for the delights of a well-to-do middle class life. If the fashion in 1968 was to drop out and to drop acid, now, apparently, it is to drop in and drop socialist politics.

From such a viewpoint 1968 was a historical anomaly, a sort of crusade of overgrown children, separated from what went before and what came after.

The contention of this book is very different—1968 was the product of contradictions which had been developing in the years that came before and which continued to explode in the decade afterwards.

The French May was followed by the Italian “hot autumn” of 1969.

The shattering of the ambitions of one US administration was followed by the collapse of its successor, as the US president himself was forced “to stand naked” by the Watergate scandal. The student riots in Warsaw in March 1968 were followed by the much more serious rebellion of workers in Gdansk and Szczecin in 1970-71, the challenge to Stalinism of the Prague Spring by the even greater challenge of Solidarnosc. The ripples of discontent in the British universities in 1968 gave way to the waves of strikes that eventually destroyed the Heath government in 1974. The Polytechnic of Athens rose up in November 1973, numbering the days of the Greek dictatorship. The chimes of freedom were still ringing in Lisbon, Portugal, in April 1974 and in Vitoria, Spain, in March 1976.

I have attempted to tell the story of this whole period. Unfortunately, space and time have prevented me from doing it on a world scale. I have had to restrict myself to the main European countries and the United States, only touching on events elsewhere (Vietnam, China, Poland, Yugoslavia, Mexico and Czechoslovakia) in so far as they had an immediate impact on the consciousness of those taking to the streets in these countries. But this should not lead anyone to imagine that 1968 was just a European year. It was, after all, the year the Naxalite movement was born in India as thousands of students attempted to pit their courage against an increasingly corrupt regime, the year of the first, unsuccessful, protests against the military dictatorship in Brazil and the beginning of a mass student-worker movement in neighbouring Argentina, the year the Christian Democrat government of Eduardo Frei in Chile floundered in the face of strikes and land occupations, the year in which the fedayeen of al Fatah took over the Palestine Liberation Organisation and fought their first major battle against Israeli forces at Karamah.

So 1968 was a notable year because it was part of a world revolutionary process. This takes place in slow motion much of the time and suffers many defeats. Its proponents often lose themselves amidst the obstacles thrown up by

the old order. As a result they confuse friends and enemies. Opponents of tyranny in one part of the world line up with oppressors elsewhere. Activists get worn out and despise those who come after them. They retire to their gardens without noticing the radiation in the soil and the hunger outside their fences. Yet at the end of the day this revolutionary process holds the only hope for humanity.

The dream of 1968 is the only alternative to the rival imperialisms, East and West, with their economic crises at home and military adventures abroad, their weapons systems and their nuclear accidents, their client dictatorships and their sponsorship of devastating local wars, their institutionalisation of national oppression and their toleration of the horrific communal carnage that can result, their insistence on ever increasing interest repayments as hundreds of millions of people go hungry and whole countries plunge into famine.

For this reason, this book is dedicated to all those who fought in 1968 and who continue to fight today, in the hope that an understanding of how we fought then will help us win next time.

Chris Harman
December 1987

Introduction to 1998 edition

THE WORLD has changed much in the ten years since the first edition of this book appeared. The Eastern bloc and the USSR have disintegrated. There have been wars and civil wars in at least a dozen countries—most notably in the Gulf, Armenia and Azerbaijan, former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Angola and Somalia. Many of the figures prominent in the official politics of the 1960s and early 1970s have died. Major political parties have disappeared or tried to resurrect themselves under new names. Some former rebels now play a part in defending the status quo as mainstream politicians, academics or media people. In Britain those once thought of as radical rock stars can now receive knighthoods.

The ageing of the generation of '68 has been accompanied by a plethora of historical material about some of the struggles—memoirs, biographies, oral histories, TV documentaries, novels, as well as straight accounts. Were I to be writing this book again, I would no doubt refer to these.

Yet, in general, I find that the new material does not put in question the general thrust of anything I wrote ten years ago, and for that reason I have left the main text unaltered.

I have, however, made some changes to the last chapter. In the first edition it referred in some detail to events of the early 1980s. I have cut these back and inserted new material on the crises and struggles of the last decade. But I do not think this involves any change in my general analysis. The patterns described ten years ago are still very relevant today.

Chris Harman
March 1998

Part One

The long calm

THERE ARE periods which seem calm beyond belief to those who look back on them. Such were the years that ended so dramatically in the spring of 1968.

For close on 20 years the problems that had plagued the advanced countries between the First and Second World Wars seemed to be disappearing for good. Unemployment fell. Living standards rose steadily. The old slum tenement blocks and back-to-back houses were being systematically demolished. “You’ve never had it so good,” proclaimed Britain’s Tory prime minister Harold Macmillan during the 1959 election campaign—and most people agreed.

With material prosperity, it seemed to many that the bitter class divisions of the past were fast disappearing. In Britain the Labour Party and trade union leaders shared the same ideological framework as the mainstream of the Tory party—a consensus that was called “Butskellism” after Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer R A B Butler and Labour former chancellor Hugh Gaitskell. In West Germany the Social Democrats abandoned even a verbal commitment to class politics at their Bad Godesburg conference in 1959, and formed a coalition government with the right wing parties in 1966. In Scandinavia social democracy had been entrenched in government for as long as anyone could remember, to the satisfaction of big business and the unions. In all these countries big and bitter strikes seemed a remote memory.

In the US the same consensus politics influenced the main wings of both Democrat and Republican parties. Big business, big labour and the state collaborated to promote a society which seemed destined to produce ever greater piles of consumer goods.

Such was the world as portrayed by journalists and broadcasters, by philosophers and sociologists, by governments and by opposition parties that might realistically aspire to take their place.

Characteristically, those once on the left were most fulsome in their praise for this world’s perfection. In Britain the tone was set in two books which

appeared in 1956. Anthony Crosland's much-praised *The Future of Socialism* catalogued the most obvious features of 1950s' society:

The full employment welfare state...would have seemed like a paradise to many early socialist pioneers. Poverty and insecurity are in the process of disappearing. Living standards are rising rapidly; the fear of unemployment is steadily weakening; and the ordinary young worker has hopes that would never have entered his father's head.¹⁰

We stand in Britain on the threshold of mass abundance.¹¹

Such had been the change, Crosland insisted, that "it is manifestly inaccurate to call Britain a capitalist society".¹² The class struggle was a thing of the past:

One cannot imagine today a deliberate offensive alliance between government and employers against the unions on the 1921 or 1925-6 or 1927 model, with all the paraphernalia of wage cuts, national lockouts and anti-union legislation; or a serious attempt to enforce a coal policy to which the miners bitterly objected.¹³

John Strachey, more than any other single individual, had been responsible for propagandising Marxist ideas in the Britain of the 1930s. He continued to pay homage to some of Marx's analyses and to describe society as "capitalist". But he too now concluded that unemployment and crises were a thing of the past. Mass democracy and the techniques of government economic intervention discovered by John Maynard Keynes, he said, meant that capitalism now was planned.

Across the Atlantic the same message was pumped out. Academic social analysis was dominated by the writings of Talcott Parsons, whose model of society focused on cohesion and left no room for conflict. Many of the radical academics of the 1930s stepped into this mould, proclaiming that even conflict had the function of ensuring cohesion.¹⁴ The minority who refused to fit were marginalised, derided and, all too frequently, driven from their jobs.

Daniel Bell summed up the prevailing consensus when in a series of essays in the magazine *Encounter* and papers for the Congress of Cultural Freedom (both later shown to be financed by the CIA) he proclaimed "the end of ideology". The means were now available, he wrote, for the "organisation of production, control of inflation and maintenance of full employment".¹⁵ Labour had firmly established itself as one interest group among many in the political arena.¹⁶ Democracy ruled out the existence of any ruling class or "power elite". Under those circumstances, "politics today is not a reflection of any internal class division".¹⁷

The point is not that such ideas were financed by the CIA and endorsed in a thousand and one newspaper articles, but that they reflected what millions of people felt to be reality. Anyone who looked just at what people experienced—

wage levels, welfare benefits, opportunities for leisure, or at the low level of class struggle—could hardly dissent. So even many of those who felt a deep moral revulsion for existing society were led to accept Daniel Bell’s conclusion that revolutionary ideology could no longer attract the mass of workers. The German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s book *One Dimensional Man* exuded hatred of the system, East and West. The rise in mass living standards, he noted, was provided by an economy which depended on monstrous war preparations for its stability; the unprecedented advance of technology, once seen as the key to human liberation, was now the lock guaranteeing human subjection:

Technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life (and power) which appear to reconcile forces opposing the system. An overriding interest in the preservation and improvement of the institutional status quo united the former antagonists (bourgeoisie and proletariat) in the most advanced areas of contemporary society.¹⁸

The ‘people’, previously the ferment of social change, have ‘moved up’ to become the ferment of social cohesion.¹⁹

The only possible hope, he concluded, lay with “the substratum of the outcasts, the exploited, the persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable. Their opposition is revolutionary if their consciousness is not.”²⁰ It has to be emphasised that Marcuse’s pessimism was not some isolated occurrence. So powerful was the feeling that capitalism had cured its own propensity to crisis, so palpably obvious was it that workers in the advanced countries were not revolutionary, that the majority of those who began by resisting the pessimism ended by surrendering to it.

This was true in America of the Marxists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, whose book *Monopoly Capital* (1964) concluded that the working class in the advanced countries no longer constituted any threat to capitalism; such threats as there were lay with the former colonial countries of the “Third World”. It was true of the dissident sociologist C Wright Mills, who saw students and intellectuals—not workers—as a possible agency of change.²¹ It was true of the French theorist of the “new working class”, Andre Gorz, who declared in an article written early in 1968 that “in the foreseeable future there will be no crisis of European capitalism so dramatic as to drive the mass of workers to revolutionary general strikes.”²²

Not that there were no great social struggles. Belgian workers staged a mass general strike at the beginning of 1961. In 1960 Italian workers took to the streets in a near uprising against an attempt to form a far right government dependent on fascist support. In Japan student protests against nuclear weapons

on Japanese soil spread to sections of workers and brought down the Kishi government in 1960. France was in political turmoil as successive governments failed to break the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria; coups by the French army in Algeria threatened to spread to the mainland. In Britain there were bitter struggles in the mid-1950s to build union organisation in the motor industry. Even in the US there were large and long strikes in industries such as steel in 1959 and cars in 1960.

Yet the system seemed able to absorb these conflicts; within the space of a couple of years it was as if they had never happened. Belgian capitalism shrugged off 1961 and encountered no comparable strike challenge for two decades. The fall of the Kishi government was the end, not the beginning of large-scale confrontation in Japan. The story was the same everywhere.

For the left, the problem was not that people were attracted by far right ideas, as they had been in the 1930s. In France the far right resorted to planting bombs precisely because there was no other way they could make a political impact. In the US when the Republicans chose the extreme conservative Barry Goldwater for the 1964 presidential election, their vote sank to a record low. Rather the problem was suffocating conformity, an all-pervading consensus that condemned opponents of the system to isolation and ineffectiveness. Worker militants complained that their workmates had lost any interest in political issues. Would-be intellectual rebels complained that “there are no good causes left”;²³ even those who saw plenty of causes felt that the problem was how to get “Out of Apathy”.²⁴

The facts which underlay the reformist optimism of a Crosland and the revolutionary pessimism of a Marcuse were real enough. Capitalism was experiencing the longest boom in its history. Those who expected an imminent collapse into 1930s-style crisis were proved wrong. An expanding economy provided the essential prerequisite for seemingly impregnable political structures.

Yet those who restricted their account of the world of the 1950s and early 1960s just to these facts could hardly have been more mistaken. For economic expansion itself bred cumulative changes in the structure of the world system which were bound, eventually, to call into question the foundations of political stability.

First there were changes in the economic standing of the different powers.

The world of the late 1940s had been dominated by two great powers, the US and Russia, around which the ruling classes of the lesser powers were forced to cluster for protection. In the West the US, with 60 percent of “free world” economic production, could afford an unparalleled peacetime level of arms

spending, so creating conditions of permanent boom. All the lesser powers could benefit from this, regardless of the size of their own arms budgets. The boom was at least as advantageous for Japan, with its 0.5 percent of national income going on “defence”, as for Britain with about 5 percent.²⁵ Since countries gained from an arms boom they did not pay for, they naturally enjoyed rates of economic growth greater than that of the US. In time this was bound to throw into question the US global hegemony and undermine its ability to pay for the boom.

The US attempt to reassert its hegemony in the 1960s through involvement in the Vietnam War was to open deep fissures in US society. When arms spending faltered, the whole world economy would slide back into crisis.

Few people saw these consequences in the 1950s and early 1960s, and their prophecies of economic and social turmoil to come were not the sort to move masses to action. If the prognosis enabled a few revolutionary socialists to find their way through these barren years, it could not do more. But other changes too were beginning to erode the social base of political stability.

The Crosland-Strachey-Bell-Marcuse picture described the situation of north west Europe and most of the United States. Here what reigned was a “liberal democratic” “welfare state” consensus, based upon the incorporation of workers’ organisations into the structure of capitalist society. But in Mediterranean Europe, in the Southern states of the US, in Northern Ireland and in many of the more advanced “developing countries” things were rather different.

Spain and Portugal were still ruled by fascist dictatorships established before the Second World War. Independent trade unions and political parties were illegal, those who tried to build them sentenced to long prison sentences or worse—in Spain in 1963 Franco ordered the execution of the underground Communist organiser, Grimau.

In Greece the left, after leading a victorious struggle against the German occupation during the Second World War, had made the fatal mistake of welcoming British troops as “liberators”. These then imposed a right wing government which staffed its army and police with former Nazi collaborators and used British and US arms and advisers to crush the left in a vicious civil war.²⁶ In the early 1960s hundreds of left wing activists were still in prison and hundreds of thousands in enforced exile.

Beneath a thin veneer provided by a parliament based on rigged elections, the political right and centre jockeyed for government position, and even accommodated a small number of left wing MPs. But the reality behind the parliamentary mask was revealed in May 1963, when a left MP, Lambrakis, was murdered by a right wing death squad which had links with the armed forces.

Soon even the mask was thrown away. A brief spell of government by the centre allowed popular discontent to express itself in strikes and demonstrations. The king dismissed the government and the military then staged a coup which imposed an open dictatorship of the far right.

In Italy and France the parliamentary system was real enough. Yet it was a parliamentary system which entrenched the right in power, allowing the reformist left little margin for political influence. In both countries the Communist and Socialist parties had played a central role in the coalition governments of 1944-47, helping disarm the left wing Resistance forces and restore management prerogatives in the factories. When the Communists were driven from office, they turned in desperation for a bargaining counter to the workers' militancy they had decried for three years and encouraged a series of large and bitter strikes. It was to no avail. Substantial sections of workers were already demoralised. Others could not understand why strikes were now right when they had been wrong only months earlier. Right wing reformists, backed by US money, were able to split the unions along political lines, weakening them decisively, enabling the employers to root out militants and often to destroy basic organisation.

So it was that the main working class parties in France and Italy, the Communist Parties, were permanently excluded from political power. So it was too that trade unions organised only a minority of workers—30 percent in Italy, fewer than 20 percent in France—a minority divided between the traditionally more militant Communist Party influenced unions (the CGT in France, the CSIL in Italy) and Catholic and social democrat organisations which militants and many employers regarded as “yellow unions”. So it was that what should have been key bastions of working class strength, such as the Citroën and Peugeot car plants in France and the giant Fiat works in Turin, were without shop-floor organisation.

In southern Europe capitalism was relatively backward compared to its rivals in the north and in North America. It could hope to catch up with them only by achieving a high level of profits and capital accumulation at the expense of workers' living standards. So it was prone to deal with working class opposition by coercion rather than by concessions and the provisions of the welfare state. The weakness of working class organisation enabled it to get away with this.

In Spain and Portugal outright coercion was still the main method of maintaining control over the working class. In France and Italy the weak and divided union federations were allowed to operate at national level, calling occasional one-day and half-day strikes, but trade unionists met considerable repression if they took local action, with attacks inside the factories by

management “security guards” and assaults on picket lines by armed police.

Political life mirrored the repression in the factories. If in northern Europe the social democrat and labour parties held the allegiance of the mass of organised workers, in the south large numbers of workers identified with Communist Parties which still used the vocabulary of revolution. They emphasised their opposition to the status quo in their own countries by proclaiming their undinting support for the rulers of Russia.

These were, in fact, highly bureaucratised parties, whose leaders had proved in the mid-1930s and in 1944-47 that they preferred political horse-trading inside capitalist society to the risks involved in trying to overthrow it. But two things about this bureaucracy gave it a revolutionary aura.

First, where traditional social democratic reformism identified with its own local ruling class, the Communist Parties identified with the rulers of the Eastern bloc. Although the Communist leaders had learnt to enjoy open class collaboration in the years of the pre-war Popular Fronts and the post-war coalitions, they showed in 1939 and 1947 that, if ordered by Moscow, they were prepared to break off such collaboration and return to apparently intransigent opposition—although they still looked for respectable bourgeois figures to join them in opposition.

To show such allegiance to Russia in the 1950s and early 1960s, at the height of the first Cold War, was to stand in opposition to what each Western capitalist class regarded as its vital national interest—the existing carve-up of the world between the different powers. However much Communist leaders begged members of the national bourgeoisie to join them in defence of “national culture” against “Americanisation”, however much they dragged their feet in supporting anti-colonial struggles—as did the French Communist Party during the Algerian war—the Russian connection alone was enough to put them outside the pale of established bourgeois political life.

But the Russian question was not the only factor behind the exclusion of the Communist Parties, and hence their apparent radicalism.

The rulers of the relatively backward capitalisms of southern Europe demanded a high price from reformist politicians and trade union leaders in return for collaboration. Such leaders had to endorse the attacks of the employers and the state on workers’ living conditions and organisation. Those who chose to continue collaboration after the Communists ended it in 1947 therefore saw their influence on the workers’ movement decline rapidly. In France, support for the Communist-influenced CGT was three times that for the breakaway Force Ouvrière and more than twice that of the Catholic CFTC, despite a series of defeats for CGT-supported strikes.²⁷ Support for the CGT was also proportionally

greater among industrial workers.²⁸ In Italy nearly twice as many workers were members of the Communist-led CGIL in 1960 as of its Catholic rival, the CISL.

Voting figures show the same picture. In France in 1945 the Communist vote was about the same level as that for the Socialist Party; by 1960 it was much bigger. In Italy in 1946 the Socialist vote was greater than that for the Communists. By 1953 this position had been reversed. Such was the influence of the Communists, indeed, that when the Socialist Party split with the onset of the Cold War, only a minority shifted rightwards to form the pro-US PSDI, getting 7.1 percent of the vote as against a joint Communist-Socialist vote of 31 percent. When the Socialist Party itself finally broke with the Communists, committed itself to the NATO Western alliance and joined the government majority in 1964, it too suffered electorally. Its share of the vote fell from 13.8 percent in 1963 to 9.6 percent in 1972, while that of the Communists rose from 25.3 percent to 27.2 percent.²⁹

These figures are particularly revealing since the years up to 1968 were ones of continual retreat by the trade union movement, with the proportion of workers in the main unions falling from 43.4 percent in 1951 to 31.0 percent in 1967.³⁰

The Southern states of the US did not fit the “liberal democratic” pattern either. Here too classic bourgeois democracy was missing.

The American Civil War had been fought a century earlier to break the power of a Southern ruling class which based itself upon the exploitation of slave labour rather than of “free” wage labour. The aims of this planter class could no longer be reconciled with those of rapidly developing Yankee capitalism, which aspired to unite the whole country under its own domination. Just as the French bourgeoisie had used the most radical language in its struggle against absolutism, so the Northern bourgeoisie used the most radical language in its fight against the slave owners—and in the immediate aftermath of the civil war it seemed the radical words were to be turned into deeds. For the few years of the “reconstruction” period Northern capital ruled the South, countering the political influence of the old planter class by giving full citizen rights to freed slaves.³¹

But Northern capital soon discovered there was more than one way of dealing with its old enemy. Once the ability of the Southern planters to obstruct the spread of Yankee capitalism had been broken, the easiest way to rule the South was to come to an arrangement with the former slave owners by which they ran the South in return for accepting Northern hegemony.

A dozen years after the civil war the South was again in the hands of its old rulers. They maintained their power by taking citizens’ rights away from the blacks, by imposing the “Jim Crow” system of racial segregation, and by

organising armed mobs of poor whites—the Ku Klux Klan—to murder any blacks who showed an inclination to challenge the racist set-up.

The Republican Party had been the party of Yankee capitalism. Radical Republicans had fought to introduce liberal democracy in the South. Once the party had won its battle for control of the country, it became increasingly conservative until it was more right wing than the Democrats. But in the South it was still seen as the party of “reconstruction”, and the new racist “Dixiecrat” structure was presided over by the Southern Democratic Party machine. This ran the South as a one-party state from 1877 through to the 1960s.

The structure did face occasional challenges. In the late 1880s and early 1890s “populist” movements among poor white farmers began to see poor black farmers as allies. They fought side by side for the right to vote. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, black soldiers returned home in no mood to tolerate the old oppression. In the late 1930s the new industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) set out to organise black and white workers together, in opposition to the segregated “locals” (branches) of the American Federation of Labour.

But on each occasion the Southern establishment beat back the challenge. The populist movement was followed by laws disenfranchising blacks and by a wave of lynchings, 214 in the first two years of this century.³² The black protests after the First World War were met with a revival of the Klan, which claimed 100,000 members and carried out 70 lynchings in 1919 alone. The CIO’s “Operation Dixie” organising drive, launched in 1946, ground to a halt as the union leaders sought to prove their Cold War respectability by concentrating their efforts on purging the unions of left wingers. By 1950 there were even cases of segregated CIO locals in the South.³³

Jim Crow segregation could survive in the South only because it was tolerated by the “Democratic” politicians of the North. They had no compunction in extending such tolerance for 80 years. For Jim Crow provided an easy mechanism for maintaining social stability in the South, ensuring that any move to unite poor whites and poor blacks was soon beaten back. Even Franklin Roosevelt’s Democratic Party administration, which undertook the renovation of American capitalism in the 1930s, bringing in apparently radical reforms, still depended for support in Congress on the racist political machine of the South. Northern upholders of the American Dream were sufficiently happy with the state of affairs in the South to allow racist Southern Democrats to dominate Senate committees and veto any legislation that might advance black rights. Formal racism was powerful enough to ensure that the armies which fought allegedly for “democracy” in the two world wars were segregated.

The alliance between the rulers of the North and South ensured that racist attitudes spread from the South to the Northern cities as whites and blacks migrated there seeking work. If formal legal segregation did not exist in the North, informal segregation meant that most blacks lived in all-black neighbourhoods, were forced to send their children to fund-starved all-black schools, were excluded from many skilled jobs and were at the end of the queue for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. This had advantages for Northern capital: the divisions between the two sections of workers ruined innumerable unionisation drives.

Social and political racism deeply influenced mass culture. Until the late 1950s the only roles for blacks in Hollywood films were as butlers, maids or porters, and before black rock music could find a mass white audience it had to be performed by white musicians.

Not only in the US did bourgeois democracy have undemocratic recesses. Britain had its own equivalent of the Deep South in Northern Ireland. Here too a one-party state had been established decades before by encouraging hostility by one section of the population, the Protestants, against another section, the Catholics. Catholics were discriminated against in employment and housing, virtually disenfranchised by electoral gerrymandering, subject to systematic repression at the hands of the armed police and special constabulary, and were the victims of periodic pogroms.

The picture presented by Crosland and Strachey, Bell and Marcuse in fact showed only those societies where there was “pure”, stable bourgeois democracy and where the leaders of the labour movement had been incorporated into the system. It applied only to the most economically advanced of the advanced capitalist countries—not to any part of Mediterranean Europe, let alone to the parts of the Third World still under the thrall of the retreating colonialisms of Britain, France and Belgium or the expanding imperialism of the US. Even an important part of the US and a significant if no longer economically vital part of the UK were run on principles very different to those which figure so strongly in Crosland, Strachey and Bell.

Yet the exceptions—even if numerically the majority of countries—did not seem to contradict the rule. Crosland, Strachey and Bell (although not Marcuse) could argue that the reforms would enable southern Europe to be assimilated into northern Europe, the Deep South into the bourgeois democratic mainstream of American life (if they had noticed that it existed—it is not mentioned in any of their books), that time would wear down the sectarian division in Northern Ireland, and even that decolonisation would lead to a bourgeois democracy in the Third World which the US’s rulers would embrace. After all, the early demands

of the movements against discrimination and segregation in both the Deep South and Northern Ireland were not demands to break with wider society, but for civil rights which would enable the oppressed groups fully to be part of it. Their message was “We shall overcome”, not “We shall overthrow”.

Above all, the “exceptional” countries and parts of countries did not challenge the general picture of social and economic stability. Resignation and immobility seemed to characterise the Communistvoting workers of France and Italy, those defeated by fascism in Spain and Portugal, blacks of the Deep South, the Catholics of Northern Ireland. It was easy to fall into the belief that all well-intentioned people from all classes could work successfully for piecemeal reform to end the worst instances of repression and discrimination.

The mirror images

The Strachey-Crosland-Bell orthodoxy did not simply paint a glowing picture of the Western countries. It also offered only one alternative: “Communism”.

Hardly had the Second World War ended than the victors had fallen out among themselves, dividing the world into two great armed camps. On the one side were the US with its client states in Latin America and the West European powers with their colonial empires; on the other was Russia, the states of Eastern Europe and, after the victory of Mao Zedong’s army in 1949, China.

Rulers on each side presented this as a division between completely different sorts of societies, themselves standing for the forces of good, the other side for the forces of evil. According to the propagandists of Western capitalism, the “free world” was waging a bitter defensive struggle against the drive to global domination of atheistic communism; according to their opponents in the East, states which embodied the socialist future of mankind were standing firm against aggression from decaying imperialisms.

But these were not just the visions of paid apologists. They provided the framework within which hundreds of millions of people understood the world, among them many of the dissidents on either side. In Eastern Europe opponents of the regime would tune in to the US station Radio Free Europe and imagine that one day NATO forces would liberate them; in the West the most militant workers believed the rulers of Russia were comrades in a world struggle.

This fixation of their own dissidents with the other side created minor problems for both sets of rulers. It meant the tightest security could be breached by ideologically motivated spies. It raised worries as to the reliability of armies in the event of war. But its great advantage was that some of the dissidents’ claims were not difficult to refute. Russia’s rulers could bask in the contrast

between their economy, then one of the fastest growing in the world, and the stagnation and endemic poverty which characterised the Western camp outside a few states in north west Europe and North America. Meanwhile Western rulers could contrast their tolerance of free speech with the purge trials and labour camps of the Eastern bloc. Each publicised the support it had among the masses on the other side: no issue of the *Reader's Digest* was complete without its "I chose freedom" story; the Western papers always available in Moscow were those which told their readers that life was better in the East than the West.

So pervasive was the idea that the world was split in two like this that it took over the minds of virtually all the socialist intellectuals in the West, even those who could not swallow Joseph Stalin whole. Jean-Paul Sartre, Isaac Deutscher, Baran and Sweezy, even the intellectual leader of the Fourth International, Ernest Mandel, held to versions of it. When they broke, disillusioned by what they discovered about Stalinism, they almost invariably simply turned the picture upside down and came out in support of the West. Such was the sad fate of Strachey himself and of writers such as Howard Fast, Arthur Koestler, James T Farrell, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos and Ignazio Silone.

Reality never fitted this picture of two qualitatively different societies, forced into polar opposition to each other. The configuration of the two power blocs had been, by and large, mutually agreed in 1943 and 1944; the US and Britain were given a free hand by Stalin in France, Italy and Greece in return for his being able to dictate what happened in Eastern Europe. The "Communist" regimes did not ally with one another automatically. The first Communist Party to take power independent of Russian help, that of Tito in Yugoslavia, broke abruptly from the Russian camp in 1948 and gave encouragement to the US in its war against Russia in Korea in 1950. The second, China, spent months of negotiations before finally signing a formal alliance with Russia in 1949, and even then would have kept out of the Korean War had US provocation not forced its hand. Most important, neither side ever gave more than token support to rebels in the other camp: Russian-controlled Communist Parties did not launch successful insurrections in the West or Third World; when the workers of East Germany rose in 1953 and those of Hungary in 1956, the US was careful to make sure not one rifle accompanied the platitudes of sympathy.

Yet few people in the 1950s and early 1960s saw through the mirror images projected from Washington and Moscow. Even after the Hungarian workers' councils were drowned in blood in 1956, new generations of young recruits could be attracted to the notion that Russia was a workers' paradise; even as the US armed military dictatorships through much of Latin America and allied itself with fascist Spain, many thousands of young idealists could see its defence of

“freedom” as a worthy cause.

You could read thousands of newspaper articles, watch innumerable hours of newsreel and TV footage, wade through hundreds of sociology and economics treatises from the 1950s and early 1960s and find hardly a reference to the factors which were to shake society only ten years later.

“A slow train coming”

“HE NOT busy being born is busy dying.” So sang Bob Dylan in 1965. It is doubtful if he appreciated the depth of his own insight.

The apparently impregnable political edifices of the 1950s and early 1960s owed their stability to the unprecedented economic boom. But that boom wrought enormous, cumulative molecular changes in the social substructure on which the political edifices were built. As Karl Marx pointed out more than a century before Bob Dylan picked up his guitar, changes in the way human beings create wealth lead to changes in their relations with each other. However small these might be, their cumulative effect is eventually to call into question all the structures established on the basis of the old social relations.

The changes wrought by the long boom were enormous. When the boom started a large proportion of the population still worked on the land. This was true even in most of northern Europe. In southern Europe the mass of small farmers were a significant social force. So long as rulers could bribe or intimidate them into supporting the status quo, there was a powerful counterweight to working class opposition. But the long boom involved a massive growth of industry and rationalisation of agriculture. That in turn meant large numbers of small farmers and their children migrating to the towns. The whole social structure was transformed.

In France nearly 30 percent of people still worked the land in 1950; by 1967 this had fallen by nearly half to 16.7 percent. In Italy 40 percent worked the land in 1950; by 1967 less than 25 percent. As late as 1956 in Japan 38.5 percent worked on the land; by 1967 only 23 percent. In Ireland the proportion fell from 40.1 percent in 1950 to 30 percent in 1967.³⁴

This decline was matched by a growth in the number of urban workers. In the 11 years after 1956, the “non-agricultural” workforce grew by 13 million (25 percent) in the US, by nearly 12 million (65 percent) in Japan, by 2.7 million (22 percent) in France, while in Italy it grew by 1.2 million (about 11 percent) in just

eight years.³⁵

Spain, Portugal and Greece were relatively slow in joining the long boom; they had governments fearful of social change and little of the modern infrastructure needed to attract new industrial investment. Their economies stagnated through the 1950s. The first Spanish development plan was not until 1963, and the proportion of the workforce in industry was no higher in the mid-1950s than it had been before the civil war two decades earlier. Yet things did not remain completely static even here. The Spanish industrial workforce did grow, if slowly at first, in the second half of the 1950s—from 26.6 percent of the labour force in 1950 to 33 percent in 1960 and 37 percent in 1970.³⁶ In Portugal the urban workforce was a third higher in 1967 than in 1956. In Greece the proportion of the population on the land fell from 57 percent in 1950 to 50 percent in 1967.³⁷

These dry statistics point to epoch-making changes in the very nature of society.

The political structures of southern Europe had been built up by counterposing the mass of independent small farmers to the political weight of industrial workers. The small farmers were often impoverished. They had narrow horizons, the result of a necessary obsession with the survival of an individual farm and an outlook derived from one small village among thousands, characterised by a conservatism which saw modern urban life as a threat and by a tendency to depend on local representatives of the national political structure for favours rather than to see them as enemies. If an external political force threatened their way of life—as with, say, the German occupation of Greece or northern Italy, or the attempts of landowners to take part of the land from the leaseholding peasantry of Catalonia in the early 1930s—then they might support a left wing movement which fought back. But in most circumstances they were easily persuaded by their rulers and the hierarchy of the Catholic church that the left was the threat to their way of life.

So it was that fascism in Spain could rely on the support of the farmers of Castille and Navarre,³⁸ and in Portugal on the peasants north of the river Tagus. In Italy, the Church and the Christian Democratic Party built up an apparatus of influence over the mass of peasants and recent migrants to the towns which enabled them to isolate and defeat the militancy of the urban workers after 1947. Catholic Action, which at that time was a rabidly anti-left organisation, had no fewer than three million members and the Italian Christian Workers Association (ACLI) one million members in the early 1950s.³⁹ The bishops felt powerful enough to threaten supporters of the Communist and Socialist parties with excommunication.⁴⁰ In France, the peasant vote guaranteed a majority for the

quarrelling right and centre parties which dominated politics from 1947 to 1958 and for de Gaulle for the following decade.

The mass migration of peasants to the cities began to change all this.

The change was not necessarily visible at first. The new workers often brought with them old attitudes. What is more they were often grateful for the escape from rural destitution and dazed by the widened horizons of urban life. So it was that in the 1950s the management of Italy's biggest factory, Fiat Turin, could destroy its traditions of militancy by recruiting a mass of new workers from the Piedmont countryside and the South, carefully selecting them to exclude anyone with left wing attitudes. So effective was this that in 1955 the main union federation, the left-led CGIL, was ousted from control of the works committee (the Internal Commission) by the Catholic union, the CISL. In its turn this then suffered a split to the right to an open scab union, which was popular with many young workers.⁴¹

In Spain when the young workers began to take an interest in social and political questions, they rarely turned to the traditional union organisations—the CNT and UGT—that had been so strongly implanted before the civil war. These had been broken by repeated arrests of their underground activists. Their exiled leaders had lost touch with reality inside Spain. Instead the new generation often joined religious organisations, established by sections of the Church hierarchy to increase its hold over workers and tolerated by the fascist regime.⁴²

But in time the new workers were bound to change. Although the wages might at first have seemed relatively good to young, single workers fresh from impoverished rural backgrounds, it was not long before they discovered these were not sufficient to provide for families. Just as important, they were subject to ever-increasing workloads and intense managerial discipline. They entered the factories just as major restructuring was taking place to make formerly more or less self-contained national economies internationally competitive. In Italy this meant that the boom years of the 1950s were also years in which formerly skilled jobs were “deskilled” and taken over by semi-skilled workers, in which labour discipline was tightened and production norms increased massively. In Spain it meant that the boom of the “first development plan” of 1962-66 was preceded by a “stabilisation plan” which increased unemployment and cut wages.

The first substantial revolts in Italy, France, Spain and Portugal took place in 1962-63.

Fiat saw the first substantial strikes for a decade, with a movement that started at the smaller plants in Brescia, Milan and Suzarra and then spread to the giant Turin works. The number of Fiat workers on strike rose from 400 to 7,000

in the first week, then to 60,000, and finally to 90,000. The management tried to break the strike by signing an agreement with the “moderate” UIL and the scab union—both of which had done well in the ballots for the works committee only a few months earlier.⁴³ When police attacked a strikers’ demonstration, the mass of workers fought back. The militancy was such that the Christian union, the CISL, was compelled to join forces with the left-led CGIL.

It was a lasting gain for the leaders of the CGIL. They were accepted as a negotiating partner by management after years of discrimination against them and took over the leadership of the Turin works committee. But the gains for the mass of workers were not nearly so great. In settling the dispute the union leaders agreed not to support any strikes for the duration of the contract, and so held back workers from struggles over conditions and workspeeds that would have given life to the embryonic shop-floor organisation that had just started to grow in many sections of the factory.⁴⁴ A year later the employers were able, under conditions of economic recession, to resume the offensive and recoup their losses.

Effectively the Communist leadership of the CGIL had done a trade-off with management, bringing a key struggle to an end in return for recognition for itself. But the union’s own gains were soon under threat when the CGIL suffered a setback in the works committee elections in 1964.⁴⁵

France

Like Christian Democrat Italy, Gaullist France too was shaken by a sudden surge of workers’ militancy and recovered.

General de Gaulle had come to power in May 1958 after a revolt by French settlers and French generals in Algeria which the quarrelling right and centre parties of the parliamentary Fourth Republic could not handle. Attempts by the Communist Party to oppose him led nowhere, and the main Socialist Party, the SFIO, actually joined his first government. The Communist vote fell, and a railway strike at the end of 1958 ended in defeat after the social democrat Force Ouvrière and the Christian union, the CFTC, signed an agreement with management leaving the Communist-led CGT to fight alone.

The only unified workers’ actions in the four years that followed were token strikes against attempts to overthrow de Gaulle’s government from the right (there were army-settler coups in French-run Algiers in January 1960 and April 1961). But the success of de Gaulle’s government in surviving these attacks from the right only seemed to attract to it sections of workers and to isolate the left even more. It was powerful enough to ban a left wing demonstration backed

by the two biggest union federations in February 1962, and, when the ban was ignored, the armed CRS riot police broke it up, killing eight CGT members outside the Charron metro station.

When transport workers struck in Paris at the end of the year, police attacked the strikers, while the army ran scab buses and underground trains.

It was no wonder that the government felt confident when miners threatened to strike at the beginning of 1963. At first its confidence seemed justified. The divisions between the different union federations led the CGT to call a strike which collapsed because the CFTC and Force Ouvrière would not support it. Then these unions called strikes which failed because of lack of CGT support. But the government overplayed its hand. Its intransigence forced all three unions to call for strikes at the beginning of March—though the CGT strike was to be only for 48 hours.

The prime minister, Georges Pompidou, announced the conscription of the miners into the armed forces on the third day of the strike—when the CGT miners were supposed to be returning to work anyway—so that if the strike continued it would be in breach of military law. He expected this to crush the miners, who had not had a major strike for 14 years, just as it had crushed the Paris transport workers.

He could not have made a worse miscalculation. Rank and file anger at his move was so powerful that the CGT was forced to join the other unions in calling for an all-out strike. In the allegedly weak area of Lorraine the strikers announced they were ignoring the government's order altogether. Miners in the north followed their lead the next day. In the mining areas the entire population expressed support for the strike—miners' wives, other workers, even local priests and shopkeepers.

The government dared not enforce the strike ban, and eventually appointed three “wise men”, whose inquiry brought the dispute to an end with a 12.5 percent wage rise and an extra week's paid holiday.

Conditions should have been ripe for the whole working class movement to gain from this victory. But the union leaders ensured otherwise. The CGT opposed spreading the miners' strike to other parts of the public sector where there was intense anger over wages. It claimed such strikes would be “unpopular”, play into the government's hands and open the union to accusations of “political extremism”. The CGT's real motivation lay in the Communist Party's attempts to overcome its political isolation by overtures to the right wing social democrats of the SFIO—an alliance which ended in a presidential election campaign around a centre-left candidate, François Mitterrand, in 1965.

So instead of calling effective, all-out stoppages in the public sector, the CGT organised token one-day and half-day strikes only. The CFTC was less inhibited by electoral considerations; it was not affiliated to any of the parties of the left. Its leaders were prepared to give the impression they wanted all-out strikes in order to gain recruits from the CGT.

The result was that each union sabotaged the other's efforts and the miners' victory was completely thrown away.

Meanwhile the government deflated the economy, creating conditions which made it much harder for workers to fight in the private sector—where the CGT was less inhibited by the “public opinion” factor. The employers began to put up strong resistance to wage demands. Early in 1965 “rotating strikes” (where different sections of workers would take it in turn to strike) at the Berliet factory at Lyons and the Peugeot auto plant at Sochaux, were met with lockouts, police attacks on strikers and the sacking of militants. “1965 proved to be a year almost devoid of serious trade union action, in part because of the presidential election campaign,” said one academic study.⁴⁶

Spain

In Spain 1962 was the most momentous year for the working class since defeat in the civil war. The first strikes began in December 1961 in the Basque country and spread to Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and Cartagena. Then the Asturian miners struck, giving impetus to the strike wave until it involved 400,000 workers, about one eighth of the national workforce.

The Franco government was forced to make concessions and look for new ways to avoid potentially dangerous conflicts. It introduced a legal distinction between “professional conflicts” and “political conflicts”. The latter were still ruled to be seditious.⁴⁷ The heads of the state-run “unions”, the Sindicatos, promised reforms to allow workers a greater say.

But the significance of the strikes was not just that for the first time workers forced substantial concessions from the government, but that they built new forms of organisation, the workers' commissions. These were workers' committees, elected at and responsible to mass meetings, which would present the workers' demands to management and organise strike action.

The first workers' commission had, in fact, been formed during a strike at La Camocha mine in 1958. They sprang up in workplace after workplace with the strike wave of 1962-63. They were spontaneous creations by workers whose initial motivation was not revolutionary, or even overtly political. Wherever workers had a grievance to put to management, the lack of any real trade union

organisation meant the only way they could do it was by electing a committee: “The first commission grew as a spontaneous movement, and dissolved themselves when the conflict ended.”⁴⁸

But this simple “non-political” act, repeated in workplace after workplace, had political implications. A new way of organising the working class from below was emerging. It was not long before links were established between different workers’ commissions and continuing organisation formed, first at a local and then at a national level. In Vizcaya in the Basque country:

The provincial workers’ commission, backed by a powerful mass movement, achieved, in fact, for some months a quasi-legal status. It was received by enterprise managements and even government authorities. But each time it went to put forward demands or to get a reply, it took the precaution of being accompanied by a few hundred workers. The demonstrations of workers accompanying their provincial workers’ commission became a frequent sight in Bilbao and its industrial zone until the commission was arrested in 1963.⁴⁹

In the next three years the workers’ commissions movement continued to grow, although in a somewhat changed form. When big strikes were not taking place, the mass meetings which had elected the commissions ceased to happen. But the movement continued as a movement of activists, who then ensured future strikes were based on mass meetings and elected committees. So, for instance, an organised regional structure had emerged in Cantabrica in the mid-1960s with about 150 activists in the Torrelavega-Reinosa area.⁵⁰

In 1966 an opportunity occurred for the new movement to consolidate itself at national level. There were elections for the lowest rung of positions in the state “union”, the Organización Sindical. These positions were meant simply to allow workers to draw up a list of minor grievances; actual negotiations were in the hands of the 30,000 fascist bureaucrats who ran the joint “union” of workers and employers. For this reason, workers had rarely cared about the elections.

Now the workers’ commissions movement decided to exploit this structure for its own purposes. Commission candidates entered the election and won many of the posts. The formal positions they held then enabled thousands of militants to maintain legal regular contact with other workers, so they could informally and illegally develop workers’ commission agitation designed to undermine the Organización Sindical. As one activist from the Basque country later said:

The sindical elections of 1966 marked an important turning point with the massive participation of workers, and candidates of a new type. Before this there were no assemblies nor direct relations between representatives and the represented... We developed new forms of participation: inquiries, information bulletins, meetings in the enterprises, despite the resistance of the Organización Sindical... using our sindical positions, we built with considerable success a movement of general solidarity...both at the economic level (collections) and the political level (solidarity strikes, declarations, news on other strikes, etc.).⁵¹

The achievement of the workers' commissions movement was considerable. By 1968, the Franco government could not take any measure without worrying whether it might cause further workers' struggles. The result was a widening of the splits within the fascist camp between those who hankered after the closed economy and the wholesale repression of the 1940s and 1950s, and those who wanted certain limited reforms so as to open the economy to the rest of Western Europe.

But this did not at all mean, as the ever over-optimistic Spanish Communist Party thought, that Francoism was already finished and that "national reconciliation" would follow in a very short time. As Fernando Claudio has correctly argued:

The spectacular upward march of the workers' movement between 1962 and 1966 was not a sign of the weakness of the regime. Although it continually infringed the Francoist legality, it was at the same time tacitly tolerated, since it was fashioned by an essential factor: the industrial boom of the five-year period in which the first development plan was inaugurated.⁵²

In 1967 the workers' commissions movement reached its peak with the calling of mass actions in Madrid in January and October which received the support of 100,000 workers, and with the first open national assembly of the commissions in June.

Then at the end of the year the government struck. It announced that the commissions were illegal bodies and declared a wage freeze which suspended all enterprise-level negotiations—thus depriving the commissions of the focus which enabled them to rally mass support on the factory floor.

A three-pronged repression followed. The government itself carried out mass arrests, with a thousand people charged with "illegal assembly" in 1968 alone and jailed for between two and six years; firms sacked thousands of militants; and the Organización Sindical removed thousands more from the posts they had won in the elections two years earlier.

The workers' movement lost nearly all its established local and national leaders: for instance, in the Torrelavega-Reinosa area of Cantabria, 105 of 150 activists were arrested. A call from the remaining national leaders for mass action on 1 May 1969 "to open the road for a general strike" met with a smaller response than in previous years. State reaction to strikes hardened. Armed police now attacked strikers, with at least one striker killed in each of the next five years. The repression and isolation of the remaining activists led to fragmentation in what had previously been a united movement.

The United States

The US Deep South, like the European south, underwent dramatic changes with the long boom. The Jim Crow system had been established when the South was overwhelmingly agricultural and the great majority of the black population worked on the land—90 percent in 1910.⁵³ Living in small, scattered rural communities, they found it difficult to resist the combined forces of the plantation owners, the local legal structure and armed groups of white supremacists such as the Ku Klux Klan.

But from the First World War onwards, growing numbers of blacks left the Southern countryside, mainly for the industrial cities of the North, but also for urban centres in the South itself. This process gathered speed as the US economy entered into a boom in 1940 that lasted right through until the 1970s. Northern capital increasingly shifted part of its production into the South.

Emigration of blacks from the 11 former Southern confederate states rose from 480,000 in 1910-19 to 769,000 in the decade that followed. After dropping back to 381,000 in the depression of the 1930s, emigration soared to 1,260,000 in the 1940s and 1,170,000 in the 1950s:

In the half century between 1910 and 1960, Negroes have been transformed from a regional peasantry into a substantial segment of the urban working class... Today three-quarters of the Negro population are city dwellers.⁵⁴

In the North, blacks became a major portion of the population of cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles. In the South, as the cities grew so did their black populations—in 1940-60 by 80 percent in Birmingham, Alabama; 40 percent in Montgomery, Alabama; 453 percent in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and 145 percent in Tallahassee, Florida.

The old racism did not disappear with urbanisation. In the South segregation meant black men rarely got jobs other than those of janitors, porters, cooks and labourers, while half of employed black women were domestic servants. The black population was confined to the most overcrowded and impoverished parts of the towns, where it was kept in its place by all-white police forces, and deprived of any ability to influence local politics through the denial of voting rights.

In the North too racism meant segregation in many fields: most housing schemes were effectively segregated, with blacks forced into ghettos. These became more racially segregated, not less as time passed.⁵⁵ Blacks rarely got employment other than in unskilled and semi-skilled manual jobs; unemployment among blacks was twice as high as among whites by the 1950s. In a Northern city like Detroit, the average black family income was less than 70 percent of that of the average white family.⁵⁶ Few blacks made it through the

school system into higher education, so that the elite “Ivy League” universities were almost completely white.

But some things did change. The Democratic Party machines could not keep their control over inner city areas in places like Chicago, New York and Detroit unless they could carry the votes of the growing black communities. So for the first time since the civil war, blacks had a minimal degree of influence on at least the language of official politics. Northern capital was happy to benefit from a racially divided workforce as it spread through the South, but it did not have the same ties with the segregationist organisations as the old planters. Finally, the US government, aiming at global hegemony, preached the gospel of “the free world”, of “liberal democracy” and “human rights” and did not want to be embarrassed by too visible forms of discrimination in a South that began half a dozen miles from the White House.

The changes that resulted were slow and superficial. Typically, the president, the Supreme Court or Congress would rule that certain things were “unconstitutional”, so hoping to appease the Northern black vote and to comply with its own proclaimed ideology, but would then fail to develop any mechanisms to get its ruling obeyed.

So desegregation of the armed forces began towards the end of the Second World War but was not completed until well into the Korean War; in 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that segregated public education was unconstitutional, but left responsibility for implementing its decision to racist state authorities; in 1957 federal troops were used to enforce a court order desegregating a single school in Little Rock, Arkansas, but that was all; soon afterwards Congress passed the first civil rights law for 80 years, but did not provide any means for its implementation. Individual blacks could spend years waiting for federal courts to grant injunctions—no great help for those threatened by lynch mobs.

There was only one way the superficial legal changes emanating from the North could affect everyday life in the South: if the Southern blacks themselves moved.

The first moves came from the organisation of the black middle classes, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). It launched a series of legal suits aimed at banning discrimination and winning the right for Southern blacks to vote. But progress was painfully slow; the Northern establishment were not going to worry about the South unless forced to. Meanwhile the Southern racists harassed NAACP activists, sacked them from their jobs, firebombed their homes, killed individuals who dared register to vote, and in seven states even pushed through state laws banning the NAACP as a “subversive organisation”. In many parts of the South conditions for black

activists were harder in 1956 than they had been five years earlier.

But forces were moving that had a much less legalistic approach than the NAACP. In June 1953 the black population of Baton Rouge in Louisiana organised themselves, with 3,000 strong nightly meetings, to boycott the local bus company when it refused to end the practice of giving priority to whites and forcing blacks to accept segregation in whatever seats were left at the back of the bus. In December 1955 the example was followed on a much greater scale in Birmingham, Alabama, after Rosa Parkes refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and was arrested. A local official of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Attendants and a local group of black women, the Women's Political Council, called for a boycott, contacting students from the local all-black college and preachers in the local black churches. The boycott lasted nearly a year, and was the biggest mass movement the South had seen since reconstruction.

Similar movements started in spring 1956 in the Florida city of Tallahassee, then in December 1956 in Alabama's biggest city, Birmingham. A 26-year-old preacher who had emerged as leader of a similar movement in Montgomery, Martin Luther King, was soon running a coordinating committee with support right across the South, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

The NAACP had been made up of a minority of individual activists, usually from middle class backgrounds, who looked for gains through the federal legal system. The SCLC had much broader roots among the black population of the South, but the key to its organisation remained a section of the black middle class: the ministers in the black churches. The churches played a central role in communities of people who had only recently migrated from the countryside. They were not just religious but also social centres. What is more, the ministers were one of the few groups in the black community who did not depend on white employers for a livelihood. They became the natural organising focuses for the movements of urban blacks in the South.

But this very fact ensured that the movement did not see itself as revolutionary. Its aim was integration into existing US society, not rejection of it. Under Martin Luther King it soon received an appropriate ideology—that of non-violence.

This ideology fitted with the interests of a black middle class which did not want massive social confrontation. It also seemed to fit the situation Southern blacks found themselves in. As a poor and unarmed minority, they did not feel they had much chance if it came to physical warfare. "Non-violent" agitation, it seemed, could create such a stir as to compel the Northern power structure to intervene on their side. So for ten years the mass of black activists in the South

were prepared to accept a non-violent ideology preached by a handful of committed pacifists, and hold to it in the face of shootings, bombings and police attacks. What for King and the pacifists was a matter of principle was accepted by thousands of other activists as a matter of tactics.

The first wave of struggle in the South in the mid-1950s was that of mass movements, organised mainly round the black churches. In 1960 a second wave of struggle began. This time black students took the lead.

On 1 February 1960 four black students sat down at the whites-only lunch counter in the Woolworths store at Greensboro, North Carolina. Despite insults and harassment from white customers, they refused to move, and in the course of the next few days they were joined by hundreds more students from the town's colleges. In the next two months the example was copied in 70 other Southern cities—50,000 students joined a movement which spread from the seaboard cities, where repression was not so great, to the Deep South, where those involved were threatened by police armed with rifles, shotguns and teargas. By the summer, lunch counters in scores of cities were desegregated.

The NAACP national office had refused to back the Greensboro sitin. The ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had given it support, and their churches were often its organisational centres. But the main driving force at the beginning of the movement was a Northern-based grouping, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which trained people to respond to white racist provocation with disciplined non-violence. CORE expanded massively because of the protests and changed from a movement dominated by Northern white pacifists to one in which black activists played the key role. Alongside it another organisation was formed at a conference of Southern student activists in April 1960, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

The movement was based in the South. But it was soon influencing colleges in the North, drawing in black students to play a key role in the struggle, and establishing support groups among white students in a hundred campuses.

Over the next four years the new student-based groups initiated challenge after challenge to Southern racism. In 1961 they organised "freedom rides", taking long-distance buses through the South to challenge segregation in defiance of local laws, racist mobs and bomb threats. In the winter of 1961-62 they led a mass movement which suffered 1,000 arrests as it attempted to bring about total integration in Albany, Georgia. In 1963 they pushed ahead with efforts to get blacks to register for the vote, despite the murder in June that year of Medgar Evers outside his own home. In 1964 they sent 150 organisers into the deepest parts of the South to challenge white supremacy in Mississippi by building the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

The activists required enormous courage and dedication if they were to sustain the non-violent strategy. Yet that strategy rested on a contradiction: it assumed that through non-violence the armed and violent Northern state machine could be made to intervene to enforce desegregation and voting rights in the South. So on one famous occasion a “non-violent” freedom ride depended upon armed protection:

A convoy of three airplanes, two helicopters and seven patrol cars accompanied the bus, while inside James Lawson held a workshop on non-violence.⁵⁷

But those who ran the Northern state machine were prepared to give such support only reluctantly, and only to a certain point. Although Southern police forces were continually being used to uphold segregation and stop black people voting, only twice were federal forces sent in to protect black civil rights—by Eisenhower in Little Rock in 1957 and by Kennedy in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1961.

President John Kennedy and his brother, attorney general Bobby Kennedy, wanted to win black votes for the Democrats—these had been key in the close-run election against Nixon in 1960—but they did not want large-scale agitation. The Kennedys provided a degree of protection and funding for the anti-racist organisations, but they demanded a price in return. As one historian of the Civil Rights movement has said:

Following the tumultuous freedom rides, the Kennedy administration made attempts to funnel activists of the civil rights organisations into voter registration activities instead of disruptive movements. Indeed, the Kennedy administration was adamant in opposing widescale civil disobedience. President Kennedy thought low key voting activities would result in peaceful change and provide additional votes for the Democratic Party.⁵⁸

Bobby Kennedy went so far as to call a meeting of CORE and SNCC leaders in his office. James Farmer of CORE told what Kennedy said:

Why don't you guys cut all that shit, freedom riding and sitting in shit, and concentrate on voter registration. If you do that, I'll get you taxfree status.⁵⁹

Meanwhile the Kennedys continued to appoint known racists as judges in the South.

The Kennedys' two-faced strategy showed itself when there was an unprecedented upsurge of black struggle in the first half of 1963 after television coverage of a new mass struggle in Birmingham, Alabama, had put pictures of police dogs and teargas being used against non-violent black demonstrators into every living room in the country. Pressure built up within the black movement for a mass demonstration to besiege Congress in Washington as it discussed a

new Civil Rights Bill. President Kennedy opposed the march, telling civil rights leaders it would “create an atmosphere of intimidation”.

When they told him they could not stop it if they tried, he changed his tack. As a classic account of his presidency tells, he then said he would support it, provided it was organised in a non-militant way:

The conference with the president did persuade civil rights leaders that they should not lay siege to Capitol Hill... So in 1963 Kennedy moved to incorporate the Negro revolution into the democratic coalition.⁶⁰

One speaker at the demonstration, the young SNCC leader John Lewis, had intended to make a speech denouncing the Democratic administration for its pussy-footing over enforcement of civil rights. Such was the success of Kennedy’s manoeuvring that he was prevailed upon to cut out his most critical remarks.⁶¹

The end result of these manoeuvrings came in summer 1964, after Kennedy’s assassination. The SNCC activists spent that summer risking their lives registering voters and building the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in opposition to the white racist local party machine that ran the state. But when the Democratic Party National Convention took place in August 1964, it was the white racist delegation that took its seat. All that established black leaders such as Martin Luther King would offer the Freedom Democratic Party was a compromise whereby a couple of its delegates would be allowed a token presence. Anything more, it was argued, would split the Democratic Party down the middle and risk electoral defeat at the hands of the Republican Party’s hard right presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater. The young black activists rejected the compromise and walked out. But that did not prevent the established black leaders giving Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Democrat presidential candidate, a blank cheque with the whole black vote on it.

It seemed the upsurge of black struggle had been successfully absorbed by the system, and the next 18 months were hard and bitter for those who had been at the forefront.

The Mississippi Summer Project brought hundreds of Northerners into the state in 1964... But once the volunteers returned to the North the old patterns of segregation returned.⁶²

The leadership of the black organisations began to feel that organisational methods were not effective. For roughly a year and a half they groped around for more effective strategies.

Britain

Southern Europe and the Southern states experienced profound social movements in the first half of the 1960s, even if these were eventually contained by the system. In Northern Europe things were much quieter. Collaboration between big business, the state and the bureaucracies of the working class movement seemed able to marginalise any protest movements. The full employment and urbanisation that resulted from the long boom were to strengthen the consensus, with increasing attempts to incorporate the union leaderships through formal government incomes policies. This meant a willingness by big business to contemplate the entry of reformist leaders into government, as for example the “Grand Coalition” between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in West Germany in 1966.

In Britain there was a slight, but only slight, exception to the general picture. There was a build up of struggles in certain sections of industry—especially engineering, motors, mining and the docks—in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Strikes reported by the Ministry of Labour rose slowly from 640 in 1957 to 780 two years later, then jumped by 50 percent to 1,180 in 1960. They continued to rise, reaching 1,496 in 1964.⁶³ One industrial relations expert noted: “The number of separate strikes reported is very much higher than for any comparable period since figures first began to be systematically collected in the 1890s.”⁶⁴

These were isolated, fragmented struggles. They did not lead to any general struggles even within the industries affected—so that union leaders voted into national office in this period tended to be on the right rather than the left. Those strikes had little impact on other major industries—rail, postal services, telecommunications, the print, iron and steel, chemicals, local and national government—where the strike rate remained low.⁶⁵

The lack of industrial generalisation was matched by a lack of political generalisation. The years which saw this rise in strike numbers also saw a growing movement of workers away from politics: individual membership of the Labour Party fell by about two thirds between 1951 and 1970;⁶⁶ the decline in sales of the two Labour papers, the *Daily Herald* and the weekly *Reynold's News*, caused them to go out of business in the 1960s; and the traditional left alternative to Labour, the small Communist Party, lost members and saw the sales of its daily paper fall by about 75 percent over the same 20 years.⁶⁷ The strikes were unofficial and led mainly by shop stewards, directly elected shopfloor representatives; but these were, on average, no more to the left politically than those who elected them, with fewer than 5 percent ever having belonged to the Communist Party.

A powerful political protest movement did arise in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It involved hundreds of

thousands of people in demonstrations and enabled the Labour left to carry a resolution against the bitter opposition of the party's right wing leader, Hugh Gaitskell, at the 1960 party conference. A militant offshoot from the campaign, the Committee of 100, led to bitter, although "non-violent", confrontations with the police in 1961 and 1962. But the movement soon found it could not command the real social forces needed to inflict a lasting defeat on the right wing bureaucracy inside the labour movement or to sustain direct action in the face of increasing arrests and prison sentences. The right reversed the Labour Party's policy at its 1961 conference, and the Committee of 100 went into decline in 1962. In the absence of any general class struggle, the political protest movement was doomed to isolation and ineffectiveness.

A defeated and demoralised left found little difficulty in 1963 in throwing its wholehearted support behind a new Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson, whose vaguely left rhetoric was matched by policies indistinguishable from those of the right.

Labour, under Wilson, won a narrow majority in the general election of 1964. This was less because of any great upsurge of enthusiasm for Labour than because of a widespread feeling (including among sections of big business) that the Tories could no longer push through the policies needed to renovate British capitalism. Wilson, with promises of a "technological revolution" and incomes policy, seemed more capable of dealing with the slow relative decline of British capitalism than did the Tory prime minister, the 14th Earl of Home.

Wilson was soon to show that Labour in power could paralyse working class struggle. What began as "planned growth of incomes" in 1964 turned, after a second and bigger electoral victory two years later, into a head-on confrontation with the Seamen's Union, the imposition of a wage freeze, and a small, temporary drop in the level of strike activity.

Mao and Che

Not only in the West were molecular changes having a political impact. In the early 1950s Stalin's Russia and Mao's China seemed to be tied inextricably, integrated in a great world Communist movement which ruled from the German River Elbe to the shores of the Pacific, dominating oppositional forces in the West and the Third World. The mood was well expressed by a British Communist leader after his party had done badly in the general election of 1950: "We have lost the Rhondda, but we have taken Peking".

The events of 1956—when Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced his predecessor Stalin as a blundering mass murderer and Russian tanks suppressed

the Hungarian revolution—knocked fragments from this monolith. Tens of thousands of people left the Western Communist Parties. Many of their activists lost some selfconfidence. But the core of the movement remained intact. The British Communist Party, for instance, whose membership fell by 7,000 members in 1956-57, had managed to make up most of this loss by 1963.⁶⁸

Then suddenly, at the beginning of the 1960s, the giants of the “world movement” started quarrelling. At first they avoided a direct confrontation. The official arguments were between Russia and Albania and between China and the Italian Communist leader Togliatti. But everyone knew Albania was a stalking horse for China, and Togliatti was more Khrushchevite than Khrushchev himself. Then in 1962 the breach became a chasm. Russia withdrew thousands of technicians who were vital to Chinese economic development, then backed India in a border war with China. Splits began to take place in most of the Western and Third World Communist Parties.

The arguments presented were between the Chinese claim that Russia had become “revisionist”, abandoning revolution elsewhere in the world for the delights of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism, and the Russian claim that the Chinese were “adventurers” preaching nuclear war.

But more deep-seated reasons lay behind the row. Three decades of forced accumulation had transformed the backward Russia of the late 1920s into the world’s second economic power. Its rulers could bargain as near-equals with the US, could buy allies among even the most reactionary regimes of the Third World, could dispense with some of Stalin’s practices at home, and no longer needed the rhetoric of world revolution (and it was only rhetoric—the reality had been dropped with Stalin’s victory over Trotsky in the 1920s). China, by contrast, was terribly poor. Its people had to be spurred to ever greater efforts if their rulers’ dreams of “catching up with the West” were to be fulfilled. This meant Stalinist practices and a quasi-revolutionary ideology.⁶⁹

At first the Chinese attacks on Russia had a limited appeal for the left in the West. The Chinese praise of Stalin and the assertion that nuclear war would not be a great disaster were not likely to have any appeal outside small groups of hardened Communist Party members. Indeed, an important effect of the split was to encourage the main Western Communist Parties to act more like traditional reformist parties: they kept from Stalinism the willingness to form alliances with their own bourgeoisies, but this was no longer tempered by a feeling of overriding loyalty to Russia as the “leader of the world Communist movement”.

Mao, however, had not played his last card. In 1966 he initiated another break with orthodoxy. Frustration at the difficulties of Chinese economic

development led him to turn against many of his fellow Chinese leaders, throwing Chinese society into the turmoil of what he called the “Cultural Revolution”.

Mao had led the guerrillas of the People’s Liberation Army to defeat the corrupt Kuomintang regime by what often seemed acts of pure will. He now believed such efforts of will could break through the obstacles to national economic development.

His first move came with the “Great Leap Forward” of 1958-60—an attempt to industrialise at all costs. It failed miserably and actually set the economy back. In the aftermath Mao was blamed by his colleagues in the Chinese leadership and lost much of his power. But he lost none of his impatience, and began to believe they had succumbed to bureaucratic inertia. He decided the only cure for it lay in a massive purge.

The idea of a purge was no novelty—Stalin had, after all, carried through purge after purge in Russia. But Mao could find no reliable instrument inside the Chinese bureaucracy itself to carry out the purge for him—the higher echelons of the government, the police and the army were all influenced by the people he wanted to get rid of. In desperation he reached outside the apparatus of power to a force he thought he personally could control. In 1966 he and his allies closed down much of China’s educational system and called on the 11 million students to carry through a cultural renovation of Chinese society.

This is not the place to write the history of “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”.⁷⁰ Suffice to say it was not “proletarian” (Mao specifically instructed that “the workers, peasants and soldiers should not interfere with the students”),⁷¹ and it was not a “revolution” (the target of every real revolution, the armed might of the state, was left untouched throughout, with the head of the army, Lin Piao, a key ally of Mao’s). Indeed, the moment workers in Shanghai began to take action, in January 1967, the army was ordered to intervene to take control of “factories, villages, institutions of finance and commerce, of learning, party organs, administrative and mass organisations.”⁷² Even the student “Red Guards” soon ceased to have any central direction. Different sections of the old power structure in each locality sponsored rival “Red Guard” and “Red Rebel” factions who fought each other, plunging areas of the country into near civil war in 1967-68.

This was not, however, how many on the left in the West and the Third World perceived the image of the Cultural Revolution. Mao, it seemed, had mobilised the youth against the old structures and had turned spontaneity against the party apparatus. He had shown there were no limits to what could be achieved if people threw off old habits of deference and obedience. He had

insisted that the world could be overturned tomorrow, if only individuals made the effort—that “one spark could start a prairie fire”.

Nothing could seem more removed from the conservatism which increasingly afflicted official oppositions in the West and Third World, whether Communist or social democrat. Nothing could be more appealing for anyone hankering after instant revolutionary change.

Mao’s message was reinforced from another direction. In the early 1960s, just as the Russians were losing an ally in Beijing they were gaining one on the Caribbean island of Cuba. A group of middle class intellectuals led by Fidel Castro had ridden to power at the head of a guerrilla “rebel army”, defeating the US-backed dictator Batista. They dreamed of developing the island economically, and when this was blocked by powerful US interests, carried through wholesale nationalisation, formed an alliance with Russia and declared themselves “Communists”.

One of the leaders of the rebel army, Ernesto Che Guevara, took charge of trying to industrialise the country by copying the methods that had succeeded in Russia. But this was not as successful as he hoped—Cuba had been bled too dry by US interests in the past to be able to raise itself to prosperity by its own bootstraps. Guevara was desperate to break from an impasse that kept Cuba an impoverished country. He was an Argentine-born doctor who had been prompted by the evidence of poverty throughout much of Latin America to throw in his lot with Castro in the mid-1950s. He saw only one way out. In 1965 he resigned all his positions in Cuba and set out to initiate revolutions elsewhere. He began to develop a plan for revolutionising all of Latin America.

Che’s scheme was to set up a guerrilla *foco* (focus) in Bolivia and open up a new revolutionary front on the borders of some of the most important Latin American states. The project was doomed to failure. Conditions in Bolivia were quite different to those in 1950s Cuba. The guerrilla band was trapped by the Bolivian army, who captured and then murdered Guevara himself.

But his calls for revolution based on the guerrilla *foco* were already echoing round the world. A young upper class French graduate of philosophy, Régis Debray, had elaborated them into a “theory” in his book *Revolution in the Revolution?*, of which 200,000 copies were printed in Cuba alone.⁷³ They were used by Fidel Castro to attack the timidity of the Latin American Communist Parties (and, by implication, the Russian leadership) at the Organisation of Latin American Solidarity conference held in Havana shortly before the Bolivian defeat.

Che’s death added to the attraction of his ideas for young idealists. His heroism was a marked contrast to those who dominated the workers’ movement

in most countries. He had gone to his death while they could scarcely stir themselves over any issue.

Che's slogans, "If you are a revolutionary, make a revolution" and "Make two, three, many Vietnams", were disastrous if taken as a guide to immediate action. For that reason none of the great Marxists—Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg or Trotsky—would have raised them: they knew it is not revolutionaries but social classes which make revolutions, and the attempt to substitute one for the other is a guarantee of defeat. Yet in 1967 Che's slogans merged with the distant echoes of the Cultural Revolution, providing an alternative direction for many of those who only a few years earlier would have been absorbed into the suffocating conservatism of the pro-Russian Communist Parties. The stress on will power, on going out and fighting regardless of the odds, grew out of the disintegration of world Stalinism. But it was to play its own part in the upheavals of 1968 and after.

The student revolt

ON 2 December 1964, some 6,000 students gather outside Sproul Hall, the administrative centre of the massive Berkeley campus of the University of California. A 21-year-old student, Mario Savio, addresses them. He has just heard that the university authorities are threatening to expel him for his role in a demonstration two months before:

If this is a firm, and the Board of Regents are the board of Directors and president Kerr is in fact the manager, then the faculty are a bunch of employees and we're the raw material. But we're a bunch of material that don't mean to be made into any product, don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the university. We're human beings...

There's a time when the operations of the machine become so odious, make you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, can't even tacitly take part. And then you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop.⁷⁴

The call goes out to occupy Sproul Hall. Joan Baez, the folk singer, speaks to the students, asking them “to go in with love in their hearts, not anger”. Between 1,000 and 1,500, headed by the Stars and Stripes, then advance up the steps into the building, as she sings *Blowin' in the Wind* through a megaphone.⁷⁵

The sit-in is broken early the next morning as the “liberal” Democrat governor of California, Brown, sends in police with guns in their holsters and clubs in their hands. They clear the building and make 800 arrests. Police entering the building were ordered to “kick their way through” demonstrators.⁷⁶

Yet in jail the mood of the students is one of exhilaration rather than despair. “Students were laughing and singing”.⁷⁷ And back at the campus between 60 and 80 percent of the 30,000-strong student body was joining in a protest strike.⁷⁸

The events at Berkeley were unprecedented in an advanced capitalist country.⁷⁹ But in the decade that followed similar student struggles would spread from campus to campus round the world, jumping like electrical sparks from terminal to terminal—to the Free University in West Berlin in June 1966, the London School of Economics (LSE) in March 1967, to most major German

universities in June 1967, to Turin, Trento and the Catholic University of Milan in the autumn of 1967 and then to almost all Italian universities in January-February 1968, to Warsaw and to the Nanterre campus outside Paris in March 1968, to one of the most prestigious US universities, Columbia in New York, and to virtually every German university in April, to the whole of higher education in France in May, then on to Leicester, Essex, Hull, Sussex and Birmingham universities and Hornsey, Guildford and Croydon Schools of Art in England, to Madrid and Santiago in fascist Spain,⁸⁰ and back to Berkeley for a second time.

And that was by no means the end of the rebellion. In the US 70 percent of private universities that responded to an academic questionnaire and 43 percent of public universities reported “severe student unrest” in the academic year 1968-69.⁸¹ So widespread was the student rebellion that 1968 was—and often still is—seen as “the year of the students”.

The central contention of this book is that 1968 was much, much more than just a series of student rebellions. Nevertheless, the student revolt did have a significant part to play in tapping much wider social forces. To understand why, it is necessary to look at important changes that had taken place in the educational system in the previous decade.

The students’ place in society

Higher education had been the traditional training ground for the ruling class and that narrow section of the middle class which directly served its needs, intellectually and ideologically: lawyers, top civil servants and some clerics. It catered for a tiny proportion of the population, the children of the most privileged sections of society. So in Britain in 1900 the total university population was only 20,000, with another 5,000 students training as teachers.

The education provided was appropriate for those whose job was to live off surplus value rather than to engage in its direct production:

Since one’s place in society was defined by one’s birth one could easily afford to spend one’s early years in leisurely pursuits worthy of a gentleman, tutored by amiable eccentrics. The distinguishing characteristic of the educational system for the elite was that it was completely divorced from reality. Indeed great pride was taken in this. To reinforce the point one studied the classics, ‘greats’ or such like, and education acquired a role similar to the ‘Grand tour’ of pleasant diversion, an interval in between infancy and the rigours of exploitation.

What mattered was the acquisition of an attitude of mind: the firm knowledge of belonging to an elite, a belief in one’s right to do so and an ability to command.⁸²

In such a system students could be revolutionary only on one condition: that

much of the bourgeoisie itself was in opposition to those who ran the state, as in France and Germany in the mid-1840s or in Tsarist Russia before 1905. If the revolutionary challenge was directed against the bourgeoisie by a working class movement, then students were to be found on the side of reaction: in Paris in June 1848,⁸³ in Russia in 1917, in Germany in 1919-23 and 1930-33.

But the needs of capitalist development in the 20th century called for a different sort of university system. Capitalism based on competition between privately owned companies gave way to monopoly capitalism, based on public shareholding, which then, through state intervention and nationalisation, increasingly merged with sections of the state. Successful capitalist accumulation demanded the continual and systematic application of science and technology to industry. It also required a mass of personnel to staff the apparatus of bureaucratic control and to help it maintain its ideological dominance. The universities had to expand to fulfil these requirements.

At first the expansion was relatively slow: at the outbreak of the Second World War there were still only 69,000 students in Britain. But with the post-war boom it began to speed up: the number of students had nearly doubled by 1954; it doubled again to 294,000 by 1964; and it reached more than twice this figure by 1972. In 1900 students had been 1 percent of their age group; in 1950 they were still only 1.5 percent, but by 1972 they were 15 percent.

Expansion on such a scale was not just quantitative. It was qualitative as well. The relations of the colleges to society had changed: they were now expected to turn out vast numbers of future functionaries and technologists as well as rulers and ideologues. They had to become, in the words of Clark Kerr, head of Berkeley during the 1964 disturbances, “multiversities” or “knowledge factories”.

Such colleges could no longer be “communities of equals”, of the children of the ruling class and the teachers of the ruling class. The top administrators and the professors closest to them would continue to mix socially with members of the ruling class, who, in turn, would continue to dominate in the boards which ran the universities.⁸⁴ But the majority of lecturers were not in this situation, and only a small minority of the students (in Britain, those in a couple of Oxbridge colleges).

Neither in class origin nor class destination were students “the children of the bourgeoisie”.

This did not mean students were workers. In Britain in 1984 some 70 percent of new university students came from the “professional and managerial” section of the population and fewer than 20 percent from the manual working class.⁸⁵ Even though most of those in the “professional and managerial” category are

wage earners—nurses and classroom teachers, for example⁸⁶—it is clear that a substantial number come from the privileged ranks of the new middle class, earning incomes and having working conditions vastly superior to the mass of manual and white collar workers.

What applies to the origins of students also applies to their eventual social destination. Many do end up as waged labour, but a significant proportion join the 10-15 percent of the population who constitute the new middle class.

The mixed origins and destinations of students mean it is quite wrong either to refer to them as a new social “class” or to assign them to any of the existing classes. Rather they are a transitory grouping of young people whose final class positions have not yet been determined.

While at college, students have certain things in common. They are concentrated together in large numbers and subject to the same gruelling system of examinations and assessments. Most face similar economic pressures, so that cuts in government spending affect them all.

Yet at the same time, some students will rise to very privileged positions in society and some will end up no better off than manual workers. Indeed, one of the greatest pressures on students, the examination system, is one of the mechanisms for determining who will rise and who will not.

As an analysis of students in the mid-1970s put it:

Students do not enjoy any definite relations to the productive process. While they are students, their careers remain uncertain. Their fate will be settled by imponderables like the state of the labour market and their performance in examinations... Students are defined socially by their transitional situation... The effect of the examination system is not to unite students into a cohesive group but to atomise them; each student's fate is settled by his or her individual performance separated from that of all the others.

But they are an oppressed group... Insecurity about the future is soon reinforced by the isolation of life on the campus. Although the discipline is less rigid than at school, decisions about the content of courses, appointments, price levels or anything else remain just as remote.⁸⁷

The result is general alienation. Much of the time this results in passivity and forms of escapism—a culture of drink or drugs, for example. But it can explode into sudden protest movements which confront the authorities in university and in society.

Here an element of the transitional relationship between students and the different classes of society can become important. Elements of ideological confusion in society at large become magnified in the student milieu. Whole sections of the student population are expected to absorb the ruling ideology, so as to be able to transmit it to others when they graduate. If that ideology is in palpable contradiction with reality as they experience it, they are themselves thrown into intellectual turmoil and can react with moral indignation.

Again and again in the late 1960s and early 1970s students found that those who ran the campuses did not live by the “liberal” ideology with which they tried to justify existing society. Far from being “liberal and democratic” the universities were firmly under the control of representatives of the ruling class, who would react to any challenge to their power in higher education with expulsions, the police and the courts. The university authorities claimed to be “non-political”, yet would collaborate with government war efforts, tolerate racism and consort with the heads of dictatorial regimes. The result was that student protests which started off over liberal issues developed into all-out confrontation.

So at Berkeley, the initial issue in dispute was the freedom of students to organise on campus for off-campus political activities—especially for campaigns against local racial segregation.

At the Free University of Berlin the conflict between students and the administration started in 1964 when the rector banned a lecture by an anti-establishment author and grew in 1966-67 when he took disciplinary action against “leaders” of protests against the Vietnam War.

At the LSE, students were spurred into action after a collaborator with the racist regime in Rhodesia was appointed director and disciplinary action was taken against student representatives involved in protests. At Columbia the movement grew out of protests at the university’s involvement in Department of Defense contracts and its attempts to expand its gymnastic facilities by evicting local black people from their homes.

Even where the grounds for protest lay in the students’ own material circumstances, as in Italy in 1967-68 where the issue was attempts to impose greater selection⁸⁸ and Nanterre where it was restrictions on men visiting women’s dormitories, the protest quickly became general and political—this was ensured by repression by the university authorities and the police.

The politics of student protest

One of the myths about 1968 is that the students started off by being political. This simply is not true.

At Berkeley 800 or so students had been involved in activities connected with the movement for black civil rights; but that did not set them apart from the mainstream of US politics, since Kennedy had eventually welcomed the civil rights march on Washington, and Johnson claimed to incorporate its goals in his programme. The student protest was in fact organised by a “united front” of “civil rights groups, radical and socialist groups, religious and peace groups,

Young Democrats and all three Republican clubs (including Youth for Goldwater) plus another right wing conservative society.”⁸⁹

At the LSE the resolution to occupy was moved by the former chair of the Conservative Society.⁹⁰ At Columbia the biggest student group before the struggle was the Citizen Council, which undertook “social action work” in the local community,⁹¹ and the far left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) worked in “coalition with moderate student groups”.⁹²

It was precisely because they were “non-political” that students reacted so bitterly to the power structure when it resorted to lies and acts of repression against them. As Hal Draper put it, the “non-ideological” character of the movement:

...accounts in part for the explosiveness of the student uprising. This was the explosiveness of uncalculated indignation, not the slow boil of planned revolt...the first discovery of the chasm between the rhetoric of Ideals and the cynicism of Power among the pillars of society.⁹³

In the early stages of each student revolt the ideas which dominated, even among the most radical elements, tended to be very different from the Marxism of the established revolutionary left. They stressed anti-authoritarianism rather than class struggle, and tended to see students as playing a privileged role in challenging the powers-that-be.

In the US the movement was dominated by the “new radicals” or the “new left”. As Hal Draper described them:

The new radicals are non-ideological in the sense that they refuse to, or are disinclined to, generalise their ideas and positions. They are inclined to substitute a moral approach—indeed, a dogmatic moral approach for political and social analysis as much as possible.⁹⁴

The tone of such radicals was very much expressed by the Berkeley student leader, Mario Savio:

The most exciting things going on in America today are movements to change America. America is becoming ever more the utopia of sterilised, automated contentment... This chrome-plated consumers’ paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children.

But an important minority of men and women...have shown they will die rather than be standardised, replaceable and irrelevant.⁹⁵

Nationally, the main organisational focus for the “new radical” movements in the US became Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). This had started life as an offshoot of a right wing social democratic organisation. Even after moving to the left under the impact of the civil rights movement, it could still raise as its slogan in the 1964 presidential election “Half the way with LBJ”.

The SDS rapidly lost its illusions in the Democratic Party when, after only four months in office, Johnson started the carpet bombing of North Vietnam. But

it still did not look to class politics. In words that could have come from its arch-opponent, Daniel Bell, the SDS insisted that:

[T]he traditional left expectation of irreconcilable and clashing class interests has been defied... It appears that the American elite has discovered a long-term way to stabilise or cushion the contradictions of our society.⁹⁶

The only way to break through the elite's control was:

to oppose American barbarism with new structures and opposing identities. These are created by people whose need to understand their society and govern their own existence has somehow not been cancelled by the psychological damage they have received.

Such people were to be found among “students”, among “middle-class insurgents” and among “the poor”, who the first two groups could “release from their fear and embarrassment” by:

a certain kind of organising which tries to make people understand their own worth and dignity. This work depends upon the existence of ‘material’ issues as a talking and organising point—high rents, voting rights, unpaved roads and so on—but it moves from there into the ways such issues are related to personal life.⁹⁷

Organising the poor did not bring significant results for the SDS. As one critic rightly put it:

Alas, the poor are not easy to organise. Their neighbourhoods destroy instead of build social cohesion. Once they are organised, their demands—street repairs, garbage collection—can be met... And finally, because they are unemployed and only marginal to the society, the social power they possess is little greater than that of students.⁹⁸

In effect, this meant that the SDS's main stress remained on activity among students, while talking in terms of “base building” and “let the people decide!”

At the LSE in 1967, the Marxists of the Socialist Society were still a fringe ginger group, capable of taking the initiative at key moments, but by no means recognised as a leadership by the mass of active students. The wording on the demonstrating students' banner was “down with the pedagogic gerontocracy” (meaning literally, rule by aged teachers); not until after nearly two years of struggle and argument did the slogan become “Free, free the LSE, free it from the bourgeoisie”. Even then, for a section of the left, the aim was to use student power to establish “red bases” in the colleges.

In Germany, the student movement was spearheaded by an explicitly Marxist organisation, the German SDS (German Socialist Student League). But the “Marxism” of the majority tendency inside the SDS would not have been uncongenial to the American new radicals, had they been more theoretically minded. For it broke with classical Marxism, considering the working class of

little significance. It accepted the analyses of the “Frankfurt School” theoreticians Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. These claimed that the capitalist system was “closed” and without any possibility of “concrete negation”—meaning that the only challenge to it could come from fringe social groups and from the peoples of the “Third World”. Workers could not fight society because their own consciousness had been shaped by “an authoritarian character structure” imposed on them by the media.

This approach was described by a contemporary critic as holding that “the liberation of workers can no longer be the task of the workers themselves, but first of all, a section of intellectuals, suited to the task, must remove the veil of their manipulation from the workers’ eyes.”⁹⁹

In Italy in 1967-68 the “radical” character of the movements in Turin and Trento was expressed through the slogan “Student Power”.¹⁰⁰ Documents were distributed nationally and expressed the general mood. They were “written in a new language which had little to do with the traditional doctrines of the groups of the revolutionary left”.¹⁰¹

The ideology and the strategy to which the student vanguard looked was essentially non-Marxist: the basic ingredient was that the student movement could be the factor that would put into motion (“detonate”) other oppressed social strata and so open up a revolutionary prospect in a short time.¹⁰²

The same anti-authoritarian, “student power” tone was to be found in the French student movement of 1968. The slogans of the occupied Sorbonne in Paris were notable for their stress on human liberation and potential—and their lack of any understanding of the forces that could bring that liberation.

Typical of this stage of the student movement was the emergence of “charismatic” student leaders—often proclaiming an end to leadership of all sorts! Mario Savio at Berkeley, Rudi Dutschke at the Free University of Berlin, Dany Cohn-Bendit at Nanterre rose to prominence because they could articulate the anti-authoritarian ideas that gripped thousands of students as they challenged the power structure of university and society for the first time. The media would seize upon such figures and present them as the student movement; indeed, this could even happen to individuals who had no organic connection with the student struggles—as with Tariq Ali in Britain, who had ceased to be a student two years before the media proclaimed him “leader” of the student movement!

This first “non-ideological” phase could not last long, however. The student movement rose so rapidly because of the students’ lack of roots in production. They were not tied to machines eight hours a day, 48 weeks of the year, so found it much easier to meet and mobilise than workers usually do. The initial outraged minority of students could take action on the campus without being held back by

the indifference or even hostility of the majority—something rarely possible for workers in a factory or office. Again, it was because students had the illusion that life in college was different from the regimented discipline of the factory that they were so angered when the authorities took action against their representatives.

But the lack of roots also guaranteed that the student movements began to decline the moment they reached their peak of involvement and enthusiasm. For the students did not have the power that workers have when they strike—the ability to hit the source of their employers’ profits. They could not build enduring organisation based on their ability to put permanent pressure on the authorities. The student upsurge could, by the very speed of its development, throw the authorities onto the defensive; it could force them to make concessions in a desperate attempt to reassert their ideological control over the mass of students. But it did not have the power to do real damage and that led students rapidly to believe that little more could be achieved by direct action.

So soon after activity reached its first peaks, militant students were prepared to throw in the towel. This happened at Berkeley and at the LSE. Only the action of the authorities in taking disciplinary measures that outraged the hitherto uninvolved mass of students pushed the movements to new peaks.

But these new peaks did not last either. The student movement at Berkeley won substantial concessions from the administration in December 1964, but when students returned to college after the Christmas break the movement was already in decline. It fragmented as a small group of students tried to divert it into supporting their right to use obscene language, and ended up so weak that it allowed the authorities to expel Mario Savio. At the LSE, after a week of occupation the majority of students had reached the point where they thought they could not win and voted for a “moderate” motion to “suspend” the action. The militants of the Socialist Society, convinced they were defeated, were amazed a fortnight later when the authorities conceded the students’ demands.

In Italy the great surge of student struggles in 1967-68 subsided in 1968-69. In Germany the movement reached its peak in April and May 1968, yet by November the organisation that had coordinated these protests nationally, the SDS, fell apart at its conference.¹⁰³

This did not mean that the colleges lapsed back into depoliticised calm. The students who had taken part would never be the same again. They had begun to question the assumptions under which they were expected to live, and continued with that questioning, even though they no longer believed that purely student agitation could have any effect.

The result was an unprecedented flourishing of intellectual debate on the

campuses. Large numbers of students began to learn about traditions of thought and action quite different from those taught by their professors. The “non-ideological” protesters of a few months earlier were now engaged in far-ranging ideological discussions—over imperialism and national liberation, over the roots of racism, over the relationship of ideas and society, over authority and class society. The ideas previously professed by only small, fringe minorities became the concerns of hundreds or even thousands of students.

In Italy, even during the first wave of occupations, “masses of students were involved in meetings and study groups on the class nature of students and society.”¹⁰⁴ In the US the number of students regarding themselves as revolutionaries and socialists of some sort grew many times over until the American SDS claimed the support of “fifty to seventy-five thousand students”.¹⁰⁵

In Britain the first, mainly student-based, demonstration in support of the national liberation movement in Vietnam, in October 1967, attracted only about 15,000 people; the demonstration a year later was 100,000 strong, and the slogan “Workers’ control” was nearly as popular as the slogan “Victory to the NLF”.

The immediate struggle rose and fell in each individual college, but the wave of politicisation spread outwards, drawing in ever-wider numbers of people. The phase of “spontaneous” upheaval and “charismatic” leadership gave way to a phase of hard, and often bitter, arguments between those with different views as to the way forward.

Political radicalism and the cultural underground

When the student movement polarised, the arguments were not just about politics. People began to re-evaluate their whole way of living, to look to alternative cultures and alternative lifestyles—often as an alternative to revolutionary politics.

Resistance to the consensus of the 1950s and early 1960s had come not only from small, marginal political organisations. It had come from equally small groups of “cultural” dissidents. In the US the “beatniks”, based on the West Coast, had “dropped out” of society and adopted an alternative lifestyle centred around drugs, sex and bebop music, with a philosophy based on a mixture of existentialism, Eastern mysticism and crude hedonism. The press “discovered” the group in the late 1950s.

The beatnik writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg became a point of identification for some of the new generation who began to reject consensus politics: Tom Hayden, who was soon to become one of the leading figures in the American SDS, was briefly attracted to it, “hitting the road” for the West Coast in

the summer of 1960, and many less well-known figures at least dreamed of making the journey. Coffee houses featuring “folk music, poetry reading, drugs and sex” sprang up on the fringes of universities such as Berkeley, Chicago, City College New York and Ann Arbor in the US,¹⁰⁶ and there was a similar identification among some of those on the fringes of the anti-bomb movement in Britain.

The “beats” were at first marginal among the mass of students. Hal Draper wrote that in Berkeley in the spring of 1965, after the first struggle of the Free Speech Movement, “only a small fringe of the university” were “disaffiliates”, those who “want to disaffiliate from the country, not transform it...and not to win”, to achieve “their own personal revolution” through LSD and dope.¹⁰⁷

But this soon changed. The upsurge in struggle challenged the assumptions many young people had about their own lives. The “hippie” subculture grew to encompass tens of thousands of people—a small minority of the younger generation as a whole, but nevertheless probably larger than the forces of the politicised left. As Draper admitted: “It blurs into the non-ideological radical tendency on one side and tends to have a colonising effect on it”.¹⁰⁸

According to the (exaggerated) testimony of one of the student “radicals” who embraced the hippie culture, young people from across the US flocked to Berkeley, so that:

A whole new culture burst forth just outside the biggest university in the history of the world. Telegraph Avenue was five blocks long lined with bookstores, outdoor cafes, poster shops and underground movie theatres... The university became a fortress surrounded by a foreign culture, long-haired, dope-smoking, barefooted freaks who were using state owned university property as a playground.¹⁰⁹

The subculture spread with the shockwaves from the student movement, and often at a faster speed than political dissidence. The very cultural conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s meant that any student who began to question any aspect of society, in however minor a way, was drawn to express rebellion symbolically in dress and lifestyle. As one veteran of the American “new left” put it:

The music and the outlawed drug experiences of what came to be called the “counter-culture” were an important part of the way we defined ourselves... It is impossible to convey the spirit...of politics among white youth in the 1960s without conveying the atmosphere of grass, acid, hitchhiking trips, Janis Joplin, Rolling Stones and ‘We are all outlaws in the eyes of Amerika’ in which they all floated.¹¹⁰

An assessment of the American SDS by one of its leaders in 1966 said of “80 to 90 percent” of its activists:

They are usually the younger members, freshmen and sophomores, moving into the hippy, Bob Dylan syndrome... staunchly anti-intellectual and rarely reading anything unless it comes from the underground press syndicate... In one sense they have no politics... They are morally outraged about the war, cops, racism, poverty, their parents, the middle class and authority in general.¹¹¹

As social rebellion spread out from the relatively privileged sections of students to wider sections of youth, so did aspects of the counter-culture. In the US army in Vietnam: “Most GIs considered... dope-smoking...an act of elementary personal rebellion.”¹¹²

Yet the cultural underground was by no means the same as the political left, even if they mutually influenced one another at the fringes. The hippie milieu displayed a powerful strain of copping out of society, rather than combatting it. The “flower children” who flocked to San Francisco in 1966-67, with their “Be in” in Golden Gate Park, may have outraged US conformity, but they in no way challenged the US’s rulers; they were very much the sons and daughters of the middle class at play, dropping out for a couple of enjoyable years before returning to well-paid careers. The thousands who went to Woodstock in New York State or the Stones concert in Hyde Park in 1969, and to the Dylan concert on the Isle of Wight in 1970 may have upset parents whose values came from the 1950s, but they did nothing—and often wanted to do nothing—to challenge those who held power in Britain or the US.

There were attempts to merge the cultural and political protests. In summer 1967, for instance, a “dialectics of liberation” conference in London brought together such stars as beat poet Allen Ginsberg, black power leader Stokely Carmichael and the “radical” psychologists Laing and Cooper. That October one of the organisers of a demonstration to lay siege to the Pentagon was the hippie-radical Jerry Rubin. According to one account hundreds of hippies, organised by “Hippie leader Abbie Hoffman”, attempted to “exorcise the Pentagon”, chanting, to the background of the beat of cymbals, triangles, drums and leather bells, “Out demons, out! Out demons, out! Out demons, out!”¹¹³

A year later Rubin was among those who believed they could mobilise 100,000 political hippies—christened Yippies—to protest outside the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, and Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver insisted that Rubin was the only representative of white radicalism fit to stand alongside himself on a revolutionary presidential ticket. Inside the American SDS an anarchist-hippie tendency, the “Up against the Wall” group, was quite powerful. But none of these efforts led anywhere. The “dialectics of liberation” conference was forgotten by the time the mass anti-Vietnam war movement grew in Britain a few months later; the Yippies mobilised only between 3,000 and 10,000 people to Chicago, and the Cleaver-Rubin presidential campaign was

abandoned.

The truth was that the hippie philosophy of “personal revolution” could not confront the harsh reality of political power in the late 1960s. “Hexing” the Pentagon seemed no way forward to the millions of people who reacted with increasing horror to the barbarity of the US war in Vietnam, epitomised in the My Lai massacre of 500 men, women and children in March 1968. The alliance with Jerry Rubin offered no answer for the Panthers when the FBI gunned down 20 of their members. “Peace and love” were of little help to the GIs whose officers ordered them into battle.

As one sympathetic study of the American new left puts it:

The cultural and political aspects of the New Left began to develop along separate paths. Experiments with communal living and sex, while remaining aspects of political activity, also were adapted to ‘non-political’ uses, the well-publicised ‘hippies’ being only the most visible of these. Religious cults emphasising communal living and personal salvation, ‘encounter groups’ and other ‘sensitivity training’ techniques, and a ‘drug and rock’ culture—all grew and spread.¹¹⁴

This process did not happen all at once. For two or three years at least there was two-way traffic between the political opposition and the cultural underground. Some of the movement’s pop figureheads showed this. Bob Dylan voiced the political response of the best white students to the civil rights movement in his earliest records, then went through a phase of “drugs and rock and roll” cultural rebellion with only occasional flashbacks to politics—such as his single *George Jackson*—before moving to a succession of religious identities. The Rolling Stones moved briefly to the politics of instant revolution—*Street Fighting Man*—between experiments with drugs and film acting. John Lennon collaborated with Paul McCartney on archetypal flower power songs (*Sergeant Pepper*) and, in 1968 of all years, an overtly anti-revolutionary track (*Revolution*)¹¹⁵—before moving on to a brief period of revolutionary politics (*Working Class Hero*). None of them stuck with the left.

The cultural “underground” was not moving in the same direction as the political left with which it once blurred, but many of the students who might have worn flowers in their hair in 1967 saw themselves as engaged in much more serious tasks by 1969.

The new student revolutionaries

If Berkeley was the birthplace of the new student revolt, Berlin was the first focus for the new student revolutionaries. This was appropriate. The city, divided by the Berlin Wall, had for two decades symbolised the division of the world into two rival imperialisms, equally oppressive and equally conformist.

Now, briefly, Berlin became the symbol of a new challenge to both of them.

The Berlin student movement began, as we have seen, in the mid-1960s over the issue of freedom of speech in the city's Free University. The students found that the "freedom of Berlin"—the rallying cry for supporters of the Western bloc everywhere—did not extend to them.

There was already a national organisation of socialist students, the German SDS. Originally the student wing of the German Social Democrats, it had been expelled by the parent party in 1961. The dominant group within the SDS had argued in the early 1960s for the building of a left reformist current within the workers' movement, but its politics began to change in 1965, under the influence of figures such as Rudi Dutschke, a former theology student from East Germany. The SDS played an increasingly important role in struggles at the Free University.

These suddenly grew unprecedentedly in spring and summer 1967. Protests against a visit to the city by US vice-president Hubert Humphrey led to police attacks on a student sit-in and disciplinary action against five activists; in a referendum 46 percent of Free University students voted to support the protests with only 43 percent against. Then, on 2 June, another protest was organised against a visit by the Shah of Iran. This time the police went berserk, shooting dead a Christian pacifist student, Benno Ohnesorg. Now virtually the whole student population of Berlin flooded behind the SDS leadership—10,000 took part in Benno Ohnesorg's funeral. Rudi Dutschke described their response:

June was a historic date in the German universities. For the first time since World War Two huge strata of students mobilised against the authoritarian structure of this society. They experienced this irrational authority during the demonstration.¹¹⁶

The movement began to spread from Berlin to the rest of West Germany. The SDS leaders were suddenly national figures, the focus of the media. The aim may have been to pillory their ideas, but things did not work out like that. The anti-authoritarian message struck a chord among large numbers of young people.

In spring 1967 an opinion poll had concluded that "young people have very little ideology... They only have one ideology, success".¹¹⁷ By January 1968 another poll showed that 67 percent approved of the student demonstrations.¹¹⁸

The SDS organised an international conference of protest against the Vietnam War in Berlin in February 1968. It drew together student activists from right across Europe and gave added impetus to further protests. The sight of demonstrators carrying red flags through the great holy place of Cold War ideology was an inspiration to all who had begun to question the established conformity.

Not surprisingly, the conference increased the crescendo of hatred directed in

the German press against the SDS leaders—especially Dutschke. The Springer press chain, the biggest in West Germany, was the most vicious. The campaign had its effect. In April a right wing fanatic shot Dutschke in the head, seriously injuring him.

The attempted assassination provoked mass demonstrations all over West Germany against the Springer newspapers. At this point the student movement was at its largest. In the month that followed there were demonstrations against the military dictatorship in Greece (21 April), a 40,000-strong May Day demonstration in Berlin, strikes in almost all universities against the government's emergency laws (15-16 May), and a day of protest against the neo-Nazis (18 May).

The students not only demonstrated, they began to reshape themselves ideologically. At the Free University more than 1,000 students were involved in "the critical university".

The anti-authoritarian politics of the German student movement was quite different from classical Marxism, but the movement was nevertheless important. Its mere existence punctured the ideological stereotypes of the long boom. The success of Dutschke and the other SDS leaders in winning many thousands of students to revolutionary ideas, however vague, was a portent of what would happen elsewhere in the course of 1968. Until then the revolutionary left everywhere had been miniscule, marginalised by the dominant orthodoxies of West and East. Now it was showing it could attract thousands of new supporters. This was of immense importance in the US and West Germany, where dissenting ideas had been virtually outlawed for years. Even in France, Italy and Britain, where there were traditions of communist and left socialist opposition, the student revolt represented something new: a force which refused to be confined by the bargaining for position of Stalinist or social democrat leaders. The "revolutionary" students became a focus for all those who wanted far-reaching change in society. What happened in Berlin in the summer of 1967 would happen in country after country in 1968.

The United States: The war comes home

IN NOVEMBER 1964 Lyndon Baines Johnson won the US presidency with a bigger majority than ever. He picked up 43 million votes against 27 million for his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater. His party, the Democrats, achieved overwhelming majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. According to one of his aides, he had “the most Democratic and the most liberal congress since the New Deal.”¹¹⁹

Johnson seemed to unite behind him an almost unprecedented consensus. When he addressed an election rally in Detroit he had Walter Reuther, head of the Union of Automobile Workers, on one side of him, Henry Ford, head of the world’s second biggest motor corporation, on the other. He picked up the great majority of the black vote and more than half the Southern white vote. He aspired to be a “great president”, who would be remembered as Roosevelt was, for a reforming zeal which reconciled rich and poor, black and white, and there didn’t seem much to stop him.

Three years and three months later his presidency had effectively collapsed. He broadcast to the nation on 31 March 1968 announcing he would not “seek renomination for another term as president”. This was not magnanimity. He knew if he did not stand down, he would be thrashed. As he spoke, opinion polls showed his personal rating at only 36 percent, and in the key Wisconsin primary for the Democratic presidential candidate he was trailing far behind his main contender, Eugene MacCarthy.

Johnson’s dream of uniting the country behind him had crumbled to nothing. He said himself in his broadcast: “A house divided against itself...is a house which cannot stand. There is division in the American house now.”¹²⁰

The divisions were, in fact, greater than any since the early 1930s and perhaps the American Civil War. There had been huge riots in all the great cities in the US—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, Cleveland, Washington DC, Atlanta and scores of others—costing hundreds of

lives. A new mood of opposition was sweeping the most prestigious universities, leading many of the children of the postwar consensus to turn against the system. The mood of dissent was even beginning to penetrate the US armed forces.

The Democratic Party had bound contradictory interests to the American Dream. In its time it had been the party of the slave owners and of the urban poor, of sections of industrial capital and of the CIO's newly organised mass production workers, of the Southern Dixiecrats and the followers of Martin Luther King. It cast a spell over European politicians and academics who sought to "break the mould" of classbased politics in their own countries: for them it was the most modern of modern political instruments.

Yet by the spring of 1968 the Democratic Party was riven by division. The incumbent president was assailed by challengers whom he could neither see off nor conciliate. But their position was hardly stronger: they could force the president to stand down, but they could not themselves get hold of the levers of power in the party. The political institutions of US capitalism were in a crisis which was not to be fully resolved until the mid-1970s, and then only after considerable turmoil.

Vietnam

The immediate cause of the political crisis was a war which had been barely noticed when Johnson took over the presidency after the assassination of John F Kennedy in autumn 1963. "Vietnam... We have thirty Vietnams," Kennedy's attorney general, his brother Robert, had told a journalist.¹²¹

Vietnam had just been one of many "responsibilities" the US took over as it displaced the defeated Japanese and the retreating European empires in much of the globe in the 1940s. France had finally been forced, in 1954, to abandon its attempts to hold on to the colony against the resistance of the Communist-led Vietminh national movement. But even before the final defeat at Dien Bien Phu much of the French military effort had been financed by the US. When, under pressure from Russia and China, the Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh accepted partition of the country, US nominees took control of the South.

For the US government, defending the South Vietnamese government was no different from defending the rulers of the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Lebanon, Zaire, or the small states of Central America and the Caribbean. It considered military intervention in Vietnam as justified and as easy as the CIA operations which overthrew the elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and the Congo government of Patrice Lumumba in 1960, or the military landings which kept a pro-US government in power in the Lebanon

in 1958 and defeated a popular rebellion in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

American “advisers” were stationed in South Vietnam, as in so many other countries. In 1961-62, when there was a spontaneous rebellion against the dictatorship of Ngo Dinh Diem, Kennedy increased their numbers from 400 to 18,000 and gave permission for “limited” use of napalm, defoliants and “free fire zones” where planes could drop unlimited quantities of bombs.¹²² To withdraw support for the South Vietnamese government, it was argued, “would mean a collapse not only in South Vietnam, but in South East Asia.”¹²³ The Kennedy brothers were enthusiasts for the methods of “counterinsurgency” used to terrorise the Vietnamese countryside and keep Dinh in power.¹²⁴

But rebellion was not crushed by sending 18,000 US advisers any more than it had been by 400. The effect of the South Vietnamese government bombing its own countryside was to drive greater numbers of peasants to identify with the rebellion. In the summer of 1963 there was a mass opposition movement led by Buddhist monks in the cities. The Kennedy administration, in a desperate attempt to stabilise the situation, connived with dissident South Vietnamese generals in a coup which led to the killing of Dinh—who Lyndon Johnson, then vice president, had previously praised as “the Winston Churchill of Asia”.

But the generals who replaced Dinh were equally incapable of establishing a regime with any level of popular support. They were notoriously corrupt and had far less popular appeal than Ho Chi Minh, who had been at the forefront of the struggle for Vietnamese independence from foreign control since the 1920s.

Johnson inherited from Kennedy, however, not only the war but also the belief that it could be ended in a year or so, if only the input of US resources were increased. In summer 1964 he and his secretary of defence, former Ford boss Robert MacNamara, staged a provocation designed to justify the escalation of military intervention. An American destroyer sailed close to the shore of North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin until there was an exchange of fire with North Vietnamese patrol boats. Claiming there had been an unprovoked attack on US ships, Johnson and MacNamara pushed through Congress a resolution giving the president a free hand to do whatever he liked in Vietnam, and US planes were sent to bomb North Vietnam.

At this stage there was near-unanimous support in the US itself for Johnson’s actions. The House of Representatives voted unanimously for the Bay of Tonkin resolution, with only two votes against in the Senate.

But Johnson’s war strategy did not work. Increased US activity in South Vietnam meant building up US bases. But the bigger the bases were, the more vulnerable they were to guerrilla attacks. In the winter of 1964-65 small groups of Vietnamese guerrillas—called “Vietcong” by the US—carried out several

attacks on US bases. Johnson's response was to begin continuous bombing of North Vietnam. A memo by one of his aides, McGeorge Bundy, argued:

The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating, and without new US action, defeat appears inevitable... within the next year or so... The international prestige of the US and a substantial part of our influence are directly at risk in Vietnam... Reprisals...will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries including our own.¹²⁵

So it was that the United States Air Force began the biggest bombing campaign in the history of warfare, flying out day after day, year after year, against targets in the North and the South, in a desperate effort to make the Vietnamese feel that the cost of resistance to US domination was too great to bear.

On 6 March 1965 marines landed at the Danang base. By the end of April there were 33,500 Americans in the country, by June 75,000 and by the end of the year 210,000. The assumption was that it would take “perhaps a year or two to demonstrate Vietcong failure in the South”.¹²⁶ In the interim, Vietnam had become a major war effort.

“The interim” went on and on and on. The struggle in South Vietnam was not like the Korean war of 15 years before, a struggle waged by regular armies which the rulers in the North could abandon if they so desired. It grew out of spontaneous struggles against a repressive regime. For the leaders of North Vietnam to have turned their backs would have done enormous damage to their prestige as pioneers of the struggle for national independence. They could not end the struggle in the South however many US planes bombed the North. They had no real incentive to do so, either, since the relatively backward conditions of the country restricted the level of material damage done by US bombs: despite hundreds of thousands of deaths, economic output grew through the war years at more than 6 percent a year.

What is more, the North Vietnamese rulers could retaliate relatively easily, by infiltrating their own regular troops across the border to aid the struggle in the South.¹²⁷

The US government was, in fact, trapped in a war of attrition from which there was no easy way out. By 1967 the US had 470,000 troops in Vietnam, but was no nearer to victory than four years before.

Any war of attrition is immensely costly—both in casualties and economics. When the escalation began in 1965, the US economy was already running almost flat out, with unemployment down to 4 percent, lower than for many years. To prevent the war having an inflationary effect on the US economy Johnson would have had either to cut back on his “Great Society” welfare programme—

increasing social tensions in US cities—or to increase taxes, so damaging his electoral support.

His administration chose to do neither. Instead it understated the probable cost of the war, claiming in 1965 it would cost at most US\$8 billion a year. By 1968 it was costing US\$27 billion. The result was a large budget deficit, leading to a surge of inflationary pressures in the Western economies as a whole.¹²⁸

The indirect economic effects of the war damned those projects which Johnson had devised to bind together the different sections of US society. As one of his aides tells:

The Vietnam War slogged on, taking mastery over Lyndon Johnson... President Johnson became more and more the war chief, not the domestic leader. The key anti-poverty programme kept running into serious difficulty¹²⁹

Yet without the “anti-poverty” programme, it was difficult to see how US capitalism was to contain an explosive movement which was developing in the heart of its great cities. This, in turn, threatened to unite with growing dissent in the colleges to create for the first time since the 1930s a sizeable revolutionary opposition to US capitalism—an opposition which might connect with US workers fighting to keep abreast of price rises caused by the inflationary effects of war spending.

From civil rights to black power

The band struck up *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The television cameras focused, through the sweltering Mexican heat, on the Olympic podium. The crowd prepared for a glorious moment of US patriotism as the 200 metres gold and bronze medallists Tom Smith and John Carlos took their positions. Then each raised his right hand, wearing a black glove, and clenched it into a fist.

It was a gesture of outright defiance against everything the selfproclaimed patriots who organised the Games stood for. The athletes had counterposed the “black power” salute to the American flag and the American anthem. In doing so they gave expression to the mood in every black ghetto in the US by that summer of 1968. What had begun a dozen years earlier as a movement in the Southern states for integration into US society had turned increasingly into a movement of opposition to US capitalism.

The struggle in the South had taken the form of mass protests, organised on the one hand by the respectable black middle class leadership of Martin Luther King and the SCLC, on the other by the young mainly student black activists of CORE and SNCC. Splits had begun over King’s tendency to make concessions to

the Democratic Party machine in 1964, with the younger activists soon expressing open disillusionment with their old methods. They began to wonder whether it was either possible or desirable to “integrate” black people into US society, and began to look for alternatives.

There was already a long-established militant, black separatist current among blacks in the ghettos of the Northern states. In the 1920s there had been mass support for Marcus Garvey’s dream of “going back to Africa”. In the 1950s and early 1960s a religious sect, the Black Muslims of Elijah Muhammad, gained a following of tens of thousands for its programme of building a separate black “Nation of Islam” in the heart of North America. And in 1963 the best-known leader of the movement after Elijah himself, Malcolm X, split away to campaign much more militantly for “black revolution”, suggesting on occasions that there could be unity with other sections of the oppressed. He was murdered early in 1965 because of the success of his message, although it is still not known whether by the Black Muslims or the FBI.

In 1965 and 1966 the separatist message began to appeal to the young civil rights activists. SNCC decided to turn itself into a blackonly organisation, claiming that the presence of whites had blunted its radicalism. A position paper argued:

We must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, write our own histories...SNCC, by allowing whites to remain in the organisation, can have its efforts subverted.¹³⁰

A number of different factors came together to produce this decision. One was a reaction against past dependence upon “liberal” politicians in the national government to step in to enforce civil rights in the South. Civil rights workers continued to be attacked and killed in the South despite all the promises in the 1964 election campaign. The black activists directed their disillusionment not just at white “liberal” leaders such as Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and former Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, but also against white radicals—even though these were rapidly losing their own illusions in the likes of Humphrey and Kennedy.

Secondly there was reaction against the way many blacks had unconsciously accepted the racist assumption of US society that whites would always lead and blacks always follow. This found expression even when it came to personal appearance: the way forward for individual blacks had often seemed to be straightening their hair and lightening their skins. The activists now felt that only a separate black identity could give blacks the confidence to purge themselves of such racist attitudes: hence slogans like “black is beautiful”, attempts to

rediscover African culture, the adoption of African or Islamic names, the call for a separate black politics.

Thirdly, more or less explicit theories of society were put forward which held that all white people, workers as well as capitalists, were involved in the exploitation of all black people, or all people in advanced countries were involved in exploiting all people in the Third World—with black Americans defined as “Third World people”.

Finally, although this was not at first a major factor, some activists saw how other ethnic minorities in the US had provided a launching pad for political careers: separate, ethnic organisations had provided a voting base which could be used as a bargaining counter in the Tammany Hall political horsetrading which characterised the Democratic Party in the urban North.

In 1965 and 1966 the activists of SNCC and CORE began to move towards such separatism. But for many the main activity continued to be the anti-segregation and civil rights struggles in the South. Others took their separatism to a logical conclusion and withdrew from that struggle, adopting a cultural nationalism which saw salvation in a personal rejection of white society. It was not, really, until 1966 that a third option arose: a powerful, revolutionary political separatism. SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael gave voice to this after the University of Mississippi’s first black student, James Meredith, was gunned down while staging a one-man protest march through the state. As Mississippi state troopers pushed around those who arrived to protest at the shooting by marching the same route, Carmichael said he was not prepared to be attacked by white racists and police: “I’m not going to beg the white man for anything I deserve. I’m going to take it.” In the weeks which followed, CORE and SNCC both came out for “black power”.

But the rise of revolutionary black separatism was not just the result of continuing white racist attacks in the South. It was also the reaction of the young black student and ex-student activists to events over which they themselves had no control in the Northern cities between 1964 and 1967.

The ghetto uprisings

In July 1964 a group of black teenagers on their way to school in Harlem, New York City, got involved in an argument with a white building superintendent. An off-duty policeman intervened, shooting a 15-year-old boy. A crowd of black teenagers gathered and smashed windows before they were dispersed by police.

Two days later CORE organised a rally in the area to protest at lynchings of civil rights workers in the South. Anger at the killing of the teenager turned this

into a march on a local police station. The crowd clashed with the police, who shot dead one of the protesters. For the next few days the black population fought the police on the streets:

Rioters raged through the streets, scattering as police counterattacked, regrouping to charge again. Rocks, bricks and garbage can lids rained down on the cops...Molotov cocktails burst into flame. Along main business streets looters smashed windows.¹³¹

The violence was not the work of some isolated group. It expressed the general feeling of hundreds of thousands of black people. As a domestic worker, an unmarried mother of five children, told a bystander:

I clean the white man's dirt all the time. I work for four families and some I don't like and some I like. That night I worked for some I like. But when I got home and the trouble began, I felt like something was crawling in me, like the whole damn world was no good, and the little kids and the big ones and all of us was going to get killed because we don't know what to do. And I see the cops are white and I was crying. I said to me, Dear God, I am crying. And I took this pop bottle and it was empty and I threw it down on the cops and I was laughing and crying.¹³²

As the US's best-known ghetto burned, it became clear that the struggle against the official structure of discrimination and oppression in the Southern states was developing into a struggle against the unofficial, but just as deep-rooted, structure of discrimination and oppression in the Northern cities. That summer there were further clashes between blacks and the police at Rochester in New York State, in the New Jersey cities of Patterson, Jersey City and Elizabeth, in Chicago and in Philadelphia, though nothing on the scale of Harlem. Then, in August 1965, the Watts district of Los Angeles erupted.

The immediate cause, as in Harlem, was the action of the police, this time in stopping a black driver for alleged speeding and then clubbing down members of a crowd which protested. The crowd began stoning passing white motorists and overturning cars and setting them alight. Thirty-six hours later it became the biggest urban disturbance in the US since 1943.

Crowds gathered in the business district of Watts and began looting... The looting became bolder and spread to other areas. Hundreds of women and children from five housing projects clustered in or near Watts took part. Around noon extensive fire-bombing began. Few white persons were attacked: the principal intent of the rioters now seemed to be to destroy property owned by whites, in order to drive white 'exploiters' out of the ghetto.¹³³

Wherever a storekeeper identified himself as a 'poor working negro trying to make a business' or a 'blood brother', the mob passed the store by. It even spared a few white businesses that allowed credit, and made a point of looting and destroying stores which were notorious for high prices and hostile manner.¹³⁴

The police were unable to cope and called in the National Guard.

When the guardsmen arrived they, together with the police, made heavy use of firearms. Reports of ‘sniper fire’ increased... Almost 4,000 persons were arrested. Thirty-four were killed and hundreds injured. Approximately \$35 million in damage had been inflicted.¹³⁵

People could look on the riots of 1964 as isolated occurrences: Harlem had rioted before, in 1935 and 1943. But Watts shook any such complacency. As a high level report to the US government noted three years later:

The Los Angeles riot...shocked all who had been confident that race relations were improving in the North, and evoked a new mood in the ghettos round the country.¹³⁶

Riots followed in 13 places in 1966. In Chicago, the police and National Guard faced stone throwing, petrol bombs and sniper fire before “restoring order”—killing three people and arresting 533. In Cleveland, Ohio, police killed two blacks and white racists killed two more. Then in summer 1967 came the two biggest confrontations yet.

On 12-17 July black people took to the streets of Newark, New Jersey, after police were seen manhandling a taxi driver. Stone throwing, looting and setting fire to cars followed. The police and the virtually allwhite National Guard began shooting at anyone they thought a looter. Twenty-three people were killed—a white detective, a white fireman and 21 blacks, including a 73-year-old man, six women and two children. Ten million dollars worth of damage was done. In the days which followed, rioting spread to other north New Jersey towns.

Five days later Detroit, the centre of the world’s biggest motor industry, erupted. Spontaneous protests:

turned the nation’s fifth biggest city into a theatre of war. Whole streets lay ravaged by looting, whole blocks immolated in flames. Federal troops occupied American streets at bayonet point. Patton tanks—with machine guns ablaze—and Huey helicopters patrolled a city of blackened brick chimneys poking out of gutted basements.¹³⁷

To describe what happened as a “riot” would be a complete misnomer. It was an uprising, a mass spontaneous onslaught by the city’s black population on the police and on businesses seen as exploiting the community. No fewer than 11 percent of the black population later admitted direct involvement, and another 20-25 percent described themselves as bystanders.¹³⁸

Within the “spontaneity” there was a high degree of improvised organisation. At one point a group of 100 snipers—mainly blacks with military experience in Vietnam—laid siege to a police station. The looting was not “random”, but directed against stores whose owners were hated. And, for the first time, there was some involvement of whites alongside blacks: some of the looting was by integrated groups, and the police complained about the presence of “white terrorists” among the snipers.¹³⁹

By the time the federal army restored order, there had been 40 deaths (nearly all of them black people), 2,250 injuries, 4,000 arrests and US\$250 million in property damage.¹⁴⁰

“Black Power” was now the slogan not just of student activists, but of millions of black workers in the Northern cities.

The early anti-war movement

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre refused to address a US anti-war rally in spring 1965, saying it would be a complete waste of time. “The political weight” of those Americans who were against the Vietnam War, he wrote, “is nil”.

Of the years 1961-64 he was absolutely right. There were only a handful of open opponents of the US presence in Vietnam. Even within the “peace movement” of anti-nuclear activists, only a minority were prepared to take a stand on Vietnam in 1963. When Madam Nhu, the sister-in-law of the South Vietnamese dictator and wife of his notorious police chief, toured the US that year there were demonstrations against her at Columbia and Wisconsin Universities—but only by a couple of hundred students. Only 600 people took part in the first anti-war demonstration in New York a year later, and the demonstration called by Students for a Democratic Society for the spring of 1965, which took place after the escalation of the war, was only 20,000 strong—big by past standards, but not compared with what was to come.¹⁴¹ Anyone looking for signs of radicalism in US society at the time would pay more attention to the civil rights movement or to Berkeley than to Vietnam.

But if the escalation of the war did not produce immediate mass protests, it did lead to the first big public questioning of the US role. The focus for this was a wave of what were called “teach-ins” on the campuses. These were not billed as protests, but long drawn-out discussions which involved supporters as well as opponents of the government’s policy. The first, at Ann Arbor in Michigan, was welcomed by the college authorities, although they had threatened disciplinary action against lecturers who had planned an anti-war protest, and this set the pattern for the country as a whole, with hundreds of teach-ins in the next year.

Yet the teach-in movement had an enormously radicalising impact. Thousands of students—3,000 at Ann Arbor, 2,500 at Columbia, 30,000 in Berkeley, hundreds of thousands in a national teach-in held in Washington and transmitted over 122 campus radio stations—entered into political debate for the first time. The government’s own spokesmen, such as Arthur Schlesinger Junior and McGeorge Bundy, faced detailed questioning of official justifications for the

war and lost the argument again and again. Students who started off right wing or non-political ended up convinced that the radical opponents of the war were right.¹⁴²

For the first time for years revolutionary socialists were offered the chance to debate on equal terms with their opponents—as when Isaac Deutscher, the biographer of Trotsky, spoke on the Cold War at the Washington teach-in and independent socialist Hal Draper argued against government spokesmen in Berkeley for the immediate withdrawal of US troops.

This did not immediately lead to any great growth of revolutionary forces on the campuses, or even to student revolts. The teach-ins were in 1965; there was not to be another occupation like that in Berkeley in 1964 for another three years. But the mood among students did begin to change in important ways. Vague opposition to the war—and a determination to avoid being drafted at all costs—was widespread. Dissent was no longer confined to a handful of traditionally liberal colleges, but now found expression among hundreds of students even at universities where student life had always been dominated by the conformist culture of fraternities and sororities.

Dissent could soon turn to bitter alienation from society as students discovered how great were the lies told by the government, and its supporters in the university power structure, to justify the war. Soon small groups of radicals were growing in many campuses. They often lacked clear understanding of what was happening in the US, adhering to the vague “participatory democracy” notions of Students for a Democratic Society. But the immediacy of the war gave a cutting edge to their arguments. It was not to be long before they were mobilising many times their own numbers in assaults on the values of existing US society. As they did so, they received further inspiration from a new, much harder, much more revolutionary politics emerging in the black ghettos—literally a stone’s throw from colleges like Berkeley and Columbia.

Politics and the uprisings

The ghetto uprisings had thrown all the established black political groupings into crisis. The strategy of the NAACP and the SCLC had been to pressurise the Northern state machine, and in particular the Democratic Party, to impose equal rights for blacks, especially in the South. The uprisings threatened this strategy. By taking direct, militant action themselves, Northern blacks were bound to antagonise key components of the state machine and the Democratic Party.

The first major riot, in Harlem in 1964, came just as Lyndon Johnson was building his campaign for the presidency against the right Republican Barry

Goldwater. Johnson feared the loss of some traditionally Democratic votes, especially in the South but also in some industrial seats in the North, where his racist Southern opponent in the Democratic primaries had taken as much as a quarter of the vote. The Harlem riot, it was claimed, increased the danger of such a “backlash”.

The leaders of the established black organisations met and agreed to call a moratorium on all mass activity until the election was over and to urge blacks to keep off the streets. Only John Lewis of the SNCC and James Farmer of CORE dissented.

In 1964 Martin Luther King and the others could hold the line with this attitude, but it was already more difficult early in 1965. Once the election was out of the way they resumed the protests in the South to put pressure on the president and the Congress to take action. King organised a mass voter-registration campaign in Selma Alabama—a town where blacks outnumbered whites by 16,000 to 15,000 but in which 97 percent of those entitled to vote were white. The local police and the Alabama National Guard attacked those asking for the vote, but the White House was reluctant to intervene. Instead its recently formed Community Relations Service put pressure on King to avoid a confrontation—pressure to which he seems to have bowed, to the anger of the SNCC activists, when he told a demonstration to disperse in the face of police barring its route.¹⁴³ Only after a Northern white clergyman had been killed by segregationists did Johnson reluctantly send federal forces to protect a further demonstration.

The gap between King’s search for respectability in the eyes of the Northern establishment and the new mood among many younger blacks was shown graphically in the aftermath of Watts. King went to Los Angeles and toured the area of the fighting. As one biography tells:

He was astonished to find that most of the people there had never heard of him. Almost all were hostile to his attempts at mediation. As he...walked through the ruins a group of young blacks boasted, ‘We won.’ ‘How can you say you won,’ Martin asked, ‘when 34 Negroes are dead, your community is destroyed and whites are using the riots as an excuse for inaction?’ ‘We won because we made them pay attention to us,’ they replied.¹⁴⁴

The younger generation in the ghettos were responding to the violence of the police with violence of their own, while King continued to advocate non-violence; they wanted immediate action, while he saw things in terms of long drawn-out manoeuvres with the Democratic Party.

Yet the Northern political establishment were losing interest in further action for black rights. Johnson added a voting rights bill in 1965 to the civil rights bill passed in 1964, but from then on he was more interested in the war in Vietnam.

Meanwhile the most active elements in the black communities were turning against “the white man’s war”. The slogan “black power” was becoming more popular than “we shall overcome”.

Things came to a head a year after Watts. King and Stokely Carmichael both went to Mississippi after the Meredith shooting to organise a long protest march. While King still called for non-violence, Stokely was issuing his call for black people to use violence when it was needed. It was the message the black marchers wanted to hear. They called for it to be a blacks-only march, and sang songs such as “Jingle bells, shotgun shells, freedom all the way, Oh what fun it is to blast a trooper man away”.¹⁴⁵

King’s arguments no longer had any impact. For the government would no longer send federal troops to the South to protect protesters: after police tear-gas attacks on marchers at Canton, Mississippi, Johnson did not even respond to King’s telegrams.

King was faced with a choice. He could become a front man for a government which was not prepared to do any more about the situation in the South, or he could align himself with the young militants. He tried to find a middle way, to step up “non-violent” protests to such an extent as to force action from the administration and big business.

So he tried mass organising in the North as well as in the South, with mass housing protests in Chicago, a planned “poor people’s march on Washington”, and in the last month of his life support for a strike of black garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee. He claimed in 1967 that he understood the nature of the movement had to change: “For the last 12 years we have been a reform movement... But after Selma and the voting bill [of 1965] we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution.”

But he and his non-violent movement could not successfully cope with the change. He was still an idol for millions of black people. But politically he was falling between two stools. The active minority who joined his demonstrations were no longer prepared to accept the message of non-violence, and those he was trying to pressurise in high places were beginning to regard him as a dangerous nuisance. This was especially so when he made public his previously private opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967.

The *Washington Post* called one of his Vietnam speeches in April 1967 “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy” and Johnson was told by one of his advisers: “King—in desperate search of a constituency—has thrown his lot in with the commies”.¹⁴⁶

Edgar Hoover of the FBI had long hated King. He had tried to discredit him three years earlier by circulating to the press transcripts of phone taps and bugs

in his hotel rooms.¹⁴⁷ Now President Johnson too was bitterly hostile, and the FBI could instruct its local bureaus to include the SCLC among the “black nationalist hate groups” which they should aim to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralise”.¹⁴⁸ When King was assassinated outside his motel room in Memphis in April 1968 there was an FBI agent on the SCLC national staff and another in one of the militant local groups involved in the garbage strike.

The disarray into which King’s political strategy had fallen was shown immediately after his death. The black ghettos in 100 cities across the US rose in a night of rebellion, looting and burning and fighting with the police, seeing violence as the only adequate way to respond to the murder of their “non-violent” leader. Yet the Poor People’s March, on which he had pinned so much hope, was a dismal failure.

The failure of the “non-violent” strategy did not lead, however, to any great gains for the student-based organisations that had always pushed a more militant stance. Leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown of SNCC and Floyd McKissick, the new leader of CORE, rejected non-violence as they embraced black power. The new, militant slogans they articulated met with assent from most of the younger elements in the ghettos—but they themselves could not organise the new mood.

This became clear in the course of the uprisings. The student leaders tried to intervene: a CORE demonstration helped ignite Harlem; Stokely Carmichael and the SNCC were active during a riot in Atlanta Georgia; Rap Brown made statements during the Newark rising and the SNCC held its conference there a few days later. But the very nature of the uprisings made such intervention ineffective. They were local movements which took off quickly because the forces of the state were temporarily thrown on the defensive by the sudden emergence of a militancy they had not expected. But after a couple of days the state recovered its balance and threw everything it had into repression. Faced with dozens of deaths and hundreds or even thousands of arrests, people withdrew from the street nearly as quickly as they had taken to it. The movement declined rapidly.

The SNCC and CORE activists had little to say to the movement when the fighting was at its height. What people wanted was tactical advice on how to fight—and the least political Vietnam veteran knew more than the most politically sophisticated activist. Indeed, the very sophistication of the activist could present a problem: he or she could know from past experience that the struggle would die down in a day or two, and might be tempted to try to quell it before mass repression took place. So there were cases of militant separatist groups urging people to get off the streets.

Yet when the movement was past its high point, the SNCC and CORE had little to say either. Their own driving force was activist in the narrowest sense—agitation for direct confrontation in the community—with no notion of putting forward a new view of the world and educating people in what it meant. This left them with little to say when people had already pushed confrontation in the community to its limits.

The years 1966 and 1967 were characterised by increasingly radical talk from SNCC and CORE leaders, but little consolidation of organisation in the Northern ghettos. What did grow—and attracted the SNCC and CORE leaders themselves—was cultural nationalism, with its tendency to move away from the struggle in the US to an obsession with Africa. It was not until the Vietnam War was producing a wider radicalisation of US society, at the end of 1967 and the beginning of 1968, that a revolutionary organisation took root.

The mass anti-war movement

The years of the ghetto uprisings also saw changes in the anti-war movement. What had been protests of a tiny minority, around slogans which blamed the war equally on the US government and the Vietnamese liberation forces, grew into mass opposition to the US war effort.

October 1965 saw a demonstration of 30,000 in New York, although the organisers rejected the demand for immediate withdrawal of US troops in favour of the less direct “Stop the War Now!”; six months later 50,000 demonstrated and the main slogan was “Withdraw Now!” Activists began to picket public appearances of Lyndon Johnson, chanting “Hey, hey, LBJ, How many kids have you killed today?” and groups in the colleges staged a series of demonstrations against Dow Chemicals, manufacturers of the napalm being used in Vietnam.

The movement against the war was still a minority and concentrated in the campuses. But the dynamic of the war itself increased the size of the minority considerably in the course of 1965 and 1966.

The US build-up in Vietnam required an increase in the proportion of young men conscripted into the armed forces: the December 1965 draft call was the largest since the Korean War of the early 1950s. This had a direct impact on millions of students who had previously been able to avoid conscription: from February 1966 they could do so only by taking special examinations to prove “academic achievement”. The war was no longer some distant event on which they could take a purely moral stand; it directly encroached on their own lives. On those campuses with some traditions of liberalism, such as Berkeley, there was now majority opposition to the war.

The black activists who had spearheaded the civil rights movement also began to come out against the war. People could not see the Vietnamese as enemies—as world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali put it, “No Vietnamese ever called me ‘nigger’.” Leaders such as Martin Luther King were caught between personal hostility to the war and a desire to stay friends with influential politicians, but by the beginning of 1967 they were prepared to go public.

The mood was different in traditional white working class areas—partly because most of the bureaucrats of the AFL-CIO union federation backed the war wholeheartedly. But even here opposition was growing. In a local referendum in Dearborn, near Detroit, in late 1966, 40 percent of voters endorsed the demand for immediate US withdrawal.

The demonstrations against the war grew massively. By April 1965, 400,000 people were demonstrating in New York and 75,000 in San Francisco. In November 100,000 people demonstrated in Washington, and 30,000 marched on the Pentagon—which was guarded by armed troops—for an attempt at “non-violent” direct action which led to more than 800 arrests. In the San Francisco Bay Area a “Stop the Draft” week saw attacks against thousands of demonstrators by police with clubs and guns. In New York a demonstration of 10,000 against Secretary of State Dean Rusk ended in running fights on the streets around the New York Hilton.

Others too, who did not openly oppose the war, were now questioning it. Within the US establishment there emerged a group which became known as the “doves”: senators, congressmen, newspaper columnists and former government advisers who had once supported the war (almost all had endorsed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution), but now began to fear that its cost was outweighing its benefits. This reasoning led 76 congressmen and 20 senators to call for a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam at Christmas 1965 to be extended to allow an attempt at a negotiated settlement. But they still refused to vote against funds for the war.

The doubts of the “doves” grew as the war went on, year after year, with no sign of the promised US victory. By mid-1967 even the man who had done more than any other to push the escalation of the war, Defence Secretary Robert MacNamara, was having doubts, which he conveyed to his one-time fellow “hawk”, Robert Kennedy.

Yet at the end of 1967 neither the anti-war movement nor the divisions within the establishment seemed able to stop Johnson’s war drive. The majority of Americans still felt the war could be won. It could therefore be justified in terms of the ideas they had been brought up on.

In 1967 virtually all established politicians thought Lyndon Johnson had the Democratic Party nomination sewn up for the 1968 presidential elections. Eventually a former Johnson supporter, Senator Eugene McCarthy, was persuaded to run against him for the nomination. Yet he did not seem to have a chance. The London *Times* reported:

President Johnson is entering the New Year in fine fettle. The Gallup Poll assessed that 46 percent of the people approved of the way he is handling his job and the Harris Polls showed surprising support for Vietnam policies.¹⁴⁹

McCarthy's own statement on why he was standing indicated as much a desire to tame the anti-war movement as to get US troops out. He spoke of a "disposition" by opponents of the war

to take extra-legal if not illegal actions to manifest protest... I am hopeful this challenge I am making...may alleviate at least in some degree this sense of political helplessness and restore to many people a belief in the processes of American politics and American government.¹⁵⁰

The Tet Offensive

The Vietnamese New Year, 31 January 1968, was the beginning of Tet. Residents in American hotels in Saigon heard explosions in the distance. They assumed it was the usual fireworks; the war was something which happened out in the countryside. In fact they were hearing the beginning of the greatest battle of the war so far. This involved uprisings against the US and its puppet regime in 36 major towns, the takeover for some days by the liberation forces of whole areas of Saigon, including, briefly, part of the US embassy compound, and the capture of the country's third city and ancient capital, Hue.

The US military command tried at first to play things down. On 2 February Johnson himself told a press conference the offensive had been a "failure". But in the days that followed the National Liberation Front (NLF, the South Vietnamese liberation guerrilla movement) and North Vietnamese forces attacked with success in town after town.

It took US troops weeks to halt the offensive—and then only by shelling and bombing the very South Vietnamese cities they claimed to be "defending". As one US major put it after the demolition of the Mekong Delta town of Dentre: "It was necessary to destroy the town in order to save it."

US military experts later claimed that the Tet Offensive had "failed". Half a million US troops, with unlimited fire power, had succeeded in holding on to the cities. But whatever the purely military outcome of the Tet fighting, it achieved something which was to seal the fate of the whole US war effort. It showed the

South Vietnamese regime did not have the popular support necessary ever to hold on to its territory without US military backing. The victory within one year, which US apologists for the war had been talking about for at least five years, could not be achieved.

One of the best accounts of US involvement in the war quite rightly tells:

In the past the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army had always fought in distant jungle or paddy areas, striking swiftly and slipping into the night, their toughness rarely brought home to the American people. Now for the first time they fought in the cities, which meant that day after day American newspapers and, more important, television cameras could reflect their ability, above all their failure to collapse according to American timetables.¹⁵¹

There was only one way the US could create even the illusion of a victorious outcome in Vietnam: to send still more troops. General Westmoreland, head of the US forces in Vietnam, had been pushing for this for months. The *New York Times* published details of his request for another 206,000 troops on 10 March 1968.

Two days later, at the Democratic Primary in New Hampshire, Johnson was thrashed by McCarthy, who received 42 percent of the votes.

The majority of people in the US were not yet positively hostile to the war as such. The White House could still get majority support so long as victory seemed possible. But only a minority of about 20 percent was for committing still more resources and still more lives to a war that was being lost.

Tet dramatically changed not only “public opinion”; it changed the opinion of the bulk of the US ruling class. In 1966 and 1967 some sections of the establishment had tentatively questioned some of the assumptions behind Johnson’s Vietnam strategy. Now some of the most influential ruling class figures turned to open hostility.

At the beginning of March the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had subjected Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the most searching questions. After the New Hampshire primary Robert Kennedy, who had started making quietly dovish noises a few months earlier without challenging Johnson directly, announced he was contesting for the Democratic nomination. Finally, in late March, Johnson heard from a “senior advisers group” which “quietly let him know that the establishment—yes, Wall Street—had turned against the War... It was hurting the economy, dividing the country, turning the youth against the country’s best traditions”.¹⁵²

What they feared was shown in April when revolutionaries led an occupation of one of the country’s most select universities, Columbia, and when the murder of Martin Luther King was followed by rapid growth in the black ghettos of an openly revolutionary, openly Marxist party.

The Panthers

In the last few months, while Dr King was trying to build support for his projected Poor People's March on Washington, he already resembled something of a dead man. Or a dead symbol, one might say more correctly. Hated on both sides, denounced on both sides—yet he persisted. And now his blood has been spilled. The death of Dr King signals the end of an era and the beginning of a terrible and bloody chapter.¹⁵³

Our brother Martin Luther King exhausted the means of non-violence with his life... But like a panther—who doesn't attack—when we are pushed into a corner we will defend ourselves.¹⁵⁴

Such was the message of the leaders of the new, revolutionary, Black Panther Party after the assassination of the old leader of black America. The party's influence was to grow enormously in the next few months. In autumn 1967 its membership had been confined to a small group in the Oakland ghetto, near San Francisco.¹⁵⁵ By summer 1968 thousands of blacks in dozens of cities said they were members, and its paper claimed to sell more than 100,000 copies.

Edgar Hoover of the FBI told President Richard Nixon that an opinion poll indicated that “25 percent of the black population had great respect” for the Black Panther Party, “including 43 percent of blacks under 21 years of age”.¹⁵⁶

The party had been founded in Oakland in October 1966. Its founders, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, had been under the influence of cultural nationalism while part-time students. But the wave of ghetto uprisings led them to conclude that what was needed was an organisation for the armed self-defence of black people. They adopted the name “Black Panthers” after an armed self-defence group in Lowndes County, Louisiana. Newton and Seale were joined in April 1967 by Eldridge Cleaver, out on parole after a nine-year prison sentence for rape. In prison he had become a Black Muslim. Then, breaking with the Muslims, he had become known in radical circles for his articles in the left wing magazine *Ramparts*. He later described in *Ramparts* how he met Newton and Seale:

I fell in love with the Black Panther Party immediately upon my first encounter...it was literally love at first sight. It happened one night at a meeting in a dingy little storefront...suddenly the room fell silent... I spun round in my seat and saw the most beautiful sight I had ever seen: four black men wearing black berets, powder blue shirts, black leather jackets, black trousers, shiny black shoes—and each with a gun!¹⁵⁷

What attracted Cleaver to the Panthers attracted thousands of others in ghettos right across the country. After more than a century of attacks on blacks by white racists who always insisted on their “constitutional” right to carry guns, here was an organisation which proclaimed openly its readiness to fight back. The Panthers' programme had ten points, dealing with the right to jobs and

housing, and with the exploitation of those living in the ghettos by white businesses. But the central attractive feature of the programme was its insistence on open self-defence against police and against racists. And this was not just in writing. The Panther leadership practised what they preached, driving round in cars with their guns showing, tailing and “patrolling” police vehicles which were out to harass the local black population.

Not surprisingly, the Panther group in Oakland was soon under attack from the local police. In October 1967 Huey Newton was arrested, accused of murder after a confrontation with the Oakland police in which Newton was injured and a cop killed. Bobby Seale was jailed twice on relatively minor charges. In April 1968 17-year-old Bobby Hutton was shot dead after a police attack in which Cleaver was wounded in the leg. Cleaver, to whom much of the job of building the party had fallen while Newton fought his murder charge, was himself now held in prison for two months and threatened with an indefinite sentence for breach of parole.

The first effect of the police attacks was to give the Panthers much greater publicity, turning them into a focus for all those looking for an alternative to “non-violence”. A defence campaign against the murder charge on Huey Newton—which carried a possible death sentence—brought Stokely Carmichael, James Forman and Rap Brown of the SNCC to Oakland in February 1968 to address a 5,000-strong rally. Afterwards they agreed to merge SNCC into the Panthers.

The “merger” did not last—SNCC broke off relations with the Panthers in July 1968 and Stokely Carmichael did so a year later. But for the leaders of what had been a major national black organisation even to talk of unity with the Panthers was a tremendous boost for a previously local group. A further boost came a couple of weeks later when a book Cleaver had written in prison, *Soul on Ice*, reached the top ten on the best-sellers list.

Cleaver has told how “the Panther popularity would reach a zenith in the latter months of 1968. The trial of Huey Newton was bringing the press to the boil”, while Cleaver himself was getting “celebrity attention in places like the *New York Times*”.¹⁵⁸

The Panthers did not have anything like a clear revolutionary theory. They did not see the need for it. They criticised the Communist Party and the existing revolutionary organisations equally as “enemies”, “hitch hikers”, and “deadweight parasites” involved in “ideological nitpicking”. In their paper they advertised the writings of the opponent of French colonialism, Frantz Fanon, who stressed the need for “revolutionary violence” so that the oppressed could free themselves of the ideas of the oppressor, of the 19th century anarchist

Bakunin, of Mao Zedong, Malcolm X and Che Guevara. Newton said he opposed both capitalism and Russian-style societies, while Cleaver said later: “My own personal fascination was with Joseph Stalin (picture on the office wall)”.¹⁵⁹

In so far as they had an analysis of US society, it portrayed the black population as an internal “colony”. The Panthers were the party which was to lead it to national liberation. To get there they demanded “a United Nations-supervised plebiscite” of black people on which nation they were to belong to. The fighting force for this liberation would be built, as Fanon recommended, from the “lumpenproletariat”—which they said meant “the brothers on the block”, the ghetto youth who lived a semi-criminal existence.¹⁶⁰

The Panthers were a separate, all-black organisation. But their leaders insisted they were not “black racists”. According to Seale:

Racism and ethnic differences allow the power structure to exploit the masses of workers... To divide people and conquer them is the objective of the power structure... The party understands the embedded racism in a large part of white America and...that the very small cults that spout up every now and then in the black community have a basically black racist philosophy.

Yet many of those attracted to the Panthers in 1968 did have such a philosophy. Seale’s book *Seize the Time* was full of attacks on “cultural nationalists” and “black racists” who had joined the Panthers. He wrote of Stokely Carmichael:

About half of the stuff he was talking about was cultural nationalism. It didn’t relate. We needed brothers to help organise and educate people, but Stokely still relied on cultural nationalism. And cultural nationalism will not educate people. It makes racists out of them. Cultural nationalism is trying to popularise dashikis... But power for the people does not flow out of the sleeve of a dashiki.¹⁶¹

Cleaver writes:

The Panthers were never a tightly run, cohesive national body. Metropolitan groups would spring up using our name and showing pictures of Huey and Bobby and me, but their operations were often vague and their motivations puzzling.¹⁶²

The Panthers made a radical break with the cultural nationalists in being willing to work with predominantly white left wing organisations. But there was little consistency in this. In late 1967 the Panthers made a formal alliance with the California Peace and Freedom Party, which campaigned, successfully, for 100,000 signatures to get candidates opposed to both Democrats and Republicans on to the ballot paper in the state in 1968. It was agreed that Cleaver would be presidential nominee of the party. But then Cleaver decided that the only worthwhile white allies were the Yippies and effectively abandoned the

campaign. Overall, the Panthers tended to see the role of the left organisations as simply to provide support for the Panthers, rather than to develop a serious revolutionary current among the mass of non-black workers.

In spring and summer 1968 these ideological inconsistencies were not the most important thing about the Panthers. What mattered most was that an organisation had emerged which claimed to be revolutionary socialist and which had mass support among a significant number of the US's 21.6 million black people. No wonder people like Hoover were worried. They had spent hundreds of millions of dollars and employed thousands of people for years to spy on, to persecute and to discredit anyone they thought slightly tainted with "Communist" or "subversive" ideas. Now, out of nowhere it seemed, an organisation with such ideas was influencing large numbers of black youth.

Not only in the ghettos did the revolutionary ideas of the Panthers have an effect. They fed back into an already radicalised student milieu, adding to the growing revolutionary current there. So, for instance, Cleaver did a series of campus meetings in the autumn of 1968. He used them to attack Ronald Reagan, who as Governor of California, was both in charge of the educational system and behind many of the police attacks on the Panthers.

Campus liberals and radicals were for once united on an issue, and the TV and newspaper coverage of the duel between the Sanctimonious Reagan and the Freeswinging Cleaver was fantastic. Cleaver played the media... His performance was a one-man guerrilla theatre with all the baddies uptight, and the kids and the other good types loving it... The issue made him the focal point of anti-Reagan feeling whatever its source—the New Left enrages, the hippies, the blacks, or the liberals.¹⁶³

Typical of the high points of this campaign was a meeting at a "Catholic college, a place where they train girls to be nuns":

He was exposing the politicians for what they are, man. He was exposing them at ninety miles an hour. He was talking about the pigs something terrible! The next thing I know, right in the middle of the speech, Eldridge had 5,000 chicks out there singing: 'Fuck Ronald Reagan! Fuck Ronald Reagan! One, two, three, four, fuck Ronald Reagan, fuck Ronald Reagan!'¹⁶⁴

Chicago

Ending a war can be much more difficult than beginning one. Johnson's withdrawal from the race for the Democratic nomination signalled that the US's rulers had abandoned the dream of victory in Vietnam. But it did not mean they had reconciled themselves to abandoning the country. That would be to accept a devastating blow to their dreams of global hegemony.

In its last eight months the Johnson administration shifted to a new approach, aimed at forcing the Vietnamese liberation forces to concede an "honorable

peace”—terms for the withdrawal from Vietnam which would leave some power in the hands of US puppets. For the first time the US government entered negotiations with North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, talks which were to continue in Paris for another five years.

But at the same time it pursued a strategy that was later to be called “Vietnamisation”—pouring money into Vietnam to build up the South Vietnamese army, while increasingly concentrating the US military effort on bombing the North. Such a strategy depended on sustaining the war effort. That meant continuing to argue in favour of a war which growing numbers of ordinary Americans were rejecting and which key sections of the establishment had turned against.

Far from ending divisions in the US, the new strategy intensified them.

The most visible expression of this came in August 1968 at the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago which would decide the party’s presidential candidate. The McCarthy presidential campaign had captured the imagination of large numbers of young people only recently won to opposition to the war. For several months this meant that activists who argued that the Democratic Party could not be persuaded to change its position on the war, even by McCarthy, were isolated from this wider audience. One sign of this was the low level of support for an anti-war demonstration called for Chicago the week of the convention. The demonstration had been suggested when Johnson was still in the running. It was expected to be massive. Even after his withdrawal the organisers talked of a turnout of 100,000. On the day it was at most 10,000.

The low attendance has been blamed by some people on the buildup, which implied there would be a confrontation with the police, or on the fact that the organisers looked for support from radicalised hippies rather than wider sections of students and workers. But these explanations are not enough in themselves: the expectation of confrontation did not scare people away from demonstrations in Britain and Germany that summer. New activists stayed away because they had the illusion that the McCarthy campaign could end the war for them. The Democratic Party opposition to Johnson’s policies had swept the board in the primaries.

But the Democratic machine was determined that not McCarthy but Hubert Humphrey, Johnson’s own nominee, would be the party’s presidential candidate—even if it meant overturning the popular vote, as the Pennsylvania delegation did.

Mayor Daly of Chicago was the archetypal machine politician, determined to prove he could fix the nomination for Humphrey, whatever the cost. Everything in Chicago in convention week was designed to make opposition to the war as

ineffective as possible—whether opposition from the 10,000 demonstrators in the streets or the McCarthyite supporters among the convention delegates.

The demonstrators were camped in Lincoln Park, some miles from both the city centre and the convention. This did not prevent the city council ordering them to leave the park at 11pm every evening. When some refused on the first day, building an improvised barricade in the park, Daly's police attacked them:

The attack began with a police car smashing the barricade. The kids threw whatever they had had the foresight to arm themselves with, rocks and bottles mostly. Then there was a period of police action before the full charge.

Shrieks and screams all over the wooded encampment area... Rivulets of running people came out of the woods across the lawn... Next the cops burst out of the woods in selective pursuit of news photographers. They'd taken off their badges...to become a mob of identical, unidentifiable club swingers.¹⁶⁵

That night 17 newsmen from some of America's leading papers were attacked by the police. The next night 400 clergy and concerned local citizens joined the few hundred demonstrators in the park. For half an hour the clergy and the demonstrators discussed the merits of violent and non-violent methods of struggle. Then:

It all happened in an instant. The night which had been filled with darkness and whispers exploded in a fiery scream. Huge teargas canisters came crashing through the branches, snapping them, and bursting in the centre of the gathering. From where I lay grovelling in the grass I could see ministers retreating with the cross... Another volley shook me to my feet. Gas was everywhere. People running, screaming, tearing through the trees... We walked along, hands outstretched, bumping into people and trees, tears streaming from our eyes and mucus smeared across our faces.¹⁶⁶

When the demonstrators finally got out of the park:

Police were advancing in...lines, swatting at the stragglers and crumpled figures; huge trucks, usually used for cleaning the streets, swept toward us spraying more gas. Kids began ripping up the pavement and hurling snowball-size chunks at the truck windows. Then they flooded into the streets, blocking traffic, fighting with plainclothesmen...and bombarding hapless patrol cars which sped through the crowd.¹⁶⁷

Finally, as the demonstrators converged at 3am on the Hilton Hotel, where many of the convention delegates were staying, hundreds of national guardsmen, in military uniforms and with rifles, moved in.

The next day the convention was to vote to choose the party's presidential candidate. Despite the beating they had taken on two consecutive nights, the demonstrators marched through the centre of Chicago, and again found themselves under police attack:

There, dammed by the police on three sides, right beneath the windows of the Hilton, the stationary march was attacked. The police attacked with teargas, with mace, and with clubs...lines of twenty or thirty policemen striking out in an arc, their clubs beating, demonstrators fleeing... The police

cut through the crowd one way, then cut through them another. They chased people into the park, ran them down, beat them up.¹⁶⁸

The respectable, establishment wing of the opposition was not immune to the police onslaught. Anyone outside the Hilton was seen as fair game by Daly's cops:

Demonstrators, reporters, McCarthy workers, doctors, all began to stagger into the Hilton lobby, blood streaming from face and head wounds. The lobby smelled of gas... A few people began to direct the wounded to a makeshift hospital on the fifteenth floor, the McCarthy staff headquarters.¹⁶⁹

Inside the convention:

delegates kept leaving the floor to watch films on TV of the violence, McCarthy was reported to have witnessed the scene from his window and called it 'very bad'. McGovern described the fighting he saw as a 'bloodbath' which 'made me sick to the stomach'. He had 'seen nothing like it since the films of Nazi Germany'.¹⁷⁰

Daly's methods were nearly as crude inside the convention as they were outside:

Episodes popped up all over the place. The police dragged a delegate from the floor when a sergeant-at-arms told him to return to his seat and the delegate refused and exchanged words. Paul O'Dwyer, candidate for the Senate from New York, was pulled from the hall as he hung on to him. Mike Wallace of CBS was punched on the jaw when he asked some questions—they went out in a flurry of cops.¹⁷¹

Against this background the party machinememen carried the nomination of Hubert Humphrey. In doing so they beat down those establishment candidates who wanted, in the words of Governor Howard Hughes of Iowa who backed McCarthy, to "arrest the polarisation in society".¹⁷²

The determination of the establishment majority to continue the war in order to force the Vietnamese liberation forces to make concessions was leading them to use forcible repression—even against the opposition within their own ranks. It was pushing the opposition outside the establishment to ever more radical conclusions. Speakers made the point at rallies: the methods used by supporters of the war were no different than those used to impose Russian rule on Czechoslovakia. That tore the whole anti-Communist ideology of the previous two decades apart. Young people went to Chicago to protest as pacifists or to hand out leaflets in support of Gene McCarthy and left as revolutionaries.

The French May

HISTORY DOES not proceed at an even speed. Sometimes even minor shifts take decades or centuries. Sometimes more can happen in one night than in the previous ten years. Such a night was that of 10-11 May 1968 in Paris.

That Friday evening had begun with a large demonstration of university and high school students, the fifth in a week. Their cause was the use of police to close the university and prevent protests at the disciplining of students from the university annexe in the suburb of Nanterre. Armed police had attacked the previous demonstrations, using batons and teargas, and making many arrests. Students had begun to fight back by throwing cobblestones at the police and building improvised barriers out of traffic signs and metal grilles. But this evening's demonstration was peaceful.

Then, around 10 o'clock, the demonstrators found the police had barred their way across the bridges of the Seine. The police aim was to bottle up the protest in the streets around the Boulevard Saint Michel. The students turned the police's tactics inside out, creating a "liberated", police-free area by throwing up barricades in all the adjoining streets—to the traffic signs, grilles and cobblestones were added scores of overturned cars, material from nearby building sites, sacks of cement, compressors, rolls of wire, scaffolding poles.

The inhabitants of the Rue Gay Lussac and nearby streets showed their sympathy with the students by bringing bread, chocolate and hot drinks. They were joined on the barricades, from which red and black flags flew, by large numbers of young workers.

The government ordered thousands of CRS paramilitary police into action at about 2am. The most vicious street fighting followed. Again and again the police charged the barricades, shooting teargas and percussion grenades, beating up anyone—student, worker or simply passer-by—who fell into their hands. The demonstrators threw everything at hand at the police—cobblestones ripped up from the street, teargas cannisters and grenades that had not yet exploded. Those

in the flats above the streets threw down water to douse the teargas fumes. Many of the overturned cars caught fire. Again and again the police were forced to halt their offensive. It took them four hours to regain control of the area.

Even then the demonstrators were not vanquished. The leaders of the major trade union federations had been meeting all evening, listening to radio reports of the demonstration. As the scale of the repression and the fighting became clear, they called for a one-day general strike for the following Monday, 13 May.

To try to contain the protests, Prime Minister Pompidou announced the university would be re-opened and there would be a “review” of the charges against those arrested. He later explained: “I preferred to give the Sorbonne to the students than to see them take it by force.”¹⁷³ But it was already too late. The students were now determined to occupy the university the moment it opened. More important, the strike was to be the biggest France had ever known, and within two days workers right across France were occupying the factories.

What began as a student protest had, on “the night of the barricades”, thrown France into a huge social confrontation, with the government virtually paralysed for three weeks as people speculated whether it was to be overthrown in a revolutionary manner.

The student movement in France

The Parisian students’ movement was not in itself all that different from the movements in Berkeley, Columbia, Berlin, the Italian cities or the LSE. Until the beginning of May it was considerably smaller than most of these.

There had been a student movement of sorts in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s in opposition to the Algerian war. The prospect of conscription, on the one hand, and horror at the scale of repression by the French army in Algeria on the other, drove many students to align themselves with left socialist opposition to the war. Something like half the students identified with the national student union, UNEF, which was in the forefront of the anti-war struggle. But when the war ended in 1963, so did the impetus behind the politicisation of students. UNEF declined, beset by leadership crises and deep financial problems. By the beginning of 1968 it could not claim to represent more than 80,000 of the country’s 550,000 students; it had become an organisation where a small politically conscious layer of older students and former students argued with each other, while the mass of the membership remained passive.¹⁷⁴

Left-inspired student activities in the first four months of 1968 were on a smaller scale than those in Italy, West Germany or even Britain. A demonstration on 21 February in support of the national liberation forces in

Vietnam was no larger and considerably less militant than the one in London on 17 March. Only 2,000 people joined the protest on 11 April called by various left organisations after the attempted assassination of German student leader Rudi Dutschke.

The cradle of a new, mass student movement was Nanterre, a new campus built on the outskirts of Paris to accommodate some of the university's rapidly growing student intake. The first, relatively non-political, student struggles took place over the conditions under which students were forced to live and work. The campus was trying to absorb many more students than it had facilities for; 80 percent of language students, for instance, could rarely get access to a language laboratory. Nanterre's situation in the remote suburbs meant students had great difficulty if they wanted to use the leisure and cultural amenities of the city. To cap it all, the university authorities imposed petty authoritarian restrictions on students living in university accommodation, such as banning men from visiting the women's residences.

In March 1967 groups of male students took part in peaceful "invasions" of the women's residences. In November 10,000 students joined a strike over conditions on the campus, which ended when a "parity commission" was set up to look into matters. In March and April psychology and sociology students voted to boycott their examinations. Politically conscious students, with anarchist, Trotskyist or Maoist affiliations, played a role in these "mass movements", raising more general questions. For instance a conference was held on "Wilhelm Reich and sexuality" in March 1967, and a year later there were arguments that sociology was an "ideology" that had to be condemned.¹⁷⁵

But the political students were few in number. On 22 March 1968, a meeting protesting at police harassment of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators voted to occupy the administration building for the night: of the campus's 12,000 students, only 142 took part in the occupation.¹⁷⁶ One description of the event tells that:

The atmosphere is strange. Joyous and serious at the same time. In a corner a bearded youth plays a guitar. They make him keep quiet as the discussion grows more heated. From time to time someone will bring in a box containing sandwiches and bottles of beer...

The discussions are about the critical university, the anti-imperialist struggle, capitalism today. They look to means to throw light on the repressive structures of the bourgeois state, for situations which will expose them, for a way to act as a 'detonator'. They also pose the question of how students' struggles can be connected to workers' struggles, how to convert the present protest against police repression into a permanent contestation.¹⁷⁷

This minority, baptising itself "the 22 March Movement", called for another one-day occupation, to be used for "a day of anti-imperialist discussion", on the

following Friday, 29 March. The next week was spent trying to gather support for this, with leaflets and posters, slogans painted on walls, interventions in lectures. At this stage, the activists claimed that “[t]here was a nucleus of some 300 ‘extremists’ capable of rallying a thousand of 12,000 students”.¹⁷⁸

It was the reaction of the authorities to this small minority which created wider support among “non-political” students. While the minister of education, Peyrefitte, and the media spoke of *enragés* who were “terrorising” other students, the university administration closed the lecture halls and library on 29-30 March, using police and the CRS. This certainly did “enrage” a minority of students—the following Tuesday 1,200 occupied one of the biggest lecture theatres to carry on their discussions.

After the Easter break the agitation resumed. Again it was the action of the authorities which provided the catalyst. The 22 March Movement announced at the end of April that it was organising another anti-imperialist day on 2-3 May. One of the movement’s leaders, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was arrested by the police and held for 12 hours after a student belonging to the far right had accused him of assault. He and seven other students were then summoned to appear before the university authorities for distributing leaflets—and the lecture halls and library at Nanterre were again closed and sealed off by police. The head of the campus complained of “a strange atmosphere in the faculty...very real war psychosis”.¹⁷⁹

Even now active involvement in the student movement was not high. Fewer than 400 students from Nanterre went to the Sorbonne, the main part of the university in the heart of the Parisian Left Bank district, to protest at the disciplinary hearing.

It was here that the university rector and the minister of education provoked a decisive escalation in the confrontation. They announced they were shutting down the whole of Paris University, and sent police in to deal with the protest. The police, in full riot gear, surrounded the Sorbonne and ordered the protesters to leave. When they did so peacefully, in groups of 25 at about 5pm, more than 500 were arrested.

The police repression achieved what the activists themselves had been unable to. Other students began to join the protests. The cycle of repression and demonstration had begun.

Spontaneous gatherings formed in the Place de la Sorbonne, the Rue des Ecoles, the Boulevard Saint Michel. A few people shouted slogans. These were taken up and magnified by the crowd.¹⁸⁰

Soon there were some 2,000 to 3,000 students gathered around the police cordon. The police responded by setting out to “clear” the streets—hitting out

with their batons at anyone who looked like a student and firing teargas at any groups. A few students began to fight back by levering up cobblestones. The idea caught on. It took the police about four hours to get control of the area, injuring 100 protesters and passers-by in the process.

The scale of the repression horrified even those who were hostile or indifferent to the activist minority of students. UNEF and the “progressive” lecturers’ union, SNE Sup, called for strikes and demonstrations the following Monday. Tens of thousands responded in colleges throughout the country. In Paris 100,000 leaflets were distributed and 30,000 students, high school students, and lecturers took part in the demonstration. Their aim was to march on the Sorbonne. This the authorities were determined they should not do. The area was flooded with police and CRS in order to stop them.

The first demonstrators marched round the area, picking up support until they were about 6,000-strong, then tried to find a way through the police cordons towards the university. In the Rue Saint Jacques the police charged.

This time the police are even more violent, the students even more audacious. It is escalation. Each attack causes a counter-attack, each means of repression produces a new means of defence. Each young man or woman in the front line learns the different way to deal with teargas from the simple handkerchief, through the use of water or even lemon, to the purchase of ski glasses.¹⁸¹

Meanwhile thousands more demonstrators gathered in response to UNEF’s call at a nearby Metro station. Those fighting the police withdrew to join them, then together they marched back towards the Sorbonne. The confrontation resumed, on an even larger scale. By the end of the evening 739 demonstrators had been wounded seriously enough to need hospital treatment.

By this stage the fighting in the Latin Quarter had begun to dominate the news. Although the state-run ORTF radio and TV stations were under orders to ignore the protests, private radio stations such as Radio Luxembourg carried hourly reports. The three individuals who emerged as “spokesmen” for the movement—Dany Cohn-Bendit, Jacques Sauvegeot, acting president of UNEF, and Alain Geismar, general secretary of SNE Sup—became virtually radio celebrities. And the student movement began, for the first time, to attract support from young workers:

The importance of the 6 May demonstrations must not be underestimated. Twice they threw themselves at the forces of the police, inflicting 345 injuries on them. The vigour and power of the student demonstrations was bound to exercise an influence on the working class and the youth.

The workers had a hardly flattering image of students, which was encouraged by the bureaucrats of the labour movement. In their eyes the students were simply ‘the sons of papa’, whose student antics would not stop them entering into the ranks of the exploiters. On the evening of 6 May this caricature was destroyed. The photos of the fights and the accounts of the battles earned gasps of admiration among workers.¹⁸²

The following Tuesday and the Wednesday saw further mass demonstrations. Tuesday's was a massive display of strength as 50,000, with arms linked right across the road, zigzagged 20 miles across Paris chanting defiance and singing the *International* outside the centres of government power. That night there were further clashes but not on the same scale as before.

By now considerable numbers of young workers were involved alongside the students. Right across France students were coming out on strike—including students in previously right wing dominated faculties such as law and medicine. Their demands centred on a call for an end to the repression of Parisian students, but broadened out to deal with the whole question of conditions in the colleges.

Yet even at this stage, the movement was by no means unstoppable. This can be seen from the demonstration of Wednesday 8 May.

For the first time leaders of the Paris trade unions and local left wing politicians turned up at the start of the demonstration at 6pm. But their aim was to reduce the demonstration to the level of a routine, ritual protest. When the police finally barred the way at 8pm, stewards, eager not to offend their new allies, ordered a peaceful dispersal.

The activists of previous nights suffered acute demoralisation:

The militants had the impression that everything was over. In their eyes the movement had suffered an irreversible defeat. It had just been broken by the trade union machines.¹⁸³

One activist, a former leader of UNEF, told a meeting the next day:

It was fortunate for us the government did not retreat yesterday night, for in that case we would have retreated too. Despite its extraordinary combat capacity, the movement showed how vulnerable it was.

But the government did not retreat. Ministers who wanted to make concessions were prevented from doing so by General de Gaulle himself.¹⁸⁴ The government continued its repressive stance, and laid the ground for “the night of the barricades” two days later.

The dynamic of the Parisian student revolt

So far I have stressed how close the dynamic of the student revolt was to that in other countries. There was profound alienation among a growing mass of non-political students, and some vague identification with revolutionary socialist ideas among a very small minority. Repression then caused a growing section of students to take action alongside the minority and to listen to its ideas. The individuals who could articulate the aspirations of the majority in vaguely

revolutionary terms became, in a matter of days, widely known figures.

But the movement in Paris reached a scale and had an impact greater than any of the other movements. To understand why, it is necessary to look at certain peculiarities of the development of French society.

France is usually thought of as an advanced Western capitalist society. Yet under de Gaulle it had adopted some of the authoritarian features more usually associated with the less developed capitalisms of Mediterranean Europe, or even the bureaucratic state capitalisms of Eastern Europe. De Gaulle, brought to power on 13 May 1958 to ward off a coup by the French army in Algeria, had sought to satisfy the longterm goals of French capitalism by overriding the particular interests that made up the ruling class. If, from 1947 to 1958, the representatives of working class organisations had been virtually excluded from political influence, under de Gaulle the traditional parties representing the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie were also excluded. Power was concentrated in the hands of one man who believed he understood intuitively what needed to be done in the interests of the ruling class as a whole.

This was not some aberration. It corresponded to the needs of French capitalism. This was true of a rational negotiated settlement to the colonial war in Algeria. It was true too of the modernisation of French capitalism to meet the challenge of international competition, even if this meant hurting both individual sections of capital and the mass voting base of the petty bourgeois parties. De Gaulle was able to end a costly, unwinnable war, increase the competitiveness of French industry and raise the rate of capital accumulation in France by more than a third, to 26 percent of the Gross National Product. This was no mean achievement in capitalist terms; just contrast it to the failures of the Macmillan and Wilson governments which ruled Britain in the same period.¹⁸⁵

But there was a double price to be paid.

On the one hand, the working class in France was more alienated from society than in Britain, Germany or Scandinavia. “By 1966 French industrial workers were the second worst paid in the Common Market and working the longest hours. They also paid the highest taxes.”¹⁸⁶

The same “austerity” had an impact in the universities. Student numbers expanded in an effort to meet the technological needs of modern capitalism in France as elsewhere; there were 200,000 students in 1960, 550,000 in 1968. But there was nothing like the material provision to cope with the increased numbers there was in Germany, Britain or the US. The rapidly expanding faculties were understaffed and overcrowded, and as many as three-fifths of students failed to complete their courses.

On the other hand, the authoritarian character of the Gaullist regime meant

there were far fewer mediating structures between those in power and those without it. Wages and employment policies were imposed without consultation with the bureaucracies of the major unions. Parliamentary representatives were denied any say for months at a time by a government which ruled by decree. The state radio and TV services were subject to openly political control. In higher education the rectors and deans were little more than ciphers, dependent upon ministerial say-so—a situation all the more perverse since everyone knew the ministers themselves were deeply divided over how to modernise the universities.

There was only one way to cope with popular discontent in the absence of mediating structures which could persuade people to abandon their struggles. This was to resort to force very quickly indeed. Whereas in Britain, West Germany or Scandinavia, the use of the police was rarely a central feature of industrial disputes in the 1960s, in France they played a central role in guaranteeing that alienation from existing society did not find an expression in successful trade union action.

In the year before the rise of the student movement, the use of police in this way had become increasingly common. At Berliet Lyons, at Rhodiaceta Bersançon, at Le Mans, striking workers were attacked by the CRS. The most violent confrontation took place at the Saviem truck plant in Caen in January 1968, where strikers organised a protest march after 400 CRS had arrived at the factory's picket lines at 4am. Police attacked the demonstration as it entered Caen, beating up workers. Ten were injured. Two days later the workers took to the streets again, supported by strikers from four other factories and by local students. This time young workers ignored calls for "moderation" from union officials, broke through police barriers, and fought back against police attacks by throwing bottles, stones and petrol bombs. The centre of the town was a battlefield until well into the night.¹⁸⁷

There was a simple strategy behind the government's use of the police in this way. The enforced rationalisation of French industry was increasing unemployment. Employers felt that intransigent opposition to workers' demands accompanied by police repression would quickly break any working class resistance.

At the beginning of May 1968 it seemed they were right. The level of class struggle had increased in 1967 and the first months of 1968, but the strikes and lockouts of those months nearly all ended in victory for the employers.

It was hardly surprising that the government decided to use against the students the same methods that had been so successful against those groups of workers who had tried to fight back.

Nor was it surprising that when faced with repression from a police force with such a record of brutality, the students should seek to defend themselves, and in doing so become a focus for workers who wanted to do the same. The very structures which had made the Gaullist regime so successful from a capitalist point of view guaranteed that the student protests had an impact greater than in other countries.

But why could the students achieve success where groups of workers had not?

Here three factors are of importance. First, the great centralisation of French society found one expression in the centralisation of its university system; there were no fewer than 200,000 students in the Paris area, with many of the faculties concentrated in a relatively small area of the Left Bank. Even if, as Dany Cohn-Bendit claimed at the time, only a minority of about 30,000 students actually took part in the demonstrations, this was a massive number of young people, ready night after night, to confront the police.

Second the relatively privileged background of the students—only 10 percent came from manual working class homes—meant that repression against them horrified a significant section of the middle class; it was their sons and daughters who were being beaten up. The government found it difficult to continue down the road of all-out repression when it faced both middle class and working class opposition.

Third, when in the past workers' movements had developed which could have beaten the Gaullist regime, as with the miners' strike in 1963, the leaden immobility of trade union and Communist Party officialdom had always held them back. The transitory nature of the student population meant it was not weighed down by such deeprooted bureaucratic organisation. The student union organisations, especially UNEF, were less rigid and more subject to pressures from below than the trade unions, where bureaucrats of 20 or 30 years' standing lived in fear of anything that might disturb their established relations with society.

The May of the workers

The demonstration through Paris on 13 May 1968 was the largest the city had seen since the liberation of the city from Nazi occupation in 1944. Hundreds of thousands of trade unionists with factory and union branch banners joined tens of thousands of university and high school students bearing the red and black flags they had fought under on the barricades two nights previously. In front of the whole demonstration was a banner reading, "Students, teachers, workers—

solidarity”. Behind it the student leaders Cohn-Bendit, Geismar and Sauvegeot marched shoulder to shoulder with the general secretaries of the main union federations, Seguy and Jeanson. Again and again the chants went up: “Free our comrades”, “Victory is in the streets”, “Adieu de Gaulle”, and, marking the strange coincidence that this was the exact anniversary of de Gaulle’s coming to power, “Ten years is enough”.

The government assumed that the demonstration would mark the end of the student agitation. It carefully kept the police out of the way so that there would be no more fighting around barricades. It did nothing to prevent students from occupying the Sorbonne that evening and from raising the red flag over it.

The union leaders too thought this would be the end. The biggest union federation, the CGT, and the Communist Party, which dominated it, had opposed the student agitation that started in Nanterre. Deputy leader of the Communist Party Georges Marchais denounced the first confrontations in Paris as the work of “groupuscules” of “ultraleftists” led by “the German anarchist, Cohn-Bendit”:

These false revolutionaries must be energetically unmasked because, objectively, they are serving the interests of the big capitalist monopolies and Gaullist power... For the most part they are the sons of rich bourgeois...who will quickly turn off their revolutionary ardour and go back to managing Daddy’s firm.¹⁸⁸

At first this attitude did not cause any problems for the Communist Party or the CGT, except among students. Few people outside the colleges and the Latin Quarter understood what was happening.

On the day after the first clashes the students were alone. Public opinion opposed their revolt, not understanding the reason for the violence.¹⁸⁹

But after the second day of fighting, 5 May, attitudes began to change. A young union delegate in an electricity factory told how:

The second or third day people began to be favourable to the students, but without understanding very well the reason for their revolt.¹⁹⁰

One leader of the Young Communists in southern Paris said afterwards:

I had difficulty in holding the lads back. One simple word from the party and they would have rushed to the Latin Quarter. The authorisation never came, but some comrades went anyway and demonstrated in crash helmets.¹⁹¹

Another Communist activist has given a similar picture:

The days of the big demonstrations, there was a real crisis of absenteeism among the militants. They would claim they were sick, using this as an excuse not only to the management, but to the party chiefs as well.¹⁹²

This pressure from below forced the party and union leaders to shift their

line. By 6 May the Communist daily paper *L'Humanité* was denouncing the repression of the student movement, although it hastened to add that “the ultra-left and the fascists are doing the government’s work”.¹⁹³ Two days later the CGT joined the other main federation, the CFDT, to declare its solidarity with the students.

But the aim of this “solidarity” was not to extend the students’ struggle into other parts of French society. It was rather to placate restless rank-and-file union and party activists, and to show the government that the CGT was a force to be taken seriously when it came to negotiations.

André Barjonet, who was a leader of the CGT on 13 May, says of the demonstration: “The CGT thought that everything would stop there, that there would be a good day of strikes and a good demonstration.”¹⁹⁴ And one historian of French Communism, who in general defends the tactics of the CGT in May 1968, writes: “The CGT hoped to drown the student revolt in a larger action in which the CGT would play a determining role.”¹⁹⁵

The attitude of the second largest union federation, the CFDT, was not all that different. Although it had swung round to support the students earlier than the CGT, its president, André Jeanson, has admitted: “For many of the organisers of the demonstration it marked the end of the events themselves.”¹⁹⁶

The demonstration dispersed peacefully. The students went off to the occupied colleges in the Latin Quarter, where no police were now to be seen. The workers got in their buses and cars and returned to the working class suburbs, where they clocked in as normal the next day. That seemed to be that.

However the workers at Sud Aviation in Nantes, in western France, had been holding weekly 15-minute strikes on Tuesdays. These were to demand that short-time working, the result of a shortage of orders, should not lead to a cut in wages. They were no different from many other defensive and usually unsuccessful union actions over the previous year. And so it was to be expected that the 15-minute strikes would eventually peter out, with a bitter but demoralised workforce knuckling under to management.

But that Tuesday the young workers in one section refused to return to work when the 15 minutes were up. Instead they marched round the plant getting support from other workers, and blockaded the manager in his office. That night 2,000 workers barricaded themselves in the factory.

For the national union leaders Nantes was just a local aberration. The area was not a traditional, disciplined bastion of the trade union movement, and it was known that there were Trotskyists and anarchists active in the Sud Aviation plant. The occupation merited only seven lines on an inside page of *L'Humanité*.¹⁹⁷

The Renault gearbox plant at Cléon, near Rouen, was a relatively new factory which had recruited young workers, often fresh from the countryside, with few traditions of militancy. Only about a third of the workforce had joined the general strike on 13 May. But the workers had taken part in one of the many defensive struggles of the year before. As one young worker said: “When we read about the accounts [of the demonstration] in the press the next day, we felt a little ashamed. Everyone had taken action except us. We wanted to make amends at the first opportunity.”¹⁹⁸

The opportunity came on the Wednesday. The CGT and CFDT had set aside that day for nationwide protests over changes in social security regulations. Through most of France the protest actions were poorly supported—workers felt the token strike on Monday had been enough for one week.¹⁹⁹ But the Cléon workers decided to extend a planned onehour strike by an extra 30 minutes, to protest at the way many workers were kept on short-term contracts. The whole plant stopped.

At midday the workers learnt about the occupation of Sud Aviation, Nantes. On restarting work they talked about it in the shops. Then, under the pressure of the young workers, a demonstration was organised. The 200 young workers chanting slogans at its head led it beneath the windows of the management offices. They demanded the director meet a delegation. He refused. So the workers blockaded the entrances of the offices to keep the management inside. That’s how the occupation at Cléon started. The new strikers were euphoric. No more bosses, no more bullying, total freedom. The union delegates could only get control of the situation with difficulty, establishing a stewarding system, protecting the machines and drawing up a list of demands.²⁰⁰

The next day dozens more factories were occupied—Lockheed at Beauvais and Orléans, Renault at Flins and Le Mans:

The industries most affected by the (economic) downturn of 1967-68 and most sensitive to European and international competition were the targets. Action began over long-standing, unresolved issues, usually local, over which the unions had been agitating for some time. Young, often non-union workers sparked and spread the movement. Once action had been started it ran up against the intransigent response from the employers which had characterised the recent period. In the changed context of May, however, such a response inflamed conflict rather than intimidating it.

The result was an explosion of labour struggle which, for two days or so, took even the trade unions by surprise.²⁰¹

At 5pm that evening Renault Billancourt, traditionally the most influential factory in the Paris area, was occupied. Some 80,000 workers were now involved altogether and every radio news bulletin told of more factories being occupied. By Friday workers’ occupations held every Renault plant, almost all the aerospace industry, all of Rhodiaceta, and were spreading through the metalworking industry of Paris and Normandy and the shipyards of the west. That night, one week after the night of the barricades, railworkers began to

occupy their depots, thus ensuring that the movement continued through the weekend. By Monday the strikes had spread to insurance companies, large shops, banks, and the print—where the unions decided to allow daily papers to appear but not periodicals. Within two or three days between nine and ten million people were on strike.

The transformation of the student movement into a strike movement of workers astonished almost all observers. One leader of the CFTD said later:

I did not believe in a ‘worker’ bending to the student agitation. But it was logical. Put yourself in the shoes of our lads. In a few days they learnt many things.

First of all, that action pays. No one used to talk about the problems of the university, now everyone does... No one thought ‘the old man’ [de Gaulle] would be beaten in the streets. ‘The old man’ didn’t say anything, Pompidou gave in and the students occupied the Sorbonne. On top of this was the power of the demonstration on 13 May: there had been nothing like it since the Liberation... People had never imagined themselves so strong.

All the barriers the government had erected against strikes had been broken. For a government employee, it was necessary to give five days’ warning before going on strike. The teachers who had struck without giving a warning were not sacked. The postal workers struck on 13 May without warning. The government was incapable of making people respect its laws... In certain parts of the private sector, the bosses had threatened: ‘The 13th of May is a political strike. If you take part we’ll lock you out.’ People went on strike. There were no lockouts; the employers were frightened of the consequences...

The result was workers discovered it was possible to fight, and that when you fight well, not only is there the chance of winning, but the risks involved are quite small... From that to action to resolve old problems was only a small step.²⁰²

A government paralysed

France ground to a halt. There were no trains, no buses, no banks open and no postal services. There was soon an acute petrol shortage. Everywhere factories were occupied or shut down with pickets on the gates. The strike movement was not confined to traditional industries: hospitals, museums, film studios, theatres and even the Folies Bergère were affected. By 25 May there was no proper TV service: journalists and production staff had walked out in protest at the government’s censorship of news of the strike movement.

The combined action of workers and students exercised an important attractive force on other layers in society “Contestation”—challenging established authority—took root among the professional middle classes: dissident architects occupied the offices of the association which regulated their profession; meetings of government planners and statisticians issued manifestos denouncing the use of their skills “by capitalism in the interests of profit”;²⁰³ medical students (previously a bastion of the right among students) and junior doctors joined movements which declared an end to the old hierarchical

organisation of the hospitals. Art students and painters took over the School of Fine Arts and turned it into a centre for the collective production of thousands of posters supporting the movement. Filmmakers withdrew from the “competitive” Cannes Film Festival, and discussed how to rescue the film industry from the profit motive and the monopolies. Professional footballers occupied the headquarters of the Football Federation.

The “moderate” farmers’ organisation, FNSEA, had already planned protests over Common Market farm prices for the last week of May, and was prepared to take advantage of the government’s weakness to step up its action. The government could still rely on the farmers’ leaders for political support, but there was a growing presence of the Communist-influenced MODEF in the peasant demonstrations. In the west especially, young peasants’ organisations declared solidarity with the workers and students. Peasants who demonstrated in Nantes and Rennes on 24 May fraternised with striking workers.

This did not mean that no one in France supported the government. Indications suggest that the mass of small shopkeepers and businessmen did. So did most of the older or more prosperous farmers. Among the strikers there were those who passively tolerated the strikes, hoping they would lead to higher pay, without dropping their right wing or Gaullist ideas.

These groups, together with the very rich, may even have been a majority of the population. Yet from 15 to 29 May they were of no consequence. The government was increasingly isolated, with no apparent way out of the dead end in which it found itself.

It did have, it was true, the armed forces and the police. But how far could it rely on them if there was an all-out confrontation with the mass of workers? Of the 168,000 soldiers, 120,000 were conscripts, and some were openly sympathetic with the strikers. The left wing weekly *Nouvel Observateur* reported that after the Fifth Army had been put on the alert for strikebreaking, “committees were created ready to turn against their superiors and to sabotage transport and armoured cars”.²⁰⁴

The police—or at least the hard core of 13,500 CRS and 61,000 Gendarmes—were likely to be more reliable. Those with left wing ideas of any sort had been purged in the 1940s and 1950s, and the forces were rife with racist and anti-communist ideas. But this did not prepare them for a situation in which they were universally unpopular in working class and some middle class neighbourhoods: individual policemen complained that they had to hide their helmets and badges after going off duty to avoid getting into unpleasant arguments. What is more, the police had unions of their own and despite their right wing ideas, many regarded themselves as “good trade unionists”.

Finally, the government's own behaviour caused enormous resentment among the police. The government had ordered them to attack the student demonstrations, yet Prime Minister Pompidou had then given in to the students' demands, talking as if the police alone had been responsible for the repression. On 13 May one police union complained that the government had used it to suppress the students, then had turned round and said it wanted dialogue. Why had it not said so earlier, the union asked.²⁰⁵ Two days later the secretary of the Interfederal Police Union warned on the radio: "I almost received a mandate at our general meeting to call a strike against the government."²⁰⁶

No doubt there was an element of bluff to such talk: the union could hope to frighten the government into making concessions to the police over pay and conditions. No doubt some of it was the result of pressure from disaffected, right wing, near-fascist elements who had never forgiven de Gaulle for abandoning Algeria and now blamed his government for being "liberal" with "subversive" students. Finally, there were probably those who suspected de Gaulle was finished and did not want to ruin their job prospects by repressing those who might succeed him. But whatever the reasons, "for a fortnight the government felt the police slipping from its hands".²⁰⁷

This did not mean the police could not be used at all. The CRS could still batter the students, as they proved on the night of 24 May. But an attack on the mass of organised workers was different. If there was any possibility the police might refuse to obey orders, then the government dare not take the risk. A police mutiny would have meant final defeat.

So the government had to stand back for two weeks, almost powerless to do anything in the country it "ruled". At the end of the first week of the general strike, on 24 May, de Gaulle broadcast to the country. He attempted to end the agitation by promising a "referendum on participation": if he lost the referendum, he said, he would resign. His speech did nothing to inspire the demoralised forces of the right and was greeted with derision by the left; the politicians of the "centre" began to search for an alternative leader, more in touch with reality, who could bring things back under control.

To restore the government's credibility it was essential to end the strikes, at least in public services and distribution. So the day after de Gaulle's broadcast, his prime minister, Pompidou, called union leaders and employers together for national negotiations. By late on Sunday night it seemed a bargain had been struck. The "Grenelle agreement" conceded a 35 percent increase in the minimum wage and a 7 percent increase in other wages. But the union leaders had to put it to the test of mass meetings in the factories.

The first such meeting was of 15,000 workers at Renault Billancourt. This

was a CGT stronghold. But when two of the federation's leaders, Franchon and Seguy, spoke in favour of the agreement they were met with a dismal silence, even some booing. By contrast, when Jeanson, leader of the minority CFTD, stressed the agreement allowed the factory to continue to strike for its own local demands, he received rapturous applause.

The Renault decision was followed by votes to continue the strike at Citroën, Berliet, Sud Aviation and Rhodiaceta. Where the big battalions of the workers' movement led, the smaller battalions followed. By that afternoon the CGT leaders were calling on workers to fight locally, "branch by branch to win considerably better results than those at Grenelle".²⁰⁸

Pompidou's ploy had failed as much as de Gaulle's speech. The general strike continued. For the next four days it seemed to politicians of both right and left that Gaullism was finished.

François Mitterrand, who had stood against de Gaulle in the presidential election two years earlier, suggested the formation of an emergency government under the one-time prime minister Pierre Mendès-France. The suggestion gathered support across the political spectrum. Leaders of UNEF and the left socialist PSU were enthusiastic. So were "centre" politicians who wanted someone able, on the one hand, to influence and workers and students, and on the other to safeguard French capitalism.²⁰⁹ The Communist Party, alone of the forces on the left (except for the small groups of revolutionary socialists), did not endorse the scheme. But many people thought it was only biding its time until it was promised positions of influence. It showed its power with a CGT demonstration of half a million people on 29 May calling for "a popular and democratic government with Communist participation".²¹⁰

At this point de Gaulle himself may have decided he was beaten. On Wednesday 29 May he left Paris without telling anyone where he was going. Rumours spread that he had resigned, and his supporters were more demoralised than ever. In fact he had gone to see the head of the French army in Germany, General Massu. When de Gaulle reappeared the next day most people thought he had simply staged a clever manoeuvre; but his prime minister, Pompidou, later claimed that de Gaulle had in fact decided to resign and was only persuaded to fight on by Massu. "In reality the general suffered a crisis of morale. Thinking the game was up, he had chosen to retire. Arriving in Baden-Baden he was ready to stay a long time," wrote Pompidou.²¹¹ In any case, de Gaulle knew the situation was desperate; disappearing from sight in the middle of a great political crisis was a terrible gamble, hardly likely to inspire supporters or to terrify opponents.

Yet de Gaulle's government did survive. And that was not all. Four days

after his return from Germany the tide had turned against the left as the strikes began to end, the right to mobilise and the police to attack workers and students. How could this rapid turn-about happen?

Politics in the mass strike

By the third week in May the press throughout the world was talking of “the revolution” in France, as if there was one, single revolutionary movement afoot. But in fact there was not one movement, but two: that of the students and that of the workers. Although each influenced the other, they proceeded at different speeds, each with its own dynamic. And in both, not only revolutionary ideas were at work but also powerful currents which saw the aim of the movement as the reform of existing French society, not its overthrow.

The student movement, as we have seen, had grown at enormous speed from the first small demonstration in the courtyard of the Sorbonne on 3 May to the occupation of the whole University of Paris on the evening of 13 May. Those spearheading the movement had been revolutionary socialists. Their initiative and courage in challenging the university authorities and confronting the police had drawn tens of thousands of other students into action.

This gave the revolutionaries enormous prestige. They had an unparalleled opportunity to explain the way capitalism messed up people’s lives and how it could be fought to students who were outraged by the behaviour of the police and the lies of the authorities. This the best-known leaders—Cohn-Bendit, Geismar and Sauvegeot—did at the big public meetings and in radio and press interviews. This the small revolutionary organisations inside the movement—the Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire (JCR) and Federation of Revolutionary Students, both Trotskyist, and the Union of Young Communists (Marxist-Leninist) and Communist Party of France (Marxist-Leninist), both Maoist—did in scores of meetings. This a vast host of newly politicised students did at thousands of discussions in the occupied colleges, in cafes and bars and on street corners throughout the Latin Quarter.

Early on, the student movement threw up a new organisational mechanism for turning those just won to the movement into apostles carrying its message into new areas. Committees of Action were created, each at first restricted to 10 or 25 people, able to meet and act together daily. Within days there were hundreds, writing thousands of leaflets, distributing them throughout the length and breadth of Paris, holding impromptu meetings both around the Latin Quarter and in working class areas, drawing in new people and discussing with them how they could revolutionise their own area of social life:

A flying column of agitation is created, which visits the districts and suburbs, with a lorry covered in flags and placards as a platform. They sell the UNEF paper *Action*, distribute leaflets, ‘provoke’ little meetings, get together little discussion groups on the pavements.²¹²

The occupation of the Sorbonne on 13 May provided an organising centre. Its rooms provided offices from which the action committees could work, its lecture halls a meeting place for a daily assembly of delegates from many of the committees. Its great amphitheatre became the site of non-stop discussions on how to revolutionise society. When the writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre spoke there an estimated 10,000 people were crammed into a hall meant for a quarter of that number.

Another centre of revolutionary agitation, directed mainly at the intellectual petty bourgeoisie, was created on 15 May when “cultural” committees of action occupied France’s National Theatre, the Odeon. Inside a banner proclaimed: “When the national assembly becomes a bourgeois theatre, the bourgeois theatre becomes a national assembly”. Some 7,000 people attended discussions there every day.

By the time of the general strike, it was no longer just students who were taking part in the discussions in the Sorbonne and the Odeon. The Latin Quarter had become a magnet, drawing towards it everyone in Paris attracted to the revolutionary upsurge. Young workers would go to participate in the movement, members of the middle class to see the spectacle of the “revolution” in motion, as previously to a fashionable play or the latest film.

It was the Latin Quarter which provided most of the revolutionary symbolism of the May events. The university buildings with their red and black flags and their near-permanent meetings, which the police did not go near, did seem to be a “liberated” zone. The slogans scrawled on the walls of the Sorbonne—“Imagination takes power”, “Turn your dreams into reality and your reality into dreams”—were telegraphed round the world by the media.

Yet it was by no means true that the whole student movement was revolutionary. Once the Sorbonne had been occupied, three distinct trends emerged.

There were those revolutionaries, whether Trotskyist, Maoist or anarchist, who saw that the real challenge to society now lay outside the university, among the working class. What mattered for these was to go to the factories and the working class areas, using the Sorbonne—at most—as a launching pad.

Then there were those who saw themselves as revolutionaries, but who believed the university should be the seat of their revolution. Their slogan tended to be “student power”, which was to be achieved by declaring the universities self-governing, autonomous bodies which any student or worker could attend

without restriction and without examinations. They argued that this was the student equivalent of the “workers’ power” that was needed in the factories.

There is no doubt the “student power” revolutionaries attracted a great deal of support among the mass of students. They directly confronted the alienation, the sense of purposelessness and powerlessness associated with the examination treadmill. But they faced a dilemma they could not overcome. The mass of students might hate the examination system, but they still knew they needed to pass their exams if they were to be guaranteed a place at college next year or the chance of a job when they finished. They sensed that student action alone could not change the wider society sufficiently to provide any alternative.

This feeling led many students to withdraw from the occupations in order to continue their studies on their own. It encouraged among those who remained the growth of a third tendency, a reformism which searched for ways of modifying the examination system and the authority structure inside the university that would be acceptable to the top professors and the more “liberal” sections of the ruling class. Within a week of the occupation of the Sorbonne on 13 May, the Assembly of Committees of Action heard fears that the movement might be in decline as students became more receptive to the idea of accepting reforms.²¹³ The proponents of “student power” were coming up against the inbuilt limitation of the slogan—the real powerlessness of students.

What prevented this problem scuppering the movement there and then was the workers’ upsurge. The spread of the mass strike that very weekend provided an alternative to slipping immediately into a student reformism. But although the workers’ upsurge was to a large extent inspired and to some extent influenced by the student movement, it had a dynamic of its own.

When the student upsurge began there was little in the way of student organisation in the colleges. This was one of the reasons revolutionaries were able to play such a leading role. Among workers, frustration with the Gaullist regime had been growing for a much longer time than among students. But there was organically rooted organisation, even if in most workplaces it directly involved only a minority.

Many workers saw the Communist Party and the union federation it dominated, the CGT, as their class organisations. This applied not only to the hundreds of thousands of Communist Party members or the 1.5 million in the CGT. It also applied to many workers who joined neither, but saw them as the militant, active section of the class, the section which stood for other workers’ interests. In the statutory elections for workplace delegates, half the manual workers voted for the lists presented by the CGT. In parliamentary and municipal elections, the Communist Party received about 5 million votes. What is more,

many workers, especially older workers who remembered the wartime resistance and the bitter pre-war struggles, felt tied to the Communist Party by more than just ideology. They had learnt everything they knew about working class struggle from the party. They had known people who had died because of their party beliefs during the war. The result was that the party did not just have a large membership and much sympathy, it also had a great ability to mobilise its supporters to do whatever the party leadership decided. It was able, for example, to ensure that the CGT had a force of 20,000 stewards on the 13 May demonstration—20,000 people prepared to follow, with almost military discipline, the orders of the Communist leaders of the union.

The Communists and the CGT showed early on they did not like student agitation, and were by no means enthusiastic for the unrest to spread to workers. Key party leaders such as Georges Marchais (later the most unsuccessful general secretary the party ever had) even opposed the calling by the CGT of the one-day general strike on 13 May,²¹⁴ and were equally against backing the strike movement which arose spontaneously later in the week.²¹⁵

But most of the Communist and CGT leaders believed they could no longer turn their backs on a movement they had done nothing to initiate. Their own members showed signs of rebelling. What is more there was much for the leaders to gain from backing a certain sort of action, provided they could control it and keep militancy within bounds which they laid down.

Politics is the exercise of power. At the end of the day, the only real power available to the Communist Party and the CGT—as a bargaining counter to put on the table of bourgeois society—derived from their ability to control a section of the working class.

The Communist Party wanted parliamentary influence. Its aim was to form an electoral front with the remnants of the Socialist and Radical parties. It was part way towards this. In 1965 it had persuaded the former interior minister, François Mitterrand (who was not to proclaim himself a “socialist” for some years yet), to allow it to join his presidential campaign. In 1967 it had come to an electoral agreement with the Federation of the Left, which linked the right wing Socialists and the middle class Radicals. But it wanted to cement the alliance by getting a common electoral programme and agreement that Communists would receive ministerial posts in the event of electoral victory.

The Communist Party could not achieve these things unless it could show its would-be allies that it commanded substantial working class support which they could not match. Taking command of the strike movement and exercising tight control over it was, most of its leaders thought, the way to do this.

The CGT leaders also wanted to be recognised as legitimate negotiating

partners, although by the government and the employers rather than by the left parliamentarians. In particular they wanted to end the discrimination long practised against the CGT by certain employers. They could not achieve this unless they too could show that they could both turn on and turn off working class struggles.

The one-day strike on 13 May seemed to fit their purposes admirably. It enabled them to identify sufficiently with the victorious student movement to dispel discontent within their own ranks, while putting on a display of force which would impress all round—and, it seemed, without any risk of unleashing a movement which would get out of hand.

The spontaneous spread of strikes and occupations later in the week created problems. Here was a movement which might escape from their control. For this reason they did nothing to encourage or publicise the first strikes at Sud Aviation or Cléon. Once the movement was under way, however, standing back from it seemed more dangerous than seeking to “run to the front” in order to direct it into channels under their own control. This they did from the Thursday evening onwards.

Union and party activists were told not simply to support strikes which were beginning spontaneously, but to take the lead in pulling out fresh workplaces, putting on pickets, declaring themselves the strike committees, making sure they were in charge of the occupations.

They were given a two-fold task: to spread the strike movement, but also to control it, to make sure it remained in safe, trade union channels and was not influenced by the revolutionary groups or the students.

What this meant was shown early in the Renault Billancourt strike. Students from the Sorbonne made a “long march” right across Paris to show solidarity and offer support. They were met by row upon row of CGT stewards who barred access to the workers inside the plant. This experience was repeated on a smaller scale in factory after factory. The student struggle might have inspired the workers’ struggle, but the CGT and the Communist Party were determined not to have revolutionary students influencing “their” workers.

In order to keep control of the strikes the union and party activists discouraged other workers from participating in occupations or discussing the issues raised by the upsurge. As one historian of the Communist Party and CGT wrote:

The confederation’s most important initial concern in the days after 17 May was to make sure the CGT militants ran as many locally elected strike committees as possible.

[As a result] In a minority of cases...sit-downs were mass phenomena and did involve a great deal of discussion and debate. But more often than not they were cadre actions, in which whole

plants were occupied by skeleton crews of pickets and maintenance workers... In such cases most of the strikers probably stayed at home and observed the crisis unfolding, with sympathy to be sure, on radio and TV.²¹⁶

This necessarily had one very important effect on the whole movement. The politicisation which had occurred among students and which was to affect a minority of workers did not spread to the mass of workers because they were prevented from participating in the confrontation and discussing its lessons.

The role the CGT and the Communist Party were playing was shown with the Grenelle negotiations. The government failed to satisfy many of the union leaders' key demands: the increase in the minimum wage affected only one worker in five, and offered nothing to the major groups that had spearheaded the strike; there was no guarantee of payment for the days on strike; there was no reduction in working hours, no automatic cost-of-living increases to protect the value of the wage increases in the months ahead. Yet union leaders could emerge from the meeting saying: "Grenelle represents a turning point in relations between the unions and the government."²¹⁷ Why? Because after long years the government was allowing the unions to control the workers on its behalf!

However, the Communists and the CGT still had to be careful to protect their left flanks. This was why, after the hostile reception that greeted the agreement at Renault Billancourt, the CGT gave the go ahead to its members to stay out for local demands.

The second most important union federation, the CFDT, had followed a different strategy to the CGT for some years. It was tied to no political party and was mainly concerned to build its membership and influence. Many of its officials believed the way to do this was through struggles to extend shop-floor negotiating rights rather than the carefully staged one-day or half-day national displays of power of the CGT. And as is often the case with smaller unions that hope to grow quickly, the CFDT national officials had no compunction about letting local militants have their heads if it brought in more members. So a union federation traditionally to the right of the CGT (it had not long ago had informal ties with the Christian Democrat MRP) engaged in left wing phraseology and had officials who were linked to the small left socialist party, the PSU.

After initially opposing the student movement, the CFDT rallied to it before the CGT and established links with UNEF. Once the strike movement took off, CFDT leaders did not restrict themselves to purely economic demands like the CGT. Instead they talked in terms which could seem almost revolutionary to activists disillusioned by the behaviour of the Communist Party and CGT, raising the demand of "*autogestion*" (workers' control)—without, however, making it clear whether this meant participation in existing structures of managerial power

or an attempt to overthrow them.

Yet when it came to the crunch the CFDT was as prepared to do dirty deals as the CGT. They did not reject the Grenelle offer, even if they were later to be prepared to engage in militant talk so as to attract CGT dissidents.

As we have seen, the failure of the Grenelle negotiations to end the strike led many mainstream capitalist politicians to think the de Gaulle regime was finished. But this presented as big a problem for the Communist Party, CGT and CFDT leaders as it did for the government. Their purpose throughout had been to use the agitation as a bargaining card to increase their own power within the existing set-up. But now that set-up was itself up for grabs. As one of the CFDT leaders put it, there was no longer any effective “interlocutor” for them to negotiate with.²¹⁸

The union and party leaders all showed signs of panic. They had not intended to overthrow the government. But if it was to fall, they had to ensure that it fell into hands not far from theirs. The CFDT leaders backed a UNEF march to a 40,000-strong meeting in Charlety Stadium, where the speeches were revolutionary in tone, and then endorsed Mitterrand’s call for a government headed by Mendès-France. The Communist and CGT leaders were now genuinely frightened. They feared they were being upstaged by a movement that drew together those to the left and to the right of them, a big section of the students on the one hand and the socialist and radical politicians on the other. The only way to stop their supporters being drawn away from them was to make a political demonstration of their own: on the Wednesday (two days after the Renault meeting) they organised their massive march for “a popular and democratic government”.

It was a game of bluff and double bluff. Neither the CGT and the Communist Party, nor the CFDT, Mitterrand and Mendès-France were prepared to take the risks involved in seriously fighting to overthrow de Gaulle. The only people who might have been prepared to do that were a section of the revolutionary students—but corralled away from the factories, they lacked the forces. Instead the aim of the game was for each to assert its right to a slice of the action should de Gaulle fall of his own accord. All the regime had to do was to call their bluff. It did so on Thursday 30 May.

The dénouement

We may not know exactly what happened when de Gaulle was in Germany on 29 May, but we do know what he and his prime minister, Pompidou, did when he returned to France the next day.

First they put the Gaullist party machine to work organising a demonstration in support of the regime in the centre of Paris. Then they let it be known that they were concentrating troops around the city. Finally, as the demonstration began to assemble, de Gaulle broadcast on radio and television.

His message was short and to the point. He was holding on to power. Those who were challenging him were using “intimidation, propaganda and tyranny” at the behest of “totalitarian communism”. They had to be stopped, forcibly if necessary. And instead of the referendum, which it had been impossible to get off the ground, he was dissolving parliament and calling a general election.

The talk of “totalitarian communism” was just what the Gaullist supporters wanted to hear. They had sat back impotent for nearly a month while the left held the streets. Now they swarmed out of the wealthier areas of the capital to the Place de la Concorde to acclaim de Gaulle and express their scorn for the workers and students.

This demonstration, 500,000 or 600,000-strong, is sometimes claimed to be responsible for the change in de Gaulle’s fortunes. The judgement is wrong. It was one thing for the well-to-do to walk through the centre of Paris one evening. It was quite another for them to set the whole of French industry back to work. Indeed that night they did not even have the nerve to challenge the students just across the river, still in control of the Left Bank.

In terms of forces at its disposal, the real weakness of the regime was shown the following night. Police tried to break the rail strike by evicting pickets from certain stations. But they could not force rail workers back to work, and the network remained paralysed.

De Gaulle’s real trump card had been to call the bluff of the union leaders and left politicians. It was to them he addressed himself when he posed the choice as between civil war and allowing him to preside over parliamentary elections.

The first reaction of the left parliamentarians to de Gaulle’s speech was to denounce it out of hand. “De Gaulle has issued a call for civil war,” said Mitterrand, “it is the voice of a dictator.”²¹⁹ The Communist Party’s judgement was similar. Yet none of the left parties or unions followed up such statements with any declaration of war on the regime. Instead, they rushed to welcome the elections. “It is in the interests of workers,” said Seguy the next day, “to be able to express their desires for change in the context of elections.”²²⁰

And for the CGT and the Communist Party, preparing for the electoral contest meant ending the strike movement as quickly as possible. Within three days negotiations were concluded bringing a return to work in key sections of the public sector: electricity and gas, the post office, the railways. What the police

had not been able to achieve on the Saturday night, the CGT achieved by Tuesday.

That weekend was a bank holiday. When people started their holidays on the Friday evening the government was still enormously weak, despite the demonstration the previous night. When the holiday ended on the Tuesday communications were restored through much of the country, petrol supplies were freely available and the momentum of the strike movement was broken. The rich and powerful could at last heave a sigh of relief.

Revolutionaries

The choice made by the Communist Party and the CGT—to wind down the strikes for electoral purposes—did not go unchallenged. Two days after de Gaulle’s speech some 30,000 people demonstrated through the streets of Paris, chanting “Election, treason”, and “It’s only a beginning—the fight goes on”. But while in “normal” times 30,000 may seem a lot of people, in the context of the huge French political crisis it was not nearly big enough to have a major impact. They could make a lot of noise on the streets. But they could not prevent the key settlements which were ending the strikes in the big public enterprises.

This was not because the workers in these enterprises were necessarily keen to return to work. Even though the electricity and gas, railway and Metro employers offered large economic concessions, workers often delayed before accepting them. As one trade union official said afterwards:

Despite the money and other difficulties...the strike had become a bit like a festival. For two or three weeks the strikers had lived in a spirit of total freedom: no employers, no bosses, the hierarchy had disappeared. So before calling the strike off people hesitated.²²¹

Once back, they were often willing to walk out again:

All that was needed, as in some RATP depots, was the presence of a determined militant, what the CGT called an ‘ultra-left’; or as in some postal depots that a particular demand, like the shortening of the working week, had not been attained.²²²

But such militants were few and far between. The revolutionary left was extremely weak when the May events started—the Maoist and Trotskyist organisations had about 400 members each and none of their members were inside the working class. Even the Trotskyist group Voix Ouvrière (later renamed Lutte Ouvrière), which refused to do student work, consisted to a large extent of students and ex-students who put leaflets into factories from the outside.

The number of individuals who thought of themselves as “revolutionaries”

had grown massively during May until they numbered tens of thousands. But most of them were students. The way the Communist Party and CGT kept the strikes passive and excluded the revolutionary students from the factories, ensured this.

The weakness of the revolutionary students was starkly revealed as early as 24 May, when UNEF had called a demonstration to protest at a ban on Dany Cohn-Bendit returning to France after a visit to Germany. The Communists and CGT set out to sabotage it by organising a demonstration of their own the same evening. The police, deliberately ignoring the CGT, attacked the 30,000-strong student demonstration. One student was killed, many more injured or arrested.

That night the student leaders like Dany Cohn-Bendit recognised that the movement could not be pushed forward simply by street demonstrations; the students had to break through to those involved in the strikes.²²³

But even when the newly revolutionary students succeeded in getting an audience among young workers, problems remained. One young Renault worker told of the discussions he had with students who had marched to Billancourt:

We got on with them, but their arguments were not clear. You have to understand it was the first time we had met such types. We weren't used to their way of talking, and they had something of the effect on us of curious beasts, coming from a different world.²²⁴

The problem was partly in the nature of some of the “revolutionary” ideas held by the students. Many were influenced by anarchist and “Third Worldist” ideas which saw the working class as “bought off” by the system, and the enemy not so much capitalism as “consumerist” society—the pursuit of material improvement. This might have a certain moralistic appeal to students rejecting the nice middle class existence on offer for those who compromised with the system; it could hardly appeal to workers for whom getting a car, a washing machine, a refrigerator or a television set represented a way of escaping from some of the tedium of working class life.

Such attitudes meant that while the CGT tried to confine the strikes to purely economic demands, claiming workers were not interested in wider social and political issues, many of the students dismissed the economic demands as irrelevant and simply spoke about “contestation”, “demystification”, “fighting authority” and “revolution”.

But there was a problem even with those students who, under the influence of groups such as the JCR, did understand that the fight for material demands was important in bringing many groups of workers forward to challenge the state. The students came, by and large, from middle class families and had become political through the abstract discussion taking place in the university milieu; as

a result they did not know how to explain their ideas to workers, whose experience was quite different, and tended to speak an “intellectualist” language remote to most workers.

These were weaknesses which the revolutionary left could solve only in the course of struggle, as individual students fought alongside the most militant workers, learning from them the realities of working class life at the same time as helping them generalise from their own immediate experiences.

The Committees of Action provided a means by which students and workers could act and learn together. The small numbers of revolutionary socialists who had been active before May were able to expand their influence over events enormously by putting across their ideas in these Committees of Action, which in turn projected them to a much wider audience.

To this extent, the Committees of Action acted as a substitute for a revolutionary socialist party. But it was not a particularly good one. Through sustained discussions that take place long before an upsurge of mass struggle, a revolutionary party develops a clear analysis of events, an understanding of how to argue its point of view with different sections of workers, and a voluntary internal discipline. It can react quickly and with a single will to rapidly changing events. The Committees of Action had none of these advantages. At key moments, their general assembly would be bogged down in seemingly interminable discussions, so that it could not respond to the manoeuvres of the regime, the Communist Party and CGT or the left politicians.

This problem showed itself with extreme sharpness after de Gaulle’s speech of 30 May. Everywhere people were looking for an alternative response to his threat of civil war, something other than the CGT’s call for a return to work. But the student movement was unable to provide it. A meeting to attempt to establish a “revolutionary movement” on 1 June came to no conclusions; an Assembly of Committees of Action the next night was equally fruitless: the discussions dragged on until many delegates left, exhausted.²²⁵

What is more, even the most optimistic estimates of the influence of the Committees of Action claimed they existed in no more than a quarter of the striking workplaces.²²⁶ In many of these the committees were no more than ginger groups of students and young workers, able to exercise pressure, but finding it much more difficult to challenge the established CGT activists for leadership in the workplace.

The result was that although the revolutionary left could act as a pole of attraction for those workers who did not want to go along with the abandonment of the strike by the Communist Party and the CGT, it could not prevent it. And so it could not prevent the liquidation of the May movement.

The bitter end

A great social movement, involving millions of people, does not simply stop in its tracks. If its forward momentum is broken, it begins to recoil backwards. All those half-convinced individuals who were pulled behind it by its confidence and power fall away, no longer seeing it as a means to deal with the petty frustrations and oppressions that benumb their lives. All those opportunist politicians who saw it as a possible vehicle for advancing their careers now jump on to different bandwagons. All its enemies feel strengthened by the weakening of its influence on those who vacillated between it and them.

The decision of the Communists and the CGT to get the public enterprises back to work at the beginning of June 1968 inevitably led to a falling away of the movement of May. The restoration of public transport and fuel distribution meant that sections of the middle class who backed the government were no longer literally paralysed. The Gaullist political machine could move back into operation again, with leafletting, postering, and the organisation of national and local demonstrations. People who only a week earlier had seen some sort of left government as the only way to return to order now put their faith back in de Gaulle. The possibility of mutiny among the police disappeared as they felt, for the first time since the student demonstrations started, that part at least of the “public” supported them if they took a hard line.

That week the police attacked strikers for the first time. They seized control of radio and TV studios from strikers on 5 June. The following day the CRS went into the Renault Flins plant and threw out pickets. They met attempts to reoccupy the plant the next day with violence, killing a high school student. On 10 June the CRS were used in the Latin Quarter for the first time since 13 May. On 11 June they entered Peugeot’s Sochaux factory, beating up occupying workers as they fled and attacking workers in the area around the factory, killing two. That same day there were police attacks on workers and students in St Nazaire, Toulouse and Lyons. A few days later the government formally banned the Trotskyist and Maoist organisations and the 22 March movement, while freeing from prison General Salan, leader of the right wing terrorist organisation of the early 1960s, the OAS.

But the police attacks themselves did not break the continuing strikes. At Flins and Sochaux workers reoccupied the plants and the police eventually withdrew. The strikes in the radio and TV dragged on for weeks.

However, the mood of the strikes changed dramatically. Workers everywhere were on the offensive until 31 May. After the public sector returned to work that weekend, the employers felt confident enough to go on to the

offensive.

The concessions the government had made at the Grenelle negotiations had been designed to fragment the workers' movement. They gave big increases to a minority of low paid workers, but much less to the big engineering and fibre plants which had spearheaded the mass strikes. The intention had been to get a return to work which left these plants with virtually no gains. The tactic had little effect while the key public services remained on strike. But now the CGT had got them to return to work, things were different. The factory-by-factory fight for "local improvements" enabled the employers to wear down the very plants which had led the May movement.

As a metal workers' union leader said later:

Neither the government nor the employers were ready to forgive the fear they had just known. They had been powerless against the students, they had no power against the public sector workers who could paralyse the whole country. But if the motor and metal working industries were dragged out for another fortnight, it was annoying but necessary to make the militant workers give in. In punishing them, they could efface the month of government capitulations and employers' shame.²²⁷

In the new climate, the employers tried all their old methods of union busting—secret ballots in which phoney "majorities" voted to return to work, the use of yellow unions and foremen to break through picket lines, the use of the police to beat up strikers, the claim that anyone who resisted such actions was a "dangerous subversive".

At first the attacks of the employers and government produced pressure from groups who had already returned to work to come out again in solidarity. The feeling was such that the CFDT proposed a day of action in support of those still on strike. But the CGT attacked "the unilateral decision of the CFDT", saying that "solidarity must not lead to incidents like those at Flins", which it blamed on "ultra-left provocateurs". "All talk of resuming the general strike must be considered as a dangerous provocation". All that could be done for the strikers was to "collect money".²²⁸

The major car plants—Renault, Citroën and Peugeot—still remained on strike in mid-June. The CGT then managed to push through a return to work at Renault in exchange for a 10-14 percent wage increase, an hour and a half off the working week, half-pay for days on strike. Even this package was rejected by a fifth of the workers—and at the Flins plant, where the fighting with the police had taken place, by 40 percent. A few days later Peugeot returned to work and, on 24 June, Citroën. In each case, the workers went back into the factory with a sense of victory.

But even if the employers had not been able to "punish" these workers as they had hoped, they still had reason for self-congratulation. The workers who

had had to stay out on strike longest to gain anything significant from the May movement were those who traditionally had the weakest organisation. They were unlikely to strike again for some time, and this gave the employers a chance to prevent the development of strong shop-floor organisation and to rebuild the yellow unions. Firms such as Citroën and Peugeot may have been forced to make economic concessions to the strikers, but they were to remain bastions of non-unionism after May as before.

In one important instance, the fragmentation of the movement by local returns to work after the end of May led to devastating defeat—in the state-run radio and TV service, the ORTF.

The broadcasting journalists and technicians had not joined the May movement fully until late in the day. They had been prompted to action because the heads of the service repeatedly refused to let them tell the truth about the scale of the May movement or to broadcast interviews with opponents of the government's policy—even if these were the most respectable of bourgeois politicians. At first, under the prompting of the CGT, they refrained from all-out strike action. But in the end accumulated frustration led to an all-out strike and occupation of the studios. The government was forced to produce skeleton services from a heavily guarded studio in the Eiffel Tower.

The return to normality at the beginning of June allowed the government to wreak vengeance. On 5 June it appointed a new governor general of broadcasting, who sacked 13 journalists and six producers, used the police to seize control of the studios, and began “normal” services with non-strikers and newly recruited scabs. The government then offered improved wages and conditions in return for complete control of programme content. Under CGT pressure the technicians returned to work on these terms on 19 June. The journalists held out for another three weeks, before admitting complete defeat on 12 July.

The importance for the government of isolating and defeating the broadcasting strike can hardly be overestimated. In the last week of May the silence of the broadcasting channels was a symbol of the government's weakness. Its control of them from 5 June onwards was a sign of its reborn strength and a powerful aid in its electoral propaganda, with the claim that it alone stood between France and chaos.

A revolutionary opportunity

Failed revolutions can quickly slip from memory. The ruling class hastens to reimpose the old way of living and, with it, the old way of thinking which

assumes there can be no other. The revolutionary period comes to seem, to the great majority of people, like a weird delirium, something quite apart from the real course of society's life, in the same way that dreams and nightmares are apart from the real course of an individual's life. Only incurable romantics are expected to hark back to them. And so effective can this suppression of the memory be, that even historians can have difficulty disinterring the truth and distinguishing it from fancy. Usually only a new revolutionary upsurge draws from the individual memories of thousands of participants' recollections which confirm the reality of what happened.

France 1968 was not even a failed revolution. There was much talk at the time about the "revolution", especially in the Latin Quarter of Paris and in the foreign media. But no attempt was ever made to seize state power. So the process of putting this bit of history into parentheses, of consigning it to the might-have-beens of historical footnotes, was even more rapid than usual. In the years that followed, 1968 was almost universally referred to as "the year of the students", as if the largest general strike ever known had not taken place, as if one of the strongest governments in the Western world had not hovered for a week on the verge of self-dissolution.

One source of this collective amnesia was the French Communist Party. Since it had done its utmost throughout May to prevent the movement becoming political, let alone revolutionary, and was only momentarily forced to modify its position in the final week for fear that if it did not hold out its hands someone else might catch power, it had to do its utmost to argue afterwards that revolution had always been an impossibility. The Communist Party claimed that the election results of late June confirmed this: the parties of the right, after all, gained votes and seats at the expense of the left. There had never been the support, it said, for any attempt at revolution. That would have been a complete adventure.

The argument was—and is—doubly wrong.

First, June was not May. In May the great mass of the working class and a considerable section of the middle class saw the regime as responsible for the fact that the students had been driven to raise barricades and 10 million workers to strike. Those hostile to what was happening felt powerless, unable to prevent this great social convulsion. They were therefore ready to try to come to the best possible terms with those who did have some control over it—an attitude which showed something of the resignation of workers in "normal times" who accept jobs that they hate and domestic lives which give them no joy.

As June progressed, these attitudes changed decisively. The regime was restoring the essentials of the old order. The contestation in the public sector and

large sections of industry was at an end. The students were once again an isolated and powerless minority. The choice now was not between a floundering government and an apparently unstoppable mass movement, but between government politicians who showed they could control events and opposition politicians who merely promised that they could.

The shift in mood affected even some who had been enthusiastic participants in the movement. In May, as 10 million people moved together, all sorts of people with quite conservative ideas could see the solution to their individual problems in mass, collective effort. By late June they were back in a world in which only individual preferment could bring personal improvement. The last flickering struggles of students and workers now seemed like a source of chaos, of danger, not of the key to reordering society.

Yet there was no objective need for the movement to fall away as it did in the first week of June. It did so because the most powerful political and trade union organisations within the French working class threw their weight into procuring a return to work in the key public services. By doing so, they brought about precisely the change in attitudes which enabled the Gaullists to win the elections and gave credibility to the claim that no revolutionary change was possible.

Secondly, to say that May had revolutionary potential is not to say that the choice was, as General de Gaulle posed it on 29 May, between elections on his terms and civil war. There was a third option—the extension and deepening of the movement in such a way as to make the government continue to hold back from using the armed forces of the state.

This would have meant encouraging forms of strike organisation that involved all workers, the most “backward” as well as the most advanced, in shaping their own destinies—strike committees, regular mass meetings in the occupied plants, picketing and occupation rotas involving the widest numbers of people, delegations to other plants and to other sections of society involved in the struggle. Everyone would then have had an opportunity to take part directly in the struggle and to discuss its political lessons. It would also have meant generalising the demands of the struggle, so that no section of workers would return to work before a settlement of the vital questions worrying other sections—security of employment, guarantees of jobs for young workers, full payment for days on strike, full trade union rights in anti-union firms such as Peugeot and Citroën, democratic control over the output of radio and TV by the elected representatives of the journalists and technicians.

A movement built on this basis would have made it impossible for the government to reassert its power. If the government conceded to the movement’s

demands, it would be a lame duck, clearly a hostage to the mass workers' movement. If it did not concede, it would be incapable of overcoming the paralysis of the country in time to stop its own supporters booting it out and looking for a "responsible" alternative, which, in turn, could well become a hostage to the mass movement. In either case the government would be in no shape to win elections in late June. The result of the elections would have been pre-empted by the movement in the factories and the streets—as was to happen in Britain five and half years later when a smaller movement, the 1974 miners' strike, continued right up to an election, resulting in a vote against the existing government.

There is, of course, no guarantee that if the Communist Party and CGT had agitated for these things they would have been able to win all of them. But what can be said with certainty is that by refusing to campaign for them, they ensured the end of the May movement and the Gaullist electoral victory. They also ensured that French trade unions continued to organise a smaller proportion of the working class than in any of the other industrially advanced European countries, despite involvement in a strike bigger than any of the others had ever known.

The alternative path would not have led to an immediate socialist revolution. But it would have led to a political situation of extreme instability, within which a victorious working class could become increasingly conscious of its own interests and its own ability to run society. No doubt it was because such an open-ended situation was in view that the Communist and CGT leaders rushed to accept the safer electoral way out of the crisis, even if this played into de Gaulle's hands.

The Prague Spring

MODERN MASS communications were always an agency for repression in the depressive fantasies of Herbert Marcuse. Yet in 1968 it was ruling classes that came to hate them. A major worry for the rulers of France in May was how to stop the “transistors” which kept the students on the barricades informed of what was happening across Paris. Lyndon Baines Johnson became positively paranoid as television news programmes took the horrors of the Vietnam War into 100 million homes. And in August it was Russia’s rulers who had reason to complain, as military occupation of Czechoslovakia did not give them immediate control of its telecommunications system, and pictures of their tanks rolling into Prague were transmitted across the world.

Rarely before had what happened in the East and what happened in the West been so rapidly intertwined in the minds of their participants.

For this reason no account of what happened in Western Europe and North America can be complete without at least a cursory glance at events in Eastern Europe—although for a full account readers will have to look elsewhere.²²⁹

History seemed to have got stuck in a rut in Eastern Europe in the mid-1960s. In the previous decade events had exploded like charges on a fire cracker—Stalin’s death in 1953; the East German uprising two months later; the disgrace and killing of his secret police chief Beria that summer; the slow rehabilitation of Communist leaders imprisoned as “fascist spies” only three or four years earlier; Khrushchev’s secret speech denouncing Stalin in February 1956; the Polish workers’ uprising in Poznan in June; the takeover of the party leadership in Warsaw in October by one of the alleged “fascist spies”, Gomulka, amid strikes and street demonstrations; the revolution in Hungary a few days later; the further and more public denunciation of Stalin in 1961; the split with China in the same year.

But since then, especially since Khrushchev’s removal from power in Russia in 1964 by bureaucrats who were fed up with his experiments at reforms that

never seemed to work, things had settled down. Russia was entering the long, conservative Brezhnev era, and the conservatism rubbed off on others, so that Gomulka, for instance, who had come to power on a wave of enthusiasm for reforms, was the greyest of grey bureaucrats by 1968.

But conservatism at the top could not always stop outbreaks of rebellion below. Nor could it cope when economic stagnation began to undermine the basis of the regime.

Economics was the weak point of what was probably the most conservative of all the East European regimes, that of Novotny, president and party leader in Czechoslovakia. The country had boomed through the 1950s, taking advantage of its relatively advanced industry to sell engineering equipment to the rest of the Eastern bloc, and had hardly been affected by the ferment in its neighbours Poland and Hungary. But in the 1960s things began to change. Czechoslovakia suffered a brief recession in 1963.

Efforts to deal with the economic malaise led to increasing divisions within the previously united leadership until, finally, at the very beginning of 1968 a coalition of forces on the party's central committee stripped Novotny of the party secretaryship—although not yet of the presidency.

Social change would be relatively peaceful if rulers simply departed when they realised the odds had finally turned against them. They rarely do, for they identify their own privileges with the highest social values. Novotny was no exception. He attempted to oust his ouster by asking friendly generals to stage a coup and by sending his henchmen around the factories in the hope of enlisting worker support. His moves left the new leadership little choice. They were moderate, lifelong party stalwarts who had never seen the mass of the population as more than an audience for applauding their own speeches. But they valued their heads and that meant taking counter-action. If Novotny was trying to mobilise forces outside the top ranks of the bureaucracy, they had to do the same. They sent those of their members with some memory of what it was like to agitate among the mass of the population to rouse the intellectuals and the students against Novotny's supporters.

It did not take much to mobilise either. They had been chafing under Novotny's conservatism in the previous year, with bitter scenes at the writers' congress and the first street protest by students for 20 years. Now journalists began exposing scandals from years before, television interviews turned into inquisitions of ministers and party secretaries, authors published accounts of what it was really like to live in "socialist" Czechoslovakia, people queued as never before to buy newspapers, students held huge assemblies into the night discussing every social and political question, workers ignored Novotny's

entreaties and slowly, but surely, identified with what was called the “reform process”, beginning to force out officials from the state-run unions and to frame demands of their own.

Novotny admitted defeat in March. By then the new leadership was already trying to wind down the agitation it had started two months earlier. The party secretary, Alexander Dubcek, repeatedly warned against “anarchy”. “It is anarchy,” he complained, “to understand democracy as a situation in which everyone interferes with everything and does what he wants.”²³⁰ The intellectuals and students had done their part; now it was time to return to order.

But the genie, once out of the bottle, was not keen to return. In the months that followed the ferment spread to encompass ever wider sections of society until it seemed to the men in the Kremlin to challenge the very bases of bureaucratic rule.

Russia’s rulers had added reason to be worried. In March the Czechoslovak agitation had a powerful ripple effect on neighbouring Poland.

A small group of revolutionaries had been causing “trouble” at Warsaw University for some years. Two of the generation of 1956, Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, had written a revolutionary Marxist critique of Polish society in 1965 and were imprisoned for three years as a result. Some of those who protested at their arrest were themselves arrested, others expelled from university. The repression was sufficient to crush dissent at first. Then, early in 1968, the news came through about the sudden opening up in Czechoslovakia. This time when the university authorities expelled two protesters, 4,000 students demonstrated.

There were bitter confrontations in every university town in Poland in the next week, as steel-helmeted police moved in with truncheons and teargas against repeated student protests. It was clear that it was not just students who were fighting back: the regime complained of “hooligans” who had joined in the disturbances, and most of the 1,200 arrests were in fact of young workers.

Gomulka’s government managed to survive—for the time being. The agitation did not spread from the streets to the factories, and the regime backed up its repression with a campaign aimed at directing anti-Semitic hatred against the protesters (giving the leaders Jewish names, for instance). But the protests had given the regime and its Russian backers a fright. (How close Poland was to real upheaval was shown only 18 months later when an increase in food prices led to bloody conflicts between workers and the police, a wave of strikes and occupations and the hasty resignation of Gomulka.) The events also gave a lesson to the young protesters in the West: socialists were thrown in jail and subject to racist abuse on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Back in Czechoslovakia the Dubcek leadership was caught between growing pressure from below for change and growing pressure from the Kremlin to restore “normality”. It could satisfy neither. On the night of 20 August troops from Russia and her four reliable Warsaw Pact allies (Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria) invaded Czechoslovakia. Within hours thousands of Russian tanks and hundreds of thousands of troops had taken over all the main airports, frontier posts, cities and towns. Dubcek, Prime Minister Cernick and other ministers were taken to Moscow as prisoners.

There was little armed resistance to the Russian troops. Students and young workers did organise demonstrations and block streets; they harangued Russian soldiers, asking why they had come to Prague; they even managed to set fire to a few tanks, and 50 or 100 protesters died. But nothing happened comparable to Budapest 1956, with its 20,000 deaths. Instead the forces of occupation were confronted by mass, peaceful non-cooperation, coordinated by sections of the Czechoslovak state machine.

The Russians had not prepared politically for the invasion, establishing in advance a reliable network of Czech collaborators. Dubcek’s supporters were able to hold meetings of the parliament and a special Communist Party Congress to denounce the invasion; radio and television stations broadcast the condemnations and news of resistance; printing presses churned out denunciations.

The resistance involved heroic efforts by hundreds of thousands of people. But its direction remained in the hands of bureaucrats who had taken part in the running of Czechoslovakia for the previous two decades. They saw it as a bargaining counter to enable them to reach a deal with the Kremlin, not as the beginning of revolutionary opposition. The bargain was reached six days after the invasion: Dubcek returned to Prague a free man, still party leader, and announced he had agreed with the Russians to “normalise” conditions in the country.

“Normalisation” was to mean a gradual reimposition of press censorship, the purging of the broadcasters who had kept television stations on the air during the invasion, the sacking of the party leaders who had done most against the Novotny old guard, the re-establishing of Russian-controlled chains of command in the armed forces and the police. Dubcek oversaw this whole process—until those backed by Russia felt secure enough to oust him and bring the period of “democratisation” finally to an end the following April.

Things did not always go smoothly for the Russians. There was growing resentment among the mass of the people at the way the leaders were backtracking on their promises of reform. By November, as one student leader

tells:

the whole country had been feeling sick. It was the third month since the invasion. The old popular leaders were still the same, but the confidence people had in them, the blind unquestioning confidence in them as individuals, started to wither away. The Moscow agreement on the ‘temporary’ stationing of foreign troops created the first doubts. Then the freedom of the press was further restricted. The most popular weeklies, *Reporter* and *Politika*, were stopped in November. Travelling abroad was to be made more difficult... The leaders were making one compromise after another, and it was not quite clear what they were forced to do and what was their own volition.²³¹

The “radical faction”²³² among the Prague students—individuals who had been agitating against the regime long before the January changes and who felt varying degrees of sympathy with the Western “new left”—began considering how to respond to the situation. There was talk of a student demonstration or occupation. Student leaders were summoned to see Dubcek, Cernick and the president, Svoboda, who warned them of the folly of taking action. Then on 15 November students at the University of Olomouc occupied, followed the next day by the Agricultural College in Prague. Things were on the move everywhere, with the smaller towns waiting for an initiative from Prague to launch a general occupation movement.²³³ For three days colleges right across the country were occupied.

The student action met an unexpectedly favourable response from large numbers of workers. Factory meetings sent resolutions of support. Some organised token five-minute or 30-minute stoppages; others sounded their sirens in solidarity. “Students went to factories and factory workers came to occupied colleges. Discussions never ended.”²³⁴ Railway workers threatened that “not a single train will move out of Prague station” if the government acted against the students.

The occupations lasted only three days. The students had pushed the country to the edge of a major political crisis. To proceed further would mean a head-on clash with the power of the state and, behind that, the occupying Russian troops—moving from pressure for reform towards revolution. The mass of students were not ready for such a conflict, and the minority of radicals “were not clear themselves as to what direction they wanted to go in. Some argued for prolonging the strike an extra day and many times the French experience was invoked.”²³⁵ But in the end the action was called off.

In the weeks that followed there was deepening contact between students and workers. The newly reformed metal workers’ union voted to establish a formal alliance with the students. One student leader told how, “We speak daily in factories to gatherings of up to a thousand workers”.²³⁶

In many cases students helped to arrange meetings of workers’ deputies from various factories...

On the grassroots level there was emerging an informal spontaneous network of conscious workers, a network which could circumvent the trade union bureaucracy and exerted pressure on the latter.²³⁷

Opposition to “normalisation” exploded on the streets three times in the following months—in January 1969 when 800,000 people demonstrated in Prague in honour of a Czech student, Jan Palach, who burnt himself to death in protest at the abandonment of reforms; in March when there were huge riots in major cities after Czechoslovakia beat Russia at ice hockey; and in August on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion.

The protests did not stop the re-establishment of monolithic, bureaucratic control. Only revolutionary action could have done that. But they did bring home to many people throughout the world the message that the socialism of the “socialist world” was as phoney as freedom in the “free world”. August 1968 was to go down in history as the month in which the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union showed they would not tolerate experiments at “communism with a human face” and the leaders of the Democratic Party of the US showed they would not tolerate experiments with democracy.

It was a lesson even the Western Communist Parties could not ignore completely. Leaders who had applauded when the tanks went into Budapest in 1956 issued statements of protest at the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Their motives were often dubious. They wanted to escape from the sinking ship of the “world Communist movement” and enjoy a pleasant future on the terrain of respectable parliamentary politics. But their actions showed that the old Stalinist certainties were losing their hold. This was important: it helped lead the new young activists made politically conscious throughout the world by the events of 1968 to look elsewhere for revolutionary inspiration.

Blowing in the wind

THE US had exercised hegemony over two thirds of the globe for a quarter of a century. Czechoslovakia had been a key component in maintaining the counter-hegemony of Russia, both within the Eastern bloc and over left wing opposition movements elsewhere. France was traditionally the cultural centre of Europe. The simultaneous eruption of political and social crises in these three countries was bound to nourish opposition in other countries.

Yugoslavia

According to “moderate” socialists in both East and Western Europe, Yugoslavia should not have been affected by rebellion in 1968. Its rulers had already implemented what they called “market socialism”, which in theory gave workers control over the factories while linking enterprises through market mechanisms—the very model favoured by the more radical of Dubcek’s reform Communists in Czechoslovakia and by the theorists of the CFTD in France.

Yet students in the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade, occupied their colleges at the beginning of June 1968 and began a political crisis which only a hasty personal intervention by the regime’s leader, Tito, was able to end.

The immediate cause was a police attack on students who had protested at not being allowed into a theatre:

After only a few minutes of hesitation the crowds of over a thousand students attacked the theatre, breaking windows, ripping off the doors and fighting with those already inside. Police reinforcements arrived with a firetruck, but before they could use its hoses the students captured and burned it. At this the police attacked. The students responded with barricades made of overturned cars and stones. After several violent clashes the students retreated to the dormitory village to discuss further action.²³⁸

The students occupied the university the next day, after a further battle as police prevented a demonstration in the city centre and injured about 60 people.

But the demands of the occupation went beyond the immediate issues of inadequate student facilities and police violence. They raised central questions of unemployment, inequality and the privileges enjoyed by the country's bureaucratic rulers.²³⁹ The students proposed an alternative of their own—"real socialism" based on "democracy and self-management".

Such a challenge could easily appeal to wide sections of the country's workers—if they got to hear of it. For "market socialism" created a situation in which enterprises, although allegedly under the control of elected workers' councils, had no choice but to pay interest to the state-owned banks and to compete for markets by keeping wages and the workforce to a minimum. In reality the factories were run by managers who were bound to each other and to the institutions of the state by membership of the ruling League of Communists. While workers suffered from continually rising prices and unemployment of more than 10 percent—with another 20 percent of the population forced to emigrate in search of jobs—those with positions in enterprise managements and the state could enjoy incomes up to 40 times those of their employees.

Some lecturers at the university's Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology had already made analyses which showed how the market mechanism turned "workers' control" into a facade, behind which groups of bureaucrats exercised class rule. The student leaders took up this analysis, attacked the "red bourgeoisie", demanded "more schools, fewer cars" and called for "brotherhood and equality for all the people of Yugoslavia".²⁴⁰

The student occupation was immediately subject to an attack designed to isolate it from the country's workers. Newspapers denounced the students, steel-helmeted riot police took control of the city centre, surrounded the occupied university buildings and beat up many of those inside. Police were used to keep student delegations away from the factories, while inside party officials pushed through resolutions denouncing the students. These were then taken to the occupied buildings by professors—often "high-ranking party officials, government ministers, economic, technical or scientific consultants"²⁴¹ who used them as evidence that the students were "isolated" and should call their occupation off.

Yet there were many signs of sympathy with the students. As one worker said:

Everyone sympathises with the students' demonstrations. We have talked about striking, but most of us could not last one week without pay. I heard that three factories went on strike during the demonstrations.

Another worker told how he had visited the occupation:

We told the students that they had proved themselves to be part of the working class and that all us workers know it. We told them that it isn't possible to reform this bunch of leaders that we have got.²⁴²

A worker who was also a part-time student wrote of a meeting at his factory where management attempted to push through a resolution attacking the students:

I proposed the workers first familiarise themselves with the demands and problems presented by the students... The leaders of the meeting did not allow me to continue speaking. But with the loud support of the workers I climbed on a chair and read an 'appeal' to all workers written by the students... I would have to be a poet to describe the excited reaction of the workers as they learned of the students' demands.²⁴³

The regime's methods isolated the students from most of the workers. But it feared that using force to smash the students might ignite support. So on 10 June Tito addressed the nation—and surprised everyone by claiming he supported the students' action programme:

The immediate fruit of Tito's support was to deactivate the mass movement. Now, they were told, they had done their bit and should concentrate on problems within the university. In most faculties these instructions were followed.²⁴⁴

The speech was a clever ruse. Within weeks the centre of agitation, the Philosophy and Sociology Faculty, was closed and disciplinary action taken against its leaders.

The Belgrade student movement, like many other student movements of 1968, grew out of the ability of a small group of radicals to draw round them a much wider following on particular issues. In this case, the radicals had started to come together in December 1966. A demonstration against the Vietnam war led to their expulsion from the League of Communists. Soon they were supporting professors from the Philosophy Faculty who were condemning both bureaucratic rule and "market socialism". These attitudes led the students to express support for the German extra-parliamentary opposition, the NLF in Vietnam and the Warsaw student movement of March 1968.

The police attack brought many more students briefly to accept the leadership of the radicals. Had Tito proceeded as de Gaulle did in France and simply sent the police in, no doubt there would have been mass radicalisation. By pretending to support the students' demands, he prevented this. He played on the illusion among many students that there was a difference between the old leaders of the regime, who had taken power after heading the resistance to the Germans in the Second World War, and a more corrupt later generation. He thus isolated the small group who saw him as the top representative of the "red

bourgeoisie”.

A year later the regime was confident enough to bring criminal charges against some of the leaders of the student left, one of whom, Vlado Mijalovic, was sentenced to 20 months in prison.²⁴⁵

Mexico

Mexico City was the centre of attention of the world’s media when students demonstrated there on 2 October 1968. This was almost an accident. The Olympic Games were due to open in ten days time.

For the rulers of Mexico, hosting the games was a symbol of their power and stability. Mexico had been transformed in the previous decades from an overwhelmingly rural country to an urban one. Even if millions of the urban population lived in dire poverty on the margins of society, Mexico’s economy was growing at 7 percent a year. Its single party, the Institutionalised Revolutionary Party, showed a rare ability to integrate different social forces into the state, so isolating any upsurges of discontent from workers or the rural poor, and avoiding the periodic spells of military dictatorship which characterised much of the rest of Latin America.

One product of the high rate of economic growth had been a rapidly expanding student population: there were to be 49 percent more students in 1970 than there had been in 1964.²⁴⁶ In summer 1968 there had been clashes between students and the forces of the state. The demands of the students were “democratic”—for the release of political prisoners, the withdrawal of police from universities, the disbanding of the riot police, the withdrawal of repressive laws.²⁴⁷

After a demonstration on 22 July, the struggle became extremely bitter. On 30 July troops with jeeps, tanks and bazookas were used against demonstrators.²⁴⁸ By mid-August solidarity with the students was general throughout the country.²⁴⁹

Brigades of propaganda about the objectives of the movement multiplied from Mexico City to the provinces. The first contacts took place with workers and the poorer districts of the city. These were symbolised in the control by students and the population of a town close to the capital, Topilejo.²⁵⁰

By now demonstrations were half a million-strong, and the students were showing enormous militancy. The correspondent of the London *Times* claimed in late September that students were sniping at the police and had set fire to 20 buses.²⁵¹

Mexico’s rulers were determined that nothing should disrupt the use of the

Olympic Games to display their power and “stability”. They were also determined to destroy the student movement before it made any lasting contact with the workers. So they made careful preparations for the student demonstration of 2 October.

The demonstration was to be in the Square of the Three Cultures (Tlatelolco), which has only one exit. Several hours before it began 5,000 troops took up position around the square. The demonstration started at 5.30pm. At 6.10pm helicopters gave the signal and the troops opened fire. Their first target was the building where the speakers were, but soon soldiers, backed up by light tanks, were firing in all directions. There were more than a 100 deaths (the *Guardian* claimed 325) and many hundreds more arrests.

The repression, like that in Warsaw six months before, was effective. For the students were isolated: they had not succeeded in establishing more than the first beginnings of links with workers. Even while the television cameras were beaming its image across the world, the movement in Mexico was broken.

Northern Ireland

One of the least noticed speakers at the end of the huge anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London in October 1968 was Eamonn McCann, from Derry in Northern Ireland. Yet the events there three weeks earlier were to send shock waves through British and Irish society for the next 20 years.

In the spring of 1968 Northern Ireland seemed one of the least likely places for socialist politics to take a hold. The majority of the population and of the working class were wedded to the ideas and institutions of Protestant supremacy. These were built into the state itself: when the rest of Ireland achieved independence in 1921, Northern Ireland had been partitioned off in such a way that a majority of Protestants would always dominate a large Catholic minority. The Protestants were granted marginally better living standards than the Catholics in return for voting for Tory Unionist politicians, proclaiming their loyalty to the British crown and tolerating lower wages and worse housing conditions than those on the British mainland.

The prospect for socialist agitation among the Catholic third of the population was little better. They voted for politicians who identified with the Green Tory government of southern Ireland and who had long ago abandoned any intention of organising against the Northern Ireland state. The only out-and-out opposition had come traditionally from groups of republicans who hoped to resume the military struggle of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) for a united Ireland: but their last attempt, in the late 1950s, had been easily defeated. By

now they had sold off most of their guns.²⁵²

A document produced by a group of socialists in May 1968 summed up the pessimistic prospects:

The situation which confronts us is not promising. The great mass of the people continue for historical reasons to see religion, not class, as the basic divide in our society. This sectarian consciousness is reinforced, week in, week out, by local Tory newspapers. The machinations of Catholic and Protestant Tories...are carefully calculated to maintain the status quo. The end result is a working class which is unresponsive to socialist ideas.²⁵³

But groups of socialists were sufficiently inspired by the general mood of 1968 to attempt to change things. In Derry a dozen or so socialists from the city's Labour Party and Republican Club began agitating over the shortage of housing—disrupting meetings of the city council, blocking traffic and squatting in empty properties. Since the council had a gerrymandered Unionist majority in an overwhelmingly Catholic city, the agitation gained a degree of popular support.

Meanwhile other, more “moderate”, political forces, inspired by the example of Martin Luther King, were setting out to build a movement for peaceful change: the Civil Rights Association. They judged that the Unionist prime minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, was a “liberal”—he had already taken the unprecedented step of meeting his southern equivalent to discuss “cross-border cooperation”. They reckoned that if put under pressure from below, he would concede “reforms” to enable Catholic politicians and the Catholic middle class to play a role in the state. So in August the association organised a 4,000-strong march from Coalisland to Dungannon to protest at discriminatory housing allocations. The march organisers were careful to evade a clash with the police when they barred it from the town centre.

The Derry activists were inspired to take up the Dungannon example in their own city, but with one important difference—they insisted they were going to march through the Diamond, the walled city centre, something no anti-Unionist demonstration had been allowed to do for half a century.

Predictably, the authorities banned the demonstration. Equally predictably, the leaders of the Civil Rights Association tried to call it off. But the activists had made sure it was too late for that. The march was assembling anyway and the “moderate” leaders—complete with three Labour MPs from Britain—were forced to join it.

Only 400 people took part in the march, on 5 October. But its small size did not stop the Royal Ulster Constabulary from regarding it as a piece of “Papist” impertinence that had to be punished. They blocked the route. When the marchers reached their cordon, the police used their batons (the first victim was

MP Gerry—later Lord—Fitt). The marchers then discovered their retreat blocked by another cordon. Several march leaders made speeches, whose message was that the police treatment showed the desperate need for reform, but there was no alternative but to submit to it. The speaker for the Derry socialist activists, Eamonn McCann, urged them not to submit.

But the speeches made little difference. The two police cordons were already moving on the crowd, beating down men, women and children.²⁵⁴

Men were beaten in the testicles. Water cannon drove demonstrators back into the police lines... An 18-year-old reporter, vainly displaying his press credentials, was repeatedly beaten to the ground and left lying in a bloody mess... One middle-aged man was seized by two policemen and flung over a wall... His leg was broken.²⁵⁵

The presence of the British Labour MPs ensured that the attack on the demonstration received international television coverage. Suddenly journalists were descending on the Catholic Bogside area of Derry to find out about discrimination and sectarianism, facts that had been ignored for half a century. People who had previously been passive spectators now saw the possibility of successful resistance to Unionism. When police attempted to enter the Bogside in the nights that followed they met stones and a few petrol bombs.

The events in Derry prompted the Northern Ireland government to promise reform. After further, mass, peaceful demonstrations in Derry and Armagh in November, the hardline Northern Ireland home secretary, William Craig, was sacked. The Catholic middle class believed it had achieved its goal of recognition by the state, and the mass of the Catholic working class thought the battle was over. There were few protests when the Civil Rights Association called an end to demonstrations.

But the spirit of 1968 among the younger activists was not so easily stilled. In Belfast a small group of socialists succeeded in rousing thousands of students at Queen's University in the immediate aftermath of the events in Derry. On 9 October the students had marched through the city centre and staged a sit-down outside the City Hall. Their slogan then was "one man, one vote".

A loose group of a couple of hundred students was formed, calling itself "People's Democracy". The group had no clear ideology: a couple of leading figures had been members, along with Eamonn McCann in Derry, of a defunct Trotskyist group, but most of the activists were motivated by militant notions of civil rights (rather like the early SNCC or CORE in the US), combined with a faith in mass spontaneity which owed something to the French student upsurge. At this stage People's Democracy included activists from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds and laid enormous stress on the need to transcend the

sectarian divide.

The Belfast students decided to put the government's reforms to the test. About 80 set off on 1 January 1969 on an 80-mile march from Belfast to Derry. On its last day, shortly before it was due to reach Derry, the march was attacked by several hundred loyalist bigots, including members of the part-time police force, the "B Specials". A hundred police officers stood and watched. The marchers were beaten with nailed clubs, stones and bicycle chains; fewer than 30 of the 80 reached Derry uninjured. That night a mob of police rampaged through the Bogside, breaking windows, kicking in doors and shouting, "Come out and fight, you Fenian bastards".

The "truce" was well and truly over. The next day the people of the Bogside organised vigilante squads, put up barricades and declared the police barred from the area. "You are now entering Free Derry" was painted on a wall near the entrance to the Bogside, and a transmitter calling itself "Radio Free Derry" started broadcasting.

Prime minister O'Neill tried to strengthen his hand by calling elections. He only revealed his weakness. Unionist opponents of any reform held on to their seats, while candidates put up by People's Democracy pulled Catholic voters away from the traditional nationalist establishment. A few weeks later one of the Belfast students, Bernadette Devlin, won the Mid-Ulster by-election for the Westminster parliament.

In the months which followed there were several bouts of fighting in Derry as police tried to break their way into the Bogside. Finally, in August 1969, there was an all-out attack on the area. The population fought back, building barricades, throwing hundreds of petrol bombs, repeatedly driving the police back.

The anti-Unionist defiance in Derry infuriated the forces of Protestant sectarianism right across the province. Sectarian mobs, headed by members of the B Specials, attacked the Catholic areas of Belfast, burning down hundreds of Catholic houses and blazing away with machine guns. People fought back desperately, throwing up barricades and begging the miniscule remnants of the IRA to defend them.

The crisis could not be confined to Northern Ireland. There was a wave of support in the South for the beleaguered minority in the North, and the Irish government opened refugee centres for those driven from their homes. It even made the token gesture of moving its army to the border areas. The leaders of the Northern resistance—including some of the handful of revolutionary socialists—were now nationally known figures.

The British government could not sit back and see instability threaten

established structures in both parts of Ireland. It sent in British troops, with instructions to stabilise the situation by stopping the sectarian attacks on the Catholic areas—but also to prop up the Northern state.

Italy

There was widespread belief on the left in the summer of 1968 that a revival of the revolutionary struggle in France was only a few months away. People talked of a “hot autumn” when the factories reopened in September.²⁵⁶ But the next link-up between the ferment in the colleges and the power in the factories was not in France at all, but across the Alps in northern Italy.

The Italian student movement began before that in France and lasted longer. The first struggles had been in 1966-67 in the universities of Pisa, Trento and Venice. But the movement took off in autumn 1967. There was a series of sit-ins, demonstrations and discussion in Trento. A fortnight later the Catholic University of Milan was occupied over a rise in fees; the rector called in the police and 32 students were expelled. On 27 November the Faculty of Letters at Turin University was occupied by students demanding changes in course content, teaching methods and exams. The movement spread to Genoa, then Pavia where several students were injured by the police.

“By January and February the agitation covers practically the whole Italian university system.”²⁵⁷ It grew out from the universities to the middle schools, with increasing clashes with the police. “At first the students reacted with non-violence to police who threw them out of the universities,” but “the repressive offensive of the state led them to respond on the same terrain.”²⁵⁸

The focal point of the movement was in Rome at the end of February. After police beat up students, a demonstration of protest to parliament was savagely attacked. The next day there was bitter fighting between thousands of students and the police in the Valle Giulia; photos of it received massive press coverage.²⁵⁹ Sympathy actions then brought clashes with the police in all the country’s other universities.

The movement had grown up around material demands. Few of the students came from working class backgrounds,²⁶⁰ but they faced appalling conditions. The drive of Italian capitalism to catch up with its more advanced northern neighbours had led to massive expansion of the student population without sufficient expansion of facilities. Whereas in 1923 there had been 2,000 lecturers for 40,000 students, in 1967 there were only 3,000 for 450,000 students. Many held other posts in industry or government and taught only 50 hours a year. This left much of the teaching to poorly paid teaching assistants, who were excluded

from university power structures. The poor quality of the teaching was matched by shortages of books and libraries. Not surprisingly, only 25 or 30 percent of students succeeded in completing their studies.²⁶¹

Meanwhile the professors regarded the universities as personal baronies designed to provide them with privileges. They used their links with the Christian Democrat power structure to prevent reform and call in the police to break up student protests.

As elsewhere, the bitterness of the confrontations with the police led to rapid radicalisation. The first phase of the movement was characterised by slogans such as “student power”²⁶² and based on “anti-authoritarian” theories mixed up with a hotchpotch of ideas from Marcuse, Regis Debray’s rendering of Guevara, Stokely Carmichael’s version of black power, and the Chinese cultural revolution.²⁶³

Already, however, the students’ demands forced them to clash with the country’s two reformist parties. The Socialist Party was allied in government with the Christian Democrats. The Communist Party’s search for respectability led it to describe the student movement as “anti-Communist provocateurs”.²⁶⁴

In this first phase of the student movement:

The revolutionary left was not a propelling force in this explosion. It did not foresee it, did not understand it, and did not know how to insert itself.²⁶⁵

Things changed quickly in the late spring of 1968, when the May events in France led many students to break with “student power” ideas and to look to the working class.

Already at the beginning of 1968 there had been attempts to influence workers’ struggle from the outside. Commissions were set up at many universities to do “worker-work”—to take part in pickets and put across to workers the “anti-authoritarian” ideas of the student movement. In general, this did not produce any positive results.²⁶⁶ The student movement seemed to be entering its death agonies.

But the process was interrupted by developments outside the colleges.

Italy’s great factories were virtually un-unionised at the beginning of 1968. Pirelli was typical: “From the years of the 1950s until the end of 1967, real negotiations at Pirelli Bococca were virtually non-existent.”²⁶⁷ A call for strike action in 1966 had “achieved hardly any results”.²⁶⁸

But in 1968 the mood in the plant began to change. In January 60 percent of workers supported a strike for a list of demands drawn up by the three union federations, a “quite exceptional” level of support.²⁶⁹ The union leaders ended the strike at the beginning of February. But many of the workers were angry

about this, and from March to October there was a series of spontaneous, sectional strikes.²⁷⁰ By the beginning of August more than 1,000 workers were striking in defiance of the union leaders, with meetings, discussions and assemblies. In September “the strikes were almost daily and came to involve 3,000 workers on one day; the factory was almost at a standstill.”²⁷¹

Three things were notable about these strikes.

First they were over something about which the rival union federations had rarely shown any interest—the speed and conditions of work.

Second, they were among workers who traditionally were not expected to be interested in trade unionism, the young semi-skilled workers; often recruited by managers precisely because of their few traditions of militancy.

Third, leadership of the strikes came increasingly not from the rival union committees in the plant, but from a group of left wing militants calling themselves the Unitary Rank and File Committee (usually known by its initials, CUB) who put regular bulletins into the factory critical of the union leadership. The core of the CUB was made up of experienced revolutionaries.

The three were interconnected. The growth of mass production had created a new section of the working class. The old-style trade unionism of the federations, with their one-day or half-day stoppages to impress on the employers the desirability of national and enterprise-wide wage agreements, did not fit. What mattered to the mass of semi-skilled workers was the ability to resist management attempts to speed up production, reduce piece rates and impose arbitrary grading structures. Such resistance could only come from continual daily struggle based on the rank and file in each section. This was something Italian capitalism was bound to do its utmost to prevent—and which ran counter to the schemes of the reformist parties to collaborate in the rationalisation and modernisation of Italian capitalism.

The change in the mood of workers was not confined to Pirelli. In December police shot two agricultural labourers who were on strike for higher wages in Avola, Sicily. There were demonstrations and protest strikes throughout Italy, with “a very effective general strike” bringing “chaos” to Rome.²⁷² For the first time there was the chance for revolutionary students to link up with workers. The most significant connection came on the first anniversary of the French May. Like Pirelli, FIAT Mirafiori in Turin, Italy’s largest factory, had been without any real shop-floor union organisation for a decade and a half. On 1 May 1969 a strike broke out by workers in the plant’s auxiliary shops, most of whom were from the Turin area and union members. The strike was for higher wages and for an equalisation of wages between different grades. It was an “internal strike”, work stopped but the workers did not leave the plant, and it was

organised through directly elected delegates. On 10 May the strike spread to the press shop and the assembly lines, where the mass of semi-skilled workers were. For most of May and June the plant was hit by strike after strike. Groups of workers would coordinate their action, so that each section would take it in turn to stop work and block the assembly line.

Early on, activists from the student left gave the strike their support.

For some months a small group of medical students were present at the gates of Mirafiori. In mid-May, after the start of the strike, some militants from La Clase [one of the small groups]...joined them and determined the character of the intervention. The major part of the cadres of the Turin student movement from the previous year went to the gates at the end of May²⁷³

The Turin students were to achieve an influence that their French comrades had only been able to dream about a year before.

The encounter between the workers and the 'externals' was in fact easy: at the gate the workers discussed, took notice, made proposals. The 'externals' were immediately identified as 'students', and this identification had a positive connotation.²⁷⁴

Meetings were held in bars with the most militant workers:

They discussed and prepared bulletins, which came out daily with brief notes on the course of the struggle and demands put forward autonomously by groups of workers. The first bulletins, signed 'workers and students', were distributed when the press shop struggle was already under way; from 27 May they were headed "Lotta continua" ("The fight goes on"), which became the symbol of the struggle and acquired a notable popularity among the workers.²⁷⁵

The unions attempted to end the strikes on 14 June, but workers from the paint shop struck and stopped the line for eight hours.

The struggle, which lasted the entire week of 16-20 June, was prepared at meetings between workers and students which were held twice a day in a hall of the medicine faculty... But this did not only inform and coordinate the platform, but succeeded in taking the role of leading the struggle, via the real vanguards of the different sections who used the 'students'' meetings to decide what initiatives to take.²⁷⁶

The need to coordinate the struggle led, on 21 June, to the birth of worker-student assemblies at city level, meeting each Saturday. These were seen by both the revolutionary students and the new worker militants as "an embryonic political organisation of the vanguard".²⁷⁷ The general mood was expressed at a meeting of the worker-student assembly by one worker:

The workers have to understand that they have to organise themselves for the struggle. The unions no longer have a working class character; they are official organisations, a public office like any other. We have no need of delegates, we need only our own forces. The Italian worker has grown up and no longer needs unions.²⁷⁸

When the unions tried to take control of the struggle, the cry went up: "We

are all delegates”.

Militants were wary when the union called a regional one-day general strike on 3 July. The worker-student assembly decided to support it, but to turn it in a militant direction by organising a demonstration of its own from the FIAT plant.

The column, formed by several thousand workers from different Turin factories, was suddenly attacked by the police. Then it was dispersed and reformed itself. The workers organised resistance. They built barricades. The chases continued all day and late into the night, with the participation of youth from the workers' quarters around Mirafiori.²⁷⁹

For the revolutionaries, this “battle of Corso Traiano”, after 40 days of struggle which paralysed the biggest industrial complex in Italy, made the FIAT workers “the vanguard in terms of public order”.²⁸⁰

The influence of revolutionary socialists inside FIAT was not a fleeting episode. The mass struggle for a new contract in the metal industry that autumn saw an explosion of militancy right across Italian industry. The revolutionaries who had won such an audience at FIAT succeeded in gaining support among young workers at dozens of other factories. They led another week-long strike in FIAT in November, then a 15-day struggle which brought production virtually to a halt in July 1970:

Huge worker columns went from one part of the plant to the other breaking through the gates separating the assembly works from the body plant.

According to one account by revolutionaries, “external militants” joined in one demonstration which “involved 10,000 workers, each with a spanner in his hand, chanting, ‘Agnelli, Indochina is in your factory’.”²⁸¹

A ripple from the storm

“BRITAIN”, LAMENTED the far left paper *Black Dwarf* in the autumn of 1968, was “the only advanced capitalist country” not to have produced a mass student movement.²⁸²

This judgement was slightly overstressed. The LSE had seen one of the first of the international wave of sit-ins and before May 1968 the demonstrations in Britain against the Vietnam War were bigger than those in France. By late summer the media were obsessed by the possibilities of a student movement in the French or German style. The *Times* ran a front-page story which spoke of a “startling plot” by “a small band of militant extremists” to use an anti-Vietnam War demonstration on 27 October “to dislocate communications and law and order”, using “weapons and Molotov cocktails” (petrol bombs) and “to seize control of highly sensitive installations and buildings in London”.²⁸³

Despite this, the tone of politics in Britain was far from revolutionary in 1968. Two years earlier the Labour government of Harold Wilson had won 46 percent of the vote, increasing its parliamentary majority from five seats to 97. The left wing of the Labour Party still had enough faith in Wilson for its paper, *Tribune*, to declare “Socialism is right back on the agenda”.²⁸⁴

Disillusionment was quick in coming. Within weeks the government was backing the big shipping companies against a strike by seamen for the 40-hour week. Wilson used the intelligence service MI5 and the police Special Branch to spy on the strike leaders, sent the Navy to move strike-bound ships in the Port of London, declared a state of emergency, and went on television to denounce the strike as “against the state, against the community”. He told the Commons that behind the strike were a “tightly knit group of politically motivated men” who were “endangering the security of the industry and the economic welfare of the nation”.²⁸⁵ These “red scare” tactics stampeded the union leadership into calling for a return to work.

The attack on the seamen set the pattern. The Wilson government may have

promised its supporters a “new Britain” to be “forged in the white heat of the technological revolution”—but that meant helping British capitalism come to terms with increasing foreign competition. Britain had been the Western world’s second industrial power at the start of the long boom, when the value of the pound had been fixed at US\$2.80. Now West Germany had overtaken it; Japan and even France were catching up fast. Exports were not growing enough to prevent repeated deficits in the balance of payments, and with them panic selling of sterling on the money markets. The value of the pound could be maintained only by emergency measures to placate big business. This is what the attack on the seamen was meant to do.

It was not enough. Further attacks by the government on those who had voted for it had to follow. A fortnight after the strike Wilson announced sharp increases in indirect taxation, big cuts in public spending and the imposition of a six-month statutory wage freeze. This was to be followed by tight legal controls on wage rises.²⁸⁶

Workers who went on strike over any issue were denounced. When dockers in London and Liverpool struck against the first phase of the Devlin rationalisation scheme in October, Wilson spoke of communists plotting disruption. Help from trade union leaders again enabled the government to force the workers back defeated.²⁸⁷ This time, however, Wilson was driven to a measure he had resisted for three years: the devaluation of the pound.

He appointed a new chancellor of the exchequer, Roy Jenkins, who pushed through new deflationary measures, including the abolition of free milk in secondary schools, the introduction of drug prescription charges, a cut in the housing programme, and the postponement of a plan to raise the school leaving age. The explicit aim was to reduce living standards for the mass of the population—something which the Tory governments of 1951 to 1964 had never dared do.

These actions created widespread demoralisation and confusion among the activists who held the working class movement together. Through the years of Tory rule they had looked to a Labour government to change society—now the Labour government was behaving in a thoroughly Tory way.

Eventually prominent left wingers began to speak out against Wilson’s policies, with manifestos of protest from the Tribune group of MPs.²⁸⁸ But the Labour left could offer no coherent alternative to Wilson. Transport union General Secretary Frank Cousins had resigned from the cabinet after the defeat of the seamen’s strike (to be replaced by one Anthony Wedgwood Benn), but none of the other “left” ministers followed him.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party virtually fell to pieces in locality after locality.

The *Times* carried an article based on interviews with activists in local Labour Parties which showed they were on the verge of collapse. People had voted with their feet.

The traditional alternative to the Labour Party among working class activists had been the Communist Party. But its leadership had long abandoned revolution. Now it looked for change through achieving “a majority of left Labour and Communist MPs”. The logic of this was that criticism of the Labour left was watered down, and in the unions the stress was on alliances with anyone in their bureaucratic structures who was prepared to challenge the existing right wing leadership.

To this end there was a conscious running down of independent Communist organisation. The move away from open class politics was expressed in the change of name of the party’s paper from *The Daily Worker* to the allegedly more modish *Morning Star*.

The result was that the Communist Party provided no clear pole of attraction to those disillusioned with Labour. In particular industries it retained networks of militants who were often central to key strikes, and who would get together to stage modest protest demonstrations against wage controls. In unions such as engineering and the draughtsmen, its militants were central to wider left groupings which were able to win union positions. But the party as a whole lost members and much of its internal discipline.

Traditional reformist organisation within the working class had always acted in two ways. It was a barrier holding back any spontaneous upward movement of the class. But it also prevented the penetration of extreme right wing ideas into much of the class: while they had confidence in Labour as a socialist alternative, activists could deal more or less effectively with the arguments of bigots and racists. Hence it was that Labour in opposition in 1962 had little difficulty in opposing calls by racists for immigration controls.

The immediate effect of disillusionment with Wilson, therefore, was to destroy the confidence of the activists and allow right wing ideas to make headway. The Tories made spectacular electoral advances in 1968. Labour suffered major by election defeats in former strongholds such as Dudley, where an 11,000 majority disappeared. It held on to Oldham and Sheffield Brightside, but lost 12,000 votes at one and 9,000 at the other. In the local elections mass working class abstentionism led Labour to lose control of Glasgow, Sheffield and 14 boroughs in London. In Islington, previously an all-Labour council, the Tories took 50 of the 60 seats, while in Sheffield the Tories gained control for the first time in 40 years.

More ominous, though, was the way whole sections of workers succumbed

to the influence of racist ideas. Early in 1968 the former Tory minister Duncan Sandys began a scare campaign against the entry into Britain of Asians holding British passports who were being forced out of Kenya. The Labour Party leadership, which had opposed all immigration controls only six years earlier, rushed to introduce a new law to stop this alleged “influx” (which in reality amounted to fewer than 1,000 people a month), pushing the Bill through both Houses of Parliament in a record two days.

Sandys had shown there was easy political mileage to be made out of the issue. On 20 April one of the key Tory shadow ministers, Enoch Powell, deliberately set out to stir up racial hatred. In a speech in Birmingham he claimed immigration was “destroying Britain”: “I see the Tiber foaming in blood... It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre.”

This was too much for the mainstream Tory leadership, which was concerned not to upset important Commonwealth countries. Tory leader Edward Heath sacked Powell from the shadow cabinet.

Powell stood for a range of policies which were later to be called “monetarism”—massive cuts in government expenditure, a deliberate forcing up of unemployment, and action to remove “monopoly constraints on the labour market” from trade union hands. These were not policies to appeal beyond the hard core of existing Tory voters. But by playing the racist card Powell could have such an appeal. The day after Powell’s removal from the Tory shadow cabinet 50 construction workers in Bilston stopped work in his support. The next day hundreds of dockers marched to Westminster to demand his reinstatement; they were soon followed by 600 meat porters; and on 26 April some 4,400 London dockers struck.

The most significant thing, however, was not that workers recently defeated and demoralised—as the London dockers were—could be affected by a wave of racism. It was that the traditional left was incapable of responding.

The networks of militants around the Communist Party and the Labour left virtually went into hiding. Fearing they might lose popularity and risk their union positions, they ducked the argument with the racists. On the few occasions they did make a stand, they showed no understanding of how to carry the anti-racist argument: one Communist Party member in the Royal Docks, Danny Lyons, tried to hold a dock gate meeting jointly with Protestant and Catholic clergymen!

So the meagre forces of the revolutionary left had to try to fill the “vacuum on the left” (as the International Socialists called it) and build a current of opposition to the racists. The *Times* reported, for instance, that of the several

thousand dockers at Tilbury, only one tried to resist the tide:

At a Tilbury meeting, one docker, Mr T Barrett, handed out leaflets published by International Socialism which attacked Enoch Powell... He made it clear he would work today.²⁸⁹

When hundreds of students marched against Powell on May Day, they were nearly beaten up by groups of racist dockers. No wonder the easiest reaction for student revolutionaries was that of *Black Dwarf*:

In Britain very many trade unionists have more sympathy with the police force and racialism than with student demonstrators. The only work stoppages in recent times which were meant politically were the racist demonstrations of dockers and meat packers in support of Enoch Powell... Can it be that the most effective militant workers in Britain are to the right of the powerful Conservative Party?²⁹⁰

In fact most militant groups of workers in Britain, for instance in the big car and engineering plants, did not strike for Powell.

There were already groups of revolutionary socialists among students in 1965 and 1966. They had generally come to politics through their experiences in the Labour Party's youth section, the Young Socialists, and in the non-violent direct action wing of the anti-bomb movement of the early 1960s. But their number was invariably small (only a dozen people attended the founding meeting of the LSE Socialist Society, formed in opposition to Labour's policies in the summer of 1965) and they had virtually no influence over the mass of students. On the face of it they seemed much less important than the Radical Student Alliance—a grouping of Communist, Labour and Liberal students set up at the end of 1966 as an electoral alternative to the right wing, “non-political” leadership of the National Union of Students.

But they began to find they could lead larger numbers of students into action over four interconnected issues:

- ★ Opposition to the repeated attempts by the Labour government to arrive at a compromise with the racist white minority regime in Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe). This issue produced the first political demonstrations by students at the LSE in autumn 1965—and the first (by today's standards mild) experiences of police brutality.
- ★ Opposition to the war in Vietnam and the Labour government's support for the US. Of those on the anti-war street demonstrations, 75 percent were students.²⁹¹
- ★ Opposition to successive waves of racism, to which all the established political parties succumbed. The introduction of discriminatory fees for overseas students prompted the first national one-day student action in 1967. The appointment at the LSE of a director who had compromised with racism

in Rhodesia led to the agitation in 1966-67.

- ★ The demand for student rights—usually expressed rather confusingly as “representation”.

None of these issues, in itself, would lead students to accept the arguments of the small groupings of revolutionary socialists. But in the context of Britain in 1966-69 they were intertwined in such a way that this was the outcome. The reformists, left and right, were in office. It was they who were compromising with the Rhodesian regime, implementing racist immigration controls and discriminatory university fees, defending every outrage by the US in Vietnam, backing repression by the university authorities and brutality by the police. What is more, the university authorities were closely entangled with the power structure of British capitalism. It was not difficult to show that the same people who were backing the US in Vietnam and making large profits in Southern Africa were insisting they had the right to impose their ideas through the examination system and to supervise students' private lives (a woman student was sent down from Oxford after being caught in bed with a man).

Agitation over such issues led to prolonged discussions in some colleges, with student union meetings of hundreds of people often lasting seven or eight hours into the night.

But politicisation did not happen instantaneously. The first sit-in was at the LSE in March 1967. It was nearly a year before further such struggles—a token sit-in at Aston University and a full occupation at Leicester University, both over student representation. In the meantime the LSE struggle seemed an aberration—even to some of the leading socialist activists.

But the radicalisation did not cease in this interval. Students moved from direct confrontation to a longer re-evaluation of their ideas: at the LSE many who had accepted a form of militant liberalism in 1967 were a year later adopting the revolutionary arguments of the Socialist Society, which itself came increasingly to be identified with the politics of International Socialism. (In February 1967 there were perhaps six International Socialist members active in the LSE, by May 1968 about 30.)

The struggle against the Vietnam War spread this process to a minority of students in scores of other colleges.

Until summer 1967, the main national body taking up the Vietnam issue had been the Communist Party and Labour left-influenced British Committee for Peace in Vietnam. It evaded taking sides in the war by raising the single slogan of “peace”. Within this organisation was the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which worked to build solidarity with the Vietnamese liberation forces. Supporters of International Socialism argued successfully within the Vietnam

Solidarity Campaign to call a demonstration with the slogan “Victory to the NLF” in October 1967.²⁹²

The size of the turn out amazed the organisers. About 20,000 people assembled in Trafalgar Square. The police too were amazed. The demonstrators took over the whole road as they marched to the US embassy in Grosvenor Square.

For the demonstrators this was a completely new experience. The traditional London demonstration was a tame four-abreast procession headed by MPs and clerics. Even the most militant demonstration in living memory—that against nuclear weapons in Trafalgar Square in September 1961—had been, in theory at least, committed to “non-violence”. Now here was a demonstration two or three times the size, 15 or 20 wide across the road, committed to expressing its anger at the US war against Vietnam in as militant a fashion as possible.

When police tried to pick off individual demonstrators the cry went out to link arms and defend one another. The response to police attempts to bar the roads to the US embassy was to charge headlong into the police cordons—on one occasion at least nearly breaking through to the embassy itself. The demonstration created a new mood of solidarity and militancy among the thousands of participants. They went away determined to redouble the agitation against the Vietnam War and the Labour government support for it.

The next few months saw a succession of local and college-based demonstrations against the Labour leadership over Vietnam and against racist MPs over the immigration issue. When Prime Minister Harold Wilson visited Sheffield on 26 January, 3,000 people ringed the town hall chanting “Wilson out”. “In scuffles, police were bombarded for a time with tomatoes and eggs,” reported *The Times*.²⁹³ It was far from petrol bombs and cobblestones, but also far from the pacifism of the anti-bomb movement.

In February Sussex University students threw paint over a visiting US embassy official. On 1 March Labour minister Patrick Gordon Walker was shouted down when he tried to speak at Manchester University. On 6 March hundreds of LSE students marched on Rhodesia House in London chanting “One man, one gun”. On 8 March defence minister Denis Healey’s car was besieged by students when he visited Cambridge; even the chairman of the Conservative Society was moved to complain afterwards about the police violence.²⁹⁴ Healey himself denounced “hysterical anarchy among students” three days later.

February was the month of the Tet Offensive. In March the crisis of the Johnson administration came to a head in the US. The economic consequences of the Vietnam War began to express themselves visibly.

On Friday 16 March *The Times* front page headline was: “Monetary crisis

shakes world capitals”.²⁹⁵ The world’s gold markets were shut for a fortnight while a last desperate attempt was made to prop up the system of fixed exchange rates established at the Bretton Woods conference 22 years earlier.

The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign’s second major demonstration took place on Sunday 17 March. It was bigger and more militant than the previous October.

This time the police were prepared. But the militancy was not quelled. As the demonstrators took over the road they linked arms, began jumping on the spot to the rhythms of their chants (usually “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh”²⁹⁶ and “Victory to the NLF”), then charged forward. They banged on the sides of vehicles (especially Rolls Royces). Everywhere, it seemed, there was a profusion of Vietnamese National Liberation Front flags and red banners. At the US embassy, to bitter chants of “Hey, Hey, LBJ, How many kids did you kill today?” they fought to break through the police lines.

But Vietnam was not the only issue motivating the demonstrators. There was a feeling that the war was just the most horrific expression of a horrific system. One US broadcaster, Jerry Landy, complained that the demonstrators seemed to be against “everything”: “They railed against the Wilson government, against devaluation, against higher prices, against unemployment, against the wage freeze, in short against the whole sea of British troubles.”²⁹⁷

A student leading a contingent from Manchester University summed up much of the feeling when he was interviewed on Granada television:

We are going through recurring crises in the world, whether it is the Gold Standard or Vietnam, and it’s the duty of those who feel strongly to get out and change it.

A lot of us voted and worked for the Labour Party in 1964 and 1966 in the thought that it would be something of a radical party. In fact it hasn’t been. It’s lost any pretensions to radicalism.

For me the demonstration is about strengthening my muscles for the sort of society I want to see later. The time has come for those who think like me to unite and try to bring about radical social change. If violence is part of it, then violence is part of it. The state is allowed to push anybody and everybody about as much as it wants to, and people are starting to fight back, and that is a good sign.²⁹⁸

The demonstration was an astonishing experience for the small groups of already committed revolutionaries. The red flags and the slogans we were accustomed to raise on the margins of demonstrations were now being taken up by contingents of hundreds of people. For the first time in decades thousands of people were singing the *Internationale* on the streets.

Again the experience of the big demonstration raised the militancy of those who had taken part. The spring and summer saw a succession of national and local demonstrations. Harold Wilson needed a police cordon to protect him when he visited Oxford on 22 March.

The attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke in mid-April prompted

revolutionary socialists to lead a breakaway march a couple of thousand strong away from the CND annual Easter rally. There were clashes with police at the German embassy and outside the Springer office—part of the *Daily Mirror* building in High Holborn.

Essex University, reported *Black Dwarf*, was from February to June “either in a state of partial or total disorder”.²⁹⁹ This followed student protests at a lecture by a scientist engaged on research into chemical and biological warfare at Porton Down; the university retaliated by calling in police with dogs and suspending “ringleaders”.

If the revolutionary left and the minority of leftward-moving students had been euphoric in March, they were forced into bitter, defensive activity after Enoch Powell’s speech at the end of April. The first weeks of the summer term were devoted to desperate anti-racist activity—leaflets, posters, arguments with some of the workers backing Powell, demonstrations. Powell himself was forced to abandon plans to visit universities “for fear of disorder”.³⁰⁰ The pro-South Africa MP Patrick Wall was “mobbed” by students in Leeds; Labour home secretary James Callaghan “deplored” such behaviour.³⁰¹ Wall had to abandon plans to speak at Warwick University.

Such was the situation when news came through of the May events in France. The far left was ecstatic. Just when things seemed their grimmest in Britain, there was a tremendous message of hope from across the Channel. The “week of the barricades” was wonderful enough. Then the first reports of the spreading strike movement seemed to confirm everything the revolutionaries had always argued: the working class was an agent of revolutionary change; revolutionary struggle was on the agenda in the advanced Western countries.

The magnificent revolt in France has answered...all those who believed that the working classes of industrialised countries were politically finished, bribed or bamboozled into permanent apathy... With great clarity and astonishing speed the vulnerability of Western capitalism has been demonstrated, and the strength and creativity of the French working class exhibited.³⁰²

1968 is a year of international revolution no less than 1793, 1830, 1848, 1917 and 1936. We are experiencing the rebirth of the international Marxist movement after thirty years of defeat and hibernation.³⁰³

The argument with the mass of not-yet political students was suddenly much easier. This did not mean that all students immediately became revolutionary. Even at the handful of militant colleges revolutionaries had to work hard to win wider support. At the LSE an overnight occupation in solidarity with the French students and workers involved at most 300 or 400 students; in Manchester 200 students took part in a solidarity march.³⁰⁴ But this minority was more confident and assertive than ever before. As the news from Paris came through, it found a

growing audience among people who a few weeks earlier had been reformist or non-political.

Demonstrations now invariably ended in some sort of confrontation with the police, even if only of the pushing and shoving type. When, for instance, the Communist Party called its own demonstration on Vietnam in July, the revolutionaries decided to support it and brought with them several thousand newly radicalised young people. The result horrified the Communist Party leadership.³⁰⁵ There were clashes with police in Grosvenor Square. Then demonstrators marched on the Hilton Hotel, throwing stones at it to chants of “Smash the bourgeoisie”. After fleeing from a police charge across Park Lane, they tried to build a barricade in Hyde Park (showing rather more enthusiasm than understanding of the tactics of street fighting). A few even tried to set fire to a petrol station.³⁰⁶

There were similar scenes in August when the far left called its own demonstrations against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia: again there were running fights with the police as people tried to break through to the Russian embassy in Kensington.

The minority of students involved in these activities grew. In a few cases they found an issue which enabled them to gain majority support in their colleges. This happened in Hull, where a few days in Paris convinced one student, Tom Fawthrop, of the iniquity of the examination system: he made a public protest by tearing up his exam paper. Few Hull students were prepared to go that far, but they were willing to give active support to a mass occupation over the question of representation. At Essex University the return of a delegation from Paris gave added impetus to the struggle against the suspension of three activists over the Porton Down affair. At Hornsey, Croydon and Guildford Colleges of Art the stimulus from Paris came just as the system of art education was being rationalised: occupations there combined willingness to engage in a long struggle with a low level of politicisation.³⁰⁷

The revolutionaries

The revolutionary left in Britain was small in May 1968. It was made up of several small Trotskyist groups with roots going back to the late 1930s, and smaller, more recent, Maoist splits from the Communist Party. The main Trotskyist groups were the Socialist Labour League (later the Workers Revolutionary Party) and International Socialists (today the Socialist Workers Party), each with about 400 members, and the International Marxist Group and the Militant, each with about 80 members. The Maoist groups were less

significant, but included among their members some important former Communist Party industrial militants, in particular Reg Birch, a leading engineering union official in London, and Mike Cooley, who was to become president of TASS, the technicians' union.

In the 1950s and early 1960s the impact of the revolutionary left in Britain was, of necessity, extremely limited. The expansion of capitalism meant that workers could look forward to continual improvements in living standards without any need for generalised socialist politics or even without great industrial struggles. The shop stewards' organisations that existed in important sections of manufacturing industry rested on the ability of workers to gain local victories through short strikes involving few people. When people did look for an alternative to Labourism, the myth of a "world communist movement" had more appeal than the small Trotskyist grouplets.

Yet in May 1968 these groups found that their revolutionary ideas had suddenly acquired a wide audience, albeit mainly confined to students. How did they respond?

The first sort of response was embodied in the fortnightly paper *Black Dwarf*, founded at the end of April 1968 by a grouping of left wing intellectuals. It concentrated on the students and radical intelligentsia as the "new vanguard". Typically, its first headline was addressed to "Workers, students, intellectuals".³⁰⁸ Later issues had front page slogans such as "Students, the new revolutionary vanguard"³⁰⁹ and "Workers, students, Don't demand, Occupy. All power to the Campus Soviets".³¹⁰

The paper attracted the talents of a wide number of able intellectuals: playwrights David Mercer and Roger Smith, historian Eric Hobsbawm, poets Adrian Mitchell and Christopher Logue, art critic and novelist John Berger, cartoonists Ralph Steadman and Posy Simmonds, journalist Richard Gott and literary agent Clive Goodwin. Its editor was the best-known figure in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, whom the media portrayed as the leader of the revolutionary students, Tariq Ali.³¹¹ Issues included long eulogies on Che Guevara (by Ken Coates), Malcolm X, Mao Zedong (by Malcolm Caldwell), the Chinese cultural revolution (by Alberto Moravia), and Fidel Castro's speech supporting the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia (with an open letter critical of "Fidel" by Tariq Ali, Clive Goodwin and David Mercer).³¹²

The paper's political ideas were essentially the same as those of Britain's most prestigious left theoretical journal, *New Left Review*—a mixture of Guevarism, Maoism and Ernest Mandel's version of Trotskyism.³¹³ But *Black Dwarf* was open to a range of contributors, including some leading figures in the student struggles: Tom Fawthrop and Paul Gerhardt on Hull, Pete Gibbon on

Leicester, David Triesman on Essex, Pete Gowan on Birmingham. It also included contributions from those such as Ian Birchall, Ray Challinor, David Widgery and Chanie Rosenberg from the International Socialists who did not share its softness on Third World Stalinists.

Black Dwarf claimed a circulation beyond the hopes of the papers of the left groups: it printed 30,000 copies. The tone of its front pages, with their implication that student-based revolution was just round the corner, seemed to fit perfectly the mood of 1968. But its eclectic mixture of politics did not prepare its readers for the hard slog ahead if they were to sustain what were still small revolutionary forces and win support, not just among a minority of students but among workers. What is more, the paper's refusal to challenge the "socialist" credentials of Third World leaders such as Mao, Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot left its readers open to easy disillusionment once it became clear what the so-called Communist societies were really like.

At the opposite extreme to those around *Black Dwarf* were the International Socialists (IS). Around 30 members in the 1950s, IS had grown to about 400 in 1967, mainly through successful work in the Labour Party Young Socialists in the early 1960s. Its young activists played a key role in many of the student struggles of 1967-69, leading half the occupations, and attracted around them many of the most militant students. But its political focus—and this was stressed continuously—was not on students at all, but on what was happening inside the working class.

The IS analysis identified a contradiction between the strength of shop-floor trade unionism—especially the shop stewards' organisations—and the needs of British capitalism. This contradiction lay behind the increasing legislative attacks by the state upon shop-floor union organisation and increasing attempts to tighten bureaucratic control in the unions. But such attacks could rebound, creating an interest in revolutionary socialist ideas among previously non-political, reformist or Stalinist activists. Building a rank-and-file movement based upon the stewards would enable the strength of the trade union movement to be united, nationally, from below.

It is the general nature of the threat facing stewards that allows the opportunity for developing them into a widely based movement. And the very fact that the attack is being launched against them by a Labour government indicates the need for a political as well as an industrial response from the rank-and-file movement in the factories, the docks and elsewhere.³¹⁴

But such a movement would not develop automatically. It was impeded by the traditional political organisations inside the working class movement—the Labour and Communist Parties. This left a "political vacuum" which the

revolutionary left had to try and fill.

In the short term it was too small to do so. This weakness was clearly revealed in 1966-67. When the Labour government succeeded in imposing its wage controls, the IS was able to take an initiative which revealed both the audience open to them and the severe limitations on their influence.

An IS member had been a leading steward for many years at ENV, probably the best-organised factory in north west London. The circumstances created by Labour's incomes policy enabled him to win several other stewards to the IS and win the backing of the stewards' committee for the formation of a London Industrial Shop Stewards' Defence Committee, committed to campaigning for rank-and-file organisation. This published a book by Tony Cliff on incomes policy and shop stewards. IS members were able to sell some 10,000 copies among trade union activists—a substantial achievement for a group only 400 strong. The committee was also able to persuade representatives of other stewards' committees, influenced by the Communist Party, to appear on a joint platform.

But the struggles the committee intended to coordinate did not develop in the years 1966-67; the ENV management decided to smash the centre of militancy by closing the factory down;³¹⁵ and the Communist-influenced stewards' committees were able to form an influential Liaison Committee for the Defence of Shop Stewards of their own.

Nevertheless, the IS perspective won a few individual militants in engineering, the building industry and the London docks; a few of its members also took the first steps towards establishing a militant opposition in the National Union of Teachers in London. More important, perhaps, it gave IS members a much more realistic appreciation of the working class movement than the rest of the revolutionary left.

In 1967-68 the IS grew because it was at the forefront of the student and anti-Vietnam war movements. But it was insistent about the limitations of these. Students were not a class; the impact of student struggles was therefore limited:

Alone students cannot change society. They can only be an irritant to the status quo... The students have to extend their consciousness, not just to a world context (this is relatively easy for students), but to the society at large... The students must come to grips with the concrete experience of ordinary people. In doing so, in directly making common cause with workers, they can act as a precipitating factor in the creation of a working class revolutionary force³¹⁶

Similarly, a one-issue campaign against the Vietnam War could not produce the forces to overthrow British capitalism. Indeed, because the direct impact of the war in Britain was very limited, the campaign would eventually reach a point where it could no longer go forward, just as the campaign against the atom bomb

had done. So within the movement against the war, IS argued for a decisive turn towards working class issues. Its leaflet for the March demonstration ended: “A blow against the boss is a blow against the Vietnam War”.

But it was not just that the student and Vietnam movements could not grow indefinitely. The vacuum on the left inside the working class needed desperately to be filled. This was the lesson of the strikes in support of Enoch Powell. The strikes indicated:

the extent to which people are fed up with existing society. They are disillusioned with established politics and...the succession of leaders who have betrayed their trust. But instead of blaming actual enemies and looking for the real source of their frustration, they blame the immigrants. The traditional organisations of the left have failed totally to offer real alternatives to capitalism or to combat the racist upsurge... A single socialist organisation is needed to fight these new and urgent battles.

This argument gained strength as news came through of the May events in France, which showed that:

What is lacking is not, as in the past, the spontaneous and massive opposition of the working class, but rather a dedicated revolutionary leadership which will link the opposition together and focus it clearly on revolution, not on the maximum concessions from the present regime... In Britain, a new left has to be created out of the existing fragmentary and divided opposition... Ultimately such a force must become a new working class party, capable of coordinating the battle on many different fronts. Without it, the opposition will continue to be fragmentary, each fragment exposed to defeat in isolation.

The IS offered to unite with other organisations on the left which accepted a minimal four points: opposition to wage freeze and anti-union laws; workers’ control; opposition to imperialism and support for all genuine national liberation movements; opposition to racism and all immigration controls.³¹⁷

The call for unity met no response from other organisations,³¹⁸ but it did mark out IS as the one organisation of the revolutionary left prepared to work jointly with others, while stressing the need to build a party inside the working class.

The impact of the other Trotskyist groups during 1968 was very limited indeed. The Socialist Labour League denounced the whole 1968 movement in Britain as “petty bourgeois” and refused to have anything to do with it. At the biggest Vietnam demonstration its members handed out a leaflet headed “Why the Socialist Labour League is not marching”.³¹⁹ It therefore picked up few members, except among the circle of playwrights and actors around *Black Dwarf*—apparently the actors, if not the students, were the agents of history!³²⁰

The Militant group were equally absent. They insisted that all that mattered was work inside the Labour Party, the “traditional party” to which the working

class would inevitably return.

The Maoists' involvement in the early activities of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was minimal, and they had no presence in the first student struggles.³²¹ The explosive growth of revolutionary ideas in late spring and summer of 1968 changed that.

Both the media and the intellectuals around *Black Dwarf* and *New Left Review* presented Mao as the prophet of revolution. His model of guerrilla warfare was seen as the inspiration of Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution as the model for student revolt everywhere. When a pseudonymous writer in *New Left Review* tried to develop a theory of "student revolution" it was based on the model of the Chinese revolution: the universities could be turned into "Red Bases" which were "sociologically inaccessible to the repressive forces of the ruling class" in the same way that the Chinese Red Army bases in Yenan had been "geographically inaccessible".³²²

When the organised Maoists first began to attend the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign's open planning meetings they were treated very much as a joke—albeit an annoying one. They would argue at length over some detail of the slogans for a demonstration, find themselves in a minority, then all stand up together chanting slogans and waving Mao's *Little Red Book*.

But as the summer developed they began to gain some influence. For the movement of 1968 was beginning to run into inbuilt obstacles. Precisely because it was confined to a mainly student milieu it could not bring immediate revolutionary change. Many of those recently won to a revolutionary perspective could not understand this. They were naturally impatient: if they had been able to see the need for revolution, why could not millions of other people?

For some of these, the Maoists and their slogans seemed to offer an easy way forward.

The climax

The very success of the Vietnam demonstration in March 1968 presented the revolutionaries who had organised it with a dilemma. Another demonstration was planned for October. But what form should it take?

As summer wore on it became clear that the authorities were quite capable of dealing with another Grosvenor Square demonstration on previous lines. During the demonstration organised by the Communist Party in July, the police had shown they could turn the square into a fortress that no demonstration, however militant, could batter its way into.

The isolation of the Vietnam student movement meant it could not look to

wider social forces to prevent it being broken by further allout confrontation. The October demonstration could in no way be an insurrectionary challenge to the state. It was therefore bound to be a symbolic action. But was it going to be one that cost the left dear, or help it go forward to overcome its isolation?

The main groupings inside the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign therefore decided to avoid a confrontation in the square by marching to Hyde Park.³²³

Such reasoning was anathema to the Maoists and to some of the newly radicalised campaigners. They argued vehemently that as a matter of principle any demonstration had to go to Grosvenor Square. To talk in terms of the costs of such a decision to the left was to betray the Vietnamese revolution.

As it turned out the demonstration went ahead as planned by the organisers and was a tremendous display of solidarity and militancy. It was at least 100,000 strong, with thousands-strong contingents from the major universities, plus hundreds of local groups and trade union banners. The LSE had been occupied to provide accommodation on the initiative of the IS-led Socialist Society, its refectory turned into a workshop for the production of thousands of silkscreen posters and its basement into an emergency first aid centre (complete with a studentrun ambulance station).

The demonstrators took over a huge swathe of the London streets, linked 30 or 40 abreast across the road, chanting slogans not just about Vietnam, but also about capitalism. The most common poster on the demonstration showed a spanner with the slogan “workers’ control”.

A Maoist breakaway march was no more than a thousand strong. When it got to Grosvenor Square, its leaders were forced to come to terms with the overwhelming police presence and urged their supporters to disperse peacefully. They engaged in ritual pushing and shoving before “singing Auld Lang Syne in unison with the police”.³²⁴

The main demonstration had been a great success. People went away exhilarated at its size and solidarity. Yet there was a slight tinge of disappointment: the movement could no longer be built by repeated demonstrations or just by emphasising the Vietnam War. The demonstration had to be a springboard to something else, or the movement would go into decline.

The paralysis of the student movement

Just as the movement against the Vietnam War reached a peak and then went down because it did not have the forces to climb higher, so did the student movement.

In mid-June the LSE Socialist Society had taken the initiative in calling a

conference of left wing students from throughout Britain to form a Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation (RSSF). In part they were reacting against the way the National Union of Students vehemently opposed the whole 1968 movement. In part the dominant IS grouping at the LSE saw themselves applying in the student field the general IS perspective of unity.

The RSSF received a publicity boost when various student leaders from around the world, brought to London by the BBC for a TV discussion, addressed an eve of conference meeting at the LSE. The conference itself was a success in providing a focus for those involved in agitation in different colleges. But the attempt to establish a united student organisation faced problems in the absence of a hegemonic revolutionary organisation outside the colleges. These were shown graphically at the RSSF's second conference in London's Roundhouse in November.

Early on the Maoists and those interested in instant revolution made it evident they had not attended to discuss the mechanics of organising. Chanting, booing and sloganising took the place of any sort of rational discussion. As Dave Widgery tells:

Discussion on student problems was desultory and local reports were ignored by busy conspirators. Maoist orators repeatedly rose to advocate immediate union with the working class, oblivious to the waves of boredom raking the audience. A speaker from Sussex Labour Club explained about the need to have faith in the working class, like a kindly teacher demonstrating the alphabet to shortsighted kids. The *New Left Review* talked rather disdainfully about the need to transcend bourgeois ideology. Oxford students submitted a blank piece of paper as their manifesto. Another group, abusing the name of Mao Tse-Tung, delivered a draft constitution which the Red Army would probably have rejected as top heavy and over-officered. The conference ended with an enormous Peking fan storming the platform, animal impersonations and Situationist comedy. The chairman's table was overturned with cries of 'Freedom' etc. If several people weren't on the CIA payroll, they deserved to be.³²⁵

There was more to the conference than that. The RSSF attracted hundreds of activists who wanted to argue politics. The majority of delegates did eventually vote for a compromise platform drawn up between IS and *New Left Review* supporters which enabled the RSSF to continue for some months more.³²⁶

But the student movement faced a greater threat than its internal ideological disagreements. The student struggles at Leicester, Essex, Sussex, Hornsey and elsewhere had caused panic within the university establishments. Professors saw their privileges under threat. Even left wing lecturers could be heard complaining that they were not "going to be told what to teach" by student activists.

That summer the Committee of University Vice-Chancellors discussed at length how to deal with student struggles.³²⁷ One immediate outcome was an

unprecedented meeting with the right wing, “non-political” leaders of the National Union of Students to draw up national guidelines on “university reform”.³²⁸ Another was an agreement to back one another in taking a hard line against student activists. The testing ground for the new hard line was to be the LSE.

There was no all-out occupation at the LSE in 1968. The occupations in solidarity with the May events in France and in support of the Vietnam demonstration had been one-day affairs, which had not interrupted the normal life of the college. This did not prevent a growing paranoia within the higher ranks of the college’s power structure.

The leading professors felt that the ideological priorities in the college were no longer determined by them but the Socialist Society. They complained of “ideological terrorism” as students took cabbages into Professor Day’s lectures in protest at the irrelevancy of his economics, challenged the established anti-Marxist orthodoxy of Professor Popper’s philosophy of science department, denounced the whole of sociology as a fraudulent pseudo-science. The final indignity was in December, when students virtually took over the college to picket and heckle an Oration Day lecture by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper after he had come out in support of the Greek military junta.

The LSE authorities, led by Lord Robbins, chairman of the board of governors and of the *Financial Times*, set out to provoke the students into an action which would permit the victimisation of “ringleaders” and the destruction of the movement.³²⁹

In January steel gates, with grilles that bore an uncanny resemblance to prison bars, were installed at key points in the college building. The aim was to lock students out of any area they might consider occupying in any further confrontation. An enraged student union meeting voted to remove the gates and some 300 students went off with pickaxes and crowbars to do so. That night police surrounded the building and, on the direction of senior professors, arrested students said to have been involved in destroying the gates. The school was then closed and permanently sealed off by foot and mounted police. Disciplinary proceedings were started against a number of students, and two lecturers who had been in favour of removing the gates, Robin Blackburn and Nick Bateson, were sacked. Blackburn was not involved in removing the gates, but was sacked for defending the action at a debate between *Black Dwarf* and left Labour MPs more than a mile away.

The LSE activists managed to thwart Robbin’s dream of inflicting total defeat. They won the support of a 1,500-strong union meeting, even though it had been organised by right wing students in collaboration with the authorities, with

police students as stewards to keep out “undesirable non-students”. The authorities were forced to reopen the school weeks before they had intended after failing to get the support of more than half the academic staff.

When the students returned, far from crawling back, they staged an enthusiastic march. But the confrontation had revealed their weaknesses. The union meeting which had voted to pull down the gates had been relatively small. A call by IS members for an immediate occupation to forestall closure of the school had fallen on deaf ears. There was a distinct lack of militancy at meetings held by LSE students at the University of London Union during the lockout, and a call to occupy the college when it finally reopened was voted down. The majority of students were prepared to raise their hands against the lockout and victimisations, but not to engage in militant action themselves.

Splits arose about how to cope with this state of affairs. The traditional leadership of the Socialist Society, the IS supporters, argued for caution, for not moving ahead unless there was a fair chance of drawing the mass of students behind them; only mass involvement could ward off victimisations. An opposition influenced by *New Left Review* and by supporters of the American SDS argued that the revolutionary minority in the college must continually provoke the authorities; the subsequent repression would expose the real nature of the college and draw the mass of students to the revolutionaries’ side.

At first the pressure of action for action’s sake had a disconcerting effect on IS members. They were used to being the most militant section of the student body. Suddenly they were being accused of conservatism! Things were complicated by the fact that any struggle at the LSE drew to it many individuals from other colleges, for whom the LSE was the revolutionary centre. They could not understand it when they were told action had to be taken in such a way as to maintain the support of the non-revolutionary majority of LSE students.

The harsh reality was that students outside could offer little more than sympathy when it came to fighting off the victimisations. There were two demonstrations, each about 4,000 strong, and a scattering of small token sympathy occupations. The campaign dragged on for months. As Dave Widgery writes:

The left slithered from an occupation which occurred basically because people were too bored to vote against it, and the recriminations which inevitably arose out of its inevitable failure, through an unsuccessful strike which was really a lecture boycott, towards the heckling of strikebreaking lecturers and a further dwindling of support.³³⁰

The authorities did not get everything their own way. Attempts to jail students for defying injunctions failed and the leading student activists escaped

victimisation. The real casualties were the two lecturers, who remained sacked.

But what took place was a defeat for the student movement nationally. The LSE students entered the next academic year feeling that no amount of struggle could achieve victory; it was to be seven years before a struggle arose in the college comparable in any way to those of 1967-69. There were no major occupations elsewhere in 1969. The RSSF disintegrated and *Black Dwarf* ceased publication at the beginning of 1970.

The movement of 1968 had exhausted itself. But an editorial in *International Socialism* argued: “Revolutionaries can break out of the student ghetto. The present wave of student militancy can play a key role in the creation of a new revolutionary movement”.³³¹

Out of the ghetto

In fact some sections of the left had been making an effort to break out of the student ghetto for more than a year. This was done most consciously by the IS, who were already urging people to join them in leafletting factories at the time of the second Vietnam demonstration in March 1968. Their student members were active alongside their few building workers on the Barbican and Horseferry Road strike pickets in London, and alongside their few engineering workers on the Roberts-Arundel picket line in Stockport. In the summer of 1968 the organisation undertook widescale agitation among London council tenants whose rents were being doubled. The IS distributed 200,000 leaflets and took the initiative in forming a GLC Tenants Action Committee. This led demonstrations of some thousands of tenants, though it failed to achieve its goal of an all-out rent strike.

Above all, in September 1968 the IS began producing a weekly paper quite different in tone to *Black Dwarf*. While *Black Dwarf* addressed an audience of students and Vietnam demonstrators, *Socialist Worker* consciously aimed to win a working class audience, however limited, to revolutionary socialist ideas.

Its first issue led on national wage negotiations and a one-day strike in the engineering industry; other articles dealt with the vote for equal pay for women at the TUC, in defiance of the Labour government, a deal between the rail unions and British Rail, and struggles over work speeds in car plants at Oxford and Coventry. This did not mean eschewing political issues—other articles dealt with the Pope’s ban on contraception, the situation in Czechoslovakia, and the Democratic Party convention in Chicago.

The paper provided a means by which those recently won to revolutionary ideas through the student and Vietnam struggles could begin to take the

arguments that had convinced them to a small but significant number of workers.

The IS probably gained more from the movement of 1968 than the other left groups put together. They entered 1968 as a loose scattering of local groups with a monthly paper; by the end of the year they were a cohesive national organisation of 1,000 members with a weekly paper selling 7,000 copies, many to industrial workers.

This transformation did not always take place smoothly. Many of the most enthusiastic new members did not fully understand the basic tenets of revolutionary Marxism. So intense was the debate at the organisation's autumn conference that there had to be a repeat conference two months later. But it was worthwhile. In spring and summer 1969 a decisive transformation took place in the class struggle in Britain, and the IS were in a much better position to intervene in this than they had been a year earlier.

Part Two

Introduction

AT THE end of 1968 the editorial board of *International Socialism* journal received a draft of an editorial on the year from one of its members, Peter Sedgwick. It began with a quote from the poet Yeats: “The centre cannot hold”. It was brilliantly written, a far cry from the style most of us dished up. Except...

Except, we all agreed (including Peter), that the centre had held. It had been besieged, shaken, battered, but at the end of the day it still survived—the Grand Coalition in Germany, de Gaulle in France, Wilson in Britain, Christian Democracy in Italy, the substitution of Richard “Tricky Dicky” Nixon for LBJ in the US.

So “the centre cannot hold” had to become, much less elegantly, “the ice cracks”.

“For the revolutionary left a sense of euphoria was inevitable”, the editorial noted. The fundamental faults underlying the seeming stability of international capitalism had surfaced dramatically. We had witnessed an expression of revolutionary potential unparalleled in 40 years. France had seen the largest general strike in history. The poorly equipped Vietnamese NLF had inflicted defeat after defeat on the world’s mightiest military power.

The pretensions of the status quo had been undermined. A succession of economic crises had wracked the system. The pretensions of Eastern “socialism” were reduced to ridicule and incoherence by the crude act of war over the border between two state capitalist regimes, Russia and China, and those of Western “democracy” by the thuggery of the Chicago convention.

But the cracks in the system did not herald immediate socialist revolution. The erosion of the system did not mechanically usher in its replacement. Such a transformation must be made actively and consciously by human beings. “Without this conscious element, and without its organisation for coherent, coordinated action, the most revolutionary of situations can transform itself into its opposite”.

Even the beginnings of revolutionary organisation were lacking everywhere. The “groupuscules” remained just that, tiny groups of revolutionaries. Social democracy and Stalinism had been eroded, leaving a vacuum on the left, but the

revolutionary alternative could not fill it. In its absence the old ideas could still stifle any spontaneous movements which challenged them.

The first lesson of 1968 was that in May French workers had acted in a revolutionary manner despite their leaders. The second lesson was that in June these same leaders got the workers back into the factories and the old ruling ideas reasserted themselves.

The working class—the social force capable of producing the changes that the movement of 1968 called for—would enter the political arena again, but only in response to objective developments in the world economic and political system.

Indeed the movement of 1968 was itself a product of such objective developments—of the way the pattern of capital accumulation on a world scale had caused a crisis of US hegemony, of the fragmentation of the Stalinist bloc, and of the fusing together of formerly submissive rural populations into powerful new groups of workers. Likewise, objective economic changes had led to the creation of the vast new student populations, forced to try to learn sets of ideas which no longer made sense of a world that seemed to be cracking up.

The interaction of these elements led to a break with past ideas in 1968. Without this interaction, the student movement alone would have ended as it began, as a pressure group committed to university reform.

The anti-war movement in the US would have been trapped in the politics of pacifist protest and moral indignation. Revulsion at the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia would merely have strengthened liberal ideas in Eastern Europe and built Eurocommunist reformism in Western Europe. Even the strikes in France might have been experienced just as economic protests, without any great ideological significance.

But the coming together of the different elements of crisis had led to a mighty process of generalisation, particularly among students, so that even those involved in relatively small and marginal struggles—such as in British universities—felt them to be part of a worldwide movement. None of the elements of crisis were resolved in the early 1970s—indeed, they continue to plague the world system in the late 1980s. But they no longer interacted with each other in quite the explosive manner of 1968. The social struggles in different countries no longer seemed bound together as the movement of 1968 had been. The way they evolved—and with them those who had been radicalised in 1968 depended upon the differing dynamics of the various national sectors of the world system.

The wounded beast

RICHARD NIXON won the US presidential election at the end of 1968 by the narrowest of margins. He got barely 43 percent of the votes, only half a million more than his main rival Hubert Humphrey. But there was little to choose between the candidates.

Humphrey was the chosen successor of LBJ. In order to win votes, he had made vague statements about ending the war in the last few weeks before the election; and in doing so had gained the endorsement of the “anti-war” candidate for the Democratic nomination, Eugene McCarthy.³³² Nixon had won the Republican nomination against the “liberal” Nelson Rockefeller and the “conservative” Ronald Reagan, and ran

a do nothing, say nothing campaign... He contented himself with telling his audiences he had a plan to end the war. The truth was he had no plan at all. Although the country was locked in paroxysms of anguish over the war, Nixon sat it out.³³³

In office Nixon and his adviser, Henry Kissinger, faced the same dilemma that beset Johnson. They could not increase spending on the war for fear of alienating Wall Street and wrecking the economy, and they could not send more troops there for fear of spreading bitter hostility to the war and the draft from students and black radicals to the mass of working class youth. But nor could they accept the damage to US prestige which would follow precipitous defeat.

They sought to resolve the dilemma by a three-fold strategy.

First, “Vietnamisation”—a slow withdrawal of US ground forces while attempting to use South Vietnamese troops to fight the liberation forces.

Second, the bombing of North Vietnam and the liberated areas in the South was to be increased—indeed, more bombs were to be dropped in a single year than in the whole of the Second World War.

Finally, there were new diplomatic moves with Russia and with China—breaking the taboo which had dominated US policy since Mao’s forces took

Beijing in 1948—to get them to put pressure on North Vietnam to do a deal. So while his planes were attempting to “bomb North Vietnam into the stone age” Richard Nixon was shaking hands in Moscow and earning praise in Beijing.

If the aim of the strategy was to “save” South Vietnam it could not work. But the choice otherwise was to broaden the war or admit defeat.

During 1969 the number of US troops in Vietnam barely fell, and the casualty rate was higher than two years before.³³⁴ In a desperate ploy Nixon and Kissinger chose to broaden the war. On Thursday 30 April 1970 Nixon announced on television that US and South Vietnamese troops had invaded neighbouring Cambodia.

The anti-war movement in the US had been flagging under the rhetoric of Vietnamisation. It revived suddenly, on a larger scale than before. There were mass meetings and rallies on hundreds of campuses, and by the Monday virtually all of them were said to be on strike.³³⁵

Student reactions at Kent State University in Ohio were typical of hundreds of other places. The university is a modern building, sitting in green fields close to a typical middle American small town, not the sort of place you would expect to find a centre of militant radicalism. On the Saturday, 1,000 students demonstrated in the town breaking a few windows, and 2,000 marched on the university’s officer training building on the Sunday, some of them attempting to set it on fire. On the Monday a third demonstration assembled, 1,000-strong, on open ground some hundreds of yards from the university buildings. By this time the state governor had called in the National Guard. They told the students the demonstration was illegal and threw teargas. The students lobbed some of the grenades back. The National Guard were ordered to open fire. Four students were killed, one was crippled for life.

The anger that swept the country was greater than any seen before. Within a few days 350 universities were on strike in protest at the war and the Kent State killings. In New York the protests spread to the high schools and even the junior high schools. The weekend of 9-10 May saw big demonstrations, not just in national centres but right across the country: 50,000 in Minneapolis, 60,000 in Chicago, 12,000 in San Diego, 20,000 in Denver, 20,000 in Austin, 10,000 in Sacramento, 50,000 in Boston, 10,000 in Providence. It was claimed that four million students—60 percent of the total—were involved.³³⁶ The section of the US establishment that had doubted the war under Johnson were gravely worried by the move into Cambodia and the killings at Kent State. They feared the administration was no longer acting rationally, but simply hitting out blindly in all directions. “The major news media virtually campaigned in protest at the Kent State killings.”³³⁷ But they did not want to encourage a movement that

might escape from their control; after a week they sought to wind the protests down. Establishment fears were summed up by *New York Times* columnist James Reston:

Nixon's advisors thought when they came to power, they were dealing with a foreign war, and now they see they are dealing with a rebellion against the war, and maybe even a revolution at home.³³⁸

Nixon turned bitterly on the critics of the war. But he also indicated to critics in the establishment that the commitment of US troops in Cambodia was not open-ended. Troops on the ground in Vietnam were reduced to 350,000 by the end of the year. In return the doves kept their opposition within safe limits: when a "dove" resolution in the Senate was narrowly defeated, all but four of the senators voted to continue financing the war effort.

But this was not the end of the matter. In November 1970 bombing of population centres in North Vietnam resumed. Three months later US and South Vietnamese troops again extended the war outside Vietnam, this time crossing into Laos.

There was a revival of establishment distrust towards Nixon and of the anti-war movement in the colleges and streets. Half a million people demonstrated in Washington in April and 300,000 in San Francisco. At the beginning of May a "Stop the government" demonstration in Washington was attacked by police with clubs and teargas. There were 1,200 arrests.³³⁹

At this point one of the Pentagon's own war planners, Daniel Ellsberg, turned against the war and handed to the *New York Times* a devastating secret report on the origins of US involvement in Vietnam. It confirmed much of what critics of the war had been arguing for years. Such was the bitterness of a section of the establishment against Nixon that the *New York Times* began publishing the report—and when the administration took out an injunction, dissident Congressmen circumvented it by reading the report into the Congressional Record.

Dissent in the army

The biggest problem Nixon now faced was the impact on the army itself of waging a war that was unpopular at home.

Already in 1968 there had been the first signs of open opposition to the war in the army. Forty GIs on active duty had taken part in the San Francisco demonstration; 43 black GIs at Fort Hood in Texas were court-martialled for refusing to go to Chicago to police the anti-war demonstrations at the Democratic Convention; 27 military prisoners at Presidio, San Francisco, staged

a sit-down strike, singing, “We shall overcome”, after the killing of a fellow prisoner.³⁴⁰

Now groups of radicals began setting up coffee houses near military bases. The first anti-war papers for serving soldiers began to appear. Some were national papers, such as *Vietnam GI*, with mailings to thousands of soldiers in Vietnam itself. Others—there were more than 200 altogether—were produced by groups of soldiers at particular bases, as with *Fatigue Press* at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

By 1970 and 1971 opposition to the war was widespread among those serving in Vietnam. One radical involved in producing an anti-war paper on the West Coast tells how:

The toughest looking paratrooper, certified hard-assed and decked out in black beret, combat ribbons and fatigues tucked into combat boots, often took our paper and gave us a clenched fist salute or a peace sign.³⁴¹

“Fuck the Green Machine” began to be a common slogan on hats and jackets in Vietnam, and there were even occasions when opposition to the war turned into open defiance, as when small groups of soldiers refused to take part in the invasion of Cambodia, or when a quarter of the crew of the *USS Coral Sea* signed a petition against being sent to Vietnam. More widespread was bitter, non-political resentment at being in Vietnam and at being sent into battle. One form this alienation took was turning to drugs. By 1970 an army survey showed that 35 percent of GIs were regularly smoking marijuana. A year later 10 percent of the army in Vietnam was addicted to heroin.³⁴² The *New York Times* reported:

By January 1971 latrines throughout Vietnam bore the epithets of smouldering, sullen rebellion —“Fuck the Army, Smoke Scrag”. One hundred thousand of them took to heroin in less than two years.³⁴³

Another habit spread to many units—“fragging”. Officers who were too keen on forcing their men into battle would have fragmentation bombs tossed under their bunks or “stray” bullets directed at their backs. There were 126 such incidents in 1969, rising to 425 in 1971.³⁴⁴ “Fragging ran at one a week” in the American Division alone early in 1971, and “word of the deaths of officers would bring cheers at troops’ movies or in bivouacs of certain units”.³⁴⁵ Officers who valued their lives allowed “working it out”—discussion by the men on whether to obey orders.

A retired colonel who toured bases in Vietnam complained:

The morale, discipline and battle-worthiness of the US Armed Forces are...lower and worse than at any time this century... ‘Search and evade’ is now virtually a principle of war.³⁴⁶

The US army had been sent to Vietnam because the South Vietnamese army had proved incapable of fighting. The danger for the US ruling class was that if the war dragged on too long the US army would be incapable of fighting as well. Whatever the desires of Nixon and Kissinger, the pressure for withdrawal was growing ever greater.

In 1972 the administration began a serious effort to reach agreement with the NLF and the North Vietnamese—though it also escalated the bombing to the highest level yet, bombing Hanoi and mining the port of Haiphong.

The war and the economy

One thing Nixon did manage to achieve. He succeeded in reducing the massive burden of arms spending. Expenditure on the Vietnam War fell by about half between the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1971.³⁴⁷ The first SALT arms limitation agreement with Russia in 1971 also helped. The proportion of economic output going to “defence” fell from 9.1 percent in 1967 to 7 percent in 1972.

This enabled the Nixon administration to deal with the “overheating” of the US economy that had so worried Wall Street in 1968, and had turned it against the war. The immediate result was a recession in 1969-71 that pushed up unemployment in the US, and, by cutting back US imports, sent out shockwaves which affected most other major Western countries.

The recession did not solve all Nixon’s economic problems. He was unable to avoid the effective devaluation of the dollar in August 1971. At the same time, electoral considerations and the bankruptcy of a major US corporation, Penn Central, were soon putting him under pressure to allow the economy to boom again.

But the recession did have one important effect. The full employment and rising prices of the late 1960s had been accompanied by a rising number of strikes. In 1968 there had been a third more strikes, involving twice as many workers, as three years earlier.³⁴⁸ The union bureaucracies were under considerable pressure from below, and could not always hold the line. There had been major strikes in autos, copper, electricals, communications, airlines and by East Coast longshoremen, and a rise in local and wildcat strikes.

The strike wave had run on into 1969 and 1970, with a ten-week official strike at General Motors and unofficial strikes by teamsters and postal workers. But then the recession had its effect—particularly as the fall in the level of price rises reduced the pressure to fight for wage increases. Nixon’s government was able to introduce “wage-price control” in the late summer of 1971, and the

number of workers involved in stoppages fell from 3,280,000 in 1971 to 1,714,000 in 1972.

The lower level of struggle eased the pressures on the union bureaucracy. It also had another important consequence. The level of working class organisation in the traditional industrial heartland of the US, running from Chicago across to the East Coast, was as high as in northern Europe. But through the 1960s and 1970s there was a restructuring of US capitalism. The number of service and white collar workers grew much faster than the number of manual industrial workers, and there was a shift of industry towards the “Sunbelt” of the south and to the west. In a period of rising industrial struggle, these new workers would have been drawn into action and would have broken the anti-union attitudes of managements and state governments. Without such struggle, the proportion of US workers in unions fell continually.

Workers who have little experience of struggle usually accept the ideas of their masters. The US workers in the early 1970s were no exception. Just as the ruling class was divided between those vehemently in favour of the war and those mildly against it, so was the working class. In the week after the invasion of Cambodia and the shootings at Kent State, the right wing leaders of the New York construction unions were able to mobilise thousands of “hard hats” to demonstrate in favour of the war, and the head of the AFL-CIO, George Meany, faced few problems in 1972 when he refused to endorse the anti-war Democratic candidate, George McGovern.

The increasingly bitter conscript army in Vietnam was overwhelmingly working class in composition; growing numbers of AFL-CIO affiliates were coming out against the war, and a referendum during the November 1970 elections in the working class city of Detroit showed 63 percent against the war.³⁴⁹ But the economic recession on the one hand, and the slow reduction of the army in Vietnam on the other ensured that bitterness against the war did not spread to wider sections of the working class and fuse with a strike movement over economic issues. Although “anti-war sentiment and local organisation continued to spread, particularly in middle-class and working class suburbs where it had not existed before”,³⁵⁰ the movement as a whole was less active in 1972 than it had been in 1968.³⁵¹

The roots of Watergate

By 1972 it seemed that Nixon’s policy was restoring “peace” to the US. But he was paying a price. He was repeatedly being forced to make concessions to his establishment critics and to run down the land war in Vietnam—a path that was

eventually bound to end in US defeat.

He resented having to take this course and, like Johnson before him, directed his resentment against those who criticised the war. He increasingly saw the anti-war movement as some great conspiracy that had to be smashed.

Nixon's obsession grew as establishment papers such as the *New York Times* carried stories he wanted to keep secret, and he began to put pressure on J Edgar Hoover's FBI to spy on journalists, government staff and "doves" in the establishment. This was too much even for Hoover. He hated the peace movement as much as Nixon, and was quite prepared to use thousands of agents to disrupt black and socialist organisations. But he regarded Nixon's schemes as too dangerous; if they were discovered, the FBI would alienate respectable opposition figures who might run the government in the not too distant future. What is more, some of those Nixon wanted the FBI to spy on were Hoover's personal friends, such as Daniel Ellsberg's father-in-law, Louis Marx, head of the toy manufacturers.³⁵²

Hoover's reaction only fed Nixon's paranoia. He began to act independently, recruiting his own private team of agents—called the "plumbers" because they had to look for "leaks"—to do "the kind of things Hoover refused".³⁵³

These agents had no compunction in carrying the fight against "conspiracies" into the heart of the establishment itself. In June 1972 they were caught burgling the headquarters of the Democratic Party inside Washington's Watergate building. The investigation into Watergate was slowly grinding into action when the November 1972 presidential election took place.

Nixon won the election easily. The pro-war section of the Democratic Party machine refused to support the dove candidate McGovern, and Nixon took 49 of the 50 states—although on a low poll, with nearly half the registered electors not bothering to vote. Six months later the US finally signed a peace agreement with the North Vietnamese and the NLF. This left the South Vietnamese regime to try to survive on its own—which it could not do. Two years later Saigon fell to the liberation forces.

Nixon's political future was short. His efforts to continue an unwinnable war had led him to commit an unforgivable sin—to direct part of the power of the state against one of the great institutions of the US ruling class, the Democratic Party. The Watergate scandal came to light slowly and painfully. Two years later Nixon was forced to resign, lucky not to have joined several of his subordinates in jail.

The fall of the student left

The year 1968 had transformed the attitudes of the US new left. At the beginning of the year it still spoke of “participatory democracy”, opposed notions of leadership, was half-inclined to non-violence, and despised the “old” Stalinist, Trotskyist or Maoist left for its obsessions with ideology. The murder of Martin Luther King, the attacks by the police on the Panthers, the battles at Columbia and Berkeley, the teargas and the clubbings at Chicago, changed all that. The mainly middle class student left began to realise they were fighting an enemy prepared to turn its cops and its weapons against them. People who went to the Pentagon demonstration or Chicago talking about peace and love went home saying there was a need for violent revolution.

One account written in 1969 summed up the change:

What began as a movement in many ways resembling a super-idealistic children’s crusade to save the world was becoming increasingly grim and increasingly serious...the stakes had been raised. The vigorous campaign of calumny and slander directed against the SDS by ruling-class media and institutions, the growing climate of repression across the country, forced the radical movement to take itself seriously... SDS members began to search for political definition.³⁵⁴

One activist recalls:

By about 1968, a minority, mostly middle-class movement had concluded that it was a necessity—and a duty—to make a socialist revolution in the US.³⁵⁵

The SDS convention in late spring 1968 marked the change. An organisation which had grown out of right wing social democracy was now inspired by the May events in France to declare itself revolutionary socialist. Suddenly the ideas of the “old left” took on a new relevance:

The years 1968 and 1969 saw a return to the disputes of the old left. We must organise the workers! We must organise the ‘new working class’! We must organise the youth! We must create the vanguard party. We must create a united front.³⁵⁶

The version of socialism which came to prevail most widely was Maoism.

The middle class student activists were cut off from a US working class whose own struggles were still at relatively low levels. The activists still accepted the assessment of Wright Mills and Marcuse: that the working class was completely absorbed into the system. From this perspective, the only forces capable of fighting US capitalism were outside it in the Third World, with the black movement defined as a “Third World” movement and China as the embodiment of Third World revolution.

The Maoists were a small minority in the SDS, but the shift in mood during 1968 changed that. At a 1,000-strong SDS national committee meeting in December 1968 a Maoist grouping, Progressive Labor, received about half the

votes, with the opposition split between the SDS leadership and a large group of near-anarchists known as the “Up against the Wall” faction. The SDS leadership then decided that the only way to offer a serious alternative was to turn to Maoist-Stalinist ideas themselves.

The acceptance of Maoism was aided by the failings of the Trotskyist organisations. US Trotskyism had split into two main tendencies in 1940—the supporters of James P Cannon, who formed the American Socialist Workers Party, and the supporters of Max Schachtman. Neither knew how to relate to the radicalisation of the late 1960s.

The Cannonites did honourable work in opposing the Vietnam War. But they saw it only as a single-issue campaign, putting up bureaucratic resistance whenever newly radical young people wanted to take a more militant stance or to broaden the movement to give a revolutionary perspective. All that mattered was to move on from one large demonstration against the war to the next.³⁵⁷ Thus they shut themselves off from much of the radicalisation.

The Schachtmanites were in even worse shape. Their view was that Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba and the rest were “bureaucratic collectivist states”, worse than Western capitalism, and the Western Communist Parties were embryonic bureaucratic collectivist ruling classes. Schachtman eventually took this view to its logical conclusion, dissolved his organisation, joined the right wing social democrats and supported the US war against Vietnam.

Some of Schachtman’s former associates such as Hal Draper, who set up an Independent Socialist Club in Berkeley, and Julian Jacobson, who edited the socialist discussion magazine *New Politics*, remained principled opponents of US imperialism. But they retained Schachtman’s belief that Stalinism was not just as bad as Western capitalism, but worse. So they and their supporters shied away from clear support for the Vietnamese liberation movement against the US forces. The Independent Socialists had played a leading role in the early struggles at Berkeley, but generally they remained small and ineffectual.

The result was that Maoism seemed the only serious option on offer.

The collapse of SDS

Progressive Labor, the Maoist opposition to the SDS leadership, were in no position to win the support of an overwhelming majority of SDS activists. Their sectarianism led them to denounce the Panthers and so cut themselves off from many of the new radicals. But they presented one model of “serious” politics—and the SDS leaders reacted to this by claiming that they were the true followers of that model.

At the 1968 convention there had been strong anarchist and “non-ideological” tendencies; by the 1969 convention, these had all but disappeared. Everyone thought himself or herself a Marxist; most were Maoists; and while some found it hard to swallow, the bulk of the... leadership openly identified with Stalin.³⁵⁸

There was little serious discussion at the 1969 convention. The two main factions simply chanted abuse at each other.

During the first two days...every discussion of whatever topic—women’s liberation, racism, imperialism, the Red Guards, etc.—was dominated by the faction fight... Every possible pretext was used for attacks and counter-attacks, chants and counter-chants.

The leadership argued that people should support it in order to give the platform to a Black Panther speaker who insisted their opponents were “counter-revolutionary traitors” and racists for not agreeing with black separatism.

The scene was an ugly one... The Panther appeal was not made on the basis of politics. It was rather an appeal to the most spineless attributes of the white movement. It was reminiscent of the scene much more common a few years back, that of a black militant lacerating an audience of white liberals—and the liberals squirming, but loving it.³⁵⁹

But this was not enough to get a majority for the old leadership. Eventually, they went to the podium, read out a statement declaring their opponents expelled, then took their supporters out to another hall and announced this was the real convention!

The convention, which was effectively the end of SDS as an organisation, was a farce. But it was not an accidental one:

The game of “I’m more Maoist than you” which went on there can be found, somewhat toned down, in most movement publications and most broad groups of campus radicals. The exaggerations at the SDS convention arose because the people who attended are the most active and the most involved, and hence those who react most sharply to political developments.³⁶⁰

Maoist “Marxism-Leninism”, with its stress on tight organisation and its talk of “people’s war”, seemed to be the answer to the problems that had beset the ill-disciplined forces of the student left in the traumatic year of 1968. If the Tet Offensive had been able to shake US imperialism and the May events to rock French capitalism, why should not revolution be possible in the US in the near future, if people only worked for it in the right way?

As one activist recalls:

Almost everyone in the movement in the years 1969-70 went a little bit crazy with the expectation of revolution round the corner and guilt for not doing enough to bring it about.³⁶¹

But few people could conceive of “working in the right way” as meaning relating to the US working class. As Independent Socialist commentators noted:

The problem is the US revolutionaries, familiar with one of the politically most backward working classes in the world, have tended, despite all the recent talk about an orientation to the working class, to lose sight of any perspective focused on an internal transformation of society by its own rank and file.³⁶²

This had led many SDS supporters to adopt the Jerry Rubin Yippie perspective in 1967 and 1968. Now they looked to Stalinist methods as a way of binding together groups of individuals, with few roots among the mass of people, into a “vanguard party”. But this did not give them a programme for achieving revolution.

Over this the new “SDS” split almost before it was formed.

The previous summer the current SDS leadership group of Bernadine Dohrn, Mike Klonsky and Fred Gordon had argued a position hardly different from the old SDS doctrines of five years before: that the agent of revolutionary change in the US was not the working class, but a pool of “uncommitted students, high school students, workers, hippies, the American poor, college-trained professionals and American GIs.”³⁶³ Now they had grafted Stalinism on to this. But not much else changed. They still considered the mass of US workers to be innately reactionary, bound to the system by “whiteskin privilege”.

Their conclusion was that revolutionaries in the US should act as support groups for Third World revolution. In a document entitled “You don’t have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing”³⁶⁴ (which gave their grouping its name, “Weathermen”) they argued:

The primary task of revolutionary struggle is to solve the principal contradiction on the side of the people of the world. It is the oppressed peoples of the world who have created the wealth of this empire and it is to them that it belongs... Your television set, car and wardrobe already belong, to a large degree, to the people of the rest of the world.³⁶⁵

The logical conclusion was that any struggle among white workers for improved living standards or working conditions was merely a struggle to rob more from the Third World. Workers’ control was an “anti-internationalist” concept, representing “national chauvinist and social democratic ideology within the working class”.³⁶⁶

At first the Weathermen argued for a policy of agitating among white students and workers in support of Third World struggles and the Black Panthers. But what is the point of agitating among people who have a material stake in the existing system? Eventually, the whole group went underground and tried to launch its own guerrilla war in support of the Third World by planting bombs in the buildings of US corporations.

The Weathermen were, in a certain sense, the extreme development of the politics that had pervaded SDS from the beginning—the politics of trying to

develop an agency for changing US society without involving the mass of US workers. As Tom Hayden, the driving force behind much SDS activity in the early period, recognised in 1972—at a time when he was himself campaigning for the Democrats in the presidential election—the Weathermen were “the natural final generation of the SDS...the true inheritors of everything that happened from 1960 on”.³⁶⁷

A certain romantic aura attached to the Weathermen in the eyes of many non-Marxist radicals. They seemed to have gone the whole hog and taken up the battle against US imperialism in earnest. Yet in reality all they had done was replace one breed of liberal moralism with another. For it was the moral necessity of armed resistance to the system that motivated them, not any materialist analysis of how to fight in order to win. In this they were to be matched, with far more serious—and disastrous—results, by the non-Marxist radicals who in Germany formed the Baader-Meinhof group and in Italy the Red Brigades.

The black revolutionaries

The experiences of 1968 changed the black revolutionary movement as massively as they did the white student movement. In 1967 the dominating voices were those of Martin Luther King on the one hand and the SNCC leaders Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown on the other. A year later the tone was set by the mushrooming ranks of the Panthers. The central problem which beset the student left also affected the Panthers: how to relate to the mass of the people. But it was much more serious for the Panthers: they were under an increasingly murderous attack from the forces of the state.

J Edgar Hoover used the FBI to spy on and disrupt the student new left, but with the Panthers, his tactics were much nastier. His job, as he saw it, was to take whatever action necessary to “prevent the rise of a black messiah who would unify and electrify the black nationalist movement” and lead “a true black revolution”.³⁶⁸ A Senate committee in the mid-1970s concluded that the FBI had “engaged in lawless tactics and fomenting violence and unrest.”³⁶⁹ In fact it cold-bloodedly set out to kill as many of the Panther leaders as it could.

The FBI “encouraged local police to mount operations against the Panthers”,³⁷⁰ most spectacularly in December 1969, when police stormed into a Chicago house where Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were sleeping and shot them both dead before they had a chance to wake. Hampton’s bodyguard was an FBI informant who had given the FBI a diagram of the house which the police used in the raid.³⁷¹

But such police murders were not enough for Hoover. He also used agents to incite other black nationalist groups to engage in shoot-outs with the Panthers. In one case a Los Angeles-based group called “US” used information from an FBI agent about Panther events to kill four Panthers.³⁷²

As a result of Hoover’s efforts 20 Panthers were killed in 18 months, and the energy of many more was absorbed in a continual round of court cases following police frame-ups. Both Huey Newton and Bobby Seale faced murder charges of which they were eventually acquitted. Seale was in prison for months as a result of charges of “conspiracy” arising out of the demonstration at the Chicago convention. Eldridge Cleaver felt impelled to flee the country rather than lose his parole and face years more in prison.

At first this repression in 1967 and 1968 focused attention on the Panthers, bringing in funds and members. But as time went on it began to have a debilitating effect. The reason was not that the US state was all-powerful—when Huey Newton staged a careful political defence he persuaded a mainly white jury to clear him of murder, and eventually the appeal courts dismissed convictions arising out of the Chicago conspiracy case. But the Panthers needed a mass base if they were to blunt the offensive of the state.

They had a base of sorts in the black ghettos—many thousands, perhaps even millions, of young blacks were favourable to them. But this support was passive, not active. One estimate is that the Panthers were between 1,000 and 2,000 strong after unreliable supporters had been removed from the membership lists in 1969.³⁷³ Most local groups seem to have consisted of at most a few dozen people who would hang around the local headquarters playing with their guns.³⁷⁴

The original Newton-Seale concept of the party had been based on recruiting “the brothers on the block”, the “lumpen proletariat”. These could be attracted by the military aspect of the party in a way that employed workers rarely were—the manual labour that was the lot of most employed blacks does not leave a lot of energy for intensive arms training. But they were also much harder to turn into a cohesive force: they lacked the traditions of discipline that capitalism hammers into those it exploits, and many of them were tempted back to a lifestyle which provided some sort of living through petty crime. As a result, some of the groups

masqueraded as Panthers and pursued gangster goals... Discipline was a constant hurdle and enforcement a real challenge for people running the party. Factions and splits were a constant threat to the stability of the organisation.³⁷⁵

Bobby Seale complained bitterly about what he called the “jackanapes”—the party member who had not broken with his petty thief background and behaved

in ways which antagonised much of the community in which the Panthers were meant to be based:

He centres things only around himself; he's still selfish. He thinks his pot and his wine are above the party. He thinks his gun is something that he can use at will, to rip off stuff for himself.³⁷⁶

Such elements were drawn to “black racist factions” in the party and easily persuaded by “FBI and CIA provocateurs” to engage in pointless shoot-outs.³⁷⁷

The party leadership had been able to ignore such problems in 1968. The party had grown from a small group of activists in Oakland to a national political force in little more than a year on the basis of ad hoc organisation and freewheeling, improvised tactics. But by the end of the year it could no longer continue in the same way.

The leadership made a turn to “serious”, ideologically founded politics similar in many ways to that of the SDS. The Black Panther paper described the party as “Marxist-Leninist”; it now talked about exploitation of the black community by “the capitalist”, rather than as in 1967 by “the white man”;³⁷⁸ and it was “saturated with Mao slogans”.³⁷⁹

This political turn was accompanied by an attempt to tighten up party organisation. Seale and Hilliard went through the membership lists, expelling 1,000 who were said to be “police provocateurs” and “black racists”.

The new, hard politics were accompanied by a concerted attempt to get deeper roots in “the community”. This involved a radical change of direction. The Panthers had grown so rapidly because of their talk of “armed self-defence”. Now the stress was on the Maoist slogan “serve the people”. At the centre of this was a “breakfast for the children” programme, a sort of do-it-yourself social work, with 19 local Panther groups supplying breakfasts to—they claimed—10,000 children, usually in church premises, by the end of 1969.

Finally the Panthers shifted their search for white allies.

In 1968 they had worked first with the California Peace and Freedom Party, which had registered 100,000 supporters around its programme of opposition to the war and support for black liberation. Then they had switched to the apparently more radical stance of Jerry Rubin and the Yippies, with Cleaver, as the Peace and Freedom Party's presidential candidate, declaring election day to be “erection day”.

Now the need for resistance to the murderous onslaught by the FBI and the police led the Panther leaders to look desperately for allies to their right. They organised a “national conference for a united front against fascism”, and urged all “anti-fascists” to attend—Democrats, Republicans or radicals. Keynote speeches were made by black Democratic Party politician Willy Brown and

Communist Party theoretician Herbert Aptheker. Thus the turn to the mildest of reforms in the black community was accompanied by a turn towards allies who urged white radicals to bury themselves inside the second party of US capitalism.

The new tactics could not work. When it came to buying support in the ghettos through social work programmes, the Panthers could not compete with the networks of patronage maintained by established political forces, particularly those associated with the Democratic Party. And no amount of infiltration of the lower ranks of the Democratic Party by white radicals was going to turn it into a force for stopping state repression.

The Maoist combination of armed organisation on the one hand and “serving the people” by alliances with established political forces on the other was bound to fail. And this failure was bound to aggravate the organisational and political problems of the party. If the stress was on armed struggle, then the logical thing to do was to try to respond to repression by going underground, seeking alliances with the white left as simply a means of getting the resources to survive; if the stress was on “serving the people”, then the logical thing was to throw your lot in with the existing political machines and abandon the guns.

For two years the Panthers wavered between the two alternatives. There was a growing sense of unease in the party. When Huey Newton was finally freed from jail in 1970:

Everyone was talking about turning the party round. Internally there were lots of things happening which left a lot of people across the country dissatisfied. There was drug use; there were problems at the top... We were hoping Huey could turn it round, but when he came home we found he wouldn't or couldn't do it.³⁸⁰

In 1971 the party split down the middle. In exile in Algeria, Cleaver had long been urging a guerrilla strategy, calling for an alliance with the Weathermen, urging the creation of a “North American liberation front” which would wage “armed warfare in the mountains” and talking of the “advantages” of “political assassination”.³⁸¹

Newton, Seale and Hilliard were increasingly wary about such language—especially after Hilliard was jailed on the charge of “threatening the life” of President Nixon in a speech. In January 1971 they expelled from the party first Elmer Pratt—known as “Geronimo”—for taking part in armed actions, then 11 East Coast Panthers for criticising a Weatherman admission that open as well as underground actions were necessary.

Cleaver rushed to the defence of Geronimo, and was expelled in his turn. Party activists were further demoralised as each side accused the other of the

most heinous crimes: the leadership accusing Cleaver of abusing his wife and murdering another Panther in Algeria, Cleaver accusing Newton of creating an “underground bureaucratic apparatus”, and the New York Panthers accusing Newton of murdering a Panther in the New York office.

The politics of the Panthers continued to receive publicity—and support in the ghettos—through 1971 with the attempted frame-up of black Communist Angela Davis, the shooting of George Jackson in San Quentin prison, and the massacre of black prisoners who revolted at Attica prison in New York State. But the split was effectively the end of the Black Panther Party. Newton and Seale drifted to Democratic Party politics. Cleaver, after several more years in exile while his “old friends” became “congressmen and mayors”,³⁸² had a fortunate “religious revelation” which enabled him to return home, get paroled from prison and make a career as a “born again” preacher.

DRUM

The Panthers were the most prominent black revolutionary organisation, but not the only one. In Detroit another organisation had begun to develop in 1968 which rejected the Panthers’ focus on the community and the lumpen proletariat, stressing instead the role of employed workers:

In one factory we have 10,000 people who are faced with the same brutal conditions... When you go into the community, the interests of the people...are going to be much more dispersed... Just in terms of expediency there are greater possibilities in the organisation of the plant... The kinds of action which can be taken [in the community] are not as effectively damaging to the ruling class as the kinds of actions which can be taken in the plant... When you close down the Hamtramck assembly plant... for a day you cost Chrysler corporation 1,000 cars... also you automatically can mobilise people in the streets, 5,000 or 10,000 at a single blow. Whereas when you go house to house...it is much more difficult to gather that many people.³⁸³

We would emphasise that the working class is the vanguard of the major force within the revolutionary struggle, and that the lumpen proletariat is in and of itself a class which generally splits. Whole sections of the lumpen proletariat go over to the other side, whole sections are totally undisciplined and cannot be disciplined, and will engage in that ‘Go for yourself thing’ regardless of the political situation... A lot of the experience of the Panthers has come from precisely that analysis—the analysis that the lumpen proletariat, which isn’t a stable class, is going to be the vanguard of the revolution. This is precisely why the Panthers have been led into so many adventuristic actions...and have been engaged in so many of these shoot-outs in which they essentially came out on the losing end. It’s precisely why the Panthers have been unable to prevent their organisation from being infiltrated with agents.³⁸⁴

The core of the organisation in Detroit was half a dozen black revolutionaries who had known each other through involvement in various black radical activities for several years, spending a period in the black nationalist

organisation Uhuru, going to the meetings of various socialist groups and taking part in classes on Marx's *Capital* led off by the spontaneist, anti-Stalinist Marxist, Martin Glaberman. Soon after the Detroit uprising in 1967 they had started producing a popular black revolutionary paper, *Inner City Voice*. Then in May 1968 one of the group, General Baker, was involved in an unofficial strike at Chrysler's big Dodge Main plant. The group was able to pull around it nine Dodge production workers and put out a weekly newsletter, *DRUM*—it stood for Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

The newsletter focused on two issues: general speed-up in the plant and systematic discrimination against black workers (95 percent of foremen were white, 90 percent of skilled craftsmen and 90 percent of apprentices, even though 60 percent of the workers were black).³⁸⁵ The union's record on these issues, the newsletter pointed out, was terrible.

The newsletter had an immediate impact. Even though Baker and another black activist had been sacked as a result of the strike, *DRUM* was able to organise a successful boycott of two bars outside the plant which refused to employ blacks and to call a wildcat strike from a rally just across the road from the factory. This kept 70 percent of the black workers out of the plant for three days and cost Chrysler 1,900 cars—even though fear of victimisation meant the picket line could not be manned by Chrysler workers, but depended on students and community people.

The success of *DRUM* led to a proliferation of similar groups. At Eldon Avenue, which produced all Chrysler's gearboxes and axles, *ELRUM* led a wildcat strike which shut down most of the plant in January 1969. The company sacked 26 militants, allowing 24 of them back into the plant after a long delay—but again the group continued to attract support.

The groups came together to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. This became quite powerful in some plants, coming close to winning elections in two United Auto Workers locals (branches), and worrying the union's national leadership—since half the country's auto workers were employed in the Detroit area.

The League's base in the factories gave it a powerful influence on all the younger black activists in the city. It became their focus for the next two years. The original group around *Inner City Voice* was able to broaden out its activities, taking control of the daily paper produced by the city's Wayne State University and using this as a revolutionary paper directed as much at workers and the black community as at students. It formed a city branch of the Black Panther Party—to prevent others bringing to Detroit the “adventurism” that flourished elsewhere. It built up its full-time staff of organisers until it was 60 strong. It hosted a national

activists' conference on Black Economic Development and used this as a forum for the League's ideas, recruiting the nationally known former SNCC leader James Forman. And it was able to do all these things without providing the state with excuses to shoot down or imprison its members. To this extent it did better than the Panthers. In a very real sense, it represented the highest point of influence of revolutionary ideas among US workers in the early 1970s.

But the League's strength depended on its base in the factories. Here it suffered from one great weakness—the black workers were rarely more than half the workforce. Yet its theory insisted that black workers had to be organised separately from whites:

Racism in the US is so pervasive in the mentality of whites that only an armed, well-disciplined, black-controlled government can insure the stamping out of racism in this country.³⁸⁶

Such an analysis had immediate practical results, as a militant white worker tells:

They...refused to hand their leaflets to white people. It wasn't until around March of 1970 that they could respect my practice enough to give them to me... Then [one of them would] pass them to me surreptitiously so none of the black workers could see him give a leaflet to a white.³⁸⁷

The result was to weaken any call by the League for strike action, not only among white workers, but also among black workers:

When ELRUM had its wildcat in January 1969, there was no attempt to relate to white workers about their demands. Consequently, many white workers crossed their lines, and many black workers who had close friends in the white force took the same position.³⁸⁸

As one of the League's leaders said later:

We ended up alienating a lot of workers. We had widespread support among the young workers which meant we had almost a majority support in some of the plants. But our approach was such that we turned off what I would call the moderate worker, certainly the backward workers and certainly the white workers.³⁸⁹

Yet white workers were involved centrally in two key strikes—the one in Dodge Main which led to the founding of DRUM and one in 1970 in Eldon Avenue. Despite their racism, some white workers could be pulled behind militant action when the issues were explained to them.

The result of not explaining issues to white workers and “moderate” blacks was that even after the successful strikes of May 1968 and January 1969 the black activists were not able to prevent victimisation. This was at a time when the motor industry was booming and managements could ill afford any strike. With the recession of 1969-70 the companies' hand was strengthened enormously. A series of victimisations of League activists followed, often with

the collusion of the union.³⁹⁰ In spring 1970 Chrysler broke the League's organisation of its all-important Eldon Avenue plant after a series of wildcat strikes, sacking three League activists and two other militants. "By the summer of 1970 ELRUM had nearly ceased to exist as an open organisation, and in the other plants the local DRUMS had to remain semi-clandestine to preserve themselves".³⁹¹

The victimisations point to an important characteristic of the League. It was, in its own words, a group of "revolutionary unions", recruiting members simply on the basis of gut militancy, not a revolutionary party based upon a much wider understanding of society as a totality. One study of the League tells:

Baker's RUM strategy had often seemed more dependent on spontaneous mass action than on the work of pre-existing organisations. At other times his groups seemed like industrial guerrillas whose unrelenting attacks would eventually spark a general uprising. The freewheeling style of the League had been compared by some Detroiters to that of the Industrial Workers of the World or 'Wobblies', an anarcho-syndicalist formation that had a mass following in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁹²

In 1968-69 the political and economic climate was such that gut militancy alone could break through. Success then had brought into the League's ranks blacks whose political ideas had not advanced beyond a fairly crude nationalism. As some of the leaders later put it:

The workers who comprised a substantial majority of the League... [were] Blacks whose consciousness had risen along racial lines and the subsequent tactics revolved around replacing white management and union personnel with Blacks. The overriding and binding factor of our group was getting the honkies off our backs.³⁹³

Another leader told how black separatist attitudes prevented the development of newer members with the same understanding as the founding core of the League:

We had no meaningful education programme. We tried it a number of times, but it was sabotaged by the attitude of the reactionary nationalists. They didn't want to study Marxism, so they used various tactics to stop the classes. That is not to say that some of our instructors were not dull for the workers, but that's another question. The nationalists would say that Marx and Lenin were white and not relevant.³⁹⁴

The paucity of League members with a broader understanding of the issues became important once the employers moved against individuals. Many had no idea of tactics and strategy, of when to respond to provocations by foremen or when to contain their anger until conditions were more favourable.

The League had succeeded wonderfully with its mass agitation in 1968-69. Where it had failed was in not developing a smaller, party type organisation of those prepared to learn as well as to fight, to sustain this agitation in more

difficult times. So it soon lost much of the influence it had gained.

The contradiction between the wider prestige of the League and its growing weakness in the plants led to a bitter split in summer 1971. A section of the leadership were pursuing a scheme to set up a national organisation, the Black Workers Congress. The rest accused them of posing on the national stage and “preferring to be with ‘bourgeois people’ and with white folks more than with black workers”,³⁹⁵ while neglecting the work around the plants.

In the end three leading members left to found the national organisation, which collapsed after one congress. The remainder were unable to stop the erosion of their base in Detroit and the League itself collapsed. Yet that was not the end of either group. Both underwent a process of rethinking and joined different multi-racial Maoist organisations—some of them moving on from there to mainstream Democratic Party politics.

Meanwhile, the mass black militancy subsided. The Nixon administration consciously set out to create a black middle class (employing, among others, former CORE leader James Farmer to hand out money to black capitalists). The major corporations cooperated by breaking down racist bars on promotion to certain managerial positions. The major unions made sure they had at least a sprinkling of black officials. Black politicians began to jockey for positions inside the Democratic-run city administrations in the North, and even in some parts of the South—such as Atlanta, where former SNCC leader Julian Bond achieved office.

In the ghettos little had changed. The development of a black middle class did not create jobs for the black working class. Indeed Nixon’s recession pushed black unemployment up by about 50 percent, and the recession of the mid-1970s by another 50 percent. But middle class jobs had been created for the black protest leaders of the 1960s who had survived racist and FBI bullets.

This permitted a return to the old political patterns of the 1950s. Politics in the ghettos was again dominated by the Democratic Party machine, though with a blacker coloration than before, while the main alternative was the separatist, non-political cultural nationalism of groups such as the Muslims. On the one hand were the black mayors and rising black politicians such as Jesse Jackson; on the other Louis Farrakhan, a Muslim whose detestation of revolutionary politics had led him to make death threats against Malcolm X.

The balance sheet of a struggle

The American left, both white and black, did not suffer total defeat. It lost much of its audience after 1970 because it was a product of the double crisis in US

society over the Vietnam War and the black question. Nixon solved the first by conceding defeat. And by doing so, he allowed the rebuilding of structures which would again bind the mass of black people to US society.

The effect of the ferment lasted after the crises that had produced it were over. Any great period of social upheaval stirs all sorts of groups in society, leading people to question a whole range of oppressions they have previously taken for granted. Women who had been associated with the radical movements began to challenge the ways they were treated and the roles they were expected to live. Native Americans were inspired to organise themselves. Gays took to the streets of New York in 1969 when the Stonewall Club was raided by the police—and founded the first openly gay organisation, the Gay Liberation Front. Tens of thousands of former student radicals “dropped out” of society in an attempt to live alternative lifestyles. And a few thousand joined socialist organisations, which learned from 1968 the need to relate to the struggles of the millions of US workers, since it is their exploitation that keeps the system going.

None of the expectations aroused by the experience of 1968 were to be fulfilled in the short term. Fulfilment depends on US workers moving into action and shaking the system. There was movement in the mid-1970s, with a series of large strikes and rank-and-file revolts against the union bureaucracies. But by that time the US ruling class had resolved the central crisis posed by the Vietnam War, and was able to work with the union bureaucracies to contain things. Though US capitalism was facing increasing pressure from Japanese and West German competition, it still had enough fat on it to buy its way round all-out confrontation with its own workforce.

The movements thrown up by 1968 were left stranded on the beach as the tide of revolt receded. Many withered and died. Others survived only in small pools, cut off from the mainstream of society.

Yet all was not lost. The US ruling class is still plagued by the memory of the late 1960s. It still hankers over global domination, but fears to act on this desire lest it lead into another land war and another wave of rebellion on the home front. So it blusters and fudges and does not dare trust its own elected presidents in case they act out its own dreams. And all the time, long drawn-out economic crisis eats into the economic gains that used to lead US workers to an enthusiastic identification with the system.

The long hot autumn

THE POLITICAL storms of the 1960s left Italian society wracked by tensions which were not fully resolved until 1976. The old mechanisms for controlling the country were thrown into turmoil, and it was not clear how they could be re-established.

The student revolt of 1968 symbolised the problem: the universities were run by a set of interests closely integrated into the structures of the Christian Democratic Party, which had ruled continually for more than 20 years.

What applied to the universities applied to many other areas of Italian life. The great nationalised companies were run as Christian Democrat fiefdoms, expanding their operations to satisfy the party's need to provide patronage for its supporters, even taking over important sections of private industry, such as electricity generation, to increase the power of the party apparatus.³⁹⁶ Local administrative bureaucracies expanded to create positions for those who voted for them. They got deeply into debt—without providing basic services for the rapidly expanding urban population. Huge sums were invested in the “development” of the backward, impoverished, agrarian south of Italy—without reducing the employment income gap between north and south.

Binding different interests to the Christian Democratic Party in this way had a paradoxical effect. Different groupings in the party came to depend on the welfare of different interests outside the party. The party was effectively colonised by different interest groups, and could govern only by reconciling continually quarrelling factions—hence the short life of almost all Italian governments.

In the 1950s and early 1960s this arrangement had one great advantage for all sections of Italian capitalism. It prevented the Communist and Socialist parties from turning their large votes into government influence, kept the trade unions weak and allowed a high level of profits and accumulation.

But by the mid-1960s important sections of capital were wanting to do

something about a welter of corruption and inefficiency that threatened both to damage profitability and to create social discontent. They pressed for the weaker of the two worker-based parties, the Socialist Party, to be brought into the government, hoping this would give governments the stability to embark on a programme of transforming the country's institutions according to the needs of the most advanced sectors of capital.

There was much talk about reform, but little materialised. The reform programme ground to a halt in face of the factional manoeuvring inside Christian Democracy. As the Socialist Party demanded positions commensurate with its new government standing, it too became colonised and corrupted by many of the interest groupings. At this point first the student rebellion of 1968 then, much more seriously, the workers' rebellion of 1969 burst upon the scene.

Strikes multiplied fourfold between 1968 and 1969.³⁹⁷ The first strikes in key factories, such as Pirelli Milan and FIAT Turin, were, as we have seen, often unofficial and spontaneous, outside the control of the unions and run by groups of militants often new to the struggle. In autumn 1969 work contracts were due for negotiation in the metal industry:

The presence of the unions was extremely weak... So as to root themselves more deeply...the unions planned, in the spring, to launch a series of disputes...and so create a network of delegates and obtain recognition for themselves. But the project was overtaken by the struggle.³⁹⁸

The autumn struggle was more intense than either the employers or the union expected. What had been seen in Pirelli and FIAT spread to factory after factory. There was what one academic account calls "a collapse of the old system of industrial relations".³⁹⁹ Another describes the "sweeping May" first appearing in key factories in the north in 1968 and "slowly developing" into the "hot autumn of 1969... A sizeable proportion of the conflicts were not initiated or fully controlled by the unions" and included "radical forms of struggle" such as blocking production and occupations. Demands were "egalitarian"—directed against the grading system and differentials—and "highly ideological".

A new generation of activists led the strikes, often informally grouping in committees either to help the unions or to take their place.⁴⁰⁰

A correspondent wrote in the British weekly paper *Socialist Worker* at the beginning of December:

The Italian working class is entering the third month of a wave of strikes and agitation which has thrown the country into political, administrative, economic and social chaos... In spite of repeatedly losing more than half their pay, the strikers have not budged from their basic demands for recognition of their new democratic organisations in the factories, the right to local negotiation, reduction of working hours to 40 a week and the regrading of their insurance, pension and social

benefits to the level of white collar workers.

The movement has been directed by the official trade union apparatus only to the extent that it has accepted and advanced the genuine demands of the rank and file. This pressure is best illustrated by the unprecedented unity of all the trade unions (Christian Democrat, Social Democratic and Communist), an alliance which has been formed first at the rank-and-file level and then mirrored at the top. The real leaders of the struggle have been the factory base committees and local assemblies.⁴⁰¹

At Pirelli Milan, for instance, plant leadership was in the hands of the rank-and-file group CUB. In some departments clashes between the delegates and members of the unions' internal commission became almost daily.⁴⁰²

The militancy spread not only to other plants, but also from manual workers to white collar workers. One academic study comments: "In 1968 white-collar workers first began to strike in large numbers... The strike leaderships tended to be influenced by the student movement and various groups to the left of the Communist Party".⁴⁰³ Typically strikes were "flamboyant" and run by "permanent assemblies". At one Milan factory, SIT Siemens, the level of white collar involvement in strikes grew from 10 percent in 1967 to 76 percent three years later.⁴⁰⁴

The rank-and-file struggle in the factories also became a focus for others. In Turin the demonstration of the middle school students in December went, symbolically, to the gates of FIAT Mirafiori.

But the struggle in the factories was not uniformly high. An attempt failed to get a CUB off the ground at FIAT's Brescia plant, where leadership was in the hands of experienced supporters of the union federations, and "the initiative of the movement can be seen as subordinate to agreements or choices made at the top."⁴⁰⁵ Even in FIAT Mirafiori the workers were not continually on the offensive: an attempt at an occupation in October failed, though a month later workers in the body shop staged a militant strike, allegedly with the slogan "Down with the contract".⁴⁰⁶

The conclusion of the contract negotiations did not end the struggle. In 1970 there were disputes in 4,000 individual factories, with new methods of struggle coming to the fore—such as "chessboard" strikes in which every other department took action in turn. One observer reported in spring 1971:

The working class emerged from the struggles of 1969-70 tired, but still basically dissatisfied. The result has been continual struggles of a spontaneous nature which have half-paralysed industry.⁴⁰⁷

Political repercussions

The sudden upsurge in class struggle upset the schemes of those within the ruling class, the Christian Democrats and the left parties who favoured reforms.

Instead of a small increase in the power of the union leaders, which it was hoped would force those sectors of the Christian Democracy and the state machine opposed to reform to back off, there was an explosion which the unions could not control. To have tried, in 1969-70, to stop the movement in its tracks would have destroyed all union influence in the workplaces. As a commentator favourable to the union leaderships explained:

It was unthinkable that working class spontaneity could be controlled without adequate organisational means... The trade unions were therefore obliged to take advantage of the new situation to go back to the factories, to win over the new vanguard emerging in the struggle. This was the foremost task: any idea of control...was in fact impossible and incompatible with the logic of strengthening union organisations.⁴⁰⁸

Instead of stamping on the militancy, the union leaders rushed to channel it into directions that suited themselves. The first to move was the Communist-led CGIL, but the Catholic CISL was not far behind, and even the right social democrat UIL had to give token support to struggles. The union leaders followed a three-fold strategy. They encouraged the formation of delegate-based factory councils to take over the running of disputes about working conditions inside the factories and local negotiations with managements. Between 1968 and 1971 the number of plant-level agreements doubled. By 1972 there were 8,101 of the new factory councils, with 82,923 delegates. This rose to 32,000 councils in 1975, with nearly a quarter of a million delegates.⁴⁰⁹

The new councils were presented as a way of building the spontaneous workers' democracy of 1969 into the union structure. At first, while the struggle was high, they did work to some extent like that. But they were designed to leave much real decision-making with the full-time union apparatuses:

Only the formal power of ratification of decrees usually taken elsewhere has been left to assemblies, shop delegates and factory councils. The very small executive body of the factory council is involved in the bargaining process. Most of the time even the executive does not have the power to make decisions alone...other union structures are likely to join in... The decision-making mechanism is shifted outside the factory.⁴¹⁰

At the same time, the three union federations began serious negotiations over the formation of a single, powerful, national trade union centre.

Finally, by a series of one-day strikes for "reform", they tried to direct the spontaneous militancy of the workers into channels which fitted their strategy of collaboration with the most advanced sections of capital.

These measures enabled the unions to grow rapidly, so that the two main federations organised 46.2 percent of the workforce in 1975 compared with 31 percent in 1967.⁴¹¹ But they did not allow them to end the workers' struggles in ways which would please the "reforming" wing of big business. The profitability

of all capital—“reformist” or “reactionary”—was hit by the new strength of the workers’ movement.

In 1970 the centre-left government tried to use the same method to check the upsurge that Nixon was using in the US—deliberately allowing the economy to enter a shallow recession. But shop floor organisation had grown too powerful in the previous 18 months to be cowed by this. The strikes continued, if not at such a high rate, and tensions in society increased.

The failure of the “centre-left” gave new hope to the right—the backward sections of capital and corrupt sections of Christian Democracy which feared any reform. They embarked on an offensive of their own which pushed the country into ever deepening political crisis.

Sections of the armed forces, the police and the secret service which hankered after a return to the “order” of the Mussolini period were given the go-ahead to take initiatives to block the road to reform. Rumours of aborted coups abounded. Right-wing terror groups planted bombs, for which their contacts in the police then arrested left wingers; in the most famous such case, the bombing of a Milan bank, one of those arrested, the anarchist Pinelli, fell to his death from a window of the police headquarters in Milan, and another, Valpreda, was held in prison for four years before being brought to trial and acquitted.

In the new climate support grew for the fascist MSI, particularly in the south where it could blame continued poverty and rising unemployment on the “reds” in the north. In some southern cities, such as Rome, attacks on the left by fascist gangs became almost daily.

The main sections of Italian capitalism had no intention of moving in a fascist direction. But they saw the rumours and outrages as serving a useful purpose: as a powerful counterweight to the growth of the left. This “strategy of tension” would persuade the Communist Party to exert greater control over the unions and to return to the original path of carefully controlled reform.

The Communist leaders complied. When in the summer of 1970 the Rumor government resigned in protest at a general strike called by the unions, the unions called the strike off and Communist leader Enrico Berlinguer made a major statement asserting that the main problem in the factories was how to increase productivity.⁴¹²

But an important section of the Christian Democrats wanted to use the “strategy of tension” to halt the reform programme completely. They were able to elect a right wing president in December 1971, and bring to power a right wing Christian Democrat government, excluding the Socialist Party for the first time in a decade, in the summer of 1972.

That summer saw increasing attacks on the left by both the fascists and the

police:

a repressive spiral in the factories, schools, and especially...against the militants of the revolutionary left...using police squadism, arrests, denunciations, condemnations, sackings and intimidation of all types, use of fascist squads in a repressive and intimidatory sense.⁴¹³

But the left fought back with a wave of counter-demonstrations. The militancy seen in the factories in 1969-70 now spread to the streets of the major cities.

The centre right government did not succeed in breaking the fighting spirit in the factories. In June 1972 there was a new wave of struggle spearheaded by the chemical workers. The climax of the autumn “workers’ offensive”⁴¹⁴ was a huge national demonstration of the metalworkers’ union in Calabria, showing the muscle of the workers’ movement in the south.

As the struggles continued into 1973 it was clear that the centre right could not bring new stability to the country. Many of the structures through which it had been able to dominate throughout the 1950s had been torn apart after 1968. The Christian union federation CISL had shifted decisively to the left, and if the Christian Democrats were able to block a full fusion with the Communist-led CGIL, they could no longer regard the union as one of their own structures. They had to fight for influence in it with supporters of reformist and even revolutionary politics and were unable to block a merger of the important metal unions. Catholic Action now had only 600,000 members, compared to 3 million in the 1950s. The Christian Workers Association had fallen from a million to 300,000. Some of its leaders even tried to form a left Catholic Party opposed to the Christian Democrats.

Unable to push through reform and unable to succeed with repression, the prospects for Italian capitalism seemed universally grim in autumn 1973 when war between Israel and the Arab states triggered massive increases in the price of oil and precipitated the worst recession the West had known since the 1930s.

The veteran general secretary of the Christian Democrats, Fanfani—closely linked to the great state-owned companies but notorious for his centre right attitudes—now attempted a final manoeuvre. He pushed for a referendum on divorce, believing the Church would bring out the Catholic vote and smash the left parties. The tactic rebounded on him completely when the vote was overwhelmingly in favour of divorce; even in the traditionally priest-ridden south only 50 percent voted as the Church directed.

Urbanisation on the one hand and the wave of struggles since 1968 on the other had transformed the attitudes of millions of people. There could be no going back to a regime that simply relied on the bishops to provide it with

ideological support.

One force, however, was falling over itself to offer its services as the saviour of Italian capitalism—the Communist Party. It had long been a critical supporter of the reform strategy, and the political turmoil of the early 1970s pushed it to offer its services ever more readily with ever less criticism.

Party leader Berlinguer used the occasion of the military coup in Chile in autumn 1973 to bid for shared power with a Christian Democratic Party increasingly unable to control things on its own. Chile, Berlinguer argued, showed that a country polarised between right and left was in danger of civil wars and military coups. The answer was a “historic compromise” between the parties which would guarantee stability while the reforms desired by most advanced sections of capital were pushed through.

But Italy’s rulers were not keen to take up the terms on offer. Even the most reform-minded feared that in office the Communist Party might be subject to pressures to push through reforms to the benefit of its worker supporters rather than to themselves. And the least reform-minded had the backing of a US government which was afraid a government which included members of the Communist Party would weaken NATO.

So from the divorce referendum in 1974 through to the general election of 1976 the “crisis of the institutions” continued. Such was the weakness of successive governments that in 1975 they bought industrial peace by conceding to the unions the *scala mobile*, which compensated workers automatically for the effects of inflation. Such was the continuing tension that many commentators had doubts about the future of Italian capitalism.

The revolutionaries

The revolutionary left hardly existed in Italy before 1968. Its adherents were few and completely overshadowed by the 1.5 million members of the Communist Party, the biggest in the West. The supporters of the Trotskyist Fourth International had buried themselves so deeply inside the Communist Party as to be invisible. The followers of Amadeo Bordiga, expelled 30 years earlier from the Communist Party he had founded, had shrivelled through decades of isolation into an insignificant sect, ritually reprinting the same theses in their paper every month and proclaiming that one day the working class would discover their existence and turn to them. Maoist splinter groups declared they were the true party, even if the mass of worker activists did not know they existed.

The wave of student and then worker insurgency changed that. By 1973 the

revolutionary left was far larger and more influential in Italy than that in any of the other advanced capitalist countries, with tens of thousands of followers and three daily papers. Far left groupings from before 1968 influenced the student movement, whose fragments then influenced rebellious young workers. But the old groups did not simply get bigger. The experience of suddenly being able to influence the ideas and actions of hundreds or even thousands of people left the old revolutionaries disoriented. Old organisations fragmented and new ones mushroomed—often to disintegrate as rapidly as they had grown.

The largest, *Lotta Continua*, was born out of the worker-student assemblies that led the struggles in FIAT Mirafiori in Turin in the early summer of 1969:

For all that hot autumn the efforts of *Lotta Continua* went into extending themselves in the North, finding factories where sectors of workers could be inspired into struggle, so as to ‘break the framework of the contract’.⁴¹⁵

Lotta Continua succeeded in drawing to itself groups of workers in many factories—mainly young workers, with little political experience, but able to agitate inside factories. The weekly agitational paper it produced in November 1969 (also called *Lotta Continua*) had a print run of 65,000.

In its early years *Lotta Continua* was hardly a structured organisation at all, but a drawing together of the “internal vanguards”—the most militant fighters—in each struggle.⁴¹⁶ The decision to produce the weekly paper was taken by the Turin worker-student assembly. As the organisation extended to new areas, the paper was run by assemblies of up to 1,000 militants meeting each Saturday in a different city: workers in large industrial centres would book railway coaches every week so as to attend in considerable numbers.

After several months a delegate structure of sorts was adopted, “but this... functioned in a disorganised way... A single, national political direction was not consolidated”.⁴¹⁷ Decisions at local or factory level were taken by weekly assemblies open to all. Although students did much of the hard graft of going to factories, distributing leaflets and selling the paper, speaking rights were restricted almost entirely to workers.

Since the great mass of workers present had had no experience of politics before the previous May, they articulated the anger and militancy of the struggle—but without locating it in the total development of society. An eyewitness of one national meeting describes how reports of particular struggles alternated with ideological statements: no real discussion developed. Any attempt to work out strategy and tactics was virtually ruled out in advance as “betrayal”.

So when the union began to push for the formation of factory councils, the *Lotta Continua* militants, who understood everything in terms of their experience

of union officials selling out struggles, rejected the idea out of hand. A special issue of *Lotta Continua* devoted entirely to the question was headlined “No to the union delegates” and described them as “instruments of counter-revolutionary control over the masses”.⁴¹⁸ Directly reflecting the mood of the new militants meant repeated attacks on the unions themselves (not just on their reformist leaders), on the signing of contracts (regardless of the terms) as channelling the most militant struggles back into the framework of the system, and on any idea of fighting to bring down the Christian Democrat government: “We are not interested in bringing down a Christian Democrat junta; we want to destroy the capitalist system”.⁴¹⁹

It also meant underestimating the impact of defeats and refusing to recognise that the trade unions were increasing their influence over workers. “The political line became the extrapolation of the ‘great moments of rupture’, without asking what their result was.”⁴²⁰

Yet *Lotta Continua* was not just a spontaneous expression of the newly militant workers. Lack of structure in any organisation, far from leading to control from the ranks upwards, allows those who are most articulate, forceful or energetic to dominate. Someone had to decide on the contents of the paper, the agenda and order of speakers at meetings, which ideas were emphasised and which not. In practice *Lotta Continua*’s organisation was increasingly “a cohesive bloc around charismatic leaders”,⁴²¹ and the key leaders were not workers but intellectuals whose politics preceded 1968.

In the mid-1960s a group of intellectuals known as the “workerists” had collected around the journal *Quaderni Rossi*. Among the best known were Toni Negri and Mario Tronti.⁴²² This group argued that both revolutionary struggle and capitalist crisis arose automatically out of conflict between workers and capitalist at the point of production. Reformism, on the other hand, arose from structures outside the factory, such as unions and electoral politics. But the growing scale of industry and the replacement of the skilled worker by the “mass” (meaning unskilled or semi-skilled) worker was creating conditions for a spontaneous revolt which would automatically transform workers’ consciousness and sweep away unions, reformist parties—and capitalism.

The ideas were crude, though often expressed in a highly obscure language. But they appealed in 1967-68 to students looking for a way to turn their total morally based rejection of capitalist society into practice. And they focused on certain real problems—especially continual speed-up and ever more divisive grading systems—which were driving workers to a desperation which the unions ignored.⁴²³

The group gained influence in the Pisa area in 1967 with a regular paper.

This was not just workerist and spontaneist. It also contained a strong dose of Maoism. The students in moral revolt against capitalism took the cultural revolution in China as their example, seeing it as a spontaneous revolt against the corruption of the masses from outside. An early article stressed “the cultural revolution...the fight against bourgeois mentality and habits... The bosses’ ideas penetrate among workers outside the factory through...sport, cinema, holidays, etc.”⁴²⁴

They saw Mao Zedong’s voluntaristic stress on politics as opposed to the development of the forces of production as an advance on “traditional Leninism”, similar to their own emphasis on the immediate class struggle as opposed to objective factors.

Finally they said that Third World struggles showed that

The present period is a decisive one for the international class struggle... The law of the guerrillas is translated to the international level... In every movement the masses must be prepared to confront each form of aggression of their enemies, opposing violence to violence.⁴²⁵

When some of the group argued the need for a national organisation, with a clearly defined leadership, one of the group’s leaders, Adriano Sofri, argued strongly against this. The problem, he wrote in an influential document, was not to create a national structure, with branches and elected leaders, “but to enter into relation with the new vanguards thrown up by the struggle and in the first place by the students.”⁴²⁶ Theoretical clarity was not the important thing: “The revolutionary leadership is legitimised not by its roots in an uninterrupted historical continuity, but by its relations with the masses, by being the general expression and consciousness of the revolutionary needs of the oppressed masses”.

When the May strike erupted at FIAT Mirafiori in Turin, Sofri and his supporters went there and were soon dominating both the workerstudent assemblies and the building of Lotta Continua.

For Sofri and his group the aim “was not to take the base organised by the ‘revisionists’ or ‘reformists’, but to bring together from scratch the working class and social rebellion as this expressed itself without political mediation or ideological suppositions.”⁴²⁷ The intervention at FIAT enabled them to fulfil their hopes of creating a new force of revolutionary “mass workers”.

From its birth at FIAT, Lotta Continua succeeded in organising in its ranks, if in an oscillating and discontinuous way, a constant working class base.⁴²⁸

However politically unsophisticated the workers were at first, many had more than transitory ties with Lotta Continua. The leadership built around itself

an active, solid phalanx of worker militants.

Within Lotta Continua was formed a sort of universal subculture with specific language and forms of behaviour unified by symbolic expression (the songs of Lotta Continua, the flag with the Lotta Continua fist), which distinguished this organisation from all others.

Yet it did not transform itself into a sect:

Militancy in Lotta Continua continued to mean each comrade locating himself in the social confrontation.⁴²⁹

The second significant organisation emerged from a group of intellectuals inside the Communist Party (PCI). The party's move to reform politics had encountered limited resistance from some of its members. A clearly defined "left" tendency developed around one of the leaders, Ingrao. A group of intellectuals, of whom the best known were Rossana Rossanda and Lucio Magri, were pushed further leftwards by the impact of the students' movement, the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Chinese criticism of the Russians. In 1969 they published a magazine, *Il Manifesto*, and were formally expelled from the party. The group contained five MPs and three members of the central committee, and the magazine soon became a focus for many others. As one leading figure says:

Originally we had seen the magazine as a way of keeping discussion alive...it was only as a result of subsequent developments that we began to think of ourselves as an independent political group. We never called on PCI members to leave together with us; indeed, the majority of those who joined *Il Manifesto* were 'sixty-eighters' who had never been in the PCI. They just gathered around the magazine in various towns and over the next few years started writing to us that they had 'constituted themselves' as Manifesto groups. This forced us to get in touch with them and in the process we became an organised movement for the first time.⁴³⁰

Il Manifesto's politics were in one respect quite different from those of Lotta Continua. They saw a move to the left among the existing activists of the Communist Party and the unions as the key to any revolutionary development in Italy, while Lotta Continua was interested only in the new generation of "mass worker" militants.

Yet there were certain points of common reference—the exaltation of the Chinese cultural revolution, a counterposing of "spontaneity" to organisation, and a rejection of "classical Leninism".⁴³¹ Both Lotta Continua and *Il Manifesto* believed that the spontaneous struggle of the working class could throw up "prefigurative forms" of a future society in the here and now, even though it would be a long struggle (echoing the Maoist "Long March") before these supplanted capitalism.

The *Il Manifesto* group was considerably smaller than Lotta Continua, and

had much less influence in the workplaces. But it was important in several ways. It saw itself as the link between the “old” party left and the “new” spontaneist left—and was involved from 1971 onwards in joint campaigns with Lotta Continua. It was the first section of the revolutionary left to produce a daily paper, which was distributed by newsagents right across Italy and acted as a channel of communication for the whole of the left. It merged in 1974 with a large but diffuse grouping, the PDUP, which was formed when a left split from the Socialist Party fell apart. This had considerable passive membership (it claimed 15,000-20,000 members) and some influence in unions such as the metalworkers. Finally, the intellectuals of *Il Manifesto* frequently developed ideas which set the “common sense” of the Italian left.

The third organisation, *Avanguardia Operaia*, saw itself as “Leninist” and criticised Lotta Continua for “spontaneism” and *Il Manifesto* for “centrism”.⁴³² It built itself much more slowly and methodically at first, from a group of revolutionaries active in the Pirelli rank-and-file group, the CUB, and the Milan student movement. While Lotta Continua simply threw itself into the struggle and was identified with an almost purely agitational approach, *Avanguardia Operaia* was much more ideological, publishing not a mass paper but a bi-monthly analytical review. Whereas Lotta Continua dismissed the reformist parties out of hand as “extraneous” to the factories and to be pushed aside by the upsurge of struggle, *Avanguardia Operaia* argued they still had much room for manoeuvre.⁴³³

Yet *Avanguardia* mixed with its “Leninism” many of the ideas fashionable with the 1968-69 spontaneists. Some of its leaders had been orthodox Trotskyists;⁴³⁴ they now embraced China and the Cultural Revolution.⁴³⁵ The organisation first grew by collecting activists in Milan, but then expanded at great speed by fusing with a variety of Leninist and “Marxist-Leninist” groups in other cities.⁴³⁶ Its leadership were sophisticated revolutionary socialists, but in 1969-70 they posed the rank-and-file CUB groups as an alternative to the unions and, like Lotta Continua, rejected work within the framework of the newly formed factory councils.

The growth of the revolutionary left

All three organisations grew in the years 1969-72, absorbing many of those who in 1968 had been unorganised spontaneists or in the orthodox Maoist groups. They became a significant force within the most active sections of the working class.

The recession of 1971 and the formation of the centre right Andreotti

government in 1972 made the struggle harder in the factories, but increased bitterness throughout society as a whole. Inspired by the upheaval of 1968-69, hundreds of thousands of people fought back against increased hardship and repression. Violent conflicts with police occurred during occupations of empty houses by immigrant workers in Milan and protests by the unemployed in Naples. There were revolts in the prisons and new waves of struggle in the middle schools. Lotta Continua threw itself into all these struggles, finding new audiences for its ideas.

The spontaneous creation of revolutionary consciousness through struggle now began to mean “conquering the cities” to create “red bases”, from which the police were excluded.⁴³⁷ The notion of “the proletariat” was broadened to include all “the oppressed”. Stress was laid on the “revolutionary violence” that such struggles led to:

Armed struggle begins with the defence of a small minority of tenants and ends with the fight of the people against imperialism.⁴³⁸

Lotta Continua called a day of protest against repression in May 1971, with demonstrations in many cities; that in Turin was attacked by the police and led to 56 arrests, with 13 members jailed for more than a year.

It soon became clear, however, that the revolutionary left could not deal with the new offensives of the employers and the right through street demonstrations alone. This was brought home hard to Lotta Continua in June 1971 when FIAT management got away with sacking a number of militants.⁴³⁹ The revolutionary left needed a new strategy if it was to avoid a wave of arrests and sackings.

The intellectuals of *Il Manifesto* were the first to react. The right’s offensive, they argued, justified their own orientation towards the Communist Party and the unions. The main threat, they said, was a movement towards fascism whose main exponent they claimed was the Christian Democrat leader Fanfani. They called on the revolutionary left to campaign for support from the big left parties and the unions against his efforts to become president late in 1971.

Lotta Continua accepted the call, and organised joint demonstrations with *Il Manifesto* around the slogan “Down with Fanfanism”. Fanfani’s presidential ambitions were not fulfilled, but when the centre right Andreotti government was formed soon afterwards, Lotta Continua raised the slogan “Kick out Andreotti”. This was taken up in many factories and on many demonstrations.

This was a period of violent conflict with the fascists: a Lotta Continua headline in April 1972 claimed that the Christian Democrats and the bosses were “preparing civil war against the working class”.⁴⁴⁰ This may not have fitted the real intentions of the main sections of Italian capitalism, but few activists whose

only political training had been in the strikes and demonstrations of the previous three years were likely to grasp that.

For young people coming to Lotta Continua in this period, militant military anti-fascism was the principal point of reference...conditioned strongly by the history and political formation of the generation who emerged after 1968.⁴⁴¹

The turn to militant anti-fascist and anti-Christian Democrat activity in 1971 and 1972 was in complete contrast to the abstentionism in the elections of 1970. Yet there was a thread connecting the two. The spontaneism of the leaders of Lotta Continua, their belief that revolutionary politics arises immediately out of the struggle, meant in 1969 articulating the hatred of strike activists against the reformist parties and the union apparatuses. In 1971 and 1972 it meant articulating the feelings of those who found Communist Party members and union activists were as worried as they were by the growth of the far right. Lotta Continua recognised in September 1972 that “at the head of the struggle you also find workers organised by the Communist Party and the unions”.⁴⁴² Soon it was admitting it had been “sectarian” to try to build new organisations opposed to the factory councils.

This was not a shift towards joint activity with rank-and-file members of the Communist Party in order to win them to a perspective different from that of their leaders. Spontaneism means adapting to whoever the organisation worked with, adopting much of their ideology. So in this period Lotta Continua tended to glorify, in an uncritical way, the “militant past” of the Communist Party.

The new orientation found complete expression in 1973 after the coup which overthrew the left wing Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende in Chile. The coup should have been the ultimate proof that the so-called parliamentary road to socialism was a road to disaster.⁴⁴³ The intellectuals of *Il Manifesto* concluded otherwise.

The value of the Popular Unity government, they said, was proved by the fact that the Chilean ruling class, backed by US imperialism, had found it necessary to overthrow it. There had been a “dialectical interaction” between the Popular Unity parties and the working class.⁴⁴⁴ The Italian left must learn how to open a similar “rupture” in society by building an Italian equivalent of Popular Unity.

Lotta Continua accepted this analysis. The “crisis of imperialism” pointed to a choice between fascism and revolution. The lesson of Chile was “the need for revolutionary leadership by the proletarian armed base” and that the way to break Italian capitalism was no longer through the “mass worker vanguard”, but by bringing about a reformist government which would give “the maximum

space to the reinforcement of the revolutionary struggle and the revolutionary organisations”.⁴⁴⁵

The outcome of this analysis was that the main slogan of Lotta Continua became “The Communist Party to the government”. In the 1975 elections it urged its supporters to vote for the Communist Party rather than for a joint list put up by Il Manifesto-PDUP and Avanguardia Operaia.

Avanguardia Operaia, for its part, at first rejected the notion that the choice in Italy was revolution or fascism. It criticised Il Manifesto and Lotta Continua for posing the issue like that. By overrating the prospects of the fascists they were, it said, creating illusions which hid the real danger—a deal between the reformists and Christian Democrats at the expense of the most militant sections of workers.⁴⁴⁶

But its leaders proved incapable of maintaining this position. They had built their organisation by adapting to the ideas of those thrown into political life by the events of 1968-69. They did not know how to sustain it without adapting to the new mood of the 1970s.

They had no theory that explained the inner development of capitalist crisis. In the late 1960s and early 1970s they stressed the particularities of the Italian situation, focussing on the need of big business for a reform strategy and ignoring the trend towards international capitalist crisis.⁴⁴⁷ Then with the international recession in 1973-74 they argued Italian capitalism was in “irresolvable crisis”.⁴⁴⁸

This shift was reflected in the organisation’s practice. In the earlier period they believed they could use the CUBS to bypass the unions. When this failed, they collapsed into trying to influence the unions’ bureaucratic structures.⁴⁴⁹

Avanguardia moved, in fact, towards a theory of their own that fascism was on the agenda. Italian capitalism, they argued, was moving towards a “strong state” which would rely upon repression to smash all workers’ struggles and repress the revolutionary left. It was easy to conclude from this analysis that the most important task for revolutionaries was to make alliances with the reformist leaders in order to dissuade them from helping capitalism establish this “strong state”. It also seemed to follow that winning the reformist leaders to such an alliance would block the way out of the economic crisis for Italian capitalism and push society towards a revolutionary confrontation.

What Avanguardia had rejected after the Chile coup in 1973 it accepted in 1976 when it joined Il Manifesto and Lotta Continua in putting forward an election list which held that the formation of a “left government”—comprised of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and themselves—could open up the road to socialism in Italy.⁴⁵⁰ If the perspective was imminent revolutionary

struggle, then a large party was needed: by 1976 Avanguardia was looking to increase its influence by a merger with those they had previously attacked as “centrists”—the intellectuals and trade union officials of Il Manifesto-PDUP.

Both Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia began to take from Mao not just the voluntarism and alleged spontaneity of the Cultural Revolution, but the Stalinist model of the party. The Lotta Continua congress in December 1974 officially adopted statutes “actually modelled on the statutes of the Chinese Communist Party”.⁴⁵¹ The Avanguardia Operaia congress in the same year was replete with references to “the need to learn from the Chinese Communist Party”.⁴⁵² This was the other side to the turn towards “national politics”.

Neither organisation could join street fights with the fascists or alliances with other political forces unless it had a centralised leadership capable of quick strategic and tactical shifts and turns. If a rapid sequence of events similar to that in Chile was expected, then a disciplined party was an absolute necessity. Without the experience of genuine democratic centralism, based on open and honest discussion, a move to bureaucratic centralism became inevitable, with all sorts of Stalinist characteristics.

The turning point

The revolutionary left entered 1976 expecting great events. It believed that eight years of frenetic activity were about to culminate in a period of greater struggle than ever before.

In 1974 Fanfani’s divorce referendum had completely rebounded on him. In the 1975 regional elections the Communist Party had got its highest vote ever, and the candidates of Avanguardia Operaia and Il Manifesto-PDUP picked up 400,000 votes in the northern cities. The Christian Democrats and their government allies were embroiled in a massive bribery scandal. Price rises imposed by them had led to a new wave of spontaneous strikes and demonstrations in the factories, climaxing in a one-day general strike. They could not avoid being forced into a general election in 1976. Almost the whole of the left believed the “Chile” perspective was going to be put to the test.

But the election of 20 June did not end the domination of Christian Democracy. The party’s vote was slightly up on 1975 and the Communist Party’s slightly down—although substantially higher than in 1972. The revolutionary candidates, although now backed by all three organisations, did worse.

The electoral arithmetic pointed to a government of the “historic compromise”—and one very much on the Christian Democrats’ terms—rather

than to a “left government”.

If the revolutionary left had had a perspective of five or ten years more of struggle, this would not have mattered.

The fact that the Communist Party had much more support among the mass of workers than the revolutionary left was not really surprising. It had not been in office nationally for nearly 30 years. It had displayed enough flexibility after 1969 to build new union mechanisms in the factory, with a layer of more than 200,000 delegates linking the unions to activity on the shop floor. If many militant workers had been only too willing to ignore these mechanisms while they were still on the offensive in 1969-70, in the harder times since then they had helped protect wages against inflation and had provided some protection to militants against victimisation.

The arguments of the Communist Party and the unions were bound to appeal to some workers who had previously ignored them: already in 1972 a number of workers at FIAT had left Lotta Continua to join the Communist Party. Those arguments would wear thin with the Communist Party in government, but this would take time. The revolutionary left had to be patient in the meantime.

Patience was a commodity in very short supply on the Italian revolutionary left in 1976. For three years people had been told by their leaders that the elections were going to bring a decisive improvement in their fortunes. When it did not happen there was mass demoralisation.

Lotta Continua was the first victim. After the organisation turned to serious politics in 1972-76 many of its members dropped out to continue the old approach of developing “autonomous” struggles through local collectives. They would fight locally in housing campaigns, tenants’ struggles, against the fascists, and, increasingly after the divorce referendum, through women’s collectives on issues such as abortion.

Until 1976 “autonomism” was not very significant. The leaderships of the revolutionary organisations could argue, with conviction, that the local collectives were diverting people from a strategy that was going in a revolutionary direction.

The election result of 20 June 1976 changed all that. Sofri, as general secretary, told the Lotta Continua national committee there had been a “political defeat” and that the organisation had made “the most disastrous error of our history”. At the organisation’s congress in Rimini at the beginning of November he gave the introductory speech.

But it soon became clear that the content of his speech was irrelevant. After he had finished some women members took over the platform. They insisted the women delegates had to meet separately before the congress could resume. The

worker delegates then announced they were doing the same.⁴⁵³

Women in the party had started meeting separately after a confrontation with the organisation's stewarding squad, the "service of order", on an abortion demonstration the previous December. It was a women-only demonstration, but the all-male "service of order" insisted on trying to break into it in order to argue against the "inter-classist notion" of excluding men. In the aftermath hundreds of women members had occupied Lotta Continua's headquarters and its women's commission had denounced "masculine power in Lotta Continua" in the paper.⁴⁵⁴

The clash between the women and the "service of order" was a symptom of an underlying malaise. The "service of order" had become almost a party within a party, the elite group of male activists who embodied its tendency towards militarism and its Maoist-Stalinist notion of what a party should be like. The women members had felt excluded from the "mass worker" struggles in the big factories and the street fighting. By contrast, in the abortion movement they could lead thousands of women from all classes, acting as an "internal vanguard" themselves. The men of the "service of order" were trying to prevent this and were encroaching on its "autonomy".

The collapse of the organisation's perspectives on 20 June suddenly made all its old priorities seem wrong. The "autonomous" meetings of the women and other "autonomous struggles" now came to seem an alternative to the discredited politics of the leadership. There was a general "crisis of militancy", with people beginning to question the immense efforts they had put in over the previous eight years. One activist comments:

20 June was the first explicit defeat of the generation of '68: with it collapsed all the hopes which had, in some way, legitimised the social conditions of the 'militants'.⁴⁵⁵

The congress became the forum where all the party's different sections expressed their feelings. "The external world, the masses, the political situation disappeared completely. The debate was completely internal."⁴⁵⁶

When the full congress resumed women and workers took it in turns to mount the rostrum. The "discussion" amounted to an airing of grievances with each other and with the party. The national leadership was the butt of much of the criticism. Its response was not to argue back, but to indulge in self-criticism. Sofri even declared that the question of whether to leave the organisation or not, whether to split or not were "decisions that are up to those who have lived through, and understood this congress."⁴⁵⁷ What mattered for each comrade was their own "individual autonomy".

Sofri and the group around him had built Lotta Continua by giving expression to the immediate feelings of those involved in a succession of

struggles, without insisting on fitting them into any tight ideological framework. Now they reacted to the feelings of bitterness against themselves by giving expression to them. Any other approach would have been to break with the whole spontaneist Maoist tradition.

Within months the organisation that most embodied the Italian spirit of 1968 had collapsed.

This might not have mattered had the other revolutionary socialist organisations remained to pick up some of the pieces. But Avanguardia Operaia, Il Manifesto and the PDUP were in crisis as well.

The leadership of Avanguardia split in the aftermath of the election. The national secretary and more than a quarter of the national committee attacked the majority of the party for holding that the Communist Party was “not a democratic and progressive party”,⁴⁵⁸ then split to merge with Il Manifesto.

Il Manifesto, meanwhile, was splitting from most of the old PDUP, with most of its intellectuals rejoining the Communist Party.

The remains of Avanguardia and PDUP merged. But the result was not the big party both had dreamt of a year before, but a small and disorganised rump: Avanguardia had had 3,000 active militants in Milan before the June elections, the new organisation had only 1,000 passive supporters.

Meanwhile the employers pressed ahead with plans to rationalise Italian industry, discussions took place on how the worker unrest of the previous seven years could be brought to an end through Communist support for a Christian Democrat-dominated government, the police treated demonstrators with renewed confidence and brutality, and coherent revolutionary socialist leadership was less and less present when people were driven to spontaneous rebellion.

The movement of '77

In 1967-68 the student revolt in Italy had been followed closely by the upsurge of worker struggles. In 1977 there was a new mass student revolt, but this time it remained isolated. Instead of growing, the revolutionary left died.

The new student struggles began in February after a group of fascists invaded Rome university. Students occupied the Faculty of Letters in protest. The next day thousands marched on the office of the neo-fascist MSI. They were met by police, who fired on the demonstrators.

From Rome the protests spread to other major cities. At this stage, despite the bitterness against the police and the fascists, the mood of the protests recalled that of the international student occupations of 1967-68. There was a sense of exhilaration, of creativeness, with a stress on new “lifestyles”.

There were continuing and endless debates... There were also the (often stormy) general assemblies, where the movement decided its policies. Anyone who had anything to say wrote out a large letter wall poster, Chinese style, and stuck it up on a wall. The walls were covered with writings, some serious, some polemical, many just zany.⁴⁵⁹

But the mood soon changed. Italian capitalism was determined to isolate the student movement, to prevent it influencing the workers and upsetting plans for the massive rationalisation of Italian industry. The Communist Party, seeing itself on the verge of government power, was eager to help.

The pattern for the months ahead was laid down at Rome University on 17 February. The Communist Party sent a top union leader, Luciano Lama, to “talk sense” to the students—and with him went a stewarding party of hundreds of union activists who were told they were to “defend the university which is occupied by the fascists”. Lama’s harangue was continually interrupted by student chants. Fights began to break out, until Lama and his stewards withdrew.

That afternoon the riot police moved into the campus to applause from about 1,000 Communist spectators.⁴⁶⁰ Dozens of students were injured by the police clubs and teargas.

The three weeks which followed were marked by further mass demonstrations in Rome, further attacks by police using baton charges and teargas, and further shootings by fascist groups. Finally a 100,000-strong national demonstration took place in the city. The police attacked the demonstrators and opened fire, killing a 19-year-old school student. Police dressed as hippies were photographed pulling out revolvers and firing from behind police lines.

Meanwhile in Bologna police shot down a Lotta Continua student, then attacked an 8,000-strong protest demonstration. Three thousand riot police occupied the university and closed down left wing radio stations; the Communist Party supported the police actions, saying “the security forces must intervene” in the face of “an explicit attack on the democratic institutions”.⁴⁶¹

This was not just a student movement. In cities such as Rome there were thousands of unemployed and part-employed former students, many of whom had been round the revolutionary left. The movement had close connections with feminist protests—to a large extent organised by women former members of Lotta Continua—with large demonstrations in Rome against the way the police treated a rape victim.

But the movement could not spread out from the student ghetto and “*marginali*” to the main body of workers. Since 1969 the union leaders had built the factory councils into a powerful structure linking them to the shop floor, a job made easier by the revolutionary left’s abstentionism. Tens of thousands of

Communist Party supporters and union delegates now argued with their fellow workers that the “historic compromise” was the only way forward, the only alternative to economic crisis, 30 percent inflation, the “dissolution of democratic institutions” and “collapse into chaos”.

It was a message the majority of organised workers were prepared to accept—for the time being. The “restructuring of industry” had still not led to redundancies in the large plants; the *scala mobile* was still protecting living standards—the first slow steps towards dismantling it were not taken until the end of March 1977; there was still the hope that Communist participation in the government would improve things.

The *Lotta Continua* paper carried revealing interviews with FIAT activists in March. One worker said that on the whole there was a positive attitude to the students’ struggles, but without a clear idea what the students wanted. People were badly informed about the government measures: “The anti-crime campaign is probably the one that has most effect on workers. If someone starts saying we need order and tranquillity, he will normally get a hearing”.⁴⁶²

The isolation of the movement of 1977 from the workers in the large factories had two effects. It gave the police a much freer hand to attack the occupations and demonstrations, and it encouraged within the movement itself the growth of tendencies which argued it did not need the support of the industrial workers. The idea that each movement could win through its own “autonomous” struggle received an enormous boost.

As the police clamped down, those known as the “organised autonomists” grew in strength. Their ideas had been developed by a group around sociology professor Toni Negri which had split away when *Lotta Continua* was formed in 1969. They had shifted their theory so that now the “factory” was seen as encompassing the whole of society, and the “proletariat” was no longer the “mass worker” in the factory, but anyone oppressed by “social capital”. This “social worker” was the student, the unemployed, the hippy—and indeed the social worker—just as much as the factory worker. The very existence of social capital, they argued, proved that society had reached a point of transformation from capitalism to socialism. The transformation would take place as a result of a spontaneous upsurge, in which a vital ingredient would be the “marginal elements”. Like any other proletarian upsurge it would have to involve the use of “mass violence”, and every clash on the streets helped build towards this.⁴⁶³

Such ideas fitted perfectly the mood of many of those who had been around *Lotta Continua* in its street fighting years. There had always been a tendency for *Lotta Continua* to exalt violence for its own sake. Although it had previously opposed individual terrorism, it praised one of the earliest actions of the Red

Brigades, the brief kidnapping of a SIT-Siemens director, Macchiavini, and referred to the assassination of a police chief, Calabresi, as “an act in which the exploited can recognise their own desire for justice”.⁴⁶⁴ The “organised autonomists” were now the inheritors of this tradition.

There was growing support for them when they put on masks, took up arms and fought against the police from the heart of mass demonstrations. By the time the movement organised a national gathering in Bologna in September, the “organised autonomists” were “hegemonic”.⁴⁶⁵

But for a socially isolated movement to take up guns against the police on mass demonstrations, as the autonomists did, was disastrous. It played straight into the Communist Party’s hands, allowing it to present the students as “anti-democratic lunatics”. This in turn allowed the police to crack down more violently than ever. The autonomists could fight the police, denounce the remnants of the revolutionary organisations and dominate the movement—but they had no strategy for taking it forward.

There was one organised group which did have a strategy, albeit a disastrous one—the Red Brigades.

This was a small underground group formed many years earlier which engaged in acts of low level terrorism—setting fire to the cars of company directors, bank raids, kidnapping managers for a few days to “interrogate” them, shooting personnel managers and union officials in the legs.

The Red Brigades reacted to the capture and trial of their leader in 1977 by escalating their terror campaign to include assassinations of lawyers and police chiefs—just as the autonomists were arguing for shooting back at the police on demonstrations. A year later they projected themselves into the centre of political events by kidnapping and then killing the Christian Democrat leader, Aldo Moro—the key figure in negotiating the formation of a new Communist-backed government.

The Red Brigades now attracted many of those disillusioned by the collapse of the revolutionary left, radicalised by the police and Communist Party attacks on the movement of 1977 and influenced by the arguments of the autonomists. They could claim that their organised individual terrorism was simply putting into practice what the autonomists preached. As one of the autonomists’ theorists said later: “The error was to allow the armed groups to insert themselves in the same social area covered by the autonomia and to recruit their militants from it.”⁴⁶⁶

The growth of terrorism frightened individual politicians, industrialists and police chiefs—but it was a godsend to the ruling class as a whole. In the early 1970s they had had to manufacture a “strategy of tension” to drive the leaders of

the working class parties and the unions into their hands. Now what claimed to be a section of the revolutionary left was doing that work for them.

The Communist and Socialist parties hastened to vote through emergency laws which gave the police a free hand to do more or less whatever they wanted to those suspected of terrorism. They could arrest virtually anyone associated with the revolutionary movement over the years and hold them indefinitely. According to one account there were 3,500 “political prisoners” in 1980.⁴⁶⁷

Meanwhile workers joined their bosses in rallies against “violence”, and the Communist leaders could isolate any critic of their participation in the governmental majority as a “Red Brigades sympathiser”. At FIAT management used such alleged “sympathies” as an excuse for sacking 61 leading militants in 1979.

There were, of course, some genuine sympathisers of the Red Brigades in the factories, but the logic of their politics was to drive them underground, making them keep their views secret. They would be the last people to risk “blowing their cover” by standing up to the witch hunt against those with revolutionary socialist views.

The very scale of the repression drove more of the activists from 1977 to join the terrorist groups in 1978, and armed actions increased in frequency. But they were increasingly random, blows in the dark by those trapped in a corner, no longer fitting even the rather tortured strategy of the Red Brigades’ founders. Their former leaders published a communiqué complaining of “militaristic subjectivity”⁴⁶⁸ and a growing number of “penitents” were prepared to testify against other Brigade members. By 1980 the state was well on its way to crushing them.

But they had done their work. They had helped bury what remained of the genuine revolutionary left. The *Lotta Continua* newspaper continued to appear for a time. But horror at the round of terror—and at the revelations of what Maoism meant in practice in China, and, even worse in Kampuchea—led those who produced it away from revolutionary socialist politics.

Proletarian Democracy, the merged remnants of Avanguardia Operaia and the PDUP, continued to exist, but increasingly as a vague current of opinion, basing itself on the left current in the union apparatuses and on its ability to win a few council and parliamentary seats. Its 1979 election posters declared that a “51 percent vote for the left” would lead in a socialist direction.

As for the “movements” that had seemed so powerful in 1977, within a couple of years they were reduced to passive pressure groups, finding political expression not in revolution, but in the extreme liberal Radical Party and even the opportunist Socialist Party. Even those who had most enthused about the

“autonomous” struggles of 1977 were forced to conclude in 1980: “There is no left in Italy today. A left with a platform, a Marxist platform, does not exist”.

The Communist Party had served its function for Italian capitalism and helped quell the great wave of workers’ struggles. It was squeezed out of the government majority, and lost votes in the election of 1979. It was running out of excuses to give to its own activists.

The party was forced to take a stand when FIAT announced thousands of redundancies in 1980 and the factory was occupied. But the resistance by the Communist Party and the unions was only token. A real fight against FIAT needed an organisation of militants prepared to take the initiative out of their hands. The collapse of the revolutionary left ensured there was no such organisation.

FIAT management bussed in foremen and “loyal” workers from every FIAT plant in Italy to stage an anti-strike demonstration, and the leaders called the struggle off. Things were nearly back to where they started in 1968.

Yet this outcome was in no way inevitable. The Italian experience showed how tens of thousands of workers could move to revolutionary politics in an advanced industrial country. Unfortunately it also showed how they could be misled.

The dying flame

GERMANY AND France were seen internationally as the centres of the student movement in 1968. Yet in neither country were the students who came to revolutionary politics that year able to have an impact on events afterwards comparable to that of the movement in Italy.

France's rulers were able to recover much more quickly from May 1968 than Italy's did from the "hot autumn". De Gaulle's own troubles were not over—he was forced to devalue the franc in autumn 1968 and resigned after losing a referendum the following spring. But his demise did not herald any new period of instability for his class, and right wing parties were to hold government power for another dozen years without difficulty.

The economy grew rapidly until 1974, with an average growth rate of 6 percent⁴⁶⁹ and without great industrial unrest.

The May-June 1968 strikes were the high point of the increase in French labour action after the mid-1960s, although a degree of action continued until 1973-4... The French May led to nothing like the accentuated trade union shop-floor power which followed the Italian hot autumn.⁴⁷⁰

In part this was because the high level of capital accumulation under de Gaulle had created an economy much more competitive than most economists had predicted. So long as world capitalism continued to boom, its French sector was able to reap high profits despite conceding considerable improvements in living standards to its workers—wages rose on average by 15 percent as a result of May 1968, but prices rose only 6.4 percent.

Partly this was because France's rulers made changes in order to reduce the chances of another build-up of bitterness like that in May. The governments which followed de Gaulle behaved in a much less authoritarian manner, allowing the re-emergence of structures which could mediate between the central state and the mass of the population. The parliamentary deputies and local authorities were allowed an increased role, the state-run broadcasting stations were not so

obviously rigged, the police were not so heavy-handed when it came to dealing with picket lines or with youth on the streets (although their essential thuggishness remained untouched). All these reforms could absorb a certain amount of discontent.

But just as important was the way the trade unions had behaved in May itself. By ending the strikes in key parts of the public sector before the employers met the claims of other, less well-organised sectors—especially motors, engineering and chemicals—they made it difficult for short-term militancy to be translated into long-term shop-floor strength. Workers entered the autumn of 1968 a little tired, keen to recoup earnings lost in May and June, and not at all eager to risk further five or six-week strikes. Because the French strikes in May had rarely escaped the control of the trade union leaders—as the Italian strikes did—the French unions did not experience anything like the expansion of union membership and shop-floor organisation that occurred in Italy.

This created immense problems for revolutionaries born of the May events. May had shown that what was decisive, at the end of the day, was not hegemony on the Left Bank but in the factories. There the most important workers' organisations remained in the hands of the Communist-run CGT. This bureaucratic apparatus could not have survived a sustained shop-floor revolt such as that in Italy—but it didn't have to.

The CGT had lost some influence after May, but remained by far the most influential of the union federations, receiving 70 percent of the votes for manual workers' representatives. The way the CGT operated meant that to take part in union meetings you had to be elected a "delegate" in government-run workplace elections. Delegates were allowed up to 20 hours off work each month to attend meetings, and all union meetings were held in work time. But it was difficult to be elected a delegate unless nominated by the union. The final "Catch 22" was that if you stood against the union list, you would be expelled from the CGT and banned from its meetings anyway.⁴⁷¹

Yet the CGT was traditionally regarded as the "most militant" union, to which workers looked if they wanted to build sustained union strength.

The dying flame The new revolutionaries did have some impact in the working class. May meant that most French workers now had some idea what the revolutionary left stood for. No longer could the Communist Party and the CGT simply beat its members up as "fascists" when they sold their papers outside factories. Many young workers had flocked to the Latin Quarter in May and joined the demonstrations of the revolutionary students; even the CGT could not stop some of them gaining influence within the factories.

The other main union federation, the CFDT, was eager to build at the CGT's expense. For a few years it allowed its activists leeway for militancy, particularly in sectors where it was weak. It also went in for left-sounding talk about "autogestion" (roughly translatable as "workers' control"). But it showed its essential moderation by urging a vote for the anti-Gaullist centre right candidate, Poher, in the 1969 presidential election.

The revolutionary organisations grew quickly at first, as student groupings such as the 22 March Movement disintegrated and their members looked to those who seemed serious about building in the working class. Yet none of the organisations could find a magic way to establish influence in the factories.

Some student activists, such as Alain Geismar, moved towards a form of Maoism which claimed that immediate, violent confrontation would gain mass workers' support. They fought the police, staged "raids" on factories, even carried out the token kidnapping of a particularly nasty manager. The government banned their paper and imprisoned some of their leaders. They gained notoriety, the sympathy of France's best-known philosopher and writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, who defied the ban by selling their paper in public, and some support among young workers. But their approach was bound to fail. By the late 1970s their organisations hardly existed, their best-known intellectuals, such as André Glucksmann, had become bitterly anti-Marxist "new philosophers", and the daily paper they had founded with Sartre, *Libération*, had become a mouthpiece for the right wing of the Socialist Party.

The Trotskyist organisations did a little better. The Ligue Communiste, successor to the JCR, recruited 3,000 or 4,000 students, was able to develop a small faction in the CFDT, started a daily paper, and was the most visible of the revolutionary organisations by the mid-1970s. But it achieved no sustained influence inside the working class movement. The CFDT leadership eventually purged its faction and its daily paper sold almost entirely to students and ex-students. By the mid-1970s many of its militants were suffering from the same "crisis of militancy" as the Italian left.

The Ligue Communiste leadership tried to break into national politics by a brief lurch towards street fighting in 1974—slugging it out with the police outside fascist meetings at a time when the fascists were completely insignificant. When this led only to damaging repression by the state (the organisation was banned and had to change its name), the Ligue swung right over to electoral politics, stressing the need for the Socialists and Communists to win an electoral majority. Leaders such as Alain Krivine, who had broken from the Communist Party because of its support for Mitterrand in the early 1960s, were claiming by 1979-80 that a Mitterrand government would open the door to

revolutionary change.

Lutte Ouvrière also grew, but in a different way. Students who joined were told not to do political work in the colleges, but to direct all their efforts into putting fortnightly bulletins into workplaces. At the same time, Lutte Ouvrière increasingly emphasised the propaganda value of putting up candidates in parliamentary and presidential elections. It slowly built its organisation in this way, and was able to sustain itself through to the 1980s. But it showed no ability to relate to any wider audience, in factories or colleges, who might be drawn to sudden political concern by non-industrial issues—such as the sudden rise in support for the fascist Le Pen in the early 1980s. Even in industrial struggles, Lutte Ouvrière would not campaign for wider support among other workers unless its own members were directly involved.

The new German revolutionaries faced even bigger problems. Their rebellion in 1968 had attracted the support of many working class youth. In summer 1968 they had taken part in demonstrations called by trade unionists in protest at new laws enabling the government to take emergency powers when it wished—such as when faced with a major strike. But this was not the same as forging links with organised workers, or influencing their struggles.

The difficulty was that the German trade union movement was just as bureaucratic, in its own way, as the French CGT. The only shop-floor representation was through delegate bodies chosen in government-run elections by the whole workforce of each factory. People rarely stood a chance of getting elected unless backed by the union appointed *Vertrauensleute* (literally, “trustees”). There was no structure by which workers in a section could elect and control their own representative.⁴⁷² And it was illegal for delegates to lead strikes except when contracts had run out.

This structure was shaken briefly in autumn 1969. An unofficial strike for higher wages spread from the Hoesch steelworks in Dortmund to miners, transport and brewery workers.⁴⁷³ More than 140,000 workers struck, forcing the employers and the unions to rush through negotiations to grant wage increases before the movement got out of hand.

But the old bureaucratic forms soon reasserted themselves. As one academic account says: “Although severe by German standards, the 1969-70 crisis in industrial relations did not discredit in Germany the existing rules of the game”.⁴⁷⁴ The German Social Democratic Party, the SPD, dominated the government after the 1969 elections. It used direct and indirect means to quell the revolt: deflationary measures and pressure on the unions through the party and the union federation.

The German economy was the strongest in Western Europe. The government

felt secure enough through the first half of the 1970s to hold down inflation, even if the result was a slower growth rate. This allowed the trade union leaders to keep their members more in check than elsewhere in Europe—as graphically shown by the figures for strike days per 100 workers. Even in 1967-71 this reached only eight in Germany, as against 60 in Britain, 161 in Italy and (swollen by May 1968) 350 in France. In 1972-76 the German figures were even lower—three, as against the Italian 200, the British 97 and the French 34.⁴⁷⁵

The German SDS effectively collapsed, isolated, after its December 1968 congress. Its scheme of changing the balance of forces in society through the high school movement was an illusion.⁴⁷⁶ But that was far from being the end of the revolutionary left. Student activists, influenced by events in France and Italy, turned in large numbers to “factory-work”—especially after the autumn 1969 strikes. This shift was accompanied by a sudden discovery of the value of “Leninist” forms of organisation.⁴⁷⁷

But the ideas of the new “Leninists” reflected their isolation from working class struggle. The members of the anti-authoritarian student movement had opposed Leninism by identifying it with Stalinism. Now they continued to make the same identification, but positively rather than negatively. They adopted Maoist and Stalinist politics and used them to claim they were the “leadership” of the revolutionary struggle even if the working class did not recognise this.

For a time rival Maoist-Stalinist organisations attracted large numbers of students and ex-students, and some young workers. Members were enormously dedicated. One organisation claimed in April 1974 that its 1,208 members were selling 40,000 copies of its paper between them.⁴⁷⁸ Many took jobs in factories in an attempt to contact workers.

But the dedication was wasted. It was based, not on any concrete evaluation of the development of German capitalism and the struggles of German workers, but on attempts to apply to Germany schema from Lenin in 1903 and Mao in 1929. This made the difficult task of trying to relate to a non-militant working class movement impossible. What is more, the fixation on China led to repeated organisational splits whenever the Chinese leaders turned on each other, and to tortuous politics—as when some ended up supporting increased German military spending on the grounds that Russian “social imperialism” was the major enemy.

Maoism was not the only politics to flourish. The failure of the revolutionary left to connect with real social forces led some of its adherents to try to shake society through individual terrorism. Groupings such as the Red Army Faction or Baader-Meinhof Group emerged, received enormous media publicity for their exploits, and seemed to many of those radicalised in 1968 to epitomise revolutionary daring.

The German state had even less difficulty dealing with them than the Italian state had with the Red Brigades. By the late 1970s their leaders were all in jail, where, the state claimed, several committed suicide simultaneously. Meanwhile the state had used the “terrorist menace” to justify harassment of the far left.

Almost all the Maoist and spontaneist organisations eventually collapsed into a new form of electoralism. Unable to break through to German workers, they identified with an alliance of students, ex-students, the middle classes and some farmers—the Green Party. This in turn dropped its principles to help the Social Democratic Party govern the state of Hesse. The one-time spontaneist Maoist, Joschka Fischer, was the Greens’ first minister, sitting in a government that continued with its nuclear power programme.

The British upturn

IN FRANCE the class struggle reached a single great peak in May 1968. In Italy it rose to a high level in the “hot autumn” of 1969 and stayed there for many months. In Britain there was a rising wave of struggle from 1969 through to the spring of 1974.

This began with a revolt against wage controls in 1969, suffered a lull after the defeat of the postal workers’ strike early in 1971, then revived with a vengeance that summer when shipbuilding workers on the Clyde “worked in” in opposition to a scheme to close the yards with largescale redundancies. In 1972 there was a wave of factory occupations, the first national miners’ strike for 46 years, and national strikes by builders and dockers, while 1973 saw the first ever industrial action by civil servants and hospital workers.

The climax came in the winter of 1973-74. In response to a miners’ overtime ban, the government put industry on a three-day week—attempting to isolate the miners but instead sparking a second national miners’ strike. Panic in the corridors of Whitehall led the head of the civil service to a nervous breakdown and the Tory government to a general election on the issue “Who rules the country?” This failed to break the miners, and the Tories lost the election.

The number of strike days rose from less than 5 million in 1968 to 13.5 million in 1971 and 23.9 million in 1972. After a fall to 7 million in 1973, this rose again to 14.75 million in 1974.

The employers’ offensive

The greatest wave of industrial struggle Britain had seen since the 1920s had its origins in a series of offensives by employers and governments against workers’ living standards, working conditions and shop-floor trade union organisation. These offensives were the result of a growing recognition that British-based industrial capital was losing out in international competition.

In the early 1950s Britain, benefitting from the damage done to Germany by the Second World War, was still the world's greatest exporter of manufactured goods. Employers grew accustomed to substantial profits, guaranteed, on virtually everything their factories produced. Many neglected to modernise their plant and equipment⁴⁷⁹ and their marketing networks. Most avoided long industrial disputes lest sales and profits suffered.

The result was a working class with little experience of large-scale class confrontation, in which right wing social democratic ideas were more likely to be challenged by working class conservatism than by those who claimed to belong to a revolutionary socialist tradition. But within the working class important sections had developed powerful shop-floor organisation, only loosely bound to the national union machines. This was especially true in the engineering and motor industries, where "payment by results" was widespread and the bargaining power of the local shop steward was a major determinant of individual workers' wages and working conditions. But it was also true in the coalmines, where face workers in particular had a long tradition of local, unofficial strikes over job rates, and in the docks, where networks of militants would organise strikes from mass meetings at the dock gates.

By the 1960s British capitalism was clearly losing to West Germany and Japan in the fight for an expanding share of an expanding world market. Successive crises in the balance of payments emphasised this. Employers, governments, political commentators and right wing trade unions saw success for British capitalism as dependent upon finding ways to discipline rank-and-file trade unionists, to weaken shop steward organisation and to increase productivity. The press regularly ran front pages on shop steward "outrages" at particular car plants; two popular films were made (*The Angry Silence* and *I'm all right Jack*), which portrayed shop stewards in a hostile way; the right wing president of the engineering union, Bill Carron, referred to stewards as "werewolves"; and in 1965 the Labour government set up a Royal Commission under Lord Donovan specifically to look into "this problem".

After 1964 the Labour government under Prime Minister Harold Wilson set out to hold down working class living standards, through the collaboration of trade union leaders. It signed a "declaration of intent" with the TUC which promised "planned growth of incomes", and relied on help from union leaders to deal with the seamen's strike of 1966 and the dock strikes in Liverpool and London in 1967.

The Donovan Report, published in 1968, endorsed this policy of collaborating with union leaders rather than using the law to make a frontal attack on shop steward organisation or unofficial strikes. It argued that a long-

term effort was necessary to bring stewards under the control of formal union structures and to increase the role of union full-timers in bargaining procedures.

This strategy was already being acted upon by important elements in the ruling class. In the car industry Ford had a payments system which did away with on-the-job bargaining between stewards and management over job times. After 1968 first Rootes (soon to be taken over by Chrysler) then British Leyland, set out to follow suit. In the mines the National Power Loading Agreement of 1966 had done away with payment by results, and the Devlin Report on the docks in 1965 recommended an end to the casual day-by-day organisation of the workforce, as a way of reducing strikes.

The “voluntary” system of relying on trade union promises did not work when it came to holding down workers’ living standards and in July 1966 the Labour government gave its Prices and Incomes Board legal powers to control wages. But this did not in itself rule out reliance on union leaders to police the rank and file. The TUC refused to oppose the new legal restraints.

The wage controls themselves were designed to shift power from shop stewards to full-time officials. Workers could get round pay restraints by reaching “productivity agreements” with employers.⁴⁸⁰ Most of these schemes did away with shop-floor negotiation by section stewards, bringing in plant-wide bargaining in which union officials played a greater role.

The long-term aim was to create a climate which strengthened management’s ability to impose new working conditions and workspeeds. But in the short term, right wing trade union leaders were finding it increasingly difficult to hold the line in support of the government’s pay “norms”.

There was an increasing number of strikes. The 1967 dock strike in Liverpool was followed by strikes of bus workers, dustmen, market porters and construction workers, creating a new climate of militancy in the city.⁴⁸¹ A strike for equal pay by 383 women paralysed parts of Ford for the first time for seven years. A stoppage by 22 engineering workers in the Girling car component factory in Bromborough shut down much of the rest of the motor industry.

Growing rank-and-file resentment at pay controls had its effect on the union hierarchies. Unions such as the transport workers (TGWU), which put up verbal resistance to the pay norms, attracted new members while those, like the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU), which did nothing, stagnated. In the TGWU the “left” was increasingly in control and one of its members, Jack Jones, took over as general secretary at the end of 1968. In the engineering union (AUEW) the right wing candidate for president, John Boyd, was too identified with the Labour government and lost the election to the Broad Left’s Hugh Scanlon. Leaders of white-collar unions such as DATA (later TASS) and ASTMS,

setting their sights on growth, employed young organisers from left wing backgrounds who would be prepared to threaten militant action in order to gain recruits. The 1968 TUC Congress reflected the changing mood by voting 7-1 against the pay controls.

There had always been a section of the ruling class which was suspicious of the “softly, softly” approach. Now they found their hand strengthened. By the end of September 1968 the bosses of Rootes, Ford, British Leyland and Vauxhall, with the support of the Confederation of British Industry, were lobbying Downing Street for a law against unofficial strikes.

Barbara Castle, the Labour “left winger” who was the new Secretary for Employment and Productivity, was won over by their arguments. She published a White Paper in January 1969, *In Place of Strife*, which proposed fines for groups of workers who disobeyed government instructions to hold secret strike ballots and to restrain from action during “cooling off periods”. The determination by employers that the government should press ahead with this measure was strengthened early in 1969 when Jones and Scanlon gave official support to a strike called by the Ford shop stewards against an agreement the company had reached with a negotiating committee dominated by right wing unions.

At first it seemed that Castle would easily get her proposed law. George Woodcock, the TUC general secretary, told her: “Barbara, you have let the trade union movement off very lightly”.⁴⁸²

But hundreds of thousands of rank-and-file union activists were deeply hostile to the proposal. A small minority were linked to the Communist Party or had been inspired by the French events of the previous year. This minority suddenly found it could get support over this issue from workers who were non-political or even right wing Labour. On 27 February 1969 the first overtly political strike since the 1926 General Strike took place as 45,000 workers on Clydeside and 50,000 on Merseyside protested against the White Paper. On 1 May a Communist Party-dominated body, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, was able to coordinate a stoppage of half a million workers and a 25,000-strong demonstration in London: a complete stoppage of the national newspapers prevented anyone ignoring what was happening.

Some important union leaders were also unhappy with the government’s proposals. They feared the government was shunting them aside. As Hugh Scanlon said later:

Jack Jones and myself...saw our destiny in collaboration, not confrontation, and the idea that anyone could propose such laws should go on the statute book without the agreement of the trade union leaders was against all we’d believed in when we fought for the return of a Labour

government.⁴⁸³

They did not intend to mobilise direct action against the White Paper. Hugh Scanlon criticised the call for the May Day strike, and the only “official” trade union body to support the call wholeheartedly was the London region of the print union SOGAT. But the left union leaders did put pressure on the parliamentary Labour Party.

Wilson and Castle suddenly found the cabinet split down the middle, with the right wing opportunist home secretary Jim Callaghan throwing his weight against them. The proposed law was withdrawn, in return for an undertaking from the TUC that it would police interunion and unofficial strikes.

The revolt of the lower paid

Reaction against Labour’s wage controls now spread from traditionally militant sectors to affect workers who had rarely if ever taken industrial action in the past. These groups had not been able to escape the effects of the controls through “wage drift”—the use of shop-floor strength to push the wages of individual sections and plants far above the established rate for an industry. Now they began to copy the militancy of others.

In May 1969 British Leyland truck works in Lancashire had its first all-out strike for 40 years.⁴⁸⁴ In June a six-week strike by trawlermen began in Aberdeen and in July a seven-week strike by blastfurnacemen in Port Talbot. In September refuse workers in Hackney and nine other London boroughs began a strike unofficially; it gained the support of the TGWU, spread to the whole of London and many other parts of the country. Even as the refuse workers were returning to work victorious, miners in Yorkshire began a strike over wages, sending “flying pickets” to pull out 150,000 men in 150 pits. The miners were forced back to work by their national leaders, but not before the revolt had spread to teachers: pressure from below forced the leadership of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) to call its first ever campaign of industrial action.

In January 1970 the wages revolt spread to clothing workers in Leeds. The mainly women workers at one firm, John Collier, struck, then pulled out other firms until 25,000 were on strike. The spirit of the strike is conveyed by one observer:

Just before midday about 1,000 strikers met on Woodhouse Moor to hear the latest details of stoppages. A list of shops still in was announced, and the workpeople split into three groups to cover them.

I went along with 300 marching people down to the Woodhouse area of Leeds. They were singing ‘We shall overcome’, which has been the theme tune ever since the John Collier workers

started the ball rolling four weeks ago. The demonstrators, mostly women, surrounded the small factory of H Spender Ltd and swarmed round it shouting 'Out, out, out'. They banged on the windows and pushed open the doors. Middle-aged ladies rushed in screaming 'Support us', 'Don't be blacklegs', 'Stop scabbing'. Several of the operatives walked out straight away and said the others would come out when the strikers had moved on. A group was left to make sure they did and the place was shut down inside ten minutes.

The demonstrators moved on, blocking traffic and taking over whole streets while nervous policemen looked on.⁴⁸⁵

The end of February also saw a strike by Ford workers in Swansea. They wanted parity in earnings with Midlands carworkers—significant because the Midlands workers, on piece rates, had leapt ahead of wage norms while “measured day work” had held Ford workers back. The strike got some support at the Ford plant at Halewood on Merseyside.⁴⁸⁶ These months also saw a rash of strikes in the south west of England, with a 21-week strike of 1,000 workers at Centrax and a 15-week strike at Ottery St Mary, both in Devon. Hull trawlermen also struck.

Finally, April saw a revolt by glassworkers at Pilkington's factories in St Helens.

The Pilkington strike resembled in many ways the Leeds clothing strike. It began as a spontaneous walkout at one plant—over discrepancies in wage packets. It took the few militants by surprise, and only once they were out the gate did workers frame a wage demand—for an extra £10 a week. They then marched round the firm's other factories, pulling them out. There had not been a strike by the industry's process workers since the 1920s, yet the strike showed a level of workers' involvement rarely seen even in traditionally militant industries such as motors, with mass pickets of strikers and bitter clashes with mounted police in the strike's closing weeks.

Not only Pilkingtons was hit by the strike. The workers' union—the GMWU—was shaken to its foundation.

The GMWU had long been the most bureaucratic and right wing of the British unions. It opposed virtually all strikes, and when it recruited it did so through “sweetheart deals” with employers worried by the possible influence of other unions. Its leadership was a self-perpetuating—and often hereditary—oligarchy, made up of officials who had to face election only once in their lives, and then only after two years of “temporary” appointment to office. Voting was by branch block votes—and the bigger branches were run by officials appointed from above.

The union could function like this because the great majority of the workers it organised were in industries and workplaces that had been passive through the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. In the previous 18 months this had begun to change.

Some of the Halewood workers involved in the Ford strike of February-March were in the GMWU; afterwards they left the union disgusted at its failure to back the strike, joining the TGWU, which had made the strike official. GMWU workers also were involved in large numbers in the refuse workers' strikes. But Pilkingtons was the union's second biggest branch, once the home base of its General Secretary, Lord Cooper, and was typical of hundreds where the union's officials were accustomed to work hand-in-glove with management. If the union leadership could not assert its control at Pilkingtons, it could not guarantee it anywhere else either. For the first couple of weeks the union reaction was not so much open hostility as bungling incompetence. After a fortnight, the union sent down one of its younger (a relative term—he was in his late 40s) full-time officials, David Basnett, whose father and grandfather had also been officials of the union. To try to get a return to work, he shouted at the workers at the first mass meeting he attended: "It's a bloody silly thing you've done."⁴⁸⁷ This immediately turned the mass of workers against him.

Leadership of the strike was now taken over by a rank-and-file strike committee chosen at a mass meeting. They kept the strike going for another six weeks without strike pay and by then they were the recognised leaders of the St Helens workers. This was recognised when TUC general secretary Vic Feather met them to discuss conditions for a return to work. Yet,

the rank-and-file committee was by no means a body of pre-existing militants. Most of its members had no trade union or political experience. A few had some experience of local Labour politics, and only one had some sort of contact with the revolutionary left.⁴⁸⁸

The GMWU got its revenge on the committee. It rattled on a promise to allow workers to choose their own shop-floor representatives. When a large number of workers at one plant walked out in disgust, demanding the right either to join the TGWU or to form their own union, the GMWU arranged for management to sack all who refused to return on the GMWU's terms—in effect, victimising the leaders of the original strike.⁴⁸⁹

Yet even the GMWU could not remain immune to the impact of the new militancy among its members. Reluctantly it began to make gestures towards the changing mood. It paid out no strike pay at Pilkingtons, but in 1971 it paid out seven times as much as in 1969 and 40 times as much as in 1967.

Selsdon Man

The Conservatives, led by Edward Heath, won one of the most boring elections in living memory in June 1970. As one academic account of the election says:

“The Labour Party adopted so many Conservative policies that it left Mr Heath little room for manoeuvre if he did not want to break the consensus to the right.”⁴⁹⁰

The Tories won, not because of any great public enthusiasm for their policies, but because six years as the governing party had cost Labour dearly. Its share of the poll was 5 percent less than in 1966, while the proportion of people voting was the lowest since 1935.

Heath was determined to succeed where Wilson had failed—to revive the flagging fortunes of British industrial capital by raising industrial growth, eliminating inefficient firms and a sharp attack on trade union strength. Despite the failure of *In Place of Strife* the ruling class had not given up its desire to use the law in order to weaken working class organisation.

The Tory election programme was considerably to the right of any since 1945. There were strong elements of what a decade later was to be called “monetarism”: an emphasis on leaving things to market forces, reducing government intervention, increasing “incentives” by cutting income tax, limiting trade union “privileges”. The Labour leadership depicted Heath as “Selsdon Man” (after Selsdon Park where the policy was decided), a throwback to a Neanderthal age.

Heath repeated the Selsdon message again and again in the first year of his government. He told the Tory party conference: “we shall have to bring about a change so radical, a revolution so quiet, and yet so total, that it will go far beyond the programme...to which we are committed”.⁴⁹¹ Heath may or may not have believed his own rhetoric. But many of his ministers certainly did, and the government proceeded to implement a more right wing programme than any since the 1930s.

Anthony Barber, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, cut both income tax and corporation tax and pushed through welfare cuts, including the abolition of free school milk in primary schools. The housing minister decreed massive increases in council rents. Robert Carr, secretary for employment, pushed ahead with an Industrial Relations Bill which went even further than Labour’s efforts in removing many of the freedoms unions had gained back in 1906. John Davies, the former head of the CBI who was industry minister, insisted that the restructuring of industry would be left to market forces; “lame ducks”—unprofitable firms—would not be “propped up”.

The Tories could not succeed in any of their policies unless they brought the wages revolt to an end. This continued in the months after they were elected with a strike at GKN Sankey which caused mass layoffs in the car industry, stoppages in the docks and among local authority manual workers.

International factors, principally the overspill from US's Vietnam War expenditure, had pushed inflation to 10 percent and British company profits were beginning to suffer. The Tories' doctrinaire non-interventionism rejected any continuation of Labour's incomes policy—but this had in any case effectively collapsed. To keep control of their members, union leaders increasingly had to organise limited official strike action. If the government would not—perhaps could not—collaborate with the union leaders, then it had to opt for confrontation, to risk the sort of national, official strikes that had been rare in Britain since 1945.

The government ducked the first tests. A national dock strike started unofficially and was backed by the TGWU's docks delegate conference despite calls for delay by Jack Jones. Then hundreds of thousands of local authority manual workers started official selective strike action. With both the government opted for appeasement, setting up inquiries which offered considerable wage increases. In the mines it was more fortunate. A national ballot gave a clear majority for industrial action over wages, but did not reach the 75 percent required by the union rulebook; right wing officials managed to end an unofficial strike which affected 116 pits.

At this point the Tories felt they would lose all credibility if they did not begin to take a hard line. They put into effect a three-fold strategy.

First they deliberately allowed the recession developing in the US, as a result of the winding down of spending on the Vietnam War, to affect Britain. From mid-1970 onwards unemployment rose, until it reached a peak of a million in the autumn of 1971. The aim was to use fear of unemployment to force private sector workers to end the wage revolt—with some success. Stoppages in 1971 were down more than 40 percent on 1970, and the number of workers involved down by a third.

Secondly, the Tories decided to impose a “wage norm” in the public sector, by which each group of workers that settled would receive an increase 1 percent lower than the group before.

The third element in government strategy was its Industrial Relations Bill. This proposed fines for strikes in defiance of orders from a National Industrial Relations Court. The fines would be limited if unions registered under the law, but to do this they had to amend their rulebooks as demanded by the government registrar. The aim of this was to prevent shop stewards from calling strikes.

Reactions to the offensive

The great majority of trade union leaders did not like the government's new

approach to industrial relations. They felt they were being frozen out from the role they had played under both the recent Labour government and the post-war Tory governments, that of mediators between the employers and the mass of workers. And they feared the Industrial Relations Bill would upset all their established relations, both with their own rank and file and with employers. At the same time, however, few full-time officials were prepared to risk all-out confrontation with the government.

The union leaderships played a double game through the next three years. On the one hand they supported and even initiated limited mobilisations against the government. On the other they sought to keep these within tight limits, so they could be ended the moment there was any hint of concessions.

The TUC, for instance, produced a large amount of propaganda explaining the Bill's dangers. Rallies were arranged to protest. But strike action against the Bill was ruled out. The aim, TUC leaders stressed, was to make the law unworkable through non-cooperation, not to engage in active defiance. What was needed, TUC conferences were told in 1971, was for unions to refuse to register under the new law and to refuse to appear before the Industrial Relations Court.

The strategy was full of contradictions. Passive resistance to the new law was eventually bound to raise one vital question: what was to be done if the court started seizing union funds? At this point some union leaders were bound to break ranks and seek to protect themselves by appearing before the court and registering. For the TUC had already ruled out the only alternative: mass strike action against the law.

What is more, different sections of the union bureaucracy interpreted the TUC strategy differently. At one extreme were those like Lord Cooper of the GMWU, who was in favour of registration under the law from the beginning. At the other were the engineering union and the print union, SOGAT, which organised one-day strikes against the Bill.

An important factor affecting the calculations of the trade union leaderships was the reaction of the great bulk of rank-and-file activists to the Bill. It was one of complete hostility.

The political ideas of most activists were the same as those of the mass of workers—various shades of Labourism. But nearly all understood the danger of taking away from the shop floor the right to strike. In key sectors of industry such as engineering, the docks, Fleet Street, building and construction, trade unionism had for years been based on threatening unofficial action. This was precisely what the Bill aimed to stop. In other sectors there was not the same long tradition of shopfloor action, but there was the recent memory of the militant unofficial strikes of 1969-70.

Among the mass of activists were three minorities with ideas which were, to varying degrees, distinct from and more radical than those of traditional Labourism.

The first minority, several thousand strong, looked to the Communist Party for leadership on industrial questions. The party had ceased to be a hardened, active organisation years before. But it still retained many industrial militants who had joined, or identified with it, when it was such a party. They would rarely attend party meetings. But they would spring to life when their section of industry was involved in struggle and they would accept the party line. They could then act as a focus for the industrial activities of other militants whose politics were those of the Labour left.

In 1970-71 the Communist Party was still the major activist force in the engineering industry in Sheffield and Manchester, in shipbuilding on the Clyde and in the Scottish and Welsh coalfields, and was influential in the British Leyland Longbridge plant in Birmingham, the Ford plant in Dagenham, the engineering union throughout London, and the building industry in London and Birmingham.

This influence enabled the Communist Party dominated Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions to take the leadership of the unofficial movement in the first stage of the fight against the Industrial Relations Bill, calling a conference of 1,750 delegates from the 135 shop stewards' committees and 300 trade union branches in mid-November 1970. The conference called for a one-day strike in early December—in which half a million workers took part.

The Communist Party's strategy, however, was not to build the Liaison Committee into a focus for coordinating rank-and-file activity nationally in opposition to the vacillations and betrayals of the trade union leaderships. Rather the Liaison Committee was to act as a pressure group in those unions where officials friendly to the party—those who supported Scanlon in the engineering union and Jack Jones in the transport union—were battling against the traditional right wing. The Liaison Committee was always careful not to upset such officials with too much militancy. Once the struggle against the Industrial Relations Bill involved spreading industrial action in defiance of the officials, it abstained.

The revolutionary left was a much smaller minority than the Communist Party at this stage. By far the biggest revolutionary organisation was the International Socialists (IS), with about 1,000 members. We had drawn to us handfuls of good militants in most major cities and industries during the struggles of 1969 and 1970. But they were handfuls—militants whose reputations allowed them to argue forcefully inside their own workplaces and

within campaigns run by others, but unable to initiate activity on their own. Some idea of the industrial strength of the revolutionary left was given by an industrial conference organised by the IS in December 1971. The total attendance was about 250—which included IS members active from the outside as well as members and supporters inside the factories.

However, the IS did have two positive features. It was much clearer than the Communist Party or the Labour left about the character of the struggles taking place. It alone emphasised how centrally important productivity deals and the employers' drive to switch from piecework to measured day work were in undermining shop-floor strength. This enabled it to produce a book, *The Employers' Offensive* by Tony Cliff, which sold 20,000 copies—almost entirely to shop stewards. Only the IS stressed that the Industrial Relations Bill aimed to increase the control of trade union officials over the rank-and-file activists, and that therefore no reliance could be placed on the officials in the struggle against the Bill. Finally, the IS alone called for a rank-and-file movement to unite union activists, independent of the bureaucracy.

What is more, the IS had recruited the best student activists both from 1968 and from a bigger wave of student occupations in 1970. These provided enthusiastic teams of young people willing to sell *Socialist Worker* on demonstrations and at factory gates, to write regular factory bulletins with the one or two IS sympathisers in large workplaces, and to offer support to groups of workers involved in strikes. Thus in 1969-70 *Socialist Worker* carried reports on all the major strikes and many minor ones, often written in collaboration with leading activists.

But the largest minority among trade union activists was not formally organised at all. It was made up of the many thousands of workers who had basic socialist, class commitment, without any fixed political affiliation. There had always been a layer of such people in the traditionally militant industries—motors, engineering, building, construction and the docks—where they had usually accepted the leadership of Communist Party members. Now they were to be found in all sorts of workplaces which had been involved in the struggles of the past two years. And here the Communist Party often hardly existed. Even where it did, the decline of its old discipline had often caused its industrial members to drop out, or to combine token membership with a politics hardly different from that of the unattached activists.

If one word had to be used to describe this group it would be “syndicalist”—except that this implies they had arrived at a finished ideological position, which was far from being the case.

In fact, it was to this unattached group that both the Communist Party, with

its dreams of winning positions in the bureaucracies, and the revolutionary left had to look. For the unattached activists were vital in mobilising many less committed stewards and branch secretaries, and through them the mass of workers. The next three years were very much the story of how these activists did upset the Tories' plans by taking initiatives independent of the trade union leaders. Unfortunately it was also a story of how that independence was not sustained. Because of the weakness of revolutionary political organisation, the trade union bureaucracy was able to regain control each time and douse the flames of revolt.

The first defeats

The Tories' Industrial Relations Bill caused a rerun of the agitation against Labour's *In Place of Strife*, but on a bigger scale. There was first a one-day protest strike in the West of Scotland on 11 November 1970—although the response was “patchy”.⁴⁹² The 8 December action called by the Liaison Committee was much more successful and involved about a half a million workers, including the membership of the print union SOGAT, whose leadership went into hiding to avoid court officials trying to serve an injunction from the Newspaper Proprietors Association.

The TUC General Council was opposed to protest strikes—the high point of its own protests was due to be a “day of action” on 12 January, restricted to lunch hour factory meetings and an evening rally of 6,000 carefully picked branch officials in London's Albert Hall. But the TUC was unable to prevent the day becoming a third one-day strike: in Coventry 40,000 struck and 15,000 demonstrated; in Oxford all the car plants were shut; on Merseyside 50,000 struck.⁴⁹³

The Albert Hall rally turned into a mass protest against the attitude of the TUC itself. Vigorous heckling from every part of the hall and repeated choruses of “General Strike, General Strike” punctuated the attempts of former Labour prime minister Harold Wilson to speak and caused TUC General Secretary Vic Feather to cut short his planned oration.

The TUC tried to recapture control of the movement by organising a big national demonstration on a Sunday—to avoid the possibility of another day of strikes. Again it received a shock: the 200,000 who took part were more receptive to the slogan “General Strike” than to the carefully measured words of speakers for the General Council. The atmosphere was such that the Broad Left in the engineering union, where there was a balance between the organised right and the organised Broad Left, were able to carry their proposal for two official

one-day strikes against the Bill.

The strikes and demonstrations were important. They won many thousands of shop stewards and union activists to direct the shop-floor organisation, built up by small economic struggles over many years, towards political goals. But the token actions themselves could neither stop the Bill nor inflict a broader defeat on the government. To do that, victories in prolonged struggles were necessary. And for the time being these were not forthcoming.

While the agitation against the Industrial Relations Bill was gathering pace, three big industrial disputes took place. The government was able to claim victory in two and a draw in the third.

In December 1970 the electricians' union called a work to rule in the power industry over wages. Almost immediately there were power cuts. But the government arranged with its friends in the media to whip up a vicious witch hunt against power workers: they were blamed for virtually any death in any hospital, while people who attacked them in the streets or bricked their windows were treated as national heroes. The pressure was enough to allow the right wing leadership of the union to call the action off after a single week. All this happened in the week of the Liaison Committee one-day strike against the Industrial Relations Bill, but there was no organisation of solidarity to counter the witch hunt, except by printers who blacked a disgusting cartoon by Jak of the *London Evening Standard*.

The second big confrontation came a month later. The postal union was one of the least militant in Britain, with virtually no record of industrial action. But its members had lost out during the years of incomes policy and a recently elected national leadership was under considerable pressure to achieve a substantial wage increase. The postal workers struck solidly, despite the absence of strike pay, and mail stopped completely. But the telephone system, then run by the Post Office, continued to operate unimpaired. Support for the stoppage was less solid among telephonists, who belonged to the postal union, and the telephone engineers, members of a different union, kept the system going.

Nevertheless, at the end of six weeks the strike was still solid, and the strikers had pride of place on the TUC demonstration against the Industrial Relations Bill on 21 February. Yet that weekend the members of the General Council were rejecting requests from the postal union for financial aid for its hardship fund, on which 40,000 of the strikers depended for their sole income. A week later the union leadership accepted the government's terms and ordered a return to work.

More than 50,000 Ford workers went on strike shortly after the postal workers, and continued after they were defeated. The strike lasted nine weeks

and stewards on the recently restructured national joint negotiating committee wanted to keep it going longer. But at this point the two “left wing” union leaders, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, agreed a deal with the firm which prohibited further strikes over pay for the next two years—and insisted they would sign it regardless of the wishes of the stewards.⁴⁹⁴

The pay settlement was higher than the government would have liked, but Ford management were happy. They had managed to tire out the workforce before settling and had found collaboration was possible with the new breed of union officials. Within a matter of weeks they were clamping down on shop-floor organisation, sacking a key Halewood steward, John Dillon.⁴⁹⁵

The feeling in government circles in early summer 1971 was one of satisfaction. The postal workers’ defeat acted as a deterrent to other public sector workers considering action over pay, while the recession blocked off many struggles in the private sector. The number of stoppages was down 40 percent on 1970.

What is more, it was clear that the union leaders did not intend to go beyond passive resistance to the industrial relations law. A special congress of the TUC at Croydon voted to “advise” rather than “instruct” affiliated unions not to cooperate with the law. And there were signs that even passive resistance was crumbling. Right wing leaders of unions such as the bank workers, the health service union COHSE and the local government union NALGO joined Lord Cooper of the GMWU in arguing for registration;⁴⁹⁶ Clive Jenkins, the supposedly left wing leader of ASTMS, the supervisors’ union, tried to persuade the union’s conference to “wait and see” before coming to a decision;⁴⁹⁷ the leaders of one print union, the NGA, insisted that their rules forced them to register; the general secretary of another, NATSOPA, prepared to set up a secret “shadow union”—which was registered.

The turning of the tide

“Reliance on unemployment is the chief weapon of economic policy”, *The Times* wrote in April 1971.⁴⁹⁸ In the short term it was directed against the wages struggle and shop-floor strength in the private sector. In the long term, “the market” was supposed to weed out the inefficient sectors of industry, providing leeway for profitable growth elsewhere.

In June UCS, the consortium which owned four of Glasgow’s five shipyards, went bust. Industry minister John Davies was insistent that “nobody’s interests will be served by making an injection of public funds into the firm as it now stands”.⁴⁹⁹ He said two of the yards had to shut and 6,000 of the 8,500 workers

had to be sacked. The indirect effect of these measures on suppliers to the yards, it was calculated, would destroy 40,000 jobs altogether.

The government was not prepared for the anger and militancy of the UCS workers' response. They voted overwhelmingly for a proposal from the joint stewards' committee that they occupy the yards—100,000 workers throughout the west of Scotland took part in two one-day strikes, with huge demonstrations through Glasgow. David McNee, the chief constable, warned the cabinet violence on a scale similar to Northern Ireland was a possibility.⁵⁰⁰

In fact the action was not nearly as militant as these first signs indicated. The leading stewards in the yards, Jimmy Reid, Jimmy Airley and Sammy Barr, were all active Communist Party members and accepted the party's gradualist approach. They downplayed militancy in order to "win public opinion" and invited Vic Feather of the TUC and Harold Wilson of the Labour Party to grace their platforms. The occupation became a "work-in", whereby groups of workers continued to work as they were made redundant, with the foremen and supervisors in charge to complete orders for the liquidator. Eventually they agreed to proposals which kept the yards going with about half the old workforce.⁵⁰¹

Nevertheless, the refusal of the Clyde workers simply to accept redundancies shook the government. It opened a split between those (later known as "wets") who saw the recession as a short-term tactic before a new phase of economic expansion based on government intervention, and those who wanted to sit back and wait for the market to solve all problems. The limits of reliance on the market had already been shown when the giant aero-engine manufacturers Rolls Royce had gone bust at the turn of the year; the government had to swallow its ideological pride and nationalise this prestigious piece of British capitalism in order to keep it going. Now the interventionists pushed the whole government into a U-turn. The chancellor, Barber, introduced an autumn budget designed to reflate the economy; departments such as health under Keith Joseph and education under Margaret Thatcher began to spend as never before; and record sums were handed out to private industrialists.

UCS had an electrifying effect on other workers. Massive collections were taken for the work-in in factories throughout England, Scotland and Wales. It was not long before other workers faced with redundancies were either occupying or working in at Plessey's plant in Alexandria,⁵⁰² Fisher-Bendix in Kirkby,⁵⁰³ the River Don works in Sheffield, the Meriden motorcycle plant near Coventry,⁵⁰⁴ Allis-Chalmers at Mold,⁵⁰⁵ St Helens Plastics,⁵⁰⁶ and Sexton Shoes at Fakenham. In Liverpool, 20,000 workers demonstrated against unemployment and—showing more political awareness than the UCS stewards—shouted down

Vic Feather.⁵⁰⁷

At Parsons in Newcastle, draughtsmen imposed a four-day week rather than an accept redundancies. When redundancy notices were handed out in the drawing office:

Pandemonium erupted. Two hundred and fifty members of TASS left their desks and marched shouting to the chief draughtsman's office... A mass meeting decided to go en masse to the executive suite. The TASS members clapped and shouted, 'Krause out' [Krause was the managing director] as he sat there, stony-faced, flanked by two other directors... Radio Newcastle, invited into the premises by the workers, relayed the events in a broadcast.⁵⁰⁸

The occupations began to create a new climate among rank-and-file activists. They felt a fightback over unemployment was at least possible. But on other fronts the effects of the postal defeat persisted. Struggles which did take place were defensive and often defeated. In the Midlands the employers felt strong enough to end the Coventry toolroom agreement, which had guaranteed the wages of thousands of skilled workers for nearly 30 years. The toolroom workers were forced into a series of one-day strikes. Newspaper printers belonging to the NGA in London and Manchester were locked out in a dispute over differentials. At London's Heathrow airport police dogs were used against baggage handlers picketing a private contractor. At Rolls Royce in Bristol 7,000 workers were beaten after a nine-week strike. ICI workers in Doncaster did win—but it took them six weeks.

Not surprisingly the government felt confident when miners voted in a national ballot for industrial action over pay. The union leadership was firmly in the hands of the right wing—not just nationally but also in the key Yorkshire area. There had not been a national strike since 1926. The new 55 percent majority needed for action had only narrowly been achieved. The *Economist* urged the government into battle, insisting, "there is plenty of coal stock to ride out a strike".⁵⁰⁹ The *Daily Express* summed up the mood of the government's supporters when it expressed sorrow for the miners:

A colliery shut down will mean the death warrant for more of the nation's uneconomic pits. The major victims of the miners' strike will be the miners themselves.

What the government did not understand was that in the unofficial actions of 1969 and 1970 miners in the militant pits, especially in Yorkshire, had learnt forms of organisation independent of the area officials. As Arthur Scargill, in 1969 a branch official in Barnsley, later said of that strike:

We formed an unofficial strike committee... And the first thing we asked ourselves...was every pit in Yorkshire out? And the answer was 'yes'. Everything was completely sewn up. The next step was to get out every other pit in Britain if we could. So we sent emissaries to Scotland and Wales...

And then we launched flying pickets into Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire... We launched from the coalfield here squads of cars, minibuses, and buses, and directed on to predetermined targets, with five, six, seven hundred miners at a time.⁵¹⁰

Now, in 1972, this tactic was applied to make the official strike effective. In Yorkshire coordinating committees of branch delegates took over the running of the strike from the officials. Scargill, who ran the Barnsley strike committee, tells how, once all pits had stopped:

We switched our attack to every major coal depot and power station in the region... We had a thousand pickets deployed into East Anglia⁵¹¹

It was not only Yorkshire that used such tactics. Bob Morrison, then chairman of the Betteshanger Colliery in Kent, told how flying pickets from there covered the whole of south east England and stopped 2 million tons of coal from moving in the first week. Miners from Coventry manned picket lines outside a big coal depot in West Drayton, West London, 24 hours a day. Five miners sealed off the supplies to three big power stations.

Everywhere the miners found support. The big struggles of the previous three years, even when defeated, had created a feeling of solidarity among wide sections of workers. This combined with bitter hatred of the Heath government among hundreds of thousands of activists. In South Wales dockers refused to unload coal and train drivers to move it. In Staffordshire 50 lorry drivers were threatened with the sack for refusing to cross picket lines. Not one of 38 power stations in the north west accepted any more coal. In Fife haulage contractors were forced to lay off 200 drivers. In the Midlands 90 percent of drivers respected picket lines.⁵¹² Coal and coke were prevented from entering the Shelton iron and steelworks in Staffordshire and the Port Talbot steelworks in South Wales. Soon it was not just coal that was being stopped, but also oil and hydrogen supplies to power stations.⁵¹³

Where support was not so easy to get, the miners supplemented the flying picket with the mass picket. Scargill tells how his strike committee responded when they heard coal was moving through the Ipswich docks:

I picked the phone up and called East Anglia HQ and said, 'Move everything in on to Ipswich dock, move everything we can.' We produced a thousand pickets in an hour and a half on Ipswich docks and stopped the dock in an hour. We left a token picket on the docks, moved on and closed down the power stations one by one. Within two days we'd shut the whole of East Anglia.⁵¹⁴

The government picked on the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham as the place to make a stand against the pickets. Hundreds of police were used to break up the miners' pickets. Scargill ordered hundreds more miners to the depot's gates. But the police had no difficulty sending in more of their forces and

beating them back. For ten days the miners from Barnsley were routed by the police and some were injured. By 10 February, Scargill says, “some of the lads were a bit dispirited”.⁵¹⁵

But the previous night he had been invited to address the local district committee of the engineering union. Convenors and stewards went away from the meeting to call on their members to strike and march on the plant. A young engineering steward tells what happened the next day:

The marchers seemed to be endless, and soon the space in front of the gates was crammed full of engineers and miners from Yorkshire, South Wales, Staffs and even Durham and Scotland. We were soon to learn that 40,000 engineers had responded to the strike call and 10,000 had joined the march and picket. For the first time in my life I had a practical demonstration of what workers’ solidarity meant. We all felt so powerful. We felt we could rule the world.⁵¹⁶

The chief constable of Birmingham decided there was only one thing he could do—close down the depot.

The government heard immediately what had happened:

In the middle of the cabinet a note came in to Reggie Maudling which he read out. It was a message from the chief constable saying that about 15,000 people had turned up at the gates and he was frightened the police would be completely overrun; the gates had therefore been closed... It really meant we were beaten by intimidation and force.⁵¹⁷

Reginald Maudling, the home secretary, later wrote in his memoirs:

The chief constable assured me only over his dead body would they [the pickets] succeed... I felt constrained to ring him the next day after it happened to inquire after his health... Some of my colleagues asked me afterwards why I had not sent in troops to support the police, and I remember asking them one single question: ‘if they had been sent in should they have been sent in with their rifles loaded or unloaded?’ Either course would have been disastrous.⁵¹⁸

There was now no way the government could stop unplanned power cuts. As the power went off without warning, industrialists saw their factories thrown into chaos. They were quickly begging the government to give in to the miners. A Treasury special adviser said afterwards:

The lights went out and everybody said the country would disintegrate in a week. All the civil servants rushed round saying, ‘Perhaps we ought to activate the nuclear underground shelters and the centres of regional government, because there’ll be no electricity and there’ll be riots in the streets.’ The result of this was that the government had to give way and pay the miners.⁵¹⁹

Douglas Hurd, later himself to become a Tory home secretary, noted in his diary:

The government is now vainly wandering over the battlefield looking for someone to surrender to and being massacred all the time.⁵²⁰

The government immediately appointed an inquiry into the miners' case, headed by Lord Wilberforce. After only three days it offered the miners a 20 percent wage increase phased over 16 months. Even that was not enough to end the strike. Still more concessions had to be made by the government before the union leadership put it to the ballot.

The summer of '72

The miners' victory shook the confidence of the government. But it still left it in the field to fight another day. For the trade union leaderships did not want to knock it out, merely to force it to the negotiating table. This was shown even in the mines, where the union leadership was in a position to demand almost anything from the government, yet settled for a pay increase that neglected the needs of the lowest paid miners and, even worse, pushed the settlement date for the next pay claim into the spring, when demand for coal would be falling. The TUC General Council showed its intentions when it sent a delegation, including Jones and Scanlon, to meet Heath.

The feebleness of the union leaderships led, as in the previous year, to a mixture of victories and defeats. But this time rank-and-file activists were able to ensure the victories outnumbered the defeats.

The next group of workers due into battle after the miners were the engineers, who faced the renewal of their national agreement. Last time round, in 1968, Hugh Scanlon and the union executive had threatened national action. Now, in a more favourable climate, they ruled it out, saying the claim would have to be fought locally. Even a call from Sheffield for a district-wide stoppage was ruled out of order.⁵²¹

The only real fight for the claim came from Manchester. The willingness to fight in the city was virtually unprecedented. A wave of occupations followed management attempts to lock out workers who had banned piecework. Eventually 30,000 workers in 25 factories were involved. But the engineering employers nationally provided finance for the plants bearing the brunt of the struggle. There was no way the workers were going to win unless they took national action. This the union refused to initiate.

Faced with this situation, the local leadership of the union adopted a disastrous tactic. They agreed to individual settlements, factory by factory. Workers in some plants did not do too badly, getting reasonable settlements after five or six weeks. But other managements, feeling strengthened as the city-wide movement began to crumble, held out until they felt they had exhausted their workforces. Metal Box workers in Manchester itself were out ten weeks and

Ruston Paxman in nearby Warrington 12 weeks. One of the engineering union's most militant areas had suffered a bruising and unnecessary defeat.

The leadership of the rail unions also behaved in a way which should have led to defeat. The government responded to their work to rule over wages by using the new Industrial Relations Act against them and ordering them to suspend action while a secret ballot was held. All the talk of defiance was suddenly forgotten. They obeyed the order.⁵²² But the union was saved by the climate created by the miners' victory. The overwhelming majority of railworkers—including a majority of those not in a union—voted for action. The government conceded a considerable wage increase.

The rail unions were not alone in retreating over the law now it was actually being implemented. In the docks a national shop stewards' committee had been formed to fight the threat to jobs from new container depots and cold stores. Pay in these was far below dock levels and union organisation more or less non-existent (in some cases unions new to the industry had tried to establish themselves by sweetheart agreements with employers). The dock stewards' method of fighting was to put pickets on depots and to black lorry firms that went in the docks proper. The lorry firms and container depots began responding by getting injunctions against the action from the Industrial Relations Court.

The first court order was by Heaton's of St Helens against the TGWU over action in the Liverpool docks, and the union was fined £50,000. But the court agreed to give the TGWU a breathing space to pay the fine. Jack Jones, the union's leader, called on the dockers to comply with the order, and the TUC General Council voted that it would not give automatic support to unions that abided by congress policy and defied the law. All this happened in the same week in April that the government imposed a secret ballot on the rail unions.⁵²³

Socialist Worker observed in mid-May that union leaders were drawing the logical conclusion from this headlong retreat: "The rush of the leaders of the trade unions to register under the Tories' Industrial Relations Act has turned into a stampede".⁵²⁴

In the week that followed it became clear that even the one big union controlled by the Communist Party was not against abandoning its principles. At Parsons in Newcastle the fight against redundancies was intertwined with the defence of the closed shop against the use by the company of a "yellow" union, UKAPE. The TASS conference voted to defy an Industrial Relations Court order to accept UKAPE;⁵²⁵ two weeks later the union's national leadership urged a compromise on the Parsons members, telling them to accept voluntary redundancies and the yellow union. The chair of the office committee at the factory, Terry Rogers, an International Socialist, urged rejection of the deal, but

lost the vote at an office meeting.⁵²⁶

But it was more difficult to bury the fight against the Industrial Relations Act than the government—and at least a section of the trade union leadership—hoped. The dockers’ blacking and picketing continued, despite daily instructions from Jack Jones to obey the court, and despite counter-picketing by some of the blacked lorry drivers. In June three London dockers were threatened with jail for picketing the Chobham Farm container base. As every dock in the country ground to a halt, the court of appeal quashed the sentences. Lord Denning later explained:

We were influenced perhaps by...the realisation that there would be a general strike, which would paralyse the whole country.⁵²⁷

The dockers were encouraged by this victory. As one of the leading London stewards said later:

We began to spread our picketing to more container ports. We would tell any lorry that threatened to cross the picket that they would be blacked in every port in the country. Then we began following the lorries, up to 200 miles we went, and every time a lorry went into a place we would follow.⁵²⁸

A fortnight later the issue came to a head again. What claimed to be a small company, Midland Cold Storage, brought an action against five dockers for picketing its East London premises. This time the courts could not back down without making the Industrial Relations Act look ridiculous. They ordered the picket removed. The five dockers refused. They were consigned to Pentonville Prison for “contempt of court”.

“We do not recognise the National Industrial Relations Court,” three of them, Tony Merrick, Connie Clancy and Derek Watkins, said shortly before they were arrested. Merrick added: “I’m going to prison for defending the dockers’ rights and the right of the working class to work. I go willingly because in all honesty such a situation cannot be right.”⁵²⁹

The London docks stewards set up a permanent picket of Pentonville Prison. It became a focus for protest demonstrations and a centre from which delegates and flying pickets were sent out, first to every port in the country then to other sections of industry. The response in the docks was immediate, with near 100 percent support for an unofficial national dock strike. Elsewhere it was hard going at first.

The jailings came on a Friday in July, when all the major engineering and motor plants were on holiday. Docks stewards turned their attention on the first evening to Fleet Street, knowing that if they could shut the papers they would have a massive and immediate impact. But the initial response was cool. The

papers appeared the next morning, and played down the significance of the jailings, trying to kill the dockers' campaign with silence. The following day docks stewards visited virtually every father and mother of the chapel (shop steward) in Fleet Street, aided by leading print union activists. At last they met with some success. Within two days Fleet Street was closed down.

Lorry drivers who had been hostile to the dockers' blacking campaign now struck indefinitely. So did London's wholesale markets. Other workers began one-day strikes—thousands of Sheffield engineers, large numbers of construction workers in various parts of Britain, Heathrow airport workers, London busworkers. A demonstration in support of the dockers on the Tuesday was between 15,000 and 30,000 strong.

Jack Jones told the TUC General Council that if it did not do something, unofficial elements would take over; five days after the jailings it issued a call for a one-day general strike.⁵³⁰

The one-day strike was not needed. The government was desperate. The pound had been under heavy pressure and there was strong feeling within ruling class circles that there had to be an agreement with the TUC on a new incomes policy. Heath had already started a series of meetings with TUC representatives, including Jones and Scanlon, to achieve such an agreement. Now all this was threatened by the growing anger from below.

The same Wednesday that the TUC issued its strike call, the Law Lords held an unprecedented morning sitting. They decided that an industrial action in defiance of a court order was the responsibility of national unions, not individual shop stewards. That afternoon the five dockers were released from prison without purging their contempt. Unofficial action had beaten the Industrial Relations Act.

The dockers' victory flowed from a rising tide of struggle and fed back into it. In the docks themselves there was now an official three-week national strike to defend jobs, which Jack Jones succeeded in ending through an agreement with a friend of Heath's, Lord Aldington—despite bitter opposition from the stewards in the big ports.

In the building industry what had been an ineffective campaign of selective strikes over pay was now turned by unofficial activists into a 300,000-strong national strike. Flying pickets would travel from site to site, bringing out one after another, non-union as well union sites. Picket buses from cities such as Liverpool and Bristol brought out sites many miles away. An attempt by the union UCATT to end the strike on the basis of a bad compromise spurred its spread, as mass meetings thousands strong voted the deal down. There was no strike pay and thousands of single building workers were without any income,

often sleeping rough in parks. Yet it took the union leaders 11 weeks to get the men back to work.

The government and employers were desperate to clinch a deal with the union leaders. The CBI even set up a Conciliation and Arbitration Service jointly with the TUC, and in September formal three-way discussions began on an incomes policy. The TUC leaders were enthusiastic. Jack Jones said later: “We thought we were in the business of developing an understanding”.⁵³¹ Heath, in turn, described Jones as “a very decent man”.⁵³²

But mutual friendship didn’t let the TUC leaders forget the wave of agitation among rank-and-file activists. Before they could sell wage controls to their members they needed a price freeze, an end to rent increases under the government’s “fair rents” scheme, and the “putting on ice” of the Industrial Relations Act. On 2 November the talks broke down.

Four days later the government announced a legally binding wage freeze. A government which had been shaky since the miners’ victory eight months earlier now gambled its whole future on its ability to force unions to accept this freeze.

Britain and Ireland

Not only in Britain did the Tory government face a succession of political crises in 1972. Its policy in Northern Ireland also floundered. The Labour government had sent troops to the province in 1969 with the double purpose of stabilising and reforming the Unionist regime. Stabilisation was necessary since the government did not want to take on the burden of ruling the province directly and rejected out of hand any end to the partition of Ireland. Reform was necessary since the rising struggle of the Catholics against discrimination threatened to spill over into the South and destabilise a country of increasing importance to European, US and Japanese investors.

Stabilisation meant ruling through governments of Ulster Unionists, which had been elected on the basis of their commitment to maintain Protestant “ascendancy”. Reform meant dismantling the most extreme expressions of this “ascendancy”—the rigged local government boundaries, the housing allocations that discriminated against Catholics, above all the armed volunteer force of Protestant bigots, the B Specials.

The policy provoked hostility from opposite directions. The forces of Loyalism bitterly resisted reform. In the first days after the arrival of the British army there were shootouts between soldiers and armed Loyalists, who wanted a free hand to attack the Catholics and raised the slogan of “Troops out”.

The Loyalists stood no chance in direct combat with the British army. But

they had another, more effective way of getting their way. They mobilised politically to bend to their will the institutions of the Northern Ireland state. They had already forced out one prime minister, Terence O'Neill, for his support of mild reforms early in 1969. Now they exerted increasing pressure on his successor, James Chichester-Clark. As the more extreme Loyalists around the Reverend Ian Paisley increased their following, Clark's own ministers began to plot against him. Early in 1971 it was his turn to resign, to be replaced by a hard-line businessman, Brian Faulkner.

Meanwhile the mass of the Catholic population were getting ever more alienated from the British presence. When the British troops first went into Derry and Belfast many Catholics welcomed them. Even veteran opponents of British rule had to recognise that the presence of the troops gave them a tactical breathing space in which to prepare for future confrontations. Some British officers did briefly interpret "reform" as meaning they should help the Catholics to resist further Loyalist attacks.⁵³³

But such a state of affairs could not last long.

The younger, more militant element in the Catholic areas had learnt one hard lesson from the events of 1968-69: they had to be armed to protect themselves in future. They flocked to those members of the Irish Republican Army prepared to take up the fight. It was this that led in 1970 to the formation of the Provisional IRA. At the same time, the emphasis on "stability" led the British authorities increasingly to try to contain the rightward move of the Loyalists by making concessions to them: creating the Ulster Defence Regiment as a reborn, if rather better disciplined, version of the B Specials, then using the British army to raid Catholic homes for the guns which were being stored for self-defence.

Such policies were already in effect before the 1970 general election, and the new Tory government pursued them with vigour. Less than a month after the election, British troops went in strength into the Catholic Falls Road, imposed a curfew and raided houses for arms. Four civilians were shot dead. According to the National Council for Civil Liberties, "their only 'crime' was to come within the sights of a British soldier who shot to kill". Two Unionist MPs were then taken on a conducted tour of the area by the army.

Three weeks later another Catholic civilian was killed:

There was shooting in Belfast almost every week after that, and one fact emerged starkly from it all—that when the army was involved it was always against Catholics.⁵³⁴

Such shootings were later justified by talk of the need to "take on the terrorists" and "crack down on the IRA". But the Provos did not start shooting at British soldiers for another six months. The real purpose of the raids on the

Catholic areas was to placate the Loyalists.

The Faulkner government pushed repression against the Catholics one stage further. In August 1971 thousands of troops and RUC police seized several hundred Catholics and took them off to internment camps in a dawn raid. People took to the streets. By 8am barricades had been erected in all the Catholic ghettos of Belfast. Outside, the Loyalist paramilitary groups took advantage of the military activity to force Catholic families from their homes in “mixed” areas and to shoot into Catholic areas. The British troops themselves shot dead nine Catholics, including one priest, on that day. Many of the internees were tortured.

But internment netted few real IRA members, as opposed to political opponents of Unionism, and the shooting was not all one way. Both the Provisionals and the Official IRA (from which the Provos had split) were soon shooting back at the troops.⁵³⁵

Far from crushing resistance in the Catholic areas, internment gave new bitterness to it. There were mass protest demonstrations, tens of thousands of Catholics went on a rent and rates strike, and more young people joined the Provos.

Bombings of shops and factories by the Provos became a daily event, and the number killed in shootouts with British troops grew. A horrific twist was added to the situation when the Loyalist paramilitary gangs began murdering individual Catholics for no other reason than their religion. Although at times Republicans retaliated in kind, twice as many Catholics as Protestants were victims of sectarian murders, even though the Catholic population of Northern Ireland was only half the Protestant population.⁵³⁶ The total death toll rose from 20 in 1970, through 172 in 1971 to 467 in 1972.

The political pressure on the Northern Ireland government from Paisley and the more extreme Loyalists did not abate. In an effort to appease it, the government banned all demonstrations. Socialists and republicans defied the ban with a series of demonstrations against internment. Under pressure the moderate Civil Rights Association followed suit: in January 1972 there were nine illegal demonstrations, often ending in riots against the troops.

One such demonstration took place in Derry on 30 January 1972 when 20,000 people marched through the Catholic part of the city, until they found their way to the town centre blocked by the British army’s barbed wire barricades. Most swung round into a car park behind a nearby block of flats, but a few younger elements stayed behind to throw stones at the soldiers. This was fairly routine stuff in Northern Ireland at the time, and normally people would have drifted off after a few minutes. But then troops from the Paratroop Regiment opened fire on people as they fled from the car park. They killed 13

people in the next few minutes.

There was nothing accidental about the killings on Bloody Sunday, as the day became known. These were not wild, panic shots from soldiers whose discipline had broken down. They deliberately shot to kill. The order for the killing came from high up—either from the top of the military command structure or from government ministers in London. It was a political move, designed to buy off Loyalist discontent and smash Catholic resistance as it had been smashed in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

The resistance was not smashed. Demonstrations and strikes involved the great majority of the Catholic population of Northern Ireland in the next few days. There was a massive increase in popular support for the Provos.

The mass protest spilt over the border into southern Ireland as never before. Hundreds of thousands of workers struck and a huge demonstration swept through Dublin to the British embassy, where police stood impotently by as it was burnt to the ground. The attempt to establish stability in Northern Ireland by placating the Loyalists was threatening to destabilise the south.

In March Heath did a U-turn. He did what the Labour government had shied away from in 1969, dismissing the Northern Ireland government and establishing direct rule from Westminster. The new minister for Northern Ireland, Willie Whitelaw, visited the Catholic Creggan area of Derry, gave the internees “political prisoner” status, and in June 1972 secretly met the leaders of the Provos—David O’Connell, Seamus Twomey, Sean McStiofain and Gerry Adams—in a London flat. For a few weeks there was even a brief, formal truce between the Provos and the British army.

But there were limits beyond which the British government could not go if it wanted to maintain British rule in Northern Ireland. The only secure base for British rule remained the Loyalism of the Protestants. So every concession to the Catholic section of the population had to be trimmed to maintain the allegiance of at least a substantial section of the Protestants. As well as negotiating with the Provos, Whitelaw also held meetings with the commanders of the Loyalist Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which was organising the murders of Catholics. British troops went on patrol with UDA men in Protestant and mixed areas.

Early in July 1972, under UDA pressure, the troops used rubber bullets, teargas and baton charges to prevent Catholic families moving into homes allocated to them in the Lenadoon area of Belfast. In the fighting that followed the Provos used their guns.⁵³⁷ The truce was destroyed by the inability of the British government to break with the Loyalist Frankenstein its predecessors had created in Northern Ireland.

Each crisis point in the Tory government’s handling of Northern Ireland

occurred at moments of crisis in its handling of the working class movement in Britain. The new hard line exemplified in the Falls Road curfew occurred simultaneously with the announcement of the “Selsdon Man” programme of tax changes, rent rises, anti-union laws, and leaving “lame ducks” to die. Internment was imposed just as Glasgow’s workers were being forced into struggle against the destruction of UCS. The massacre on Bloody Sunday took place at the height of the government’s attempt to break the miners in open confrontation. Direct rule was imposed as a chastened Heath tried to conciliate the union leaders in the aftermath of the miners’ victory. The truce with the Provos broke down as the government entered into confrontation again in the docks.

This did not mean there was an automatic interconnection between the struggles in Northern Ireland and those in Britain.

Most British workers were indifferent, or even hostile to, the struggle in Northern Ireland. They were confused by the attitude of the Protestant majority of Northern Ireland’s workers, and could normally be won to support the struggles of the Catholic minority against British rule only after they had been won to a socialist understanding by arguments over other issues. The demonstrations over Ireland which took place in Britain in this period were larger than any since—20,000 demonstrated against internment in November 1971⁵³⁸ and 15,000 clashed with police in Whitehall the week after Bloody Sunday. But they were demonstrations of committed socialists—for instance, 4,000 people marched behind the International Socialists’ banners on the internment demonstration—and Irish immigrant workers.

Conversely, the growth of a revolutionary socialist presence in Britain in these years found no counterpart in a flourishing of the socialist activism in Northern Ireland that had been so important in 1968-69. At that time Irish socialists had dreamed of uniting Catholic and Protestant workers in a struggle against both the island’s states. But Protestant workers, whose own struggles were at a low ebb as the decline of the province’s traditional industries sapped their militancy, were rarely drawn into struggle against big business and the state, and did not question their old sectarian Loyalist allegiances. So the Catholic minority fought alone, and saw the Loyalist workers as on the side of its enemy. The ideas which increasingly dominated among the young, militant section of the population—who had once followed the lead of the People’s Democracy, Bernadette Devlin and the Derry socialists—were now the ideas of Republicanism, and especially of the Provos.

If the revolutionary socialists had had a better theoretical understanding of the situation and tighter organisation in 1968-69 they might have been able to resist this trend to some extent. In those years of growth they showed all the

weaknesses of the left throughout Europe—the mixture of hazy Guevarist and spontaneist ideas, the lack of understanding of what life was like for the mass of workers, inexperience when it came to dealing with workers who had some allegiance to traditional organisations. But whereas in Italy, France, Britain or Spain it was possible for student revolutionaries to overcome many of these weaknesses as they learnt from involvement in workers' struggles, in Northern Ireland the weaknesses were accentuated as the working class itself became increasingly divided along sectarian lines. The student left itself divided: some dropped out of politics, a few fell for the pro-Loyalist politics peddled by Maoists who talked of “two nations”,⁵³⁹ and many of the hardest fighters against oppression ended up parroting the arguments of the Provos they had once denounced as near fascists. Only a few isolated individuals stuck by a socialist politics which combined support for the struggle against British rule with belief in the long-term prospect for united workers' action.

Yet none of this prevented some important interconnections between what happened in Northern Ireland and what happened in Britain.

There is little doubt that the Heath government's difficulties in coping in Britain were aggravated by its difficulty finding solutions in Northern Ireland. A lot of ministerial energy went into trying to square the Northern Ireland circle which might otherwise have gone into dealing with the fundamental problems British capitalism faced at home. And the failure of out-and-out repression to crush the nationalist population in Northern Ireland was a powerful argument against resorting to out-and-out repression in Britain. There were fears in the summer of 1971 that Clydeside would become a new Bogside, as the Glasgow chief constable's warning to the government indicates.

And if the mass of workers in Britain did not understand what was happening in Northern Ireland, many of the minority that moved towards revolutionary socialist politics did. For them Northern Ireland provided a graphic refutation of the illusion, so dear to parliamentary socialism and so engrained in the British labour movement, that the state is a neutral body. They could see the British state imprisoning people without trial, torturing its opponents, shooting people down in cold blood. So when Bernadette Devlin—revolutionary socialist MP from a Northern Ireland nationalist constituency to the British parliament—walked across the floor of the House of Commons and hit home secretary Reginald Maudling immediately after Bloody Sunday, millions of British workers may not have understood the significance of the gesture but some thousands of the key activists did.

The wage freeze and the left

Heath's imposition of a wage freeze in November 1972 was not a wild gamble. It was based on a careful calculation that the union leaders would not fight vigorously against a government which imposed what they had come so close to accepting voluntarily. As one account, based on interviews with ministers involved, says:

Tripartite discussion was not seen as having been a futile exercise. Much of the proposed package re-emerged in a subsequent statutory offer which the unions could not refuse.⁵⁴⁰

The Tories were not completely wrong. This was shown in March 1973 when the stewards on the Fords negotiating committee recommended strike action. Moss Evans of the TGWU and Reg Birch, the increasingly right wing Maoist who sat on the engineering union executive, worked together to kill the strike.⁵⁴¹

Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the engineering union were among those who met secretly with Heath—even while the TUC was calling an official Day of Action against him on 1 May. In September the two of them went so far as to urge Chrysler workers to break with every tradition of solidarity and cross picket lines to work alongside contractors scabbing on a strike of Chrysler electricians.⁵⁴²

Heath had calculated on something else as well. The timing of the freeze was clever. It came as the traditionally powerful sections of workers had finished negotiating their annual wage rounds. Those trapped by it were mainly workers who had rarely, if ever, gone on strike—the teachers, the civil servants, the gas workers and the hospital workers.

Yet Heath's calculations could still be upset. The pool of anger among rank-and-file workers was getting larger, even among sections not immediately hit by the wage controls. This was shown in December 1972 when the Industrial Relations Court fined the engineering union £50,000 over the refusal of its branch at Sudbury in Suffolk to admit into the union a man, James Goad, expelled some years before for strike breaking at the local CAV plant; hundreds of thousands of engineering workers obeyed calls from shop stewards and district committees for one-day protest strikes.

The strike on the TUC's 1 May Day of Action over the wage controls was the biggest political stoppage yet. Two million workers struck, and more than 100,000 demonstrated in London, 20,000 in Birmingham, 12,000 in Liverpool, 10,000 in Glasgow.⁵⁴³

Anger also built up quickly among previously non-militant sectors. In the

hospitals growing bitterness channelled in London by an unofficial grouping of some 80 stewards forced the union leaderships to ballot over strike action. Health workers in the public employees' union NUPE and the TGWU voted for all-out strike action;⁵⁴⁴ when, despite this, the union leaders called only selective action, 1,000 hospitals were affected.⁵⁴⁵

In the civil service the pattern was similar, although not on the same scale. The first ever industrial action took place in January 1973 when civil service branches held mass meetings in protest at the wage freeze. At a rally in London 4,000 CPSA members voted unanimously for a resolution giving the executive power to call any action, then marched to Downing Street chanting "Heath Out".⁵⁴⁶

The gas industry dispute began with an official overtime ban and selective strikes. When the GMWU called off this action in mid-January, unofficial activists continued it, using flying pickets to spread it. It was ten weeks before the union leaders got the industry back to normal working.⁵⁴⁷

By the end of February *Socialist Worker* reported: "Close on a million workers are now in revolt against the Tory wage freeze".⁵⁴⁸

The anger was not confined to questions of wages and the Industrial Relations Act alone. The so-called Fair Rents Act had come fully into action in autumn 1972. In England and Wales many Labour-controlled councils had voted to resist it. They all gave in, with the exception of Clay Cross in Derbyshire. Nonetheless many thousands of council tenants were involved in partial or total rent strikes against the Act, and in Scotland several councils were still holding out at the turn of the year. At the same time, there were still some significant occupations against redundancies—at Cole Cranes in Sunderland, at CAV Fazackerly in Liverpool, and at Bryant Colour Printing in south London.

Yet by the TUC Day of Action on 1 May, the wave of agitation had died down. The Tories had won the first round in their new offensive. The reason, as Tony Cliff of the International Socialists explained at the time, was that workers' "readiness to fight" was not accompanied by "organisational forms that can sustain the movement effectively":

Workers can move extremely quickly—as teachers, health workers and civil servants have proved—from comparative backwardness to a high level of militancy. But the organisations needed to sustain such militancy and lead it to victory take time to create... Either the form of organisation will rise to the level of the needs of the movement or the struggle will slow down to the level of the existing organisational framework. That is the basic cause of the extreme volatility of the new sections of workers now engaged in action.⁵⁴⁹

What is more, the stronger, traditionally more militant sections were less likely to see the struggle in general terms than those new to struggle:

Sections which have considerable economic power, like the Ford workers, are less ready to accept the...need for a united general fightback... Sections with long traditions of militancy have created institutions such as shop stewards' committees that have won many concessions from employers. But often those concessions were gained with little involvement of the members at a time when capitalism was expanding swiftly and employers were ready to give way even to slight pressure. Now that the battles are taking on a more decisive character, the fact that...stewards have not been used to involving their own rank and file or keeping in close contact with one another appears as a grave weakness.⁵⁵⁰

In the first stage of the struggle against the Tories, a network of militants associated with the Communist Party had been able to some extent to overcome the isolation of unofficial activists—especially in the traditionally militant sectors. They had been decisive in getting the one-day strikes against the Industrial Relations Act in 1970-71 and in gathering support for the UCS work-in. But as the struggle became more serious, they were less and less able to provide a national focus. This was because their perspective was to bring pressure on the “left” union leaders Jones and Scanlon—the very leaders increasingly friendly with Heath.

So it was that the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions failed to take any initiatives at all during the struggle of the dockers against the law—even though one of the imprisoned dockers, Bernie Steer, was a Communist Party member. The refusal of the Liaison Committee leadership to permit discussion on such issues led the London Port Shop Stewards' delegation to walk out of its April 1973 conference in disgust.⁵⁵¹ A somewhat similar attitude prevailed in the building industry. Communist Party members such as Pete Carter in Birmingham and Lou Lewis in London played a central role in spreading the 1972 strike, but the party's paper backed the UCATT national leadership in its early attempts to end it. The party was officially against Labour councils implementing the Tory Fair Rents Act, but could not stop its own best-known member, the UCS steward Jimmy Reid, voting for Clydebank Council to obey the law.

In the engineering industry things were slightly more complex. Union president Hugh Scanlon was an enthusiast for conciliation with the government and employers, but he was also vehement in his opposition to the Industrial Relations Act, refusing any compromise over recognition of the Industrial Relations Court. So the union's many Communist Party supporters could praise Scanlon's record on the law as a way of deflecting attention from his retreats on other issues. Yet the overall approach of the Communist-backed Broad Left was just as disastrous as in the TGWU. It meant that within Communist Party Liaison Committee circles there was no discussion of defeats such as the union's 1972 pay campaign in Manchester, or of the use by the employers of measured day

work to weaken shop-floor organisation.

Such confusions meant that even during the great upsurge of struggle in 1972, there were signs of an erosion of shop-floor strength in important sections of manufacturing industry.

In Glasgow, the desire to protect the compromise UCS settlement caused the best-known shipbuilding stewards to discourage militancy in their own industry—failing, for instance, to call any solidarity stoppages during the Pentonville and Goad affairs. In Birmingham the stewards' committee at British Leyland's Longbridge works—headed by Communist Party members such as Derek Robinson and Jack Adams—rushed to accept measured day work in November 1972 in order to get a quick pay rise before Heath's freeze came into effect.

In Coventry—until then the best-paid area in the motor industry—the effects of three years of measured day work took their toll. The “top table” of the joint shop stewards' committee at Chrysler's Stoke plant accepted management's right to refuse to allow deputy convenor John Worth to be a shop steward;⁵⁵² its support for scabbing during the electricians' dispute of 1973 meant, according to one embittered militant, “the end of trade unionism as we know it”.⁵⁵³

In the building industry the massive militancy of the 1972 strike was not consolidated into permanent organisation on more than a few, already militant, sites. Some 40 building workers from North Wales were soon facing charges of “conspiracy” for taking part in flying pickets during the strike. Six of them were jailed after a trial at Shrewsbury.

That 1972 was not *just* a year of workers' victories is shown by the length of the strikes. Even before the wage freeze in November, the average number of days per worker on strike was 17.1—more than three times that during the wages revolt of 1969-70. Many strikes lasted seven, eight, nine or even ten weeks. Workers usually won, and learned the virtues of solidarity—but they often also emerged tired, and not too keen to enter into immediate struggle again.

There was a gap between the level of the struggle and the politics of the activists leading it. Heath was able to exploit this. But what were the chances of the revolutionary left filling this gap?

The growth of the International Socialists

The International Socialists were the one part of the revolutionary left of 1968 to make contact with significant numbers of workers during the wages revolt of 1969-70. Nevertheless, their total membership continued to hover around the 1,000 mark until early in 1971; some workers joined and so did students from the occupations of 1970, but recruits from 1968 dropped out as exaggerated

revolutionary expectations wilted.

In 1971 the IS began to grow quickly again. The check which the workers' movement met that spring with the postal workers' defeat led substantial numbers of activists to look for political explanations. They took more seriously the IS students and ex-students who were leafleting their factories, and some hundreds joined the organisation. The IS conference in April was told that the organisation had grown by two thirds, mainly in the previous six months.

The growth was not because the IS could lead struggles; its strength on the ground was such that it could do no more than aid struggles already taking place and try to draw general political conclusions from them. So when the UCS struggle broke out, IS had no influence in the yards—but it could send about 40 students and teachers to Glasgow that summer to sell *Socialist Worker*, distribute leaflets and win the arguments about UCS with some militants in other industries, building the IS in Glasgow if not in UCS itself.

The IS did not grow through industrial interventions alone. Political issues were also important—especially Ireland. The organisation ran successful speaking tours with Bernadette Devlin, who spoke to audiences of several hundred on the question of Ireland while accompanying IS speakers drew the lessons from the struggle against the Tories in Britain. At the height of the UCS occupation, *Socialist Worker* raised the central question of internment, while the fourth issue of the paper during the great 1972 miners' strike devoted more space to Bloody Sunday than it did to the strike.⁵⁵⁴

Throughout the period a continuing preoccupation was the fight against racism—with extensive coverage in *Socialist Worker* of struggles against police harassment⁵⁵⁵ and efforts to campaign against a wave of hysteria which met Asian immigrants from Uganda in late summer 1972.⁵⁵⁶

Unlike papers like *Lotta Continua* in Italy, *Socialist Worker* did not simply talk about the struggle. It also placed a strong emphasis on ideological arguments, with regular articles on Marxist ideas, potted histories of British imperialism and the oppression of Ireland, reviews of books putting forward other views of the world.

Again in contrast to *Lotta Continua*, the paper did not pull its punches when criticising wrong revolutionary tactics. When a group of former revolutionary students, the Angry Brigade, tried to protest at the Industrial Relations Bill by setting off a bomb outside a Tory minister's house, *Socialist Worker* denounced their individual terrorism as a diversion from the struggle. A year later it repeated this when a bomb planted by the Official IRA killed cleaning women at an army officers' mess at Aldershot. Supporting the aims of other revolutionaries or Irish republicans, and defending them against the state, did not mean—as it

did for some of the international revolutionary left—that the International Socialists refused to criticise outright disastrous methods of struggle.

The growth of the IS was reflected at a second industrial conference called by the organisation in Manchester in January 1972 at the height of the miners' strike (and by coincidence on the same day as Bloody Sunday). More than 700 delegates attended—twice as many as the previous conference in 1970. During these months the print run of *Socialist Worker* rose first to 20,500 in October 1971, then to 27,000 in February 1972.

Recruitment to the revolutionary left tailed off temporarily after the spring of 1972. Although *Socialist Worker's* print run remained close to 30,000, an attempt by IS to cash in on the victories of that summer through an “autumn-winter” recruitment campaign yielded no results. The reason, it became clear in retrospect, was that so long as workers were winning, activists saw little reason to join a small revolutionary organisation. Had IS itself been leading the struggles, things might have been different. But 99 percent of its industrial members were critics of established factory leaderships, not themselves those leaderships, and most IS members were not industrial workers.

The IS leadership developed a strategy which, it hoped, could bridge the gap between its own organisational weakness and the needs of the struggle. IS members in industry were to take the initiative in building organisations linking together the many thousands of activists who did not have clear political ideas, but who did recognise the need for a militant, active, class-wide struggle. As Tony Cliff put it, there was one very large cogwheel, the trade union movement with its 11 million members, and another, much smaller cogwheel, the revolutionary organisation. This could not move the larger cogwheel by itself without breaking. What was needed was an intermediate cogwheel:

This is the organisation of militants in different unions and industries who work together round specific issues, issues wider than those affecting a small group of workers in one place of work and not going so far as to aim at a complete emancipation of the working class by the overthrow of the capitalist system.⁵⁵⁷

IS members in several industries attempted to build rank-and-file organisations of this sort. They were most successful in industries new to militant action. Rank and File Teacher was established as early as 1969, with an organisation of several hundred activists, a magazine selling several thousand copies, and enough influence to lead unofficial actions and to force the union leadership to call strikes it would have preferred not to. In the civil service clerical union, Redder Tape was formed late in 1972 and rapidly came to spearhead the opposition of younger, more militant members to the right wing

leadership. In the white-collar local government union, NALGO Action emerged for a while as the opposition to the leadership and as the main grouping fighting to transform what had been a cosy staff association dominated by managers into a fighting union.

In the more traditionally strong manual unions it was more difficult to create viable rank-and-file groupings. A handful of leading London dockers who joined IS after Pentonville produced a paper, *The Dockworker*, which sold several thousand copies in the major ports, but were able to establish only an informal grouping of militants with influence in the National Port Shop Stewards Committee. In the mines, supporters of IS were able to get a paper, *The Collier*, off the ground, but were not powerful enough to challenge the Communist Party machines which ran the Scottish and Welsh coalfields and in Yorkshire they had much less influence than the grouping of pit and area officials around Arthur Scargill (who was elected area president in 1973). In the motor industry the paper *Carworker* carried arguments militants could not find elsewhere, such as on the state of the struggle against measured day work. It brought important shop stewards towards IS, but did not create a real rank-and-file organisation.

What could be achieved locally was shown at Chrysler's Ryton plant in Coventry. Management launched an attack on shopfloor organisation in the spring of 1973 by locking out workers for "shoddy work". The IS was able to organise some 30 or so workers into a Chrysler Action Group which waged the sort of aggressive campaign rarely seen before in car industry disputes, picketing rail depots and other plants to stop the movement of components and to bring all the company's operations in Britain to a halt. But the Chrysler Action Group could not sustain itself in the months that followed, when the union leaders organised scabbing on the electricians' dispute.

The industrial influence of the IS grew considerably in 1972-73. That spring the IS annual conference called for the organisation to set up ten factory branches; in fact some 40 or so factory or industrial branches were set up, often in key plants, and 120 delegates attended a factory branches conference in September 1973.⁵⁵⁸ Although their membership would often be quite small, they could exert considerable influence; when *Socialist Worker* reported that IS had 30 members in its Chrysler Coventry branch, one leading member of the branch complained we had given the game away to management who until then had been convinced we had 300!

Tony Cliff reported that 211 recruits had joined the organisation in the first month after the 1973 conference and 281 in the second: "For the first time we are recruiting more TGWU and AUEW members than members of the NUT".⁵⁵⁹ A *Socialist Worker* Industrial Rally in Manchester in November 1973 attracted

2,800 people—three times the attendance at the industrial conference there 20 months earlier.

This growth was not without problems. Some of those who had joined from the student struggle in 1968-70 could not adjust to the different tempo of activity involved in trying to build inside the working class. There were several small splits by people attracted to a range of political positions that seemed to offer short cuts—usually by ascribing magical powers to formal programmes of demands written many years before. The arguments around these splits were tedious, but they could not stop the fast growth of the IS.

A more serious problem in 1972-73 was that in its drive to build in the working class the IS forgot its analysis made in 1968, which showed that many students could be won to revolutionary politics. Its students were left to their own devices. Many stopped working in the colleges completely. Others tended to look to electoral alliances aimed at winning positions in student unions and the National Union of Students rather than agitation at the base. The result was that the Fourth International's International Marxist Group led three major college occupations in 1973 and recruited the best students, enabling it to increase its influence significantly.

But these were minor setbacks compared with the advances—advances which were to shape the IS's attitudes for several years after.

The end of Heath

Edward Heath had reason to feel satisfied with himself at the beginning of October 1973. He had enforced state control of wages and was confident the TUC General Council would offer little resistance to “stage three” of the policy.

The one great obstacle he had feared had, he believed, been cleared back in July, when he rushed from greeting the Portuguese fascist dictator Caetano at the front door of Downing Street (amid protest banners which proclaimed “Grocer meets butcher”) to a secret meeting in the back garden with the right wing president of the miners' union, Joe Gormley. They had agreed on a formula which should satisfy the next miners' pay claim without breaking the incomes policy. Just in case this did not work, record coal stocks had been built up which should last right through to the following summer.

Heath's confidence was increased by other factors. The economy was now booming, with a high growth rate and unemployment half what it had been a year before. True, this boom had unfortunate side effects—in particular a visible and therefore rather embarrassing upsurge in profits for bankers and speculators of all sorts. But the Labour Party was not gaining from this. The Tories did lose

two by-elections rather spectacularly to the Liberals, but these could be dismissed as mid-term aberrations, and so could the 4,500 votes the fascists of the National Front had picked up in West Bromwich in May.

Peter Walker, one of Heath's ministers, summed up the government's feeling when he proclaimed that Britain was "on the verge of a period of unprecedented prosperity".

Five months later the Tory government was no more.

The first blow to Heath came as the White Paper outlining stage three of the wage controls was at the printers. War between Israel and the Arab states led to a quadrupling of the price of oil. Raw material prices had already been rising as a result of a wild upsurge in production worldwide, of which Heath's boom had only been a local expression; now they shot up at enormous speed, threatening to lead to inflation rates not known since the Second World War.

The increase in the price of oil also completely altered the balance in any confrontation between the government and the miners. The government would not be able to afford to buy oil abroad—even if it could get hold of it—to burn instead of coal in the power stations. Instead it was having to switch from oil to coal, burning up its record coal stocks. Miners knew this. They raised their demands in a way Joe Gormley could no longer control. In November 1973 they started an overtime ban.

Heath's response was to try to cow them into accepting his terms. He announced an immediate state of emergency. Soon he was on television announcing a compulsory ten-day closure of industry for Christmas, to be followed by a three-day week. People were exhorted by television adverts to save electricity. A junior minister, Patrick Jenkin, urged people to clean their teeth in the dark—an image spoilt when newspapers printed a picture of his house with every light on. The Tories aimed to create a climate of national emergency, in which the miners could be depicted as the great enemy.

The left expected dramatic events. Troops had already been used to scab on striking firefighters in Glasgow. There had been a succession of attacks on workers by specially trained police—at Neap Wharf near Hull during the 1972 dock strikes, outside Bryant Colour in London, against picket lines at Fine Tubes in Plymouth, during rent protests on Merseyside. In Shrewsbury building workers were receiving jail sentences of up to three years for picketing. There were reports of police training on the Yorkshire Moors, learning to break picket lines with "flying wedges", and of preparations for the use of troops. There were rumours that the government was considering setting up internment camps for left wing militants.

Certainly there were people in government circles who did envisage a scale

of confrontation not known in Britain for half a century at least. *The Times* spoke of the need for its readers “to impose a policy of sound money at the point of a bayonet”.⁵⁶⁰ John Davies, Heath’s former industry minister, told his children this might be the last Christmas they would be able to enjoy. Heath himself “relied heavily for advice”⁵⁶¹ on his top civil servant, Sir William Armstrong; by the end of January 1974 Armstrong was talking wildly of coups and coalitions. The head of the CBI tells how: “We listened to a lecture on how Communists were infiltrating everything. They might even be infiltrating, he said, the room he was in”.⁵⁶²

The government was certainly in complete disarray as its previous strategy collapsed, and individuals were drawn to right wing, authoritarian conclusions. But the government dared not take these seriously while it thought there were alternatives. The methods of bourgeois democracy had kept the working class in its place for more than a century, encouraging it to believe it had a stake in the existing system. Heath was not going to risk throwing that asset away by going over the top. He knew that a working class movement which had freed the Pentonville dockers only 15 months before was too strong to be beaten by relying on force alone. Armstrong was dispatched for a rest cure, and never returned.

Heath’s talk of confrontation was a mixture of panic and bluff. It was meant to create an ideological climate in which the trade union leaders would make a deal.

It nearly worked. The TUC representatives at a meeting of the National Economic Development Council offered to impose “stage three” on their own members if the government would recognise the miners as a special case. The government rejected the offer, believing the union leaders could not deliver on their promise—and no doubt suspecting that if they were so ready to settle they would not give the miners much solidarity. That did not stop further grovelling from union leaders, left as well as right. At a later meeting with Heath Hugh Scanlon begged: “Is there anything, anything we can do or say that will satisfy you?” Heath said nothing.⁵⁶³

Heath’s aim seems to have been to raise the odds so much that the miners would eventually settle without turning the overtime ban into a strike. He underestimated the confidence in the pits and the bitterness towards his government.

Heath agonised for weeks before playing his last card. He announced a general election around the theme “Who runs the country?”

He would almost certainly have won had the miners called off industrial action for the duration of the election campaign. This was what Joe Gormley

called for, claiming that this alone would create a climate in which Labour could win the votes of the middle ground. Had Gormley got his way, Heath would have been able to boast the same sort of triumph as de Gaulle in June 1968.

But the miners rejected Gormley's electoralist "realism". They voted 81 percent for strike action in a pithead ballot and stopped every pit—causing deeper and deeper divisions within the ruling class camp as election day approached. The more farsighted sections of the employers now saw no choice but to settle with the miners and then rely upon other trade union leaders to hold the line. Campbell Adamson of the CBI virtually said as much when he let slip his view shortly before the election that the Industrial Relations Act would have to be repealed by the incoming government.

At the same time, the three-day week—which effectively meant workers were locked out two days a week—did not intimidate workers and turn them against the miners. Most ended up with wage packets only marginally lighter than normal and appreciated the greater leisure. This made it difficult for militants who had hoped there would be a fightback against the "lockout",⁵⁶⁴ but it had a worse effect on the government's calculations. Support for the miners from other workplaces was virtually automatic: typical of the solidarity were the coal trains which would stop the moment they saw a picket sign—even if no picket was in sight. The police and troops trained for picket breaking would not have helped the government at all.

The election result was a vote of no confidence in the government. The Tories' vote was down. So was Labour's—from 43 percent to 37.2 percent of the poll. The Tories came unstuck because, lacking faith in the government's ability to deal with the crisis, many habitual Tory voters had switched to the Liberals—or in Scotland, to the nationalists. Heath tried to hang on to power for another four days. But that served only to anger important sections of big business. If he could not persuade the unions to accept cuts in their members' living standards, he must make way for someone who could—and that meant a Labour government.

The end of a period of struggle

The last months of the Heath government were among the most exciting in recent British political history. For the revolutionary left they were a time in which the ideas they had been putting across in weekly papers since 1968 really began to go with the stream of much working class thinking. Although the proportion of people voting Labour declined, the minority identifying with some sort of alternative well to the left of Labour grew enormously. There were

probably hundreds of thousands of people looking for such an alternative, and on the issue of wages those hundreds of thousands could move many more behind them.

There was a sense of ecstasy on the far left. Socialists were able to sell far more papers than ever before—*Socialist Worker's* print order rose from 30,000 to 40,000, and one week touched 52,000. The IS was able to organise meetings several hundred strong to hear Shrewsbury defendants speaking alongside IS members. This was in contrast to a passive election campaign from the Labour Party, which had not begun to recover the activists it had lost during the last disastrous Labour government. In non-marginal seats IS posters, with their message “Back the miners, Beat the Tories, Vote Labour”, were often the only ones to be seen.

The ecstasy was justified—up to a point. The strategy of decisive sections of the ruling class, to use the law to break union power, had collapsed. The revolutionary left, on the margins of politics in Britain since the days of Chartism and crushed for a generation between the forces of Stalinism and Labourism, had established roots in key factories and was the main opposition in important white-collar unions.

But that did not mean it had the weight to counter the consistent pursuit by a Labour government of a different strategy, the one Heath had begun to play with half-heartedly—close cooperation with the union leaderships.

In an important article in 1972, Tony Cliff had argued that a revolutionary socialist party of 50,000 members would be able, on particular issues, to organise around it many of the 300,000 shop stewards, and through them bring into motion many of the 11 million trade unionists.⁵⁶⁵ Unfortunately when Heath fell there were not 50,000 but 4,000 revolutionaries, and Jones and Scanlon had more influence over the ranks of shop stewards than they did. The hold of trade union reformism, a hangover from the period of expanding capitalism, persisted into the new period of intense crisis.

This did not mean the new Labour government brought the period of turmoil in British political life to an immediate end. It could contain workers' militancy only by running before it.

Prime minister Harold Wilson carefully set out to get the backing of the trade union left by including in his government ministers with left wing reputations such as Michael Foot, Tony Benn and Eric Heffer. The miners' strike was immediately ended with a large wage increase, and although the government put up token resistance to the demands of other workers, they usually got large increases as well. While prices rose 8 percent between February and October 1974, wages rose on average 16 percent.⁵⁶⁶

The new employment minister, Michael Foot, repealed most of the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act—any hesitation was removed when the entire membership of the engineering union struck in protest at the seizure of the union's assets by the courts.⁵⁶⁷

The right wing Labour chancellor, Denis Healey, introduced a budget which increased government spending in an effort to counter the effects of the world recession. As groups of workers continued to occupy against closures and redundancies, industry minister Tony Benn was able to promise government aid to workers' cooperatives at Triumph Meriden, KME (formerly Fisher-Bendix) in Kirkby, and the *Scottish Daily News*—although his officials were quick to insist the firms had to compete on the market and repay the loans with interest.

In these months, previously non-militant sections of workers who had started to fight back against Heath's wage freeze in 1973 now fought again—with a wave of struggles by London teachers, local government white-collar workers and health workers. The ability to win victories against a weak government led to the first real consolidation of shopfloor trade unionism in these industries.

But Wilson knew he could not buy time indefinitely. British capitalism could not escape for long from the effects of world crisis, and if the government did not hammer the workers, the employers would move to hammer the government. A hard right tendency in the ruling class was already beginning to organise itself in the summer of 1974; senior Conservatives began the movement which was to give the party's leadership to Margaret Thatcher a few months later; top industrialists resigned from the CBI because they thought it had become too soft; retired army officers got enormous publicity when they talked of forming strike-breaking "private armies"; MI5 used "dirty tricks" in an effort to discredit both the Labour government and Heath's supporters in the Tory Party, now called "the wets".

The head of the CBI told later how, faced with a draft White Paper from Tony Benn which preached state intervention to curtail the powers of private industry, "We certainly discussed an investment strike...the possibility of industry withholding its investment...and a list of things which in themselves would not have been legal".⁵⁶⁸

Wilson began to move to placate big business right across the board, as in 1966, once he had secured a larger majority in a second general election in October 1974. Symbolic of this was what happened to two Shrewsbury building workers still in jail, Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson. They were released on bail pending appeal before the election—and thrown back inside afterwards.

Wilson worked to humiliate the left wing in his own cabinet by campaigning with the Tories, Liberals and big business to defeat them in a referendum on

Common Market membership in June 1975, then demoted Tony Benn from the industry ministry to the much less important energy ministry. A senior civil servant commented: “Wilson certainly didn’t want Benn to resign. He wanted him in the government.”⁵⁶⁹ Benn’s presence helped bind to the government many of the activists who had played such an important role in defeating Heath. He could have been a focus for mass left wing opposition to Wilson. Now he stayed in the government only on Wilson’s terms.

The chancellor of the exchequer, Healey, pushed through the first of a series of massive cuts in welfare expenditure in his April 1975 budget. The environment minister, the same Anthony Crosland who had preached 19 years earlier that governments could always spend their way out of economic crises, now told local authorities they had to cut back. “The party’s over,” he announced.

On the wages front, workers found it much harder in the first half of 1975 than they had six months before. A wave of strikes by thousands of workers in Glasgow in autumn 1974 had, by and large, been successful; Wilson used troops against striking dustcart drivers in the city in the spring of 1975 and forced them back to work defeated.

Then in summer 1975 there was a run on the pound which senior figures in the Treasury and the Bank of England did little to stop. They saw it as an effective way of bringing pressure on the government to introduce new wage controls.

Not only Wilson, but the “left” trade union leaders soon showed how right they were. Jack Jones said afterwards: “I recognised that something further would have to be done to try to persuade in a voluntary way the trade unions to hold their wage claims within reason.”⁵⁷⁰ Scanlon was shaken when the Labour right winger Denis Healey and left winger Michael Foot together spelt out the scale of the financial crisis at a meeting of the National Economic Development Council. Another TUC leader told how “Jones and Scanlon came back and Scanlon said, ‘I have looked into the abyss’ and what he’d seen had frightened him to death”.⁵⁷¹

Within days the same left union leaders who had opposed—at least publicly—wage controls under the Tories were backing a “social contract” which restricted wage increases to a flat £6 a week.

There was nothing half-hearted about their commitment. When veteran left Labour MP Ian Mikardo denounced the wage controls at a rally organised by the left Labour paper *Tribune* at the Labour Party conference, Jack Jones stormed down to the front of the meeting, seized the microphone and interrupted, bellowing: “I detest these attacks on the trade union movement”.⁵⁷²

The decisions of Jones, Scanlon and Benn to stick with the Labour government were of decisive importance in determining what happened to left wing resistance to the Social Contract.

Wilson did have some objective advantages when it came to imposing his wage controls in summer 1975 which Heath did not have 18 months earlier. Wages had risen considerably faster than prices for the previous year, until the living standards of employed workers reached their highest level ever. At the same time the rate of inflation—now around 20 percent—and rising unemployment enabled the media to create fears of a real economic catastrophe among considerable numbers of workers.

But it is worth remembering that right up to the last minute, when the run on the pound forced their hand, ministers were afraid that wage controls would encounter widespread resistance. That was why they were so reluctant to turn to them.

What made the difference when it came to the crunch was the attitude of the trade union leaders—not the right wingers who had proved so incapable of holding the line in 1969-70, but the left wing. For these could persuade many militant rank-and-file activists to accept the government policy—at least for the time being.

The networks of activists who had resisted *In Place of Strife* and the Tory attacks of 1970-74 were torn apart, as those who looked to Jones, Scanlon and Benn apologised in one way or another for what the government was doing. The IS tried to create a new network, with two conferences of rank-and-file delegates. Several hundred delegates from union branches and stewards' committees attended, but they did not have the muscle to beat back the message coming from so many of those who had fought the Tories.

In 1975-76 the world recession hit Britain with a vengeance. Unemployment doubled. Just when organised rank-and-file resistance was most needed, the behaviour of the trade union and Labour lefts ensured it was most lacking. The level of struggle fell sharply. More than 1.25 million workers had been involved in nearly 3,000 strikes in the 12 months before Labour's wage controls were announced; in the next 21 months fewer than 600,000 workers were involved in only 1,800 strikes.

A vicious circle was soon operating. Every failure to fight back by one group of workers caused less confidence in others. The feeling among a growing minority of workers in 1969-74, that their class had the ability and power to run society, began to evaporate. There was a general rightward shift throughout society. This meant that even when there was a limited revival of struggle in 1977 and again with the "winter of discontent" in 1978-79, it did not lead to the

sort of political generalisation that had taken place before.

The new conditions were not easy for revolutionary socialists. Many of the generation of 1968 dropped away—to join the rapidly rightwardmoving forces of British Eurocommunism, to throw their lot in with the Labour Party, to devote themselves to single-issue campaigns, to run publishing ventures that promoted the ideas they had argued against for ten years, or even, in one or two cases, to work for the other side. Those who remained with the revolutionary left had a hard task adjusting to a period of setbacks after a period of great victories. Bitter quarrels broke out among people who had worked closely together for years on what the character of the period was and what was to be done—quarrels that on occasions led to splits.

But the revolutionary left did not disintegrate in Britain as it did in Italy. The Socialist Workers Party (as the International Socialists were now known) survived to lead the fight against the growth of the Nazi National Front, to play its part in the steelworkers' strike of 1980 and the health service strikes of 1982, and to throw itself into the miners' epic struggle in 1984-85.

The party's ability to survive was a product of its politics. In 1968 and afterwards, the influence of the IS prevented the new revolutionary socialists in Britain from being captivated by the Maoist and Guevarist ideas that were so powerful in many other countries. That in turn avoided the political disillusionment with China and Kampuchea which elsewhere combined with the demoralisation of temporary defeat to produce a flight from politics. In “this most bourgeois of bourgeois countries”,⁵⁷³ where parliamentarianism has traditionally dominated, the revolutionary left continues to exist, albeit on the margins of the working class movement.

Portugal: The revolution that wilted

PEOPLE ROSE from their beds in Lisbon on 25 April 1975 to find armed troops with tanks in control of all the main streets. At first no one knew on whose orders they were there. The country had been ruled by a fascist regime for 44 years. Any opposition was ruthlessly hunted down by the secret police, the PIDE. The fascist Portuguese Legion had 100,000 uniformed members. Independent trade unions were banned, and police would open fire on strikers.

Were the troops just a move by the regime to protect itself? After all, it had clamped down on a suspected military conspiracy a few weeks earlier.

The truth was not long in coming out. The playing on the radio of a banned song, *Grandola Vila Morena*, by the known left winger Zeca Afonso, had been the signal for a coup. People were soon embracing the soldiers, putting red carnations down the barrels of their guns, riding on the tanks in impromptu demonstrations, directing them to the hideouts of known secret police informers. The world's press proclaimed this the peaceful "revolution of the flowers".

Yet the next 18 months were to be far from peaceful. For the motives of those who made the coup were not those suggested by the talk of social harmony and a "political spring".

Portugal was Europe's last major colonial power, but also the poorest. Its attempts to hang on to the vast African colonies of Angola and Mozambique and the smaller Guinea-Bissau had led it into wars it could not afford and which it was not winning.

The two great monopolies which dominated most of Portuguese industry, CUF and Champalimaud, had concluded that a negotiated end to the wars was necessary if they were to restructure Portuguese industry in the face of growing international competition. There were close personal connections between the heads of these companies and leading figures in the armed forces. It was not difficult for them to persuade General Antonio de Spínola, an old fascist who had fought as a volunteer for France in the Spanish Civil War, to give the go-

ahead to other discontented officers to stage a coup. As the dictator Caetano was dispatched into exile—with full military honours—Spinola became president, heading a junta of other generals.

The workers' movement

Spinola saw himself as a de Gaulle figure. He intended to run an authoritarian regime, compel political parties to bow to his dictates, and continue the wars in Africa until the liberation movements would agree to an “honourable settlement”—one which left the interests of the Portuguese monopolies and the privileges of white settlers barely touched. But he reckoned without the effects of the sudden collapse of the fascist power structure on Portuguese workers. There had been a slow build up of workers' struggles for several years. In some, such as the Portuguese airline TAP, there were violent conflicts with the police although on nothing like the scale in neighbouring Spain. More often, workers would decide among themselves to stop work on their machines at a given time, refuse to elect delegates in case they were victimised, and simply wait for the management to offer improved wages.

In a few industries, militants had gained control of the local fascist unions and set up a semi-legal coordination between them, the Intersindical. But every attempt at organisation came up against the fascist structure of the state, which extended into the factory, with fascist managers and a network of informers on the shop floor. As one Plessey worker explained:

It is difficult for workers in Britain to understand what fascism means. It means that you have no information about what is going on in other factories or the world at large. You cannot speak freely. You have no right to hold meetings. There are no such things as unions. There are spies everywhere. It is terrible. It imposes on you complete isolation where you cannot talk to other workers freely.⁵⁷⁴

A week after the coup workers celebrated May Day freely for the first time in their lives—100,000 workers took over the streets of Lisbon, with red banners and speeches from left wing leaders just returned from exile. But workers did not simply go home and wait for these leaders to carry through reforms. Every section had grievances that had been building up for years. Now they went on strike to demand satisfaction. And they did not raise just economic questions, but called for “saneamento”—literally, the “cleaning out” of fascist managers and spies. As one trade union activist explained: “In some places this means sacking all of them”.

The momentum of the strikes built up slowly. Then on 15 May the 8,000 workers in the Lisnave shipyards, just across the river from Lisbon, occupied.

The country's new rulers faced a massive upsurge of working class struggle—in May alone 200,000 workers in 158 workplaces struck. In an attempt to placate the workers the regime conceded a 30 percent increase in the minimum wage and sacked 1,000 company directors with fascist connections.

But this did not end the strike movement. In June there were big strikes by the postal workers and Lisbon bakery workers. And there were repeated arguments as to who was in control of the media as old fascists were removed and workers' committees of one sort or another took over.

The left parties and the unions

Spinola soon realised that a military regime alone could not control the popular upsurge. On 15 May he formed a provisional government made up of parties and individuals with anti-fascist records.

He would have preferred to have only “moderate” oppositionists—members of the fascist parliament who had occasionally raised their voices to protest at particular actions—plus the recently formed Socialist Party led by the lawyer Mario Soares. With a mere 200 members before 25 April, this was hardly a mass force which could escape from military control. But these groups alone knew they could not control the workers' upsurge. They persuaded him to override his own bitterly anti-Communist inclinations and include two Communist members in the government.

The Communist Party had been the backbone of every serious opposition to fascism in the past 40 years. It had maintained a continuous underground presence, for instance always managing to circulate its paper, *Avante*, despite the long prison sentences most of its leaders had received. It had been an indispensable ally for those liberals who occasionally tried to contest the rigged elections and it had taken the initiative in fighting for control of the local fascist unions.

The party grew massively in the days after the coup. Underground it had had 5,000 members. Now each of these had no difficulty recruiting ten or 20 new members—at a time when what was to become the main bourgeois party, the PPD, had not even been formed! One account tells:

I had the experience of attending a mass meeting of the Communist Party in Lisbon's bullring. It was held in a terrible thunderstorm—but still 40,000 people were crammed inside with thousands locked outside... The politics were an abortion of socialism, but I've never in my life experienced the sheer fervour and determination of that meeting, 40,000 workers singing the *Internationale* in a moving experience in any language.⁵⁷⁵

Communist Party militants were in the forefront of the expansion of the

unions—the Intersindical grew from 20 local unions to 200 in a matter of weeks. They led the way in building workers' committees in workplaces and in fighting for control of the media against the old fascist appointees—so that one main Lisbon daily paper, *O Seculo*, became virtually a party paper and the party's influence was visible in many radio stations.

The Portuguese Communist Party was still Stalinist, repudiating the Eurocommunism so popular in the Italian and Spanish parties. But that did not mean its strategy was revolutionary, that it would seize the opportunity presented by the near collapse of the old machinery of repression to build up the strength of democratic workers' organisations until they could bid for power. Rather, its model in the months ahead was to be what had happened in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, where Communist Parties had built their strength by holding back workers' struggles in exchange for positions in the existing state machine, then had used these positions to squeeze out the old bourgeoisie, establishing state capitalism.⁵⁷⁶

So in Portugal the Communist Party set out to use its government position to consolidate its hold over the formal structures of the trade union movement, to increase its penetration of the media, to advance sympathetic army officers and to establish local power bases for itself in areas where the workers' movement was weak. Thus in the north of Portugal the party saw to it that people (usually lawyers) prepared to follow its orders took over official positions from purged fascists.

The other side of this approach was proving to Spinola and big business that the party could control the working class and this meant campaigning to bring the strike wave to an end. At the beginning of June the Intersindical called for anti-strike demonstrations; Communist Party and union leaders claimed that "fascists" were behind the bakers' strike; they denounced a struggle in the country's biggest paper, the *Diario da Noticias*, though it was for the sacking of fascist managers; they applauded when troops were used to break the postal workers' strike, though the majority of the strike committee were themselves supporters or members of the Communist Party.⁵⁷⁷

Participation in the government did not just mean opposition to strikes. The party supported various acts of repression motivated by right wing forces in the government—the imprisonment of a Maoist editor, Saldanha Sanchez, for opposing the continued sending of troops to Africa, fines on the newspapers *Republica*, *Capital* and *Revolucao* and the radio station *Renascenca*, for giving details of conflicts between left and right inside the armed forces,⁵⁷⁸ the throwing into prison of two conscript officers who refused to break the postal strike, and the use of troops against a strike at the Portuguese airline TAP. Communist

ministers also helped draw up a law banning sympathy and political strikes.

At one level, the strategy seemed successful. In a government reshuffle at the beginning of July the party increased its influence and an army officer thought to be sympathetic to it, Vasco Goncalves, was appointed prime minister. The party showed its strength at a rally afterwards in which, although the main speaker was Spínola, it was clear that the tone was set by the Communist Party; the rally was televised and its slogans echoed through every town in the country.

But the party's strategy faced a problem not met by the Stalinists in Eastern Europe after 1945. The tempo of class struggle was rising, not falling.

Workers' struggles were weakened but not quelled by the Communist Party attacks. Militants influenced by the party were confused and often did not know what to do. But others reacted by turning against the party and looking in a more revolutionary direction. As one activist explained:

As a result of the discussions about the strikes, the workers' understanding grew a lot. For instance, when the Federation began to argue that agreeing to all the wage demands of the workers in Portugal would use up more than the national income, workers began to reply by asking: Why pay the National Guard [the paramilitary police] which does nothing? Why maintain a police force which disrupts the rest of the country? What about the wars in Portugal's colonies which cost half the national budget? The reaction of many transport and bakery workers was to say they wanted to burn alive Communist minister Cunhal.⁵⁷⁹

Revolutionary groups to the left of the Communist Party began to gain influence in Lisnave and the other big shipyard Setnave, in the textile union, in Timex, in the post office union, in TAP. When the anti-strike law was introduced on 29 August 5,000 Lisnave workers defied a ban to march in protest through the centre of Lisbon.

And the workers' movement did not subside after the wave of strikes. Growing numbers of factory owners tried to cow the militancy by closing or threatening to close their plants. Workers reacted by taking over the plants—either running them themselves or imposing their control over the managers. Hundreds of factories were run in this way by the following spring. In February 1975 more than 1,000 workers' representatives from 38 factories organised a demonstration through Lisbon to protest at rising unemployment and a visit by the NATO fleet. The demonstration was denounced by the Communist Party and the Intersindical, but nevertheless drew 40,000 workers, with banners from many major factories in the Lisbon area.

Reaction organises

Portuguese big business had welcomed the overthrow of fascism because it

wanted a negotiated settlement to the wars in Africa and the modernisation of Portuguese industry. But it got more than it bargained for. The revolutionary ferment was threatening to make it impossible to wage the African wars at all, while the sudden growth of workers' organisation in the factories put question marks over any "rationalisation" strategy. The US government was also worried—about the rise in the political influence of the pro-Russian Portuguese Communist Party and the growing likelihood of all-out victory for the liberation movements in the colonies.

In July 1974 the politicians of the "centre" made an attempt to stop things getting out of hand. The prime minister, Palma Carlos, resigned, complaining of "disorder in the streets, social indiscipline, agitation in the newspapers and the invasion of public buildings." A new government in which middle-ranking officers became ministers alongside the representatives of the political parties, resolved the crisis temporarily. It dealt with two of the colonial wars by granting independence to Guinea-Bissau and establishing a government dominated by the liberation movement FRELIMO in Mozambique.

But it could not end the ferment in Portugal itself. Nor could it resolve the vexed problem of Angola, where powerful Portuguese, South African and US interests hoped continuation of the war would deny victory to the liberation movement, MPLA, and enable the puppet FNLA and UNITA to form a government.

The political crisis broke out again, in a more serious form, in September. Spínola made a speech urging people to "wake up to defend themselves against extremist totalitarianisms that fight in the shadows."⁵⁸⁰ Already he and three other members of his junta had had meetings with representatives of several leading companies and supporters of the fallen Caetano regime. They decided to organise a demonstration of the alleged "silent majority" of right wingers in support of Spínola, while distributing guns among former fascists.

The aim was not to restore the fascist regime, but to give the impression of mass popular opposition to the left. The demonstration was intended to be 300,000-strong. The presence of armed groups of fascists would provide the generals with the excuse to intervene and "restore order" on their own terms.

The day of the demonstration, Saturday 28 September, officers who had played key roles in the overthrow of fascism went to the presidential palace to plead with Spínola to call it off. They were placed under virtual arrest. Meanwhile troops supporting Spínola prevented the publication of any newspapers and stood guard outside radio stations. However the generals had omitted one thing from their calculations: the reaction of the mass of workers. People who had won the right to organise and act for themselves for the first time in four decades were not going to give this up without a struggle. Even the

parties and union leaders that had been denouncing the struggle in the factories for the past four months felt they had to oppose Spínola now—their own future was at stake.

The evening before the rally, a number of unions came out in opposition to it. The Intersindical called on people to be “vigilant”. The railway union instructed its members to refuse to operate special trains carrying right wing demonstrators to Lisbon for the rally and to search other trains. The coach drivers’ union did likewise. The Popular Democratic Front, a Communist Party-led organisation, began to set up roadblocks throughout the country. In Lisbon itself representatives of the most militant workplaces—TAP, Lisnave, the postal workers, Standard Electric, Jomal do Comercio—and revolutionary left groups called a joint demonstration designed to clash with that of the right—40,000 workers took to the streets.

The mass mobilisation of workers could not fail to penetrate the barracks. The officers who were backing the attempted coup began to find themselves isolated. Soldiers began to join civilians on the roadblocks. The balance within the armed forces command shifted away from Spínola, and his opponents took control of the radio stations back from the right. He was forced to call the demonstration off. The next day he resigned.

The defeat of the right was principally the work of the working class organisations. But it also revealed deep splits within the officer corps of the armed forces.

Although Spínola and his junta of generals had been given power by the coup of 25 April, they had not organised the coup themselves. This was done by a grouping of 400 middle-ranking officers who called themselves the Armed Forces Movement. They came, generally, from conservative backgrounds: the key organiser, Otelo de Carvalho, had broken into tears at the funeral five years earlier of the fascist dictator Salazar. But they did not have the same intimate ties with the leaders of big business as the top generals. And of one thing they had become convinced—the war in the colonies had to be ended as soon as possible by handing over power to the genuine liberation movements. Their own experiences had also led many to hate the old fascist structure, which they blamed for the colonial war and for the backwardness of Portuguese society.

Such attitudes did not mean they identified with the wave of workers’ struggles in spring and summer 1974. They joined the general government denunciation of strikes and supported measures such as the anti-strike law. But they were not prepared to strengthen the hand of the right by allowing the police and National Guard to be used to break strikes. Instead they preferred to nominate some of their own number to “mediate” between workers and former

fascist managers—which in practice often meant allowing workers to run things themselves. As the first political crisis developed in July 1974 the officers of the Armed Forces Movement set up a military force under their own control, COPCON, charged with “maintaining order”—thus avoiding the need to call in the discredited police.

COPCON’s first major intervention was against the postal workers’ strike, which it broke. The rank-and-file soldiers of COPCON were unhappy about this, and even its commanding officer, Otelo de Carvalho, seems to have been disturbed: by acting in this way, were they backing forces opposed to themselves? When COPCON was called out in September to stop the Lisnave protest against the anti-strike laws, its rank and file refused to act against the demonstration and the officer in charge withdrew them without pressing the matter.⁵⁸¹

The events of 28 September deepened the hostility of the 400 officers of the Armed Forces Movement towards the representatives of Portuguese capitalism—if only because many realised that a victory for Spínola would have seen them sent off to die in Angola, if not to rot in Cascais prison. In the months that followed they allowed workers to take over a growing number of factories threatened with closure, agricultural labourers to divide up many of the huge estates in the south of the country, and slum-dwellers to occupy large numbers of empty dwellings in Lisbon.

When the demonstration against unemployment and NATO was called in February 1975, COPCON allowed it to go ahead, even though it had been banned by the Civil Governor of Lisbon, who was a supporter of the Communist Party. At the close of the demonstration rank-and-file soldiers raised their clenched fists to chant slogans with the demonstrators.

The general drift to the left worried growing numbers of senior officers—and now significant numbers of middle-ranking officers agreed with them. Elections to positions inside the Armed Forces Movement showed a shift to the right.

On 11 March 1975 Spínola and his friends attempted another, much more serious coup. Right wing officers took control of the Tancos airbase and sent two fighters and two helicopters to bombard the Light Artillery Barracks which guarded the northern approaches to Lisbon. Paratroops then surrounded the barracks. This was meant to be the signal for action by right wing officers throughout the country. But it backfired.

The counter-mobilisation

Instead of workers being cowed by the attempt at a coup, they took physical

control of key points throughout the country. An account based on reports in the Portuguese press told how:

Workers at Radio Renascença, which had been silent since they occupied 10 days before, broadcast the news. The Lisbon workers closed down the banks and stopped anyone entering. Shops and offices shut after lunch and the phones went out of order as workers rushed to join demonstrations and man barricades. In Barreiro, a centre of industry south of Lisbon, factory and fire sirens shrieked continuously as workers formed pickets round barricades which stopped and searched all vehicles. In Savacem, near the bombed barracks, workers formed a dense barricade across the main road, backed up with four bulldozers and tons of cement. A representative from the workers' committee at the local construction firm went to the barracks and asked that the workers be armed so that they could join in the fight. At Cartaxo the barricade was built from lorries from the occupied brewery works of SDC, but was quickly joined by hundreds of workers from other factories, armed with clubs, spades or anything else which was at hand. At Lisnave shipyard, the workers stopped work, joined the barricades and sent pickets to protect children in the local school. The frontier roads to Spain were blocked off, and all over the country groups of people were guarding the roads. In Coimbra, cars were driven onto the airport runway after a plane was seen flying low over the city.

Huge demonstrations were jamming the streets of Lisbon, Oporto and the other towns. All the papers were sold out. Many printed second editions or special broadsheets as did the workers' committee of the big Lisbon daily *O Seculo*.⁵⁸²

The revolutionary left played a more important role than in the September events. They built barricades along with Communist Party and Intersindical militants and seized control of Lisbon's only bridge across the river Tagus and the river ferries. In at least three towns they seized arms from police and National Guard buildings.

The mass workers' action prevented officers sympathetic to the right declaring for the coup. In some units, soldiers were openly fraternising with the workers manning the barricades. In others, officers did not dare put the loyalty of their men to the test.

Outside the Light Artillery Barracks the isolated paratroops were at a loss to know what to do. For two hours soldiers and workers from local factories argued with them, Then they put their guns down and fraternised with those they had been ordered to attack.

The attempted coup, which was meant to bring "order" to Portugal, gave events another big push to the left. For the first time there were joint meetings in some barracks of rank and file and officers together. What had been a wave of factory occupations now became a deluge. And the breach between the leaders of the Armed Forces Movement and the big monopolies CUT, Champalimaud and the banks became complete: trade union activists who had occupied firms as their owners fled abroad were told that from now on they were nationalised; the majority of Portuguese industry passed into state ownership overnight.

But who controlled the state?

The fragmentation of power

The supreme power seemed to be the Armed Forces Movement. It dominated the government, it appointed the administrators of the newly nationalised industries, and it held the chains of command inside the military. Part of the Western media gave the impression Portugal had become a military dictatorship. It made a great deal of noise about the “political prisoners”—the imprisoned former secret policemen of the PIDE and the few people arrested after the attempted coups of September and March. A small section of the left internationally⁵⁸³ went along with this, arguing that the greatest danger in Portugal was a “Bonapartist dictatorship”.

But the leaders of the Armed Forces Movement in fact had little power. They were a minority of the officers in the armed forces—400 out of 10,000. They had risen to prominence because the others were uncertain what to do about the war in Angola and feared mutiny if they ordered rank-and-file soldiers to attack the workers’ gains. But this did not mean the majority had disappeared from the scene. Only in the navy were a significant number of right wing officers sacked.⁵⁸⁴

Elsewhere they bided their time, avoiding commands which might provoke rebellion in the barracks, but also doing their best to keep the ordinary soldiers insulated from revolutionary ideas.

The leaders of the Armed Forces Movement could seem all powerful inside the military because there was a balance between the majority of officers, who did not yet feel powerful enough to give vent to their increasingly right wing inclinations, and the mass of rank-and-file soldiers who, although unwilling to attack the workers, did not yet feel confident enough to overturn the formal power of the officers. But this was necessarily a temporary balance, an unstable equilibrium. In time either the rank and file would challenge the prerogatives of the officers, or the officers would regain complete control in the barracks and use their power against the workers. In either case, the Armed Forces Movement would lose its footing and come crashing down.

The balance in the armed forces reflected the balance in society as a whole. The great monopolists had lost their power. The sheer concentration of economic wealth in their hands made them vulnerable; not many people in Portugal were prepared to risk their lives for them. But there were also a mass of small businesses still untouched by the upsurge of workers’ struggles, and even the occupied factories still operated according to market criteria—although moderated by the refusal of many workers to accept sackings. The bourgeoisie was disorganised and internally divided—the main bourgeois party, the PPD, had

not dared support either of Spínola's coups—but it was still a powerful social force. This disorganisation allowed the officers of the Armed Forces Movement to rise above society for a while—but only for a while.

During this time some of them did, perhaps, dream of dictatorship. Not a dictatorship on the fascist model, but rather that of the Third World liberation movements they had fought in Africa—a dictatorship with popular support which would use its powers to take over industry and lead Portugal out of poverty and backwardness. Castro or Nasser, not Hitler or Mussolini, were the prototypes they might have liked to copy. But Third World dictators like Nasser and Castro had only been able to rise to supreme power because the major social classes were passive—the bourgeoisie weak and disorganised, the working class fragmented and non-militant.⁵⁸⁵ That was not the situation in Portugal. The bourgeoisie, it was true, had been weakened, but it still had considerable reserves of strength and backing from the major Western powers. And the working class was massively organised and active. To fulfil their dream of dictatorship, the Armed Forces Movement leaders would have had to mobilise all the forces of the working class against local and international capital—and such a mobilisation would have made their dictatorship impossible.

The same applied to the Stalinist fantasies of the Communist Party leadership of establishing a regime on the model of Eastern Europe. They had been granted important positions of influence in civilian sectors of the state machine, in the media and in the nationalised industries in return for using their influence to restrain working class militancy. But they had not succeeded in breaking that militancy. And so their successes were threatened from two sides—by the increasingly right wing mood within the middle bourgeoisie and the mass of army officers, and by the growing influence of revolutionary socialist groups within the working class.

The Communist Party's problems were now increased by two further factors. Sections of the Armed Forces Movement increasingly distrusted the party, fearing its influence might be detrimental to their own. And the other Western states saw the party as a possible pro-Russian "Trojan horse" in the heart of NATO, an example they feared might be copied in Italy and Spain.

The Communist Party had already faced one challenge from forces it had itself helped to build up. In January 1975 the Socialist Party had tried to alter the law on unions to encourage the formation of rival politically affiliated unions on the French model. The Communist Party had been able to thwart this move—but only by mobilising 300,000 workers on the streets in a short-lived lunge leftward. It would not find things so easy in future.

The other important factor in the equation of power was the working class

itself, which had made enormous advances since the overthrow of fascism and in September and March had shown it could block any moves to restore right wing rule.

For this reason Marxists were prone in 1974-75 to talk of “dual power”,⁵⁸⁶ judging the situation in Portugal to be one in which the official power of a bourgeois government was balanced by the power of organisations based on direct workers’ democracy. But a more accurate description was “fragmented power”. For although rank-and-file workers exerted enormous pressure at key points throughout society—in important sections of the army, in the occupied factories, in sections of the media, on the streets against attempted mobilisations of the right—there were no workers’ councils, no structures uniting this influence at a local, let alone a national level. There were factory councils—but attempts at coordination between them had only transitory success.

One reason for this was the influence of the Armed Forces Movement. The fact that they had taken the initiative in overthrowing fascism gave the 400 officers enormous influence inside the working class. Had the armed forces acted as a uniform block to every workers’ demand, that influence would not have lasted long. But the divisions inside the military led sections of it to side with workers in battles against their employers or the right. COPCON, for instance, often seemed more sympathetic to militant working class action than did the Communist Party and the Intersindical. The result was that few workers spontaneously saw the need for a permanent organisation of their own, based upon elected and recallable delegates.

A second reason was the weakness of the revolutionary left. Had there existed a single, strong party of revolutionary socialists, arguing with their fellow workers about the need to rely on their own strength and not to rely on the good intentions of a minority of the country’s officers, then the various fragmented forms of workers’ power might have been linked into delegate-based organisation. But such a party was missing.

The revolutionary left

The revolutionary left was small when fascism was overthrown. But then so was every organised political force, except the Communist Party. The vehement opposition of the Communist Party to the strike wave presented the left with a virtually unparalleled opportunity to grow, which the left seized. It produced weekly papers that sold widely, it gained members in most of the main factories in the Lisbon area and, as we have seen, under its influence 40,000 people demonstrated against unemployment and NATO in February—as many as the

French revolutionary left and the CFDT together were able to get to the Charlety stadium at the height of the May events, in a far bigger country.

But the revolutionary left was beset by problems of political understanding. Most of its original cadres came from splits in the Communist Party and its front organisations. And the ideas which influenced them were those prevalent throughout most of the European revolutionary left—Maoist, Guevarist and occasional Fourth Internationalist ideas.

The Maoists showed great enthusiasm and dedication in the weeks immediately after the fall of Caetano in pushing the movement forward. The editor of the paper of the biggest Maoist group, the MRPP, was thrown into prison for urging soldiers not to continue fighting in the colonies. Activists from another, the AOC, played a prominent role in the postal strike and won leading positions in the Lisbon branch of the union. A third Maoist grouping, the UDP (actually a front for two organisations), was the main force in the committee which called the February demonstration. At this stage, when workers thought of a force to the left of the Communist Party, they normally thought of the Maoists.

But the Maoist groups did not have the theoretical understanding to come to terms with the complexities of the situation in which they found themselves. They accepted the same basic characterisation of the revolution as the Communist Party—that it was “national democratic”—though they put on it a different gloss. And so all the Maoist groups looked for “bourgeois democrats” who would forge alliances with them.

In the first months this did not matter over much, since they did not allow the search for such allies to weaken their commitment to the workers’ struggles or their insistence on an immediate end to the colonial wars. But by spring 1975 their analysis began to present enormous difficulties. For Portugal clearly was not a normal “bourgeois democracy”: on the one hand there was the high level of workers’ struggle, on the other the domination of the government by the Armed Forces Movement. It was by no means self-evident what a “national democratic” demand was in such circumstances—unless the aim was to push the revolution backwards rather than forwards.

What is more, the Communist Party had by now accumulated more influence than in any other Western state—and the Maoist groupings had no analysis of the Communist Party. To them it was simply a body of “revisionists”, “traitors” and “agents of social imperialism”. Russia was “social fascism” and since the Communist Party hoped to build a similar society in Portugal, it was a “social fascist” party.

The logic of this position was to push the Maoist organisations to the right once the Armed Forces Movement and the Communist Party became powerful.

Faced with the growth of “military dictatorship” and “social fascism”, fulfilling “democratic tasks” meant allying with “bourgeois democrats” against the Communist Party and the Armed Forces Movement.

This was the path which the MRPP and the AOC followed. By April 1975 all their propaganda was directed against the Communist Party and the Armed Forces Movement. Its vehemence led to the arrest of a few of their members, driving them to still more furious denunciations.

The distance the Maoists had moved to the right must have created enormous confusion among militant workers who had been drawn to these organisations in May and June. It certainly helped those opposed to the advance of the revolution to gain a footing among groups of workers, such as the postal workers, who had grown to hate the Communist Party.

The third Maoist organisation, the UDP, avoided this trap. But it retained the “social fascist” terminology⁵⁸⁷ and this made it difficult for its members to comprehend the need for united action with Communist Party members against the right. Instead, it ended up calling for a “patriotic front” around the slogan “No to civil war”.

There were two “orthodox” Trotskyist groups, both linked to the Fourth International. One took a political position barely different from the right wing Maoists. It argued the main danger was the Communist Party, and it was necessary to support the Socialist Party against it. The other had a better appreciation of the real situation, but spent much of its time discussing unity with the first.

There was a small left socialist party, the MES (Movement of the Socialist left), mainly made up of intellectuals but with some influence in the textile unions. It oscillated between trying to pressurise the Communist Party and following the lead of revolutionaries.

Finally, there was the PRP, the Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat—a party which stressed the need for a working class revolution based upon workers’ councils, but which combined this with a Guevarist stress on armed action through its armed wing, the Revolutionary Brigades. Under fascism it had put a lot of effort into acts of sabotage (such as blowing up a NATO installation or even releasing a pig dressed in a naval officer’s uniform on the day when Caetano’s candidate in a fascist election was an admiral). It had members in a few factories but little influence before 25 April.

Within weeks of the overthrow of Caetano the PRP was producing a weekly paper, *Revolucao*, which claimed to print 50,000 copies,⁵⁸⁸ but many of its members were slow in coming out of clandestinity and it was slow to make its presence known in the factories and on demonstrations. As a result it was

considerably weaker than the Maoists at the time of the second attempted right wing coup in March 1975. It did rather better in the summer of 1975. It had insisted all along that only socialist revolution offered a way forward for workers. And this enabled it to relate rather better than the Maoists to a situation in which hundreds of factories were under workers' control and the issue of workers' power could no longer be avoided.

But even at this stage the PRP was burdened by political weaknesses. It played down its own role as a party, reacting to the sectarianism of the Maoists by "*apartiderism*"—the attitude that workers of goodwill should all get together despite the existence of parties. It put little effort into recruitment and boasted that its members did not wear party emblems.⁵⁸⁹ It told people to avoid the "sectarianism" of the April 1975 election campaign by putting in a blank vote marked "for socialist revolution".

At the same time the Guevarist tinge to its politics made itself felt. The PRP stressed the technical, armed preparation for socialist revolution far more than the political mobilisation of the masses. Its own members became increasingly concerned with arms training, while its paper was neglected in 1975 to such an extent that it came out only roughly every three weeks—when events were changing by the day, if not the hour—and was written in a style remote from most worker activists (quite different from the popular style it had used a year before).⁵⁹⁰ The party's leaders put more effort into trying to influence leftward-moving army officers than trying to win workers away from the Communist and Socialist parties.

The attitude of the PRP was almost that its job was to propagandise for socialist revolution and have armed groups available on the day. Spontaneous action by the workers would do the rest. Any notion of the need to fight here and now to organise politically those who were breaking from reformism was lacking.⁵⁹¹

The social democratic card

By April 1975 Western commentators were extremely worried by Portuguese developments. The international media started a hysterical campaign about "political prisoners" and the "dictatorial aims" of people such as Otelo de Carvalho. The international financial institutions began to refuse Portugal the credits its economy needed to avoid a devastating recession. The US ambassador, Carlucci, began to use his CIA connections to try to influence Portuguese political life.

The right was clearly going to make another attack. But what form would

this take? The Portuguese left⁵⁹² tended to envisage a more serious repeat of 28 September and 11 March—a move by Spínola's exfascist friends to impose a right wing authoritarian regime. This view was given credence by the appearance of an underground right wing organisation, the ELP, which started carrying out acts of sabotage. But there had, in fact, been a change in the strategy of international capitalism in relationship to Portugal. The two failed coups showed that the far right option would not work. People remembered all too well what it had been like under far right rule. Better to find politicians who could claim to be on the side of the revolution to start reversing it.

The European social democratic governments—especially those of Germany and Britain—had been cultivating such a force for the previous year, the Socialist Party led by Mario Soares. The party had been formed in 1972 under the auspices of the German Social Democratic Party. Soares consulted Britain's Harold Wilson and West Germany's Willi Brandt before joining the Portuguese government after 25 April. By spring 1975 the Europeans seem to have persuaded the US to play the Soares card. From now on the CIA used any influence it had with the Portuguese far right to persuade it to follow Soares's lead.

For the previous year the Socialist Party's policies had been virtually indistinguishable from those of the Communist Party. It had been Soares who had told Spínola after 25 April that the first provisional government would not work without Communist participation. He had been a speaker alongside Cunhal at innumerable meetings organised by the Communist Party.

Workers without political experience must have found it difficult to see differences between the two parties—except that the Communist Party, with its control of the Ministry of Labour, its influence in the unions and its greater number of militants in the workplaces, was more prominent in the campaigns to stop strikes. Less directly involved, the Socialist Party could even give the impression that it was to the left of the Communist Party. By standing in the shelter of the Communist Party, it was able to gain from the general popular identification with the "revolution", without being too exposed to the unpopularity of some of the government's actions. In this way, Soares built his own party up until he thought it could act independently.

The first attempt at independent action was in January, with an attempt to block the formation of a single union federation. Soares was forced to retreat in the face of the massive demonstration for trade union unity and drop his threat to resign from the government. Yet even then, his behaviour was not such as to cause him long-term unpopularity with most workers. It all appeared as a sectarian quarrel, for which both parties shared some blame.

Soares's speeches in spring 1975 continued to be full of left-sounding rhetoric. He told a huge public meeting on 20 April:

The Socialist Party is not a bourgeois party and has no disagreements with the Armed Forces Movement. We do not want to copy the Soviet, the Chinese, the Cuban or the Swedish model. We want to construct an independent Portuguese socialism. Our political project is that of the Armed Forces Movement.⁵⁹³

At the same time, Soares was telling his friends in the British and German governments—and through them the forces that had backed Spínola—that he was determined to bring the revolutionary ferment of the previous year to an end.

His first success came with the elections for a Constituent Assembly on 25 April 1975. The Assembly itself did not have any formal power; it existed simply to draw up a constitution under which future elections would be held. But the elections were a popularity poll for the different parties, giving them counters to use in the political bargaining over the composition of future governments.

The election campaign was marked by much rancour, but virtually no political differences, between the three main parties, the bourgeois PPD, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. All claimed to back the Armed Forces Movement, the existing government and the changes of the previous year—including major nationalisation. Soares went into the elections meaning all things to all people. He got the support of many workers who could see no differences in policy from the Communist Party. At the same time one of the journals representing financial interests told its readers “the right and centre should vote Socialist Party rather than PPD”.⁵⁹⁴

The Socialist Party picked up nearly 38 percent of the votes, against 17 percent for the Communist Party and its front organisation, the MDP, and 34 percent for the openly bourgeois parties. The rival candidates of four far left parties picked up 2.5 percent of the votes between them, and about 7 percent of the voters cast blank votes—perhaps heeding the advice of some leading figures in the Armed Forces Movement.

Soares used his high vote as an excuse to break from the governmental consensus of the previous 12 months. He began to have bitter arguments with the Communist Party and, for the first time, to criticise the Armed Forces Movement openly. He talked of “dictatorship” when COPCON refused to help sack “agitators” at the newspaper *República* who had led a strike and occupation against the owner, the Socialist former minister Paul Rego. As minister of information Rego had fined several newspapers the previous summer for

printing “forbidden” news; suddenly he now became an internationally acclaimed apostle of press freedom!⁵⁹⁵ Socialist Party ministers first refused to attend government meetings, then, when the Armed Forces Movement would not accept their dictates, resigned early in July. The next day the bourgeois PPD followed suit.

Through this period the Communist Party leadership played straight into Soares’s hands. The election indicated that the great majority of the Portuguese working class wanted socialism and that the other classes lacked either the inclination or the will to resist. But it also showed that about half the workers believed they could get socialism from Soares. They had to be convinced otherwise. And that was only possible if genuine socialists made an all-out effort to involve them in struggles which clashed with the policies Soares was secretly committed to. Instead the Communist Party wholeheartedly backed a call by prime minister Goncalves for “austerity” and a “battle for production”, while trying to reduce Socialist Party influence through bureaucratic methods—such as keeping Soares off the platform at the Lisbon May Day rally, sending Communist Party “heavies” to break up Socialist Party meetings and even calling on its militants to barricade roads against Socialist Party rallies. The effect was to drive passive Socialist Party supporters into Soares’s hands.

The resignation of the Socialist Party from the government was the signal for all the forces of the right to mobilise in direct action against the government. A wave of riots swept the smaller towns of northern Portugal, where the small farmers were very conservative in attitude, very much under the influence of the clergy, and prone to blame the effects of the economic crisis on the revolutionary turmoil in the cities. In town after town, mobs attacked and burnt down the offices of the Communist Party, the trade unions and the far left. Units of the armed forces sent to defend these buildings were subjected to a torrent of abuse.

It is sometimes claimed that this agitation showed mass working class support for the Socialist Party’s campaign.⁵⁹⁶ There was a working class presence on demonstrations in support of Soares in the northern city of Oporto. But it was mixed in with the local middle class and not more than a fraction of the big Socialist Party vote, and in the main working class areas in Lisbon and the south his campaign received hardly any active support from workers. Socialist Party demonstrations were smaller than those called by the revolutionary left, let alone the Communist Party, and were made up of contingents of well-heeled members of the bourgeois PPD and CDS parties marching behind much smaller Socialist Party contingents. A sign of Soares’s relative weakness in Lisbon was that in several unions his supporters had to run joint electoral lists with the right wing Maoist groups.

Crisis after crisis

The immediate effect of the Socialist Party's move into opposition was to lead the Armed Forces Movement to try to rule alone. Goncalves formed a government made up entirely of officers. The Armed Forces Movement, as well as balancing between different groups inside the armed forces and different classes in society, was now balancing between the bitter rivalries of the country's main parties.

But the higher it rose in its balancing act, the more unstable the whole performance became. Holding on to the emblems of national power did not provide it with mechanisms for controlling what happened in any area of Portuguese society.

In the south workers were carving out greater areas of control for themselves, with a further wave of occupations by slum dwellers, more takeovers of landed estates, new strikes as 30 percent inflation ate up the wage increases won the year before, and mass demonstrations for lower rents. Troops sent, with Communist Party support, to end strikes would not do so—they had to be withdrawn from the Lisbon telephone exchange after just two days and they fraternised with workers who refused to pay higher rail fares. Groups of soldiers in uniform began to go on workers' demonstrations—with guns and armoured cars.⁵⁹⁷

A symbol of the government's weakness was that it could not enforce a ban on *Republica* workers producing the paper under their own control and could not hand the occupied radio station *Renascença*, which was increasingly influenced by the revolutionary left, back to its formal owners, the Catholic church hierarchy.

Meanwhile in the rural north the government could not stop the wave of right wing agitation forcing its nominees to resign from local office.

Above all, it could not deal with the growing economic crisis. It could not do so in a capitalist way by forcing "austerity" on workers, winning the confidence of international big business and borrowing abroad. Nor could it do so by socialist means, for that would have meant putting the economy under workers' control—a complete break with the class background of 99 percent of the officers.

The all-military government was, in fact, weaker than any of its predecessors.

The contortions involved in trying to maintain its balance tore the Armed Forces Movement apart. Some sections moved to the right, trying to placate the Socialist Party-inspired agitation by trying, unsuccessfully, to use troops against

strikers. Some tried to plough ahead as in the past by relying on the Communist Party. Some began to look for a base among workers and rank-and-file soldiers as a counterbalance to the right, at one point seriously debating a scheme to set up workers' and soldiers' councils. Some swung from one extreme to the other virtually overnight.

But the Armed Forces Movement was congenitally incapable of dealing with the dilemma which confronted it. Its left wing had grown to hate the ruling class over the previous year and were carried away with the enthusiasm of the revolutionary period. (In this respect they were a bit like some of the students and intellectuals who became revolutionaries in 1968.) But their ingrained middle class attitudes made them see workers and rank-and-file soldiers simply as potential supporters of military conspiracies, not as agents of their own self-emancipation. Significantly, the one revolutionary demand the left inside the Armed Forces Movement never raised was for the election of officers.

The movement's right wing, for its part, was afraid of provoking a premature confrontation with the left which might lead to a new, victorious workers' upsurge. It also feared the far right in the army, who wanted to join the war which the US-backed FNLA was waging against the MPLA in Angola.

Various attempts were made to resolve the crisis. The Armed Forces Movement Assembly debated rival schemes to set up Popular Councils or Committees for the Defence of the Revolution—and then dropped both. A “triumvirate” of Costa Gomes (from the right), Goncalves (from the centre) and Otelo de Carvalho (from the “left”) was set up—then forgotten. A long “programme of the fifth provisional government” was drawn up—and not acted upon.

In little more than a month the all-military government—the Bonapartist-Stalinist monster that some of the left saw as the great danger—fell apart. Nine key members of the Armed Forces Movement, including some previously on the left, signed a document urging a completely new government and conciliation with the right. It warned:

A progressive decomposition of the structures of the state is taking place. Wild and anarchistic forms of the exercise of power have appeared in the ranks of the Armed Forces Movement itself. The movement, which was originally stated to be above parties, has become more and more the prisoner of the manoeuvres of parties and of mass organisations... It is necessary to push back energetically the anarchy and the populism which is leading inevitably to the catastrophic dissolution of the state... The country risks being submerged under a wave of uncontrolled violence.

The left in the Armed Forces Movement tried to resist the document's appeal to the mass of officers. COPCON voted for a rival document, written in part by

revolutionaries,⁵⁹⁸ which argued that adoption of the proposals of the nine officers would “lead to a recuperation of the right and open up to them room for manoeuvre for the destruction of the revolution”. It accepted that the present government was leading nowhere and that the bureaucratic behaviour of the Communist Party had driven people into the hands of the far right in the north. But what was needed was a move to the left, not a move to the right. It called for “the setting up of a structure for the organisation of the popular masses through the constitution and recognition of councils of villages, factories and neighbourhoods so that workers can take their own decisions and resolve their own problems”.

The far left was able to call a massive demonstration in support of the COPCON proposal. One participant reported:

The march was led by 2,000 sailors and soldiers in jeeps and army trucks...in open defiance of officers who had ordered them to return the vehicles to barracks.

Behind...were hundreds of Lisnave shipyard workers dressed in their overalls and helmets. Behind them and stretching for more than two miles were delegations from hundreds upon hundreds of workers' committees, tenants' committees, and committees of farmworkers and poor peasants, riding on their tractors. For every worker on the demonstration, there was another on the pavement, cheering, raising clenched fists and joining in the chanting of slogans... The soldiers cried again and again, ‘Soldiers always on the side of the people’. This slogan was taken up by the whole march.⁵⁹⁹

The following week, as the pressure from the right on the government reached breaking point, the Communist Party took a sudden lurch to the left, joining a united front with the revolutionaries to call a still bigger demonstration—estimates at the time suggested it was half a million strong.

But such efforts could not prevent the majority of officers seeing that the balancing act was over. Two days later the Goncalves government resigned and negotiations began, with Communist Party support, for a government to include Socialist Party and PPD ministers. As one of the left officers in the Armed Forces Movement told *Le Monde*:

It is necessary to know how to lose illusions. You cannot change an army from the inside... The Armed Forces Movement no longer exists. Torn apart by the same contradictions as Portuguese society, it has collapsed... Now is the time to choose: to stop in one's tracks and accept a social democratic neo-capitalism, or to go forward to socialism.⁶⁰⁰

The bitter autumn

The collapse of the Armed Forces Movement government did not signify the end of the problems it had faced. The rival pressures that had raised it above society

and then torn it apart still remained to plague its successor. Giving in to the pressure from the right quelled the agitation in the north and bought promises of foreign credits to deal with the economic crisis—but it increased the explosive potential of the working class in the Lisbon area and the south. The new government was desperate to show it had restored order and it needed symbolic victories to prove the point.

Yet even before it made any moves it faced a new problem. The officers' movement, the Armed Forces Movement, was finished. Suddenly in its place rose a massive movement of rank-and-file soldiers.

Until now the participation of the lower ranks in the struggle had been disorganised and episodic. The fact that some of them had refused to break strikes or move against workers' demonstrations had tilted the balance among the officers to the left at important moments; fear of what others might do had prevented right wing officers turning to open counter-revolution. But by and large, they had been followers of the left wing officers, not a force organised in their own right. In only one military unit had the most visible sign of class divisions within the barracks, the separate messes for officers, lower ranks and ordinary soldiers, been abolished. Of 120 army delegates to the assembly of the Armed Forces Movement, only 12 were ordinary soldiers.⁶⁰¹

A conscript sergeant explained the situation early in July 1975:

We have forced through the demand that the soldiers have the right to call general assemblies. But the power to call meetings is not enough. How much power the soldiers have depends on their organisation and political consciousness. The officers have the right to send one delegate to these meetings and in the more backward units his presence is enough to intimidate the men and to leave real power in the hands of the officers. In the more advanced units the situation is very different. Often the assembly has objected to the officer delegate and expelled him from the meeting... The situation is delicately balanced. We are not yet able to elect our officers, and the day-to-day running of the units is shared between officers and men.⁶⁰²

The "balance" meant that most military units in the Lisbon area were regarded as "unreliable" by the right wing. The few right wing officers who had opened their mouths had been forced out by the rank and file, and so most preferred to go along with the militant talk in order to preserve their positions and their ability to influence things at a later stage. By contrast, the army of the north was regarded as a bastion of the right. And most people expected its power to be reinforced by the large number of troops returning from Africa.

Such views received a rude shock a bare 12 days after the appointment of the new government when 2,000 soldiers demonstrated in the northern city of Oporto, chanting, "The soldiers will always be on the side of the people" and "Portugal will not be another Chile".

In at least one barracks the officers locked the door to stop the rank and file joining the demonstration.⁶⁰³

The demonstration was the result of an initiative by a handful of members of the revolutionary left, who had set up a group called SUV (Soldiers United Will Win) and put out leaflets calling for action:

In recent weeks we have been fighting hard for better conditions in the barracks and against reaction. We have been fighting for better pay, for an end to arbitrary punishment, for the right to refuse reactionary orders, for the right to meet and discuss freely...

Our fight is part of the great fight for popular power, for power to the workers.

The gentlemen in gold braid epaulets do not want to lose their privileges. We rely on you to say No to the military coupists... In the fight for better pay, for free transport, against discipline which only attacks the ordinary squaddie, we are united.

The soldiers always, always on the side of the people.⁶⁰⁴

The tone was different to anything written by the officers of the Armed Forces Movement, even its left wing. The leaflet spoke of the material conditions in the barracks instead of propagating the myth of an army united except for a few “reactionary officers”. It was a message taken up in unit after unit of the armed forces in the following days.

In Lisbon 12,000 soldiers (said to be one fifth of the whole Portuguese army) led 85,000 workers through the city in a demonstration organised by SUV. When the demonstrators heard that two soldiers had been arrested for handing out SUV leaflets, the cry went up to release them immediately.

Immediately some 20,000 people seized every double-decker bus in sight. With ready assistance from bus drivers and army drivers we set off for the military prison of Trafaria. As the convoy arrived, 7,000 soldiers went to the front to guard the loudspeaker van and to start arguing with the troops inside... A delegation met the prison commander. Both he and Otelo de Carvalho, the head of COPCON, refused to release the prisoners... The decisive moment came at 1.50am. A convoy of armoured vehicles sent to disperse the demonstration reached the bridge over the river Tagus in Lisbon. Here they were stopped by left wing war veterans in wheelchairs who had earlier taken over the strategic bridge. After a discussion the elite unit turned round and returned to barracks. Ten minutes later, just after 2am, it was announced that Carvalho had agreed to release the soldiers. Twenty thousand soldiers and workers then sang the *Internationale* and marched back to the buses cheered by the population of Trafaria.⁶⁰⁵

Much of the organisation of this demonstration was carried out by the military police. The government had tried to take control of this left-influenced unit by removing two of its officers. The rank and file responded with a vote of confidence in the two men, and held a mass meeting which forced nine right wing officers to resign—1,000 automatic rifles due for delivery to the regiment had disappeared, and the mass meeting accepted the word of one of the left wing officers that they had gone to “good revolutionaries”.

The government tried to stop the spread of agitation among the rank-and-file

soldiers by issuing a decree banning the media from carrying reports about the situation inside the armed forces. When radio and television stations refused to obey the law and reported, often enthusiastically, the soldiers' demonstration, troops were sent in to seize control of them.

But again the government's plans backfired. The radio workers refused to take orders from the army, drawing the occupying troops into their discussions at several stations. The soldiers agreed to allow the workers to broadcast:

By 11.30 that night Radio Renascenca was on the air, with the *Internationale* and revolutionary songs... Mass meetings in every military unit in the Lisbon region supported the workers in radio stations.⁶⁰⁶

One incident showed how little the government could rely even on allegedly right wing units. A unit of commandos from Amadora, where one of the key right wing officers was in command, were sent to break up a 10,000-strong demonstration outside the Ministry of Information:

The Amadora commandos arrived in trucks and tried to drive through the streets. A shot rang out. A few people ran. But people said to them, that is not how we are supposed to react. They stopped, turned towards the trucks and started haranguing the soldiers. Soon the whole crowd was chanting 'Soldiers always, always on the side of the people', and 'Reactionaries out of the barracks'.

The commandos were tense. None of them moved. Then a young soldier in the second truck jumped up, with his fist clenched and a look of exaltation on his face. 'Soldiers always, always on the side of the people', he shouted. Sheepishly the rest of the troops joined in. The workers climbed up on the trucks, linked arms with the soldiers and chanted and chanted.⁶⁰⁷

The government tried to recoup the situation by sending a different group of commandos to occupy Radio Renascenca, by far the most revolutionary of the stations. But these troops withdrew after a mass demonstration a fortnight later. In desperation the government itself resorted to terrorism: it sent a group of paratroops to blow up the transmitter. The radio was forced off the air. But even this measure backfired. Other soldiers talked to the paratroops, and they turned against the government, forcing 123 out of 125 officers to quit the barracks at Tancos.

But not every attempt by the government to regain control of the armed forces failed. Where the workers' movement was weaker than in Lisbon, the ability of the rank-and-file soldiers to stand up to their officers was also weaker. Early in October right wing troops swooped on the centre of SUV influence in Oporto, the CICA barracks. The unit was disbanded and its left wing members demobbed. The right was similarly able to assert its control at Beja in the central region.

By this time much of the talk in Lisbon was about the possibility of civil war. The press reported that the government was prepared, if necessary, to abandon

Lisbon in order to recapture it from the outside.

There were open discussions about which military units would fight for the left and which for the government. The Communist Party raised the slogan “No to civil war”. The PRP and the left socialist group MES began a joint campaign arguing that the only way to avoid civil war was to arm the workers and prepare for insurrection.

The left's weak point

The left was certain that a bitter confrontation was in sight. But in preparing for this it forgot one vital point: revolutionary influence was greater among the rank-and-file soldiers than among the mass of workers.

The revolutionary left had been able to gain a hearing in many workplaces in the Lisbon area, and win substantial support for several major demonstrations. But it had not been able to give any continuing organisational form to this episodic influence. The “inter-enterprises” committee that had organised the February demonstration had withered away; the PRP had won support from many workplaces for a demonstration in favour of workers’ and soldiers’ councils, but its attempt to create such councils had led nowhere; vast numbers of workers had demonstrated support for the COPCON document’s vague talk of councils, but again no councils had been formed.

The central obstacle was the opposition to any such path from the Communist Party. Although the Socialist Party had won about half the working class votes in the vital Lisbon area, it had virtually no organised presence in the factories; significantly, the only unions where it had a leadership majority—closely contested—were white-collar unions such as the school teachers! Where the Communist Party and the far left campaigned together for demonstrations or political strikes the response was massive—including from many of the workers who had voted Socialist.

The Communist Party set its face completely against any organised mass popular movement of the working class of the sort that could take power. When its own bureaucratic manoeuvre to get its hands on the levers of the state failed with the collapse of the Goncalves government in August, it decided to retreat. It accepted the one token ministry offered it, that of public works, and broke from the united front with the revolutionary left. It opposed the SUV, the soldiers’ movement, and strikes against the government seizure of the radio station.

But it did not merely retreat. It also saw an opportunity to strengthen its base in the factories. Its opposition to strikes and its calls for sacrifice had isolated its activists from many of the most important groups of workers. The key

workplaces in the Lisbon area had ignored it and joined in demonstrations organised by the far left. Some of its most important activists were near open revolt against its moderation. Now that it had lost most of its government responsibilities, however, it could regain influence in the workplaces by limited moves to the left.

The party began to initiate strikes and demonstrations against unpopular government measures. Workers' committees under its influence called a 30,000-strong demonstration in Lisbon and a one-day strike in the southern agricultural area of Alentejo in mid-September, local factory and tenants' demonstrations to the left-influenced barracks in October, a huge demonstration in Lisbon early in November, and a two-hour token general strike on 24 November. These actions enabled the party to regain influence from the far left, and to dominate a new coordinating centre, the Workers' Committees of the Lisbon Industrial Belt.

If all the revolutionaries had been in a single party which knew what it was doing, the Communist Party would not have been able to recover its influence over key sections of workers by such a limited shift to the left. But a united revolutionary socialist party did not exist. The far left was divided into half a dozen more or less equal organisations, with no single pole of attraction for the many workers whose support for the Communist Party wavered in the summer months. The support of some of the Maoists for the right had created enormous confusion. The left Maoist group the UDP echoed the Communist Party slogan "No to civil war". The PRP had recognised the need to build workers' councils, but was a minority within the revolutionary left—my impression was that it had fewer active members in the factories than the UDP—and neglected the most important of all tasks, that of "patiently explaining"⁶⁰⁸ what needed to be done to the mass of workers influenced by the Communist Party or the other sections of the revolutionary left through a regular paper—ideally daily—sold in the factories and working class districts.

Another factor contributed to the failure of workers' councils to develop. This was the role played by the Armed Forces Movement in general, and COPCON in particular. Their refusal to be instruments of repression and interventions favourable to the mass of the population had made workers' gains easier. This encouraged workers' struggles. But at the same time it meant the struggles did not have to be all that hard. Once COPCON stopped breaking workers' struggles and instead "mediated" in a way favourable to workers, victory did not seem a result of working class determination, solidarity and self-reliance, but of the "Alliance of the Armed Forces and the People" (the slogan of innumerable Armed Forces Movement posters). What mattered, it seemed, was what happened in the army, not in the factories and localities.

Even the best sections of the revolutionary left fell, to a greater or lesser extent, for this delusion. They became fixated on the content of policy documents coming out of Armed Forces Movement committees or the statements of leading officers rather than what was happening in the factories.

For instance, the PRP had first raised the question of building workers' councils in propaganda put into the big Lisbon factories. But when it had difficulty getting them off the ground, it did not double its political agitation within the working class, adjusting the call for councils to the particular situation. For instance, it could have called for councils to be built by uniting and extending the existing factory committees, as Gramsci had argued for in Italy in 1919-20 and Trotsky argued for in Germany in 1923.⁶⁰⁹ Instead, the PRP looked to the Armed Forces Movement to create the councils.

As one PRP member put it in June:

Some officers are supporting these slogans...for autonomous revolutionary councils...for reasons very different from our own. But the councils will open up the way to the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁶¹⁰

This approach ended up as agitation for one Armed Forces Movement document rather than another, with slogans such as "Support for COPCON". This could only encourage the widespread illusion that the progressive officers would solve workers' problems for them. Of course revolutionaries had to give tactical backing to the left of the Armed Forces Movement against the right, but that did not necessitate identifying with them. It had to be said, and wasn't, that the progressive officers had vacillated at every major crisis and would continue to do so.

Neglecting the building of revolutionary organisation inside the working class and instead focusing almost entirely on the armed forces necessarily weakened the movement in the armed forces itself.

As Tony Cliff of the International Socialists warned in October 1975 when the rank-and-file soldiers' movement, the SUV, was at its peak:

The great weakness of the revolutionary movement is the unevenness of the soldiers and the workers. The workers lag behind the soldiers... The conservative influence of the Communist Party is incomparably greater among the workers than among the soldiers. The unevenness cannot go on forever. If the workers will not rise to the level of the revolutionary soldiers, there is a great danger the soldiers' level of consciousness will sag down to the lower level of the workers... The soldiers will be wary of marching forward on their own to seize state power. An insurrection not supported by the mass of workers will not appeal to them.⁶¹¹

A mass spontaneous upsurge of workers' struggles would have broken the tendency to rely on sections of the armed forces. One big struggle did develop in the autumn of 1975 which showed how quickly a near insurrectionary mood

could grip a major section of workers. Thirty-two site committees of construction workers—including that from a half-finished giant oil refinery—organised a strike and demonstration outside the Constituent Assembly. They erected barricades and held the Assembly hostage until their demands were met.

But such upsurges were rare in these months, when all the talk in political circles was of the possibility of civil war. This was partly because the government was careful not to provoke conflicts. It was prepared to let things slip on the wages front if this gave it time to reassert its control over the armed forces. But there was another factor.

People felt the social crisis had reached a point where a political solution was required. This was especially true for workers in the nationalised industries—now 60 percent of all workers—and the small factories run under workers' control: only a complete reorganisation of the whole of society could enable them to escape from domination by the market. But “politics” in Portugal in the autumn of 1975 meant, to nearly everybody, what happened inside the armed forces—at most it meant the progressive officers fighting for power for the workers, not the workers struggling for power for themselves.

This was the bitter “Catch 22” of the Portuguese Revolution. Everything conspired to make it seem that what was decisive were the plots and counterplots in the armed forces, not the mobilisations of workers. Yet without massive mobilisations of workers the right was bound to win the plotting in the armed forces.

The government's attempt to seize control of the radio stations at the end of September was a test of the ability of revolutionaries to mobilise workers by themselves, without the support of the Communist Party or COPCON. It was a test they failed. The revolutionary organisations called for a general strike and mass protest. The general strike did not get off the ground except at the two shipyards, Lisnave and Setnave, and the protest demonstration was only 10,000 strong at most. The government failed to retain control of the radio stations because of what happened in the army, not in the working class.

The point could not have been lost on the more intelligent government advisers. The revolutionary left could not mobilise the mass of the working class in the Lisbon area at short notice unless it got the backing of the Communist Party or prestigious sections of the armed forces such as COPCON. And if it could not mobilise for a peaceful demonstration, how much less likely it was to be able to do so for what people feared might be the beginning of a civil war. The right could regain control of events provided it could neutralise the Communist Party and COPCON and concentrate its attack on some issue which was not going to have immediate appeal to the mass of workers.

This it finally managed to do on 25 November 1975.

Denouement

On 24 November the Council of the Armed Forces announced it was replacing Otelo de Carvalho as head of the Lisbon military region—an obvious tactical blow against the left. Carvalho believed he could not oppose this ruling. But some officers felt otherwise.

The most recent section of the armed forces to be radicalised were the paratroops. Their anger at the lies told to them by their officers to get them to blow up Radio Renascença caused them to drive nearly all the officers out of the barracks. A group of officers associated with the Communist Party saw the paratroops as giving them the means to reimpose the influence they had had in the government in the summer. This might also have been the opinion of the party leadership.

On 25 November they prompted the paras to seize control of five barracks in the Lisbon area, while other friendly troops took control of the radio and TV stations.

The government knew the action had little overall coordination—if only because Carvalho himself had immediately gone to consult with the president of the republic. But it saw a wonderful opportunity. Carvalho's actions showed the main forces of COPCON would neither move themselves nor call upon workers to do so. The Communist Party was begging for more places in the government and was clearly not intent on serious confrontation. The revolutionary left was completely unprepared.

The government took the chance to throw down a gauntlet which the left was not ready to pick up. It issued statements saying it was faced with an armed insurrection. It sent what it hoped were reliable units to act against the paras and retake the TV and radio stations.

The actual number of soldiers mobilised on the government's side was small—a couple of hundred. But their officers led them with determination against the paras, who gave up without a fight. Then they turned their attention to the other left-controlled units, forcing each to surrender in turn. A Portuguese revolutionary explained two days later why there was so little resistance:

There was no coordination, no real coordination. The Communist Party expected COPCON to do it. COPCON didn't. It hesitated, wavered, and so on. The same thing happened with the so-called revolutionary units because they were caught totally unprepared in a totally defensive position, discussing and so forth. Inside the barracks they did not take a single initiative...

No one offered resistance to the commandos. There were a few shots in the case of the military police. And even there the top commander of the military police opened the door to them... One of

the military police told me these soldiers were prepared and organised for an insurrection, for socialist revolution. As soon as the two commanders disappeared, they did not know what to do. There wasn't anyone to give orders. Although the soldiers were refusing military discipline they did not know how to operate in any other way.

At the light artillery barracks the soldiers wanted to do something, but they lacked military direction—their commander had surrendered.

The so-called revolutionary officers are finished.⁶¹²

The revolutionary left did want to resist the right, but did not know how to do so effectively. Two hours after the paras' rebellion began the PRP and the MES issued a statement urging opposition to the attack on the paras. They realised that a decisive battle had broken out and that the left could not simply ignore the outcome, however unfavourable the timing.

But their obsession with the purely military aspect of things meant they did not know how to react. What had broken previous attacks by the right on the left in the military had not been the fire power of one side or the other—that was more or less evenly balanced—but mass workers' action. For the right wing officers could not yet get their men to shoot down large numbers of unarmed workers. A general strike with huge workers' demonstrations on the streets would have given heart to the left wing units and made the rank and file in the right wing units hesitate about going into action. Even a demonstration of some thousands in its path would have made the column of 200 right wing troops hesitate.

The government was certainly aware of its weakness: it did not dare send troops into a working class area such as Barreiro, even though the Socialist Party had got half the votes there six months before, but instead dropped leaflets from the air telling people to keep off the streets! In Lisbon itself it could do nothing as large numbers of people ignored its curfew.

Yet the revolutionary left did not call for street demonstrations and strikes of unarmed workers. The PRP-MES statement instead gave the impression that now was the time for armed, offensive action. "Now is the time to give a lesson to the bourgeoisie", it said. The working class must respond to this attack by the bourgeoisie "with the violence necessary to defeat the fascist actions and to advance to the taking of power".⁶¹³

This overstated what was needed to beat back the attack of the right in a way that was going to deter, rather than encourage workers to take action. Although it was fair to point out that nearly all the government's supporters in the armed forces had once enthusiastically supported fascism, this was not a fascist attack. The fascist right was still far too weak and it had to hide behind the social democrats and liberals. This could change—but it had not changed yet. To fail to see that was to raise the odds to such a level that the mass of workers would feel

there was nothing they could do.

Facing the choice between the civil war urged on them by the forces of the far left and the option of peaceful retreat urged on them by the far larger forces of the Communist Party, workers were bound to opt for retreat. This might not have happened had the revolutionary left told the large sections of workers under Communist Party influence, not “take up arms today”, but “force your leaders to back strikes and demonstrations against the right”.

The left wing units were disarmed on 25 November because the workers looked to the armed forces to act for them, and inside the armed forces the rank and file looked to the progressive officers for a lead.

The gains of the right on 25 November were, in one way, very limited. The most left wing of the military units were disarmed. This should not, in itself, have caused a collapse of rank-and-file rebellion in other units, still less a collapse of the revolutionary hopes of wide sections of workers.

Certainly the Portuguese right did not feel it had gained complete control of the situation yet. It could begin to establish “normal” chains of command in the military and send home “trouble makers” among the rank and file, even to imprison a few. But it still had to bide its time before launching wholesale attacks on the gains workers had made since the overthrow of fascism. Even the worker-controlled newspaper *Republica* was not closed immediately. The openly bourgeois parties still had to hide behind Mario Soares and the Socialists; they all still had to rely on the Communist Party to persuade the most militant sections of workers to abide by the rules they laid down.

Yet precisely because workers had come to put so much faith in the Armed Forces Movement, forgetting that without their own mass action it would never have moved beyond support for Spínola, the best of them did feel they had lost everything on 25 November.

Western capitalism could heave a huge sigh of relief.

The fall of the Greek colonels

This is the radio station of the free fighting students, this is the radio station of the free fighting Greeks! Fight on! Smash the junta! We call on everybody to help in our struggle for freedom.⁶¹⁴

IT WAS the beginning of November 1973. Some 10,000 students had occupied Athens Polytechnic. Their first demands were for an end to the conscription of students, the abolition of the student branch of the security police and educational changes. But the character of the protest soon changed.

Workers, especially building workers from the big construction sites, began to respond to the call from the radio station. By noon all the roads within a quarter of a mile of the polytechnic were flooded with people and demonstrations were starting in many directions. People began to seize various ministry buildings, particularly the ministry of public order, and the first clashes with the police occurred. Buses and trolley buses were overturned and used as barricades.

Worker delegates joined the students, and the joint worker-student committee called for the struggle to be extended:

The character of the struggle...is a struggle against both the military dictatorship and the local and foreign monopolies that support it. It is a struggle for power to pass into the hands of the people... Spread the call for committees to be set up at every place of work with the aim of preparing workers to come out on an economic and political general strike.⁶¹⁵

By the evening of the first day at least 100,000 people were on the streets, controlling a three-mile radius around the college. What had begun as a student occupation had turned into a general—although unarmed—uprising against the dictatorship which had ruled Greece for more than six years.

A group of colonels had seized power in 1967 to pre-empt a possible electoral victory by the liberal Centre Union Party, led by George Papandreou, and to bring to an end a period of popular agitation. They had banned all political parties, including the main right wing party, the Radical Union, and

established a regime with strong fascist leanings, although without the mass organisations that characterise genuine fascism.

The leader of the military junta, Tassos Papadopoulos, was generally portrayed by the West European media as a deranged right wing lunatic. He was. But he knew how to defend the interests of substantial sections of Greek capital. He had been able to come to power because all the main sections of the Greek ruling class feared even the slightest reform after 20 years of governments which staffed the weak trade unions with their own nominees, banned the main working class party, the Communists, and prevented even right wing parliamentarians exercising any real control over the state. The king had already thrown out one Papandreu government and monarchist generals were planning a coup after the elections to prevent another. Papadopoulos, head of the Greek secret service, decided the time was ripe to seize power with a coup before the elections.

The coup stunned and demoralised a left which had been told by the Communists that the elections were the way forward. For four years there was no mass resistance to the junta. As one account tells:

The junta, using terror on a large scale—mass arrests, systematic torture, police harassment—succeeded in disbanding every unofficial workers' and peasants' organisation and placed its own appointees in the unions and the cooperatives. The slightest attempt to organise was ruthlessly persecuted and suppressed.⁶¹⁶

The colonels were able to push ahead with policies which guaranteed a rise in profits, prepared Greek industry for competition at a European level, rationalised agriculture by driving hundreds of thousands of peasants from the land, and prevented wages from rising. Their successes eased the tension with other military factions and with conservative politicians—tensions which had led the junta to exile the king in 1967. By 1972 it seemed the junta and the constitutional opposition were on the verge of an agreement, by which the king would return and right wing civilian politicians would be allowed to become the public face of the regime.⁶¹⁷ The opposition parties of the left seemed doomed, since their strategies were based on “popular fronts” with the bourgeois politicians who were now lining up with the colonels.

Those Greek students who took part in the international ferment of 1968 did so as they studied abroad in Berlin, Paris, Rome or London. For this was the bleakest period in Greece itself. The only resistance seemed to be that of groups in exile, smuggling a few papers or leaflets to their homeland.

Things began to change in 1971-72. As prices rose faster than wages, workers began to put pressure on the junta-appointed heads of the unions, then to

take unofficial action themselves. There was a rash of stoppages in 1972, including important strikes in a Salonica plastics factory and a construction site in Piraeus. There was even an official stoppage on the Athens trolley buses that autumn,⁶¹⁸ though the union leaders called it off after only half a day.

In spring 1973 pressure from below forced the union leaders to threaten strikes by bank workers, shop workers and on the railways. Only substantial concessions enabled them to withdraw the threat at the last minute. In the countryside there was growing resentment towards the regime from the smaller peasants, who found themselves ground between the regime's agricultural bank, to which they owed money, and the capitalists close to the regime who monopolised the market for their main products. But the first overtly political mobilisations against the junta came not from workers or peasants, but from students.

Big capital put pressure on the junta to expand and modernise higher education. As well as new methods of examination and selection there was a degree of liberalisation, which aimed to bring students to identify positively with their studies. So the regime allowed the election of student representatives—but then tried to control the outcome of the elections.⁶¹⁹ The manoeuvre backfired completely. The elections gave left wing opponents of the junta an opening in some colleges; the attempt to rig the elections caused the mass of students to identify with their protests.

Protests which began in one or two colleges in the Athens area in spring 1972 spread until there were mass illegal protests on the streets in February 1973. The only way for the junta to bring these to an end was to send in the police, killing three students.

The repression ended the student protests for a while. But it also exposed the basic weaknesses of the regime, ending the honeymoon it had been having with the old politicians. Naval officers friendly to the king tried to take advantage of the situation with an attempted coup of their own. The junta reacted by isolating itself still further from the monarchist far right by proclaiming a republic in summer 1973.

This was the situation when the students occupied Athens Polytechnic on 1 November. The general resentment against the regime was such that the occupation became a focus for students, workers and peasants right across the country.

The junta fought back in the only way it knew:

Marine commandos spearheaded by tanks smashed their way into the Polytechnic, machine guns blazing. People were shot point blank. There were scores of dead and hundreds of wounded. The massacre spread to the streets with bloody clashes. Martial law was imposed on the Saturday

morning and a curfew on the Saturday afternoon. But there were further clashes on the Sunday in the centre of Athens.⁶²⁰

This repression crushed immediate resistance. But it further isolated the junta. The middle classes turned against the regime as it murdered their children. Greek capitalism saw that reliance on the colonels would lead to further confrontations—and next time the military might not win. It began to apply pressure on the junta to step down and hand power to conservative civilian politicians.

The colonels resisted this pressure for another eight months, in the face of passive opposition from the rest of the military and from conservative politicians. In summer 1974 they made a desperate attempt to build up their prestige by organising a coup against the government of Cyprus.

Their aim was to incorporate into Greece at least part of the island. Turkey responded by landing troops in northern Cyprus and war between the two countries seemed imminent. When a general mobilisation of the Greek armed forces led to chaos, revealing their weakness, the junta's rivals in the officer corps staged a coup. They then invited the veteran conservative politician Constantine Karamanlis back from exile to preside over a “government of national unity”, which included members of Papandreu's former party.

The immediate aftermath of the colonels' overthrow was similar in some ways to the days after 25 April in Portugal. As a Greek revolutionary explained at the time:

There is the same sudden liberation of forces. The jails have been emptied of political prisoners. People feel free publicly to raise demands on the government. Communists and others on the left have been welcomed back from exile by exuberant crowds.

But there are also major differences. To start with there is no radical movement comparable with the Armed Forces Movement in Portugal. And the extent of the collapse of the junta is far smaller than the collapse of Portuguese fascism... The security police have not been sacked. Far more of the junta's oppressive machinery is still in force than was the case in Portugal last April... Political prisoners are released but their torturers and murderers are pardoned.⁶²¹

The fact that so much of the repressive state remained intact enabled Karamanlis's Conservative Party (now called New Democracy) to win easily the elections on the anniversary of the polytechnic uprising in November 1974. In the countryside police pressure could be used to get the vote out for him; in the towns the veiled threat that a defeat for Karamanlis would lead to a new military intervention had the same effect.

In fact, however, the military were in no condition to take power again. Besides, Greek capitalism no longer needed them. The conservative government showed itself able to control the explosion of militancy that had built up over the

preceding years.

A year after the collapse of the junta, building workers organised a one-day strike and mass meeting to protest at rising unemployment. The government sent in the police, and for 12 hours workers and students fought them on the streets of Athens. By the end of the day two workers had been killed and hundreds wounded. Any chance of the workers and students beating the police was ruined as:

every five minutes the radio broadcast an announcement from the Communist Party and Socialist Party youth organisations saying they had cancelled the rally to mark the anniversary of the fall of the junta and, instructing all their members and supporters to stay at home.⁶²²

The bourgeois democracy which Greek capitalism had feared in the late 1960s proved it could damp down workers' struggles in the late 1970s. Instead of workers relying on their own strength, they were persuaded to concentrate their hopes on an electoral victory for the left—a victory which, when it came in the election of 1981, was only the prelude for a new period of “austerity” and wage cuts.

The Greek left

The revolutionary left hardly existed in Greece before the dictatorship, except for a small Maoist split from the Communist Party. But things began to change with the student movement of 1972-73. The traditional organisations of the left had been shattered by repression.

The student movement was new and young, made up of people who had no previous experience. But there were small groups, which had started to create Marxist circles. During the phase of liberalisation some publishing houses published Marxist books, and the groups—which were all based abroad in Germany, France or Britain—were able to smuggle in their journals. When the student agitation started, these groups came to the fore. They had a big influence in the occupation of the polytechnic, although they did not have a majority on its coordinating committee. The reformist left wanted the occupation to call for a government of national unity, for the politicians to organise elections. The revolutionaries said, ‘We do not want a liberalisation of the regime, we want to overthrow it’.⁶²³

The whole of the left grew rapidly after the fall of the junta in summer 1974. In the case of the revolutionary left this meant the Maoist organisations which soon marginalised most of the other groups. But the really big growth was of the Communist Party, which had split into Eurocommunist and pro-Russian wings during the dictatorship. Both wings were better known than the revolutionary left, and people from all sections of Greek society now joined them.

At first the Eurocommunists seemed to be making most headway. But their

politics led them to associate with elements in the government of national unity, and that lost them a lot of influence. By late 1970 the pro-Moscow wing was by far the largest, with a dominant influence over important sections of workers.

Meanwhile George Papandreou's son Andreas had returned to Greece from exile to build a "Panhellenic Socialist Party", PASOK, by grafting socialist rhetoric on to elements from his father's old Centre Union Party. This gained enough support from different classes—from newer groups of workers who did not look to the Communist Party, from some union leaders, from sections of the peasantry and from the liberal middle classes—to win government power in the elections of 1981.

The Maoist groups survived until 1979-80. Then there was a wave of unrest in the universities at a time when workers' struggle was low. As in Italy, this favoured the "autonomists", and the Maoist organisations virtually collapsed, their members dropping out of politics or joining PASOK. By 1985, when there was a new wave of workers' struggle, only one revolutionary socialist group survived to play a part—the group Socialist Revolution, whose politics were close to those of the British Socialist Workers Party.

The death of Francoism

THE YEAR 1969 was a grim one in Spain. The government declared a “State of Exception” which gave the police and the paramilitary civil guards a free hand to arrest and torture whoever they wanted. There were arrests virtually every day of workers, students or Basque nationalists. Tribunals of Public Order handed out ten-year prison sentences for organising strikes or distributing leaflets of the Basque separatist group ETA. In 1968-69 the Basque provinces alone saw 1,000 arrests, 250 prison sentences and 250 people forced into exile. Mildly critical publications were suspended and fined.

Things had barely changed in this respect six years later. Caetano’s fascism might now be a mere memory and the Greek colonels might be serving long prison sentences, but Franco remained as immobile as ever. In the first six months of 1974 his police had imprisoned 500 left wingers;⁶²⁴ two of them were executed using the medieval garrotte. Through much of 1975 there was a State of Exception in the Basque country, with Bilbao bullring used at one point to hold those arrested. In September Franco showed that for him nothing had changed since the end of the civil war: five more opponents of the regime were executed for alleged involvement in “terrorism”.

Franco had decided in 1968 to deal with the new workers’ movement and with the impact in Spain of the worldwide upsurge of that year in the only way he knew. He reached for his gun. It seemed that the “Bunker”, the ultra-right fascists who would kill thousands rather than make concessions, were back in control.

But Franco could not simply restore society to the late 1940s, when repression had crushed every murmur of opposition. The new generation of workers had not been through the defeat of the civil war and the bloodletting which followed. There were more of them, and in greater concentrations. Increased repression did not cause struggle to disappear. It simply ensured that struggle was bitterer, nastier and more political than before.

The year 1970 saw a revival of working class struggle as people attempted to keep up with prices that were far ahead of the state-imposed wage norm. The year began with a strike of 20,000 Asturian miners (which the state attempted to break by importing East European coal), and ended with strikes among construction workers in Granada and Madrid and a complete stoppage of the Madrid metro. Three of the Granada strikers were killed when the police fired on a 2,000-strong demonstration, and the metro workers were forced back to work by the threat of conscription into the armed forces.

The pattern was set for the next five years, “a hardening of the regime against all forms of opposition, and especially against the workers’ movement”.⁶²⁵ The reaction to workers’ demands would be lockouts, sackings, the calling in of the police, and shootings. Yet half a million workers took action in 1970 and there were three times as many strikes as in the whole of 1966-69.

The readiness to take political action and the limitation to Franco’s turn to pure repression were shown at the end of 1970 when the state organised a show trial of 12 ETA members. They were dragged before a military tribunal in Burgos accused, without any real evidence, of direct involvement in ETA’s first ever assassination, that of a notorious police torturer. The judges duly handed out death sentences to six of the accused and 30-year jail sentences to the rest. But not before a huge wave of protest had shaken the country.

There were repeated strikes and demonstrations in the Basque country. There were student strikes in both Madrid and Barcelona universities, with street fights between police and 3,000 students and workers in Barcelona. And 300 writers, artists and intellectuals held an illegal assembly to protest in Catalonia’s Montserrat Abbey, and left only after armed civil guards had surrounded it for two days. There was, one history of the workers’ movement tells, “the first major political mobilisation known in Spain since the Civil War”.⁶²⁶ Even the Catholic Church, long one of the great pillars of the Franco regime, spoke out: it could not afford to lose complete contact with the many believers who had participated in the protests especially since two of the Burgos defendants were priests. Reluctantly Franco made a slight bow to these pressures and commuted each death sentence to 30 years in prison.

The repression continued for the next five years. But so did the mass opposition—and the need for the regime to make occasional gestures to appease it.

In 1971 there were bitter strikes among Madrid building workers—one worker and one Communist Party member handing out leaflets were shot dead by police. In 1972 there were major strikes in the shipyards at El Ferrol in March—with the police opening fire and killing a striker—and Vigo in September;

both strikes turned into local general strikes with some sympathy strikes elsewhere.⁶²⁷ In 1973 there were widespread strikes in Catalonia after police killed a worker in a Barcelona factory.

But the most significant struggle that year was in Pamplona, capital of the province of Navarra. This was a city which had declared for Franco in 1936 without a shot being fired in opposition. Since then industrialisation had transformed the character of the population. Early in May a strike which began at the Motor Ibirica plant spread to neighbouring factories. After police had attacked a 2,000-strong demonstration with teargas and rubber bullets, it spread to all firms with more than 50 employees, so that 50,000 workers were involved. Eventually the employers conceded the workers' demands, including no victimisation.⁶²⁸ The workers at one factory which took part, Authi, were confident enough to strike again the following year, this time for 37 days—and again won.⁶²⁹

In all these struggles the key features of the workers' commissions movement of the 1960s reappeared—the organisation of action from mass meetings, the election of delegates, the spread of action from one enterprise to others. In many cases, the workers forced employers to go behind the back of the authorities and negotiate, illegally, with the strikers' representatives. The historic leaders of the workers' commissions re-emerged as the leaders of many of the struggles, despite jailings and sackings.⁶³⁰ The state itself recognised this when it arrested ten of them, sentencing them at the “1,001 trial” in 1973 to a total of 162 years' imprisonment. Finally the Pamplona strike showed that traditions of struggle built up in older industrial areas such as Asturias, Bilbao, Catalonia and Madrid could easily spread to newer areas where many of the workers came from right wing peasant backgrounds.

Any Francoist hopes that the agitation would simply die down of its own accord were smashed in autumn 1973 when the Arab-Israel war quadrupled the price of oil and the world boom came to a sudden halt. Inflation rose to 25 percent—with petrol up 70 percent, the butane gas most people used for cooking up 60 percent, transport costs up 33 percent. Wages, however, were held to 15 percent. There was strike after strike in the period.

Barcelona was shaken at the end of 1974 by a huge strike of SEAT car workers demanding higher pay and the reinstatement of workers victimised in previous struggles. They were locked out:

The workers took to the streets supported by technical and administrative staff. Meanwhile workers' delegates elected at mass meetings went from factory to factory explaining what was at stake. On 14 November thousands of SEAT workers, supported by white-collar workers from banks and offices, staged a sit-down in the main square. The riot police immediately moved in with guns and teargas...

In those weeks there were demonstrations in Barcelona with people chanting “End the dictatorship” and “SEAT will win”... The SEAT workers decided to return to the factory as the only place they met without being attacked. But they have succeeded in changing the atmosphere completely in the city. Workers’ assemblies have considerably increased in number, both in the workplace and on the streets, with militants being able to express themselves with more freedom than since the Civil War in the 1930s.⁶³¹

In the last six months of 1974 more than a million workers were involved in strikes. In January 1975 10,000 workers were on strike or locked out in Bilbao, there were strikes at several government ministries in Madrid,⁶³² and “Pamplona was paralysed by a near general strike in solidarity with 160 Potash miners who had been staging an underground sit-in”.⁶³³ In February 100,000 workers struck against the imprisonment of the workers’ commissions leaders imprisoned in the 1,001 trial—usually known as the Carabanchel Ten.

Politics and the Basques

The strikes of the first half of the 1970s were much more political than those of the 1960s.

This was true first of all in the Basque country of the north. The four Basque provinces of Viscaya (centred on Bilbao), Guipuzcoa (centred on San Sebastian), Navarra (centred on Pamplona) and Alava (centred on Vitoria) had been ruled by the Spanish crown for centuries, but only in the 19th century were they fully integrated into the state structure. A substantial minority of the population—about 20 percent overall but 43 percent in Guipuzcoa—continued to speak Euskari, a language completely different from any other in Europe.⁶³⁴ Before fascism, the largest political party, the Basque National Party (PNV), had combined conservatism with the demand for independence, or at least “autonomy”, from the rest of Spain.

In the civil war, Franco was committed to centralisation. The Basque nationalist politicians had no choice but to side with the republic. The victorious fascist armies took their revenge by slaughtering thousands of conservative-minded nationalists along with socialists, anarchists and communists and forcing into exile between 100,000 and 150,000 Basques out of a total population of only 1.5 million.⁶³⁵ Those that remained were punished with severe sentences if they identified with their traditional culture in public—using even a few words of the Basque language in the streets could lead to a term in prison in the 1940s and displaying the Basque flag was a serious offence indeed.

But not only the mainly rural, Basque-speaking population continually ran up against the Francoist state. Around Bilbao and San Sebastian were two of the most important industrial areas in Spain, centres of heavy industry like the Ruhr

in Germany or the Lowlands of Scotland. They took part in the first strikes against the fascist regime, in 1947, 1951 and 1962-63. In the 1960s and 1970s, with one tenth of the country's workforce, the Basque provinces accounted for a third of strikes.⁶³⁶

Since the same armed police attacked strikers as attacked those raising Basque slogans, the more militant workers grew to identify strongly with nationalist demands—even among the many workers who had migrated to the Basque country from other parts of Spain. Flying the Basque flag, shouting slogans in Basque, attending Basque festivals, taking part in illegal celebrations of the Basque national day became a focus for resentment against the Franco regime—and provoked the Spanish police and Civil Guards into acts of violent repression which increased that resentment.

The PNV aimed to maintain nationalist agitation, but to avoid violent conflict, believing that what mattered was holding together its support until Franco died. But in the 1950s and early 1960s a group of young nationalists emerged for whom this was not good enough. They set out to build an organisation, ETA, committed to armed struggle.

At first their armed actions were limited. The first assassination was not until 1968, and of the 19 deaths associated with their actions between 1968 and 1973, 11 were of their own members.⁶³⁷ But these actions were enough to drive the Francoist establishment wild. The generals believed they had smashed dissent once and for all with the “crusade against the reds” in 1936. Now it was raising its head again, and that head had to be cut off.

Armed police were sent into the Basque country to arrest anyone who might possibly be associated with ETA. They picked up people by the hundreds, torturing many, then sending them to prison for long terms. Between 1960 and 1977 a total of 8,500 Basques were arrested or imprisoned.

But repression served only to convince a growing number of people that ETA were right. The Burgos trial in 1970 showed that many workers in the coastal Basque provinces of Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya identified to some degree with ETA's actions against the state. This identification was less in the inland provinces of Navarra and Alava, where Basque nationalism had always been weaker, but this began to change in the Pamplona area after the general strike of 1973. When a strike was called in December 1974 to protest at inflation and repression, 20,000 Navarra workers struck alongside 150,000 in Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa.

The general popularity of ETA was shown after it carried out its most spectacular action, the assassination of the fascist who was effectively Franco's prime minister, Carrero Blanco. A bomb blew him, and his car, over the church

he was due to visit. A popular slogan became: “Up with Franco, higher than Carrero Blanco”.

By this time the workers’ commission movement had rebuilt itself sufficiently to call a national one-day strike in protest at the imprisonment of its leaders, the Carabanchel Ten. In February 1975 100,000 workers struck in their support.

The resistance of the working class to the offensive in the 1970s had a profound effect on the bloc of interests that ran the state. There had always been wrangles between the different groups who backed Franco in the civil war—big business, the ideological fascists of the Falange, the mainstream monarchists, the dissident Carlist monarchists, the members of the right wing business-cum-religious order Opus Dei. But in the past these had been about who had the plum jobs running the machinery of repression, not about the character of the repression itself. Now this began to change.

Fragments began to split from the ruling bloc who believed the only way to protect their own future—and that of Spanish capitalism—was to switch to a right wing regime legitimised by at least a pretence at democracy. Monarchists began to suggest that the pretender to the throne, in exile in Portugal, was vaguely liberal in his inclinations; reactionary Catholics suddenly started calling themselves Christian Democrats; some Carlists began to call themselves socialists; some Falangists discovered they had always been, secretly, in favour of radical social measures. By summer 1974 the feeling that reform was necessary was no longer confined to the fringes, but had powerful supporters close to the centres of government power:

In the course of 1974 there had been virtually open meetings between prominent industrialists and financiers on the one hand and members of the moderate opposition on the other. Among the most celebrated were those which took place in the Hotel Ritz and at the home of Joaquim Garriguez Walker, one of the most significant figures in the Spanish business world. He made no secret of his conviction that political liberalisation had to be risked to avoid cataclysmic confrontation.⁶³⁸

The fragmentation of the ruling bloc meant that although repression could be vicious, it was increasingly less effective. Some of those involved in discussions with the “moderate” opposition controlled parts of the fascist apparatus itself—for instance monarchist newspapers and Catholic magazines—and were able to print reports with an oppositional slant.

The “moderate” opposition was, in its turn, trying to strengthen its hand by talks with the more radical sections of the opposition. In November 1971 a formal opposition grouping—the Communist-led workers’ commissions, liberal monarchists, Catholics and professional groups—was formed in Catalonia. In mid-1974 a national “Democratic Junta” was set up by the Communist Party, the

workers' commissions, one of the small socialist parties, some regionalists, and some monarchists.

The news of the fall of Portuguese fascism in April 1974 gave a forward push to all these oppositional moves. People whose whole careers had been inside the structures around Franco began to wonder how they could insure themselves against similar sudden change in Spain.

Franco had tried to counter such fragmentation by making it clear that fascist principles would continue after his death. He had designated as his successor Juan Carlos, the son of the pretender to the throne, who had been educated by fascist tutors in Madrid, and put the day-to-day running of the government in the hands of hard-liners, replacing the assassinated Carrero Blanco with Navarro Arias, "the hardest man in Carrero's cabinet".⁶³⁹ The executions in the summer of 1975 were a final, desperate attempt by Franco to reassert total control. Two months later he died.

His last horrific return to wholesale repression did not succeed. "Demonstrations, strikes and shootings punctuated his death agony".⁶⁴⁰ The king who took Franco's place had a fascist upbringing, fascist advisers, a fascist prime minister, and had sworn an oath to the fascist movement. His cabinet was mostly hardened fascists. His armed forces and police were officered by men whose careers had been based upon fascist repression. No wonder underground left wing papers, such as the Communist *Mundo Obrero*, greeted his accession with headlines such as "No to an imposed king" and "No to a Francoist king".

But many of the men in the cabinet were also deeply connected with national and international big business circles. Fraga, the minister of the interior who was in charge of repression, had been Franco's minister in charge of censorship in the 1960s, but also in charge of tourism, key to economic development. Other ministers had connections with US Steel, Rank Xerox and General Electric. The foreign minister, Areilza, was an aristocrat with connections with ruling circles all over Western Europe.

None of these people had any objection in principle to fascist repression—if it worked. But if it did not work, they were prepared to consider alternatives that left their power intact. So, as it turned out, was the king. His grandfather had lost his throne through association with an unpopular dictatorship and so, more recently, had his relative the king of Greece; he did not intend to go the same way.

Areilza summed up the feelings of the more far-sighted business interests in his diary:

The truth was this; if we wanted to reduce salaries below the average level of inflation, it was necessary to concede political and trade union freedom among other things. If we wanted to

guarantee to neo-capitalism that the market model of the economy continued, we had to accept reforms.⁶⁴¹

Fraga had sympathy with the idea that carefully controlled reform might provide a “democratic” veneer to the regime. Both he and Areilza were under pressure from other Western governments to allow the moderate Socialist Party, led by the lawyer Felipe González, to organise openly—in order to provide a safety valve as Soares had done in Portugal.⁶⁴²

Yet through the winter of 1975-76 neither the cabinet nor the king made any serious move to dismantle fascism. Only after another great upsurge in the factories and streets did they switch direction.

The turning point

The city of Vitoria, in the Basque province of Alava, did not have militant traditions. It had not fought against the fascists in the civil war and had not joined the great protest strikes in support of Basque prisoners. Half its population were new workers who had migrated to the city in the previous 15 years, often from outside the Basque country. But a general strike erupted in the city at the beginning of March 1976, in solidarity with several factories that had been striking for eight weeks.

On the first morning the general strike paralysed all the large companies, all the small factories, building sites, centres of education, most businesses, bars and banks.

At 10am some 8,000 people marched towards the city centre, where they waited for a large number of students to join the demonstration. The police fell on the demonstrators with an extraordinary violence, using all their resources—rubber bullets, teargas, firearms... In front of the telephone exchange a vast crowd of women were repeating the slogans that were resounding throughout the city: ‘Reinstate the sacked workers! Fewer police, more work!’

The behaviour of the police continued... In their enthusiasm to threaten the population they even began to fire their machine guns and use smoke bombs against people who appeared at windows.⁶⁴³

For a time the police withdrew, and people began to organise to defend themselves, building some barricades. Five thousand gathered in the Church of St Francisco to work out plans for the afternoon. But the police soon returned, surrounded the church and refused to let more people in:

Within a short time a large number of people were congregated outside the church, shouting slogans demanding the reinstatement of the sacked workers, the withdrawal of the police and satisfaction of the striking factories’ demands. Police threw teargas into the church and then baton-charged those who began to leave. The workers tried to defend themselves in any way possible. Immediately the police began to machine gun the crowd.⁶⁴⁴

This was no panic measure by a few individual policemen. It was a deliberate attempt to crush the movement using the bloodiest of measures. A message had come over the police radio a few minutes earlier: “If you cannot disperse the crowd in any other way, shoot to kill.”⁶⁴⁵

Three workers were killed on the spot and two later as one bitter street confrontation followed another. There was solidarity action with Vitoria throughout the Basque country, with “the biggest general strike since the civil war”.⁶⁴⁶ After another demonstrator was killed in Bilbao workers began to erect barricades and “half a million strikers at one point controlled most of Bilbao’s industrial complex, including steel mills, chemical works and a major shipyard.”⁶⁴⁷

In Vitoria the funeral of the victims was a display of mass defiance—100,000 people filled the streets to hear a young strike leader, Jesu Naves from the Mercedes-Benz plant, give an oration which denounced fascism and capitalism. The alienation from the regime was total. When Fraga, the interior minister, visited the wounded in hospital, one turned on him: “Have you come to finish me off?”⁶⁴⁸

The London *Daily Telegraph* reported that the city was “silent and shuttered, like a city under enemy occupation. The working class suburb of Arana still resembled a battlefield, the streets strewn with crude barricades”.

Vitoria was the bitterest confrontation of workers with the regime, but far from the only one.

In another new industrial area, Valencia, “strikes, demonstrations, mass meetings, lockouts spread and involved the majority of the working class”.⁶⁴⁹ As wage contracts came up for renewal, one mass struggle followed another: metalworkers, construction workers, bank workers, health workers, teachers, furniture workers, print workers.

The fascist union began to refuse to allow workers to use its building. They had to meet in churches or in the street. There were massive meetings where the workers began to play the key role instead of the delegates to the fascist unions. The meetings usually ended with demonstrations.⁶⁵⁰

In Madrid there were strikes by metro and postal workers—with the army sent to run the metro. Action in the metal and construction industry virtually paralysed the outer suburbs. In Barcelona 143,000 construction workers struck and built barricades in the city’s main streets to defend themselves from the police, while in the industrial suburb of Sabadell 50,000 factory workers ended a strike only when the Ministry of the Interior ordered the release of workers arrested earlier in the week.⁶⁵¹ There were virtually weekly clashes in the city centre between police and large demonstrations demanding an amnesty for

political prisoners and Catalan autonomy.

Strikes in the first two months of 1976 totalled 36 million hours—twice the figure for the whole of the previous year. The Madrid Business Council warned that the government's whole economic programme was in danger.⁶⁵²

The new regime faced its most desperate moment. Most of the cabinet had no idea what to do. When they heard the news about Vitoria, ministers blamed it on “defrocked priests”, “the wave of erotica” or “left wing extremists”.⁶⁵³ Top generals demanded repression on the scale that had followed the civil war. But those who saw what had happened so recently to the Greek and Portuguese dictatorships were not prepared for the risks involved: it might work for a year or two, but the army could not hold down such immense social pressures forever—the eventual explosion would be uncontrollable. They argued for quick action for reform. As foreign minister Areilza noted, “the events of Vitoria and Bilbao have seriously eroded the government”.

The king and a whole layer of former fascists saw they had no choice. In June a new prime minister was appointed, Adolfo Suárez. He had been a life-long member of the fascist apparatus, and his appointment was seen by most of the opposition as a victory for the “Bunker”. But he knew which way the wind was blowing. He promised elections before June 1977 and announced an amnesty for some of those in prison for political offences.

Suárez, the king and key sections of the ruling class had decided on a new strategy: a quick election while the most radical oppositional forces were still disorganised. This would guarantee victory for political parties organised by ex-fascists and the “moderate opposition”.

But the strategy could work only if important sections of the opposition accepted it as “legitimate”. To this end Suárez met Felipe González, leader of the main section of the old Socialist Party, the PSOE. González was only too eager to comply with Suárez's wishes. “Their relationship was to remain cordial throughout the transition period”.⁶⁵⁴ His party was given the go-ahead to organise openly throughout the country, and he made it clear at the party congress in Madrid in December that the party would take part in the election even if parties to the left of it, such as the Communists, were still banned.

González gave powerful aid to Spanish capitalism and to those ex-fascists who wanted “democratic” credentials. But aid was also forthcoming from the leadership of the political party which was meant to be the victim of the whole manoeuvre: the Communist Party.

The Communist Party

In the opposition to Franco, the Communist Party had been many times more important than the Socialist Party. It had maintained underground resistance through the most difficult years of the 1940s and 1950s⁶⁵⁵ and had been the biggest single influence within the workers' commissions movement of the 1960s. Its clandestine structure and the dedication of its militants had enabled the leaders of the commissions to keep in contact when forced underground after 1968. At the time of Franco's death, it was seen in most of Spain as the key force in the opposition, the backbone which enabled the other bits to function.

By contrast, the Socialist Party had virtually abandoned underground work in the 1950s and 1960s. Individual members were well known as left wing lawyers or journalists, but it had no network of activists. Its trade union, the UGT, was seen by most militant workers as something from before the civil war, but which had done nothing since. At the time of Franco's death the union had a lot of support internationally, as a result of donations from non-Communist unions elsewhere in Europe, "but was much weaker in Spain than the workers' commissions or USO".⁶⁵⁶ One estimate gave it 10,000 members in February 1976⁶⁵⁷ and another only 60,000 a year later after months of full legality.⁶⁵⁸

The Socialist Party would have been in no position to have gone along with the government's game if the Communist Party had used its prestige and the huge upsurge of struggle of 1976 to stop it. For the strike wave continued right through to the autumn, with big strikes over economic issues, a 700,000-strong stoppage in the Basque country, and a million-strong national token strike for "democracy". Altogether there were ten times as many strikes as in the previous year. In every one the direct democracy associated with the traditions of the workers' commissions came to the fore. In 90 percent of them the people elected to leading positions in the strike committees came from the Communist Party or groups to the left of it.

But the Communist leaders had neither the will nor the ability to build from this mass upsurge a united workers' movement based on the direct shop-floor democracy of the semi-legal workers' commissions of the 1960s. Their whole political method was based on doing political deals with forces to the right of them, on the one hand, and using the crudest, bureaucratic, Stalinist methods to control the workers' organisations on the other.

The Communist leader, Santiago Carrillo, was prepared to blunt his own members' militancy in order to placate "liberal" monarchists, "democratic" ex-fascists, "progressive" employers and, of course, the Socialist Party leadership. This led the party to make an explicit move to the right in the spring of 1976. In the past it had said the aim of alliances was to confront the regime and force a "ruptura democrática"—a democratic break; now it was to get a "ruptura

pactada”—a “break” negotiated with the fascists and ex-fascists who held state power. By September the party leadership was in “indirect” contact with the prime minister.⁶⁵⁹ It was hardly in a position to criticise the Socialist Party.

This policy affected the practice of every party activist. The strike movements were seen as a way of exerting pressure so that the Communist Party and workers’ commission leaders could gain access to the corridors of power, not as a way of deepening the militancy of millions of previously non-political workers.

As a Spanish revolutionary said in March 1976, the Communist Party played an important role in initiating many struggles, but discouraged all-out strikes:

It wants token strikes and demonstrations which it can control. There have been massive struggles starting with concrete programmes of demands. But the Communist Party has not been agitating round these, but round general slogans... In the Barcelona construction strike, after nine days the Communist Party said return to work—but the workers kept up the fight for concrete demands for another three days. After the Vitoria shootings the revolutionary and semi-revolutionary organisations in the Basque country put out a call for a general strike together with the workers’ commissions [which were not controlled by the Communist Party in that area]. The Communist Party said nothing. In Barcelona the Catalan Communist Party merely stepped up calls for ‘national reconciliation’.⁶⁶⁰

During the bitter 1976 metalworkers’ strike in Sabadell, the Communist Party even put out an open letter to the employers saying the dispute could be solved if the employers appointed a new negotiating team, adopted a “compromise” and joined the Sabadell Democratic Assembly.⁶⁶¹

Carrillo himself spelt out the party’s perspective when he emerged from clandestinity to hold an illegal press conference in Madrid at the end of 1976. He promised collaboration in a “social contract” if the party and the unions were fully legalised.

Carrillo was seized by the police a couple of days later and held under arrest for a time. But this did not stop him keeping his side of the “contract” before the government had even met his conditions.

On 24 January 1977 a fascist group attacked a labour lawyers’ office in Madrid, shooting dead five people, four of them leading figures in the workers’ commissions. The “Bunker” was out to show it could still kill its enemies. A wave of shock and anger swept the country. But instead of calling for strikes and mass demonstrations in support of the commissions, the Communist Party urged “serenity” and organised a mass, silent funeral. The aim was to impress Suárez and the king with the party’s discipline and moderation. If all the Communist Party wanted was legalisation, the approach worked. A month later Suárez met Carrillo for eight hours and agreed the party would be legalised in return for recognising the monarchy and working for a social contract.

The results of the meeting were soon to be seen. From now on Communist activists discouraged strikes and where they could not prevent them, discouraged active picketing. The number of strikes fell and those that took place were defeated.

The Communist Party's policy of alliances at all costs also led it to give the Socialist Party and its union, the UGT, a platform where they would never otherwise have had one.

The policy of the workers' commissions until the summer of 1976 was to campaign for a Constituent Sindical Congress, open to all genuine union bodies that had forces on the ground.⁶⁶² This formula, if acted on in an open and democratic way, would have cut the ground completely from under the Socialist Party attempt to rebuild the UGT. For the UGT simply did not have the forces to prevent workers sympathetic to the Socialist Party from supporting such a congress.

The Communist Party's search for alliances killed the idea. To appease González the workers' commissions leadership instead agreed to establish a coordinating committee, the COS, between themselves, the smaller left socialist union USO and the then miniscule UGT. They agreed that during strikes all three unions would be put forward as "negotiating partners" with the employers, even where the majority of the strike activists were from the workers' commissions.

With the alliance went the bureaucratic manipulation. The Communist Party tightened its hold over the national coordinating committee of the workers' commissions by driving out the biggest oppositional forces (two Maoist parties), then turning the commissions into a trade union to compete for members with the other unions. It preferred a smaller body of organised workers over which it had almost complete control to a mass union based upon delegation from below and argument between different political currents. It could use one as a bargaining counter with the ex-fascists who ran the state in a way it could never have used the other.

The manoeuvre resulted in unnecessary weakening of the working class. The splitting of the trade union movement into rival and necessarily weak political federations, something which had taken a lot of effort and US money to achieve in France and Italy after 1948, was brought about in Spain by the Communist Party's own efforts.

The elections of June 1977 looked like a dream come true to the former Francoist converts to "democracy", grouped around the prime minister. His party, the UCD, won more than a third of the votes, more than anyone else and easily enough to govern with. González and the Socialist Party could also be happy. They were now able to get 28.5 percent of the votes, despite having

virtually no organisation in the country a year before. The losers were those parties still openly associated with the fascist period, especially ex-interior minister Fraga's Popular Alliance which got only 8.4 percent of the votes, and the Communist Party, which with 9.3 percent got only a third of the votes of the Socialist Party whose prestige it had helped to build.

The Communist Party could make excuses for itself. The prime minister's party hogged TV time and had great influence over the press. Voting for the Socialist Party was the soft option for those who wanted change but were afraid of conflict. The Communist Party had only had eight weeks of full legality to prepare for the election; it did relatively well in Catalonia, where it had long been well organised, and much worse in the south and west.

But none of these excuses made any sense unless the party learned from the way its alliance-at-all-costs policy had built up the strength of its opponents. It did not. Four months later the party and the workers' commissions joined the Socialist Party and the UGT in signing the "Pact of Moncloa" with the government and employers. They agreed to 20-22 percent wage limits at a time when prices were rising at 29 percent, to "monetarist" restrictions on credit and cuts in public spending. In return they were promised a series of economic reforms.

The unions and the parties stuck to their side of the bargain, opposing strikes and protests and making sure the great working class upsurge of 1975-76 was soon a distant memory. But the government delivered few reforms. Instead unemployment rose from 7 to 13 percent and there was a wave of bankruptcies and plant closures. Workers had flooded into the rival unions in 1976-77—the UGT alone grew from 60,000 members at the beginning of 1977 to claim a million members in August;⁶⁶³ the workers' commissions union could boast a similar membership. But from 1978 onwards workers saw less and less point in taking out union cards, and the membership of all the unions fell.

The revolutionary left

If the Communist Party lacked the politics to thwart the plans of big business, Suárez and the Socialist Party leaders, then the revolutionary left lacked the strength. It barely existed during the upsurge of the 1960s. The old POUM party of the 1930s had been reduced by years of persecution and exile to "virtually an association of ex-combatants, incapable of taking new directions".⁶⁶⁴

The new revolutionary left was very much a product of the years 1967-69, as elsewhere in Europe. At first, there was a flourishing of a mass of little groups. These came from four main sources.

The move of the Communist Party leadership from orthodox Stalinism to Eurocommunism was punctuated by a series of splits and expulsions. Even when these splits did not lead to new organisations, they helped break the party's domination of underground political life.

The second source was successive splits from ETA. There was continual tension within ETA between those who looked to the military struggle and those who looked towards the working class—precisely because the Basque country experienced both the highest level of national oppression under Franco and the highest level of class struggle. Successive ETA leaderships tried to unite the two by using the examples of Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam to tie together nationalism and bits of what was called “Marxist Leninism”. This could work while working class struggle was low, or confined to the Basque country. But any rise in workers' struggle to the point of violent conflict with the Spanish state attracted members and sympathisers of ETA towards revolutionary socialist politics based on Spain as a whole. In 1966-67 a section of the leadership was expelled after concluding that the way to defeat Franco was working class struggle; it later merged with a Catalan-based group to form the Communist Movement of Spain (MCE). In 1970 it was the turn of many of those who voted for these expulsions to be pulled to the left by involvement in strikes; they declared for revolutionary socialism and merged into the Trotskyist Liga Comunista Revolucionaria (LCR).

Other revolutionary groups emerged from the Catholic workers' movement, which was where many new militants of the 1960s received their first chance to discuss politics. Some went on to form the left socialist union USO. Others drew revolutionary conclusions: from this milieu came a large Maoist organisation, the ORT. Most of the left organisations contained not only many ex-Catholics, but also a sprinkling of ex-priests.

Finally, as elsewhere in Europe, student struggles threw up groups drawn to revolutionary ideas. Right up to 1976 there was ideological ferment in the colleges, with Communist Party, Maoist, Guevarist and Trotskyist ideas battling it out. LCR, part of the Fourth International, was able to grow from virtually nothing in this milieu in the early 1970s, while another Trotskyist group, Acción Comunista, refused to do student work and eventually disintegrated.

By the mid-1970s the little groups had crystallised into six major organisations. The divisions between them were partly a reflection of ideological divides in the revolutionary movement internationally, partly they arose from very important arguments about Spain itself—whether sections of the bourgeoisie could be persuaded to play a revolutionary role, what attitude to take to the national movements.

But they had certain things in common. They all argued that there could not

be a peaceful transition from Franco to bourgeois democracy. The LCR described the situation as pre-revolutionary. The leader of the Fourth International, Ernest Mandel, told its world congress in 1975 that the next congress would be in “Red Madrid”. The Maoism of some of the organisations consisted in preparing for “prolonged people’s war”.⁶⁶⁵

All were able to exercise influence over some of the great upsurges of 1970-76—the ORT was in the leadership of the Pamplona strike of 1973;⁶⁶⁶ the OICE claimed a leading role in the struggle at Vitoria⁶⁶⁷ and had some influence in Sabadell and Ford Valencia, the PTE claimed to be the leadership in several sections of SEAT;⁶⁶⁸ the MCE was certainly influential in many workplaces in Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Navarra.

The two things together tended to lead them to exaggerate their own abilities and underestimate the ability of the Communist Party to dampen down the movement.

In 1970-75 some set up “their own” revolutionary workers’ commissions. This did not matter over much at the time, since the old national structure had been shattered by repression and what existed, except during upsurges of struggle in individual cities, were only groupings of activists who called themselves “workers’ commissions”. But such tendencies weakened the ability of the revolutionaries to oppose the Communist Party in 1976 when it agreed with the UGT and USO to a divided trade union movement. The Maoists of the PTE and the ORT willingly allowed themselves to be driven from the national coordination of the workers’ commissions to set up their own little unions, while the “left Communist” OICE was not even involved in the arguments. The LCR and the MCE were left to battle alone.

The tactical mistakes over the unions left the revolutionary left in a weaker position than otherwise to resist the deals of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the unions with Suárez and big business. But even with the best tactics in the world, the revolutionaries were not in a position to prevent the deals. The revolutionary left had perhaps 20,000 members altogether in the winter of 1976-77; the Communist Party had around 100,000 members and many passive supporters. The sudden turn of the government towards reforms convinced most non-militant workers there would be more, so long as they followed the advice of the Communist militants and avoided “adventures” and “provocations”.

As it turned out, to most workers this implied voting for the Socialist Party, since the Communist Party was still seen as an “extreme” option despite all its efforts. Hence the result of the June 1977 general election.

The quiet aftermath

The Spanish ruling class was able to heave a great sigh of relief in the summer of 1977. It had made the transition from fascism to a democratic regime without the risks of revolution, which the events in Portugal had all too clearly revealed. The government remained, in the main, in the hands of those who had run sections of the state machine under Franco. Yet the key sections of the old anti-Franco opposition—especially the Communist Party and the workers' commissions—were prepared to collaborate with it. The ground was laid for a massive rationalisation of Spanish industry, which the unions, bound to the Pact of Moncloa, would not resist. And even when the Centre Democrat government eventually fell victim to wrangles of its constituent elements in 1982, a Socialist Party committed to essentially the same policies replaced it.

There were still some hiccups. Powerful generals longed for a return to the past. They would meet and mutter and in February 1981 a Civil Guard captain, Tejero, held parliament prisoner at gunpoint while various military units tried to stage a coup.

Yet the military plots always fell apart at the last moment. The overwhelming majority of the ruling class were happy with the new bourgeois democratic order and did not want to run the risk of provoking an explosion of working class militancy. They made sure the generals were leaned on not to do silly things and that the king stood firm against the plotters. The Tejero coup, frightening as it must have been for the cowering parliamentarians, was more akin to farce than tragedy.

There was only one blemish on the picture of bourgeois stability, and it was one the bourgeoisie could live with—the Basque country. The desire of the government to placate the Francoist generals delayed proposals to devolve some powers to regional assemblies. This left one section of the moderate anti-Francoist opposition dissatisfied—the nationalist parties from the non-Castilian parts of the state. Mostly this did not matter in the long run. Indeed it diverted a lot of oppositional energy (including that of many revolutionaries) into petty nationalistic agitation, the waving of regional flags, an emphasis on language rather than class. But in the Basque country there were deep-seated grievances and a tradition of armed action against the central state. Had the central government moved quickly to do a deal with the bourgeois PNV, the grievances might have seemed something from the past. Instead, two years passed before such an agreement on Basque autonomy was reached.

In the meantime the government relied on the military to maintain order and ETA stepped up its armed campaign with support from about a third of the

population. Deaths associated with ETA actions rose from 11 in 1977 to 60 the following year. In 1977 revolutionary nationalist parties⁶⁶⁹ got about 9.5 percent of the Basque vote; in 1978 the pro-ETA party Herri Batasuna got 16 percent. Throughout this period there were bitter clashes between demonstrators and police who did not hesitate to fire. It was not unusual for thousands to take to the streets of San Sebastian or Bilbao, chanting “ETA, kill more policemen”.

The nationalism was fed by more than repression. The Basque country—especially Vizcaya—was the centre of much of Spain’s heavy industry. It was hit hard by recession, rationalisation and unemployment. Workers once the most militant in Spain lost confidence as the closures and redundancies rose in an ever higher spiral. Passive support for a nationalist military struggle in which other people would take all the risks increasingly took the place of self-reliance.

But a fight confined to the Basque country was not going to be more than an irritant to the Spanish state. Spanish capitalism could boast that the transition had been 90 percent successful.

The crisis of the European left

THE YEAR 1968 marked a turning point in the post-war history of Western capitalism. A three-fold crisis—of US hegemony in Vietnam, of authoritarian forms of rule in the face of a massively enlarged working class, and of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia—reverberated round the world, ripping apart much of the prevailing ideological consensus. This disruption was most important where young people were trained to propagate ideology—in the universities. It spilt over to affect the mood of young people generally, affecting the popular culture of pop music, film, even dress. More important, a new revolutionary left was born which was able, in several countries, to influence a new militancy among large numbers of workers.

But the years 1974-76 saw a second turning point. There was a stabilisation of bourgeois rule everywhere. The structures by which ruling classes maintained their own internal coherence and ruled the rest of society were repaired—in the most extreme cases virtually rebuilt.

In the US the presidencies of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter (1974-76 and 1977-80) overcame the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate, avoiding direct involvement of US troops in land wars, cutting the FBI and the CIA down to size, offering an amnesty to the thousands of Vietnam draftdodgers and deserters, allowing dissidents from the late 1960s and early 1970s to reintegrate into the mainstream of US society.

In southern Europe the dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece gave way to parliamentary democracies in which members of previously persecuted opposition parties could suddenly play an important part as MPs, trade union leaders or even cabinet ministers. In Italy the country's biggest political party and second biggest vote-winner, the Communist Party, was allowed a say in government policies for the first time for nearly 30 years. In Britain, the attempt of the Heath government to legislate against the unions was replaced by the whole-hearted cooperation of the Labour government with the union leaders.

These changes were not accidental. They were a product of the turmoil which preceded them. The great economic crisis that broke in late 1973 meant that all the Western economies had to be restructured at the expense of their workers. Attempts by right wing governments at direct, frontal attacks in the previous five years had failed to weaken the workers' movement. Force had failed. Persuasion and fraud must be used instead. The leaders of opposition movements must be incorporated into the system if their rank and file were to bear the brunt of the system's economic crisis.

Hence the characteristic form which the restabilisation of bourgeois rule took—the signing of a formal pact between the leaders of the non-revolutionary opposition, the government and big business. In Britain it was called the Social Contract, in Spain the Pact of Moncloa, in Italy the Historic Compromise. In each case it served the same purpose. It enabled ruling classes to impose cuts in living standards and increases in unemployment which had been regarded as politically impossible only two or three years earlier. The number of workers without jobs doubled, real wages fell for the first time for decades—and workers accepted the change.

But why did workers who had fought so hard in the previous period knuckle under now?

The “new” reformism

Organisations committed to reform rather than revolution had, by and large, been unable to respond to the sudden upsurge of militancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their whole political stance focused on what was happening within established political structures; they saw the workers' movement as at most a means of putting pressure on these; it was to be kept going by a routine of activities, carefully supervised from above and never allowed to take on a life of its own.

For the Western Communist Parties, this still meant maintaining an inflexible, closed Stalinist position which, however, never challenged the system; their strategy was to wait for a “left government” to win an electoral majority in France and Italy, to look to a “peaceful general strike” to bring about “national reconciliation” in Spain, to talk incessantly about “left advance” and “alternative economic policies” in Britain.

Social democracy was in an even worse state. The French party had discredited itself by its support for the colonial war in Algeria and its participation in de Gaulle's 1958 government. The Italian party had lost support and credibility through participation in coalition governments with the Christian

Democrats. The British party—Labour—had disillusioned many of its own activists by imposing wage controls and attempting to impose legal controls on the unions. The Spanish party was made up of exiles who seemed unable to stir themselves to build an underground organisation. The Portuguese party did not even exist until the early 1970s.

As workers were drawn into wages struggles, demonstrations, political strikes, occupations, revolutionary socialists were often the only section of the left to respond to the possibilities. Suddenly their leaflets and newspapers were being enthusiastically accepted and read by at least some working class activists. There were times when they had only to raise their red banners, and thousands would march behind them. Groups that had built themselves from dozens to hundreds through participation in student struggles could now draw in thousands of workers.

But the paralysis of the reformist organisations did not last all that long. Even the ultra-rigid French Communist Party did make some use of the May events, “running to the front” in order to strengthen its own hand in political horse-trading with the social democrats and the right. The Italian Communist Party was more adept at taking advantage of the new militancy; the trade unions it influenced created the factory councils in order to draw many of the workplace activists into their orbit. In Spain, the Communist Party’s caution could leave it on the sidelines during the Pamplona and Vitoria general strikes; but it was still capable of exerting hegemony over the workers’ commissions nationally. In Portugal, the Stalinist Communist Party which had cheerfully broken strikes in summer 1974 was quite capable of the “left” turn of autumn 1975. In Greece, the Stalinist wing of the Communist Party, apparently marginal during the struggles against the colonels, was able to reassert its traditional control over the most militant section of the working class once the colonels had gone.

The turn to “Eurocommunism” in Italy, Spain and France was primarily intended to reassure the local ruling classes that the Communist parties would not betray their interests to Moscow. But it also allowed the parties to open themselves up to what they called “new forces”. A whole array of leftist intellectuals were assured there was now room for them. A new climate of tolerance was promised to those who would never have thought of joining in 1968-69.

The transformation of Stalinism was child’s play compared with what happened to social democracy.

In France the old Socialist Party, the SFIO, had received an ignominious 6 percent of the vote in the 1969 presidential election. After a series of manoeuvres it was reborn anew in 1971. The new party made every possible

attempt to stress its discontinuity with the old; its leader, Francois Mitterand, had not even been a member of the old party, and the new party did not shy away from a certain “left wing” rhetoric, absorbing many of the leaders of the left socialist PSU. It made great play of “workers’ participation” and openly sought alliances with the Communist Party. It cultivated relations with the former Catholic union, the CFDT, which had gained a reputation for “leftness” in 1968, rather than with the SFIO’s old ally, the “moderate” Force Ouvrière. The result was a remarkable renaissance. The Socialist Party never built an industrial base like that of the Communist Party, but it overtook the Communist vote in the mid-1970s and by the end of the decade it was the focus for workers who aspired to change through elections.

In Portugal, a mixture of money from the ruling German Social Democrats and a policy which in 1974 meant all things to all people enabled the Socialist Party to rise from nothing to become the country’s biggest vote-winner, even though its influence in the factories and unions of the key Lisbon area was minimal.

The Soares phenomenon in Portugal was soon followed by the González phenomenon in Spain. Here again money from West German Social Democrats, plus media support and a toleration of left phrases, enabled the Socialist Party not only to grab more votes than the Communists, but to revive its virtually defunct union federation, the UGT.

In Britain there was no great regrowth of Labour politics in the 1970s. Activists continued to drop out of the party, and the left kept its head down until after the Tory election victory in 1979. But there was a perceptible growth of left reformist politics in the unions. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s right wing social democracy had dominated most major unions, from the late 1960s onwards several key unions were controlled by figures associated with the “broad left”. Union leaders consciously set out to develop mechanisms to tie shop stewards more closely into the running of the unions. The strikes of 1968-70 tended to be unofficial; not so the great strikes of 1971-74.

Overall, the “vacuum” on the left was not nearly as marked by the mid-1970s as it had been in the late 1960s. Institutions which told workers that change could be achieved by exerting pressure within bourgeois society had to a large extent filled the void.

But the considerable effort by reformists of all hues to integrate the new activism of workers does not, by itself, explain why the wave of struggle came to an end. Why did workers allow their struggles to be restricted within limits prescribed by reformists?

To answer this, a good starting point is to be found in comments made by

Leon Trotsky in 1921—when a previous international upsurge of militant workers' struggle was coming to an end. Trotsky made some acute observations on how the working class reacts to a sudden turn for the worse in the economic situation:

The political effects of a crisis are determined by the entire political situation and by those events which precede and accompany the crisis, especially the battles, successes or failures of the working class itself prior to the crisis. Under one set of circumstances the crisis might give a mighty impulse to the revolutionary activity of the working masses; under a different set of circumstances it may completely paralyse the offensive of the proletariat... Prolonged unemployment following a period of revolutionary political assaults and retreats does not at all work in favour... On the contrary, the longer the crisis lasts, the more it threatens to nourish anarchist moods on the one wing and reformist moods on the other.⁶⁷⁰

Economic crisis leads to attacks on workers' living standards and jobs. To that extent it increases their bitterness. As they join the dole queue, workers who never before questioned the political and economic system can develop a bitter loathing for it. But the crisis also does something else: it makes workers with jobs much more wary of entering into struggle. After all, their jobs might be at stake. The political context of the period decides which reaction becomes dominant.

Workers in the mid-1970s rarely feared, as they had in the slumps of the 1920s and mid-1930s, that management would sack them and replace them from the dole queues. Traditions of struggle were too strong for management even to try that. But more insidious mechanisms were at work. Workers were told, over and over, that their jobs depended upon the viability of the particular section of the system in which they found themselves. Protecting their living standards and working conditions, they were told, would increase the crisis that beset "their" factory, firm or nation and destroy its ability to provide jobs. The same argument was pushed by the media: such was the crisis that any sustained struggle—over wages, working conditions or hours—would push society into an "abyss".

Workers could have resisted this argument. But only if either they understood that there was a viable alternative to the present crisis-prone set up or if they were so embittered that they were prepared to struggle no matter the odds.

It is not difficult to see why workers were prepared to fight back during the Heath government in Britain, before the Communist Party entered the government majority in Italy and before the Pact of Moncloa in Spain. The established reformist leaders of the working class were indicating there was an alternative: the hoisting of themselves into office. It was a visible, general political alternative with which every worker who had a grievance could

identify. He or she did not even have to have any great illusions that the reformist leaders could deliver what they said they would. There was a general sense of movement into which the fight against every grievance could fit.

The focus was removed once the reformist leaders agreed to at least half-collaboration with governments.

This would not have mattered had there been a new, spontaneous mass upsurge of struggle. Out of that the class would have begun to create at least the embryo of its own alternative. Nor would it have mattered if the revolutionary left had been a mass force, capable of appearing as a credible alternative in its own right. But in 1974-76 there was no credible alternative for the mass of workers between what the reformists offered and seemingly endless crisis.

The reformists could deliver little in the way of reforms. As the crisis deepened their language became closer and closer to the ruling class. There was little positive in it for workers to have illusions in. But workers went along with the reformist prescription because, however miserable it was, it seemed the only viable option.

Eventually the reformist parties were themselves to become victims of the shift in attitudes they helped bring about. Sections of workers drew the logical conclusion from the argument that there were only capitalist solutions to the crisis—and opted for the most right wing of the reformist or even the openly capitalist parties. In Italy the Communist Party vote fell in the late 1970s. In Spain the Communist Party was reduced electorally until it was almost marginal. In Britain the Labour Party lost the 1979 general election to a rightward-moving Tory Party under Margaret Thatcher.

The crisis of the revolutionary left

In 1974 the revolutionary left in most countries could look back on five or six years during which it had grown from strength to strength. It expected to continue to grow at least as fast, as the world economic crisis hit workers' living standards and working conditions. In Britain, as we watched the miners bring down the Heath government, we waited for a massive increase in our own strength, expecting that after a few months of "honeymoon" with Labour, the working class movement would explode in a "big bang".

Our formulations in the International Socialists were not nearly so absurdly optimistic as those who wrote in the Fourth International's paper *Red Weekly* of "the road to dual power". Yet we did expect a rapid resurgence of struggle:

A period of lull in the class struggle is inevitable. But such is the severity of the economic crisis that

the 'honeymoon' between the trade unions and the Labour government will be much shorter than in 1964-6. This time it will be a matter of months, not years.⁶⁷¹

In practice, we behaved as if the ever greater growth of the previous period was going to continue. The round of activities and meetings continued at the same tempo as in the upsurge years. We set targets for paper sales and for membership that assumed nothing had changed.

By European standards, we in Britain were profoundly conservative in our perspective. In the run up to the 1976 election in Italy virtually the whole revolutionary left believed the Communist Party would do better than the Christian Democrats, the revolutionary list would get a substantial vote, and a "left" government would be formed. The same expectations were general in Spain in the period before Franco's death. The Spanish LCR spoke of a "maturing revolutionary situation", and the big Maoist organisations of "people's war".

In France the wild optimism of 1968 had died down in the early 1970s—and with it the influence of the various Maoist and spontaneist groups which had most embodied it. Nevertheless, sections of the revolutionary left still behaved as if their actions alone could transform the situation. The optimism persisted, with the illusion in 1976-78 that the election of a "workers' government" made up of the Communist and Socialist parties would produce a huge upturn in the class struggle.

The expectations of the revolutionary left did not look as absurd at the time as they do in retrospect. People had just been through half a decade in which the new revolutionary organisations had grown and influenced workers' struggles. Only those who had been active since before 1968 could remember what it was like to be completely marginal to the workers' movement.

The failure of these hopes was bound to throw the revolutionary left into crisis. The bigger the organisations, the greater their previous impact and the greater the expectations, the more serious the crisis would be. In Italy it was only a month from the failure of the June 1976 elections to widespread talk of "the crisis of the revolutionary left". Within a year the symptoms of the crisis were manifest right across Western Europe and North America.

An important element was "the crisis of militancy". By the mid-1970s much of the membership of the revolutionary organisations had been involved in non-stop activity for seven, eight or even ten years. They had come to politics on the barricades in 1967-69 and had hardly stopped moving since. Day after day, week after week they had sold papers, produced bulletins, stood outside factories, argued over political issues. This was fine when the movement was going from strength to strength. When the forward momentum was checked, much of the activity seemed to lose its point.

The “tiredness” was most marked in Italy after the elections of June 1976, in Spain after the consolidation of the post-Franco regime, in Britain after the downturn in the class struggle in 1975 and again after the defeat of the firefighters’ strike of 1977-78, in the US with the Carter administration. This could create a mood of “rebellion” against the demands of the organisation. In France there was at least one case in 1977 of a branch of the LCR going “on strike”, refusing to pay subs, attend meetings, sell the paper or read the internal bulletin, until the leadership allowed shorter hours of activity! At the final traumatic conference of Lotta Continua in 1976, the repeated theme in the contributions from the membership was, as the official summary put it, that “one’s existence and condition in society should be recognised as the basis for one’s own participation in the construction of the revolutionary party”.⁶⁷²

Such moods were most prevalent at first among those who had been students in 1968. They had either been outside the struggles they had worked around or had “industrialised”, voluntarily taking up the burden of factory work. Once the struggle took a downturn, they were tempted to get other jobs and turn away from the factories in a way that was not open to those born into the working class.

But the mood soon affected many “real” workers as well. A few found escape routes from the factories into higher education or teaching on trade union courses. Others could not resist the temptation of full-time or near full-time trade union activity and dropped revolutionary ideas which made it difficult to survive in that milieu. A greater number simply abandoned active politics.

The politics of many of the revolutionary organisations made the “crisis” of militancy much worse than it needed to be. The influence of Maoism had encouraged the adoption of Stalinist forms of organisation which allowed little participation by the membership in discussions of politics, strategy and tactics. Congresses were dominated by the platform, with no encouragement of debate between different positions. Internal bulletins (where they existed) merely reprinted the documents of the leadership, not disagreements. The general secretary was presented as “the leader”, after the model of Stalin or Mao. “Democratic centralism” was interpreted to mean blind obedience to the “line”, however difficult it was to carry out.

But no “line” provided immunity to immense disappointment at the drop in the level of struggle and interest in revolutionary ideas after 1975-77. Lack of past internal debate did not prevent the debate now; it simply ensured it took much more violent, much more traumatic, forms. People reacted against years of Stalinist-Maoist discipline by rejecting all discipline. From accepting complete subjection of the individual militant’s personality to the line handed down from

above, they turned to the belief that no strategy was necessary, since the needs of the personality were themselves “political”.

The global politics of the Maoist organisations intensified the crisis of militancy. Events dealt blow after blow to their glorified portrayal of China. In 1968-71 Mao’s number two had been Lin Biao, featured on posters alongside “the great helmsman” wherever Maoists were active; then he suddenly disappeared, dying, the Chinese government announced, in an air crash as he attempted to fly to Russia after an unsuccessful military coup. After Mao’s death in 1976 it was the turn of the “Gang of Four”—Mao’s widow and three other leaders—to be denounced as “conspirators”, receiving long prison sentences after public trial. Deng Xiaoping became the effective ruler of China, honoured by *Time* magazine as its “man of the year” for his criticisms of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, the Chinese backed the Pol Pot regime of Kampuchea as it established a Stalinism even more horrific than the Russian original: a million people died in the most horrible ways as it attempted to bring about state capitalist “socialism in one country”. The final blow to any residual illusions came in 1978 when Vietnam invaded Kampuchea to overthrow Pol Pot by force and China went to war with Vietnam.

The demoralising effect of these events on much of the generation of 1968 was immense. They had identified Third World guerrilla struggle, especially in China, Vietnam and Kampuchea, with socialism. This was especially true of the Maoists, but also in part of the “orthodox” Trotskyists, for whom “Uncle Ho” had been a model to be studied and followed. Any criticism of the Third World revolutions, even from those who were in the forefront of defending them against imperialism, was deprecated, if not shouted down.⁶⁷³

They had believed that what existed in China, Vietnam and Kampuchea was what they were going to establish through revolution in Italy, France or Britain. When the truth came out, it was like a form of political electric shock treatment. All too often it destroyed not merely their delusions, but also what had been rational in their perception of Western capitalism. Followers of Mao flipped overnight. Most dropped out of politics; a few became “*nouvelles philosophes*”—apostles of imperialism, backing its nuclear weapons and its Central American Contras.⁶⁷⁴

Moving to the right

There was, as we have seen, a change in the mood of workers as the economic crisis grew deeper and reformist leaders started giving open or covert support for government measures. The shift of political discussion to the right affected wide

layers of workers who had only ever partially broken from the “ruling ideas: inculcated in them at school and by the media.

This in turn exercised a powerful pressure on those militants previously prepared to accept many of the arguments of the revolutionary left. The changed mood affected how they saw things. It now seemed more “practical” in drawing up a wage demand to talk in terms of productivity payments rather than across-the-board rises, when threatened with redundancies to go into “viability” discussions with management rather than raise the demand “occupy, nationalise”, when faced with doubling unemployment to accept wage controls in return for “alternative economic policies” and “social investment plans” rather than call for the overthrow of the system.

A few years earlier many militants with vaguely reformist ideas had been prepared to go much further than the reformist leaders in the struggle for economic demands. Now the same militants often voiced the reformist arguments against struggle in the factories.

Members of the revolutionary organisations suddenly found themselves isolated. For reasons they could not quite fathom they were no longer going from success to success. Their paper sales were stagnating or falling; there was little response to their calls for solidarity with groups of workers who were fighting; some worker members were dropping out.

The easiest thing to do was to swim rightward with the tide.

The main organisations of the Italian revolutionary left moved to the right and to belief in the magical powers of a “left” government in 1974-76.

In France the Trotskyist LCR developed the view that the election of a Socialist-Communist left government was the only way to open up a new period of revolutionary upsurge. In the run-up to the national assembly elections in 1978, its publications stressed the need for a Socialist-Communist majority, with hardly a warning to workers that the politics of that majority would be barely distinguishable from the Labour and Social Democratic governments in power in Britain and West Germany at the time. It was a strange irony that such should be the political fate of an organisation that had grown in the mid-1960s when a group of Communist students turned to revolutionary politics in disgust at the party’s electoral support for Mitterrand.

The French LCR at least maintained itself as a distinct organisation. Revolutionary socialists elsewhere often went further.

A debate took place in London in 1980 between three left Labour MPs (Tony Benn, Stuart Holland and Audrey Wise) and three representatives of the revolutionary left: Tariq Ali, then a member of the International Marxist Group; Hilary Wainwright, a former member of the same group; and Paul Foot of the

British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the renamed International Socialists. Within two years Tariq Ali had applied to join the Labour Party and Hilary Wainwright was working for the Labour-controlled Greater London Council, where she was in the company of other ex-revolutionaries such as John Palmer, once of the International Socialists, and Mike Cooley, once a Maoist.

The fate of the large Maoist organisations in Germany and Spain was not all that different. By the early 1980s they had nearly all collapsed, with their members either dropping out of politics or turning to some variant of electoralism. In France Geismar became an adviser to the Mitterrand government; in Germany Dutschke and Cohn-Bendit were founder members of the Green Party.

In the US being “practical” involved even greater moves to the right. Since no viable social democratic party existed, there was only the slightly more “liberal” of the two great bourgeois parties, the Democrats. By the mid-1980s one-time Maoists were buried deep in the party, supporting Jesse Jackson’s campaign for the presidential candidacy. The “new left” magazine *Socialist Revolution*, changing its name to *Socialist Review*, aligned itself with the Democratic Socialist Organising Committee and people such as Michael Harrington, from whom SDS had split 20 years earlier. Tom Hayden, former leader of SDS and defendant at the Chicago conspiracy trial, went even further. As a Democratic Party state congressman in California, he announced he was now in favour of capital punishment.⁶⁷⁵

The rise of the movements

Moving right towards reformism did not seem the only alternative to the demoralised revolutionaries ten years after 1968. For a time the upsurge of what were called the “social movements”—the women’s, gay, anti-nuclear and ecology movements—seemed to offer another option. The women’s movement was seen as providing the impetus for this development, although it was itself not new.

The mainstream women’s organisation in the US, the National Organisation of Women, had been formed in 1966. More radical groupings followed in 1967-68.⁶⁷⁶ In Britain *Black Dwarf* had proclaimed 1969 “The year of the militant woman”⁶⁷⁷ and the first women’s workshops were formed; the first national women’s liberation conference took place in 1970—also the first attempt by supporters of women’s liberation to organise working class women: a campaign among night cleaners in London. In Germany there was already a bitter argument over the attitude to women in the German SDS at its last conference in

December 1968, and in Italy the question of women's rights was central in the run-up to the divorce referendum of 1974.

The ideas of women's liberation were widespread and cut with the grain for the growing numbers of women in waged work and higher education. But the movement itself involved relatively few activists. In Britain its conferences were only a few hundred strong and the combined sales of its magazines amounted only to a few thousand. The magazine *Socialist Woman* noted in 1974: "Most working class militants do not turn to the Women's Liberation Movement to centralise and coordinate their struggles".⁶⁷⁸

In much of Europe this was a period in which the socialist left could relate to widespread working class struggles, many involving women. Few politically committed women saw women's liberation as opposed to Marxist organisations based on the working class. Most women's movement activists assumed themselves to be part of the left. They did have to challenge some attitudes among socialist activists, who had, after all, been brought up in a capitalist society and were affected by its ideological assumptions. Only struggle and debate would change that. But it was felt such problems could be resolved as women and men workers together fought the system.

In southern Europe the pressure to see the struggle against the oppressions suffered by women as part of a wider working class struggle was especially strong. Challenging women's oppression in Italy of necessity involved challenging Christian Democracy; fighting it in Portugal, Spain and Greece was inconceivable without a confrontation with the entrenched dictatorships.

In the US the dominant attitudes in the radical wing of the Women's Liberation Movement were rather different. It was an offspring of the student left and the student left had very different experiences in the US to Europe. It came from universities until then dominated by the sexist attitudes and rituals of the fraternities. Insofar as the student left broke with its social origins, this was not by making contact with an organised working class in which there was at least some tradition of collective struggle involving men and women together. Instead the left looked to sections of the lumpen proletariat, through the community organising of the SDS on the one hand and the black nationalist groups, especially the Panthers, on the other, or to young soldiers rebelling against the Vietnam War. "Serious organising" was often based on finding the lowest common denominator among such groups—which meant imitating the sexist attitudes widespread among them, summed up by Stokeley Carmichael's claim in 1967 that "the role of women in the movement is prone".

The result was that from the beginning the radical wing of the women's movement tended to be hostile to men and to the "male dominated" left. In much

of Europe such hostility was continually undercut in the early 1970s as women and men workers took part together in big struggles against the system. In the US it was not. It was already part of the “common sense” of the American left in the early 1970s to say that socialism need not liberate women. In Europe such ideas still met powerful resistance from socialist women; the term “patriarchy”—with its implication that the struggle against women’s oppression was something separate from the struggle against capitalism—was rarely used in the European women’s movement.

But the very years after 1974-76 that saw a decline in working class struggle also saw an upsurge of struggles over a central issue for women, abortion, in Italy, Spain and Britain. It seemed that the women’s movement, previously mainly restricted to those who had been through higher education, was involving women of all classes, especially working class women. It also seemed that here was a form of political action that could be effective even as the “old” politics of the revolutionary organisations came unstuck. This argument was extended to other movements which showed some life in these years—the anti-nuclear power movement in Germany, the black movement in Britain, the movements for Basque nationalism and for national and regional autonomy in Spain.

Many people, not just women, left the revolutionary organisations to embrace this new “movementism”. In Italy many former activists from Lotta Continua saw the women’s movement as the prototype to copy now that China was discredited. In Britain three former revolutionary socialists, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, proclaimed in their book *Beyond the Fragments* that “feminism” provided the model for “remaking socialism”,⁶⁷⁹ for a movement which would break with what they saw as the oppressive structures of the “old” revolutionary left.

The notion of a “movement” of “autonomous movements” began to influence existing revolutionary organisations. It was what the Lotta Continua leadership hoped to establish after their final 1976 Congress. One of its leaders, Guido Vitale, spoke of “the proletariat” as:

all those sectors who, having been invested by the strength and contents of the workers’ struggles over the past few years, have now found, or are beginning to find, their own autonomous growth as a movement and a mass organisation: the unemployed, the state and local government employees, the young people, the soldiers, the social struggle etc.⁶⁸⁰

As one revolutionary commentator noted:

If historians of the future have time to spare, they will be able to collect hundreds of articles from Lotta Continua in which students disposed to go into the streets with slogans are referred to as proletarians.⁶⁸¹

The much-depleted Democrazia Proletaria (formerly Avanguardia Operaia) set itself the task of “accumulating forces practising a broad democratic opposition...and thus capable of unifying the anti-capitalist bloc”.⁶⁸²

The trend towards “movementism” destroyed one of the Italian organisations and broke the internal coherence of the other. Elsewhere there were similar developments, although they did not always go so far.

The revolutionary organisations, under pressure to “respect the autonomy” of the different movements, tended to abandon any attempt to draw them together in a common struggle, or to relate them to the only force capable of winning their particular demands—the passive yet potentially revolutionary working class. Yet the movements were on the margins of society, unable to exercise any leverage of their own. This applied even to the women’s movement. Although it claimed to be a movement of more than half the population, in fact it involved only a small number of working class women and was viewed with bemusement (sometimes sympathetic, sometimes hostile) by the majority of those it set out to represent. The notion of “autonomy” was taken to mean not simply that revolutionaries must respect the right of those involved in a movement to make their own decisions (as if there could be any choice about *that*), but that they must refuse on principle to intervene in debates within the movement—and this precluded any attempt to help the movements break out from the “margins”.

The point was often reached where the notion of separate “autonomous” sections infected the revolutionary organisation itself. It became a federation of different interest groups, a “bloc” of “the youth” and “the old”, the “trade unionists” and “the women”, the “northerners” and the “southerners”, all taking their separate decisions. The revolutionary paper ceased to be a mechanism to unite the different struggles against the system. Instead it became a series of sections—one for the women, one for the youth, one for the male trade union activist, one for those in the “movement”, to debate endlessly with each other. Any overall political analysis capable of integrating people into a common struggle which endured as particular movements rose and fell was missing.

Burying themselves the movements did not just lead to an internal fragmentation of the revolutionary organisations. It also led many of their members to abandon a revolutionary perspective.

In the great upsurge of the movements in 1976-77—particularly the women’s movement—they could seem more revolutionary than the “old” left, with its concern with workers’ struggle and trade union organisation. They challenged everything, all the existing modes of behaviour, while the “old” revolutionary left insisted that the fight against exploitation in the workplaces had to be central.

Yet the movements soon came to be very unrevolutionary. Many of their activists made their peace with reformism, and their ideas became part of the “common sense” of Eurocommunism and social democracy. In Britain, for instance, the authors of *Beyond the Fragments* all ended up in the orbit of the Labour left. Meanwhile “macho militancy” became a favourite phrase of Labour Party leaders who wanted to denounce workers’ struggle, and the feminist journalist Bea Campbell used the rhetoric of the late 1970s “movements” to give valuable assistance to her fellow Eurocommunist, Professor Eric Hobsbawm, in justifying the abandonment of class politics. Right wing forces—for instance the Zionists in Britain—were soon jumping on the bandwagon and denouncing critics for “infringing their autonomy”.⁶⁸³

The collapse of the movements into reformism was no accident. It was inevitable once they ceased to see change as coming through working class struggle. By themselves, the movements lacked the power to make any decisive impact on society—they were social protests, not social forces. They could grow quickly, but they shrank just as quickly as their supporters discovered their lack of power. All that then remained were smallish groups that either satisfied themselves (usually in a fairly unsatisfactory manner) by cutting themselves off from the wider society and trying to change their own lifestyles, or looked to established political institutions to bring about change for them. The “revolutionary” scheme of a “movement of movements” ended up in practice as a grouping of pressure groups hoping for reform.

The fire next time

THE DISAPPOINTMENT of the hopes of the generation of 1968 led many to write off the possibilities of socialist revolution. Former revolutionary socialists now swung over to accept Eurocommunist and reformist or Green arguments which rejected any reliance on working class struggle. The mistake in 1968, they now said, had been to ascribe to the modern working class a revolutionary potential. Even if there had been a historical moment at the close of the First World War when the working class might have become the subject of historical change, this moment had passed. The working class was now a declining social force and was internally divided, with an ever larger “affluent” section which had no interest in the overthrow of existing society. All that socialists could do was attempt to frame alliances between some of the declining institutions of the working class, the “new movements” and the middle classes.⁶⁸⁴

One aim of this book has been to refute such arguments, by showing how the working class became a decisive social force in certain major Western countries in the years between 1968 and 1976. Its struggles caused the plans of de Gaulle and Heath, Franco and Fanfani to come unstuck. Far from shrivelling up or disintegrating, its struggles everywhere encompassed sections who had rarely if ever looked to working class forms of action in the past. Teachers, clerical assistants, social workers, librarians, firefighters, computer operators—all took action. The mass of white-collar workers, often a powerful force against working class struggle in the past, became aligned industrially (if not always politically) with the working class movement.

The theories of the new reformism adopted by the repentant stepchildren of 1968 try to wipe out this experience as if it had never happened. They tried to resurrect, in the crisis-riven 1980s, the fashionable ideas of the booming 1950s, as if all that had happened in between was that a few students took “acid”.

A more left wing version of the argument has been put by writers who still saw the working class as central, but concluded that workers in the West would

never move in the revolutionary direction expected by those whose ideas come from Lenin and Trotsky. This was a case argued by thinkers as diverse as Ralph Miliband, the British critic of Labourism; Perry Anderson, editor of *New Left Review*; Fernando Claudin, the former Spanish Communist; and Nicos Poulantzas, one-time admirer of Mao.⁶⁸⁵

Western society, they argued, creates a strong commitment to its “democratic forms”. Given the chance, workers will identify with its parliamentary institutions because these give the appearance of real power, and serious socialists cannot exert enduring influence over the mass of workers until they learn to operate on this terrain.

Claudin has argued that even in the period 1917-21 revolution as envisaged by Lenin was ruled out in the West:

It is above all the cultural universe in which the Western proletariat lives which escapes him [Lenin]; for example to take two great aspects which profoundly affect its political behaviour, the Western proletariat’s deep attachment to national and democratic values⁶⁸⁶

So long as elections do not indicate the existence of a fairly solid conscious majority in favour of radical change, the essential condition for a decisive confrontation with monopoly capitalism, whether in mass struggle or in representative bodies, is not fulfilled.⁶⁸⁷

Ralph Miliband puts a very similar argument:

So long that the achievement of a parliamentary majority appears possible, so long must any alternative strategy, based upon the expectation of a revolutionary seizure of power, remain of very marginal political significance. So such seizure of power is not possible without substantial popular support but no such popular support for insurrectionary purposes is to hand in conditions of capitalist democracy. This turns the insurrectionary project into a fantasy.⁶⁸⁸

Tariq Ali interpreted the defeat of the Portuguese revolution using a variant theme:

The vanguard in Portugal was ready in the factories and the army. It thought it could make the revolution. It was derailed once again by the election to the constituent assembly. The failure of the far left to understand the significance of these elections and the bureaucratic urge of the Portuguese Communist Party to ignore them led to a shortlived alliance. This enabled Mario Soares to present himself as the only defender of democracy within the working class.⁶⁸⁹

Ernest Mandel, the leading theoretician of the Fourth International, went part of the way with this argument when he argued that “the Portuguese revolution was blown off course” over the question of “freedom of the press” (that is, the workers’ take-overs of *Republica* and Radio Renascenca), and that dual power in the West “may stretch over several years”.⁶⁹⁰

Perry Anderson came to conclude that parliamentarianism was the ideological barrier against revolution in the West:

The existence of the parliamentary state...constitutes the framework of all the other ideological

mechanisms of the ruling class... By comparison, the economic improvements won by reform—apparently more material—have typically left less ideological mark on the masses in the West... The ideology of bourgeois democracy is far more potent than that of any welfare reformism and forms the permanent syntax of the consensus instilled by the capitalist state.⁶⁹¹

False arguments often start with uncontested facts. This one is no exception. In 1968-76 mass working class action did not lead to a mass revolutionary working class consciousness. But this should not surprise those of us who base our analysis in the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Much of the time capitalist society does get the more or less grudging support of those over whom it rules. The ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class; most people see no alternative to the existing set up; the small minorities that put up resistance can be dismissed as marginal irritants and, if necessary, be subjected to repression.

In such a period, bourgeois democracy can reign supreme. The ruling class can use it to make the quiescent masses feel they have a degree of control over the system. It allows their grievances against particular aspects of their situation to be absorbed within the interplay of different bourgeois parties.

The Dutch “left” Communist Pannekoek gave an account of this absorption of the masses into the mechanisms of Western European bourgeois society some 70 years ago:

The old bourgeois mode of production and the centuries-old civilisation which has developed with it have completely impressed themselves upon the thoughts and feelings of the popular masses... Bourgeois culture exists in the proletariat primarily as a traditional cast of thought. The masses caught up in it think ideologically instead of in real terms... The mental reflexes left over from the innumerable class struggles of former centuries have survived as political and religious systems of thought which separate the old bourgeois world, and hence the proletarians born into it, into groups, churches, sects, parties, divided according to their ideological perspectives. The bourgeois past thus survives in the proletariat as an organisational tradition that stands in the way of the class unity necessary for the creation of the new world. In these archaic organisations the workers make up the followers and adherents of a bourgeois vanguard. It is the intelligentsia which supplies the leaders in these ideological struggles. The intelligentsia—priests, teachers, literati, journalists, artists, politicians—form a numerous class the function of which is to foster, develop and propagate bourgeois culture; it passes this on to the masses and acts as a mediator between the hegemony of capital and the interests of the masses.⁶⁹²

Better known, but similar, is the later account by the Italian revolutionary Marxist Antonio Gramsci. He labelled the network of institutions mediating between the state and the masses as “civil society”. These networks, he argued, made capitalist society “resistant to the catastrophic ‘incursions’ of the immediate economic elements (crises, depressions etc).”⁶⁹³ They presented a serious barrier to any assault on the state and could survive even if the state itself were temporarily to fall, allowing the bourgeoisie to regroup and stage a comeback. It followed that the revolutionary struggle would, most of the time,

take the form of a “war of attrition”, a struggle for influence (hegemony) with (and perhaps within) these networks, with the frontal assault (“war of manoeuvre”) reduced to merely a “tactical” significance.⁶⁹⁴

The formulations of Pannekoek and Gramsci describe important aspects of reality. The working class in late Victorian Britain, for instance, was colonised by the two great bourgeois parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, each associated with rival religious and social institutions; the working class in Ireland has long been split by the rival structures of Orangeism and nationalism; Christian Democracy in Italy relied precisely upon such networks to bind masses of workers and peasants to it in the 1950s; even Franco’s fascism depended, in part, on the support provided by the networks of supporters of the church, the monarchists and the Carlists.

But the analysis is ahistorical. It neglects the way in which the development of capitalism tends to undercut the very structures of “civil society” which it created in the past. Many of the institutions referred to by Pannekoek and Gramsci withered right across the Western world in the long boom of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s as tens of millions of people were dragged from villages and small towns into the great conurbations of mass industry, and from old centres of industry to new ones.⁶⁹⁵ Significantly, observers of working class life in the late 1950s in Britain, the US, West Germany and France focused on “apathy” rather than political commitment as the dominating feature. What they rarely realised was that the other side of apathy was the weakening of old barriers which stood in the way of sudden upsurges of working class militancy.

As Tony Cliff noted in 1969:

For decades, Marxists used to infer the state of mass consciousness from a few institutional barometers—membership of organisations, readership of papers, etc. The deep alienation of workers from traditional organisations smashed all such barometers to pieces. This explains why there was no way of detecting the imminence of the mass upheaval in May 1968. And also, more importantly, it explains the extreme, explosive nature of the events. If the workers in France had been accustomed to participate in the branch life of the unions and the Communist Party, these institutions would have served both as an aid and a ballast preventing the uncontrolled spread of the strike movement.

The concept of apathy or privatisation is not a static concept. At a certain stage of development apathy can be transformed into its opposite, swift mass action... Workers who have lost their loyalty to the traditional organisations...are forced into extreme, explosive struggles on their own.⁶⁹⁶

The balance of class forces could suddenly be disturbed by a transformation of working class activity. This in turn made a radical restructuring of working class consciousness possible. Many workers suddenly became open to new ideas, because their old ideas no longer corresponded to what they were doing.

This was what the upsurge of 1968 to 1976 was about. A substantial minority of workers—varying in size from country to country—experienced a profound change in consciousness as a result of large scale struggles and began to exercise an influence on other workers. New subversive networks began to challenge the old, enfeebled, conservative networks of institutions and ideas.

But that could not be the end of the matter. The most farsighted representatives of the ruling classes saw the need to strengthen, or even create afresh, institutions for mediating between the state and the mass of workers. This is where the bourgeois democracy on which Anderson, Miliband and so forth put so much stress came to play an important role. It had to be strengthened after 1968 in France in order to pre-empt another May. It had to be restored as quickly as possible in Greece, created from scratch in Spain and Portugal.

But—and it is here that Anderson and the others go completely astray—this bourgeois democracy was not simply an ideological abstraction or even a set of parliamentary forms. It was bourgeois democracy tied to certain concrete institutions, institutions which enabled people to bargain to some degree about the conditions they lived and worked under.

Trade unions were legalised where they had previously been banned, and systematic attempts made to incorporate workers' representatives into bureaucratic bargaining mechanisms. A plethora of bodies were used to integrate the inhabitants of the new industrial conurbations into the structures of the state: community relations councils were set up in Britain; the local Democratic Party machines were refurbished in the US to provide patronage for blacks and hispanics as well as the various white ethnic groups; there were various schemes for regional councils in Italy, Spain and France. Only in this way could people feel that the act of writing a cross on a piece of paper once every five years somehow affected their own daily lives.

The institutional changes did not take place in isolation from people's material circumstances, as Anderson implies when he counterposes the "ideology" of bourgeois democracy to "welfare reformism". Everywhere, the first step in curtailing the upsurge of militancy was the satisfaction of immediate economic demands: the wage increases granted in May and June 1968 in France, the concessions made by the newly elected Labour government to the miners and others in Britain in 1974, the 30 percent increase in the minimum wage in Portugal in the same year, the granting of automatic cost-of-living increases in Italy in 1975. These concessions not only bought time for the ruling class; they also made it seem to the mass of workers that they could achieve gains within the existing structures of society. They translated ideology into bread and butter.

The material concessions were only temporary. After a brief period

governments were trying to cut living standards, abandoning commitments to contain unemployment and reducing welfare provision. But by then the new institutional networks had had time to take root. And they survived even when right wing governments took power, as with Thatcher in Britain, Reagan in the US, Kohl in West Germany: redundancies and closures were negotiated rather than imposed, wage cuts came from tripartite discussions not arbitrary managerial dictates.

All this effort showed how difficult, not how easy, it was to channel the upsurge of militancy into safe, “bourgeois democratic” channels. Of course, if the “ruling ideas” in a society tell workers that the way to change things is through parliamentary methods, that is what many workers will begin by believing. But consciousness is not a fixed property of individuals or classes. It is a reflection of their relation with each other and with the world around them. As the terms of that relation change, so consciousness itself is thrown into turmoil. As Gramsci put it (in a passage never quoted by his reformist admirers):

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world insofar as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in contradiction to his activity. One might say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and absorbed uncritically.⁶⁹⁷

The bourgeois democratic ideology which looms so large in the theories of Miliband, Anderson and the others is no more exempt from these contradictory processes than any other element of consciousness. It is not self-subsistent. It is an answer bourgeois society offers to workers who ask how they can control the social processes that threaten them. Workers can continue to verbalise that answer during an upsurge of struggle, while their own activity provides a completely different answer, which they also partly accept.

Indeed, in a certain sense, the bourgeois democratic ideology itself represents an attempt to bridge the gap between contradictory elements within the worker’s consciousness: on the one hand the worker lives in bourgeois society and takes it for granted; on the other he or she strives for something better. The bourgeois democratic ideology tries to reconcile the two, by allowing the worker to believe existing society can be changed through its own structures.

But this is far from being a stable element in consciousness during a period of revolutionary upheaval, as the Anderson-Miliband view asserts. If either the ruling class resistance to change or the worker’s desire for change is too great, then the compromise comes unstuck.

The history of capitalism is not simply one of a relentless advance towards the acceptance of bourgeois democracy by the two great social classes. It includes periods in which bourgeois democracy has been thrown into crisis by its inability to satisfy the demands of both classes.

To take one historical example, in 1918-19 rulers of the biggest European power, Germany, were able to hang on to their power by establishing a bourgeois democratic coalition government headed by the Social Democrats. Both the workers and the middle classes voted overwhelmingly for this, marginalising the far left and the far right. But this “bourgeois democratic” consciousness did not remain frozen at this level for long for either class. By 1920 it was collapsing as sections of the ruling and middle classes opted for the anti-democratic parties of the right, and growing sections of the working class were influenced by the revolutionary left.⁶⁹⁸ So weak was the hold of bourgeois democratic ideology, in fact, that after 1920 the “democratic” parties always received less than 50 percent of the votes and when the Weimar Republic was finally destroyed in 1933 not one shot was fired in its defence. A period of intense economic and social crisis had caused large numbers of people in both the middle classes and the working class to lose all faith in the ability of electoral mechanisms to improve their lot.

The Weimar Republic was not unique. The course of development was similar in Italy in 1918-22, in the Spanish Second Republic of 1931-36, in France from 1934 through to 1940. Once people felt mediating mechanisms could no longer mediate, they tended to abandon bourgeois democracy. It certainly did not show the powers of endurance ascribed to it by Miliband, Anderson and the others.

Bourgeois democracy is a framework within which the class struggle takes place at certain periods in the history of capitalism. It can do so because the main protagonists do not feel driven to break with it. The ruling class accepts the framework because the pressures are not yet so great as to warrant the risk of a frontal attack on the defensive structures of the working class. Workers do not, in their great majority, challenge it either so long as they are not driven to mass struggles.

“Social being determines consciousness,” wrote Karl Marx. At the end of the day, the extent to which the rival classes accept “bourgeois democratic” ideology depends upon the economic terrain on which they find themselves fighting.

Stabilisation and crises

The point is brought home vividly by comparing the years between the First and

Second World Wars with those since 1974. The first period saw the progressive collapse of bourgeois democracy in Europe. The second has seen bourgeois democracy stabilise itself in countries where it was once regarded as weak, such as France and Italy, and spread out to Portugal, Spain and Greece.

The key to the difference lies in the differing character of the economic crises.

The crisis of the 1930s was much more severe than anything we have experienced since 1974. In 1931 one third of the workforce in the two greatest industrial economies, the US and Germany, were unemployed. In Britain, the least hard hit of advanced countries, unemployment was 20 percent in 1932.

Each recession since 1974 has had a wider impact than the one before. Deep pools of poverty exist in places where people not so long ago were promised endless “affluence”. Job insecurity is now a fact of life for white collar and manual workers alike. Whole cities have become symbols of devastation. But in the major Western economies unemployment has not yet reached even half of the 1931 level for Germany and the US.

The impact of the crisis in the 1930s was not only on the employment levels of workers. Large sections of the middle classes were driven to the wall—their businesses bankrupted, their savings lost as banks collapsed, their farms sold to meet interest repayments. They were, in Trotsky’s words, “driven mad” by the crisis, and their madness turned them towards fascism. The ruling classes of the worst hit national capitalisms too were driven to desperation—such that at the end of 1932 Krupps and Thyssen turned to Adolf Hitler for salvation.

The crisis of the mid-1970s and early 1980s were rather different. They grew out of the long boom of the 1950s and 1960s, and some elements remained from that boom to deaden the immediate effects.

Arms spending remained at a much higher level than in 1929-33, and helped provide a floor below which production did not fall. Despite rhetoric about “non-intervention” and “privatisation”, states rushed to prop up any of the great corporations, banks or even countries that looked like falling—Chrysler and Continental Illinois in the US, Johnson-Mathey in Britain, AEG in West Germany. The cumulative crashes which opened gaping holes in interwar economies, destroying up to a third of jobs and eating up the savings of the middle classes were prevented.

The crises were at a much slower tempo. Politically this was important. It enabled the professional mediators—the trade union leaders and local politicians—to play a role, however minimal, in negotiating over the immediate impact of the crisis: they may not have been able to avert closures forever, but they were often able to delay them while workforces were run down; they were certainly

able to ensure redundancy payments—something unheard of in the 1930s. So it is that within the working class, the reformist bureaucracy was able to maintain its grip, and encourage the acceptance of bourgeois democratic ideas.

Meanwhile, the middle classes were certainly not driven “mad” by sudden impoverishment. Yuppiedom rather than bankruptcy was the prospect for many, and their response was to opt for the politics of the centre rather than of the extreme right.

The importance of such material factors in underpinning the strength of bourgeois democracy after 1974 cannot be exaggerated. If revolutionary socialists were wrong in the early and mid-1970s about the prospects for a restabilisation of society under the “social pacts” between governments, employers and trade union leaders, it was at least in part because they did not foresee the economic leeway available to ruling classes despite the crisis.

This was true, for instance, of Portugal where we underestimated the willingness of the other Western states to provide financial backing for the right wing social democratic government of Mario Soares. We assumed 25 November 1975 would be quickly followed by savage attacks on workers’ living standards. In fact the attacks took place over several years rather than months, allowing the government and the ruling class to wear down workers’ resistance piecemeal rather than engaging in immediate confrontation.

Events followed a similar course in Britain, where the closure of the Chrysler car plant at Linwood and the halving of the British Leyland workforce were long drawn out events. In Italy, there was a five-year gap between the first rationalisation in the motor industry—the attempted closure of Innocenti in Milan—and the great carve up of the workforce in FIAT Turin.

To put the argument crudely: capitalism could afford to phase out closures, to give workers redundancy payments and wage-related unemployment benefits, so cushioning the immediate impact on living standards of rationalisation and restructuring. And this in turn enabled the institutions of bourgeois democracy to maintain their hold.

However, the different character of the crisis today compared with that of the 1930s had a negative as well as a positive impact on the capitalist system.

The very scale of the crisis in the 1930s enabled some national capitalisms to begin to emerge from it by the middle of the decade. This happened in Japan and Germany on the basis of vicious attacks on workers’ living standards, the enforced subjugation of some capitals to others and the development of war-oriented state capitalist economies. It was an example other national capitalisms were forced to follow. By 1941 the whole capitalist world was back to conditions of full employment and high profitability—even if these depended on

the horrors of war. The economic crisis was completely over barely a dozen years after it started.⁶⁹⁹

By contrast, the period of economic crisis that started in 1973 has already lasted a quarter of a century and shows no signs of going away. Unemployment doubled in most countries with the first major recession of 1973-76, and again with the second recession of 1979-82. That second recession enveloped countries which had been able to expand through the first—for instance, Poland, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, the Republic of Ireland, the Philippines. Recovery from it was partial and has served to increase rather than obviate the instability of the system internationally.

This was shown dramatically by the sudden onset of a new international recession in the early 1990s. Millions of jobs were destroyed across the advanced industrial countries in a few months. But it was not only the workers who were hit this time. Major companies had their fingers burnt, and a few well known names went bust. There were record figures for bankruptcies among small companies. And this recession hit particularly hard white collar workers who in the past had tended to think of themselves as “middle class”, with hundreds of thousands in Britain losing not just their jobs but their homes as well.

Nor was that the end of the matter. Eventually there was economic “recovery” of sorts in Britain and the US—the countries where the recession had begun—although it was recovery accompanied by continued high levels of job insecurity and in the US a continued fall in real take home pay. But by then the crisis had engulfed Western Europe and Japan. Here it persisted. As I write there is still record unemployment in France and Germany despite some resumption of economic growth and Japan is experiencing its sixth year of economic stagnation, with a stock exchange valued at less than half of the figure of nine years ago.

Through the first seven years of the 1990s enthusiasts for the existing system had one response to those who said the crisis was a damning indictment of the system. They pointed to East Asia as the “centre of dynamic growth” which offered hope to the rest of the world. But that dream fell apart last in 1997, as a wave of crises which began in Thailand swept through Malaysia and Indonesia into South Korea. Leading procapitalist economists are still shaken by it as I write, discussing among themselves whether there is a serious risk of worldwide “deflation”—their euphemism for a slump of 1930s proportions.

Even if their panic is an over-reaction, it suggests very strongly that stability is the last thing we should expect from the world economy over the next decade.

Economics and politics

There is no automatic transmission belt from economic crisis to political change. But there is nonetheless a connection. A prolonged period of economic crisis makes it very difficult for millions of people to cope with getting a livelihood. And this encourages them to question the wider society in which they find themselves.

But the turmoil is not just at the bottom of society. It is at the top as well, as a ruling class no longer finds it easy to proceed as it used to in the past. Some of its members seek to change the mechanisms by which it rules—they press for “restructuring” often at the expense of other members. Ideological disputes arise which draw in not just the rules but also all those who justify their power to the rest of society. All the traditional certainties that have helped persuade the mass of people to put up with cramped and meagre lives are thrown into question.

That was why I argued in the conclusion to the first edition of this book that the political stability that seemed to ruin once and for all the hopes of 1968 was like “a castle built on ice of unknown thickness”. The years since 1988 have seen the sudden cracking of the old structure, the sudden eruption of conflicts that no one expected.

The first great break up was the old Eastern bloc. The apparent stability and sterility of the Brezhnev years rested on an economy which had long before lost its old dynamism. Gorbachev encouraged a limited “glasnost” (opening up) in order to overcome this. But, on a massively bigger scale than in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the whole process escaped from any control.

It was not long before measured debate among liberal intellectuals in Moscow had given way to demonstrations in the streets of Yerevan and Vilnius; to massacres in Tbilisi and Baku; to strikes uniting miners all the way from the Ukraine to Siberia and Kazakhstan; to “round table talks” with formerly imprisoned dissidents in Poland and Hungary; to huge protests which forced governments from office in East Germany and Czechoslovakia; to a spontaneous uprising in Romania and the televised execution of the country’s ruler, Ceausescu, by his own generals.

Gorbachev still hoped for a carefully staged strategic withdrawal from Eastern Europe so as to concentrate resources on bolstering his position at home. But the rout in Eastern Europe was followed in the summer of 1991 by the disintegration of the Soviet Union into its constituent republics after the failure of an attempted coup in Moscow.

The political collapse of the former Eastern bloc led to ecstasy among the ideologues for the Western system. Not only did they argue that the US had won

the Cold War. Capitalism, they claimed, had beaten off all opposition. Newspaper columnists promised that Eastern Europe, and East Germany in particular, would enjoy the same sort of “economic miracle” as West Germany and Italy in the later 1950s and early 1960s. US President George Bush proclaimed that we lived in a “new world order”. A former state department official, Francis Fukuyama, announced nothing less than the “end of history” in an article that must have been reprinted a hundred times in scores of languages.

The celebrations on the right were accompanied by mourning by a good part of the left internationally. They had seen they believed, a historic defeat for socialism. Whole Communist Parties fell apart in country after country, a few of their former leaders even admitting that Trotskyists had been right in their criticisms of Russia all along. Formerly radical economists claimed that the whole notion of replacing the market by democratic planning had been proved wrong. There were cases of well known left wing intellectuals jumping ship and extolling the capitalist system they had spent most of their life denouncing.

Others insisted that the mistake went right back to the attempt by the enlightenment of the 18th century to provide a rational account of the world. We were, they insisted with dogmatic fervour, in a “postmodern” world in which class struggle was a thing of the past, and attempts at historical explanation simply “discourses”, each as valid as any other. The most we could do, they claimed, was to press for the most limited of reforms to deal with particular grievances, without any hope of radical change.

The trajectory of the 1990s

As the 1980s drew to a close, it was almost as if the intellectual climate had indeed gone full circle, back to the “end of ideology” talk of the early 1960s. Yet within 12 months of the fall of the Berlin Wall the Western capitalisms themselves were in deep trouble.

The same economic demons which had been at work undermining the Eastern bloc were operative here as well. While the newspaper presses were still churning out promises of endless prosperity the third recession in 15 years broke around them. Nor was that all. It soon became a cliché to speak of “new world order” as a US-led military coalition unleashed payload after payload of bombs on Baghdad and assembled half a million troops in the desert to punish the US client dictator Saddam Hussein for stepping out of line.

Meanwhile one of the great fixtures of the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher, fell from office after the biggest riot on the streets of London for a century and amid bitter wrangles within her own party over how a weak British capitalism was to

cope with European Monetary Union.

She was not the only political leader to fall from grace in the new period of political volatility. Politicians who had record opinion poll ratings one year typically had derisory ones only months later. The Bushes, the Majors, the Berlusconi, the Balladurs, the Kim Young Sams, the Juppés came and went, leaving little behind but increased general disillusionment with politicians of all sorts.

Just as typical of the decade has been the emergence from the fringes of politics of much more dangerous figures like Le Pen in France, Haider in Austria and Fini in Italy. The far right is showing a staying power that few would have predicted in the 1980s. What is more, it is increasingly ready to throw off the mask of respectability and reveal the openly fascist grimace beneath. It recognises that despair at deteriorating conditions can lead people away from parliamentary politics and hope to benefit from the mood as Mussolini and Hitler did in the inter-war period.

It is not yet in a position to complement its millions of votes with street fighting organisations hundreds of thousands strong, comparable to the Blackshirts and the stormtroopers. The middle classes are not yet so hard hit by crisis that they are prepared to risk life and limb in physical confrontations with picket lines and the left. But the new Nazis recognise that another great slump could soon change that. They have grown much more slowly than in the inter-war years but have had more time to grow, just as the crises have so far been shallower but have succeeded each other over a more prolonged timespan. It is as if the world is going in the same direction as the 1930s, but at a slower pace.

There should be no room for the complacency of those who accepted left versions of the end of history argument back in the early 1990s. The postmodernists may deny the validity of anything outside of discourse. But the Holocaust of the old Nazis was no mere discourse. Nor are the racial killings and firebombings already undertaken by their present-day heirs. Fortunately, however, the 1990s have also seen the renewed growth of the forces that can offer a different way out of the crisis to that of the far right.

Even in the 1980s there were tremendous struggles. But they were usually defensive struggles, even if sometimes heroic ones as with the miners' strike in Britain. And they usually took the form of what have been described as "bureaucratic mass strikes"—carefully managed manoeuvres in which union leaders called workers out on strike and then sent them back to work for pitiable concessions just as the struggle was beginning to take on a life of its own. The overall result was to wear down and demoralise the last activists from the generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, not to build a confident fighting

spirit amongst a new generation.

The trajectory of the 1990s has been rather different. The decade began, in general, with struggles on the periphery of the organised working class—the poll tax riots and anti-Criminal Justice Bill protests in Britain, the “X case” protests over abortion rights in Ireland, the mobilisations against war in the Gulf, the near uprising in Los Angeles, the young people’s protest over the minimum wage in France, the anti-racist demonstrations in Germany.

But in the middle of the decade struggles centred in the workplace came to the fore in many countries—the general strikes against the welfare plans of the Berlusconi government in Italy, the strikes by metal workers and public sector workers in Germany, the first truck drivers’ blockades in France, the various one-day general strikes in Ottawa province in Canada, the long succession of strikes and one-day general strikes in Greece, the huge demonstrations and strikes in Belgium, the UPS strike victory in the US.

The contrast with the 1980s was most marked in France. Socialist Party governments under President Mitterrand had demoralised their own supporters by embracing “neo-liberal”—Thatcherite—policies for a decade and a half. As unemployment rose relentlessly, the new Nazi Le Pen increased his vote from a bare 0.5 percent of the vote in 1981 to over 15 percent. And the mainstream right were powerful enough by 1993 to win a massive majority in the French assembly to take the presidency in 1995.

Then suddenly in December 1995 right wing ministers started talking of “a new ’68” as up to 2 million people joined in twice a week demonstrations in the major cities, strikes paralysed the national railway network and Paris’s traffic ground to a halt. Major concessions by Prime Minister Juppé managed to end the strikes a few days before Christmas. But he could not end the underlying discontent, or the tendency for it to radicalise to the left—15 months later he gambled the right’s enormous parliamentary majority in another election, and lost.

The whole political culture of France shifted to the left, away from the depoliticisation and cynicism which marked the Mitterrand years. Opinion polls showed people rejecting the idea that high unemployment was inevitable and that the unemployed were to blame for their own plight. Strikers got high popularity ratings. Young people demonstrated in large numbers in support of “*sans papier*” immigrants and famous intellectuals declared they would break the law over the issue. Le Pen was faced for the first time with large and sometimes very militant counter-demonstrations.

The fire next time

It is far too soon at the time of writing to see where the new mood of the late 1990s will lead. In some countries, especially Britain, it has expressed itself only in a shift in electoral opinion but not as yet in any revival of working class struggle. In others, like Italy, former oppositions are now doing their utmost in government to push back the struggles that got them there. And in most countries there are now substantial fascist forces biding their time in the hope that anger at the wreckage of people's lives will turn into cynicism, creating the climate for the widespread scapegoating of minorities.

A period of economic crises can lead people to want great change. But it is not ordained in advance that the change has to be to the left. If people find that their attempts at arriving at collective solutions to the struggles get them nowhere, they can be pulled back to the panaceas—sometimes very dangerous panaceas—preached by sections of the right.

So it was that the bitterness of the inter-war years could lead to an upsurge of workers' struggles in countries like the US in 1934 and 1937 and France in 1936, but could also lead to the success of the Nazis in Germany. More recently Yugoslavia was shaken by a wave of strikes which united workers from all ethnic groups in 1987-88. But that did not prevent nationalist demagogues like Milosevic and Tudjman recruiting workers to their rival armies, to bloody civil war and to the horrors of ethnic cleansing only two years later.

Workers' struggles played a central role in the disintegration of the Eastern bloc and the USSR. But the political beneficiaries of the collapse were not the workers but the remnants of the old *nomenklatura*, often wrapped up in nationalist garb. So today former Politburo member Boris Yeltsin runs Russia, former Politburo member Aleyev runs Azerbaijan and former Politburo member Scheverdnadze runs Georgia. Aided by those former dissidents who have embraced market capitalism, such people have presided over the devastation of the hopes of 1989.

The very economic instability of the system ensures further upsurges of struggle and further waves of hope. But fulfilment of these hopes is not guaranteed in advance. Professional “mediators”—trade union bureaucrats, social democrat politicians, repackaged Stalinists, populist demagogues—will always be available to try to guide the struggles back into the channels of existing society. Shocked by the first sudden upsurge, those who control the apparatuses will “run to the front” and try to regain control. Where the old organisations are weak, willing volunteers will try to rebuild them, as Cunhal and Carrillo, Soares and González did—and like them they will be aided by

worried members of the ruling classes. But once the routines of the old society reassert their hold and destroy people's hopes of change, then forces of the right can feel strong enough to dispense with the "mediators", and fascists get the chance to step from the shadows with their barbaric message built on counter-revolutionary despair.

Whether struggles can be contained by the "mediators" depends in part on objective factors—the scale of the revolt and the ability of the system to satisfy the material grievances fuelling it. These are beyond the control of individuals and organisations. Ultimately they depend upon the dynamic of the world system and the reaction to this dynamic of millions of people. That is why no one predicted exactly when and where the great revolts of 1968-76 would break out, and why no one can predict the next great revolt.

But "subjective" factors—groups of people pressing different courses of action—also play a role. The "networks" which bind exploited classes to existing society are not made up of metal or stone, but of human beings who argue with other human beings to direct their activities in a certain direction. They are foremen or priests, trade union officials or local politicians, lawyers or community relations councillors. They can be challenged by other organised groups, by revolutionary socialists bound together into parties which enable them to combine their efforts, to present common arguments and work out common strategies.

In modern industrial capitalist society the most important arenas for these arguments are the workplaces where the great mass of people are exploited and the labour movements which claim to articulate their grievances. It is here that decisive arguments will ultimately occur which will determine whether people escalate, unite and win their struggles or moderate, fragment and lose them. As Rosa Luxemburg put it shortly before she was murdered in 1919, "Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there must they be broken."

But revolutionary organisation itself is not built just in the workplaces. It was precisely the ability of revolutionary organisations to grow in the student, black and anti-Vietnam War struggles of 1968 that enabled some of them to relate to mass workers' struggles afterwards. Today spells of defeat and demoralisation in the workplaces often mean revolutionary organisations again have to look outside the workplaces for new supporters. This support has eventually to connect with the arguments in the workplaces if the next great upsurge of struggle is to end in victories.

The subjective element is itself ultimately dependent on objective factors. Human ideas do not float down to us from heaven, but are a result of the interplay of human action and an ever-changing objective world.

There were reasons why revolutionary socialist ideas suddenly had such an impact in 1968. The world's two great blocs entered into political crisis, weakening the ideologies that had bound people to the system for two decades. At the same time working classes which had grown massively during the long boom—especially in southern Europe and the black ghettos of the US—could no longer be controlled in old ways.

In the past decade one of those blocs has been torn to shreds by the same contradictions that shook it in the late 1960s. The US ruling class would like to think this leaves it the only contender in the field, more powerful than ever before. Yet its attempts to assert unchallenged global dominance are continually undermined by its “Vietnam syndrome”—the memory of a bitter defeat inflicted not by the rival superpower but by a popular struggle in a relatively small country. And at home 20 years of unbridled greed by the rich and falling real wages for the mass of workers have weakened the hold of the American dream upon tens of millions of people.

Meanwhile throughout the world the symptoms of social decay are as visible as ever—recurring famines and ever larger food mountains, appeals to the rich to get richer and to the poor to make sacrifices, bloody local wars and horrific waves of communal carnage, escalating armaments bills and diminishing welfare budgets, the propagation of faith in markets which can suddenly be thrown into complete turmoil.

The real message of 1968 was that there was an alternative to imperialism of any sort, that people through their own self-activity could reconstruct society on a rational basis, that the working class could become the ruling class and build a classless society. A slogan from Trotsky scrawled on the wall of the Sorbonne spelt it out: “Mankind will not be free until the last capitalist is strangled with the entrails of the last bureaucrat”.

The reality of worldwide economic, political and ideological crisis can lead minorities of individuals to identify with that message. And out of those minorities can be built the parties to ensure the next wave of struggles ends differently to the last.

Glossary

- COHSE: British health workers' union
- COPCON: Special detachment of the Portuguese Armed Forces Movement, which came under left-wing influence
- CORE: US Campaign for Racial Equality, a militant civil rights organisation
- CPSA: British civil servants' clerical union
- CRS: French riot police
- CUBs: Groups of rank and file militants in Italian factories
- Doves: Wing of the US establishment which had doubts about the Vietnam War
- DRUM: Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, a Detroit-based organisation of black workers
- ETA: Basque nationalist military organisation
- FNLA: Tribally-based organisation in Angola supported by the US and apartheid South Africa
- Fragging: Use of weapons by US troops in Vietnam against their own officers
- GMWU: British General and Municipal Workers Union, later to become the GMB
- Green Machine: One of many derogatory slang expressions for the US armed forces used by US troops
- International Socialists: Main British revolutionary socialist organisation, later renamed the Socialist Workers Party
- JCR: French Trotskyist organisation, later renamed LCR
- Jim Crow: Name given to white supremacist practices institutionalised in the US Southern states
- Latin Quarter: Area of Paris on the left bank of the River Seine, traditionally a centre for students and intellectuals
- LCR: Name shared by both French and Spanish Trotskyist organisations
- Lotta Continua: Italian revolutionary socialist organisation, with paper of the same name
- MES: Portuguese left socialist organisation
- MPLA: Angolan liberation movement
- MRPP: Portuguese Maoist organisation, which moved rapidly rightwards in the course of 1974-75
- MSI: Italian fascist party
- NUPE: British manual workers' union based in the health service and local authorities
- OICE: Organisation of Left Communists of Spain, a revolutionary organisation influenced by spontaneist, Trotskyist and Maoist ideas
- ORT: Spanish Maoist organisation
- PDUP: Italian party standing on the right wing of the far left, influential among a layer of union officials
- PRP: Portuguese revolutionary organisation based on a mixture of guerrillaist and revolutionary socialist ideas
- PSU: French left socialist party
- PTE: Spanish Maoist organisation
- RSSF: British Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation
- SCLC: US Southern Christian Leadership Conference, civil rights organisation in the Southern states led by Martin Luther King
- SDS: Initials of both the German Socialist Students League and the US Students for a Democratic Society;

in this book the initials used alone usually denote the German organisation

SNCC: US militant, student-based civil rights organisation, which later supported black power

SOGAT: British printworkers' union

SUV: Soldiers United will Win, Portuguese rank and file soldiers' organisation

TASS: British white-collar engineering workers' union

TG WU: British Transport and General Workers Union, the country's biggest union, organising mainly semi-skilled and unskilled workers

22 March Movement: French student group based at Nanterre, led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit

UCATT: British building workers' union

UDP: Portuguese left Maoist group

UGT: Spanish union federation dominated by the Socialist Party

UIL: Italian union federation dominated by the Social Democrats

UNEF: Main French students' union, based on left-wing politics

USO: Spanish left socialist union federation

Vietcong: US term for Vietnamese National Liberation Front

VSC: British Vietnam Solidarity Campaign

Notes

- 1 Widgery's piece, marking the tenth anniversary of 1968, was the one Chris Harman chose to republish in *International Socialism* in 2008.
- 2 Among Chris's most important books are: *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918-1923* (Bookmarks, 1997), *A People's History of the World* (Verso, 2017), *Zombie Capitalism* (Bookmarks, 2009). See also *Chris Harman: Selected Writings* (Bookmarks, 2010).
- 3 Chris Harman, "Out of Apathy", *Socialist Review*, May 1998.
- 4 See Chris Harman, "Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left", *International Socialism* 4 (Spring 1979).
- 5 Chris's most important publication from 1968 was on precisely this theme, namely his article, "Party and Class", *International Socialism*, first series, no 35 (winter 1968/1969).
- 6 For more on Chris Harman's life and politics, see Ian Birchall, "Chris Harman: A Life in the Struggle", *International Socialism* 125 (winter 2010); Joseph Choonara, "Another Side of Chris Harman", *International Socialism* 125 (winter 2010); Colin Barker, "Introduction", in *Chris Harman: Selected Writings* (Bookmarks, 2010).
- 7 David Widgery, *The Left in Britain 1956-1968* (Penguin, 1976).
- 8 Chris Harman, "Editorial: Students", *International Socialism*, first series, no 43 (April/May 1970).
- 9 Sabby Sagall, "Tributes to Chris Harman", *Socialist Worker*, 10 November 2009.
- 10 Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London 1956) p115.
- 11 Crosland, p515.
- 12 Crosland, p62.
- 13 Crosland, pp32-33.
- 14 See Lewis Coser, *The Function of Social Conflict*.
- 15 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Illinois 1960) p84.
- 16 Bell, p207.
- 17 Bell, p14.
- 18 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London 1964) ppxi-xii.
- 19 Marcuse, p256.
- 20 Marcuse, p256.
- 21 C Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York 1960).
- 22 A Gorz, "Reform or Revolution" in R Miliband and J Saville (eds) *Socialist Register 1968* (London 1968) p111.
- 23 Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (London 1956).
- 24 The title of a book edited by E P Thompson in 1960, *Out of Apathy* (London 1960).
- 25 For contemporary accounts of this, see Tony Cliff, "Perspective on the permanent arms economy", in *Socialist Review* (London) May 1957, reprinted in Tony Cliff, *Neither Washington nor Moscow* (Bookmarks, London 1982), and Mike Kidron, "Rejoinder to left reformism", in *International Socialism* (London) issue 1:7, winter 1961-62 (hereafter referred to as IS). For a more recent account see C Harman, *Explaining the Crisis* (Bookmarks, London 1984) chapters 2 and 3.
- 26 For accounts of these developments see Dominique Eudes, *The Kapetanios* (London 1972).
- 27 G Lefranc, *Le mouvement syndical* (Paris 1969) p132 and p205.

- 28 Lefranc, pp206-207.
- 29 Figures given in G Bibes, *Il sistema politico italiano* (Rimini 1975).
- 30 Figures given in Marino Regini, "Labour unions, industrial action and politics", in P Lange and G Pasquino (eds), *Italy in Transition* (London 1980) p64.
- 31 For accounts of this period see K M Stamp, *The Era of Reconstruction* (New York 1965), and W E B Dubois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York 1956).
- 32 Details in John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York 1980) p266.
- 33 Philip S Foner, *Organised Labor and the Black Worker* (New York 1982) pp277-278.
- 34 Figures produced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).
- 35 OECD figures.
- 36 Figures quoted in Joan Estaban, "The economic policy of Franco", in Paul Preston (ed), *Spain in Crisis* (Hassocks 1976) p286.
- 37 OECD figures.
- 38 For accounts of the conservative attitudes of such farmers, see Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (Cambridge 1974) and Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain* (Harmondsworth 1981) pp83-94.
- 39 According to G Pasquino in P Lange and P S Tarrow (eds), *Italy in Transition* (London 1980) p88.
- 40 Paul Furlong, *The Italian Christian Democracy* (Hull 1982) p27.
- 41 Marianella Selavi, *Lotta di classe e organizzazione operaia* (Milan 1974) p212; Liliana Lanzardo, *Classe operaio e partito comunista alla FIAT* (Turin, no date) pp14-28.
- 42 J C Argos Villar and J E Gomez Diaz, *El movimiento obrero en Cantabrica 1955-77* (Santander 1982) pp49-52 and pp61-66, and, for the valleys of Catalonia, Isador Boix and Manuel Pujados, *Conversacionei, sindicales con dirigentes obreros* (Barcelona 1975).
- 43 Aris Accornero, in *Problemi del Socialismo* (Milan, July 1962) p633.
- 44 As was pointed out by Liliana Lanzardo, "La FIAT dopo lo sciopero de! '62", in *Quaderni Rossi* 4 (Turin 1964) pp67-68.
- 45 See Elio Giovannini in *International Socialist Journal* (Rome 1965).
- 46 George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France* (Berkeley 1982) p147.
- 47 *Le commissioni operaraie spagnole* (Turin 1969) pp29-30; F A Morcillo and others, *Il sindacato de classe in España 1939-77* (Barcelona 1978) p39 and p42; Villar and Diaz, p51.
- 48 Morcillo and others, p57.
- 49 Fernando Claudin, "El nuevo movimiento obrero espanol", in Lucio Magri and others, *Movimiento obrero y accion politica* (Mexico 1975).
- 50 Villar and Diaz, pp52-54. Similar committees of activists appeared in this period in Madrid and Barcelona, see Morcillo and others.
- 51 J M Susperregui, in M Zaguirre and J M de la Hoz (eds), *Presente y futuro del sindicalismo* (Barcelona 1976) p141.
- 52 Claudin, p107.
- 53 Figures quoted in Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (Harmondsworth 1973) p248.
- 54 Baran and Sweezy, p252.
- 55 Baran and Sweezy, p256.
- 56 Figure quoted in Foner, p295.
- 57 Howard Zinn, *SNCC* (Boston 1965) p51.
- 58 Zinn, p234.
- 59 Quoted in Zinn, p235.
- 60 Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days* (London 1965).
- 61 Zinn, p190.
- 62 "What Black Power means to Negroes in Mississippi", in J Geschwender (ed), *The Black Revolt* (New Jersey 1971), p211.
- 63 Quoted in Tony Cliff and Colin Barker, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards* (London

- 1966) p81.
- 64 H A Turner, *The Trend of Strikes* (Leeds 1963) p2.
- 65 For a further discussion of these issues, see C Harman, “1984 and the shape of things to come”, in *IS* 2:29 (1985) pp64-65.
- 66 The official membership figures concealed this fall because the minimum number of members on which any of the 600 constituency parties could affiliate to the national party was 1,000, so official local membership was never allowed to fall below this figure.
- 67 For further figures see Harman in *IS* 2:29, p64.
- 68 For figures, see Jules Townsend, “The Communist Party in Decline”, in *IS* 1:62, September 1973.
- 69 For an early revolutionary socialist analysis of the split, see Tony Cliff, “China and Russia”, in *IS* 1:3, Winter 1960-61.
- 70 See, for instance, Nigel Harris, *The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China* (London 1978) pp60-72.
- 71 On 23 August and 7 September 1967, quoted in Harris, p63.
- 72 Quoted in Harris, p67.
- 73 According to *New Left Review* (London) issue 45, September-October 1967, p2, which claimed with typical stupidity that “Debray has renewed the Leninist tradition of political and strategic analysis” with “the brilliance of his writings”. (Hereafter *New Left Review* will be referred to as *NLR*.)
- 74 Quoted in Hal Draper, *Berkeley: The New Student Revolt* (New York 1965) p98.
- 75 See Draper, and *Students in Revolt: The Battle of Berkeley Campus* (Solidarity, London, no date).
- 76 Draper, p105.
- 77 Draper, p107.
- 78 Draper, p108.
- 79 There had been college occupations in Italy in 1963-64 over limited student demands, but nothing on the Berkeley scale; see Franco Catalano, *I movimenti studenteschi in scuola in Italia* (Milan 1969) p372. In the 1930s there had been campus strikes in the US for “peace”, but only of one hour’s duration.
- 80 “Documentos del movimiento universitario bajo el franquismo”, in *Materiales* No 1 (Barcelona 1977) p117.
- 81 A W Astin in A W Astin and others, *The Power of Protest* (San Francisco 1975) p42.
- 82 C Harman, D Clark, A Sayers, R Kuper and M Shaw, *Education, Capitalism and the Student Revolt* (London 1968), p6.
- 83 Witness how the main character of Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* switches from urging on the revolutionary movement to helping to suppress it.
- 84 For details, see Marvin Garson’s pamphlet, *The Regents*, reprinted in Draper, and the analysis of the LSE governors in LSE Socialist Society, *LSE: What It Is and How We Fought It* (London 1967).
- 85 University Central Council on Admissions, quoted in *Social Trends 1986* (HMSO, London).
- 86 For analyses of this category in class terms, see A Callinicos, “The new middle class” in *IS* 2:20 and C Harman, “The working class after the recession”, in *IS* 2:33—both essays are reprinted in Callinicos and Harman, *The Changing Working Class* (Bookmarks, London 1987).
- 87 A Callinicos and S Turner, “The Student Movement Today”, in *IS* 1:75 (1975).
- 88 See *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia* no 7, vol 2 (Milan 1973) p6.
- 89 Draper, pp31-32.
- 90 See *LSE: What It Is and How We Fought It*.
- 91 E K Trimberger, in H S Becker, *Power Struggle* (New Jersey 1973) p33.
- 92 Trimberger, in Becker, p38.
- 93 Trimberger, in Becker, p162.
- 94 Trimberger, in Becker, p158.
- 95 “An End to History”, reprinted in Draper, p182.
- 96 Tom Hayden, “The Politics of ‘The Movement’”, in Irving Howe (ed), *The Radical Papers* (New York

- 1966).
- 97 Hayden, in Howe.
 - 98 Mike Parker, "SDS: Copping out of American Life", in *New Politics* (New York), 1969, no 4, vol 7.
 - 99 M Buddeberg, "The Student Movement in West Germany", in *IS* 1:33, (summer 1968) p33.
 - 100 L Bobbio, *Lotta continua: Storia di una organizzazione rivoluzionaria* (Rome 1979), p14.
 - 101 Bobbio, p14.
 - 102 *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, p16.
 - 103 For the transcript of key debates at the conference, see F Wolff and E Windhaus (eds), *Studentenbewegung 1967-9* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1977).
 - 104 Bobbio.
 - 105 Astin and others, p26.
 - 106 G R Vickers, *The Formation of the New Left* (Lexington 1975) p48.
 - 107 Draper, p165.
 - 108 Draper, p165.
 - 109 J Rubin, *Do It* (New York 1970) p26.
 - 110 D Cluster, *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee* (Boston 1979) p124.
 - 111 C Davidson, vice-president of SDS, quoted in Racciocco, *The New Left in America* (Stanford 1974) p184.
 - 112 Steve Rees, a former GI who worked on an anti-war soldiers' paper, in *Cluster*, p154.
 - 113 Norman Mailer's account, in *Mailer, The Armies of the Night* (Harmondsworth 1970) p134.
 - 114 Vickers, p131.
 - 115 See the correspondence between Lennon and John Hoyland in *Black Dwarf* (London), 10 January 1969.
 - 116 Quoted in Riccardo Corato, *Gli studenti tedeschi* (Florence 1968) p135.
 - 117 Marplan-Forschung, quoted in Corato, p19.
 - 118 *Der Spiegel*, quoted in Corato, p19.
 - 119 E E Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (London 1969) p255.
 - 120 Quoted in Goldman, p512.
 - 121 Quoted in David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London 1970) p78.
 - 122 Halberstam, pp209-211.
 - 123 Quoted in Goldman, p398.
 - 124 Halberstam, p123.
 - 125 Quoted in Halberstam, p525.
 - 126 Halberstam, p577.
 - 127 For a fuller analysis of these arguments, see Halberstam, p619.
 - 128 Halberstam, pp606-610.
 - 129 Goldman, p509.
 - 130 Quoted in Geschwender, *The Black Revolt*, p206.
 - 131 *Newsweek*, 3 August 1964, reprinted in Joseph Boskin, *Urban Racial Violence* (Los Angeles 1969) p100.
 - 132 Quoted in Goldman, p172.
 - 133 Otto Kerner and others, *Report of the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders* (New York 1968) p38.
 - 134 Bayard Rustin, quoted in Boskin, p109.
 - 135 Boskin, p38.
 - 136 Boskin, p38.
 - 137 *Newsweek*, 7 August 1967, quoted in Boskin, p126.
 - 138 Figure given in Anthony Platt, *The Politics of Riot Commissions 1917-20* (New York 1971) p351.
 - 139 See Boskin, pp130-133.

- 140 Boskin, p126.
- 141 For an account of this period, see Fred Halstead, *Out now!* (New York 1978) pp9-42.
- 142 The teach-in movement spread to Britain, and I know of at least one person who went to one teach-in as a Tory and left convinced by the arguments of International Socialist member Nigel Harris.
- 143 D L Lewis, *Martin Luther King* (London 1970) pp277-278.
- 144 Lewis, p306.
- 145 Quoted in Lewis, p324.
- 146 Quoted in D J Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King* (New York 1981) p214.
- 147 Garrow, pp126-134.
- 148 Quoted in Garrow, p1982.
- 149 *The Times* (London), 1 January 1968.
- 150 Quoted in Halstead, p365.
- 151 Halberstam, pp647-648.
- 152 Halberstam, p653.
- 153 Eldridge Cleaver, *Post-prison Writings and Speeches* (London 1971) p96.
- 154 Bobby Seale, quoted in George Otis, *Eldridge Cleaver: Ice and Fire* (London 1977) p1.
- 155 According to C L Heath, *Off the Pigs!* (New Jersey 1976) it had “a hard core membership of fifteen”; despite the author’s reliance on police and FBI sources, he is unlikely to be far from the mark in this case.
- 156 Quoted in Cluster, p44.
- 157 Cleaver, *Post-prison Writings*.
- 158 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Fire* (London 1979), p95; although this book was written by a repentant, “born again” Christian Cleaver, anxious to disown much of his past, the sections that deal with the early Panther movement seem fairly accurate.
- 159 Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p97.
- 160 See for example Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time* (London 1970) p84.
- 161 Seale, p291.
- 162 Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p112.
- 163 Robert Scheer, introduction to *Cleaver, Post-prison Writings*, p21.
- 164 David Hilliard, quoted in Seale, p297.
- 165 *The Washington Post*, quoted in Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (Harmondsworth 1968) p145.
- 166 Steve Lerner, in *Village Voice* (New York), quoted in Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p146.
- 167 Lerner, quoted in Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p146.
- 168 Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p166; despite Mailer’s tendency to egocentricity, this is a fascinating account of the convention and of the mood of summer 1968.
- 169 Jack Newfield in *Village Voice*, quoted in Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p165.
- 170 Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p171.
- 171 Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p172.
- 172 Quoted in Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, p173.
- 173 Georges Pompidou, *Pour Rétablir une Vérité* (Paris•1982) p181.
- 174 Vladimir Fisera, introduction to Vladimir Fisera (ed), *The Writing on the Wall* (London 1978) p11; Lucien Rioux and René Backmann, *L’Explosion de Mai* (Paris 1968) p78.
- 175 Fisera (ed), p78.
- 176 Figure given by Daniel Cohn-Bendit in Herve Bourges (ed), *The Student Revolt: The Activists Speak* (London 1968) p67.
- 177 Rioux and Backmann, p38.
- 178 Fisera (ed), p79.
- 179 Quoted in Posner (ed), *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth 1970) p64.

- 180 Daniel Ben Said and Henri Weber, *Mai 1968: une répétition générale* (Paris 1968) p112.
- 181 Philippe Labro, *Les Barricades de Mai* (Paris 1968).
- 182 Ben Said and Weber.
- 183 Ben Said and Weber.
- 184 According to his prime minister, Pompidou, in *Pompidou*, p180.
- 185 Michael Kidron, *Western Capitalism since the War* (Harmondsworth 1970) p169.
- 186 Kidron, p170.
- 187 *Pouvoir Ouvrier* (Paris), January-February 1968, and Ross, p163.
- 188 *L'Humanité* (Paris), 3 May 1968, translated in Fisera, p109.
- 189 Rioux and Backmann, p215.
- 190 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p216.
- 191 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p218.
- 192 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p218.
- 193 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p217.
- 194 Quoted in Ross, p182.
- 195 Ross, p182.
- 196 Quoted in Ross, p182.
- 197 According to Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall, *France: The Struggle Goes On* (London 1968) p19.
- 198 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p256.
- 199 Rioux and Backmann, p254.
- 200 Rioux and Backmann, pp256-257.
- 201 Ross, p184.
- 202 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p247.
- 203 Rioux and Backmann, p423.
- 204 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p376.
- 205 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p382.
- 206 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p383.
- 207 Rioux and Backmann, p384.
- 208 Georges Seguy of the CGT, quoted in Ross, p202.
- 209 See Rioux and Backmann, pp442-458 for a detailed account of these days; see also Ross, pp203-204.
- 210 Estimates of the size of the demonstration vary from between 300,000 and 400,000 in Rioux and Backmann, p446, to 800,000 in Ross, p206.
- 211 Pompidou, p197.
- 212 Rioux and Backmann, p249.
- 213 Rioux and Backmann, p276, and Ben Said and Weber, pp159-160.
- 214 According to Ross, p181.
- 215 Ross, p185.
- 216 Ross.
- 217 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p408.
- 218 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p450.
- 219 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p465.
- 220 Quoted in Ross, p208.
- 221 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p512.
- 222 Rioux and Backmann, p513.
- 223 Rioux and Backmann, p553.
- 224 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p281.
- 225 See the accounts in Rioux and Backmann, p559, and Ben Said and Weber, pp209-210.
- 226 A CFDT leader quoted by Rioux and Backmann, p451.

- 227 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p522.
- 228 Quoted in Rioux and Backmann, p524.
- 229 See for instance my own book: Chris Harman, *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe* (London 1974) pp188-242; a condensed version appears in the later edition, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe* (London 1983).
- 230 Speech of 16 March 1968, in the week before Novotny gave up the presidency.
- 231 Pavel Tomalek, "Report from Prague", in *NLR* 53, January-February 1969.
- 232 Tomalek's words.
- 233 Tomalek, in *NLR* 53, p16.
- 234 Tomalek, in *NLR* 53, p18.
- 235 Tomalek, in *NLR* 53, p19.
- 236 Lubos Holacek, quoted in Jan Kavan, "Czechoslovakia 1968: Workers and Students", in *Critique* (Glasgow) no 2, p69.
- 237 Kavan in *Critique* no 2, pp67-68.
- 238 "The Belgrade Student Insurrection", in *NLR* 54 (1969) p61.
- 239 "Yugoslav Students under Attack", a document smuggled out of Belgrade, in *IS* 1:45 (1970) p9.
- 240 *NLR* 54.
- 241 *NLR* 54.
- 242 Quoted in *NLR* 54.
- 243 From the magazine *Student*, quoted in *NLR* 54.
- 244 *NLR* 54.
- 245 *The Times* (London) 24 October 1970.
- 246 Pedro A Vives, "La Matanza de Titelolco", in *Siglio xx* (Madrid), no 32 (1985).
- 247 Vives sees the whole movement as one of the middle classes.
- 248 According to Vives.
- 249 Vives.
- 250 Jose L Rhi Sausi, "Breve cronica de Mexico", in *Debate* (Rome) no 2, December 1977.
- 251 *The Times*, 25 September 1968.
- 252 For a much fuller analysis, see Chris Bambery, *Ireland's Permanent Revolution* (Bookmarks, London 1986).
- 253 Quoted in Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (Harmondsworth 1974) p30.
- 254 This account depends mainly on that by McCann, but see also Chris Gray and John Palmer, "Ireland and the British left" in *IS* 1:36; *Socialist Worker*, 1-2 October 1968; and *The Times*, 7 October 1968.
- 255 Eamonn McCann, in *Socialist Worker*, 12 October 1968.
- 256 See for example Ian Taylor in *Socialist Worker*, 28 September 1968.
- 257 Rossanna Rossanda, *L'anno degli studenti* (Bari 1968) pp39-41.
- 258 Bobbio.
- 259 Rossanda, pp46-48; *The Times*, 1 and 2 March 1968.
- 260 Only 15 percent were from worker or peasant families, according to Rossanda, p31.
- 261 Figures in Rossanda, p32.
- 262 Bobbio, p14.
- 263 Rossanda, p45.
- 264 *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 1, no 7, p130.
- 265 *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 1, no 7, pp11-12.
- 266 *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 1, no 7, p17.
- 267 Sclavi, p41.
- 268 Sclavi, p45.
- 269 Sclavi, p45.
- 270 Sclavi, p65.

- 271 *The Times*, 6 December 1968; see also Norah Carlin, in *Socialist Worker*, 14 December 1968.
- 272 See a photograph of the Rome demonstration in *The Times*, 6 December 1968.
- 273 Bobbio, p28 onwards.
- 274 Bobbio, p29.
- 275 Bobbio, p30.
- 276 Bobbio, p31.
- 277 Bobbio, p31.
- 278 Quoted in Bobbio, p33.
- 279 Bobbio, p34.
- 280 Bobbio, p34.
- 281 Lotta continua, quoted in Bobbio, p62; Agnelli was head of FIAT.
- 282 *Black Dwarf*, 15 October 1968.
- 283 *The Times*, 5 September 1968; see also J D Halloran, P Elliott and G Murdock, *Demonstrations and Communications: A Case Study* (Harmondsworth 1970) p101.
- 284 *Tribune* (London), 8 April 1966.
- 285 For accounts of the strike, see Paul Foot, in R Blackburn and A Cockburn (eds), *The Incompatibles* (Harmondsworth 1967), and Paul Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (Harmondsworth 1968) pp173-178.
- 286 For accounts of these measures, see Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, pp178-181, and Philip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall* (London 1985) pp173-178.
- 287 See Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, p191, and D F Wilson, *The Dockers* (London 1972) pp187-189.
- 288 See for example an article on one such protest, John Palmer, "Soggies begin to see the light", in *Labour Worker* (London), September 1967.
- 289 *The Times*, 26 April 1968.
- 290 *Black Dwarf*, 12 May 1968.
- 291 A survey in *New Society* (London), quoted in Halloran, Elliott and Murdock, p53.
- 292 See Ian Birchall, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World* (London 1981); Ian and myself both attended the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign committee meetings.
- 293 *The Times*, 27 January 1968.
- 294 *The Times*, 9 March 1968.
- 295 *The Times*, 16 March 1968.
- 296 Some anarchists and purist Trotskyists objected to the slogan; the best comment came from Tony Cliff of the International Socialists, who said in private conversation: "Who cares what they are chanting if thousands of people storm the American embassy?"
- 297 "The Demonstration", *World in Action* television programme, 18 March 1968.
- 298 *World in Action*, 18 March 1968.
- 299 David Triesman, in *Black Dwarf*, 15 October 1968.
- 300 *The Times*, 26 April 1968.
- 301 *The Times*, 4 and 6 May 1968.
- 302 Editorial in *IS* 1:33 (summer 1968).
- 303 Speech by myself in June 1968, quoted in David Widgery, *The Left in Britain* (Harmondsworth 1976) p341.
- 304 According to *The Times*.
- 305 See the article by Young Communist League organiser Fergus Nicolson in *Black Dwarf*, 14 August 1968.
- 306 Paul Gerhardt, in *Black Dwarf*, 14 August 1968, and *The Times*, 22 July 1968.
- 307 Hornsey was the only occupation in that year in which Communist Party members played a significant role, doing their utmost to prevent open revolutionary socialist discussion.

- 308 *Black Dwarf*, special two-page issue, 1 May 1968.
- 309 *Black Dwarf*, 5 July 1968.
- 310 *Black Dwarf*, 15 October 1968.
- 311 Although Tariq himself insisted in reply to sectarian criticism: “Do I consider myself a student leader? No, I don’t and I never have done, I am neither a student nor a leader. If the mass media have inflicted me with this title it has been without my conscious consent and despite my protestations” (*Black Dwarf*, 5 July 1968).
- 312 *Black Dwarf*, 22 September 1968.
- 313 *NLR* had adopted this pose only relatively recently; in the first couple of years of the Labour government its political perspective had been to influence the Labour left.
- 314 Cliff and Barker.
- 315 See Joyce Rosser and Colin Barker, “A working-class defeat: the ENV story”, in *IS* 1:31 (1967), and *The Times*, 24 May 1968.
- 316 Editorial in *IS* 1:33 (summer 1968).
- 317 Editorial in *IS* 1:33. There were various versions of this call, but all were more or less the same.
- 318 Except for one small Trotskyist group called Workers Fight, which joined *IS* in the summer of 1968, retained its own secret, separate structure inside *IS*, and was eventually expelled in 1971.
- 319 Text in Widgery, p349.
- 320 The most notable recruits were Vanessa Redgrave and her brother Corin; the discussions which took place in this circle are the basis for Trevor Griffiths’ play *The Party*.
- 321 One leading individual in the LSE Socialist Society had been partly influenced by Maoist ideas, but had been won to the *IS* by 1968.
- 322 J Wilcox, “Two Tactics” in *NLR* 53, January-February 1969.
- 323 The *IS* and the International Marxist Group (IMG) were divided on their reasons. *IS* argued that the key thing was not the demonstration, but the building of a wider revolutionary socialist movement within the working class; the IMG argued for a strategy of repeated peaceful demonstrations over the Vietnam issue.
- 324 Report by Geoff Richman, quoted in Widgery, p386; see also a letter by Roger Protz, in *The Times*, 30 October 1968.
- 325 Widgery, p415.
- 326 The compromise involved the *IS* students voting reluctantly for a formulation about Red Bases with which they disagreed.
- 327 *The Times*, 13 June 1968.
- 328 *The Times*, 8 October 1968.
- 329 For an excellent pseudonymous account of this manoeuvres by the LSE authorities, see Jill West, *Thugs and Wreckers, May Day Manifesto* pamphlet, (London 1969) pp2-6.
- 330 Widgery, p417; although David Widgery was not at the LSE, he was at this time in the same *IS* branch as some of the leading LSE students and was in continual touch with what was happening.
- 331 Editorial in *IS* 1:36.
- 332 *IS* 1:35, winter 1968-69; see also the front page of *Socialist Worker*, 4 January 1969.
- 333 *IS* 1:35.
- 334 *The Times*, 26 October 1968.
- 335 Halberstam, p661.
- 336 According to Halstead, p522.
- 337 According to Halstead, p536.
- 338 All figures given in Halstead, pp544 and 556.
- 339 Halstead, p559.
- 340 Halstead, pp6, 9, 19.
- 341 Steve Rees, in Cluster, p160.

- 342 According to Halstead, p426.
- 343 *New York Times*, 8 August 1974.
- 344 Figures in *Cluster*, p152.
- 345 Martin Rinaldi, "The Olive Green Rebels: Military organising during the Vietnam Era", in *Radical America*, May-June 1974.
- 346 Retired colonel R D Heinl, writing in *American Forces Journal*, 7 June 1971, quoted in Halstead, p637.
- 347 *SIPRI Yearbook* (Stockholm) 1972, p56.
- 348 Figures in Kim Moody, "The American working class", in *IS* 1:40, p19.
- 349 Halstead, p582.
- 350 Heinl, in Halstead p637.
- 351 Halstead p582.
- 352 Cluster, p144.
- 353 Cluster, p145.
- 354 Jack Weinberg and Jack Gerson, "SDS and the Movement", in *Independent Socialist* (USA), October 1969, reprinted in Michael Friedman, *The New Left of the Sixties* (Berkeley 1972) p180.
- 355 Cluster, p126.
- 356 Vickers, p129.
- 357 This stance comes across clearly in the history of the anti-war movement by one of their number, see Halstead.
- 358 Parker, in *New Politics*, vol 7, no 4 (1969).
- 359 Weinberg and Gerson, p188.
- 360 Parker, in *New Politics*, vol 7, no 4.
- 361 Cluster, p129.
- 362 Weinberg and Gerson.
- 363 Quoted in Raccaccio, *The New Left in America* (Stanford 1974) p210.
- 364 The title is a line from Bob Dylan's song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.
- 365 Quoted by Weinberg and Gerson, p158.
- 366 Quoted by Weinberg and Gerson, p188.
- 367 Interview in *Rolling Stone* (New York), November 1972, quoted in J H Bunzel, *New Force on the Left: Tom Hayden and the campaign against Corporate America* (Stanford 1983) p12.
- 368 Letter to FBI field officers, quoted in Garrow, p187.
- 369 Quoted in Powers, p426.
- 370 Powers, p458.
- 371 Powers, p458, and Cluster, p44.
- 372 Cluster, p44.
- 373 Figures given in Heath, p61.
- 374 See the account by Schell, a leading member of the Philadelphia Panthers, in Cluster, pp61-62.
- 375 Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p112.
- 376 Seale, *Seize the Time*, p421.
- 377 Seale, *Seize the Time*, pp421-422.
- 378 Heath, p152.
- 379 Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p111.
- 380 Schell, quoted in Cluster, pp61-62.
- 381 Quoted in Heath, pp159-163.
- 382 Cleaver, *Soul on Fire*, p189.
- 383 Interview with John Watson, in *Fifth Estate*, quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency* (New York 1977) p139.
- 384 John Watson, "Perspectives, a summary session", quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p141.

- 385 Extracts from the first three issues of DRUM are in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, pp90-91.
- 386 Quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p145.
- 387 Quoted in D Georgakas and M Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (New York 1975) p117.
- 388 Quoted in Georgakas and Surkin, p117.
- 389 Mike Hamlyn, quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p180.
- 390 See Georgakas and Surkin, p161.
- 391 Georgakas and Surkin, p161.
- 392 Georgakas and Surkin, p179.
- 393 John Williams, Rufus Burke and Clint Maybury, quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p159.
- 394 Mike Hamlyn, quoted in Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p178.
- 395 Georgakas and Surkin, p162.
- 396 For this episode, see Alberto Martinelli, "Organised Business and the Italian Politics", in Lange and Tarrow, p73.
- 397 See Marino Regini, "Labour unions, industrial action and politics", in Lange and Tarrow.
- 398 Bobbio, p32.
- 399 Michele Salvati, "Muddling through: Economics and Politics in Italy 1969-79", in Lange and Tarrow, p31.
- 400 Regini, in Lange and Tarrow, pp52-53.
- 401 Andreas Savonuzzi, in *Socialist Worker*, 11 December 1969.
- 402 Sclavi, p96.
- 403 J R Low-Ber, *Protest and Participation: The New Working Class in Italy* (Cambridge 1978) p38.
- 404 Low-Ber, pp48-9.
- 405 Sclavi, p253.
- 406 Bobbio, pp49 and 54.
- 407 Andreas Savonuzzi, "Italy", in *IS* 1:49, pp20-21.
- 408 Michele Salvati, "Impasse for Italian Capitalism", in *NLR* 76, November-December 1972, p24.
- 409 Regini, in Lange and Tarrow, p53.
- 410 Regini, in Lange and Tarrow, p53.
- 411 Figures in Regini, in Lange and Tarrow, p64.
- 412 Bobbio, p63, and Savonuzzi, in *IS* 1:49, p21.
- 413 *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, p62.
- 414 Bobbio, p107.
- 415 Bobbio, p49.
- 416 Bobbio, p22.
- 417 Bobbio, p68.
- 418 *Lotta continua*, 14 February 1970, quoted in Bobbio, p59.
- 419 Quoted in Bobbio, p58.
- 420 Bobbio, p65.
- 421 Bobbio, pxv.
- 422 See the introduction to Ranieri Panzieri; *La ripresa del Marxism-Leninism in Italia* (Milan 1972), and Attilio Mangano, 'Per una autocritica del '68', in *Praxis* (Palermo), no 14-15, 1977.
- 423 Mangano claims that the insights were Panzieri's, and that Tronti and the others were involved in a "vulgarisation of his ideas" (Mangano, in *Praxis*, no 14-15).
- 424 *Potere Operaio* (Pisa), 11 March 1967, quoted in Bobbio, p8.
- 425 *Potere Operaio*, 26 October 1967, quoted in Bobbio, p12.
- 426 Sofri, *Avanguardia e massa*, quoted in Bobbio, pp20-2.
- 427 Bobbio, pxii.

- 428 Bobbio, pxii.
- 429 Bobbio, pxiii.
- 430 Interview with Luciana Castellina, in *NLR* 151, May-June 1985.
- 431 See for example the postscript to Lucio Magri's article, "What is a revolutionary party?" in *NLR* 60, March-April 1970.
- 432 See for example *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 1, pp187-204, and vol 2, pp32-42.
- 433 Bobbio, p64.
- 434 Corvisieri had edited a selection of Trotsky's writings on Italy; Massimo Garia spoke at the meeting in Paris of the French JCR on 9 May 1968.
- 435 See the debate between Avanguardia Operaia and the International Socialists in *IS* 1:84, December 1985, and the interview with Silverio Corvisieri in *Praxis* no 9-10, November-December 1976.
- 436 For details, see *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 2, pp92-94.
- 437 Bobbio, p80.
- 438 Quoted in Bobbio, p79.
- 439 Bobbio, p86.
- 440 Bobbio, p191.
- 441 Bobbio, p102.
- 442 Quoted in Bobbio, p117.
- 443 For an analysis of the coup, see Mike Gonzalez, "Chile 1972-73: The workers united", in Colin Barker (ed), *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Bookmarks, London 1987) pp41-82.
- 444 This account is based on arguments put by Il Manifesto and Lotta Continua to an international congress of solidarity with Chile in Frankfurt on 24 April 1974.
- 445 Sofri, quoted in Bobbio, p125.
- 446 See *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*, vol 1, p80 and pp198-204.
- 447 See the analysis in *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*.
- 448 This is the general argument of the first section of *Quaderni di Avanguardia Operaia*.
- 449 See the account of what happened to the CUBs in Glynis Cousins, in the *International Discussion Bulletin* (SWP, London) no 9 (1979) p13.
- 450 See the discussion by Tim Potter and myself in *International Discussion Bulletin*, no 4 (1977).
- 451 *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes* (London 1978); see also Bobbio, p147.
- 452 I was myself an observer at the congress.
- 453 The description of the congress is from Bobbio, p178; see also *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, pp81-96.
- 454 Bobbio, p163.
- 455 Bobbio, p175.
- 456 Bobbio, p178.
- 457 The speech is in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, pp93-96.
- 458 Extracts from the document are in *International Discussion Bulletin*, nos 2-3 (March 1977), pp20-23.
- 459 *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p52.
- 460 Account printed in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p53.
- 461 Quoted in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p25.
- 462 *Lotta continua*, 17 March 1977, quoted in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p64.
- 463 This is a rough precis of the ideas; see for example the interview with Tony Negri in *Italy 1980-81: Red Notes* (London 1981) p21.
- 464 Bobbio, pp104-105.
- 465 According to Sergio Bologna, interview in *Italy 1980-81: Red Notes*, p3.
- 466 Interview with Bologna, *Italy 1980-81: Red Notes*, p3.
- 467 Interview with Bologna, *Italy 1980-81: Red Notes*. Castellina claims: "In the new civil war atmosphere hundreds of people were killed and tens of thousands put in jail", but this seems to be an exaggeration, see *NLR* 151, p35.

- 468 Quoted in interview with Bologna, *Italy 1980-81: Red Notes*.
- 469 Figures in P Lange, G Ross and M Vannicelli, *Unions, Change and Crisis* (London 1982) p38.
- 470 Lange, Ross and Vannicelli, p28.
- 471 See the account of how the CGT worked in “France: Results and Prospects”, in *IS* 1:36, April-May 1969.
- 472 See the account by Volkhard Mosler and James Wickham in *IS* 1:49, autumn 1971, pp22-23.
- 473 See the account by Volkhard Mosler, “The German workers’ winter sleep is over”, in *Socialist Worker*, 2 October 1969.
- 474 M Salvate and G Brosio, in *Daedalus* (Boston), spring 1979, p52.
- 475 Figures given in P Armstrong, A Glyn and J Harrison, *Capitalism since World War Two* (London 1984) p378.
- 476 See Martin Popp and Ruediger Gantzer, *Die Maoisten, die modernen Volkstuemler* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1974) p7.
- 477 *Politischer Bericht des Zentral Komitees des Kommunistischen Bundes Westdeutschland* (Mannheim 1974) p70.
- 478 For a lengthy critique, see Popp and Gantzer.
- 479 This was notoriously true of the firms that later merged to become British Leyland and of the steel industry.
- 480 See Tony Cliff, *The Employers’ Offensive* (London 1970) p20.
- 481 See Martin Barker, “Why is Merseyside so militant?”, in *Socialist Worker*, 16 November 1968.
- 482 Quoted in Whitehead, p21.
- 483 Quoted in Whitehead, p22.
- 484 See the articles in *Socialist Worker* between 29 May and 26 June 1969.
- 485 Vince Hall, in *Socialist Worker*, 26 February 1970.
- 486 *Socialist Worker*, 19 and 26 February 1970.
- 487 Quoted in Roger Protz, “What really happened in St Helens”, in *Socialist Worker*, 23 May 1970.
- 488 “The Pilkington Strike”, in *IS* 1:44 (1970), p5.
- 489 Through lack of experience, strike committee members failed to see the need for a tactical retreat to keep their jobs when it became clear that the majority of workers were not going to strike in their defence. One committee member who did swallow his pride and go into work, after long arguments from members of IS, was bitterly criticised by the others.
- 490 D Butler and M Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (London 1971) p92.
- 491 Quoted in Whitehead, p54.
- 492 *Socialist Worker*, 14 November 1970.
- 493 *Socialist Worker*, 16 January 1971.
- 494 See *Socialist Worker*, 10 April 1971, and Eric Wigham, *Strikes and the Government 1893-1981* (London 1982) p168.
- 495 *Socialist Worker*, 22 May, 19 June and 26 June 1971.
- 496 *Socialist Worker*, 29 May 1971.
- 497 See *Socialist Worker*, 19 June 1971.
- 498 Quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 1 May 1971.
- 499 Quoted in Whitehead, p80.
- 500 Whitehead, p81.
- 501 See Peter Bain, in *Socialist Worker*, 4 March 1972.
- 502 *Socialist Worker*, 28 August 1971.
- 503 *Socialist Worker*, 15 January 1972.
- 504 *Socialist Worker*, 13 November 1972.
- 505 *Socialist Worker*, 8 January 1972.
- 506 *Socialist Worker*, 11 March 1972.

- 507 *Socialist Worker*, 6 November 1971.
- 508 *Socialist Worker*, 22 April 1972.
- 509 Quoted in Whitehead, p74.
- 510 Interview in *NLR* 92 (1975) pp9-10.
- 511 Interview in *NLR* 92 (1975) pp9-10.
- 512 *Socialist Worker*, 22 January 1972.
- 513 *Socialist Worker*, 29 January 1972.
- 514 Arthur Scargill, interview in *NLR* 92.
- 515 Scargill, in *NLR* 91, pp18-19.
- 516 Quoted in Gareth Jenkins, in *Socialist Review* (London), April 1984, p12.
- 517 Jim Prior, quoted in Whitehead, p75.
- 518 Reginald Maudling, *Memoirs* (London 1978) pp160-161.
- 519 Quoted in Whitehead, p76.
- 520 Douglas Hurd, *An End to Promises* (London 1979) p103.
- 521 *Socialist Worker*, 22 April 1972.
- 522 For full details, see *Socialist Worker*, 6 May 1972.
- 523 *Socialist Worker*, 6 May 1972.
- 524 *Socialist Worker*, 13 May 1972.
- 525 *Socialist Worker*, 6 May 1972.
- 526 *Socialist Worker*, 20 May 1972.
- 527 Quoted in Whitehead, p79.
- 528 Michael Fenn, quoted in Tony Cliff, "The Balance of Class Forces", in *IS* 2:6 (1979).
- 529 Interview in *Socialist Worker*, special issue, 22 July 1972.
- 530 *Socialist Worker*, 2 September 1972; I managed to see the TUC minutes at the time, but no longer have a copy.
- 531 Quoted in Whitehead, p88.
- 532 Quoted in Whitehead, p87.
- 533 See for instance the account of a discussion between a British brigadier and the Derry Defence Committee in McCann, p64.
- 534 McCann, p80.
- 535 See for instance the description of the fighting in the Markets area of Belfast in Clann na hEireann, *The Battle of Belfast* (London, 1972) p18.
- 536 See for instance Martin Dillon and Denis Lehane, *Political Murders in Northern Ireland* (Harmondsworth 1973).
- 537 See the on-the-spot reports by Mike Miller in *Socialist Worker*, 8 and 15 July 1972.
- 538 *Socialist Worker*, 6 November 1971.
- 539 The British and Irish Communist Organisation, accurately described by John Palmer as the Peking Lodge of the Orange Order.
- 540 Whitehead, p88.
- 541 "What went wrong at Fords?" in *Socialist Worker*, 24 March 1973; see also *Socialist Worker*, 3 and 12 May 1973.
- 542 *Socialist Worker*, 1, 8, 15 and 22 September 1973; see also Peter Jones, "Politics and the Shop Floor: 12 months at Chrysler", in *IS* 1:64 (1973) p13.
- 543 According to *Socialist Worker*, 5 May 1973.
- 544 *Socialist Worker*, 3 and 17 February 1973.
- 545 *Socialist Worker*, 17 March 1973.
- 546 *Socialist Worker*, 27 January 1973.
- 547 *Socialist Worker*, 20 January, 3 February and 10 March 1973.
- 548 *Socialist Worker*, 24 February 1973.

- 549 Tony Cliff, in *Socialist Worker*, 17 March 1973.
- 550 Cliff, in *Socialist Worker*, 17 March 1973.
- 551 See the reports in *Socialist Worker*, 7 and 14 April 1973.
- 552 For full details, see Peter Jones, in *IS 1:64*.
- 553 Quoted in Peter Jones, in *IS 1:64*, p8.
- 554 *Socialist Worker*, 5 February 1972.
- 555 For example in the Notting Hill area of London, where a police attack was followed by the trial of the “Mangrove Nine”, see *Socialist Worker*, 9 October 1971.
- 556 See *Socialist Worker*, 2 September 1972.
- 557 Tony Cliff, in *Socialist Worker*, 5 August 1972.
- 558 *Socialist Worker*, 8 September 1973.
- 559 *Socialist Worker*, 23 June 1973.
- 560 Quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 1 December 1973.
- 561 According to Whitehead, p109.
- 562 Quoted in Whitehead, p110.
- 563 The scene is described in Whitehead, p108.
- 564 So our headline in *Socialist Worker*, “Knock out the lock-out”, was way off beam.
- 565 *Socialist Worker*, 5 August 1972.
- 566 Figures in Whitehead, p125.
- 567 Arising out of a union recognition strike at Con-Mech Engineering in Surrey.
- 568 Campbell Adamson, quoted in Whitehead, p131.
- 569 Quoted in Whitehead, p143.
- 570 Quoted in Whitehead, p150.
- 571 Sid Weighell, quoted in Whitehead, p152.
- 572 The incident is described in Whitehead, pp151-152.
- 573 The words are those of Engels.
- 574 Deniz Correia, quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 1 March 1975.
- 575 Bob Light, in *Socialist Worker*, 13 July 1974.
- 576 For a full account of this process, see [Part 1](#) of my book, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe* (London 1983).
- 577 Bob Light, in *Socialist Worker*, 13 July 1974.
- 578 *Revolucao*, 14 June 1974, reprinted in *Revolucao e contra revolucao* (Lisbon 1976) pp44-45.
- 579 Antonio Martins dos Santos, of the Lisbon metalworkers’ union, interview in *Socialist Worker*, 27 July 1974.
- 580 Quoted in Antonio de Figueiredo, *Portugal: Fifty Years of Dictatorship* (Harmondsworth 1975) p247.
- 581 See the account by a rank-and-file soldier in Pete Robinson, “Portugal 1974-5: Popular Power”, in Barker (ed), *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, p95.
- 582 Compiled in *Socialist Worker*, 22 March 1975.
- 583 That associated with the American section of the Fourth International, the American Socialist Workers Party.
- 584 Details in Joanna Rollo, “Portugal: One year after the coup”, in *IS 1:77* (1975) p17.
- 585 For an account of this phenomenon, see Tony Cliff, “Deflected Permanent Revolution”, in *IS 1:12* (spring 1963), reprinted as a pamphlet of the same name (London 1981).
- 586 See for example *Socialist Worker*, 22 March 1975.
- 587 I remember attending a 7,000-strong meeting where the audience chanted in unison “Cunhal, traitor to the working class” and “Down with social fascism”.
- 588 *Revolucao e contra revolucao*, p42.
- 589 *Revolucao e contra revolucao*, p249.
- 590 See the articles reprinted in *Revolucao e contra revolucao*.

- 591 For a longer version of this argument, see my article “Portugal: The latest phase”, in *IS* 1:83, November 1975.
- 592 And those of us in other countries influenced by its analysis of events.
- 593 Quoted in Pierre Naville, *Pouvoir militaire et socialisme au Portugal* (Paris 1975) p35.
- 594 Quoted in *Portugal: Espoir du socialisme* (Paris 1975) p70.
- 595 For a full account of the *Republica* affair, see *Socialist Worker*, 28 June 1975.
- 596 This was claimed by the American SWP at the time and, later, by supporters of Ernest Mandel’s section of the Fourth International.
- 597 See the reports from Colin Sparks and Richard Noss in Lisbon in *Socialist Worker*, 19 and 26 July 1975.
- 598 Members of the PRP and UDP.
- 599 Report from Richard Noss in Lisbon, in *Socialist Worker*, 30 August 1975.
- 600 Matos Gomes, quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 20 September 1975.
- 601 See the description of the organisation of the Armed Forces Movement in *Portugal: Espoir du socialisme*, Appendix 8, p117.
- 602 Interview with Carlos Silva, *Socialist Worker*, 12 July 1975.
- 603 Report from Robin Ellis in Oporto, in *Socialist Worker*, 20 September 1975.
- 604 Robin Ellis, in *Socialist Worker*, 20 September 1975.
- 605 Report by Roger Kline and Margaret Renn, in *Socialist Worker*, 4 October 1975.
- 606 Report by myself from Lisbon, in *Socialist Worker*, 4 October 1975.
- 607 The report by myself is to be found in *Socialist Worker*, 4 October 1975; here I have supplemented it slightly from memory.
- 608 The phrase was used by Lenin in April 1917.
- 609 See Antonio Gramsci, *Political Writings 1910-20* (London 1977) pp64-114, and Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October* (London 1971) pp56-57.
- 610 The fraternal delegate from the PRP to the International Socialists annual conference, quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 14 June 1975.
- 611 Tony Cliff, “Portugal: The great danger”, in *Socialist Worker*, 18 October 1975.
- 612 Quoted in Tony Cliff and Chris Harman, *Portugal: The Lessons of 25 November* (London 1975); many of the arguments in this chapter are taken from this pamphlet.
- 613 The full statement is in *Revolucao e contra revolucao*, pp470-471.
- 614 Quoted in *Socialist Worker*, 24 November 1973.
- 615 Quoted in Stephen Marks, “Greece: The Junta stumbles”, in *IS* 1:65 (December 1975) p14.
- 616 Members of the Greek group Socialist Revolution, in *Socialist Worker*, 3 March 1973.
- 617 For an account of the period based on discussions with Greek revolutionary socialists, see Marks, in *IS* 1:65, pp12 onwards.
- 618 Marks, in *IS* 1:65, p12.
- 619 This account is based on the report by George Gionis, in *Socialist Worker*, 24 June 1972.
- 620 Report in *Socialist Worker*, 24 November 1973.
- 621 Christos Patrakis, in *Socialist Worker*, 3 August 1974.
- 622 Report from George Gionis in Athens, in *Socialist Worker*, 2 August 1975.
- 623 Panos, a member of the Greek organisation Socialist Revolution, in an interview made in July 1987.
- 624 Figures given in Paul Preston, *The Triumph of Democracy in Spain* (London 1986) p62.
- 625 Almendros Morcillo and others, p52
- 626 Almendros Morcillo and others, p53.
- 627 Almendros Morcillo and others, p54
- 628 Almendros Morcillo and others, pp39-40, and Preston, p48.
- 629 R P Clark, *The Basques, the Franco Years and Beyond* (Nevada 1979) pp260-262.
- 630 Almendros Morcillo and others, p53.

- 631 Report from Barcelona, in *Socialist Worker*, 8 March 1975.
- 632 *Socialist Worker*, 22 February 1975.
- 633 *Socialist Worker*, 25 January 1975.
- 634 Figures given in Clark, pp6-7 and pp142-150.
- 635 Figures in Clark, p80.
- 636 Clark, p256.
- 637 Clark, p165.
- 638 Preston, p68.
- 639 *Vanguardia* (Barcelona), quoted in Preston, p51.
- 640 Preston, p75.
- 641 José Maria de Areilza, *Diario de un ministro de la monarquía*, entry for 30 December 1975, p36.
- 642 See Areilza's accounts of his meetings with Wilson, Callaghan and others, in his diary, p101.
- 643 *Coordinadora de Euskadi de Comisiones Obreros* (Solidaridad, Vitoria, no date), translated in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 644 *Coordinadora de Euskadi*, in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 645 *Coordinadora de Euskadi*, in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 646 Clark, p269.
- 647 Report in the *Washington Post*, quoted in Clark, p270.
- 648 Quoted in Preston, p83.
- 649 *Voz Obrero*, translated in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 650 *Voz Obrero*, translated in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 651 *Socialist Worker*, 6 March 1976.
- 652 *Financial Times* (London), 14 March 1976.
- 653 See the account of the cabinet meeting the day after the events in Vitoria, in Areilza's diary, p102.
- 654 Preston, p95.
- 655 For an account of these years, see Jorge Semprun, *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* (Barcelona 1977).
- 656 Almendros Morcillo and others, p131. The USO was a small, left socialist trade union.
- 657 *Cambio 16*, quoted in Almendros Morcillo and others, p138.
- 658 *Las Provincias*, quoted in Almendros Morcillo and others, p138.
- 659 Preston, p95.
- 660 Interview in *Socialist Worker*, 3 April 1976.
- 661 Text in D Fabrigas and D Gimenez, *La huelga y la reforma, Sabadell, metal otone 76* (Madrid 1977), and in P F Grasa, R Cliville and M Serracant, *Metal: 30 dias de huelga* (Sabadell 1976).
- 662 See for example Almendros Morcillo and others, pp59-64.
- 663 Almendros Morcillo and others, p138.
- 664 "Chequeo a la Vanguardia", in *Acción Comunista* (Frankfurt-am-Main), no 15 (1973), p6.
- 665 By the time of the OICE Congress in spring 1976, its leaders were saying a peaceful transition was possible, but people assured me that this was not what the members had been told previously.
- 666 According to Angel Amigo, *Pertur, ETA 1971-76* (San Sebastian 1978) p49.
- 667 Document circulated by OICE, March 1976.
- 668 In conversations with myself in November 1976.
- 669 Euskadi Eskarra and ESB/ANV.
- 670 Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International* (New York 1972) vol 2, pp76 and 82.
- 671 Report of the International Socialists national committee, in *Internal Bulletin*, April 1974.
- 672 Quoted in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p83.
- 673 As I found when, in 1969, I dared to criticise some aspects of Ho's politics at a meeting in London; others on the platform—such as Tariq Ali and Adrian Mitchell—rushed to join with the Maoists, the

- Communist Party and a representative of the Vietnamese embassy in abusing me.
- 674 See Guy Hocquenghen, *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du Mao au Rotary* (Paris 1987).
- 675 Quoted in the *Guardian* (London), as I write this in summer 1987.
- 676 For a much fuller account, see Lindsey German, “The rise and fall of the women’s movement”, in *IS* 2:37. Much of the material on Britain and the US in this section is based upon her account.
- 677 *Black Dwarf*, 10 January 1969; after this single issue it contained little on the women’s movement, although Sheila Rowbotham was a member of the editorial board.
- 678 Quoted in Lindsey German, in *IS* 2:37.
- 679 Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments* (London 1979). The book was subtitled “Feminism and the re-making of socialism”.
- 680 Quoted in *Italy 1977-78: Red Notes*, p84.
- 681 P Petti, in *Praxis*, February 1979, p84.
- 682 *Praxis*, May 1978, p5.
- 683 This happened repeatedly in the National Union of Students, and in what remained of the women’s movement it led to a bitter split in the editorial board of *Spare Rib* (London).
- 684 These, essentially, were the arguments presented by Stuart Hall and Eric Hobsbawm at the Gramsci Conference held by the British Communist Party’s monthly magazine *Marxism Today* (London) in June 1987; they were cheered to the echo by hundreds of former members of the generation of 1968.
- 685 See Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power and Socialism* (London 1978); F Claudin, *Eurocommunism and Socialism* (London 1977); Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci”, in *NLR* 100, November 1976-January 1977; and R Miliband, *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (London 1982).
- 686 Claudin, *The Communist Movement* (Harmondsworth 1975) p60.
- 687 Claudin, *Eurocommunism and Socialism*, p108.
- 688 Miliband, *Capitalist Democracy in Britain*, p157.
- 689 Tariq Ali, “The Lessons of 1968”, in *Socialist Review* (London), no 2, 2 May 1978.
- 690 Interview with Ernest Mandel, in *NLR* 100, p110.
- 691 Anderson, in *NLR* 100, p28.
- 692 “World revolution and communist tactics”, translated in Smart (ed), *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London 1978) pp103-105.
- 693 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (London 1971) p235.
- 694 For a much fuller critical account of Gramsci’s views on these questions, see my pamphlet, *Gramsci versus Reformism* (London 1983).
- 695 Their survival in Northern Ireland can to some extent be linked to the weak effect of the boom there.
- 696 Tony Cliff, “On Perspectives”, in *IS* 1:36, April-May 1969, p17.
- 697 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p333.
- 698 For a full account of this period see my book *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918-23* (Bookmarks, London 1982).
- 699 For a full account of the crisis between the First and Second World Wars, see the chapter “The crisis last time” in my book *Explaining the Crisis* (Bookmarks, London 1984).

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