

1968: The general strike and the student revolt in France

Part 3—How Alain Krivine’s JCR covered for the betrayals of Stalinism

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This eight-part series first appeared on the World Socialist Web Site during May–June 2008, on the 40th anniversary of the general strike in France. We are presenting it here unchanged, but with a new Introduction in light of intervening events. Part 1, posted May 29, deals with the development of the student revolt and the general strike up to its high point at the end of May. Part 2, posted May 30, examines how the Communist Party (PCF) and the union it controls, the CGT, enabled President Charles de Gaulle to regain control.

President de Gaulle and his Fifth Republic owed their political survival in May 1968 to the Stalinist French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français—PCF) and its trade union arm—the General Confederation of Labour (Confédération Générale du Travail—CGT).

The influence of the PCF had clearly decreased, however, between 1945 and 1968. In order to strangle the general strike, the Stalinists relied on the support of other political forces that struck a more radical stance, but ensured that the PCF maintained its political dominance over the mass movement.

In this respect a key role was played by the Pabloite United Secretariat, led by Ernest Mandel and its French supporters, the Revolutionary Communist Youth (Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire—JCR) led by Alain Krivine, and the International Communist Party (Parti Communiste Internationaliste—PCI) headed by Pierre Frank. They prevented the radicalisation of youth from developing into a serious revolutionary alternative, and so helped the Stalinists bring the general strike under control.

At the end of the Second World War, the PCF had acquired considerable political authority due to the victory of the Soviet Red Army over Nazi Germany, and the French party’s own role in the anti-fascist *Résistance* movement. The French bourgeoisie, in the form of the Vichy regime, had discredited itself through its collaboration with the Nazis, and there was a powerful yearning within the working class for a socialist society, which extended into the membership of the PCF. However, the leader of the PCF at that time, Maurice Thorez, used his entire political authority to re-establish bourgeois rule. Thorez personally participated in the first post-war government established by de Gaulle, and was instrumental in ensuring the disarming of the *Résistance*.

Support gradually ebbed for the PCF, due to its role in restabilising bourgeois society in the post-war period. The party had lent its support to the colonial wars against Vietnam and Algeria, and was further discredited following the revelation of Stalin’s crimes in the speech made by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. This was followed by the bloody suppression of popular uprisings by Stalinist troops in Hungary and Poland. While in 1968 the PCF was still the party with the biggest

working-class membership, it had largely lost its authority among students and youth.

In particular, the Communist Student Federation (Union des Étudiants Communistes—UEC) was in profound crisis. From 1963 onwards, various fractions emerged in the UEC—“Italian” (supporters of Gramsci and the Italian Communist Party), “Marxist-Leninist” (supporters of Mao Zedong) and “Trotskyist”—which were then expelled and went on to establish their own organizations. This period marked the origin of the so-called “extreme left,” whose appearance on the political scene marked “the emerging break by an active part of the militant youth with the PCF,” according to the historian Michelle Zancarini-Fournel in her book about the 1968 movement. [1]

The authority of the CGT was also under increasing pressure in 1968. Rival trade unions—such as Force Ouvrière and the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail)—at that time under the influence of the left-reformist Parti Socialiste Unifié (PSU)—struck militant postures and challenged the CGT. The CFDT in particular was able to garner support in the service sector and public services.

Under these circumstances the Pabloites, organised in the United Secretariat, played a very important role in defending the authority of the Stalinists and making the sell-out of the general strike possible.

The origins of Pabloism

The Pabloite United Secretariat emerged in the early 1950s as the result of a political attack against the program of the Fourth International (FI). The secretary of the FI, Michel Pablo, rejected the entire analysis of Stalinism that had formed the basis for the founding of the Fourth International by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

Following the defeat of the German proletariat in 1933, Trotsky concluded that the extent of the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International made any policy based on the reform of the International untenable. Proceeding from the political betrayal of the German Communist Party, which had made possible Hitler’s assumption of power, and the subsequent refusal of the Communist International to draw any lessons from the German disaster, Trotsky concluded that the Communist parties had definitively gone over to the side of the bourgeoisie. He insisted that the future of revolutionary struggle depended on the building of a new proletarian leadership, and wrote in the founding program of the Fourth International: “The crisis of the proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind’s culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.”

Pablo rejected this view. He concluded, from the emergence of new deformed workers’ states in Eastern Europe, that Stalinism could play a historically progressive role in the future. Such a perspective amounted to

the liquidation of the Fourth International. According to Pablo there was no reason to construct sections of the Fourth International independently of the Stalinist mass organizations. Instead, the task of Trotskyists was reduced to entering existing Stalinist parties and supporting the presumed leftist elements in their leaderships.

Pablo ended up rejecting the entire Marxist conception of a proletarian party, which insists on the necessity of a politically and theoretically conscious avant-garde. For Pablo, the role of leadership could be allocated to non-Marxist and non-proletarian forces, such as trade unionists, left reformists, petty-bourgeois nationalists and national liberation movements in the colonial and former colonial countries, which would be driven to the left under the pressure of objective forces. Pablo personally put himself at the service of the Algerian National Liberation Front, the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), and following its victory even joined the Algerian government for a period of three years.

Pablo's onslaught split the Fourth International. The majority of the French section rejected his revisions and was bureaucratically expelled by a minority led by Pierre Frank. In 1953, the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) responded to the Pabloite revisions with a devastating critique and issued an Open Letter calling for the international unification of all orthodox Trotskyists. This became the basis for the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which included the French majority.

However, the SWP did not maintain its opposition to Pabloism for long. During the next 10 years, the SWP increasingly dropped its differences with the Pabloites and eventually joined them to form the United Secretariat (US) in 1963. In the meantime, the leadership of the US had been taken over by Ernest Mandel. Pablo played an increasingly secondary role and left the United Secretariat soon afterwards. The basis for the reunification in 1963 was uncritical support for Fidel Castro and his petty-bourgeois nationalist "26th of July Movement."

According to the United Secretariat, the seizure of power by Castro in Cuba amounted to the setting up of a workers' state, with Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and other Cuban leaders playing the role of "natural Marxists."

This perspective served not only to disarm the working class in Cuba, which never had its own organs of power; it also disarmed the international working class by lending uncritical support to Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist organizations and strengthening their grip on the masses. In so doing, Pabloism emerged as a secondary agency of imperialism, whose role became even more important under conditions where the older bureaucratic apparatuses were increasingly discredited in the eyes of the working class and the youth.

This was confirmed in Sri Lanka, just one year after the unification of the SWP and the Pabloites. In 1964, a Trotskyist party with mass influence, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—joined a bourgeois coalition government with the nationalist Sri Lankan Freedom Party. The price paid by the LSSP for its entry into government was to abandon the country's Tamil minority in favour of Sinhala chauvinism. The country is still suffering the consequences of this betrayal, which reinforced the discrimination of the Tamil minority and led to the bloody civil war that plagued Sri Lanka for three decades.

The Pabloites also played a crucial role in France in helping maintain bourgeois rule in 1968. When one examines their role during the key events, two things are striking: their apologetic stance with regard to Stalinism, and their uncritical adaptation to the anti-Marxist theories of the "New Left," which predominated in the student environment.

Alain Krivine and the JCR

The Fourth International had considerable influence in France at the end of the Second World War. In 1944, the French Trotskyist movement, which had split during the war, reunited to form the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI). Two years later, PCI had around 1,000 members

and put up 11 candidates in parliamentary elections, who received between 2 and 5 percent of the vote. The organisation's newspaper *La Vérité* was sold at kiosks and enjoyed a broad readership. Its influence extended into other organizations; the entire leadership of the socialist youth organization, with a total membership of 20,000, supported the Trotskyists. Members of the PCI played a prominent role in the strike movement which rocked the country and forced the PCF to withdraw from the government in 1947.

In subsequent years, however, the revolutionary orientation of the PCI came under repeated attack from elements inside its own ranks. In 1947, the social-democratic SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière) moved sharply to the right, dissolved its youth organization and expelled its Trotskyist leader. The right wing of the PCI, led by its secretary at the time, Yvan Craipeau, reacted by junking any revolutionary perspective. One year later this wing was expelled, after it had argued in favour of dissolving the PCI into the broad left movement led by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire—RDR). Many of the leading figures in the expelled wing, including Craipeau himself, re-emerged later in the PSU.

In the same year, 1948, another group—Socialisme ou barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism), headed by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort—quit the PCI. This group reacted to the start of the Cold War by rejecting Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state, arguing that the Stalinist regime represented a new class within a system of "bureaucratic capitalism." Based on this standpoint, the group developed a number of positions hostile to Marxism. The writings of Socialisme ou barbarie were to have considerable influence on the student movement, and one its members, Jean François Lyotard, later played a leading role in developing the ideology associated with postmodernism.

The biggest blow to the Trotskyist movement in France, however, was delivered by Pabloism. The PCI was both politically and organizationally weakened by the liquidationist policy of Michel Pablo and the subsequent expulsion of a majority of the section by the Pabloite minority. The PCI majority, led by Pierre Lambert, will be dealt with in the final part of this series. The Pabloite minority, led by Pierre Frank, concentrated after the split on providing practical and logistical support for the national liberation movement, the FLN, in the Algerian war. During the 1960s it had largely lost any influence inside the factories. It did have support in student circles, however, and played an important role amongst such layers in 1968. Its leading member, Alain Krivine, was one of the best known faces of the student revolt, alongside figures such as the anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the Maoist Alain Geismar.

Krivine had joined the Stalinist youth movement in 1955, at the age of 14, and in 1957 was part of an official delegation attending a youth festival in Moscow. According to his autobiography, it was there that he met members of the Algerian FLN and developed a critical attitude towards the policies of the Communist Party, with regard to Algeria. One year later, he began to collaborate with the Pabloite PCI on the Algerian question. Krivine claims he was initially unaware of the background of the PCI, but this is highly unlikely, since two of his brothers belonged to the leadership of the organisation. In any event, he joined the PCI at the latest in 1961, while continuing to officially work inside the Stalinist student organization, the UEC (Union des étudiants communistes).

Krivine quickly rose inside the leadership of the PCI and the United Secretariat. From 1965, the 24-year-old Krivine belonged to the top leadership of the party, the Political Bureau, alongside Pierre Frank and Michel Lequenne. In the same year he was appointed to the executive committee of the United Secretariat as a substitute for Lequenne.

In 1966, Krivine's section of the UEC at the University of Paris (La Sorbonne) was expelled by the Stalinist leadership for refusing to support the joint presidential candidate of the left, François Mitterrand. Together

with other rebel UEC sections he went on to establish the JCR (Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire), which consisted almost exclusively of students and, unlike the PCI, did not expressly commit itself to Trotskyism. In April 1969, the JCR and PCI then officially merged to form the Ligue Communiste (from 1974, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—LCR) after the French interior minister had banned both organisations a year previously.

In retrospect, Krivine has sought to present the JCR in 1968 as a young and largely naïve organization, characterised by heady enthusiasm but little political experience: “We were an organization of some hundred members, whose average age barely corresponded to the legal age of adulthood at that time: twenty-one years. It is hardly necessary to note that, driven by the next most important task from one meeting and demonstration to another, we had no time to think things through. In view of our modest forces we felt at home in the universities, on strike, and on the streets. The solution of the problem of government took place at another level, over which we had barely any influence.” [2]

In fact, such claims simply do not stand up. Aged 27 in 1968, Alain Krivine was still relatively young but had already acquired considerable political experience. He had inside knowledge of Stalinist organizations, and as a member of the United Secretariat was entirely familiar with the international conflicts within the Trotskyist movement. At this time, he had already left university, but then returned in order to lead the activities of the JCR.

The political activity of the JCR in May–June 1968 cannot be put down to juvenile inexperience, but was instead guided by the political line developed by Pabloism in the struggle against orthodox Trotskyism. Fifteen years after its break with the Fourth International, the United Secretariat had changed not only its political but also its social orientation. It was no longer a proletarian current, but instead a petty-bourgeois movement.

For one-and-a-half decades the Pabloites had sought the favours of careerists in the Stalinist and reformist apparatuses and wooed national movements. The social orientation of such movements had become second nature to the Pabloites themselves. What had begun as a theoretical revision of Marxism had become an organic part of their political physiognomy—insofar as it is permissible to transfer terms from the realm of physiology to politics.

In drawing the lessons from the defeat of the European revolutions of 1848, Marx distinguished the perspective of the petty bourgeois from that of the working class as follows: “The democratic petty bourgeois, far from wanting to transform the whole society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible.” [3] This characterisation applied equally in 1968 to the Pabloites. This was clear from their uncritical attitude towards anarchist and other petty-bourgeois movements, movements which had been uncompromisingly fought, at an earlier time, by Marx and Engels. It was also evident in the significance they attached at that time, and continue to attach today, to such issues as race, gender and sexual orientation; and in their enthusiasm for the leaders of nationalist movements, which despise the working class and—as was the case with the Russian Populists fought by Lenin—orient themselves towards layers of the rural middle class.

“More Guevarist than Trotskyist”

Above all, Krivine’s JCR was characterised by its completely uncritical support for the Cuban leadership—the issue that lay at the heart of the unification which took place in 1963. The author of a history of the LCR, Jean-Paul Salles, refers to “the identity of an organization, which prior to May 68 appeared in many respects more Guevarist than Trotskyist.” [4]

On October 19, 1967, 10 days after his murder in Bolivia, the JCR organised a commemoration meeting for Che Guevara in the Paris

Mutualité. Guevara’s portrait was pervasive at JCR meetings. In his autobiography of 2006, Alain Krivine writes: “Our most important point of reference with regard to the liberation struggles in the countries of the third world was undoubtedly the Cuban revolution, which led us to being called ‘Trotsko-Guevarists’ ... In particular Che Guevara embodied the ideal of the revolutionary fighter in our eyes.” [5]

With its glorification of Che Guevara, the LCR evaded the urgent problems bound up with the building of a leadership in the working class. If there is a single common denominator to be found in the eventful life of the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary, it is his unwavering hostility to the political independence of the working class. Instead, he represented the standpoint that a small armed minority—a guerrilla troop operating in rural areas—could lead the path to socialist revolution, independently of the working class. This required neither a theory nor a political perspective. The action and the will of a small group were crucial. The ability of the working class and the oppressed masses to attain political consciousness and lead their own liberation struggle was denied.

In January 1968, the JCR newspaper *Avant-Garde Jeunesse* propagated Guevara’s conceptions as follows: “Irrespective of the current circumstances the guerrillas are called upon to develop themselves until, after a shorter or longer period, they are able to draw in the whole mass of the exploited into a frontal struggle against the regime.”

However, the guerrilla strategy pursued by Guevara in Latin America could not so easily be transferred to France. Instead Mandel, Frank and Krivine ascribed the role of the avant-garde to the students. They glorified the spontaneous activities of students and their street battles with the police. Guevara’s conceptions served to justify blind activism at the expense of any serious political orientation. In doing so, the Pabloites completely adapted to the anti-Marxist theories of the New Left, which played a leading role amongst students, thereby blocking the path to a genuine Marxist orientation.

There were hardly any recognizable political differences between the “Trotskyist” Alain Krivine, the anarchist Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the Maoist Alain Geismar and other student leaders who were prominent in the events of 1968. They showed up side by side in the street battles that took place in the Latin Quarter. Jean-Paul Salles writes: “During the week of May 6–11 members of the JCR stood at the forefront and took part in all the demonstrations alongside Cohn-Bendit and the anarchists—including the night of the barricades.” [6] On May 9, the JCR held a meeting prepared long before in the Mutualité, in the Latin Quarter, scene of the fiercest street battles at that time. Over 3,000 attended the meeting and one of the main speakers was Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

During the same period in Latin America the United Secretariat unconditionally supported Che Guevara’s guerrilla perspective. At its 9th World Congress held in May 1969 in Italy, the US instructed its South American sections to follow Che Guevara’s example and unite with his supporters. This meant turning their back on the urban-based working class, in favour of an armed guerrilla struggle aimed at carrying the fight from the countryside to the cities. The majority of delegates at the congress supporting this strategy included Ernest Mandel and the French delegates, Pierre Frank and Alain Krivine. They held firmly to this strategy for no less than 10 years, although the perspective of guerrilla-type struggle was a source of dispute inside the United Secretariat, as its catastrophic consequences became increasingly visible. Thousands of young people who had followed this path and taken up the guerrilla struggle senselessly sacrificed their lives, while the actions of the guerrillas—kidnappings, hostage taking and violent clashes with the army—only served to politically disorientate the working class.

The students as “revolutionary avant-garde”

The utterly uncritical stance taken by the Pabloites to the role played by students is evident from a long article on the May events, written by Pierre Frank at the beginning of June 1968, shortly before the prohibition

of the JCR.

“The revolutionary vanguard in May is generally conceded to have been the youth,” Frank wrote, and added: “The vanguard, which was politically heterogeneous and within which only minorities were organized, had overall a high political level. It recognized that the movement’s object was the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a society building socialism. It recognized that the policy of ‘peaceful and parliamentary roads to socialism’ and of ‘peaceful coexistence’ was a betrayal of socialism. It rejected all petty bourgeois nationalism and expressed its internationalism in the most striking fashion. It had a strongly anti-bureaucratic consciousness and a ferocious determination to assure democracy in its ranks.” [7]

Frank even went so far as to describe the Sorbonne as the “most developed form of ‘dual power’” and “the first free territory of the Socialist Republic of France.” He continued: “The ideology inspiring the students, of opposition to the neo-capitalist consumer society, the methods they used in their struggle, the place they occupy and will occupy in society (which will make the majority of them white-collar employees of the state or the capitalists) gave this struggle an eminently socialist, revolutionary, and internationalist character.” The struggle by students demonstrated “a very high political level in a revolutionary Marxist sense.” [8]

In reality, there was no trace of revolutionary consciousness in the Marxist sense on the part of the students. The political conceptions that prevailed amongst students had their origin in the theoretical arsenal of the so-called “New Left” and had been developed over many years in opposition to Marxism.

The historian Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey writes on the '68 movement in France: “The student groups driving the process forward are groups, which explicitly base themselves on the intellectual mentors of the New Left or were influenced by their themes and critique, in particular the writings of the ‘Situationist International,’ the group around ‘Socialisme ou barbarie’ and ‘Arguments.’ Both their strategy of action (direct and provocative), and their own self conception (anti-dogmatic, anti-bureaucratic, anti-organizational, anti-authoritarian) fit into the system of coordinates of the New Left.” [9]

Rather than regarding the working class as a revolutionary class, the New Left saw workers as a backward mass fully integrated into bourgeois society via consumption and the media. In place of capitalist exploitation the New Left emphasised the role of alienation in its social analysis—interpreting alienation in a strictly psychological or existentialist sense. The “revolution” was to be led not by the working class, but rather by the intelligentsia and groups on the fringe of society. For the New Left, the driving forces were not the class contradictions of capitalist society, but “critical thinking” and the activities of an enlightened elite. The aim of the revolution was no longer the transformation of the relations of power and ownership but social and cultural changes, such as alterations to sexual relations. According to the representatives of the New Left, such cultural changes were a prerequisite for a social revolution.

Two of the best-known student leaders in France and Germany, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Rudi Dutschke, were both influenced by the “Situationist International,” which propagated a change of consciousness by means of provocative actions. Originally formed as a group of artists with roots in the traditions of Dada and Surrealism, the Situationists stressed the significance of practical activities. As a recent article on the Situationists puts it: “Activist disruption, radicalisation, the misuse, revaluation and playful reproduction of concrete everyday situations are the means to elevate and permanently revolutionize the consciousness of those in the omnipotent grip of the deep sleep arising from all-pervasive boredom.” [10]

Such standpoints are light-years removed from Marxism. They deny the revolutionary role of the working class, which is rooted in its position in a

society characterised by insurmountable class conflicts. The driving force of the revolution is the class struggle, which is objectively based. Consequently the task of Marxist revolutionaries is not to electrify the working class with provocative activities, but rather to elevate its political consciousness and provide a revolutionary leadership capable of enabling it to take up responsibility for its own fate.

Not only did the Pabloites declare that the anarchist, Maoist and other petty bourgeois groups, which played the leading role in the Latin Quarter, demonstrated “a very high political level in a revolutionary Marxist sense” (Pierre Frank), they put forward similar political points of view and took part in their adventurous activities with enthusiasm.

The anarchist-inspired street battles in the Latin Quarter contributed nothing to the political education of workers and students and never posed a serious threat to the French state. In 1968 the state had a modern police apparatus and an army that had been forged in the course of two colonial wars, and could rely on the support of NATO. It could not be toppled by the sort of revolutionary tactics used in the 19th century—i.e., the building of barricades in the streets of the capital city. Even though the security forces were, in the main, responsible for the huge levels of violence that characterised the street battles in the Latin Quarter, there was an undoubted element of infantile revolutionary romanticism in the way the students eagerly assembled barricades and played their game of cat and mouse with the police.

To be continued

Notes:

1. Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, “1962–1968: Le champ des possibles” in *68: Une histoire collective*, Paris: 2008
2. Daniel Bensaid, Alain Krivine, *Mai si! 1968 – 1988: Rebelles et repentis*, Montreuil: 1988, p. 39
3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Speech to the Central Authority of the Communist League”
4. Jean-Paul Salles, *La Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*, Rennes: 2005, p. 49
5. Alain Krivine, *Ça te passera avec l’âge*, Flammarion: 2006, pp. 93–94
6. Jean-Paul Salles, *ibid.*, p. 52
7. Pierre Frank, “Mai 68: première phase de la révolution socialiste française”
8. Pierre Frank, *ibid*
9. Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, “Mai 68 in Frankreich” in *1968: Vom Ereignis zum Mythos*, Frankfurt am Main: 2008, p. 25
10. archplus 183, Zeitschrift für Architektur und Städtebau, May 2007

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