

1968: Revolutionary year

John Molyneux

As Marx says at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto* the class struggle which runs through history is ‘an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight’. It does not move in a gradually rising steady line upwards. Rather it rumbles on at a subterranean level, taking hesitant steps into the light followed by retreats back underground and then renewed surges. Sometimes it oscillates sharply up and down, and sometimes it explodes. It is always a battle: they attack us and we resist; we resist and they counter attack. The war is always waged on many fronts – economic, political, ideological and military - and over many different issues, small and great.

The tempo of the struggle is always different in different countries and in different parts of the one country. At any particular moment one country or one town can seem to be THE revolutionary country or THE revolutionary city: France and Paris in 1848 and 1871; Russia and Petrograd in 1917; Turin in 1919, Spain and Barcelona in 1936; Portugal in 1974, Egypt and Cairo in 2011. But the underlying rhythm of the struggle is international. Looking back on history we can see: the (bourgeois) revolutionary wave in the last quarter of the 18th century which stretches from the American and French Revolutions to the Haitian slave revolt, and 1798 and the United Irishmen; the wave of revolutions, part bourgeois, part proletarian, that strikes Europe in 1848 with centres in Paris, Berlin and Vienna but also the Chartists in Britain and the Young Irelanders in Ireland; there was the wave of industrial struggle before the First World War that included the IWW in the US, the rise of syndicalism in France, the ‘Great Unrest’ in

Britain and the Lockout in Dublin, followed by the anti-war revolutionary wave running from the Easter Rising of 1916 through the Russian Revolution, the Hungarian Revolution, the German Revolution of 1919, the Italian Red Years, the Irish Revolution to the ebb tide setting in with the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923. More recently we saw the surge of 2011 encompassing the Tunisian Revolution, the Egyptian Revolution and the other risings of the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain and the Occupy movement in the US and elsewhere.

1968 was such a moment. In country after country, from Vietnam to Mexico, from Chicago to Derry volcanoes of resistance erupted on what were largely an unsuspecting media and public. But despite their volcanic character it is clear, looking back, that the eruptions of 1968 did not come out of the blue. They marked the coming together of various mass movements that had been developing over the previous decade: the Black movement and the anti-racist movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the international student movement, the youth counter-culture, the beginnings of a new women’s movement, the emergent new left and underneath it all a rumbling but rising workers’ movement in the factories and workplaces. These movements, in turn, had deep roots in the molecular social changes gathering pace since the Second World War.

The roots of ‘68

The decade of the 1950s, and to lesser extent the early sixties, was a political desert for the left. Not, of course, in what was then called the Third World where there was

the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and numerous other developing national liberation struggles, but certainly in North America and Western Europe, capitalism's heartlands. Especially in the US, where the McCarthyite witch-hunts had routed most of the Left, but also in most of Europe there was a stifling conservative consensus. America saw eight years of relatively untroubled rule for the blandly conservative 'Ike' (President Eisenhower). In Britain Churchill gave way to Eden and Eden to MacMillan who confidently informed the British people that they had 'never had it so good' and secured 13 years of Tory rule. In France General De Gaulle reigned supreme after extricating the country from the Algerian War and in Germany it was the Christian Democrat, Konrad Adenauer, who served as chancellor from 1949-63. In Portugal and Spain the old fascist dictators, Salazar and Franco, lingered on without major challenge, until 1968 and 1975 respectively.

Underpinning this stability was the Post-War economic boom, conditioned by the permanent arms economy whereby the major powers devoted vast quantities of capital to investment in armaments and thus offset the tendency to over accumulation of capital and the declining rate of profit. The result was summarised by the Marxist economist Michael Kidron in his 1970 book *Western Capitalism Since the War*:

High employment, fast economic growth and stability are now considered normal in western capitalism. Half the working population have known nothing else... the system as a whole has never grown so fast for so long as since the war – twice as fast between 1950 and 1964 – as between 1913 and 1950, and nearly half as fast again as during the generation before that.¹

But this boom, long and powerful as it was, also contained the seeds of its own destruction. The permanent arms economy rested overwhelmingly on the massive arms spending undertaken by the US, to a lesser extent, Britain. This created an international expansion from which other countries benefitted without themselves having to engage in the armaments expenditure while the US and British arms spending sustained growth but at a slower rate. The consequence was that Japan and Germany grew at a much faster rate than the US or Britain and by the late sixties emerged

as major competitors. This in turn induced the US and Britain to cut their arms budgets (in relative not absolute terms) thus allowing the falling rate of profit to resume and economic growth to begin to falter in the second half of the sixties to be followed by a full blown international recession in 1973.²

The long boom also generated a number of gradually accumulating social contradictions. It created, in the first place a serious labour shortage in the capitalist heartlands. This led to: a) a shift in population from the countryside to the towns; b) large scale immigration from colonies and former colonies; c) the entrance of large numbers of women, especially married women, into the workforce d) the increasing empowerment at workplace level of rank-and-file trade unionism (due to bosses' need for their labour); e) an expanded demand for a more educated workforce which in turn involved a big expansion of higher education, i.e. more students. All of these developments interacted with each other and created the conditions for a radical explosion.

Thus in many countries: Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and, indeed, Ireland the post-war conservative hegemony rested in large part on social structures rooted in the countryside. The massive process of urbanisation undermined those structures. In France in 1950 30% of the population still worked on the land. By 1967 this had fallen to only 16.7%. In Italy in 1950 the figure was 40%, falling to 25% by 1967 and in Ireland the proportion fell from 40.1% in 1950 to 30% in 1967.³ Even in Britain which had been urbanised back in the 19th century it was still the case in the fifties and sixties that the old Tory Party and much of the ruling class still had a substantial base in the countryside and traded on the habits of deference engendered by rural life. In the US the most important feature of the process of urbanisation was the drawing of Southern black peasants and small farmers into both the Southern and Northern cities, thus creating a Black working class and small educated middle class, unwilling to accept the traditional Jim Crow racism and, most importantly, with the ability to resist it. It was not only the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that laid the ground for '68 but also the huge uprisings in Watts in 1965 (34 dead) and Detroit in 1967 (43 dead).

The entrance of more and more women into the workforce and the expansion of higher education,

including an influx of female students, created a huge pool of women whose life experience was radically at odds with the traditional view of women as simply mothers and housewives in the home, not supposed to have opinions or voices of their own, and certainly not expected to demand equal pay. How this interacted with the growing power of workers in the workplace can be seen in the Dagenham women's equal pay strike of 1968, which was a crucial landmark in the struggle for Equal Pay in Britain.⁴

The demand for educated labour and the expansion of higher education had effects on the student body that were qualitative as well as quantitative. It meant, on the one hand, the appearance for the first time in universities and colleges of a layer of students from working class backgrounds. The majority of students continued to be drawn from the middle classes and above but the working class presence altered the social and ideological atmosphere in the student body. At the same time students of the sixties could no longer look forward to an assured position within the establishment after they graduated. Thus there emerged a generation of students at least open to questioning the received political wisdom and even, in certain circumstances, identifying actively with working class struggles. This generation was very different from the generation of students many of whom had famously scabbed on the General Strike of 1926.⁵

As a result the 1960s saw the birth, internationally, of a student movement that was well underway before 1968. Some of its key moments included the publication of the Port Huron Statement of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in 1962, the birth of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley in December 1964, the Free University of Berlin in June 1966 and the London School of Economics sit-in in 1967. White American students were also interacting with, and being radicalised by, the Black Civil Rights Movement particularly through going to the South to assist in voter registration drives.

Other interactions that were important in preparing the way for 1968 were those between the anti-colonial movements in Africa (Ghana, Congo, Algeria, South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe etc), the Black movement in the US and the relatively new Black (largely West Indian) community in Britain. These connections exist at many levels. Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-

Violent Coordinating Committee in the South, Black Power and then the Black Panthers, cites Algerian revolutionary Franz Fanon as his patron saint. Malcolm X tours Africa and goes to Mecca and visits Britain, speaking at the Oxford Union and inspiring a Black nationalist movement in Britain. The sit-in at the London School of Economics was precipitated by the appointment as its Director of the racist Sir Walter Adams from Rhodesia.

Most important of all, globally, was the interaction between the American war in Vietnam and the international anti-war movement. I will deal with this shortly when I come to discuss the actual events of 1968.

First, however, it is necessary to say something about what became known at the time as 'the counter culture'. The underlying social changes described above produced a broad radicalisation that was reflected culturally in a multitude of forms throughout the sixties. There was the emergence of a series of youth subcultures - beats, flower children, hippies, etc - most significantly, of course, in the US but each with massive international resonance and certain local variations (beatniks, mods etc) producing such phenomena as 'the summer of love' in Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and widespread experimentation with psychedelic drugs. This was closely associated with waves of musical innovation from Bob Dylan, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, The Doors, Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone and much else, with the confluence of the youth culture and the music being most visible in the famous festivals such as Woodstock.

If the music, always the art form closest to the life of young people, stands out as most memorable and most representative of the period, it is also the case that no aspect of art and culture remained unaffected. Whether it was in the poetry of Ginsburg, Ferlinghetti, and Adrian Mitchell; the novels of Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, James Baldwin, or Alan Sillitoe; the films of Godard, Truffaut and Loach, the satire of *That Was The Week That Was* and *Private Eye*, or the comedy of Lenny Bruce or Dick Gregory or the 'anti-psychiatry' of R.D. Laing, the radicalism of the sixties leaves its mark. Of course this cultural radicalism is not at all the same thing as revolt on the streets or socialist politicisation, but the counter culture shapes the atmosphere of the time and forms an important back drop to the events of 1968 and from

time to time there are direct intersections such as at the International Poetry Festival at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965, presided over by Allen Ginsberg, when Adrian Mitchell read his dramatic poem 'Tell me lies about Vietnam'⁶ or the Dialectics of Liberation Conference in 1967 organised by R.D. Laing and David Cooper and addressed by, amongst others, Stokely Carmichael, Paul Sweezy and Herbert Marcuse.⁷

From Saigon to Paris

The Vietnamese people had been fighting for their independence since the mid-1940s, first against the French whom they defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, then, after a short interval, against the pro-imperialist South Vietnamese government and their US backers. In 1960 President Kennedy sent 3200 US troops to Vietnam and from there on the war escalated rapidly. By 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, the number of US troops had risen to 18,000. By 1965 it was 180,000 and by 1967, 500,000. Throughout this time the line from the US government was, naturally, that America was winning and that, as they said at the time 'there was light at the end of the tunnel'. In the mindsets of mainstream America of the time it could hardly be otherwise. How could the might of the USA not be about to crush a small country full of Communist peasants?

Then, on 31 January 1968, came the Tet Offensive. 'Tet' is the Vietnamese New Year. In this uprising, led by the National Liberation Front, fighting reached the heart of Saigon. Jonathan Neale describes what happened:

On Tet they [the NLF] struck, throwing in everybody they could. The tunnels of Cu Chi were the base for the assault on Saigon. Fighters flooded into the city. That morning sappers from the tunnels assaulted the American Embassy in the heart of Saigon and held part of it for hours. The world saw the television pictures.⁸

In military terms the Tet Offensive failed. They did not capture Saigon and the NLF guerrillas were forced to retreat suffering heavy casualties but in political terms its effect was immense. Images flashed round America and the world that were undeniable and 'unspinnable'. Far from being on the verge of victory the US forces were in fact under siege in the enclave of Saigon. The government's lies were exposed for all to see.

Because of the growing draft and lengthening casualty list, combined with the radicalising Black Revolt, the War was already massively unpopular in the US. 300,000 had marched against the War in New York in April 1967. Now this opposition intensified and spread internationally. Opposition to the Vietnam War became the great unifying factor of the global youth and student revolt and runs like a red thread through all the events of 1968.

In Britain, for example, it produced the famous Grosvenor Square demonstration of the 17 March. Post war Britain had seen some large trade union and CND demonstrations but this was different. Called by the far left Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, under the militant slogan of 'Victory to the NLF!', the march of tens of thousands of, mostly, students and young people charged down Charing X Road, spontaneously taking the whole breadth of the street and, when it faced a line of police blocking its path to Grosvenor Square and the US Embassy, unceremoniously swept the cordon aside and triumphantly occupied the Square. Fearing that the crowd might want to storm the Embassy, the police counter-attacked on horseback and in force. The result was a pitched battle the like of which London had not seen for decades. But this was just one example. Similar processes and similar confrontations were developing in Germany, with Rudi Dutschke and the SDS, in Japan with the Zengakuron student movement, in Italy, in France and elsewhere.

Back in America the combination of the War, the student revolt and the radicalisation of the Black movement was throwing the whole of society and its political system into crisis. On 12 March the anti-War Senator Eugene McCarthy, the Bernie Sanders of the day, very nearly defeated the sitting President, Lyndon Johnson, in the New Hampshire Primary- an unheard of occurrence - and in Wisconsin he won by 57 - 38%. On 31 March, a deeply troubled Johnson announced he would not be seeking re-election. Then on 4 April Martin Luther King was assassinated - an event that was followed by largely Black riots across many of America's cities. King himself was part of the shift to the left occurring in the US. In 1967 he had come out against the Vietnam War and at the time of his death he was leading a campaign against poverty and supporting a sanitation workers strike. But his assassination also signified to many that to achieve real change, to win

Black liberation, it would be necessary to go beyond the great Civil Rights leader's politics of non-violence and passive resistance to a more revolutionary position. For many, the politics of Martin Luther King were giving way to the politics of the Black Panthers.

Meanwhile in France the student revolt was growing rapidly and, along with issues about male/female access to dormitories and overcrowding in lecture halls, the Vietnam War was central to this. We see here the interplay of immediate local, you could call them 'bread and butter' issues with big global questions that was, and often still is, characteristic of the student movement. Writing at the time Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall describe what happened:

On 20 November 1967 Nanterre witnessed the largest student strike in France to date. Ten thousand students took part. On 13 December university students all over France held a one-day strike and six secondary schools joined in.

On 21 February 1968 a mass demonstration of university and secondary school students took place in Paris. One of its acts was to rename the Latin Quarter 'The Heroic Vietnam Quarter'. On 22 March a mass demonstration took place in Nanterre protesting against the arrest of a number of militants in the previous demonstration. On this occasion the March 22 movement was formed. The students occupied the university.

On 29 March the students of Nanterre decided to hold a day of political discussion at the university. The rector closed the university for two days, during which large-scale clashes took place between members of March 22 movement and the fascists of the Occident group.

May 2 and 3 were to be days of demonstration against imperialism. On 2 May the rector again closed the university. Disciplinary procedures were initiated against Daniel Cohn-Bendit and six other members of the March 22 movement. On 3 May a meeting of 500 students took place in the Sorbonne. Several revolutionary organisations participated: JCR, FER, the March 22 movement and others. The rector of the University, Roche, called the police in at 4 p.m. The Sorbonne was invaded by the police and all the students arrested. Immediately after, spontaneous demonstrations began in the Latin Quarter and they fought the police until 11 p.m.⁹

This was the start of what has gone down in history as 'May '68' or 'the May events'.

The May events

Following the mass arrests on 3 May there were further student demonstrations on 6, 7 and 8 May of increasing size, with 'Libérez nos comrades!' as a key slogan. The demo on 7 May began in the Latin Quarter and then set off on a spontaneous 'long march' across Paris gaining support as it went and ending in the evening with 50,000 on the Champs-Élysées. Then on Friday, 10 May came the fateful 'Night of the Barricades'. More than 50,000 students, school students and young workers, gathered at Place Denfert-Rochereau, south of the Latin Quarter, and headed for the Boulevard Saint-Michel where they were met with a huge force of CRS riot police. The Battle of the Barricades which ensued saw street fighting not experienced in a western European city since the end of the Second World War. It raged from 2am in the middle of the night to 7am in the morning. The CRS acted with their customary brutality, using water cannons, CS gas and baton charges, beating people at will, and the demonstrators resisted by tearing up and hurling cobblestones from the streets and building over sixty barricades. What was particularly significant was that, witnessing the behaviour of the cops, the local residents started to actively sympathise with the revolt, handing out food and drink, throwing water on the pavements to neutralize the gas and taking the injured into their homes. This was an important sign of what was to come.

The next day representatives of UNEF (National Union of Students), the CGT (the main trade union confederation controlled by the French Communist Party) and the CFDT (the next biggest union) called a general strike for Monday 13 May in protest at the police brutality. On that day 10 million workers came out on strike – the whole country was shut down – and a million workers and students marched through Paris. The main slogan was 'Adieu de Gaulle!' But it was what happened next that was really historic.

The union leaders, who had not initially been sympathetic to the students but had been pushed into action by grassroots pressure over the police brutality, assumed that after the one-day strike the workers would return to work and it would be back to business as usual. There would have been, as so often before and since,



Strike vote at Renault May 1968.

a token protest – very fine in itself but no real threat to the system. In the event many workers did not go back to work and sections of them, beginning with the Sud Aviation factory in Nantes on 14 May, declared an unlimited strike and started to occupy their workplaces – like the students had occupied the Sorbonne. Once this process started it spread like wildfire. Again Cliff and Birchall describe the sequence of events:

Next day, 15 May, Renault-Cléon was occupied.

On 16 May the strike and occupation movement spread to all Renault factories. At Billancourt the strikers declared their demands: for a minimum of 1,000 francs a month, immediate return without loss of pay to 40 hours a week, retirement at 60, full pay for the days of the strike, trade union freedom in the factory. These demands were taken up by all the large enterprises in the country.

In the footsteps of Renault all the engineering factories, the car and aeroplane plants, went on strike and were occupied by the workers. On 19 May the trams stopped along with mail and telegraph services. The subway and bus services in Paris followed suit. The strike hit the mines, shipping, Air

France, etc, etc.

On 20 May the strike became general. Some 9 million workers were now on strike. People who had never struck before were involved – Folies Bergères dancers, soccer players, journalists, saleswomen, technicians. Red flags fluttered from all places of work. Not a tricolore was to be seen.¹⁰

It was this that changed everything and made 1968 historic, that transformed dramatic and heroic street theatre into a real challenge to the system. The revolutionary carnival atmosphere in the Latin Quarter continued – the Odéon, the National Theatre, was handed over to the students by its Director, the legendary Jean Louis Barrault, and turned into a permanent 24/7 debating chamber, and the students at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Art) made it into a factory for the production of those still iconic silk screen posters which flooded the streets of Paris. But it was the mass action by the working class, in the workplaces where profits are made and real power lies, that constituted a potential revolutionary challenge to capitalism in a way that was simply not possible for students however ‘revolutionary’ their ideas and aspirations might be.

This fact is lost in many of the somewhat romantic and nostalgic accounts of May '68, which focus on the imaginative slogans of the students and the alleged role of the avant-garde Situationist International but it was widely understood at the time¹¹ as can be seen in many of the posters.

But, of course, concentrating mainly on the students and ignoring or down playing the role of the workers comes naturally to various academics and journalists and makes it possible to view the whole struggle as a glorious 'utopian' illusion. The revolutionary potential of the situation was also denied, from a different angle, by the trade union leaders and the leadership of the French Communist Party (PCF) who insisted that the workers only wanted economic concessions not workers' power or social revolution. Georges Seguy, Secretary General of the CGT wrote:

No, the 10 million workers on strike did not demand power for the working class but better conditions of life and work, and the overwhelming majority expressed their attachment to democracy in their opposition to personal rule.¹²

Certainly it is true that May '68 in France was not yet a fully formed revolutionary situation comparable to September-October 1917 in Russia or October 1923 in Germany in which a majority of the working class were ready to support insurrection but that is not the argument. The argument is that the general strike could have developed in that direction but that the trade union and Communist leaders, like the above mentioned Georges Seguy, did their very best to ensure that the movement didn't go beyond limited economic demands and that the general strike was brought to an end, as rapidly as possible, on that basis. The reason this was effective is that the PCF was then the dominant party in the French working class and ran the main union, the CGT, whereas the revolutionary left groups were tiny and only had a base among students. Again, the PCF, which from the start had been hostile to the student revolutionaries, used its stewards to physically prevent the students and the 'ultra lefts' from reaching and influencing the workers.¹³ In addition the PCF argued to call off the strike in favour of defeating De Gaulle and the right in the coming general election set (by De Gaulle) for 23 June. In the event, with the movement demobilised and demoralised, the Gaullists

won the election easily and the PCF actually lost votes. The leaders then claimed that the election result proved there was no revolutionary possibility and blamed the left.¹⁴ *L'Humanité*, the PCF newspaper, wrote that, 'Each barricade, each car set on fire, swung hundreds of thousands of votes to the gaullists'.¹⁵

In reality what the May Events showed was that contrary to the almost unanimous opinion of sociologists, journalists and many leftists, the working class in an advanced European capitalist society retained a capacity for revolutionary action. What it also showed was the need for consciously revolutionary organisation and leadership not external to but within the working class if that capacity was to be developed and realised rather than squandered.

The defeat in France, and it was a heavy defeat, had serious consequences for the French left in the years ahead. Revolutionary groups were banned and many demoralised intellectuals moved to the right, spawning the phenomenon of Post-Modernism with its scepticism towards all 'grand narratives'.¹⁶ However, internationally the May Events continued to have an inspirational effect and 1968 carried on being a year of radical upheaval.

From Prague to Mexico – via Derry

In 1968 so much was happening in so many different places that recording all the important developments, or weaving them into a coherent narrative, in one article is impossible. Thus unmentioned so far is the fact that Black Panther, Bobby Seale, was arrested in February, that student rebellion forced the closure of Rome University in March and that German SDS leader Rudi Dutschke was shot and nearly killed in April, that there was a three month long occupation of Tokyo University, and that in Britain there was student unrest at the Universities of Essex, Hull, Bradford, Leeds and Guildford and Hornsey Art Schools. On 5 June Robert Kennedy, who had come out against the Vietnam War and was waging a campaign for Presidency based on radical rhetoric, was assassinated in California. In July the trial came to a head of Dr Benjamin Spock and four others for advocating resistance to the Vietnam War Draft and Dr Spock was sentenced to two years in prison for 'treason'. When you remember that Spock was the author *The Common Sense Book of Baby and*

Child Care, which had sold 50 million copies and served as a guide to a whole generation of American parents and turned its author into a 'national treasure,' you get some idea of the impact this trial had in the US. All of these events contributed to the mounting atmosphere of apocalyptic crisis.

The next major event of world importance came on 20 August with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. It is not possible here to go into the complex history that led to up to this¹⁷ except to say that although the dynamics in the Eastern bloc were different it was not totally disconnected from the crisis and wind of change in the West. In January 1968 Alexander Dubcek was elected 1st Secretary of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, replacing the diehard Stalinist Antonin Novotny who had ruled the country since 1953 and inaugurating the process of liberalisation known as 'the Prague Spring'.¹⁸ Leonid Brezhnev and the Soviet state were having none of it. On the night of the 20-21 August their tanks rolled into Prague. The invasion of Czechoslovakia, though it restored Stalinist control in the short term, was nevertheless a major landmark in the slow dissolution of the Soviet empire that proceeded from Berlin in 1953, through Hungary 1956, the Solidarnosc rising in Poland 1980-81 to the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1991. But it was also very significant within the specific politics of 1968. It divided the international Communist movement in such a way that supporters of the invasion and hard line Stalinists are still known on the left as 'Tankies' and it reinforced the anti-Stalinist inclinations of the young generation of '68ers. Let me put this in personal terms: for me and many like me it was very important that in 1968 we protested at both the US embassy and the Russian embassy, against Vietnam War and against the crushing of the Prague Spring¹⁹, just as in 1956 it was important for the birth of the New Left that they protested both Suez and Hungary. It meant we had anti-Stalinism in our political DNA and put flesh on the bones of the slogan, 'Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism!'

No sooner had Russian tanks ensconced themselves in the streets of Prague than attention swung back to America with the Chicago Democratic Party Convention. Following LBJ's decision not to seek re-election the US Democratic Party had to select a new presidential

candidate. With Bobby Kennedy dead, the Democratic Party bosses (as in 2017 with Sanders and Clinton) set about ensuring the victory of a 'safe' pro-war candidate, Hubert Humphrey. Meanwhile the forces of the anti-war movement and the left mobilised to protest on 28 August. About 10,000 demonstrators gathered and the response of the Chicago authorities headed by Mayor Richard Daley (the epitome of an old time machine politician) was to unleash a police riot that mercilessly beat the protestors of the streets – in full view of the world's media. Eight leaders of the protest, including Black Panther Bobby Seale and peace activist David Dellinger were arrested and charged with conspiracy. The spectacular show trials of the Chicago Eight, then Seven, rumbled on throughout the year with scenes of Bobby Seale being bound and gagged in the dock for answering back against Judge Hoffman.

On 7 September there was a protest that might seem insignificant compared with many of the events we have been discussing but in fact was a very significant harbinger of things to come: a women's liberation protest at the Miss America Beauty Contest at Atlantic City. The new women's movement only fully took off in the early seventies but its roots definitely lay in the struggles of the sixties. A particular catalyst in America was the serious and often overt sexism that was common within the Black, student and anti-war movements of the time. Women activists who had made the journey to the South to fight for Civil Rights or campaigned against the War started to ask 'What about our liberation?' and this in turn resonated much more widely. It was similar with the birth of the Gay movement in the Stonewall Riots of June 28, 1969. The fact that what was born was called 'the women's liberation movement' and the Gay Liberation Front is an echo of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam and testifies to the seminal role of the War in radical consciousness.

Then in October came a sequence of events that both illustrate the profoundly international character of the struggle in 1968 and have resonated down the years.

The 1968 Olympics were scheduled for Mexico City. The highly repressive Mexican Government had spared no expense in what was a very impoverished country. On 2 October about 10,000 students and school students gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelco district of Mexico City. Among their slogans

was the cry, 'No to the Olympics, We want Revolution!'. The regime, unprepared to permit any interference in their costly spectacle, unleashed the security police and army, complete with snipers. More than 1300 people were arrested that day and an unspecified number – some estimates are as high as 3-400, were killed. Three days later, on the other side of the world, on 5 October, a crowd assembled in Derry to demand their Civil Rights. The Civil Rights movement, directly inspired by the Civil Rights struggle in the Deep South, and the Derry Housing Action Committee were making such extreme demands as 'One Man, One Vote!' – against the systematic gerrymandering that produced a permanent Unionist dominated City Council in a majority Nationalist town – and 'No discrimination in Housing!' – in a state where such discrimination was endemic. At the Rally, which was banned by the Northern Ireland authorities, Eamonn McCann rose to address the crowd when, he recalls, a youngster called Mickey Devine shouted out 'McCann! What about the Mexican students?'²⁰ a cry which inspired Eamonn's call for defiance. The deeply sectarian Royal Ulster Constabulary proceeded to batter the demonstration off the streets with blatant brutality with the result that 5 October has gone down in history as marking the beginning of 'The O' which rocked Northern Ireland for the next thirty years. But just one week later we are back in Mexico where the government's hope for a trouble free Olympics was shattered for all time by the dramatic gesture of two Black American athletes.

When Tommie Smith and John Carlos, respectively Gold and Bronze medallists, in the 200m Sprint mounted the victory podium they raised their black gloved fists in a Black Power salute. This extraordinary gesture of defiance sped instantly round the whole world. Unparalleled in sporting history except for Muhammed Ali's conversion to the Nation of Islam and refusal of the draft to Vietnam, this action seemed to sum up in one single image the whole spirit of 1968.

Those who reject the central revolutionary message of 1968 will depict, and dismiss, it as primarily a student affair. They should be reminded that politically speaking 1968 began with peasant fighters in Vietnam and ended in Derry and Mexico City, with its highest point being a general strike of ten million workers. Moreover, although 1968 came to a chronological end

the struggles launched in that year did not cease and in many cases reached their highest levels in the years that followed: for example the Italian workers struggles in the 'hot autumn' of 1969, the struggle in Chile in 1972, the industrial struggle in Britain in 1972 and early 1974, the Portuguese Revolution in 1974. Only in the mid-to-late seventies was the system able to restore its stability largely through a series of deals with social democracy and trade union leaders.²¹

Lessons and conclusions

When Marxists draw 'the lessons' of historical events they have a very convenient habit of confirming said Marxist's current political perspective. I guess this is no exception but I will say in my defence that these are lessons and conclusions which, personally speaking, I drew at the time – in the immediate aftermath of the the May Events. Essentially there were three:

- 1 Revolution is possible
- 2 The agent of revolution will be the working class
- 3 For revolutionary victory there needs to be built a revolutionary organisation based in the working class.

To these we can add a number of others: the role of anti-imperialist struggle in provoking rebellion within the imperialist powers themselves; the particular role of students as a catalyst of change and fertilizer of the revolutionary movement; the central role of fighting racism and other struggles of the oppressed in any revolutionary crisis. But all these 'lessons' only matter if in some sense the events of 1968 can be repeated.

Now, obviously, if we are speaking of mechanical or exact repetition this is clearly not possible. But will we see new revolutionary years, years in which revolts and struggles inspire and inform each other, leaping national and indeed continental boundaries? I am convinced we will. I have argued the case for this at length elsewhere and will simply say here the underlying crisis of the system both economically and environmentally is now much more severe than in 1968 and the international working class is now much larger and potentially stronger. Of course sceptics will produce no end of reasons as to why the working class will not, will never, revolt but they did exactly that before 1968. They were wrong then, they will be wrong again.

1 See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kidron/works/1970/westcap/intro.htm>

2 This is a highly condensed summary of the analysis most fully presented in Chris Harman, *Explaining the Crisis*, London 1987.

3 Figures from Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, London 1988, pp17-18.

4 We have seen a recent reprise of these processes in Ireland and the consequent spectacular victory in the Repeal referendum. See Marnie Holborow, 'Fighting the sexist system', *Irish Marxist Review* 20.

5 The changed social position of students was very well analyzed at the time in Chris Harman, Richard Kuper, Dave Clark, Andrew Sayers and Martin Shaw, *Education, Capitalism and the Student Revolt*, London 1968. Extracts from this pamphlet are published in *International Socialism* 158, Spring 2018.

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmMCObg_ujc

7 See R.D. Laing and David Cooper ed., *The Dialectics of Liberation*, London 1967.

8 Jonathan Neale, *The American War: Vietnam 1960-1975*, London, Chicago and Sydney, 2001, p.93.

9 Tony Cliff and Ian Birchall, *France: the struggle goes on*, London 1968, p.7.

10 As above p.19

11 Including by the then 19 year old author of this article.

12 Georges Seguy, cited in Cliff and Birchall, as above, p.57.

13 The PCF had a highly disciplined cadre and they literally formed cordons on the mass demonstrations to prevent the students merging with the workers, and when several thousand students marched to the occupied Renault-Billancourt factory they found the gates locked against them.

14 It should be noted that this mode of argument- set out to demobilise the workers and then blame defeat on the demobilised workers and the 'ultra-left' is in no way specific to the Stalinist - reformist French Communist Party but is deployed by union officials and reformists everywhere. In recent years Irish workers have often heard it from the leadership of SIPTU.

15 Cited in Cliff and Birchall, as above, p.67.

16 "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives", Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition*, Minnesota, 1984. Especially, of course, the 'grand narratives' of socialism and Marxism.

17 For an excellent account see Chris Harman, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945-83*, London 1988.

18 It would be a mistake to see Dubcek as either the main driver of this process or its 'hero'. There was a serious economic crisis that impelled sections of the ruling class to move towards reform and Dubcek, previously a run of the

mill bureaucrat was merely the figurehead, moreover as the movement for change gathered steam he did his best, in classic reformist fashion, to restrain it. See Chris Harman, as above, pp.187-244.

19 Of course for us the protests against the Vietnam War were larger and more important - after all as Karl Liebknecht said 'The main enemy is at home!'.

20 See Eamonn McCann's verbal account of this episode https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1pPCP2nako.

21 For a superb account and analysis not only of 1968 itself but of the social changes leading up to it and the struggles that followed see Chris Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, London 1988. This book, by far the best on the year and the period has recently been republished by Bookmarks in London.

22 See John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*, London 2017, especially The Introduction and Chapters 1, 3 and 7.