

Trade Unionism in France

- - a Marxist view

Information Bulletin

edited by Barbara Zeluck

based on Lutte Ouvrière

documents, articles & interviews

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TRADE UNIONISM IN FRANCE

-- a Marxist view

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Introduction

This pamphlet is devoted to important historical data on the modern French working class, as presented and analyzed by Lutte Ouvrière.

One high point in Lutte Ouvrière's history was the leadership provided by L. O. (at that time called Union Communiste) comrades in the first major French strike to take place after World War II. Some comrades are already aware that in 1971 L. O. published a booklet, La grève Renault d'avril-mai 1947. Included here is my condensed translation of that booklet.

To set the strike in a political framework, the booklet is preceded by some historical background, an explanation of the unique aspects of trade union structure in France, and a few paragraphs on Renault's "pilot" role in the class struggle there. The pamphlet is followed by a summary account of the 1971 Renault strike. This material is drawn from issues of L. O.'s weekly newspaper as well as from answers by L. O. comrades to questions I posed to them at the time of the recent International Conference.

L. O. opened the Conference with presentations of its views on four topics. Of major importance was its presentation on "Building the Revolutionary Party". I have added to that presentation additional clarifying material obtained from discussion with L. O. comrades.

The pamphlet concludes with L. O.'s own translation of their documents on trade union work today in France. The first, "Revolutionaries and Trade Union Activity", was presented at the International Conference and published in the first issue of L. O.'s bi-lingual magazine, Class Struggle. It was followed by a two-part article, "What is to be Done in the Unions?", on the CGT in issue #3, on the CFDT in issue #5.

((Remarks in double brackets)) are my own. The rest is L. O.

Barbara Zeluck

Historical Background

Several organizations joined in 1905 to form the French Socialist Party (known as the SFIO, Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, French Section of the Workers' (or Second) International). It became popularly known as the SP only in 1971 when it reorganized and moved to the right. The French SP remains affiliated to the Second International.

In 1914 all 101 SFIO deputies in parliament voted in favor of financing the French government in World War I.

In 1920 a majority of the SFIO Convention delegates voted to transform themselves into the Communist Party and to join the Communist International. The French CP was not to become a sizeable force until the mid-1930s when the SP topped a whole series of working class betrayals by assuming the premiership of the June 1936 Popular Front government.

Just before taking over as Prime Minister, Leon Blum stated to his party that once in power, the Socialists must act within the framework of the Constitution, "legally, loyally, without committing any tricks like profiting from our presence within the government in order to transform the exercise of power into the conquest of power". Later he analyzed his behavior as prime minister, "The circumstances were so anguishing, we were so close to civil war that our

only hope was for a sort of intervention by providence; I mean the coming to power of a man with sufficient power of persuasion over the working class to make them listen to reason and not use their power..."

The CP supported fully, but did not participate in, the Popular Front government.

In 1934 the SFIO had 130,000 odd members to the CP's 30,000. By the end of 1936 the CP held first place in the working class with 150,000 members plus 100,000 in its youth movement. It was the CP leader Maurice Thorez who called off the 6 million strong 1936 general strike.

During World War II the SFIO disappeared as a political force. More than 100 of its parliamentary deputies voted full powers to the Petain collaborationist government. Meanwhile the CP, through its activities in the Resistance, became known as the most radical opponent of the Vichy government and the best fighters for French nationalism.

The "Liberation" (from German occupation) found the Stalinists in the leadership of tens of thousands of armed resistance fighters. At a moment when the bourgeois state apparatus was in ruin, DeGaulle recognized that without Communist participation a bourgeois government could not hope to survive. The CP gladly participated, stating, "We, who are Communists, we now formulate no demands of a socialist or communist nature. We say that at the risk of seeming lukewarm in the eyes of those who constantly mouth the word revolution."

The CP never even dreamed of organizing workers' militia. The Resistance fighters were turned into "patriotic militia" who for a while played the role of a "parallel" police, choosing as their principal victims revolutionaries whom they called "Hitlero-Trotskyists". On October 28, 1944, DeGaulle demanded the dissolution of the "patriotic militia". In January 1945 Thorez, on his return from spending the war in Russia, agreed, saying, "Only one state, only one army, only one police". DeGaulle's Minister of the Interior set up eleven companies of riot police made up entirely of Stalinists.

The SP played a more "radical" role in the post-war government than did the CP. When DeGaulle in the summer of 1945 announced his intention of holding a referendum to limit the powers of the coming Constitutional Assembly, the SP ministers threatened to resign -- and were dissuaded by the Communists.

The CP won 26% of the votes cast in the October '45 elections, the highest won by any party. Together with the SP they could have formed a majority government, but the SP refused to govern without the MRP (Christian Democrats). The Communists were delirious with joy when DeGaulle offered them five ministries, including Armaments, National Economy, Industrial Production, and Labor.

After DeGaulle's January 1946 resignation, the tri-partite government of

the CP, SP, and MRP continued, with some rearrangements, until May 1947. By that time, thanks to the CP's control over the workers, the capitalist economy and government had been reconstructed. By chaining the workers during the period when a revolutionary situation was possible, the CP succeeded in guaranteeing that by 1947 the bourgeoisie no longer needed their services and was free to begin the "Cold War".

It is in this context of increasing capitulation by the CP domestically (as well as internationally, for example in its opposition to Vietnamese independence) that the description of the watershed 1947 Renault strike must be seen.

Moving to the right, surrendering the interests of the working class, the CP was caught up short by a working class explosion in the most important factory in France -- an explosion that threatened the CP with being "outflanked on the left", and with the loss of leadership in this plant to Trotskyist worker cadres.

TRADE UNIONS IN FRANCE

In the United States there is one national trade union federation, the AFL-CIO (though there are a few unions that do not belong to it). When there were two federations, the A. F. L. and the C. I. O., one was a federation of craft unions, the other of industrial unions, and the presence of affiliates of both in the same industry (not to mention the same plant) was the exception rather than the rule. Each international union is an independent entity. The federation is indeed a federation. There has been no "democratic centralism", at least until recently when Meany attempted to enforce the AFL-CIO Council's decision not to endorse McGovern.

In France there are three major trade union "confederations" -- organized on political lines: the Confédération Générale du Travail (General Labor Confederation), the CGT, with 2,360,000 members, now dominated by the CP; the CGT-Force Ouvrière (CGT-Workers' Power), known as FO, with 830,000 members, formerly associated with the SP (which in the past 20 years has effectively disappeared from the plants); and the Confédération Française et Démocratique du Travail (French and Democratic Confederation of Labor), the CFTD, with 706,000 members. There are no closed or union shops. Occasionally, for example during a strike, meetings are called jointly by all the unions in a plant.

Here a little history is in order:

The CGT was formed in 1885. Until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, it was led by Anarcho-Syndicalists. They, like the Social Democrats, supported "national unity" during the war.

After the 1920 formation of the Communist Party, the CGT expelled CPers. The latter set up a "red union", the CGTU, which remained very small until 1935, when, during the Popular Front mass movement, it rejoined the CGT.

Within the CGT the Stalinists were a minority.

During World War II the Stalinists maintained the CGT clandestinely. After the war they had a majority.

From 1945 to 1947 the CP, then a government party, demanded that the workers "roll up your sleeves" to increase production "for the grandeur of France". The Stalinists in the CGT set up a real dictatorship in the plants, including against the reformists.

After May 1947, although the CP had been expelled from the government, the Stalinists retained control of the CGT. The French bourgeoisie needed to create a union able to be integrated into the state. The reformist leaders in the CGT made loud and pretentious noises about the lack of democracy in the CGT, and led a split. They took a number of members with them, including the Anarcho-Syndicalists, in setting up Force Ouvrière.

The extreme anti-communism of FO, in spite of a presence within it of a left wing formed by Anarcho-Syndicalists and Trotskyists ((most notably in the Nantes-St. Nazaire area, where the OCI is relatively strong)), its advanced integration into the state apparatus, explain fully the lack of confidence it enjoys within the working class, above all within the industrial proletariat. Moreover, the extreme weakness of its machine, its lack of militants, often makes it a negligible force in the plants.

F. O. could never really play the role the government had designed for it, even though it was overtly favored until 1968. The bourgeoisie needed a new tool in the workers' movement.

In 1919 the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (French Confederation of Catholic Workers), the CFTC, had been formed. Created by Catholic capitalists with the agreement of the Church, it was composed of office workers, foremen and their assistants. Led by a Catholic hierarchy, it was known as a "yellow union".

In the 1960s there was a small upswing in the Catholic worker and youth movements. The CFTC became more active and recruited some workers who were neither Stalinists nor members of F. O., F. O. being considered "too yellow".

The bourgeoisie then made the decision to favor the CFTC as being more attractive than FO. That required that it abandon its Catholic character. In 1964 it therefore changed its name and became the CFDT. It grew principally at the expense of FO.

Opposing the CGT, the CFDT took on a "gauchiste" (ultra-left) flavor. Like the left-Social Democratic party in France, the PSU, it favors "workers' self-management". For example, it demands control over firings. For revolutionaries, this must mean control by all the workers over employer

decisions. But, picked up by the reformists, this demand loses all its value as a tool with which to mobilize the workers for struggle and simply comes to mean that union activists will decide who will and who won't be fired -- according to "fairer" criteria than those used by the boss. In fact, that kind of "self-management" would lead to the activists' taking responsibility for doing the firing in place of the boss, and has nothing to do with the task of trade unionists, the task of involving all the workers in a direct, and therefore (from the boss' point of view) "unfair" way in this control... and therefore in the struggle.

The CFDT has always had "reactionary" politics. Being a minority union, it is free to mouth revolutionary phrases. On every important question, however, it lines up with the CGT.

French unions are weak compared to those in the U. S., despite their "communist" leadership.

First, their rights were not won in struggle, but accorded by law -- notably in conscious collaboration between DeGaulle, representing the bourgeoisie, and the Stalinists -- in order to block rank and file combativity.

For example, French law provides that for a union to be "official", to have standing in a plant, it must be affiliated to a national union, with certain exceptions.

Besides the 3 major confederations, a rump CFTC remains, and there is the CGC, with 250,000 members, composed of foremen and lower management, and a few "independent" unions. Some are really independent, but the most notable is the company union existing in the Citroen auto plants.

Just as individual militants can be expelled by the union bureaucrats, if militants should happen to win control of a union within a plant, there is nothing to prevent the bureaucrats from lifting "official" status by setting up a new official unit in the same plant or office. This has occurred.

Secondly, all "official" unions in the plant are represented in any bargaining with the company. Competition between the "rival" unions is not as a rule serious ((more on this below)), but the absence of trade union unity within a plant is a sure sign of weakness.

Contracts

While collective bargaining is permitted by French law, it is generally confined to the plant level. Contracts are minimal, most things are not negotiable, and the company most often presents its proposals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Two years ago the government wanted to give the appearance of proposing a new social program. It therefore initiated "Contracts of Progress", beginning in state-owned industries and limited to the industries in strong positions. This

is an effort to limit the risks for small plants. It applies only to a fraction of the working class, and gives them little. For example at Renault, where the pay scale starts at 1200 francs (something less than \$240) a month, most of the workers already earn more than the "Contract of Progress" provides.

The government's primary aim in instituting the "Contracts of Progress" was to create division between the unions. Since the contracts give little, some unions, due to opposition in the ranks, refused to sign. Other unions, being weak, sign. If a union representing very few of the workers in the industry signs a very minimal agreement, which is then put into effect by management, this leads to a fight among the unions in the industry.

Trade Union Structure

Each national Confederation (CGT, CFDT, FO) is made up of national federations, the principal ones being the Metal Workers (which includes steel, auto, etc, large companies like Renault employing 100,000 workers in 5 major and some minor plants being covered by an autonomous division unto itself), the Construction Workers, the Chemical Workers, the Transport Workers (including railroads, trucking, air). There are small Federations in Textile, Food, etc.

The CGT Book Federation has historically been divided into skilled crafts, but there is very little craft division in French unions, including in construction.

In only one industry is there just one union, the CGT on the daily newspapers. There you need a party card to find employment, because the CP controls all hiring.

Besides the national confederations, the CGT has Departmental Unions, comparable to the state federations in the U.S. The CFDT's size being insufficient to support Departmental Unions, it is organized into Regional Unions (cf. New England). All their respective Federations belong to these Departmental or Regional Unions, as well as to the "Local Unions". The latter also include the "autonomous sections" of large plants like Renault in that locality.

The Local Union, e.g. of the CGT, generally has a building housing all the offices of the various federations as well as meeting rooms, coordinates propaganda and "solidarity" collections in support of strikes. Strikers do not receive unemployment insurance.

Membership and Dues

After the war until 1948 up to 40% of the workers in the large plants were union members. But, little by little, the majority of workers became disheartened, and left the unions. Since then only a minority, perhaps 15 to 20%, remain members. But only 1 or 2% come to meetings. In general in a plant employing 3000 workers there are 300 to 500 union members, of whom 15 to 20 come to union meetings. That, of course, facilitates control by the bureau-

cracy. Thus the confederations do not compete with each other to recruit more members.

The CGT Executive Commission or CFDT Council correspond to the local executive board in the U.S. According to the by-laws, members of these bodies are elected annually by a general membership meeting. In practice such meetings never take place, so the bureaucrats designate themselves.

Union dues amount to less than one hour's pay a month. Only one fifth of union members pay regularly. That means that only 4% of the total work force pays union dues. The unions are therefore poor and pay even the bureaucrats very little. ((More on this below)).

Shop Stewards, etc.

(1) Personnel Delegates are by law granted 15 hours a month, paid by management, to circulate in the plant, write up grievances, fight with management about them. (Granted by law, these rights were not won, are not negotiable, and are therefore not included in contracts, unless management voluntarily chooses to include them.) Delegates have one meeting a month with management, the results of which are always nil. (At Renault a delegate and an assistant delegate share 50 hours to do this work.)

Though variable in practice, French law provides one delegate and one assistant for 11-25 workers, 2 delegates and assistants for 26-50, 3 for 51-100, 5 for 101-250, 7 for 251-500, 9 for 501-1000, above 1000 another delegate and assistant for every 500 workers. (There are 38,000 workers at Renault's Billancourt plant).

Personnel delegates are elected annually on the basis of plant-wide proportional representation. All workers, union and non-union, in the plant have the right to vote. Since delegates are elected on a plant-wide basis, most workers in a large plant don't know most of the candidates. Elections are held in two rounds. In the first round, where an absolute majority is necessary to win, only the official unions (i. e. the bureaucrats) have the right to name competing lists of candidates. In the second round, where a plurality is sufficient to win, anyone can run. It is very rare that a candidate not nominated or a delegate not renominated by a union (often a revolutionary) wins. Only half the workers ever vote.

Grievances are usually handled by small strikes, since negotiations get nowhere. If a law is broken by management, the delegate can call in a government Labor Inspector who has the power to enforce the law.

Personnel Delegates, usually one or more from each of the unions in the plant, participate in contract negotiations in small or medium sized plants. In large plants, when there is a real fight going on, they are called in to supplement the Union Delegates.

At best only a formal right exists for members to vote on contracts.

(2) Delegates to the Plant Committee (Comité d'Établissement):

These committees were created in 1945 by DeGaulle and the Communist Ministers, in order to promote collaboration between the delegates and management "for the good of the plant". Management is required to present an account of how the plant is doing to this committee, which theoretically has much to say about the running of the plant.

The committee's principal function, however, is "social": to manage the canteen, vacation colonies, nurseries and nursery schools which may be set up around each plant. These institutions are supported financially by management, the amount contributed depending on whether the individual management has a class struggle or a class collaborationist policy. A generous policy is a way of integrating the unions into the state, of putting pressure on the workers to behave. Michelin, the giant, privately owned tire company, gives nothing, running all these activities itself. Nationalized giants like Renault and Air France donate billions of francs to their Plant Committees.

Plant Committee delegates are elected on a plant wide basis every 2 years. They have 15 hours a week paid by management to administer social activities. Where the CGT is the majority union and elects a majority of these delegates, those managing the canteen buy provisions from CP-controlled companies. The sport clubs, for example, are used as a way of bringing CP cadre together. Delegate administrators don't make a lot of money, but they are excused from factory work for a good part of the year, and are free to spend most of their time on party work.

(3) Committee of Health and Safety:

This committee is named by the Plant Committee. These delegates, unlike the canteen managers, get no time off from work. The committee's rights depend on management policy. After an accident, delegates often have the right only to find out what happened. Some plants allow Safety delegates to walk around the plant and make suggestions to management. They have the legal right only to report the presence of a dangerous machine, not to order that its operation halt. Health and Safety delegates are therefore limited primarily to propaganda work.

(4) Union Representatives:

Along with the right to a room in the plant for its private use, and --for the first time -- the right to sell the union press inside the plant, the right to name its own non-elected, permanent representatives was the big gain won in 1968 by the unions. Union representatives play the same role as either Personnel or Plant Committee Delegates.

Union representatives are given 15 paid hours a week for their work. According to L.O., this is the best job for a revolutionary in the sense that it allows the greatest opportunity for talking politics with the workers. But this job is dependent on the good will of the union bureaucrats, and so is extremely

vulnerable for revolutionaries. On the other hand, once a revolutionary has won election to be Personnel or Plant Committee delegate, it is almost impossible for the bureaucrats to displace him or her.

Since French law protects all delegates from being fired (unless they have committed a serious infraction of the rules) both during and for 6 months after leaving office, L.O. members occasionally run for Plant Committee delegate purely for protection. The Plant Committee having been designed for class collaboration, holding that post has the sole advantage of allowing delegates to report back to the workers, and to denounce the class collaborationist delegates as "soup merchants".

Too many compromises are required for revolutionaries to take posts higher than on a plant level. Higher posts fulfill purely bureaucratic tasks.

Convention delegates are almost never elected. Conventions are attended by representatives from the national Federations, the Departmental (or Regional) Unions, big Local Unions, autonomous unions within the Federations (like Renault). Conventions are completely prepared in advance, there is no controversy. There is not even any real chance for propaganda. Revolutionaries are thrown out before they can speak, or, at best, what they say is never published in convention reports. Thus conventions provide no way to reach the rank and file.

Overtime and Bonuses

In 1936 mass working class action won a law establishing the 40 hour week. That law is technically still in effect. But management can ask the government to make an "exception", and, in fact, management always does. Thus the "normal" French work week of 44 hours is composed of 4 hours of compulsory overtime, paid at time and a quarter. Many plants insist on 8 hours of compulsory overtime a week. Generally additional overtime work on Saturday is voluntary.

There are many different kinds of bonus. Some are called "anti-strike bonuses", since workers who go on strike, or get sick, lose them. Others are given for seniority, for dangerous, dirty, or difficult work. The CGT supports this system. Revolutionaries generally demand the abolition of all bonuses and their incorporation into basic pay.

Strike Support

Their union activity allows L.O. to intervene in some strike situations where they do not have members inside the plant. This occurred, for example, during the Girosteel strike in the spring of 1972. L.O. was able to play a leading role in the strike committee through a comrade who plays a leading role in the CFDT Local Union against the CFDT bureaucracy.

L.O. puts its main emphasis on the workers actually involved forming their

own Strike Committee, organizing the strike themselves. Other left groups, trying to make up for their weakness inside the plants, create Strike Support Committees to try to politicize the strike. This is possible only in small strikes in plants where the CP is not strong. Where the CGT is weak, it leaves whenever the leftists turn up. L.O. considers the creation of Strike Support Committees a tactical question, but really a false and dishonest tactic opposed to developing a political base among the workers themselves. The outside creation of such committees more often than not embarrasses the workers.

Divisions in the Industrial Working Class

Unskilled workers are divided into 5 categories: Laborer 1, Laborer 2, and "Ouvrier Spécialisé" or O.S. (Specialized Worker) 1, 2, and 3. The difference is often purely arbitrary. Moreover, there are levels within and between these categories.

Skilled or "professional" workers are divided into 3 categories, also with levels within and between.

In the huge factories like Renault or Peugeot, there are up to 300 different levels, and no two workers receive the same pay for the same work.

For example, during the 1971 Renault strike, the unions did everything possible to explain to the workers that the strike concerned solely 83 O.S. at the Le Mans plant, that the demand by those 83 workers for more equitable pay concerned only themselves and no one else, and therefore that the Renault workers at Billancourt (where the 1968 sit-down strike lasted 33 days) in particular should remain aloof. In opposition to this idea, the revolutionaries raised the demand for an equal and uniform pay increase for all workers, a demand that won considerable support.

The CGT, aiming to increase its base among skilled workers, technicians, and foremen, has adopted a policy of demanding percentage wage increases that increase the pay spread and the divisions in the class.

Another division is between the hourly and monthly paid workers. Twenty years ago, only white collar workers were paid on a monthly basis. More and more of them are now paid by the hour. Now many blue collar workers are "monthly", but for the most part "false monthly".

Pay on a real "monthly" basis, which really starts with office management, provides a fixed monthly salary and provides management's paying for sick leave and social security. A "false monthly" is paid by the hour, but gets the same sick pay as the real monthly. Hourly paid workers after the third day of illness receive half pay up to a certain sum from Social Security. For the monthly paid, the boss adds to the social security payment to make up full pay.

Some employees have positions that we might classify as "assistant foremen".

This is worth mentioning because some of them joined the 1968 general strike, and even the 1971 Renault strike. This particularly involved the "team chiefs", who coordinate the work of 8 or 9 workers, going from machine to machine, dividing the work, in plants where management is less "hard" sometimes assisting the workers on the line. They are eligible for union membership, as are the assistant foremen (contremaître), who supervise 20 to 30 workers, are directly responsible for speeding up production and trying to prevent strikes. Some of the latter also joined the 1971 strike. A real foreman heads an entire workshop, sector, or department.

Men and Women Workers

Women make up more than a third of French workers, and, as in other industrial countries, earn about a third less than men in every occupation. In the same plant, for the same work men and women earn the same amount. But unlike men, women are not promoted. Thus, little by little, men earn more than women. In banks, for example, 70% of the work force is composed of women, but only 20 to 30% of the supervisors, and only 5% of management. Factories employing only women generally pay average wages lower than those employing only men.

L. O. does not undertake qualitatively different work with working women than with working men. In plants where there is a majority of women, however, L. O. does everything possible to bring up in a systematic way the problems affecting women either on the political or union levels, e. g. nurseries, abortion, contraception, etc.

Immigrant Workers

Immigrant workers make up nearly 20% of the industrial working class. They are the most insecure, the most exploited. They are forced into the least desirable jobs. Only 5% belong to unions. The CGT is completely disinterested in them, since they are not citizens and therefore cannot vote for the CP.

((A study comparing the role of immigrant workers in France, as well as in the rest of western Europe, with that of black and Latin workers in the U. S. remains to be made)).

RENAULT

World War II wrought such destruction that only the government could afford to get the economy going again. Thus, gas, electricity, public transportation, and the coal mines were nationalized.

The Renault auto plants were the only profitable operation to be nationalized. The owner had been imprisoned because his pro-Nazi sympathies remained undiminished at the end of the war.

The government, by taking it over, made Renault a pilot project, both for the working class, and for setting policy for the employers. The government had to beware of two risks in response to worker demands: if it gave nothing and failed to break the combativity of the Renault workers completely, the struggle could spread; if it gave in too quickly, the strike could spread, other workers thinking that gains made at Renault should apply to them, too.

The April-May 1947 strike let loose a wave of strikes which forced the government to give up its wage freeze policy.

In 1950 the government thought it had found a miracle solution for avoiding conflicts at Renault: a contract covering all the plants. Following the defeat of a strike demanding 15 francs an hour pay increase, management imposed an agreement wherein, in return for 5 francs an hour, the unions agreed not to call strikes without 3 days advance notice.

This, however, did not prevent the 1952 and 1953 strikes. Due to the isolation of the CP in that period and to its adventurism, these strikes ended in whole or partial defeat and resulted in numerous firings.

In 1955 a new contract covering all Renault plants gave a third week of vacation, plus payments for sickness and retirement in addition to the amounts the workers were already receiving from social security. These gains were granted by the government which, with most of its repressive forces busy in Algeria, wanted at all costs to prevent the violent conflicts at Nantes and St. Nazaire from spreading.

At the end of 1962, a new contract gave a fourth week of paid vacation. Costing only 2% of the wage bill, this was important for the workers. It set a pattern, and succeeded in preventing Renault workers from coming out in support of the 1963 miners strike.

Renault started the working class strike movement in 1968, and the CGT worked its hardest to get Renault back to work.

((Note: I do not know exactly what a French franc was worth in 1947. Something perhaps approaching an approximation can be deduced when we remember that DeGaulle, on again coming to power in 1958, devalued the franc. The "old" franc became 1% of the new franc. At the present time (varying according to whether the French or U. S. currency has most recently been devalued) the new franc is worth 19.5477¢.))

LUTTE OUVRIERE

Pierre Bois, THE RENAULT STRIKE OF APRIL - MAY 1947

The Renault strike of April-May 1947 was the first big demonstration by the industrial proletariat following World War II. It finally allowed the renewal of the tradition of workers' struggles forbidden during the war and the occupation, denounced by the CGT at the "Liberation" as "the weapon of the trusts". It was the prelude to a whole series of movements that touched every sector of French economic life. And just as important, it marked the end of a political period, that of the collaboration of the Communist ministers in the bourgeois government.

The political situation before the strike

The CP's participation in the government was due not only to the number of votes it received, but to DeGaulle's insistence that he needed their support in his power struggle with the United States. DeGaulle gave Maurice Thorez credit for putting an end to the "patriotic militia" and for convincing the miners that they must produce. But once the bourgeoisie was restored, the CP became less useful to them. The Renault strike precipitated their expulsion from the government.

The social situation on the eve of the strike

Prices were rising at an average rate of more than 10% a month. Wages were frozen. The CGT was making the claim that, thanks to its 5 million members, it would be able to force the government to institute a price freeze.

The Stalinists had plastered the subway walls with posters: "Let's roll up our sleeves, everything will get better."

At the end of January 1946 the printers went on strike against union orders. The CP did everything possible to mobilize public opinion against them. L'Humanité, which didn't hesitate to commit the worst slander, appeared the day after the strike ended with a large blank spot, the pressmen having decided to censor a particularly scandalous article in the CP daily.

Since parliamentary elections were due in June, the CP, sensing the workers' discontent with the continuing inflation, called for 25% pay increases.

After the elections, prices continued to rise but wages stayed frozen. The only concession that the Communist Minister of Labor succeeded in getting from the government, to the great satisfaction of the capitalists, was that the workers could increase their wages by breaking production ceilings.

In 1936, the workers had won a provision that wages, linked to production, couldn't go above a certain ceiling so as to put a brake on superexploitation through piece work. Now the CGT took the place of the foremen in urging more

production.

At Renault, the ceiling went rapidly from 116% to 120%, 125, 130, 140, 150 and higher. (A few years later management moved it back to 145, against the active protests of the CGT leaders, because of the catastrophic increase in accidents on the job.)

Discontent grew. In August 1946, under Anarcho-Syndicalist leadership, a postal strike broke out at Bordeaux, electing a strike committee outside the CGT.

At the end of December 1946, the CGT was forced to come out for a "vital minimum wage".

The beginning of January 1947, the government issued a decree lowering prices by 5%. Of course it provided no way of insuring this decrease which followed numerous much higher price increases. Nonetheless, it was welcomed by the CP, which continued asking for the "vital minimum wage", that is a wage increase of half the size of the officially admitted increase in the cost of living. And this on the basis of 48 hours a week, of renouncing the 40 hour week won in 1936 -- on the basis, claimed the Stalinists, of the necessity of making "production efforts".

The CGT, of course, did nothing to win its demands, and on February 28, faced with the capitalists' intransigence, it abandoned its demand for the "vital minimum" and substituted a demand for production bonuses -- to be calculated individually on the basis of each worker's production -- since "rebuilding the country depends on increasing production".

Renault had been nationalized in 1945, or more exactly put under a nationalized management. If it thus became a trump in the hands of the State to serve as a model for the direction the economy should take, it also became a trump in the hands of the Stalinists.

At the time the CGT was pretty much the only existing union. There was the CFTC (the Catholic union) in the offices and the CGC among the foremen and assistant foremen, but their influence was pretty much nil. The majority of Catholic militants were in the CGT.

The French CP promoted, through the CGT within the new Plant Committees, its pro-government politics which consisted of imposing on the workers the sacrifices necessary to get the capitalist economy back in the saddle. This policy included not only Renault, but also the mines and railroads. But Renault had a particular importance: it, as a nationalized factory, served as pace setter for private industry.

In the workshops the foremen had lost a lot of their authority: they compromised themselves during the war by following the collaborationist politics of Louis Renault, then the owner.

So it was the Stalinist delegates who took it upon themselves to make the workers sweat. It was they who, believing that the hour of Stakhanovism had arrived, pushed for production. It was they who denounced workers for wasting electricity (the Minister of Industrial Production being a Communist). It was they who denounced workers as thieves for daring to eat 2 meals in the canteen run by the Plant Committee. They even denounced foremen for not speeding up the workers enough.

In this poisoned climate, in sharp contradiction with the hopes of the "Liberation", by the end of '46 the workers began to show their discontent.

A revolutionary current

In Department 6 ((of the Billancourt plant)) a small current of hostility began to develop to Stalinist policies. This current was inspired by workers belonging to the Union Communiste (Trotskyist), a group that published The Class Struggle.

This wasn't the first time that the Union Communiste (U. C.) tried to stir something up in the Renault citadel. In 1945 a militant had tried in the Foundries. But having issued a leaflet protesting the diminution of rations in the canteen, the CGT delegates dragged him before management who fired him on the spot.

We must note that at the time the number of revolutionary militants who dared contest the "Stalinist monopoly" over the working class, inside or in front of the plants, was very small. A militant of the PCI (French section of the Fourth International at the time) had tried at Renault, but gave up very quickly.

The PCI position was "you mustn't clash head on with the Stalinists", under the pretext that the latter were "the representatives of the workers". With undoubtedly the same reasoning, they even failed to come sell their paper at the plant gates.

The reactions of the workers were favorable to revolutionary militants, but few dared defend them openly, conscious of the pressure they would be subject to within the plant. Those who dared had to fight back and were often "quarantined".

At the end of '46, before the growing discontent of the workers and its powerlessness to obtain a few demands to compensate for the price increases, the CGT tried to find a way to ask for pay increases. It launched the idea of a "progressive production bonus". At the beginning of January '47, it announced its "first success": 2 francs an hour. Far from satisfying the workers, this angered them.

In the Collas sector (departments 6 and 18), on the initiative of a U. C. militant, a small revolutionary group formed. Not all the workers in the group were Trotskyists. They were workers who wanted to struggle for a change.

They were against capitalism, but they did not call themselves communists; for them, communism was represented by the French CP with its demands to "roll up your sleeves" and its militants acting like prison guards.

They Prepare for Action

The group launched an agitational campaign against the progressive production bonus, which benefitted the higher paid workers the most. In Department 6 with its 1200 workers, the group circulated a petition that received 850 signatures, in spite of the hostility and obstruction of the CGT leaders.

On February 15 they published the first number of a bulletin called The Voice of the Renault Workers. That same day the union organized a meeting to elect representatives to a "production conference", with no mention of the petition against the bonus. The workers behind the petition invited the workers to come to the meeting, all workers -- including those not belonging to the union -- to make the union give a public reply to the petition.

Unlike most union meetings, more than 100 workers came that day. The CGT leaders had put marshalls at the door to keep out non-members and members who had fallen behind in their dues. At the time nearly all the workers felt compelled to belong to the union, since union dues stamps and newspapers were openly sold in the workshops, and those who refused were quickly spotted. Nonetheless, for some time some workers had been on a dues strike.

The organizers of the petition knew that if you were less than 3 months in arrears, you were still in good standing. Being the most numerous, they pushed a little, and got into the meeting.

After the delegate's report on the famous "production conference", several workers spoke up against the production bonus. That made the CGT secretary-general furious: "It seems that you want to keep the CGT from speaking. It seems there are demagogues here..."

To which a worker replied, "We understand, the meeting is over." And he left, followed by everyone except the 13 bureaucrats. And the workers understood that if they wanted to accomplish something, they had to do it without the union or even against the union.

The Voice of the Renault Workers comrades got out their bulletin every 15 days, held meetings attracting 10, 12, 15 people; the numbers attending grew. Soon members of other political tendencies came: from the economist French Movement for Abundance, Anarchists, Syndicalists, Bordiguists, and Trotskyists from the PCI. 50 to 60 people came, but since each group insisted on its point of view, confusion reigned.

The U.C. explained to the PCI that those attending the meeting could not baptize themselves a "Struggle Committee" because "We are comrades of different tendencies...with different ideas and positions. That we could all come to agreement is an utopian idea. What we must do is work to organize the

workers. It is our right to try to influence them according to our convictions, but it's our duty to submit ourselves to their collective decision.

"'Struggle Committees' are the working class' organs of struggle, where the workers elect representatives, revocable at any moment, to apply the decisions made by the majority of workers.

"We must help the workers build their own committees, and not designate ourselves as a 'Struggle Committee'."

The Voice of the Renault Workers comrades therefore proposed to stop the discussions which, in the absence of the great mass of workers, could only be sterile. They proposed agreement on two objectives:

(1) Faced with inflation as a government policy, and with the complicity of the organizations claiming to represent the working class, to propose to the workers that they demand a 10 franc an hour increase in base pay;

(2) Considering that only a strike is able to win such a demand, to agitate for a strike.

Only the Voice was engaged in such agitation. The Syndicalists (CNT) put out paper butterflies with the word "Strike" written on them.

The climate for this agitation was much more favorable than it had been in some time, due to the objective conditions facing the workers. Spontaneous actions took place in various parts of the plant, always limited and hobbled by the Stalinist machine.

Pierre Bois wrote an article, "The Rising of the Strike" that appeared in Proletarian Revolution:

"For several weeks, in the plant, we've been seeing different movements, all originating with wage demands. While production has increased 150% in a year (66.5 vehicles in December '45 and 166 in November '46), our pay has increased only 22.5% while the official price index has mounted from 60 to 80%."

He went on to detail various actions that had taken place, isolated since the leaders had done nothing to spread the actions, believing that alone they would have a better chance of winning. After a week on strike, one such action won a 4 franc increase for most of the workers involved. Others won 40 centimes, 2 francs, and nothing. On all occasions, the CGT delegates did everything they could to sabotage the movements.

An Unsuccessful Attempt

In the middle of March the workers of workshop 5 went out for 2 francs an hour. Next door in Department 6, the workers who published the Voice (secretly, because they could expect to be fired immediately if it became known) sent a delegation to offer help. Turned down, as expected, by the workshop 5 delegate, who was both a sectarian and a violent Stalinist, they then had to decide

what to do. If they acted, the Stalinist would accuse them of "sabotaging" "their" strike, but on the other hand, the best time to start something was when other workers were already in motion.

100 of the 1800 workers in Departments 6 and 18 decided to go out, but realized that alone that would be foolish. So they went through the other workshops, asking everyone to come to a meeting to decide what to do. 500 to 600 of the 1200 in Department 6 stopped their motors and went. But while the meeting was going on, the delegates turned the motors back on and started a campaign of insults. "You won't win anything by striking. The bosses are only waiting for that to send for the police, and a strike could last a month, even longer. You will die of hunger. You're letting yourselves be led by adventurers, former collaborators, etc., etc.."

The workers didn't go for that, but, understanding that if, besides having to fight management and the government, they had to fight the union, too, they knew they weren't prepared. The organizers admitted their defeat, determined to organize more carefully the next time.

Toward the Strike

At the beginning of April, the comrades of the Voice circulated another petition demanding a 10 franc increase an hour in base pay, a petition that gathered the signatures of a great majority wherever it circulated. To be recognized by management, the petitions had to be presented by delegates. With such support, the delegates couldn't refuse to present the petitions to management, but they tried to prevent the petitions from circulating, or went so far as to "lose" them.

The workers had no illusions in the petitions, but saw them as a way of expressing their discontent, including their discontent and even hostility towards the delegates.

The workers were talking of the 10 franc pay increase, some were talking of a strike. Some were anxious to go out, others sceptical. The comrades of the Voice decided to take action.

Thursday, April 17, they organized a meeting outside the canteen. Many workers came. The speaker explained: "Prices are rising, wages are frozen. We need 10 francs more base pay." (The CGT had been the first to come up with the 10 franc figure.) "We need this. And the only way to get it is by striking. The CGT leaders are against striking, so we must do it without them, maybe against them."

He went on to refute arguments concerning the unsuccessful strike attempt. "They say we'll die of hunger. But we've been dying of hunger for 5 years. They say the government will send tear gas like on November 30, 1938. For 5 years we've had to resist worse things than tear gas. Bombs do more than just make your eyes tear; they crush our houses and us with them.

"Really, if we believe those who claim to be the 'Party of the Executed', who claim to be the 'heroes of the Resistance', they don't seem to have seen anything during the 5 years of the war."

The speaker pointed out the difficulties: privations, even physical attacks, and if they failed, being fired. But he also recalled the sufferings 100 times worse that "we've just endured for interests that weren't our own. In spite of the real difficulties, we are completely capable of waging a struggle and coming out of it victorious. And those who want to discourage us, pretending we are not capable, distrust us or have interests different from ours, or both at the same time." He ended his speech in a call to struggle.

First he proposed a vote on the principle of a 10 franc an hour increase in base pay. All hands went up except for the CP hards. Then, he proposed forming a Strike Committee, and asked for volunteers. The comrades from the Voice raised their hands. Others followed. The candidates climbed on a platform; the speaker called for a vote of ratification.

The workers waited for the strike to start. The speaker explained that the just elected Strike Committee would go present the workers' demands to management. After that, the Committee had a mandate to act, and it would, but right now the workers should return to work.

The Committee presented itself to the Department head, who said they weren't "legal" representatives, so he couldn't talk to them. The Committee explained that it had been elected by the workers themselves, not according to some bourgeois law. If he refused to discuss, that would be a slap at the workers, who wouldn't be slow in drawing their own conclusions. The head of the Department then changed his tune, saying the decision was up to management. He was given 48 hours to get management's okay. Since the workers had gone back to the job, he wasn't at all impressed.

The Committee held several meetings to figure out the best conditions for starting the strike. First, they gathered information on the stock on hand. Through the stock clerks they found out that a shortage of axles existed -- and axles were made in Department 6.

The members of the Strike Committee were inexperienced unskilled workers who knew very little about how the factory functioned. They had to find out how to cut off the electric current centrally and safely.

Are those who can tell us on our side? If they're in the CP, the chances are that they'll let the cat out of the bag. Anyhow, will they give us honest information, and do they really know?

The members of the Strike Committee knew how to turn cranks, but pushing buttons to tinker with 5000 volt lines, working the steam or compressed air valves frightened them a little. They had to be careful. The least mistake would lay them open to Stalinist charges of being adventurers.

They went back to the Department head. He had obviously had no word from management. A double problem posed itself. Thursday was pay day, and, even more, the day of the vote to elect administrators to represent the workers in the newly created Social Security fund. It would be prudent to wait for the workers to be paid -- that would last them a fortnight. The CGT would charge them with being "Anarcho-Hitlero-Trotskyites", with sabotaging the election in order to harm the CGT. To wait for Monday would allow the enthusiasm to cool.

That left Friday. That meant risking a weekend break in the strike. But on the other hand, that offered the advantage of testing the breadth of the action the first day, and pulling back without too much risk if not successful.

Wednesday, April 23, the Strike Committee organized a meeting to report on the negative outcome of the approach to management. 700 workers, almost all of the regular shift in the two departments, were present, in a gay and expectant mood. Pierre Bois' report and strike call was met with loud approval. He went on to explain the seriousness of the struggle, the necessity of spreading word of the strike though all the Renault plants, of organizing pickets and defending the plant gates. He announced that one demand would be for payment of the days on strike, and "As for the police using tear gas, for more than 6 years we took bombs in the gut and said nothing. We've kept pulling in our belts, a sacrifice the bourgeoisie imposed on us to fill their strong boxes. And today, we don't have the strength and courage to do just a small part of that for ourselves?" He then called for a vote for a strike as soon as possible. Almost all the workers voted "For".

The floor was open. The CGT delegate, pushed by his supporters, came forward, while other workers called, "You see, here we have democracy." He tried to explain "reality", warned against "demagogues" -- and was howled down, the workers demanding action.

A worker spoke up: "Comrades, for months the CGT has told us to wait for pay increases that have never come... We can't go on that way..." Pierre Bois took up where he left off: "The CGT capitulated on the vital minimum and no longer even talks about it or making it retroactive. How can we believe people like that? What proof can they give that they won't capitulate the same way tomorrow?" He then called for another vote of confidence in the Strike Committee. This time only 8 voted No.

Closing the meeting, Bois again sent the workers back, reminding them that now that the strike had been decided, it would be called as soon as opportunity, by the Strike Committee.

Some workers were impatient and complained. The CGT laughed. But the Strike Committee, satisfied with the meeting, also wanted the strike to have a surprise effect. The Committee met after work. Pierre Bois reminded everyone of the reasons for calling the strike Friday, and of the importance of keeping the secret. Any indiscretion would be treated as treason. He need not have worried.

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The Strike Committee had 11 members. They had to arrange for pickets at all gates and other key posts, that is about 50 workers. With 50 they couldn't be sure of keeping the secret. So each Committee member had to recruit 5 workers to come Friday morning at 6:00, explaining that it was for a meeting to prepare for the strike. Even so, they were to be told to keep quiet.

Thursday the workers collected their pay and the elections were held. Of course, there was talk about a strike, but no one really dared believe in it.

The Strike Starts

Friday, April 25, the workers arriving at 6:15 found a picket line distributing a short mimeo'd leaflet, an order of the Strike Committee in the name of the workers who gave it its mandate, giving the names of the Strike Committee and the workshops for which each member was responsible, the demands, and adding: "The Strike Committee warns the workers against certain defeatist elements who will not hesitate to state in advance that we will be beaten. These people are so afraid of OUR VICTORY that they have already attempted police spy maneuvers to sap the authority of the members of the Committee.

"The Strike Committee invites the workers on strike to conform strictly to the directives that will be given.

"In the fight we are shouldering, each worker will have a particular task to fulfill. We must be disciplined and resolute. What we each do EVERY day for the boss, we must be capable of doing for ourselves.

"Victory depends on it.

"ALL UNITED IN ACTION, AND WE WILL WIN OUR LEGITIMATE DEMANDS."

Most workers stayed outside waiting for the main shift to arrive at 7:30 and the 8 A.M. meeting. Some were sceptical and went in. But the electricity had been shut off, ten or so strikers guarding the transformer. At the 8 o'clock meeting Pierre Bois again explained the reasons for the strike, "Now the action has started. It will go on till we win." A great majority were for the strike, the delegates and a few CP members being the only ones to vote against it in the departments involved. The CGT secretary-general, who was present, demanded the right to speak; against the strike, he promised to bow to the workers' decision. He and some other CGT "leaders" joined the delegation to go see the Director-General of the entire plant. They were told that he was out of the country, and that without him none of the other big shots could do anything. Pierre Bois informed management that if they wanted the strike to end, the Director-General had better hurry back and give the workers their 10 francs.

Departments 6 and 18 organized themselves. They decided that, since some workers were spending too much time outside the plant in a bar, passes

would be needed to leave the plant; taking pride in conducting their own struggle, most of the workers supported that proposal. Groups of workers spread out through the factory to call on all the workers to go out on strike. Some entire workshops went out, but the CGT delegates turned the motors on again and demanded a return to work. This resulted in confusion: stop, start, etc. Only in Departments 6 and 18 was the strike total. The Personnel Director came to ask that trucks be allowed to pass; refused, he turned to threats.

Only one workshop, dominated by a Stalinist, imperturbably continued working. But assuming that that shop would soon run out of supplies, and knowing that the frightfully overworked women there were sympathetic, the Strike Committee waited.

At noon in the Place Nationale, just outside the plant, the CGT secretary-general (who had come to the morning meeting and said that he'd go along with the majority) harangued the workers:

"This morning, a band of Anarcho-Hitlero-Trotskyites wanted to make the plant go out."

A big protest arose from those who knew better. Others were astonished. Later in a workshop confrontation, the CGT head was shouted down. The plant Personnel Director, who had joined the CP at the "Liberation", then took up the CGT argument.

A member of the Strike Committee, a veteran of the Asturian insurrection and the Spanish Civil War, said to the latter: "Sir, yesterday you commanded the factory, tomorrow perhaps it will be the police, but today it's the workers. You have no rights here."

The Personnel Director retorted, "I don't discuss with foreigners", which drew the reply, "Sir, if there's a foreigner here, it's you. Here there are only workers and the capitalist who walked in, the foreigner is you because you are not of the same class. For the workers, there is no fatherland, there are only classes. Go! Get out! Leave!"

The Strike Develops

Over the weekend a few pickets occupied the factory. The Strike Committee spent the weekend preparing for Monday, when they distributed a leaflet inviting all the workers in the plant to join the strike and come to a meeting at noon at the Place Nationale. The printed leaflet continued:

"For months and months, we have been told to produce, to make sacrifices in exchange for promises. Our efforts, which should allow us to increase our purchasing power, have only served to forge our chains. In spite of overtime and speed-up forever increasing, our wages are laughable and reduced to the point that we can't even buy the minimum necessary to eat. Our pay is so low that the government is obliged to subsidize absolutely indispensable necessities, like bread and wine, so that they are within our reach. And that brings specu-

lation and the black market. The CGT has shamefully capitulated on the vital minimum, replacing it with production bonuses. And today they want to reduce our miserable morsel of bread.

"What do we want? A liveable minimum wage, limiting ourselves to the CGT's figure of 7000 francs a month, a 10 franc an hour increase in base pay.

"Management answers that the government hasn't authorized them to increase wages. But management certainly found the means to obtain authorization from the government when it had to pay a 30% increase for steel products. If there is money to pay a 30% increase to the powerful billionaires of the steel industry, we must force the capitalists also to pay for our labor power that has been devalued much more than 30%. They often present the power of the trusts as a scarecrow which is always on the point of crushing us. But the working class, united in defense of its demands, isn't it more powerful than a trust? We have a monopoly of labor power, without which these gentlemen could harvest no profits. In spite of all the insults and all the maneuvers with which they try to divide us, we have decided to continue our struggle until victory.

"Can we continue to live, always making more sacrifices, every day seeing our situation get worse?

"The demand we are making is a general demand that interests all the workers. The so-called workers' organizations not only don't defend us, but oppose our struggle. It is up to us ourselves to defend our demands:

1. 10 francs an hour added to base pay
2. Full payment for strike time

Only action can win satisfaction.

"No one can resign himself to the present situation. The proof is that before us, several other sectors of the plant have also gone on strike... Only all those movements took place without our knowing about each other, and, isolated, they were beaten. Consequently, since struggle is inevitable and necessary, we must all go into motion together, because only the unity of the whole factory will win victory for all.

"We set off the movement. We call on all the workers to join with us, to name their representatives to come join our Strike Committee which meets constantly in the Collas sector.

"Let us make for ourselves just a fraction of the sacrifices we are forced to make every day for the bosses' profit, and we will win."

Groups of strikers gathered at the factory gates to give out the Strike Committee's leaflet. Attacks by CP militants in a number of places made the strikers furious.

All morning the strikers of the Collas sector, knowing there was a good

chance the CP and CGT would turn up at the meeting with loud-speaker trucks, were getting their own loud speakers ready. The Strike Committee decided that if the CP's loud speakers drowned them out, they would hold the meeting inside the plant.

Starting at 11 A. M. the strikers spread out in the plant to call everyone to the meeting. At noon the Place Nationale was packed. 4 loud speaker trucks were there, too. But it turned out that the fourth and most powerful loud speaker did not belong to the CP. The Socialist Party Youth, in the midst of their convention, had approached some of the strikers to offer their help, and had gladly supplied their loud speaker truck at the strikers' suggestion. And that one loud speaker succeeded in drowning out all the others.

By evening, 10,000 workers, some having already elected strike committees in their workshops, were on strike.

The newspaper Combat on April 29 reported, "10,000 STRIKERS AT RENAULT. IN SPITE OF THE CGT'S DELEGATES, 200 WORKSHOPS STOPPED WORK YESTERDAY EVENING.

"In spite of the CGT, some independent workers formed a first 'kernel', and, making themselves the interpreters for their comrades, went to demand from management the wage increases that had been promised... We are watching, then, an absolutely spontaneous movement..."

At the beginning of the meeting at the Place Nationale, "everyone agreed on the demands. But some were against the strike:

"What can a penniless strike committee do?" asked an old worker. "We will perish from starvation."

"We are going to die of starvation anyhow with the wages they give us," replied a partisan of the strike.

"The women were very animated: 'Everyone should be on strike,' said one of them."

Pierre Bois took the microphone, explained the reasons for the strike. Then, speaking of the leaflet the CGT had distributed that morning,

"They say of us: 'You are reactionaries, neo-fascists, you are playing DeGaulle's game!' That is false; for 2 years they've been telling us to refuse to go on strike, that strikes would be playing the game of the trusts, and now they tell us that the reactionaries are bound to take power. Who are they making fun of?..."

"... A spokesman for F. O., a minority tendency within the CGT, declares that his group is supporting the strike... By afternoon, 10 to 12,000 are out, 8000 of whom belong to unions. That's two thirds of the personnel employed by Renault..."

The CGT Hops on the Moving Train

By the next day, Tuesday April 29, 12,000 were on strike. The CGT tried a maneuver. It called for a walkout between 11 and 12 A.M. for its few very partial demands, at the same time charging that the strike had been called by provocateurs. But no one was duped by this. Everyone not yet on strike came out at 11:00 -- but no one went back, and from then on the whole plant was on strike.

In the afternoon there was a demonstration of 2000 in front of management's offices. The Director-General, Lefauchaux, was off seeing a government minister; when he returned, a lot of the crowd had left, and he refused to receive the Strike Committee, noting that since he had been a commandant in the Resistance, he could not be pressured.

The next day, the Central Strike Committee, built around the Collas sector Strike Committee, called for a general strike throughout the plant. In fact, there had been a general strike since the day before, but with 105 members now having been elected, the Central Strike Committee was thus taking responsibility for the movement.

The CGT, in a name-calling leaflet, called its own meeting in an effort to establish control. At the meeting, attempts were made to get rid of the pickets. When the Central Strike Committee attempted to intervene, they were threatened with being thrown in the Seine.

That night, some Stalinists tried to dislodge strikers sitting in at the Collas sector. Finding that the strikers were ready for them, they backed off.

Thursday, May 1, the CGT held its annual march. The Strike Committee prepared 100,000 leaflets calling for a general strike to be distributed at the march. To express their solidarity, the printers who prepared the leaflet contributed from their pay to cover the cost of the leaflet.

Throughout the line of march there were numerous clashes between the CGT strong arm men and the strikers who were supported by the Socialist Youth.

May 2 the Strike Committee sent delegations to the gates of many other plants to call the workers there to join the struggle. They met a lot of sympathy and some success. But CPers provoked arguments, in most places succeeding in getting the workers back to work.

The same day the CGT issued a leaflet to the strikers, calling on everyone to join the CGT so that they all might be united, promising that the CGT would win a 3 franc an hour increase in the production bonus, calling all the workers in the plant to exercise their right to vote -- on whether the strike should continue or be called off while the government made a decision. Afterwards, the CGT promised, it would fight for the 10 francs.

The vote was held: 11,354 voted to continue the strike, 8,015 to go back,

1,009 cast blank ballots, and 538 abstained. The CGT had hoped to drown what it thought to be an activist minority under the weight of the majority it believed to be passive.

But the majority of the Renault workers had responded to a Strike Committee leaflet which said, in part:

"Each worker must understand the following truths:

1. The whole working class and the great majority of little people are with us. The effective solidarity of the workers is already shown by strikes in the provinces spreading more and more. In the Paris region, it is the unions' minority leadership's attempt to pull the wool over their eyes that has provisionally prevented this solidarity, and above all the methods of gangsters, as they showed on April 30 in our plant. Nonetheless, if we hold firm, these obstacles will be removed by the workers of the other plants who, like us, want to find a way out of the present situation.

2. The struggle of all the workers together will make the capitalists give in as they did in June '36. If Renault stops the fight before the others join it, the whole momentum of the working class will be stopped...

What argument could be more powerful than our strike to make Prime Minister Ramadier agree to concessions?..."

The Strike Committee received information that an interview with the Minister of Labor could be arranged. Not wanting to neglect any opportunity, they sent a delegation to see an intermediary. The latter turned out to be an old side kick of the previous private Renault management, trying to maneuver the committee into an anti-nationalization operation. All discussion was immediately stopped.

Back to Work, Collas Continues Alone

Friday, May 9, the CGT published a leaflet announcing that management had agreed to another 3 francs an hour on the production bonus, and calling for a return to work. The vote was 12,075 to 6,866 to go back.

But the great majority of workers in the Collas section voted to stay out.

The return to work was scheduled for Monday. The Strike Committee took the position that if the strike were to end, the return should be organized in an orderly way -- the way the strike had begun. So it called the workers to a meeting at 8 A. M.

The workers had in no way decided to give up. The Committee's leader, Pierre Bois, then explained:

"If we haven't been able to make management give in on our basic demand for a 10 franc basic wage increase while the whole plant was out, it would be utopian to hope for a victory based on continuing the strike in one sector alone. In spite of everything, we can't give up."

He proposed that the strike continue until management agreed to pay wages for the hours on strike.

The government's Labor Inspector came to try to demoralize the strikers with the trick about the "freedom to work". But the strikers voted by a large majority for Pierre Bois' proposal.

Solidarity in the form of financial support began to come in. Monday, May 12 alone, 50,000 francs were collected from other sectors of the factory that had gone back to work, showing that they were in no way hostile to the Collas strikers.

The CGT stepped up its insults, calling the strikers "dividers", and demanding that the Minister of Labor take measures to get them back to work.

But the Collas workers stood fast, paralyzed the rest of the plant, and thus caused management to get nervous. Management let the Strike Committee know it was ready to receive its delegates, but "accompanied by regularly elected delegates". The Strike Committee accepted.

Naturally, management wanted to save face by not receiving the Strike Committee officially. But everyone understood this juridical ruse, and no one felt compromised by bringing along the delegates who had always been hostile to the strike.

The delegates, too, felt no embarrassment at compromising themselves with the "Hitler-Trotskyites" of the Strike Committee, so pleased were they with the honor done them by the boss.

The Director-General began with a speech warning the Strike Committee against the dangers of continuing the conflict: danger for the plant, danger for nationalization, danger for the workers.

Pierre Bois explained that all these dangers could be avoided by management's agreeing to pay wages for the hours lost on strike.

"I know, Monsieur Bois, that if you tell your comrades to go back to work, they'll do it, and I ask you to do that."

"You ask me to betray my comrades! It's useless to continue this discussion."

"Don't get upset, I didn't want to offend you."

"You already have, but if you think that the workers are ready to give up, you can go ask them yourself."

"Okay, I will."

"Good, I'll go tell them you're coming."

The Strike Committee preceded management, and set up a platform on the back of an oily truck.

Pierre Bois introduced the Director-General, explaining:

"Comrades, here is Monsieur Lefauchaux who has come to ask you to undercut your own movement. He doesn't want to pay for the hours lost on strike, but he wants you to go back to work. He claims that you really don't want to continue the strike, that the only reason you've stayed out is because of my influence. I suggested to him that he come and try to exercise influence in the other direction, and that's why he's here. Monsieur, you have the floor."

M. Lefauchaux blanched, and said, "That's not very good sportsmanship." Then he spoke to an icy silence. When he had finished, the workers followed him, each claiming payment for the time on strike plus the 10 franc increase.

On May 13 the Strike Committee of the Collas sector put out another leaflet:

The Collas sector alone continues the fight -- for payment of the days lost. "We don't have a choice: since we can't make ends meet by working, we have no reserves to live on till the next pay day. We would prefer to die of hunger to win our rights rather than to fatten up the rich stockholders of Renault.

"A leaflet by the union 'leadership' continues to sow lies and division among the workers: 'Against the will of more than 1000 workers of Departments 6 and 18, in violation of the rules of democracy, less than 250 troublemakers oppose going back to work.'

"There is a very simple way of finding out the truth: send delegations into our sector to find out the truth. You will see that the workers are unanimous in demanding payment for the days on strike.

"Besides, after an interview without results, Monday May 12, M. Lefauchaux came to our sector, to make his 'proposals' directly to our comrades.

"What were his proposals? (1) the possibility of making up the money by working Saturdays, Sundays and holidays (!) (2) a promise from management to lend the strikers the sum of 1500 francs to be paid back 100 francs on each pay check.

"The workers were unanimous in refusing this proposal.

"The Strike Committee asked M. Lefauchaux to publicly answer certain questions. M. Lefauchaux refused, thus provoking boos from the audience.

"We are not on strike for selfish reasons, as the splitting union politicians pretend. Just as at first, when we linked our demands to those of all the workers, we find ourselves united; let's all get together to defend the right without which

the working class is at the mercy of the exploiters: THE RIGHT TO STRIKE.

"P. S. We found out this morning that 6000 Renault workers at Le Mans went out on strike."

The next day the CGT put out a leaflet: "WHO PULLS THE STRINGS?"

"... No one with good sense believes that 200 men can stop 30,000.

"We are faced with a plot of broad scope. Who pulls the strings?"

"The enemies of the Nationalizations.

"The enemies of Worker Unity.

"Who is responsible for hiring these troublemakers..!"

An ex-policeman, responsible for the arrest of a Resistance fighter.

"We now understand the connections of these individuals with the outside..."

With the metal workers of all Paris, we will win our demands for:

"More to eat. A collective bargaining agreement with control of hiring to prevent the penetration of troublemakers into the factory. A production bonus of 10 francs an hour.

"That's why we will stop work Friday at 4 P.M. to come to a

"BIG MEETING... at the Town Hall.

Long live the CGT!"

Management Gives In

On May 16 the Collas sector Strike Committee issued another leaflet:

The union "leaders" have capitulated once again. Just as they first called for a one hour strike on April 29, now they're calling for a purely symbolic two hour strike by all metal workers.

"But each worker now knows from his own experience that in these (union-called) meetings, no one with a contradictory opinion is allowed to speak, that the marshalls, instead of protecting the workers against the police or the fascists, on the contrary, have as their mission to clobber discontented workers..."

"To honestly and seriously examine the present situation and what to do about it, the workers of the Collas sector, who, since Monday, are continuing the struggle for the payment of the hours on strike, are organizing a meeting in the work place, in their sector..."

"We invited you all to this meeting where everyone, as you know, can speak his mind freely -- including CGT leaders."

Also on May 16, management, "with the objective of creating a climate favorable to production", proposed to pay 1600 francs when work resumed, plus a 900 franc advance to each worker, to be granted as a pay increase soon thereafter.

That, in fact, was a disguised way of granting payment for the hours lost.

L'Humanité on May 17 published an article by CGT Secretary-General Benoit Frachon, "The Apprentice Sorcerers":

"Haven't we often enough said that the working class situation was becoming intolerable? Haven't we warned enough that to the growing difficulties of daily existence are being added deep feelings of formidable injustice whose victims are precisely those who deserve the most of the Fatherland...

"... Attempts have been made to play with the suffering of the workers by means of miserable partisan maneuvers.

"Against the only union organization on which the working class can count, the CGT, attempts have been made to use the bitterness accumulated by others.

"It is necessary to recall, to say: the legitimate strike of the Renault factories, for several days, was considered by some as an instrument of war against the unions.

"Those who most energetically opposed the production bonuses, which the strikers were demanding, encouraged that.

"Reread the newspapers of the first days of the strike. The most violently reactionary were the most enthusiastic for the (strike) movement. Even journals like Le Populaire (SP), L'Aube (MRP) mixed their voices together with" those of the extreme right...

"For them, the strike was aimed against the CGT. We know too well why, they imagined that the Confederation condemned the strike.

"They confused our permanent concern with demasking some troublesome elements, provocateurs, who haven't lost the habit of slipping in among the workers, with systematic opposition to the workers' activity.

"In other words, these bullies had certainly decided to play the role of incendiaries on the condition that we would play that of firemen...

"The sorcerers' apprentices opened the way for forces they never imagined.

"They lifted the cover from the pot with the sole thought of playing us a bad turn. Today they are all astonished, even indignant, that we didn't rush to put the cover back on...

"We have nothing but disgust and disdain for such degrading procedures. We will tranquilly continue to serve the interests of the working class which are inseparable from those of the nation. We will support every action tending toward the granting of production bonuses, and thus we will continue to serve France well..."

On Monday the 19th, after a final meeting of the strikers, the Strike Committee proposed a return to work. It took place after a vote.

For management, Lefaucheu issued a statement:

"... It was a hard blow... the balance of the strike is heavy: More than 2000 vehicles lost, with a total value of 500 million francs, 40% of which would have been exported... deplorable publicity for our nationalized enterprise, renewing

the courage of our adversaries...; but, above all, how many hours of wages lost...

The Collas workers felt in no way beaten. They had begun with the other workers, finished after the other workers, and by their tenacity they had won a disguised payment for the hours lost.

In effect, all the workers were on strike from April 29 until May 12, that is for 8 working days. While the wages of an O. S. (unskilled worker) were about 7000 francs a month (for 20 working days), each O. S. got 2500 francs for the 8 days lost. Most of the workers in the plant lost nothing. In the Collas sector, the workers stayed on strike until April 16, that is for 15 working days, so they lost a little, some of which was made up by solidarity contributions.

But the Collas workers were not disappointed. They waged the strike themselves. In spite of the CGT's hostility, they held out. They even won. Of course, the 3 franc addition to the bonus, whether it was admitted or not, was due to their activity. Besides, payment for the strike time, if not a victory, was a success -- and the other workers were conscious that this success was due to the Collas workers.

But the Collas workers were also happy and proud to have broken the fetters, both those imposed by the foremen and those imposed by the bureaucracy. For them, their sector was a little Republic where freedom and democracy reigned. "With us, there are no rulers, we make the decisions."

Every morning during the strike, and often several times a day, meetings were held to make decisions about what to do next.

They decided first on picket lines, then on sending delegations to other workshops during the first week, to other factories the second week.

And then solidarity. In the morning groups left, carrying a mandate from the Strike Committee and sealed cans to go to merchants and to other plants. In the evening they counted the money. Delegations from other plants came to make contributions. Everything was distributed equally at the end of the strike, the workers having been able to live on their last pay throughout the strike. The Strike Committee had taken the precaution to start the strike right after a pay day.

The CGT, too, collected money, but arranged things differently. One day they announced that each striker could come get... one kilogram ((2.2. pounds)) of cod and one kilogram of lentils!!!

In cleaning the workshops, a member of the Strike Committee found a list of those who had signed up for help from the CGT in the bottom of a garbage can, and so was able to announce to a general meeting that the people on the list would be served without delay.

The CGT Claims Victory

The CGT, after having violently denounced the "irresponsible committee of provocateurs" who continued the strike even after being asked to stop it, of course claimed the benefits of the new victory. They didn't hesitate to write that it was the "union" that "in pursuing its activity" (?) had won 1600 francs for everyone. They even specified: "THIS VICTORY was won after 2 more hours of discussion by our delegation in the office of the Minister of Labor in the presence of management." They drew back neither from outright lies nor from the ridiculous, usually having the forces to get away with it.

We have seen that the CGT opposed the strike firmly and brutally at the beginning. But afterwards they knew how, hour by hour, to make the turns necessary not to let things get completely out of their control. When they saw that they couldn't break the determination of the Collas sector, they tried to isolate it politically and materially. Even while they were participating in the strike, they increased their name calling, thus trying to retake the initiative and leadership by reducing the Strike Committee's influence. Once the general strike was in effect, they feverishly multiplied their interviews with management and the Minister of Labor to find an acceptable compromise.

It seems clear that the CGT, unable to stifle the wave of worker discontent at Renault, the evening of May 2 chose to take over the leadership of the strike so as to be able to control it. That's a traditional tactic, but in 1947 it resulted from a political choice. A choice the French CP resigned itself to make, conscious of all the political consequences that necessarily followed. It was a fundamental choice, showing perfectly the contradictory nature of the French CP's politics.

The CP had participated in the government since 1944. At the time of the last change of ministers -- on January 22, 1947 the Socialist President, Vincent Auriol, had charged another Socialist, Ramadier, with forming a new cabinet -- the CP had obtained an unprecedented number of posts: five, including the much sought after post of Minister of National Defense.

Governmental solidarity bound the ministers together. That is, they couldn't vote against the government without being thrown out of it. On many points, the French CP, to guard its working class base, respectfully opposed government policies in its press, but found handy expedients for continuing its "participation". Thus, on the question of the Indochinese war, the "communist" ministers gave the government a vote of confidence while the 183 CP deputies abstained. In the same way, on April 16, 1947, when the 3 deputies from Madagascar had their parliamentary immunity lifted on charges of being responsible for the insurrection (which broke out March 29), the CP ministers left the Cabinet meeting so as not to have to take a position. None of these steps threatened their participation in the government.

But the Renault strike was something different.

Starting on April 30, before the strike had been officially voted, but when 20,000 workers had already stopped work and were following the Strike Committee's directives, the CP's Political Bureau denounced "the refusal to readjust equitably the workers' wages", and Maurice Thorez, at a Cabinet meeting, announced that the CP would no longer go along with the government's wage control policy.

That was the beginning of the "crisis". The prime minister pretended to believe that the CP would use May 1st to organize "troubles". He sent out a general alert. This served as a cover for his decision to break with the Communist ministers. To consummate the break, he opened debate in the National Assembly in order to force a public vote.

Friday, May 2 the debate opened. The vote of confidence took place May 4. The government won, on the wage control issue, by 360 to 186. The Communist ministers and deputies had voted against the government. That very evening the premier asked the Communist ministers for their resignations. They refused. The premier removed their powers.

On May 3, Le Monde reported: "We are faced with a very serious government crisis" due to the Renault strike's having changed the CP's position... Everyone knows that wages are too low, that the standard of living is lower than before the war. "Safety lies today first of all in increased production and in an equitable division... With abundance some results of the monetary crisis would resolve themselves... A government policy of freezing prices must be based on a faithful majority, a resolute government..."

"Everything is coming apart today. The parties are crippled, and the Communist Party even more than the others. It fears, more even than ((one of its leaders)) Monsieur Jaques Duclos, being outflanked on its left. It fears the effect of lost illusions, and would like to regain that 'confidence of the masses' so often invoked to increase its strength. But no more would it like to lose the government posts it fills, from which 'the party' benefits so much. Its tactic, well known, is at the same time to be in power and in the opposition." The Communist ministers don't want to resign. "They would prefer to take the whole cabinet with them." They must make a decision.

Sunday France Dimanche had a banner headline:
"A LITTLE WORKER, 25 YEARS OLD, FORCED AURIOL TO "DISMISS" THOREZ"
"The Communist Ministers Leave the Government"

"25 years old, he is a little fitter in workshop 6 at Renault. He earns only 7800 francs a month and his clothing is worn. His intelligent face is ravaged by the tension he's experienced since the beginning of the strike. He is not much to look at in his old leather shirt, but he expressed himself with the ease of a cultivated man and a passionate warmth gives witness of his profound sincerity.

"It is this man, P. Bois, who, the end of last month, brought his comrade

(though many have not paid their dues for several months) denies these accusations. It replies that it was democratically elected, that it includes workers of all nuances and of all parties, and that their intentions are extremely clear: 'defend their beef steak'. It is easy, they object, to find among 30,000 strikers two suspicious persons.

"The situation appears extremely grave for the Communists. Never have they agreed to separate themselves from the working masses and from the union movement. In spite of the first articles in L'Humanité, they knew very well that the strike movement responded to the deepest hopes of the workers.

"Should they push the CGT that they control to brake the strike and thus lose the confidence of the working masses, but still remain faithful to Ramadier's policies?

"Besides, a brisk discontent had actually been in evidence for several months in the Communist cells, a discontent which showed itself in vehement complaints against the party leaders: 'Under the pretext of a policy of being present ((in the government)), you go from concession to concession, abandoning the working class... You are getting more and more bourgeois.'

THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S UNEASINESS

"Within the Central Committee of the CP, itself divided into two tendencies, the uneasiness was strong: the Thorez-Duclos tendency supporting participation in the government, and the Mauvais-Marty tendency preaching the return to opposition.

"Some by-election results, wherein the Communist votes decreased, had aggravated this uneasiness.

"The disaffection of the militants with the CGT, where Communist influence is preponderant, had also been shown rather clearly at the time of the postal and newspaper strikes, which had started without CP agreement.

"In its breadth, the Renault strike was even more important.

"Besides, the Socialists and the MRP, delighted to see the trade union minority at Renault attack the CGT, openly encouraged the strike, at the same time pronouncing their support for the wage control policy. L'Aube and Le Populaire were filled with sympathetic, almost encouraging, comments: 'You have thrown oil in the fire!' Duclos reproached the Socialists and the MRP last Friday in the Chamber of Deputies.

"The Socialist and MRP ministers had to print somewhat embarrassing 'clarifications' in their papers.

THE CGT DOES A FLIP-FLOP

"In the meantime, the Communists had made a choice: they would stay with the working class. And the CGT, thus performing a flip-flop, decided to take up again in its own name the strikers' demands and to extend them to the metal industry throughout the Paris region.

"The government crisis that followed took place in a completely crazy atmosphere..."

Conclusions

"In April-May 1947 the Renault strike was an important event in more ways than one. First, because it linked the workers to the past tradition of struggle. They rediscovered the strike as a class weapon. Further, the Renault strike gave a considerable push to the workers' movement. As Pierre Monatte ((a veteran Trotskyist)) wrote, 'Renault opened the dam and a wave of strikes spread over France'. After May '47 many plants took their turn at striking, followed by the railway workers, and several months later, the miners. Finally, on the political level, it was the direct cause of the end of Communist participation in the government, which had by hook or crook lasted since the "Liberation", first under DeGaulle, then in the three party government. Above all, this strike, called and led by revolutionary militants supported by the workers' fighting spirit -- against the employers, the state and the union leaderships -- showed that militants could contest, in one of its working class strongholds, the CP's actual 'monopoly' over the working class, and that the revolutionary militants were absolutely the only ones to really defend both the short and long term interests of the workers.

"The departure of the Communist ministers from the three party government was not a secondary phenomenon. Even if the international situation, sooner or later, would have brought about that eviction, that doesn't make it any less true that in April '47, it was the French CP ministers who chose to break the coalition and on a national problem. That problem was the relationship of the French CP to the working class. That relationship is difficult and contradictory.

"Like all reformist organizations whose fundamental role is to defend the interests of the bourgeoisie within the workers' movement, the French CP, in its daily policies, finds itself subject to two kinds of antagonistic pressure. That of its rank and file and of the working class on the one hand, that of the bourgeoisie on the other hand. Most often this contradiction is resolved by a policy of making 'reasonable' demands, allowing the workers' discontent to express itself without in any way putting in question either the normal functioning of the capitalist system, or the political domination of the bourgeoisie. But when pressure from the workers becomes stronger, when the workers' discontent can no longer be channelled into limited and controlled actions, then the margin for maneuver by the reformist bureaucracy becomes even narrower. According to the degree of worker combativity, according to the more or less serious threat it poses to the

social order, the reformist organizations are compelled to 'march' with the workers at least up to a certain point and sometimes even to get out in front so as not to lose all their credit. (That's what happened in May '68). Obviously that brings about a certain break with the bourgeoisie, a very relative break, eminently tactical and transitory, over a whole range of different degrees, depending on the importance of the social crisis, but which never goes as far as a definitive break. Even the opposite. For when the working class moves to the point of directly threatening the bourgeoisie's rule, to the point of forming its own organs of combat and power, all history proves that the reformist organizations openly choose the camp of the bourgeoisie and unyieldingly oppose the workers.

"That has not yet happened in France. Whatever may have been the power of the strike movement, it has never formed its own fighting autonomous leadership, and the French CP has always been able to make it 'end the strike'. But it is nonetheless true that the French CP can -- as it has shown since 1947 -- even if only in May 1968, call a strike, including a general strike.

"In 1947, called on to choose between participation in the government, that is its devoutly wished for integration into bourgeois political life, and support for the then developing strike struggles, the French CP chose the latter. Why?

"Because the CP, suspect in the eyes of the French bourgeoisie because of its ties with the USSR, has only one trump to make the bourgeoisie accept it: its influence with the French working class. To lose that influence is to lose its only card. It is to start on the road that led the SFIO to being today no more than a ghost of a workers' party. The French CP would consent to that only in a fundamental crisis, that is in a directly pre-revolutionary period.

"That wasn't the case in May 1947, as it wasn't the case in May '68. And the French CP was able, by lowering its standing with the bourgeoisie a little, to place itself publicly at the side of the striking workers.

"This political choice is obviously destined to firm up and reinforce its hold on the workers' movement; that is, during the time it extends or supports the strike, the CP openly and very violently attacks the 'irresponsible', the 'ultra-lefts' (the word wasn't yet in fashion in 1947) who set off the fight. Reading CGT Renault leaflets included in this booklet ((only some of which are included in this translation)) is edifying in this regard. Similar prose was used in May 1968, and again during the 1971 Renault strike. Duclos declared to the National Assembly, 'the French CP will never allow itself to be outflanked on its left.' At any rate that's the policy it has followed ever since, which explains the violence with which it 'hates' the 'ultra-lefts'.

"But there, too, is its weak point, and the French CP is perfectly conscious of it. Waging from day to day a nationalist, reformist, ineffective and demoralizing policy, the CP lays itself open to attacks from the left. The respectful opposition to which it limits itself politically, as well as on the level of economic demands, has absolutely no perspective nor prospect of profitability. And when the workers want to defend their standard of living or their safety, they must do

they must do it in spite of the "Communists" or even against them. In this regard, too, the April-May 1947 Renault strike is rich in examples. On defending wages, the CGT talked but did nothing effective. The action of the Union Communiste militants at Renault, in engaging the struggle, showed up this contradiction between all the workers and the union's planned policy of inertia.

"And the April '47 Renault strike showed what is possible in such a case. Of course, the divorce between the working class and the French CP was not consummated, except perhaps in the Collas sector. The group of revolutionaries that led this action was too weak, too young, too little known to be able to conduct the experiment beyond what was done at Renault. But its merit was to show concretely, by correct policies and behavior throughout an action that had national repercussions, the direction in which work had to be undertaken, and the perspectives really open to revolutionaries who agree to come to grips with the French CP within the working class.

"These perspectives always exist. They are even more apparent today. The CP is no longer in the government, but the role of brake played by the CGT and the CP is becoming more and more obvious to an unceasingly larger number of workers. That consciousness remains diffuse because within the plants there are not enough revolutionary militants who know how to give it concrete form. Today it is the role of the revolutionary vanguard to remedy this absence rapidly, as rapidly as possible. That is the task the militants of Lutte Ouvrière have set themselves, the task with which they struggle daily. Doing so, they are conscious of continuing the work undertaken by the Union Communiste militants, work which in 1947 made possible the first big strike after the war."

Editor's Postscript

After the strike, the rank and file in the Collas sector pressured the revolutionaries to set up a new, "dual" union. Queries to L. O., on how long that union lasted, on what was the fate of those involved in it, have so far gone unanswered.

THE 1971 RENAULT STRIKE

During the month of April, 83 O. S. ("specialized", unskilled workers), in the work force of about 8000, at the Le Mans plant spent 61 hours on strike and about 10 hours on slow down, demanding promotion to a higher classification. Promotion would have brought a 5¢ wage increase.

The CGT has a clear majority in the Le Mans plant. Despite its bending its every effort to isolate the 83, despite a variety of bureaucratic maneuvers, on April 29 a huge majority of the 5500 O. S. in the plant voted a sit-down strike. The strike spread to all the other Renault plants and lasted until May 24.

In its June 8 issue, Lutte Ouvrière wrote, "If the government preferred, with the help of the CGT, to lose billions rather than fully satisfy the Le Mans

strikers, it was because it knows very well that every victory, even minimal, at Renault, serves both as a reference point for a good part of the working class and for the employers."

Unable to stop the strike, the CGT joined it -- to try to keep matters under control, to prevent the skilled and monthly workers getting involved, and to keep the strike from spreading to the other plants. Throughout the strike, the CGT, management, and the bourgeois press insisted that only the 83 Le Mans O. S. were on strike, all the rest being "technically unemployed".

In fact, on the basis of a parts shortage resulting from the Le Mans shutdown, management almost immediately started to lock out the O. S. in the other plants. The workers' need to defend themselves provided a charged atmosphere.

Of the approximately 38,000 workers at the Billancourt plant (right outside Paris), 15% belong to unions: 300 to the CFDT. Of the 30 members of the CFDT plant-wide Council, 6 are members of L. O. They have a strong base in a number of departments in the plant, and there they immediately started organizing meetings, calling for all Renault workers to make the Le Mans workers' struggle their own -- against speed-up, lay offs, inflation, the bosses, the government... They also called for the election of a Strike Committee in each department.

Through L. O.'s influence, the CFDT Council at Billancourt on May 4 voted for a strike, and started general agitation in the plant.

On its part, the CGT demanded... that management negotiate. At Billancourt, where opposition is most lively, it embarked on a militant campaign to discourage "action by a minority" which "would be falling into management's trap" and might unleash the riot police. Throughout the strike, CGT hacks tried to disrupt meetings, forbid the posting of posters, etc., etc..

Despite CGT arguments that going on strike would be very hard on the workers' budgets, that a Renault-wide strike would favor private capital over nationalized plants, on May 6 8000 of the Billancourt workers took part in a referendum; 60% voted for a sit-down strike of unlimited duration. A partial sit-down started that day (Thursday). The CGT, undaunted, called for a revote the following Monday, as part of its campaign to discourage the workers and prevent the whole plant shutting down.

Only on May 11 did the CFDT call on the white collar workers to join the strike. The CGT's position was "freedom to work". CGT pressure kept most white collar workers from joining the strike, though they made financial contributions to the strikers.

On May 19 the skilled workers, many of whom were already on strike, formally voted to join.

Far from posing general demands for all Renault workers, the national CGT, CFDT, and FO in negotiations with national Renault management kept lowering

their demands for the Le Mans O. S. Management and the capitalist press, meanwhile, were constantly sounding the alarm to "hold the line against inflation".

Before the strike began, the CGT and CFDT had already organized a "day of action" (a demonstration during working hours) for all metal workers for May 14. 30,000 workers took part, in support of demands for return to the 40 hour work week and retirement at 60. Nothing was said about all the metal workers coming out on strike in support of Renault.

A "week of action" having been called to begin on May 27, both the CGT and management panicked at the thought it could "plunge France into a general strike. We are ready to face down any adventure that would lead the country into disorder ..."; said the general-secretary of the CGT.

On May 17 the unions and Renault management agreed to reclassify the 83 Le Mans O. S., thus granting them a \$10 a year wage increase, and to allow the "actually locked out workers" to collect unemployment compensation. Workers at Le Mans, the only ones allowed to vote, rejected the agreement almost 2 to 1.

Management then threw in another crumb, and with the help of the unions, got the workers back, just in the nick of time.

Lutte Ouvriere presentation: BUILDING THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

L. O. 's position on building the revolutionary party begins with its emphasis that the key activity must be within the working class, that priority must be given to the penetration of socialist ideas into the class. That priority determines the form of organization of the revolutionary party, that is its organization on the basis of factory cells. L. O. factory cells are set up whenever there is one L. O. member working in a plant. L. O. non-worker members are included in the cells.

Each cell issues a factory bulletin on a regular basis, once every one or two weeks. These bulletins constitute a true workers' press, giving information and help, and taking positions on the workers' problems. They constitute L. O. 's public political appearance within the factory. The bulletins include the foreign and domestic problems confronting the working class movement, and are the most read of L. O. publications. They exist in about 200 key factories, and can be considered equivalent to issuing 150,000 leaflets every 2 weeks.

L. O. insists that its worker members work in large factories. That means that a worker recruit employed in a small factory must change his or her place of work even when it means a cut in pay or harder work.

But L. O. bulletins exist in nearly all the major factories in the country, and are considered the most effective use of L. O. forces. Priority is given to factories of 1000 or more workers. The bulletins are read, passed on, some-

times posted. In France workers read little of the political press, so the weekly Lutte Ouvriere reaches only a minority.

That these bulletins embarrass the CGT was proved by the activity of the CGT press union in June 1972 in using strong-arm methods to prevent the distribution of several issues of the weekly Lutte Ouvriere, in an effort to stop distribution of the bulletin within the union's fortress.

The bulletins involve a whole network of workers -- involved in gathering information, putting out the bulletins, contributing money, distributing outside the plant gates or "clandestinely" inside the plants. This is seen as a way of involving and organizing workers. Workers attracted to L.O. are urged to join tenants' committees, subway users' committees, etc., in order to introduce them to more aspects of L.O. politics.

All L.O. members in the factories are active in unions, 75% in the CGT. Even though no L.O. worker identifies him/herself politically in that union, some have been expelled. If the revolutionary militant detected as such is active in the CGT, the machine tries to expel him or her. Once expelled, or taking part in another union, he or she is maligned, slandered, even denounced to the employer, and sometimes physically attacked.

After May 1968 L.O. members were forced to create factory CFDT and FO sections, the choice between the two being tactical, based on the freedom of maneuver allowed by the union bureaucracies. The aim was to continue the struggle against Stalinism by exposing the reformism, the anti-democratic and Stalinist methods of the CPers in the CGT to the rank and file militants.

In the CFDT and FO, the members of L.O. can be more open. There they try to politicize the union members and bring them closer to L.O. They have been reasonably successful.

L.O.'s aim is to appear as an alternative leadership to the Stalinists and reformists through taking the lead in struggles. Most struggles in France are outside and against the union bureaucracies. In effect, L.O. has led these struggles wherever they were present: to a certain extent during the Renault strike in 1971 at the Billancourt plant, at Alsthom, at Girosteel, at Polymechanique, etc., i. e. strikes that went on for several weeks and ended in victory.

L.O. seeks to give the workers confidence in their self-activity, to recreate methods deformed by the bureaucrats, to return control to the rank and file, to create strike committees as the arena for democratic struggle, and thus to raise the political consciousness of the class. They feel they have been effective, but note that they have been able to assume the leadership only in isolated, not national, arenas, due to the limited size of their forces. But in this way L.O. has been able to increase its proletarian composition, its numbers and its effectiveness. They have recruited so many workers that there is a shortage within the organization of students to serve as back-up within the factory cells.

Political Fractions in the Unions

The National Workers Conference, held jointly by L.O. with the PSU (Unified Socialist Party, left social democrats), the last weekend in October 1972, resulted in an advantage for L.O., both in the number of workers attending (174 L.O., 139 PSU, 38 others not including the Ligue Communiste (French SWP) or the OCI (French group formerly affiliated with the Workers League) who both declined to attend), and on the level of ideas.

L.O. put forth the principle of Fractions, the right of a political party to control its members and put forth its ideas in the unions. The PSU opposes this principle, and its members are each free to do as they please, including to support the union bureaucracy (particularly in the CFDT) when it expels L.O. or other militants from the union, as has happened on a number of occasions.

A union fraction is more than a tendency. Tendency rights are limited to expressing differences with the union leadership. A fraction has the right to hold advance meetings in order to organize for intervention in the union. When they were in the minority, CP union members organized to defend themselves, to go to conventions, to put out publications. Now that they are the CGT majority, they monopolize the leadership and the whole life of the union, claim to be the union and refuse fraction rights to everyone else. The PSU claims to be opposed to the unions becoming a battlefield for party rivalry.

L.O. insists that for workers democracy to be meaningful, minorities must be able to express their opinions, to organize to explain and defend their opinions before all the workers, both union members and non-union members. The practice of real democracy will build the unions, attracting new members among those workers turned off by present union policy and bureaucratic practice. Only union democracy will permit the unification of the Confederations. Fraction rights are the guarantee of workers democracy.

Fractions are not synonymous with what in the U.S. is called a caucus. Fractions in France exist in a single plant, and ((to the best of my understanding)) include non-L.O. members. Some of these militants help with the factory bulletins that the L.O. cells put out; some don't. If these militants agree with L.O. union policy, they are finally won politically -- often to L.O. union and political positions at the same time.

There is no connection between L.O. fractions in, for example, different Renault plants. But L.O. cells from the different plants do meet together.

L.O.'s long-term perspective for trade union work seems to have been expressed in articles in two issues of their weekly newspaper:

June 16, 1971: "The workers will soon create their own organizations of struggle." This statement followed the Renault strike, and I was unclear whether or not it implied setting up an independent union. An L.O. comrade explained that it referred to Strike Committees, elected by all the workers, union members

or not, as occurred during that strike and in the course of all the important strikes that have taken place since. This, he said, is incontestably a step forward in the development of class consciousness by many workers.

September 5, 1972: "If revolutionaries have been able to play a key role on the plant level, their efforts at breaking the isolation of these struggles have hardly been crowned with success. From this point of view, the absence of a revolutionary organization capable of intervening effectively on the national level, that is, of a revolutionary party, is cruelly felt."

The Level of Class Consciousness

"It is difficult to estimate the present level of consciousness in the working class since it can be measured really only by the actions the working class will be able to undertake in the coming period.

"But I think there has been a definite change for the better compared to the period before '68. Today thousands of workers understand perfectly, even if they don't agree with us, that it is possible to be to the left of the CP. They don't place their confidence in the revolutionaries, but they admit that these revolutionaries are right on a certain number of questions against the CP. That explains why our ideas are echoed much more than before.

"But this advantage is only relative and will become concrete only on condition that great struggles take place in the coming period and that they are victorious. If the reverse should occur, we would rapidly lose all the benefits of this situation." (Letter of December 5, 1972 from Jean Lievin)

Industrial work is basic, but it is not the limit of L.O.'s activity. L.O. takes positions on all national and international problems, positions now limited to propoganda, as is the case for all the revolutionary groups in France, due to the relationship of forces.

In the coming parliamentary elections, L.O. will be running 100 worker candidates, allowing them access to radio and television. L.O. has proposed an electoral bloc with the Ligue Communiste and the OCI, believing that to appear responsible and serious to workers, it would be foolhardy for 3 different Trotskyist groups to run candidates against each other in the same districts. Discussions have been in progress since May, and L.O. is hoping for a definitive response from the other two organizations shortly. In the proposed bloc, each group would choose its own method of organization and slogans, and would call for a vote for the other organizations in the constituencies where its own candidates are not running. Necessary to such an understanding would be an equal division of constituencies; arguments over the division of constituencies have so far blocked an agreement. Such an agreement would mean that Trotskyists would be running in 300 districts.

((Editor's Postscript: In fact L. O. is running 176 and the Ligue Communiste 133 candidates. In December, after 7 months of negotiations, the OCI abruptly broke off negotiations and announced that it was running only 19 candidates -- since it's useless to take advantage of bourgeois television or radio time.

Elections in France are run in two "turns". It takes a majority to win in the first round, only a plurality to win in the second. For the March 1973 elections the CP, SP, and a "left" split-off from the "Radical" Party have formed a bloc, that is they will run against each other in the first round, but have agreed to step down in the second round in favor of the "best placed left" candidate against the right. The L. O. and Ligue Communiste candidates will be running only in the first round. Altogether they will be running in 309 of the 487 French parliamentary districts. A 1000 franc (about \$200) deposit is required for the right to run, for each candidate. Both L. O. and the Ligue are calling for votes for either the CP or SP in the second round.

When the OCI first opted out of the Trotskyist bloc, it called for a vote in the first round for candidates of the CP, SP, L. O., or the Ligue -- all on equal terms. Based on its slogan, "a workers' government to power", the OCI calls for a second round vote to the best placed CP or SP candidate, with no warning that if elected, with or without the "left" Radicals, the CP and SP would be operating a bourgeois government.

On January 12 Le Monde (the French New York Times) reported on an OCI press conference where their spokesman attacked L. O. and the Ligue as "crypto-Stalinists, propelled by the bourgeoisie". This, while the OCI is not only trying to woo CP and SP members by not criticizing their leaderships, but is actually seeking acceptance by those leaderships..

L. O. replied that the OCI's statement was the equivalent of Stalinism within the workers movement, that no such criticism was made during the 7 months of negotiations, that such behavior shows the OCI's deep-seated fear of allowing its rank and file, particularly the youth, the opportunity to participate in joint activity with L. O. and the Ligue. L. O. broke off all relations.

Of the first 60 of its candidates to be chosen, L. O. named 18 manual workers, 24 clerical and other white collar workers, the rest teachers and housewives. 18 of the 60 are women; 40 of the 176 will be, as many as are being put up by all the major parties put together (out of their 800 or more).

The aim of L. O. in the elections, of course, is to show workers that their real strength is not the vote, but the class struggle in the factories and on the streets.))

At the International Conference, in response to questions from other groups present, L. O. made these further points:

In France for 25 years the left parties, the CP in particular, have not been in the government, so that we must consider the working class' illusions on their

coming to power and being able to do something. Yet L. O. does not call for supporting them. L. O. seeks to organize the workers to fight for their own demands, saying, "You may have illusions, you may believe the "left" parties will grant your demands when they're in power, we don't believe it. Let's fight for these demands together. If the left parties come to power, we'll fight for your demands." Taking account of the workers' illusions allows L. O. to wage a better fight against those illusions

What does L. O. do with the workers whose votes they win? The comrades of L. O. are not electoralists. Many votes are only a gesture and mean no further commitment. Others may be more committed to the L. O. point of view, but L. O. does not have enough members to organize them. Where L. O. does have strength, the campaign will make contact and try to organize. That is one reason for factory cells, for area action committees, transport and tenant committees. If L. O. had the strength, they would have unemployed workers committees.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

REVOLUTIONARIES AND TRADE UNION ACTIVITYTRADE UNIONS IN OUR EPOCH

Trade unions rose a century ago, as a tool to defend the moral and material interests of the working class. Despite all the statements of ultra-leftists since the past fifty years - who explained that the traditional unions, under hold of reformist leaderships, are supposedly obsolete forms of organization and consequently a place of no interest for revolutionaries - still the trade unions maintain their outstanding position in the working struggles - whether their role is positive or negative is not the point.

The history of the working class movement can boast indeed of a great number of struggles carried on without the initiative of the trade unions; and sometimes such struggles met an open opposition on the union's part. More often, we've seen strikes which, at one given time, somehow stood out of reach of the union leaderships' control. Of course, revolutionaries should not consider the trade union as a fetish. To be against starting or pursuing a movement when the unions are against it but the workers are for it, because of the alleged necessity to avoid opposing the union leaderships, this is a pure betrayal of the interests of the working class. On the contrary, on such occasions, revolutionaries must try and propose the workers as alternative to the policy of the reformist leaders.

Indeed it is true that for the majority of the working class economic struggles are still today carried on under the leadership of traditional unions. It is true that these unions still largely benefit of the workers' confidence, whereas the revolutionary movement, in all countries, is a very small minority among the working class. So, revolutionaries must necessarily take into account this given situation before deciding on their strategy.

Now, reformism in traditional trade unions obviously has some effects on the way they view the defense of the immediate interests of the workers. Because of the economic situation under decaying imperialism, when you do not defend the historical interests of the proletariat, i.e., when you refuse to defend them, in practice, this very often results in not even defending some of their immediate interests. And even more so in the weaker imperialist countries than in the richest ones; a fortiori, in under-developed countries.

During the first decades of the present century, the reformist character of the traditional trade unions was mainly based on the fact that they recruited most of their militants and most of their cadres among the working class aristocracy. They expressed the desire of such layers for a peaceful adjustment of capitalism. But at present, reformism is no more successful at gaining the slightest reforms. So this social basis was more or less completely substituted for a new one - this is particularly the case for France. Decaying imperialism and bourgeois democracy resulted in pushing the unions apparatuses toward collaboration with the bourgeois state; in the meantime, the state was attempting to transform the unions into the driving belts of its policy among the working class. Such evolution gave birth to growing bureaucratic apparatuses, more or less directly in the pay of the bourgeois state, with the positions it secures and the legal facilities it provides, etc.

Of course the bureaucratic machine which have arisen from growing integration of unions to the state are in total contradiction with the workers democracy and the democracy in unions, such as was to be found in reformist unions, in the early XXth century.

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The nature of traditional trade unions in our epoch is thus contradictory in terms. They pretend to defend the working class before the state and the bourgeoisie; consequently, they still somehow defend the interests of the workers, just the same way a lawyer should defend his clients: this means that his own interests are not the same as his client's. Since their existence is tied to that of bourgeois society, trade unions are the mere delegates of the bourgeoisie's general interests among the working class.

WHY ARE WE ACTIVE IN THE UNIONS ?

The traditional unions most often are the best upholders of bourgeois order. Still we should not forget that the rank and file union militant is usually devoted to the working class but he is deluded by his own leaders. Some of these militants might be recruited on the basis of the union's policy, a policy that copes with their backgrounds, their ideas and sometimes their personal interests, but such elements seldom build up the majority of the union militants.

Maybe honest union militants generally have a petty-bourgeois state of mind, but they are not different in this regard from the great mass of the working class; actually they are its militant vanguard. This is why revolutionaries must strive to win over such elements to their positions. In so doing, revolutionaries have to carry on the same activity as union militants on bread and butter issues, in order to prove that revolutionary ideas are correct and accurate. When they convince people on such grounds, revolutionaries prove they are not armchair revolutionaries, talking a lot about world revolution, and leaving to others the responsibilities and difficulties of daily struggles.

Now the necessity of winning over the best elements of the working class is not the only aspect which leads revolutionaries toward union activity. Revolutionary activity should not be reduced to the unionized section of the working class, a section which is more or less important according to countries, branches and factories - anyway it is always a minority section. And revolutionaries must orientate toward all the working class. Activity within unions is a necessity to win the confidence of larger layers of the working class, including those reluctant to union activity.

Whereas the trade unions do not defend the general interests of the workers, the latter are most unaware of that. The working class is the only revolutionary class in society. Still it does not follow from that, that it is ever conscious of its interests, of its historical possibilities and of its strength. It is only on rare historical occasions that the working class reaches such a high level of consciousness, i.e. during revolutionary crises. Otherwise, revolution would have been made a long time ago. So, apart from revolutionary periods, most of the time, workers are necessarily influenced by bourgeois ideology and its representatives among the working class movement, i.e., the reformists. Consequently, the bureaucracies' activities, policies and arguments then reflect the level of consciousness of the workers. The union machines have a lot of experience in this regard, and they cleverly play on the most backward aspects of the working class mind to force their own policy into the proletariat.

For all these reasons, working class combativeness is still being expressed mainly through the channel of traditional unions. Now revolutionaries who are active within the unions rapidly find that their militancy has to be attuned to the workers' level of consciousness, if they are to raise this level of consciousness through experience and thus gradually reinforce the workers' confidence in their own forces. The union is then the place where the proof should be made (by first convincing the workers themselves of this truth) that the ideas, actions and behaviour of the revolutionaries - and not those of the union apparatuses - truly represent the interests of the working class.

Moreover, activity within the unions is an excellent training school for revolutionary militants: they learn to know better the actual preoccupations, aspirations, problems and conceptions of the rank and file. And this is particularly important at a time when the revolutionary movement in general has unfortunately developed far stronger roots in the petty-bourgeoisie than in the working class, with the result that militant workers are more often influenced by the petty-bourgeois mentality than the opposite. Too often, the working class known to the revolutionary groups does not exist outside the heads of a few leftists. And in fact, these groups are led to determine their political line according to their own mythical view of the working class and not according to the actual level of consciousness of the real working class. In view of this, the activity of militant workers within the unions is undoubtedly a beneficial activity, disregarding its possible positive results.

A revolutionary organisation worthy of the name, that is a revolutionary organisation caring for the quality of its membership, is also sensible to the fact that union activity can serve as a selective test, because it enables the organization to make the difference between the true militants and the chatterers and critics who are often incapable of taking even a small part of the risks that reformist or Stalinist militants do take. On the other hand, it also helps separate the honest militants from the apprentice bureaucrats who are not few within the revolutionary movement. Being often the only public activity open to revolutionary militants in the plants, being the only activity requiring that they be responsible before all the workers, union activity is, so to say, ethically a must for revolutionary organizations and militants, and here again, whatever the positive results.

For all these reasons, union activity is considered most important by revolutionary militants: for no reason whatsoever do they have the right to abandon it. But they must never forget that it constitutes but a part of their total activity, that is but a mean of doing revolutionary work.

Revolutionary working class militants consider that, the union being the basic form of working class organization, it must be reinforced and developed. Now, because their aim is the organization of the whole working class without exception, and because they have no other interests to defend but the class interests of the workers, they must become the best militants of the unions. However, they do not view their union activity narrow-mindedly because they are well aware of the fact that unionism alone cannot solve all the problems of the working class and because they refuse to put political and union activities in separate water-tight compartments. Thus, though they do stick up for their union, they of course refuse to stand up for one bureaucracy against another or to flatter their union brass, in order to facilitate their relations with them. Revolutionary militants active in the unions are militants, who, through their union work as well as through the other types of activities in which they take part, try to win the greatest possible number of workers to their ideas, to the socialist program.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN THE UNIONS

Union activity of course mainly means addressing all the workers, unionised or not, and participating in their daily struggles. But it also means being active within the union itself, playing a part in its inner life.

Usually, the first problem to worry those revolutionary groups who have a union activity is the following : how to outgrow their rank and file activity in order to intervene at higher levels (Union Congress, City or Province Alliance, Federation or Confederation) and to assume more important responsibilities. But in our opinion, such would not be their problems if they took into account the actual balance of power between the revolutionaries and the union apparatuses.

Of course, revolutionaries do not turn away from post implying greater responsibilities in the union. But such a post may enable them to act with more efficacy only if they benefit from the support of a certain number of union members. Hiding one's own ideas in order to climb in the union hierarchy under the pretence that one will be able to act with more efficacy at a higher level is a nonsense. In the better case, such a militant will be confined to official union activity for the illusive advantage of being able to intervene at key moments in struggles to come; illusive, because anyway such an intervention is bound to be short-lived, as the apparatus will then most certainly take the necessary counter-measures. In the other and unfortunately more frequent cases, the militant will become the hostage or the accomplice of the apparatus or will even more simply be completely absorbed by it.

The acceptance of new responsibilities thus has a meaning only when it is the result of the will of the rank and file and not the result of an error (from their point of view) on the part of the apparatus. Only then may union members feel concerned with conflicts occurring between the said militant and the apparatus and consequently intervene in order to impose their will upon the union brass. But of course, at least in France, this problem is more or less limited to the plant or union Local level, since at any other higher level, one meets only members of the union hierarchy.

As of the intervention in union congresses, which does not imply the same problems and risks, one must be aware of the fact that it constitutes but a secondary aspect of a militant's activity.

The actually overwhelming weight of the union apparatuses and the more or less complete absence of democracy inside the unions have made the fight for working class and union democracy the main axis of the union activity of revolutionary militants.

This is perfectly exemplified by the situation in France, and especially in the largest and most influential union, the CGT, where union members are not only deprived of the power to weigh on the union's line but are more than often not even convoked at union meetings - their membership being thus reduced to the ownership of the union's card.

Now if the situation appears to be slightly different in other countries or in other unions, the situation prevailing in France is not altogether an accident or an exception. On the contrary, this phenomenon is more or less generalized and stems from the role of the unions in our times, from their being integrated in the state apparatus and from the fact that union bureaucracies aim at completely escaping the control of the workers.

Under such conditions, it is an illusion to believe that revolutionaries can possibly, by a long and steady work, make the wheel of history backwards and bring back again the union democracy to the beginning of the century. The struggle of revolutionaries against the reformist apparatuses cannot be reduced to a slow nibbling at the reformists' precisely because there is no democracy inside the unions, which accounts for the successful defensive reactions of the bureaucrats; and then because of the fact that the development of a revolutionary working class consciousness does not follow a steady-growth pattern.

By struggling for the working-class and union democracy, the revolutionaries are not really aiming at a restoration of democracy that would allow the workers to take their organizations into their own hands: this may - or may not - happen during a revolutionary crisis, but is in no way a necessary condition to the victory of the workers - in fact, it may be but a consequence of their victory. Their aim is rather to raise the level of consciousness of the workers, by making them understand why the policies of the apparatuses have nothing to do with working-class interests; why the workers should not have confidence in union officials; why they must be active in labor organizations; and why the policy of the revolutionaries is the only one that is consistent with the short and long-term interests of the working class.

The reason for and importance of this struggle for working class democracy lie in the fact that such a democracy is the necessary condition of the seizure and use of power by the proletariat.

In fact, the union apparatus could not maintain its policy if it were actually controlled by the rank and file, a thing it will do everything to avoid. The first thing to be done in order to be able to oppose the union bureaucracy is then to fight for a more active rank and file that will thus be able to form itself an opinion, then express it and finally make its own decisions. That implies struggling for meetings to be held as frequently and as regularly as possible and to be open to all union members and even, if possible, also to non-members. That implies seeing to it that rank and file workers be interested by such meetings and develop a liking for gatherings where they can regularly discuss their problems. Thus only can revolutionary militants possibly create the possibility to oppose the apparatuses.

That is, as one can easily see, a very elementary type of work, all the more elementary as the repression of the apparatus (in the CGT mainly, but also in the so-called more democratic confederations) makes it impossible for a revolutionary militant to appear as such within the union: if he does, he is immediately excluded or barred from all union activities. However, the elementary character of the tasks confronting the revolutionaries is determined by the very conditions in which they have to work, by the present balance of power between revolutionaries and the apparatuses. No other type of work is possible right now, with the exception of empty phrasings, sterile agitation or else integration within the union apparatus.

Moreover, in their struggle against the apparatuses, the revolutionaries should not expect any great or durable victories. Even if the balance of power in a particular plant or in a particular instance is favorable to the revolutionaries, the outcome of a conflict is ultimately dependant upon the national balance of power, which is presently overwhelmingly in favor of the apparatuses, all the more so since the so-called "social" laws are generally aimed at screening the apparatuses from any type of rank and file control.

Such conflicts with the apparatuses generally end with the victory of the latter and can consequently discourage some workers. It is nonetheless through such struggles that workers can realize what the apparatuses are really like and that militants grow hardened, more experienced, in one word, learn the militancy trade.

THE DUTIES OF A REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION IN UNION WORK

Being active inside union is thus a very difficult task for the revolutionary militant as he is permanently exposed to the pressure of the apparatus and may possibly yield to it. He also has to cope with the pressure of his own impatience, which sometimes is not less important than that of the labor machines and may bring him to engage in premature struggling (in the present context, that often boils down to a search for an excuse for renouncing all union activity altogether). Moreover, he is often exposed to the incomprehension of his fellow-workers, who do not understand his willfulness to stay in a union that evidently wants to get rid of him.

In these conditions, working out the proper tactics in each particular instance is generally above the forces of the isolated militant in a labor union. His organization must then be set on helping him out as best as it can, must care for his activity, must discuss and control it.

The revolutionary militating in a labor union must not be left to himself, to his sole reflections and inspirations; he must become the militant of a particular organization, applying in the union sphere the well-defined and thought over policy, strategy and tactics of his organization. What calls for, on the one hand, an organization that is well aware of its responsibilities and on the other hand militants who have confidence in their organization and who are consequently disciplined militants. When that is lacking, there can be no revolutionary activity in the labor unions. In the best possible cases, we will find militants who say or believe they are revolutionaries but who in fact are merely doing the type of work that can be expected from union left-wingers.

In France, we have a very good example of this state of things. The PSU, whose leadership is careful not to oppose the labor union machines, takes care not to ask its union militants to follow a given policy and even theorizes this state of things by declaring against the right to form fractions or caucuses inside the unions (while that right is recognized inside the PSU itself). By way of consequence, the PSU may well be a party where a number of labor union trends are represented but it is in no way a party intervening as such, through the unions, in the class struggles at the plant level.

Of course, the PSU is much more a left social-democrat party than a revolutionary organization. But the danger of following the same policy more or less awaits all revolutionary groups. For it is indeed easier to adapt oneself to the policy of left-wing unionists than to try to transform them in order that they become true revolutionary militants. Such opportunism in matters of organization has been proven by the whole history of the labor movement to be no less dangerous than opportunism in political matters. One must be aware that nothing durable can be built in this way. At least, nothing revolutionary.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE in the UNIONS?

1-REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY IN THE C G T

We have described in an earlier issue (1) how, in the conditions prevailing in France today, a revolutionary organization's work in organized labor must be focused on the C.G.T., the labor confederation which plays a predominant role in the French labor movement both by virtue of its social composition and large membership.

However, for a revolutionary, militating in the C.G.T. is not an easy task. For with the exception of extremely marginal elements of the working class, which are more or less beyond the reach of the Stalinist apparatus—and by their nature of only secondary interest to the militant—it is at present absolutely impossible for a revolutionary to militate openly within the C.G.T.. Not only is it impossible to openly defend the revolutionary program within the C.G.T., but it is usually enough that a militant be labelled, or merely suspected of being "Trotskyist" or "leftist" for him to be barred, if not excluded, from all union activity.

Thus the revolutionary worker who militates within the C.G.T. finds himself obliged to operate in virtual secrecy in relation to the union apparatus. This is the case not only as regards his activity in the union, but all his extra-union activity at the plant as well.

The problem is thereby all the more complicated in that revolutionary activity at a given plant can in no way confine itself to union work alone. As important as it may, work within the union is but one part of the task before revolutionary militants. Of equal importance is that militants possess a means of expression capable of reaching the mass of workers in any given factory.

To not organize a means of expression directed to all the workers, union members or not, is to limit the influence of one's ideas and program—however restrained by the pressures above described—to but a small minority of workers. Possibly they are the "active minority", which is not necessarily profitable since they often happen to be the union apparatus at the same time. If it is evident that revolutionaries must militate within the unions, it should be equally clear that they must militate within the entire working class, taking their own political responsibilities in front of the workers, and not only through union intermediaries.

And yet, it is no less evident that the existence, or sudden appearance of a local, revolutionary press in a factory would put the union apparatus on guard and incite a Trotskyist-hunt, thereby making revolutionary activity in the union that much more difficult.

Because we are convinced of the tremendous importance of political expression of revolutionaries within the plants, we push ourselves to carry out both these primary tasks. In every factory where there are militants of our tendency, they publish a regular political bulletin aimed at the ensemble of their fellow workers. (There are presently two hundred such bulletins published in the main plants throughout the country, each corresponding to a more or less developed group of militant revolutionaries). Political appearance within the factory is our comrades' first task, which in no way implies neglect of systematic union activity.

Unfortunately, the necessity of carrying out these two simultaneous and complementary tasks is far from being accepted by all of the "leftist" groups. Most of those who admit the importance of union activity refuse an independent political appearance in the plant, fearing that it might hinder their union work; and many of those who are willing to intervene politically in the factory are quick to withdraw from the difficulties of regular union activity, declaring it useless or even destructive; and so they abandon the unions to the labor machines.

So it is that the most typical example of the first case is that of the factory militants of the P.S.U. (2) (more readily tolerated by the Stalinists than the militants of revolutionary organizations), who have virtually renounced all political intervention in factory life. Except for very rare occasions, P.S.U. leaflets hardly ever appear in the plant. Those exceptional leaflets which do come out are usually of such a general nature as to not challenge the role of the union apparatus, particularly within the local.

The union policy of the P.S.U. is the most perfect example of opportunism that one may find. In effect, the P.S.U. declares itself opposed, in principle, to all factional work within the union. Now, if P.S.U. militants defended the party line individually within their union organizations, this "anti-faction" policy would be merely hypocritical. But instead, it becomes curiously honest to the extent that the P.S.U. has, in fact, no union policy at all. In the name of its "anti-factional" principles, the P.S.U. leaves each of its militants free to join the labor confederation of his choice, and, therein, to make his own political line free of all party control. These two aspects of P.S.U. politics: renunciation of political expression within the factory; and refusal of any intervention in union life as a political party, explain the relative tolerance of P.S.U. militants by the labor union machines.

But such opportunist adaptation to unionism is not unique to the P.S.U., a centrist organization which clearly stands for the "right to equivocation". This is to be found also among some Trotskyist revolutionary groups.

The O.C.I. (French Section of the International Committee before the split), which likes to consider itself as diametrically opposed to the politics of the P.S.U., has a political practice which, in this regard, on the union front, hardly differs from that of the P.S.U.. The O.C.I.'s political intervention within the factories is, in effect, just as infrequent as that of the P.S.U., being limited to sporadic leaflets voicing support for their latest campaign.

If the O.C.I., which claims for itself the traditions of democratic centralism, carries out a policy different from the "laissez faire" of the P.S.U., it is not a policy which calls for the constitution of revolutionary factions

within the unions, but rather an escalation of references to the Charter of Amiens (the fundamental text of French anarcho-syndicalism proclaiming the necessity of independence of unions from political organizations). This frame of reference is particularly true as regards the activity of O.C.I. militants within Force Ouvrière (3).

As for the organizations from which sprang the Ligue Communiste (French Section of the United Secretariat of the IVth International), it was only after May, 1968 that they discovered the necessity of a revolutionary press within the factories. They had previously considered such activity to be objective provocation. This abrupt change in position (which is no more readily explainable than the sudden abandonment of the policy of "entrism") would be nonetheless a wholly positive change if only the content of the Ligue Communiste's factory bulletins was not so often designed to flatter a given union organization in which the Ligue has a number of its militants, rather than combat unconditionally the politics of the labor union bureaucracy. (4)

Differing from this kind of unionist deviation is the position of the Maoist-spontaneists who do publish more or less regularly within the factories (though less now than during the period immediately following May, 1968), but who have completely rejected all activity within the unions. Far from trying to raise the consciousness of militant union members as to real nature of their labor confederations, these political groups, not shrinking from the most crude demagoguery, put Seguy, Maire, Bergeron (leaders of the main three confederations), and the rank and file steward in the same category.

So, the militant revolutionary worker is obliged to establish for himself a shaky balance between a position which consists of doing and saying nothing, both within and outside the union, so as not to jeopardize his position within the union, and wait for better days, and that position which consists in openly brandishing his flag and thereby very quickly making impossible any activity within most unions, the C.G.T. in particular.

In order to correctly trace the path of revolutionary action, to avoid running aground on either opportunist submission to the union apparatus or leftist impatience, the revolutionary militant must never lose sight of the ultimate goal of his labor union work.

If we are championing activity in the C.G.T., it is obviously not with the expectation of getting important offices within the federation; nor is it a question of rapidly winning over the majority of the rank and file. The fact is that anywhere above the lowest strata of the union hierarchy, the C.G.T. apparatus is composed exclusively of hard-core Stalinists. The hold which the P.C.F. (5) has on the union structure at all its higher levels could never be loosened except in the event of a profound crisis in the heart of the P.C.F., of a revolutionary crisis in the society, or a combination of the two. To try to acquire responsibilities within the union apparatus by camouflaging one's ideas and without the support of the workers in the plant, can only finish by making the militant a hostage of the union machine whose politics he has affirmed by virtue of his own political silence.

If we are championing activity in the C.G.T., it is because a revolutionary can not hope to win a certain audience among the workers, gain their confidence,

and prove to them the value of his ideas if he does not actively participate in all of the working class' struggles. By his constant presence and activity through even the most limited and humble actions, the militant also proves his capacity to organize and stimulate the working class. The point then is that not only should the revolutionary militate within the framework of the union, but that the union in which he works should be that which is the most effective in the daily struggles of the working class.

The role of the revolutionary militant is to make the workers conscious of their force and their historical possibilities. That means, of course, presenting a political alternative in the workers' struggle to the demoralizing and immobilizing politics of the Stalinist apparatus. But that also means opposing the methods used by the Stalinists, which prevent the working class from controlling its own organizations and which keep them submitted to the union machine. Stalinist methods of control in the labor unions, as much as the reformist political line of the P.C.F., present a constant obstacle to the raising of working class consciousness.

This is why the initial task, that of a revolutionary militant in a C.G.T. local, is to do all he can to bring new life into the union.

In general, union life is non-existent. Union meetings are rare and poorly attended. Union activity is usually led by the "executive commission" formed of a few union officers who, in most places, are not even elected according to the union statutes. This commission tends to be composed of the stewards only..., if not of the local P.C.F. cell members. For the new union member, unsuspected of revolutionary ideas and seeming to want to do something in the union, it is not usually too difficult to be invited to such meetings, or even to run for steward on the union slate. The union apparatus often has difficulty finding a sufficient number of militants to keep the union going and to occupy all the eligible offices: shop-stewards, delegates of the Comité d'Entreprise and non-eligible offices: union delegates and union representatives, to which the apparatus can legally make claim. In such cases, the new, active C.G.T. militant will find himself quickly drawn into the union's executive commission (which theoretically is a body elected by the union's rank and file) and is liable to find himself quickly elected shop-steward thereby clearly increasing his possibilities of intervention and influence within the plant.

However the situation is different when the union apparatus is strong, and when the P.C.F. has the necessary manpower at its disposal to control the machinery of the union local. Then, the new union member could conceivably wait for months, his union card in his pocket, before being able to attend his first meeting. Though there is no hard and fast rule, this situation is more frequent in Paris and vicinity than in the provinces; more in large factories than in small ones. But, whatever the case, it is the weight carried by the Stalinist apparatus in the plant which will largely determine the possibility of militant, revolutionary action in the union.

Whatever difficulties present themselves initially, the main line of the revolutionary militant's intervention within the C.G.T. remains the same: to restore to both unionized and non-unionized workers, the taste for open meetings in order to freely discuss their problems, demands, and the means to satisfy these demands. The point is to try to transform the present character of union

meetings—generally designed by the apparatus to be deathly-boring—in such a way that the participants find renewed interest in meeting more regularly. The point is to reintroduce democratic practices into the function of the union local so that the workers feel themselves directly concerned by the decisions taken, and so that the decisions taken truly reflect the ideas and aspirations of the workers concerned.

Undoubtedly all of this constitutes a more or less elementary task the carrying out of which is nonetheless absolutely indispensable under present conditions; it is a task which, in the doing, shows itself to be much more difficult than one would imagine if not already well acquainted with the problems of militant activity in the factory.

In spite of the fact that Stalinism has killed the taste for organization and democracy among many workers, the real difficulties do not usually come from the union membership. For when the apparatus doesn't openly oppose such meetings, it is relatively easy in the C.G.T. to bring together a significant number of members on a regular basis, and to create a normal union life. This is particularly true of the C.G.T. because it is this federation, more than in the C.F.D.T. or F.O., which attracts a sufficient number of workers who are ready to devote at least a minimum of their time to union activity.

But in this area, considered by some to not be very "political" (as if the proletariat's apprenticeship in workers' democracy, an essential stage in its movement toward power, was not one of the most "political" tasks of a revolutionary!), the Stalinist apparatus generally defends itself tooth and nail (because the Stalinist machine IS very political!). In the end, the Stalinists are more ready to tolerate a well-contained opponent who delivers his customary speech at each of the rare meetings without ever really disturbing the bureaucratic ritual of the union, than the militant who tries, however discretely, to stimulate a rebirth of union life, to make the union once again the property of the workers.

At times it takes very little to stimulate distrust and negative reactions from the union machinery. Often, the first battle awaiting the revolutionary militant is simply to request that union meetings be held, and that the importance of their being held regularly be considered. That is an indication of the difficulty involved in reimposing democratic customs in the union, or defending demands to which the apparatus is violently opposed such as the immediate return to the forty hour week, or the principle of equal wage increase for all, demands which do not even go beyond the framework of economic demands.

The union apparatus is all the more quick in assaulting revolutionaries that in the end, this is the best way to keep them from attaining their goals. For the apparatus, it is not only a question of keeping the opposition in minority in relation to the body of union members (which of course they do whenever possible). It is also a question of creating a depressing atmosphere within the union so as to discourage workers from getting involved in union life. From this point of view, the more undemocratic, the more slanderous, the more vile the methods employed, the more effective they are. If, within the C.G.T., there are enough workers who are ready to meet together and participate in the life of the union, there are obviously fewer who are ready to accept insult, slander, and redbaiting—which gives way to company harassment—or even to simply participate in union meetings in such an atmosphere. These methods undoubtedly risk pushing

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a certain number of members to leave the union altogether. But this is a risk the union machine is ready to run. For the apparatus, control of the union is much more important than recruitment of membership. It considers preferable the maintenance of tiny union locals which pose no problems, to the animation of lively but problematic locals.

Overall, the backgrounds of union activity have changed noticeably since 1968. Chasing after revolutionary militants has become more difficult for the union machine. First, there are many more revolutionaries. Moreover many young workers are now, in their state of mind, more or less influenced by the "leftists". Were the Stalinist apparatus to systematically ostracize every youth suspected of being "leftist", it would cut itself off from all possibility of recruiting new members. The apparatus is thus obliged to adapt itself to the situation and, at least in certain cases, try to win over a number of the young workers who are more or less influenced by revolutionary ideas.

Given these new conditions, the revolutionaries often find themselves less isolated when in conflict with the Stalinist apparatus than they have been in the past. More and more union members—even if far from embracing all the revolutionaries' ideas—are ready to join them in the fight for a given set of demands, disregarding the reactions of the union bureaucracy.

But there is no point deluding oneself. Overall, the relation of forces between the revolutionaries and the Stalinist apparatus remains manifestly in favor of the latter. Even if there are plants in which the bureaucracy is weak, it still has the considerable advantage over the revolutionaries of being organized at the national level, of having a real constituency within the society, and of being capable of recruiting and educating trained, efficient militants in much less time than can the revolutionaries.

This means in effect that no matter how competently and discretely the revolutionaries carry out their union activity in the C.G.T., with the exception of a few places which fall outside the reach of the apparatus, and/or which are of little interest to it, their activity is doomed, at one moment or another to failure; exclusion of one or several militants from the union, or their complete removal from union activities. Even if the militants are able to gain the confidence of the majority of union members in the plant or local, they find themselves utterly defenseless against the decisions taken by the higher officials in the apparatus who, just a step or two up the ladder of the union hierarchy, are thereafter exclusively hard-core Stalinists.

The defeat is that much more certain since, when fighting against revolutionaries, no holds are barred. If the apparatus cannot be certain of keeping the revolutionaries in the minority at any given meeting, after rounding up a host of marginal P.C.F. sympathizers who rarely come out for a union meeting, the bureaucracy organizes a system of balloting "by mail" which is completely uncontrollable. And if they cannot arrive at their ends within the legal framework of their own statutes (which are at all times open to the most convenient interpretation), the bureaucrats will not hesitate to openly violate them, if necessary, not stopping short of the elimination of an entire local.

But such defeats, though only a matter of time before their inevitable occurrence, should not turn militant revolutionary workers away from union work

within the C.G.T.. As bitter as they may be, it is through such struggles that revolutionary militants can acquire experience, become more competent, and eventually win the confidence of the workers under the influence of the C.G.T. and the P.C.F..

It is through such defeats that tomorrow's victories are prepared.

Union activity within the C.G.T. may be less comfortable and infinitely more difficult than work within the C.F.D.T. or F.O.. But from the point of view of future perspectives, it is both more important and more effective. Which is why activity within the C.G.T. should not be abandoned by any militant until he finds himself practically unable to continue in his work; that is, until he is either excluded, pure and simple, or reduced to a mere card-carrying member with no possibility of attending union meetings.

Then, and then only, a militant, who has been isolated by the union machine, can withdraw from the C.G.T. and pursue his activity within the C.F.D.T. or F.O.. Otherwise, all those who can keep on this work within the C.G.T. must do so, just as every new militant entering a plant must join the C.G.T. to pursue the work already started. If we consider militating in the C.F.D.T. or in F.O. to be at times a necessary and correct tactical choice for a militant no longer able to work within the C.G.T., this is in no way a political choice, neither on the national level, nor on the level of the plant.

The way we view our work within the C.F.D.T. and F.O. will be the subject of a future article.

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- (1) - See Class Struggle No I (Revolutionary Militants and the Unions) - June, 1972.
- (2) - Parti Socialiste Unifié - a centrist organization often viewed as "leftist" after May, 1968.
- (3) - Force Ouvrière - the smaller of the main three unions and the most integrated - affiliated to the International Confederation of Free Unions.
- (4) - See Lutte Ouvrière No 186 - March 21, 1972.
- (5) - Parti Communiste Français - French Communist Party

WHAT IS TO BE DONE IN THE UNIONS ?

2 - REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY IN THE FO OR THE CFDT

In earlier issues of «Class Struggle» about the union activity of revolutionaries (1) we have shown that the only possible political choice for a revolutionary organization in France was to be active in the CGT (2).

However, in a number of circumstances, revolutionary militants can no longer be active in the CGT. When they are blatantly expelled, of course, but also when the union apparatus puts them in such a situation that, practically, they can no longer carry on a real union activity. In such a case, the question for these militants is of course to find another framework in which to carry on a union activity, i.e., to be active in the FO (3) or in the CFDT (4).

But it is to be understood that union activity in any of these two confederations can only be a position of withdrawal for these militants. That the other revolutionary militants in the factory who can still be active in the CGT must do it. And that those who have been led to be active in the FO or the CFDT must not cease their actions toward workers organized in the CGT or influenced by it.

We think it necessary to insist on this point because it is not an academic debate, but a concrete problem which faces the French revolutionary movement: the OCI (the French section of the International Committee) as well as the Ligue Communiste (the French section of the United Secretariat) privilege, in the facts, union activity inside one of the two minor confederations, the FO for the OCI, and the CFDT for the Ligue Communiste. None of these Trotskyist organizations writes in its texts that activity within the CGT must be abandoned to the benefit of an activity elsewhere. But to warrant their practice they are led to describe, in their political press, the FO (or the CFDT) in a way which does not at all correspond to reality, and they are led to overestimate the importance for the class struggle of what is going on in these two confederations.

These fundamentally similar practices of the OCI and the Ligue Communiste in union activity go together with a sharp polemic; the OCI exposing the Ligue Communiste for considering the CFDT as a working class trade-union, and the Ligue Communiste blaming the OCI militants for their activity within the FO—which is considered by the Ligue as a scab union. The opportunism of the OCI and of the Ligue Communiste leads them to see pink, if not red, the confederation they give prefer-

ence to in their activity, and the confederation in which they have no activity black (or yellow).

Once again, these different opinions do not flow from divergences on principles, but on the contrary from a common absence of principles, and from unequal developments of these two Trotskyist tendencies. When the International Secretariat split in 1952-53, the majority of the French section, which was to give birth to the OCI, included nearly all the working class militants of this section. At that time, one could in no way be tempted to be active in the openly christian CFTC, which was as small a union as the FO was. Thus, the working-class militants of the OCI found themselves in the latter confederation, whether they wanted it or not. The close collaboration they engaged with some anarcho-syndicalist elements, and also the fact that their main sector of union activity is the traditionally laic «Fédération de l'Éducation Nationale» (teachers' union), account for the way in which the OCI views the CFDT (in addition to the fact that the rival brother, the Ligue, is willingly active in this union). Thus, the November 1972 issue of *Jeune Révolutionnaire* (the paper of the Youth organization of the OCI), in a long article about the CFDT, characterizes this confederation as a «... bourgeois organization within the working-class... the agent of catholic hierarchy among the workers», as they did for the CFTC before the label was changed for CFDT.

Though *Jeune Révolutionnaire* does not even care to discuss a few other aspects of the question, particularly the fact that the leftist speeches of the CFDT enabled it to recruit a number of active young workers, especially just after May 68, their

judgement on the CFDT is however close to reality, in the sense that there was actually no fundamental change in the CFDT in the last few years. The attempt made by a part of the union leadership to transform a small christian confederation into a big reformist confederation in the American fashion is in no way particularly progressive. It is only to be regretted that the OCI press does not show such intransigence when the FO is concerned. The FO is characterized, in many articles, as a «working class union», as well as the CGT, opposed to what the CFDT is.

Of course, in words, the OCI claims to be opposed to the policy of the FO leadership. The OCI militants are supposed to stand for another policy. But it did not prevent the «class struggle minority» (which groups the OCI militants belonging to the FO and anarcho-syndicalists) from writing just after the 1966 convention of this organization that the FO was «the last stronghold and the first place where working class democracy exists». And, nearer to us, in February, 1972, a number of well-known OCI militants and leaders signed a public declaration of allegiance to the FO, declaring: «If this confederation did not exist, how easier things would be between the liberticide party sided by its docile CGT and a new Socialist Party irritated by the CFDT calling for a so-called economic democracy!».

The «liberticide party» is of course the French Communist Party. Here is a strange formula for militants claiming to be Trotskyists, but, on the other hand, a formula which does suit outspoken FO militants. And when we consider that the OCI views the «Workers' United Front» with the French Communist Party (a «working class liberticide» party?) and the Socialist Party (a working class party irritated by a bourgeois trade-unionist organization?) as the key stone of its policy, we can only be deeply amazed. But it is true that we should not ask opportunists to be consistent with their words.

The fact that the FO openly calls for class collaboration must in no way prevent revolutionary militants expelled or put aside from the CGT to be active in that union. But it makes it all the more imperative for them to expose the attitude of the FO at least in their political press, and to point out that this confederation has remained what it was at its beginning in late 1947: due to the socialist government of that time and to the union leaders with whom the government was linked, the FO appeared as a confederation of division, which began its career by standing against the vast movement for economic demands which the working class was engaged in at that time.

As for the Ligue Communiste, they would not write such things on the FO. They consider it as a

scab union. But there too, it is to be regretted that such intransigence goes only one way and that the Ligue shows much more lenity with the CFDT.

It is true that the Ligue started recruiting a few working class elements only in the period which followed May, 1968, and that most of these elements were either CFDT militants or young workers with many illusions about the CFDT (which was also the case for the major part of the leftist movement). And this sheds light upon the above stated—in addition to the fact that the rival brother, the OCI, is willingly active in FO).

Thus, most of the union activities of the Ligue Communiste militants is devoted to the CFDT and these comrades are championing a «class struggle CFDT» (as the title of a pamphlet of the Ligue claims) which means they not only assert that the CFDT is not yet quite a «class struggle» union, but also that it may become one. Expressing such an opinion means that the Ligue has and spreads many illusions, which is obvious when *Rouge*, the Ligue Communiste weekly, (in the February 12th issue) characterizes the CFDT as a «new centrism with a labor base and a revolutionary-syndicalist ideology», and specifies, for those who might have indulged themselves in believing that this definition only applied to the CFDT rank and file, that «the present CFDT leadership is a good example of this neo-centrism».

The Ligue Communiste does not judge the Force Ouvriere by what this federation says about itself but by what it actually does. Even if the conclusions drawn by the Ligue are not always absolutely right, they do use the only correct method for Marxists. But why don't they use it for the CFDT?

For in its already mentioned pamphlet: «For a Class Struggle CFDT», the Ligue Communiste describes the evolution from the CFTC to the CFDT as follows: «The evolution from Christian Socialism to social humanism will be accomplished... at the 35th convention where the class struggle will be recognized and the determination to intervene in the struggle to build a new socialist society will be asserted.», but it would be vain to look for the slightest analysis of the CFDT leadership policy or of its prospects. We are also told that: «The convention was a complete political confusion». But the political confusion is certainly not on the side of the CFDT leaders who are experts at giving themselves a leftist appearance without getting really involved, because they know very well that they must have this appearance, if they wish to build the big confederation for class collaboration they are dreaming of. The political confusion is on the side of revolutionaries who believe in the good words of the

apparatus.

And the evidence of this confusion is to be found in the way in which the Ligue Communiste defends its militants when they are expelled or threatened to be expelled by the CFDT apparatus. In a pamphlet about this problem, *«The Ligue Communiste answers the CFDT»*, the Ligue makes this statement: *«The fight against factions has been the old argument of majorities to expell minorities». But this attempt to immediately justify themselves, to demonstrate that the Ligue militants do not constitute a faction within the CFDT, which, they admit, would be reprehensible, and that they only ask for the right to build a separate faction. And at last, to declare on the anti-democratic practices of the CFDT: «But, as a whole, we hope that these are only errors (as well as we happen to make mistakes which we are ready to recognize)».*

The Ligue Communiste actually makes numerous mistakes (which, by the way, it seldom recognizes); and among them to give up the defense of the rights of factions in the trade-unions, on the pretext that one must not alarm the apparatus, and to consider the practices of the CFDT apparatus as the results of «errors» committed by honest working class militants. But when it tries to get rid of embarrassing revolutionary militants, the CFDT apparatus is not making an «error». On the contrary, it follows a consistent policy which corresponds with its interests. In claiming that these are only fortuitous errors, whether one intends to or not, one makes oneself an accomplice.

But the Ligue Communiste's submission to the pressures of the CFDT, as well as the OCI's submission to the pressures of the FO, is not only to be seen in the public statements of these organizations, statements which, whether they be without principles, are none-the-less directed only toward a limited number of militants. Equally critical is this trade-unionist opportunism which can also be seen in the daily union activity of the militants of the Ligue and of the OCI.

For instance, in the FO local of the Michelin factories in Clermont-Ferrand, the OCI militants are trying to win the support of the elements in this trade-union who are following the FO apparatus against militants of our tendency. They presented a «Statement of Trends in which the following could be read: *«Our aim is not to distinguish ourselves, but to get in the mainstream of the union movement with the means which we have, where everyone, the confederation, the chemical industries federation, the UD 63 (the regional branch of the Puy-de-Dome) are ready to help us, if we succeed in putting forward a consistent program of demands and a method which leads us to be admitted and recognized».* In other words, let us not do anything which distinguishes us from Bergeron and his friends, and

not only will we be able to live quietly in the FO, but we will even be able to benefit from the support of the apparatus. In any case the OCI militants did find the support of Bergeron's friends within this union. But in the final count, what does actually distinguish these militants from the very members of the apparatus?

Besides, in the attitude of the OCI militants in Michelin, there is not only the determination to line up behind the bureaucracy decisions, but also the determination to be considered as different from the other revolutionary militants. This practice has, by the way, become a principle for the OCI. For instance, at the last congress of the FO union branch at Air France the OCI militants could be seen voting for all the proposals, except those made by a militant of our tendency, voting for all the candidates to the national bureau, but not for our comrades. The OCI militants who think they may thus gain the favors of the apparatus might succeed. But what is sure is that they will have ceased to be revolutionary militants long before.

We have seen how, on its side, the Ligue Communiste was careful not to oppose in its national political press the CFDT apparatus as a whole, trying to distinguish the democratic leaders from the others, and always pretending, in every case, to believe in their sincerity. This attitude is of course reflected in the policy conducted by the Ligue militants in the factories.

Thus in a political leaflet distributed by the Ligue in May, 1972, at Roussel-Uclaf about the attitude of the union confederations during the Joint Français strike, one could read: *«In the CFDT, it is the rank and file who speaks. It is a good thing because it enables the workers to carry on an effective struggle in their factory. In Pennaroya, Girosteel, the Joint Français, the rank and file were able to organize the struggle, look for external support and win the victory. The CFDT was on the first lines for the fight». However, after this open approval of the CFDT, the Ligue expresses a small reservation: «If Edmond Maire is right when he considers the 'national days of action' as 'brakes' and 'extinguishers', he does not present any more real perspectives to the workers... The CFDT leadership does not draw all the lessons from the Joint Français strike».*

And, just as the OCI policy leads them to present themselves as the best defenders of the FO (in the already mentioned «Statement of Trends» of Michelin-Clermont, the following could be read: *«The leadership of the trade-union must belong to its best builders.»*), the Ligue's policy leads it to present itself as the best builder of the CFDT. In its polemic with the CFDT apparatus in Normandy, Rouge justified itself the following way, in the February 26 issue: *«The intervention of the Ligue militants reinforced the union every-*

where, and did not weaken it...In the Shell Berre refinery in Petit-Couronne, the CFDT positions have been constantly reinforced since its creation, the successive elections mark an increased implantation of the CFDT».

A revolutionary militant whom the situation lead to be active in the CFDT or the FO has of course the right to explain his union activity and its results to his comrades in the union. But the revolutionary organization to which he belongs does not in turn have the right to present itself as the best defender of that union. It would not be right as far as the CGT is concerned, and even more so in relation to the CFDT and the FO.

Of course revolutionaries do consider the unions as the elementary form of a workers organization which they must develop and reinforce. Because they aim at organizing all the workers without exception, and because they have no other interests to defend than those of their class as a whole, revolutionary militants must be the best militants in the unions. Yet, if they stand for the principle of trade-union organization, if they actually try to organize the greatest possible number of workers, revolutionary militants of course are forced to defend one union against the other, i.e., one apparatus against another one; thus they refuse to appear as supporters of the policy of one of them.

Compelled by the CGT apparatus to find a substitute union activity in the CFDT or the FO, the revolutionary militant has the same fundamental aim as in the CGT: to try and give back to the workers the will to organize and discuss their problems, to decide about the issues to be found, in one word, the desire to organize. On this level, his activity will be the same as it was in the CGT: his aim is to establish regular union meetings which the greatest possible number of workers would attend, whether they be in or out of the union; these meetings must be lively and interesting, the decisions must be taken democratically, and the leading organs elected democratically. However we must note that if this activity is generally easier in the CFDT or the FO than in the CGT--because the bureaucracy holds less weight, it is not more effective on this score because more workers are ready to attend meetings organized by or within the CGT than by other union confederations.

In this activity, revolutionary militants aim at what is fundamental, not at appearances. Their aim is to actually organize the workers, not only to «recruit», and as such they must consider regular meetings of a certain number of workers (not necessarily union members only) as more important than the selling of union cards to workers who will never come to meetings. Both things, to organize meetings of workers and to recruit members, are of course not inherently contradictory. Yet it

is useful to specify which aspect of this work revolutionaries must emphasize, as reference for those who want to be the «best builders» of the union: the revolutionary militants' task is to give the workers the desire to organize in unions, and not simply try to improve, in such and such union local, the statistics concerning the number of cards which were sold, or the number of ballots obtained in such and such elections.

In the course of union activity, revolutionary militants also obviously have to defend their own positions as well in regard to the domain of union activity and demands. This is generally easier to do in the CFDT or in the FO than in the CGT, but should, in any case, be done as openly as possible. Because of the emphasis and absolute priority we give to our activity inside the CGT, we are justified in staying virtually underground in this union, i.e., we withhold most of our ideas and program so as to avoid exclusion or being set aside. But the same attitude wouldn't make any sense within the CFDT or the FO, other than to permit a given militant to climb up the union hierarchy. Such evolution may be of some interest when it is supported by the rank and file, but not when it is granted by a benevolent union machine. For being active in the CFDT or the FO is meaningful only if the revolutionary militant can openly express his own ideas. So, when eliminated from the CGT, the revolutionary militant must choose the union confederation in which to continue his activities, according to the possibilities offered to him to express his ideas.

But defending your own notions within the union local, and trying to convince the union members does not necessarily contribute to the «building» of the union, at least in the way the union machine understands it: when the union local stands on a class line, some reformist union members may be led to leave it. Moreover, such a stand won't necessarily win the immediate support of the workers.

Revolutionary militants stand for the principle of a single union confederation, democratic and capable of grouping all workers, regardless of their opinions; thus they are obviously not in favor of eliminating the reformist members of the union (or the Stalinists in the case of the CGT), or even of separating them from union activity, when revolutionary militants have won over the majority in the union. For revolutionaries, the defense of union- and workers-democracy is a matter of principle, not a tactical trick; the latter attitude would be an ignominious transgression of their own principles. Still it might happen that the reformists (or very rarely the Stalinists inside the CGT) do initiate the rupture; here again the presence of revolutionary militants within the union, or within its leadership, eventually results in a decrease in membership.

Similarly, when a union local supports a class line, this may well lead to a decrease in the number of voters since it comes up against the prejudices of many workers. For instance, when immigrant workers run for steward on the union slate, some racist French workers may well vote for another slate. On a more general level, we should keep in mind the following: revolutionary militants defend the general interests of the working class, at any time and under any circumstance, but the whole working class does not always see its image in the union which defends its interests. This is why it is not correct, from a revolutionary point of view, to consider the electoral success or the number of membership cards as the only criteria for the quality of the leadership's activities—and it is of course still less correct when you let the union machine be the judge of these activities.

In union activity as elsewhere, the only criterion determining the attitude of revolutionaries is the end they are pursuing. Consequently, the policy they maintain is not necessarily that which is most likely to meet the immediate aspirations of most workers, but it is that which will be the most capable of raising the level of consciousness of the great mass of the working class.

There is no point in making virtue of a necessity, raising to a principle the difficulties of union activity, and championing the creation of union sects in which only the workers in agreement with our political line would be organized. For fear of lapsing into stale opportunism, the point is to keep in mind the goal we are aiming at on the union field, i.e., actual organization of the maximum workers of course, and also the defense of a class line, the penetration and the influence of revolutionary ideas and organization among the working class, and the fight against the union machines which paralyze the development of workers struggles.

In France today, the Stalinist apparatus is the most efficient brake in these areas. And this is one of the reasons why we believe that revolutionaries must be active first within the CGT. Still, that this apparatus is the most efficient does not mean it is also the most integrated to the state, actually it is the contrary. The FO and CFDT apparatuses are equally much more integrated to the state apparatus; politically, they stand, so to speak, on a much more right-wing line—even though the CFDT leaders cherish a «leftist» phraseology. Therefore it would be a serious mistake for revolutionary militants, when circumstances forced them to enter the CFDT or the FO, to view the leadership of any of the two confederations as a possible ally in the fight against the Stalinist apparatus. And it would be a still more serious mistake to indulge oneself in the skirmishes between the bureaucrats of the FO or the CFDT against the CGT apparatus.

When in the FO or the CFDT, revolutionary militants should always keep in mind that the main concern of their organization—and consequently THEIR main concern, must be directed toward the workers influenced by Stalinism; and this regardless of the fact that they themselves had been forced to apply to the FO or the CFDT. It means that the policy they have to uphold is, in this area, usually quite the opposite of that of the confederation they belong to.

The FO's policy for instance, is entirely based on a systematic refusal of united actions with the CGT, which they accuse of being the union branch of the French Communist Party. The attitude of revolutionary militants in the FO must be the opposite of that of Bergeron and his friends, i.e., during conventions, they must champion united action with the CGT (this is what the OCI militants actually do), and above all, in each factory, for every movement or action, they must do all they can to concretize a united action with the CGT; in the meantime, they should express also their own opinions on the demands to be put forward in any given circumstance, and the necessary means to their realization.

Such an attitude makes obligatory a clear separation from the visceral anti-communism of the FO leadership. This is the only way to prove to those workers under the influence of the French Communist Party and the CGT that the revolutionary militants, far from being their adversaries, place themselves squarely in the same camp: that of the working class.

Unfortunately, the OCI militants are far from maintaining such a position within the Force Ouvrière. We have already quoted the statement of February 1972 on the «liberticide party», borrowing the FO phraseology word for word. But this is not the only example. Even when calling for unity in action with the CGT (which is not in itself particularly revolutionary since the CFDT voluntarily does as much), the OCI militants feel themselves obliged to adopt the FO's vocabulary: that is, to situate themselves in the reformist perspective. So it is that at the 1966 convention of the FO, a known leader of the OCI cried out from the platform in behalf of united action with the CGT: «As regards the CGT, we might sum up our position in the following terms: 'you're a bunch of scoundrels and we know it. But this is of no interest to us even though we have repeated it time and again. For, in the interest of the working class, and by virtue of our political line, we are ready, all the same, to ally ourselves with you'».

Discourse for unity? As you wish. But what CGT-influenced worker would believe that those on the platform of the Force Ouvrière convention are really in his camp, if here they call the CGT a «bunch of scoundrels», and Bergeron and his

friends «comrades», (whatever they may say elsewhere)?

The response of such a worker would be, on the contrary, to believe that in the end, the Trotskyists and Social Democrats of the FO defend the same political line. The vocabulary of one may be more radical than that of the other, but the two would be nonetheless in agreement that the leaders of the CGT are «scoundrels».

It is not the name which bothers us. That Frachon, Seguy, and Krasucki be called scoundrels does not in itself disturb us. But that one thereby considers Bergeron a «comrade»—Bergeron, who deserves the name «scoundrel» at least as much—, seems to us unworthy of revolutionaries.

And the problem is posed in almost identical terms for the revolutionaries active in the CFDT. To pretend that the FO leaders are «sincere democrats» confronting the liberticide Stalinists, or to pretend that the CFDT (see *Rouge* November 18, 1972) is a sincerely «socialist» confederation, is six of one and half a dozen of the other. *Rouge* considers that the CFDT «knew how to counter any attacks coming from the French Communist Party questioning the value of the CFDT's commitment to socialism by clearly pronouncing itself not only in favor of class struggle, but for the socialization of the means of production and economic planning», and that it «knew how to counter-attack at the same time by adding that these elements were inseparable from a clearly stated position (sic) in favor of self-management», even though the CFDT had not «clearly» grasped the question of the state. Such an evaluation is tantamount to the adoption of the vocabulary and, thereby, the

political line of the reformist confederations; to the renunciation of any political line capable of influencing those workers who definitely must be won over if we ever hope to be able one day to build a revolutionary workers' party. We speak of those workers who up to now have been organized or influenced, by the Stalinist apparatus, because of their more or less confused feeling that, after all, this apparatus is, next to the other union machines, the one which is the least integrated into the French bourgeoisie and its state.

Work within the CFDT or the FO may be a means, a sort of springboard, for those militants edged out of the CGT, to be able, under certain circumstances, to act upon the Stalinist apparatus which, alone, except within a few restricted milieus, maintains a strong influence on the workers.

Through this intermediary, militant revolutionaries can do what they would be unable to do within the union apparatus of the CGT: intervene publicly as what they are—revolutionaries.

Nonetheless, it is in no way a question of gaining a noteworthy influence on the French working class and leading its future struggles through the intermediary of the CFDT or the FO. Work within these confederations can be only a part, and a small part, of the entire task requiring more or less underground activity within the CGT, as the purely union activity; and a large, public activity within the plants, plus a direct activity—clandestine or not, aimed at the Stalinist militants.

In the end, outside of this framework, the only activity possible within the unions is opportunist activity, carried out by «left-wing unionists» possibly, but certainly not by revolutionary militants.

(1) See «Class Struggle» No 1 (Revolutionary Militants and the Unions) and No 3 (What Is To Be Done in the Unions - 1: Revolutionary Activity in the CGT).

(2) CGT: Union confederation actually led by the French Communist Party. By far the most influential among French union confederations. It groups the greatest number of workers, and the most active ones. Its Secretary General is Georges Seguy.

(3) Force Ouvriers: Union confederation issued from the former, out of a split in 1947. Close to the social-democrats, and much less influential than the CGT. The present Secretary General is André Bergeron.

(4) CFDT: Union confederation issued from a shift in the majority of the CFTC, a catholic confederation. As reformist as the FO is, though inclined to be somewhat leftist in words since May 1968. Its present Secretary General is Edmond Maire.

