

Workers' Strikes in the Paris Region in 1968: Continuities and Discontinuities

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ABSTRACT

Many analysts have regarded the workers' strikes in the Paris region as the apex of the workers' movement in Western Europe during the 1960s. In terms of numbers of strikers and media coverage, the work stoppages were undoubtedly the most spectacular of the decade. However, the 1968 Paris-area strikes did not break with the established patterns of stoppages in twentieth-century France. As during the Popular Front of the late 1930s, the momentary weakness of the state—which the student movement provoked in 1968 (not electoral politics as in 1936)—helped to launch the wave. The overwhelming majority of strikes were not “wildcats” (*grèves sauvages*) since the unions played a major role in both their initiation and termination. The great mass of strikers showed much less interest in *autogestion* than in material demands. The gains from this strike wave especially benefited the lowest-paid workers—youth, women, and immigrants—who received significantly higher pay and fewer working hours. Consumerism played a paradoxical role in both fomenting worker demands and acting as a socially cohesive force which induced them to return to work, but a powerful state—following the counterrevolutionary Republican tradition—supplemented consumerism by defending property and the “right to work.”

KEYWORDS

Strikes, Paris Region, 1968, Unions, Consumerism

The specter of revolution dominates much of the historiography on 1968 in France. Henri Lefebvre, Alain Touraine, Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, and Cornelius Castoriadis viewed the May “events” as a welcome “rupture” (*une brèche*) with a hierarchical consumer society.¹ These French sociologists/philosophers found that the 1968 rebellion anticipated a new social order. Likewise, Pierre Bourdieu stated that May 68 was a “critical moment” “when all became possible.”² Michel de Certeau, a pioneer of current cultural interpretations, argued that May represented an innovative “prise de parole” by oppressed social groups.³ Most recently, a handful of French political scientists have mirrored Bourdieu’s perspective by labeling 68 as a crisis of “symbolic order” “without precedent.”⁴

These analyses emphasizing discontinuity are based largely on interpretations of the student component of the 1968 events, and they either ignore or distort the history of the workers’ movement. The latter began after student protests at Nanterre and La Sorbonne in late April and early May had challenged and weakened the centralized Gaullist government. On Monday, May 13, a large worker-student demonstration initiated a one-day solidarity strike against government “repression” of the student movement. The following Monday, May 20, workers’ strikes expanded massively, even as the government assured many essential services, such as gasoline distribution, to priority consumers. Thus, workers in 1968 continued various nineteenth-century traditions when wage earners took advantage of an upward economic cycle and full employment to launch major strike waves, which often began in the spring and on Mondays (Saint Lundi).⁵ On May 25 formal national negotiations among government, employers, and unions opened in Paris. On Monday, May 27, the major partners issued what became known as the Grenelle Accord, but workers in large Parisian metallurgical firms rejected it. The estimates of the total number of strikers at the height of the movement vary. Bernard Pudal declares seven to ten million; Kristin Ross nine million; Antoine Prost seven million, and Xavier Vigna 3.5 million.⁶ Whatever the figure, it far

¹ Morin, Edgar; Lefort, Claude; Castoriadis, Cornelius. *Mai 68: La brèche*. Paris: Fayard, 1988), p.185; Touraine, Alain. *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*, trans. Leonard F. X. Mayhew. New York: Random House, 1979, pp.26-81; Lefebvre, Henri. *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, trans. Alfred Ehrenfeld. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969, p.118.

² Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp.161, 182; Gilcher-Holtey, Ingrid. *Die 68er Bewegung: Deutschland-Westeuropa-USA*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001, pp.72, 80, 83, employs Bourdieu’s concept of the “critical event.”

³ de Certeau, Michel. *La prise de parole: Pour une nouvelle culture*. Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1968; Gobille, Boris. Mai-Juin 68: crise du consentement et ruptures d’allégeance. *Mai-Juin 68*, p.21.

⁴ Gobille, Boris. *Mai 68*. Paris : 2008, pp.6, 95; Damamme, Dominique; Gobille, Boris; Matoni, Frédérique; Pudal, Bernard. Mai-Juin 68 en France, le temps de comprendre. In : Damamme, Dominique; Gobille, Boris; Matoni, Frédérique; Pudal, Bernard, eds. *Mai-Juin 68*. Paris: éd. de l’Atelier, 2008, pp.11, 13, 19.

⁵ Perrot, Michelle. *Les ouvriers en grève: France 1871-1890*. Paris: Mouton, 1974, pp.101, 109, 137, 722.

⁶ Pudal, Bernard. Les événements de mai et juin 1968: bref récit chronologique. In : *Mai 68*. Op.Cit., p. 192; Pudal, Bernard Pudal and Retière Jean-Noël., Les grèves ouvrières de 68, un mouvement social sans lendemain mémorial. In *Mai 68*. Op.Cit., p.208; Prost, Antoine. Les grèves de mai-juin 1968.

outclassed the 1 million strikers of the previous great strike wave in the spring of 1936 during the Popular Front.

On 29 May a large Confédération générale du travail (CGT, General Confederation of Labor) demonstration in Paris and President Charles de Gaulle's departure from the capital seemed to indicate a deep crisis of the regime. The following day, De Gaulle returned to Paris and addressed the nation. His speech was followed by a massive rightist demonstration which contested the leftist dominance of the streets of the capital. The government took the offensive, guaranteed "the right to work," and threatened recalcitrant strikers with repressive state power. Unlike in 1848 or 1871, authorities were able to fuel and feed the city and thus to prevent their adversaries from gaining the solid support of discontented housewives.⁷ In the first week of June, strikers in smaller firms returned to work, and gradually in the first half of that month, holdouts from the major enterprises negotiated firm-by-firm agreements which ended the work stoppages.

Workers' actions could only with difficulty be seen as a "rupture" or, in the hyperbolic words of André Malraux and Georges Pompidou, "a crisis of civilization." Similarly, the influential sociologists mentioned above viewed wage earners as participating in a broader movement that challenged the social order. They posited that salaried personnel desired *autogestion* (workers' control) which demanded the end of separation between those who commanded and those who obeyed. According to these analysts and some recent historical accounts, workers wanted to democratize their workplaces.⁸ Other progressives sympathetic to the movement yearned so deeply to believe that workers wished to take over their factories that they invented the story that the personnel of the CSF factory at Brest had initiated "democratic control" and were producing walkie-talkies.⁹ The myth-makers—who included historians Alain Delale and Gilles Ragache, theorists Ernest Mandel and Serge Mallet, and the major newspapers *Le*

L'Histoire, no. 110, April, p.36, 2008 ; Ross, Kristin. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 8, 184; Vigna, Xavier. *L'Insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68*. Rennes Ed. Presses universitaires de Rennes: 2007, p.37; Zancarini-Fournel, Michelle. L'épicentre. In : Artières, Phillipe and Zancarini-Fournel, Michelle. eds. *68: Une histoire collective*. Paris: **La Découverte**, 2008, p.226; Zancarini-Fournel, Michelle. *Le moment 68: Une histoire contestée*. Paris Le Seuil, 2008, p.46; Kergoat, Jacques. Sous la plage, la grève. In : Artous, Antoine; Epszstajn, Didier; Silberstein, Patrick eds., *La France des années 68*. Paris : Syllepse, 2008, p. 66.

⁷ On 1848, see Price, Roger. *The French Second Republic: A Social History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972, p.171.

⁸ Horn, Gerd-Rainer. *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.2; Wolin, Richard. *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, pp.98, 139, 192, 214.

⁹ Porhel, Vincent. L'autogestion à la CSF de Brest. In: Dreyfus-Armand, Geneviève and Gervereau, Laurent eds. *Mai 68: Les mouvements étudiants en France et dans le monde*. Nanterre La Découverte : 1988, p.395; Porhel, Vincent. *Ouvriers bretons: Conflits d'usines, conflits identitaires en Bretagne dans les années 1968*. Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes: 2008, pp. 76-104. See also Kergoat. *Op.Cit.* pp.77-78, 83.

Monde and *Témoignage chrétien*—proved as willing to take their desires for reality as any youthful *gauchiste*.

As in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, strikers' demands remained traditionally materialist, and workplace democracy was seldom invoked by the workers themselves or their representatives.¹⁰ Rather than reflecting worker sentiment, the call for *autogestion* may have served as a facile solution to the genuine and thorny problem of worker dissatisfaction with industrial discipline in particular and wage labor in general. The doctrines of self-management had little appeal to a mass of wage laborers for whom work remained *travail* (from the Latin, *tripalium*, instrument of torture) and who were more enthusiastic about escaping the factory or enjoying the opportunities of consumption provided by the expanding 1960s economy. Despite the rhetoric of various unions and parties, including the leftist *groupuscules*, workers never fully identified themselves as producers who wanted to take control of the means of production.

The notion of workers' control in the 1960s recalled *fin-de-siècle* French revolutionary syndicalism. *Autogestionnaire* militants and intellectuals demanded that the individual adapt to the productivist collectivity. However, workers inevitably questioned whether it was really advantageous for them to run the factories.¹¹ Many concluded that it was not, since successful workers' control demanded a degree of professional and social commitment that they could not or would not provide. Instead of autogestion, during the strikes of May-June, the major CGT and even local Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT, French Democratic Confederation of Labor) affiliates recalled their agreement of January 1966, which pledged to struggle for a dramatic 35 percent increase in the minimum wage, higher salaries for skilled workers, job security, and a reduction of

¹⁰ Kergoat.Op.Cit., p.58; Perrot.Op.Cit., pp.55, 83; Cf. the editorial in *Les Temps modernes*, no. 264, May–June, 1968, p.11; Morin, Edgar; Lefort, Claude; Castoriadis, Cornelius. Op.Cit. p.95; Gorz, André. *Limites et potentialités du mouvement de mai*. *Les Temps modernes*, no. 266–267, August–September, 1968, pp.240–241. Statera, Gianni. *Death of a Utopia: The Development of Student Movements in Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.137: “On May 25 ... millions of people poured into the squares and streets of every French town to demonstrate against the regime, to ask for ‘revolutionary reforms,’ substantial wage increases, a genuine share in power for the masses.” Katsiaficas, George. *The Imagination of the New Left*. Boston: South End Press, 1987, p.106: “In general, however, workers’ actions against management revealed a fundamental aspiration of the general strike: *autogestion*.” Feenburg, Andrew and Freedman, Jim. *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p.34: “It was to the Sorbonne, to an alternative to union leadership, to advocates of the anarchistic theory of self-management, that the workers turned.”

¹¹ Zegel, Sylvain. *Les idées de mai*. Paris Gallimard, 1968, p.43. Recent articles have questioned the importance and extent of *autogestionnaire* desires among workers. See Bonnet, Alexis. *L’Autogestion et les cédétistes lyonnais* and Porhel, Vincent. *L’autogestion*. In : Dreyfus-Armand.Op.Cit., pp.363–399. Also, Hassenteufel, Patrick.Citroën-Paris: Une grève d’émancipation. ; Capitaine, Ronan. Dassault Saint-Cloud: Las grèves de la continuité. Naudet, Jean-Francois. La RATP : Une grève-régie ; and Ribeill, Georges. SNCF: Une grève dans la tradition de la corporation du rail. In : Mouriaux, René; Perceheron, Annick; Prost, Antoine; Tartakowsky, Danielle eds. *1968 Exploration du mai français*, vol.1, Paris: Harmattan, 1992, pp.35-140 ; Pigenet, Michel. Les mutations des mondes et du syndicalisme portuaires autour de 1968. In: Margairaz, Michel and Tartakowsky, Danielle eds. *1968 entre libération et libéralisation*. Rennes Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010, pp.289-302.

the working week.¹² In metallurgy and other branches, the CGT and the CFDT demanded less work time and more pay, particularly for the lowest-paid workers, who were often foreigners, women, or young people.¹³ This signaled the resolve of union activists (generally male and French) to reach out to social groups who composed the majority of industrial workers.

Well before May, the CGT had made efforts to attract different categories of wage earners, including women.¹⁴ The demand for female equality meshed harmoniously with new attitudes toward female freedom and emancipation in the “long sixties.”¹⁵ As early as 1965, the CGT had called for a reduction of working hours for women. Aware of “the double and profoundly social role of female workers as both wage earners and mothers,” it campaigned in 1967 for equal wages and opportunities for working females. CGT militants insisted upon “the end of any type of discrimination against women.”¹⁶ In a special edition of its women’s magazine, the confederation argued that females should labor less. Its activists claimed that a work-free Saturday and reduced work time were even more necessary for women because “time-measurement and piecework has pushed them to the brink.”¹⁷ The CFDT too had appealed for equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex.

Women were not the only objects of the unions’ attentions. The confederations also wanted young workers and immigrants to participate as equals in the worlds of labor and leisure. The unions accepted growing 1960s multiculturalism and recognized that “one out of four workers is foreign,” a percentage which was three or four times greater than during the last great strike wave of 1936. The CGT congratulated itself on its “long tradition of internationalism” and supported the demands of *immigrés*.¹⁸ French Communists backed the Italian Communists’ Main d’Oeuvre Immigré (MOI, Immigrant Labor Force), which fought for equal pay and equal rights.¹⁹ The unions urged the end to

¹² Caire, Guy. *La situation sociale. Droit social*. July–August 1968, p. 455; Capitaine. *Op.Cit.*, p.81.

¹³ Situation sociale, période du 13 au 26 mai, Groupement des Industries Métallurgiques, [GIM, Metallurgical Industry Association], Neuilly.

¹⁴ For the CGT’s attitude prior to May 1968, see René Mouriaux, “Le mai de la CGT,” paper presented to Colloque: Acteurs et terrains du mouvement social de mai 1968, Paris, 24–25 November 1988. On the central and thus “non-marginal” role of women and immigrants, see Baudouin, Thierry; Collin, Michèle and Guillem, Danièle. *Women and Immigrants: Marginal Workers?* In: Crouch, Colin and Pizzorno, Alessandro eds., *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968*. New York: Macmillan, 1978, vol.2, p.63.

¹⁵ Marwick, Arthur. *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. French scholars have increasingly adopted this approach. For example, see Margairaz, Michel and Tartakowsky, Danielle. Introduction. In Margairaz, Michel. *Op.Cit.*, p.21.

¹⁶ CGT, Chemins de fer, 28 mai, Tracts de mai 1968, Bibliothèque Nationale [BN]; CFDT, 23 mai, Tracts de mai 1968, BN.

¹⁷ *Antoinette*, [n.d.].

¹⁸ Mouriaux, “Le mai de la CGT;” Ross, George. *Workers and Communists in France*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982, p.165. For an overview see, van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: 2008, p.10.

¹⁹ March 1968, Archives Nationales (AN, National Archives) 820599/89.

discrimination against foreigners and youth and demanded the suppression of the practice of paying lower wages to youthful wage earners. Prior to May, the CGT made special efforts to recruit young rebels who resisted factory discipline and the authority of supervisory personnel. It wanted to enlist insurgent youth who might have otherwise gravitated towards *gauchisme*.²⁰ Youthful CGT activists insisted that employers pay for educational courses, sporting activities, housing for young married couples, and a fifth week of paid vacation. Displaying their desire for a key commodity of consumer society, young automobile workers at Citroën pleaded for the right to discount car rentals during their vacations.²¹ As in automobile firms, the formal demands of striking youth in vocational high schools—more money for scholarships and the creation of a technology teaching center—were highly materialist.²²

Although militants occupied many factories—e.g., 31 out of 39 striking firms in the Parisian suburbs of Issy-les-Moulineaux and 20 out of 40 in Boulogne-Billancourt—the occupations revealed that the rank and file had little desire to become actively involved. Contrary to the assertions of the Union national des étudiants de France (UNEF, National Student Union of France) activists and other leftists, who adhered to the productivist legacy of Marxism and council communism, many forms of worker struggle did not imply “a total change of society.”²³ In general, the number of workers actually engaged in the occupations remained a tiny percentage of the work force. At Sud-Aviation, the pioneer plant of the occupation wave, the overwhelming majority of workers did not wish to participate in the sit-in, but rather to spend time alone or with their families and friends. Only 3,195 of 8,000 workers voted, and just 1,699 of them wanted to occupy the factory.²⁴ Merely several hundred out of a work force of 5,000 occupied the Renault factory at Cléon.²⁵ At Flins, approximately 250 of 10,000 were occupiers. A few hundred of the 30,000 workers at Boulogne-Billancourt remained inside the flagship plant. At Citroën, both strike meetings and the occupation revealed the passivity of the rank and file, who remained content to permit those union militants who had initiated the strike to spend time at the workplace.²⁶ In the Citroën branch in the

²⁰ Informations Correspondance Ouvrières, April 1968, p.13.

²¹ Citroën, 26 May 1968, Tracts de mai 1968, BN.

²² Lycée d'état Corbeil-Essonnes, 20 May 1968, AN 790793; Michel, C. Témoignages apportés au colloque, Acteurs et terrains du mouvement social de mai-juin 1968. *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, no. 20, July-September, 1990, p. 71.

²³ UNEF militants quoted in Schnapp, Alain and Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. *Journal de la commune étudiante*. Paris : Seuil, 1969, p.302. This *gauchisant* orthodoxy is repeated in many other analyses. See also Zancarini-Fournel. *Op.Cit.* p.230.

²⁴ Guin, Yannick. *La commune de Nantes*. Paris Maspéro: 1969, p.17; Poperen, Claude. *Renault: Regards de l'intérieur*. Paris: Editions Socialies, 1983, p.167: “Ce n'était pas toujours la bousculade pour 'occuper' l'usine.”

²⁵ *Le Monde*, 17 May 1968; Labro, Philippe ed. *Ce n'est qu'un début*. Paris Maspéro, 1968, p.71; Hatzfeld, Nicolas and Lomba, Cédric. La grève de Rhodiacta en 1967. *Mai-Juin 68*. *Op.Cit.* p. 112. Cf. Ross. *Op.Cit.*, p. 68: “The workers [were] enclosed, for the most part, in occupied factories.”

²⁶ Hassenteufel, Patrick. *Citroën-Paris en mai-juin 1968: Dualités de la grève*. Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Paris I, 1987, pp.49-101. For a different perspective, see Dubois, Pierre. Les pratiques de mobilisation et d'opposition. In: Dubois, Pierre ; Dulong, Renaud ; Durand, Claude ; Erbès-Séguin, Sabine and Vidal, Daniel. *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques?* Paris: Anthropos, 1971, p.361.

fifteenth *arrondissement*, usually no more than 100 occupiers out of a work force of over 20,000 were present. Leftists charged that the Citroën strike committee was more concerned with organizing ping-pong matches and card games than with educating workers politically. During the long weekend of Pentecost (June 1-3) when gasoline became readily available, only twelve remained in the factory. The occupations were the greatest wave since 1936, but the small number of occupiers suggested that the number of engaged militants was proportionally tiny. In contrast to 1936, when masses of workers remained in the factories to prevent unemployed scabs from entering them, in 1968—when full employment prevailed—the fear of scabbing was relatively weak, and workers felt less compelled to join sit-downs.

Usually it was the same group who initiated the strikes—mature male French workers close to the CGT—that conducted the occupation. Employers continued to attribute “responsibility” for most strikes to union militants, particularly the CGT.²⁷ Of the 77 metallurgical strikes listed, CGT militants were responsible for 68, CFDT for 6, and Force Ouvrière (FO, Workers’ Force) for 3. As a rule, militants were male. Although women in the textile and service industries were unusually active, sectors with a female work force generally struck less than male-dominated branches.²⁸ Wives found themselves saddled with increased social and familial responsibilities during the strike wave.²⁹ When observers discussed the change in June of “public opinion” towards strikes, they often meant the opinion of women. School closings added to their child-care duties.³⁰ Unexpected shutdowns, lack of fuel, unavailability of cash, and runs on supplies complicated shopping. Many workers did not stop working because their “women at home did not look favorably upon the strike.”³¹ Numerous wives opposed the work stoppage because it unbalanced the family budget or, in higher income households, destroyed vacation plans. It is not surprising that militants reported divorces. A Flins worker with radical tendencies explained to a strike sympathizer that his wife did not

For an emphasis on the subversive nature of the occupations, see Vigna, Xavier. *Insubordination et politisation ouvrières: les occupations d’usines*. In : Artières, Phillipe and Zancarini-Fournel, Michelle. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 378-384.

²⁷ Enquête, GIM. Cf. *Les événements de mai-juin 1968 vus à travers cent entreprises*, 16, 25. For the union role at Citroën, see Hassenteufel, Patrick. *Op.Cit*, p.44. For the industries of the Nord, see Dubois, Pierre. *Les pratiques*. In Dubois, Pierre; Dulong, Renaud ; Durand, Claude; Erbès-Séguin, Sabine and Vidal, Daniel. *Op.Cit.*, pp.342-345. Talbo, Jean-Philippe ed., *La grève à Flins*. Paris: Maspero, 1968, p.90, underlines the role of “active minorities” in initiating strikes.

²⁸ Adam, Gérard. *Etude statistique des grèves de mai-juin 1968*. *Revue française de science politique*. No. 1, February, 1970, pp. 109, 117.

²⁹ Schwartz, Olivier. *Zones d’instabilité dans la culture ouvrière*. In: Azémar, Guy-Patrick. ed., *Ouvriers ouvrières: Un continent morcelé et silencieux*. Paris : Autrement Revue, 1992, pp.126-127.

³⁰ Leuwers, Jean-Marie. *Un peuple se dresse: Lutttes ouvrières mai 1968*. Paris Éditions ouvrières: 1969, p.319.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 64; *L’Anti-Mythe*, 9-10 June 1968; *Cahiers de mai*, August-September 1968; Lefranc, Georges. *Le Mouvement syndical de la libération aux événements de mai-juin 1968*. Paris:Payot, 1969, p.252, which argues that wives of workers reacted against the strike wave by voting for the right in elections at the end of June. Cf. Bertolino, Jean. *Les Trublions*. Paris Stock, 1969, p.288: “Les travailleurs un instant grisés par la furie des enragés, par les barricades qui rappelaient tant la Commune, luttèrent pour la chute d’un régime, et non de la société qui leur assure le travail et la vie.” Cf. also *Mai 68 par eux-mêmes: Le mouvement de Floréal An 176*. Paris :Editions du Monde Libertaire,1989, p.20.

want to see him involved in the movement. As the stoppages endured, perhaps even more than males, women feared politicization, i.e., the subordination of material demands of the movement to the political goals of left parties and unions. Yet during the strikes they pragmatically welcomed the meals offered by left municipalities. They also appreciated the aid of priests in the working-class suburbs who “every day visited some families [of strikers] in their homes.”³²

Metallurgical industrialists reported that older and more experienced workers provoked the stoppages.³³ Fifty-one out of 88 strikes (58 percent) were started by wage earners between 30 and 40 years old. Twenty-four (27 percent) were begun by 20- to 30-year olds. Only 7 (8 percent) were initiated by those under twenty. Young people under 30 may have become strike leaders in firms where unions were weak, but usually activists had some seniority.³⁴ Workers who had been employed in their firms for more than one year were leaders of 67 percent of the strikes. Wage earners at Renault-Billancourt and at a major electronics firm, Jeumont-Schneider, in La Plaine-Saint Denis, did not remember young wage earners as particularly active in the strike.³⁵

The above information is significant because it modifies the common interpretation of May 1968 as a youth revolt.³⁶ Even in cases such as Renault-Cléon (Seine-Maritime), where young workers were said to be most committed to the movement, the major unions and their more mature trade unionists quickly gained control over the work stoppage.³⁷ Relatively mature, stable, and unionized French workers were largely responsible for initiating metallurgical strikes in the Paris region. The stoppages in Parisian metallurgy confirm the statistical analysis that has established that age was not a determining factor in the strike wave.³⁸

Maturity, though, did not exclude boldness. Metallurgical industrialists noted that in 35 out of 41 reported strikes, workers used threats to convince their colleagues to stop work. In 16 of 60 strikes, militants resorted to force; yet they did not usually insult their bosses or lock in management. In only two cases was property damaged, but the threat of sabotage certainly existed. For example, several persons entered a factory at night and set a truck on fire. A police investigation was unable to conclude if the incident was

³² 14 June 1968, AN 820599/41.

³³ Groupement des industriels d'Argenteuil-Bezons et communes avoisinantes, “Enquête concernant les conflits sociaux,” July-November 1968, GIM.

³⁴ Davezies, Robert ed., *Mai 68: La rue dans l'église*. Paris: Epi, 1968, p.84. See Zancarini-Fournel. *Op.Cit.*, L'épicentre. pp.224, 228.

³⁵ Schnapp. *Op.Cit.* p.777; Henri Simon Oral History Project, interviews with workers (1994), Paris.

³⁶ Cf. Cohn-Bendit in Bertolino. *Op.Cit.*, p.391: “Almost everyone agrees [...] that young workers [...] started the movement.” Georges Pompidou also claimed that “young workers [...] ignoring union orders” began the occupations. See *Débats de l'Assemblée Nationale: Seconde session ordinaire de 1967-1968*, 22 May 1968, Paris, 1969, p.2039. Cf. Zancarini-Fournel. *Op.Cit.*, 231. Cf. also Kergoat. *Op.Cit.*, p.59.

³⁷ Bulletin mensuel, May-July 1968, AN 820599/89; Capitaine. *Op.Cit.*, p.102. See *Notre arme c'est la grève*, pp.14-18.

³⁸ Adam. *Op.Cit.*, p.110.

provoked by strike tensions or by a desire for “vengeance” on behalf of a worker fired before May. In certain white-collar firms, union militants forcibly excluded non-union workers.³⁹ CGT militants dominated the occupation at Jeumont-Schneider, an important electronics firm in the Parisian suburbs, and locked out anti-CGT and indifferent workers. At Flins, veteran wage earners normally manned picket lines.⁴⁰ Sometimes—especially in one large white-collar company that was occupied—older militants were joined by young *gauchistes*. The presence of leftists did not alter the corporatist concerns of strike committees, which were reluctant to forge links with students or even with other occupied firms. Police explained that the Parti communiste français (PCF, French Communist Party) was sure that the situation was not revolutionary and insisted that strikers fly the tricolor as well as the red flag at the gates of their factory.⁴¹ Foreigners usually played a minimal role, perhaps because French wage laborers in many cases regarded them as strikebreakers or as disinterested trade unionists.⁴² Yet some nationalities were more willing to participate than others. For example, at Citroën-Levallois, Spanish workers were active during the work stoppage; whereas, North African workers were largely passive.⁴³

As the stoppages endured, mature breadwinners seemed more anxious to end the strikes than younger wage earners.⁴⁴ It was at the end of the strikes—not the beginning, as many have assumed—that a generation gap became relevant in the workplace. Young workers resisted returning to the workplace more than their elder colleagues. Indeed, perhaps the most famous striker, known only by her first name Jocelyne, was captured on film as she defiantly refused to return to work as the strike at her metallurgical factory was being settled.⁴⁵ The continuing popularity of anti-work ideologies quickly transformed Jocelyne into the rebellious heroine of the May revolt. Her refusal to labor (*ne pas perdre sa vie à la gagner* as the slogan went) pithily expressed the specific sixties’ synthesis of personal, social, and political concerns. Being both female and a worker further heightened her status as a symbol of an ideology that male intellectuals had articulated. Her complete disappearance from the media spectacle enhanced her mystique. Yet ultimately neither she nor any other individual or group resolved the problem of wage

³⁹ Henri Simon Oral History Project.

⁴⁰ Kerbourc’h, Jean-Claude. *Le Piéton de Mai*. Paris Julliard, 1968, p.46.

⁴¹ 27 May 1968, AN 820599/40.

⁴² *Lutte socialiste*, 20 October 1968; Hassenteufel. *Op.Cit.*, p.36; *Ouvriers face aux appareils*, 93; Cf. Confédération Générale du Travail de la R.N.U.R. [Régie Nationale des Usines Renault] *33 jours 34 nuits*, (Paris, n.d.), 181; *La Vie ouvrière*, 29 May 1968; *L’Anti-Mythe*, 21 August 1968; Frémontier, Jacques. *La forteresse ouvrière: Renault*. Paris Fayard, 1971, p.344; Hatzfeld, Nicolas. Les ouvriers de l’automobile: Des vitrines sociales à la condition des OS, le changement des regards. In : Dreyfus-Armand. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 68, 355.

⁴³ Leuwens, *Peuple*, 185. Gordon, Daniel A. *Immigrants and the New Left in France, 1968-1971*. Ph.D. Diss., University of Sussex, 2001, p.160, disputes this by accusing Leuwens of anti-Arab and pro-Catholic bias.

⁴⁴ Filiu, Jean-Pierre. Le gouvernement et la direction face à la crise. *Mai 68 à l’ORTF*, Paris: Nouveau Monde, 1987, p.273; *Ouvriers face aux appareils: Une expérience de militantisme chez Hispano-Suiza* Paris : Maspero, 1970, p.198.

⁴⁵ Le Roux, Hervé. *Reprise: Récit*. Paris Calmann-Levy, 1998; Ross. *Op.Cit.*, p. 139.

labor. Thus, ideologists of the sixties proposed contradictory solutions that ranged from the abolition of work to its internalization in a democratic workplace.

Initially, women were excluded from certain sit-downs for “moral reasons,” but in others they played important roles.⁴⁶ Occupations disclosed gender divisions. The 400 female workers at the Kréma chewing gum factory outnumbered the 200 males, but male domination of the strike provoked the resentment of women.⁴⁷ At a branch of the Compagnie des compteurs of Montrouge, women did participate in the occupation, yet only in their traditional roles as cleaners and cooks. Men proved reluctant to allow them to spend the night at the factory in order “to avoid that the bosses make an issue of morality.”⁴⁸ Women rejected this argument and by the third night of the occupation were almost as numerous as men. Usually, the overwhelming majority of workers—female or male, foreign or French—preferred to stay away from the plant.⁴⁹

Large numbers—whether male or female—displayed little commitment to the electoral process at the workplace, and participation in strike votes varied widely from 40 to 75 percent.⁵⁰ The low level of attendance contrasts sharply with late nineteenth century when meetings attracted 80 to 100 percent of strikers.⁵¹ Union and non-union strikers of some of the most important Parisian firms—Otis Elevators, Sud Aviation, Nord Aviation, Thomson-Houston, Rhône-Poulenc—reflected on striker passivity in a pamphlet written at the beginning of June. They contended that in order to win, a greater number of workers [must] get involved. While the strike forces everyone to make material sacrifices, many comrades rely on a minority and do not participate actively. This allows the government to divide workers by playing on the weariness of some and on the poor information of others... There is only one response to these tactics of division: massive participation of all workers who have stayed away from the occupied factories.⁵²

To encourage non-committed or apathetic workers to join the movement, the pamphleteers recommended adopting the model of strike organization at Rhône-Poulenc (Vitry), where rank-and-file strikers elected strike committees that were easily revocable. Militants regarded the occupation of this firm as particularly impressive because 1,500 of a work force of 3,500, or 43 percent, were actively involved.⁵³

⁴⁶ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 30 May 1968; “CGT aux femmes,” Tracts de mai 1968, BN.

⁴⁷ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 30 May 1968.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Gobille. *Op.Cit.* p.51: “Une majorité de travailleurs n’a en effet participé ni à l’occupation ni aux votes relatifs à la reprise, et nul ne sait, pas plus les syndicats que les autorités, ce qu’il en est de leur détermination.”

⁵⁰ *Situation sociale*, 6 June, GIM. Fifty-five percent of French industrial workers surveyed in 1969 declared that they had never participated in a union meeting. See Adam, Gérard; Bon, Frédéric; Capdevielle, Jacques; and Mouriaux, René. *L’Ouvrier français en 1970*. Paris A. Colin, 1970, p.21.

⁵¹ Perrot. *Op.Cit.*, pp.588-589.

⁵² “Défendons notre grève,” Tracts de mai 1968, BN.

⁵³ *Lutte Socialiste*, December 1968; Martinet, Gilles. *La conquête des pouvoirs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1968, p.69, which sees Rhône-Poulenc at Vitry as a model of “*tendances gestionnaires*.” Vigna, *L’Insubordination*, 67: “La grève de Rhône-Poulenc Vitry inaugure bien les années 68.” See also

Even in this example of relatively high participation approximately 57 percent of personnel avoided activism. Many wished to evade the workplace and stayed at home either to garden or to *bricoler*. Suggestions from an inter-union committee, action committees, and Nanterre students that proposed a more innovative and participatory form of striking failed to interest wage earners. Committees recommended that workers engage in “freebie strikes” to rally opinion to their side and to direct public anger against the government. For example, garbage men should collect accumulated trash, transportation workers should permit free rides, and Postes, Télégraphes, Téléphones (PTT, Communications) employees should allow free postage and telephone calls.⁵⁴ However, sanitation, transport, and postal workers disappointed activists by making only traditional bread-and-butter demands. The belief of the Movement of March 22 that the occupations expressed the “unconscious yearning of the working class to take over the means of production” was wishful thinking.⁵⁵ March 22’s demand for the sabotage of the means of production in case of a police assault usually went unheeded.⁵⁶ Striking workers seldom damaged property, and when they did, their targets—telephone lines, vehicles, etc.—were precise and limited.

Indeed, workers’ strikes displayed a considerable continuity with previous strike waves. As in the nineteenth century, most strikers did not use the stoppage as a political weapon, even though the political climate had a decisive influence on the strikes’ beginning and ending.⁵⁷ The fact that student radicals looked to workers to make the revolution was less important in sparking strikes than the divisions among political elites. What has been called the “political opportunity structure” encouraged the extension of the unrest to wage earners.⁵⁸ As in 1789, 1848, 1871, and 1936, cleavages within ruling groups promoted popular revolt. Students triggered the enormous wave of work stoppages during the second half of May by challenging the state and, at the same time, provoking

“Histoire et leçons d’une grève,” *Esprit*, no. 373, August-September, 1968, p.101, which claims that 1,500 to 1,600 workers occupied the factory. Police report that on 12 June only 300 out of a work force of 3,700 favored a return to work. See 12 June 1968, AN 820599/41. Censier militants wanted to popularize the Rhône-Poulenc example. See Baynac, Jacques. *Mai retrouvé*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1978, p.226. Trotskyites of the *Voix ouvrière* claimed to have greatly influenced the strike committee of this plant. See 18 July 1968, AN 820599/41.

⁵⁴ Groupes inter-syndicaux des salariés, Tracts de mai 1968, BN; Ravignat, Patrick. *L’Odéon est ouvert*. Paris :Stock, 1968, p.217; Schnapp. *Op.Cit.*, p. 311; Baynac. *Op.Cit.*, p. 176; Dansette, Adrien. *Mai 1968*. Paris : 1971, p.275.

⁵⁵ Mouvement du 22 mars, *Ce n’est pas qu’un début, continuons le combat*. Paris :1968, p.99. Cf. also Lucio Magri, “Réflexions sur les événements de mai,” *Les Temps modernes*, no. 277-78, August-September, 1969, p.32: “Because of its spontaneous origin and the consequent occupation tactic, the workers’ struggle profoundly upset the traditional relations between masses and leaders.” Similar views are found in Geismar, Alain; July, Serge; Morane, Erlyne. *Vers la guerre civile*. Paris: Editions Premieres,1969, p.258.

⁵⁶ Cohn-Bendit during 1 June press conference in Bertolino. *Op.Cit.*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Perrot. *Op.Cit.*, pp.196-199.

⁵⁸ “Political opportunities cannot make the poor conscious of grievances of which they were formerly unaware, but it can help them to detect where and how the system is most vulnerable, enabling them to overcome their habitual disunity and lack of information.” Tarrow, Sidney. *Struggle, Politics, and Reform: Collective Action, Social Movements, and Cycles of Protest*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p.36.

its brutality.⁵⁹ Both student and worker actions were parts of “a general cycle of protest,” which traversed the social system from its center to the periphery.⁶⁰

A strong state proved as necessary to limit workers’ insubordination in the late 1960s as it had during the Popular Front strike waves of the late 1930s. In contrast to 1936, when Prime Minister Léon Blum defied management and endorsed the shortening of the work week from 48 to 40 hours, Prime Minister Pompidou rejected workers’ demands for a 40-hour week and negotiated a moderately progressive reduction of the work week—2 hours for wage earners laboring more than 48 hours and 1 hour for those laboring between 45 and 48 hours.⁶¹ The follow-up to the Grenelle Accord, the national agreement between employers and unions of December 13, 1968, decided in principle to return gradually to the forty-hour week without a reduction of buying power.⁶²

Many workers shared an ambivalent attitude towards salaried labor which they considered both wage slavery, but also a part of their social identity. An important recent work, Xavier Vigna, *L’Insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68*, focuses on resistance to labor discipline in the decade following 1968. Vigna explores absenteeism, slowdowns, lateness, faking illness, turnover, sabotage, and theft during what he and other French historians have called “les années 68.”⁶³ These revolts against work integrated various components of the class. Militants and rank and file, women and men, French and foreign could all participate in the “guerrilla” against wage labor. Vigna renews the rich tradition of French social/labor history by showing the paradox of workers’ identities as both producers and refusers. While avoiding workspace and work-time, wage earners used the same vocabulary that they had employed in the nineteenth century and labeled their enemies—whether scabs or cops—“lazy” (*fainéants*). Vigna also demonstrates the dual role of the state as *état-flic* and *état-providence*. However, his periodization of “insubordination” is not fully convincing.⁶⁴ Since he fails to explore resistance to work before the 1968 strike wave, he cannot argue that the decade following 1968 was especially “insubordinate.” Strike statistics do not indicate any major increase

⁵⁹ The CGT rejected the thesis that students had detonated the strike wave in favor of the more *ouvriériste* argument that the workers and their unions were the spark. See Michel Johan, “La CGT et le mouvement de mai,” *Les Temps modernes*, no. 266-67, August-September, 1968, p.327. For a comparison between the student movement’s weakening of the state in 1968 and 1986, see Duclaud-Williams, Roger. *Student Protest: 1968 and 1986 Compared*. In: Hanley, D. L. and Kerr, A. P. eds., *May ’68: Coming of Age*. London: Macmillan, 1989, p.52.

⁶⁰ Tarrow, *Struggle*, 4, 34, 46. See also Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁶¹ Réunion tenue les 25-27 mai au Ministère des Affaires Sociales, AN 860561.

⁶² Cohen, Maurice ed., *Le bilan social de l’année 1968*. Paris : Revue pratique de droit social 1969, pp.105-122, 387, 414. See also Accord du 13 décembre 1968, AN 860561. Cf. Howell, Chris. *Regulating Labor: The State and Industrial Relations Reform in Postwar France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.27: “The strike wave of 1968 was not even translated into sustainable material gains for workers.”

⁶³ Vigna. Op.Cit..Sommier, Isabelle. *La violence politique et son deuil: L’après 68 en France et en Italie*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1998, p.13.

⁶⁴ Vigna’s periodization also repeats that of sociologists, such as Alain Touraine and Serge Mallet, who saw ’68 as the beginning of a new era in labor history. See Touraine. Op.Cit. and Mallet, Serge Mallet. *Essays on the New Working Class*, trans. Dick Howard and Dean Savage, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975.

in days lost to work stoppages in the decade before and after 1968, even if the number of strikes and strikers did rise.⁶⁵ We do not know how the micro-conflicts Vigna examines were different either in kind or degree from other mini-struggles prior to 1968. Acts of insubordination were hardly new phenomena and were prevalent from 1936 to 1938.⁶⁶ The Gaullist government was much more effective in limiting resistance to work than its Popular Front counterpart in the 1930s or its contemporary Italian foil during the *maggio strisciante*.⁶⁷

Socially, the strike wave of 1968 expressed continuity by repeating the nineteenth and early twentieth pattern of elite division which caused state weakness and consequently promoted worker opportunity. Workers made very few demands for revolutionary workers' control and instead asked for more wages and less work time. Even though women, immigrants and youth participated to varying degrees, French male militants led the work stoppages. The 1968 stoppages did not support a Marcusian interpretation that workers were integrated into capitalist society since resistance to work, whether in form of strikes, absenteeism, sabotage, theft, lateness, etc. had to be curbed by a strong state (*état flic*) which served, in workers' words, as prison wardens (*gardes-chiourme*).⁶⁸ The absence in the 1968 work stoppages of a significant rupture with the past can help to explain the "memory deficit" of the strikes in present-day French consciousness.⁶⁹ In sharp contrast to the continuity in the domain of labor, discontinuity dominated the cultural arena. In the sixties, public questioning of work expanded from avant-garde groups such as the Surrealists to a larger mass of students and workers. Similarly, the sixties also marked a new interest in labor history which for the first time began to chronicle workers' everyday refusals of work.⁷⁰ A focus on resistance to work helps link the French movement to others around the world.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Forsé, Michel et. al.. *Recent Social Trends in France (1960-1990)*. trans. Liam Gavin. Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1993, p.150; Jeff Bridgford, "The events of May: Consequences for Industrial Relations in France," in *May '68*. Op.Cit. pp. 106, 115-116; Rose, Michael. *Servants of Post-Industrial Power? Sociologie du Travail in Modern France*, (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1979), pp.140, 148. Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2005, p.176. For another statistical view, see Sirot, Stéphane. *La grève en France: Une histoire sociale (XIXe-XXe siècle)*. Paris :Odile Jacon, 2002, p.33.

⁶⁶ Hatzfeld, Nicolas and Lomba, Cédric. La grève de Rhodioceta en 1967. *Mai-Juin 68*. Op.Cit., pp.106-107; Seidman, Michael. *Workers against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.

⁶⁷ Cf. Zancarini-Fournel. Op.Cit., p.248.

⁶⁸ Seidman, Michael. *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968*. New York: Berghen Books, 2004; Perrot. Op.Cit., pp., 44, 303.

⁶⁹ Pudal, Bernard and Retière, Jean-Noël. Les grèves ouvrières de 68, un mouvement social sans lendemain mémorial. *Mai 68*. Op.Cit., p. 217.

⁷⁰ Prost, Antoine. La CGT [*à l'époque du front populaire: 1934-1939. Essai de description numérique. Paris :A. Colin, 1964;*](#) Trempé, Rolande. Les mineurs de Carmaux, 1848-1914. Paris : Ed Ouvrières 1971; Lequin, Yves. Les ouvriers de la région lyonnaise (1848-1914). Lyon: [*Presses universitaires de Lyon*](#) , 1977.

⁷¹ van der Linden, Marcel, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations*. Aldershot: Ashgate Pub. Ltd., 2003.

List of Abbreviations

CFDT Confédération française démocratique du travail

CGT Confédération générale du travail

FO Force ouvrière

PCF Parti communiste français

PTT Postes, Télégraphes, Téléphones

UNEF Union nationale des étudiants de France