

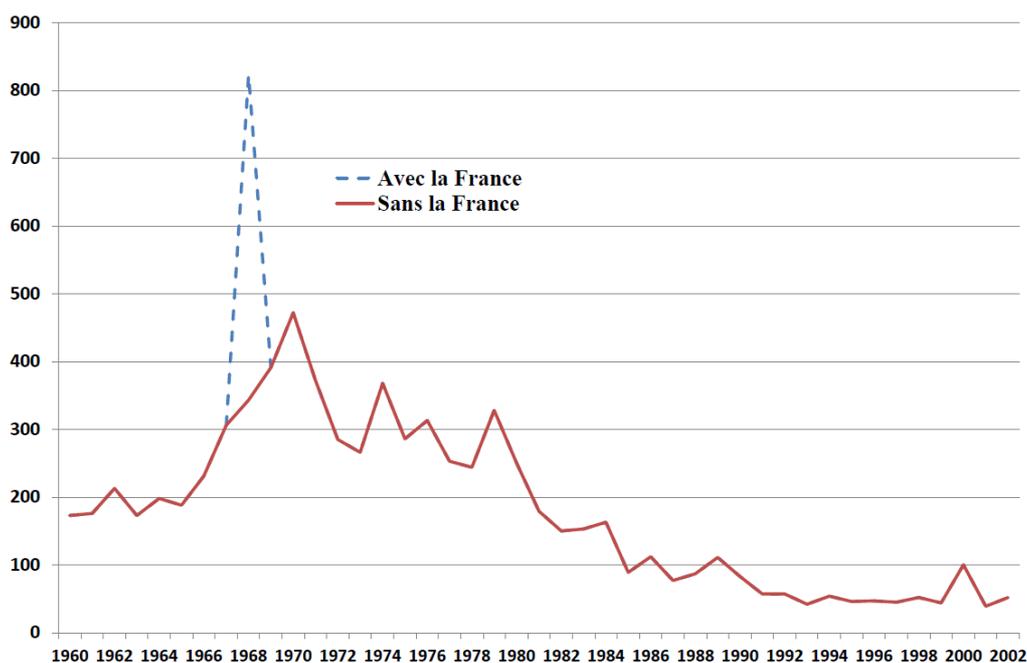
The significance of the struggles from 1966 to 1972 (Part 1)

How to understand 'May 1968' in France?

» The struggles of May-June 68 in France have been part of a general wave of labor disputes and protests of various kinds (student claims, protests against the multiple wars in the world, a search for different values and ways of life...) that flourished from the second half of the 1960s until the beginning of the 1970s. All these conflicts expressed the accumulated tensions in society after two decades of very vigorous growth that jostled all the ideas and structures in place. They manifested to the highest degree the contradictions between the rapid development of the productive forces and the obsolete nature of the superstructures that coordinated them: economic, political, ideological, legal, family, cultural, moral super-structures, etc. These blatant inadequacies are at the basis of the explosion and the radical character of all these movements, not in the sense of an exit from capitalism – a perspective that was shared only by a very small minority at that time – but in the sense of challenging old structures that are not adapted to the new realities of the post-war period. The article *“The significance of the struggles from 1966 to 1972”* tries to draw up its tableau. Its first part is devoted, on the one hand, to the critical discussion of explanations commonly put forward to understand these events and, on the other hand, to lay the foundations of a coherent alternative explanation. « (From the presentation of *Controverses* No. 5, May 2018)

The full version of this article has first been published in French on the *Controverses* website on May 11, 2018: [La signification des luttes de 1966 à 1972](#). Hereafter we present an abridged version by the author. (Note from the editor).

Intensity of labor disputes in the world



Graph 1: Intensity of labor disputes in the world (Source: [Perry and Wilson](#), I.L.O., 2004)

From the second half of the 1960s to 1972, we witness the rise of a wave of labor disputes in the world that would culminate in 1970. Like all large-scale social revolts, they have emerged spontaneously and have surprised everyone, both by their massive character and their radical nature. To these struggles of waged labor various kinds of protests have superposed themselves – just as massive and radical – from the student youth, in opposition to the wars in the Third World, in search of other values and ways of life... and this throughout the same period and in all four corners of the world.

What have been the causes of all these movements?

1. Have they been the product of an international economic crisis and/or a generation conflict?
2. Did they express a desire to overthrow capitalism and/or a desire to better benefit from growth or to live it differently?
3. What balance sheet can be drawn up from this? Did they impose a new, even a potentially revolutionary social course, or were they only a jolt in the counterrevolution that had crushed the workers' movement following the failure of the revolutionary attempts in opposition to the First World War?

These are the questions this contribution proposes to address by starting, in this first part, with a discussion of the thesis that May 1968 was the product of a global economic crisis and a capitalism on the verge of bankruptcy.

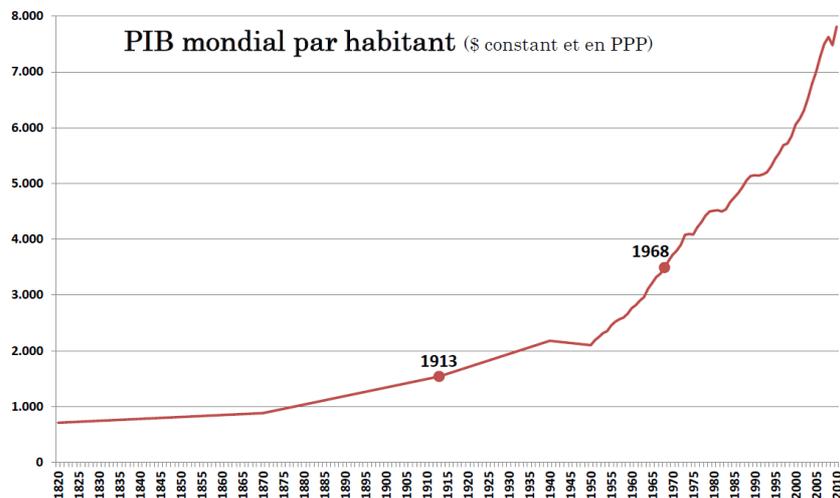
The return of crises?

This thesis was the key idea behind the resurgence of a component of the Communist Left at that time, that of interpreting such a social conflagration as “...the first major response of the working class to a process of *acute* crisis of the capitalist system.”⁽¹⁾

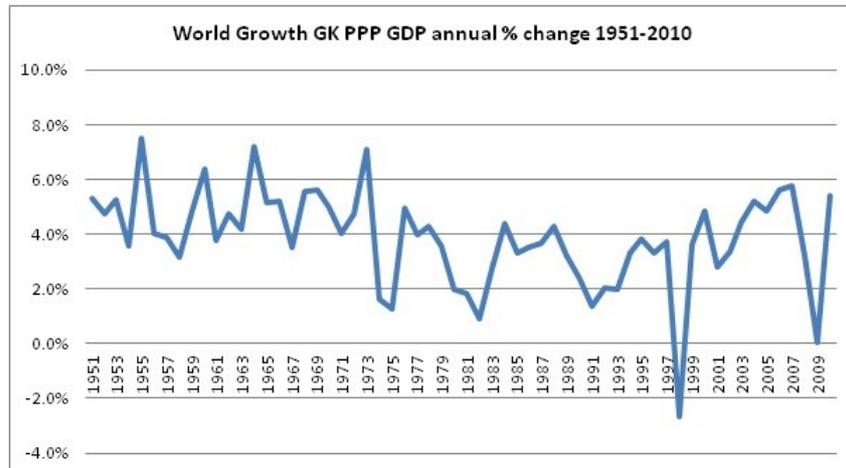
Crisis or prosperity?

However, all the data are unambiguous: this wave of social conflicts has unfolded not in a context of “acute crisis” but in one of full prosperity. If there have indeed been some oscillations due to the cyclical nature of capitalism, there has been no real economic crisis before 1974-75,⁽²⁾ the growth rate has been between 4% and 6% during the post-war period until 1973, as shown in the three graphs below for the world (A. Maddison) and for France:

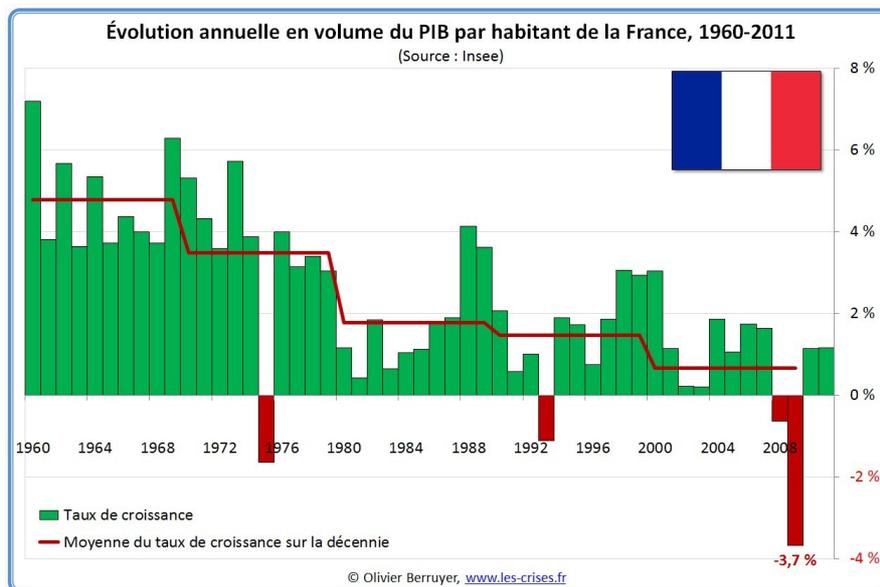
- 1) [Révolution Internationale n°3](#), 1969, p. 48. This group – with the same name as its publication – would constitute the motor pole of what in 1975 has become the actual *International Communist Current* (ICC).
- 2) With the exception of the USA, who knew a [recession from 1970 onward](#).



Graph 2: Global GDP per inhabitant



Graph 3: World Growth GK PPP GDP annual % change 1951 - 2010



Graph 4: Annual evolution in volume of GDP per inhabitant of France, 1960 – 2011 (Source: Insee)

The economic slowdown and crises have been posterior to this wave of struggles, so it cannot result from a “context of global economic exhaustion”⁽³⁾ where “the specter of crisis and total collapse hovers over the whole society.”⁽⁴⁾ To continue to claim this, while world GDP per capita has since doubled again, while China has changed its status from an underdeveloped country into a major power... is to hold a purely ideological discourse unrelated to the facts. To distort reality to make it correspond to one’s desires is not doing the work of Marxism but is a profession of faith.

3) [Révolution Internationale n°2](#), MC, 1969 & [n°470](#). ([Against the lies about May '68!](#) Bmc April 28, 2018)

4) [Révolution Internationale n°2](#), *La crise monétaire*, 1969.

Unemployment or full employment?

Would this wave of struggle then have been a reaction to a “threatening unemployment [which] is becoming more and more worrying every day. (...) Several sporadic strikes have the issue of maintaining employment and of full employment as a direct cause?”⁽⁵⁾

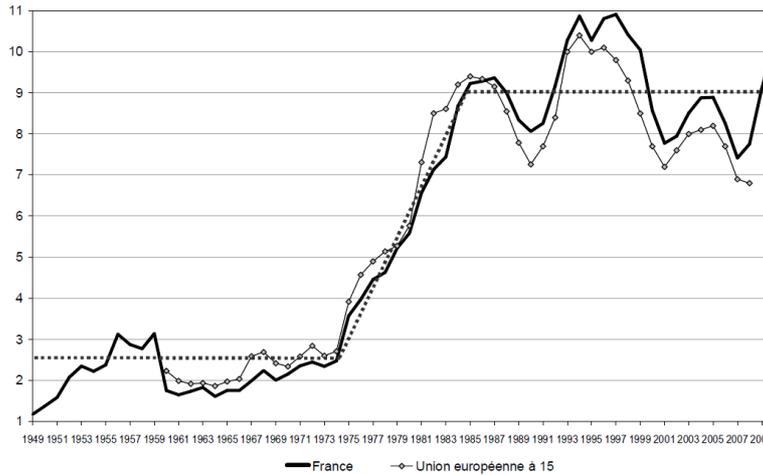
Let us recall this evidence that, in the course of capitalist functioning, and even in periods of full growth, there are always companies that fail, obsolete sectors that are threatened and companies that need restructuring. The 1960s were no excep-

5) [Révolution Internationale n°2](#), MC, 1969 & [n°470](#).

tion to this rule, as they were characterized by unprecedented growth, which implied inevitable changes and rationalizations and therefore technical unemployment and redundancies. The sectors most concerned were the textile industry overturned by the arrival of synthetic fibers; the steel industry, an industrial sector undergoing restructuring throughout Europe at that time and coal

mining with competition from oil. Finally, the post-war baby boom generated an increase in the number of young people entering the labor market. Despite all this, the unemployment rate remained below the 1950s and fluctuated only slightly in a context of full employment until 1975:

Unemployment rate, European Union, France



Graph 5: Unemployment rate, European Union, France (Source: Michel Husson, [La France du travail, IRES 2009](#) : 29.)

And for good reason, alongside these sectors undergoing restructuring, others such as electricity, chemicals and the automobile industry heavily engaged personnel (24% more jobs in the automobile sector between 1962 and 69).

Strikes around the issue of employment have therefore always existed, including in the 1950s and 1960s. It is thereby not surprising that some conflicts in 1968 in France crystallized around this question... but, it is quite a different thing to claim that this wave of struggles responded to a generalized rise in unemployment following “a world economic situation that is deteriorating” and to “a process of acute crisis of the capitalist system” (ibid). Nothing could be further from the truth, as full employment is such that, lacking manpower, European countries will ‘import’ it massively. Thus, in France, the number of foreigners doubled between 1954 and 1975 with the call for Portuguese, Spanish and North African workers.

It was this full employment that would be the driving force behind the strike movement at that time, since there was not yet a reserve of unemployed people permitting to put pressure on the wage workers.

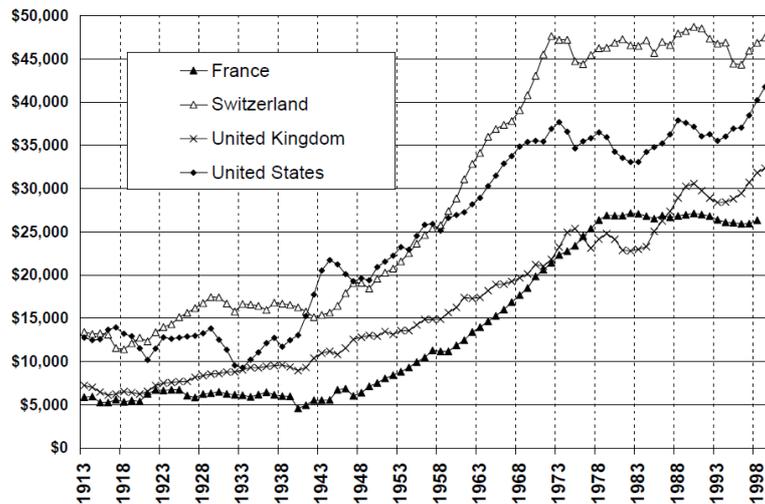
Decrease or increase in real wages?

Could it then have been an attack on real wages that would have driven this wave of strikes: “At the end of 1967, the economic situation in France began to show signs of deterioration. (...) Concurrently, with un-employment and under its direct pressure, wages tend to fall and the standard of living of the masses deteriorates.”⁽⁶⁾ This affirmation of 1969 is still repeated today⁽⁷⁾ while the average real income in France has multiplied by 5 (five) between 1945 and 1978 and stagnates before and after these two dates, something never seen in the entire history of France and the other developed countries:

6) [Révolution Internationale n°2](#), MC, 1969 & [n°470](#).

7) [International Revue n°134](#), Fabienne, July 2008.

Average real income USA, UK, France and Switzerland (1913-2000)



Graph 6: Average real income USA, UK, France and Switzerland (1913-2000) (Source: Saez E., 2004, [Income and Wealth Concentration in a Historical and International Perspective](#))

Such a denial of reality is totally foreign to the Marxist method, which has to rely on objective data to give them meaning and not imprint an ideological schema corresponding to a militant wish at the cost of being in contradiction to the facts.

The workers' and students' movement

A commonplace of the dominant ideology consists in being silent about or minimizing the workers' dimension of the revolts of that time and, if it speaks of it, in presenting it as a French singularity. Unfortunately, some in the communist Left are open to such a vision. ⁽⁸⁾ Once again, the facts totally invalidate these judgments since the social

explosion of May-June 1968 in France was part of an overall movement of labor disputes in the world that had clearly been rising since 1965 (see the first graph of this contribution).

A course open to the revolution?

What about this other affirmation on the general perspective opened by this wave of struggles, namely that the deepening of crises would see "*proletarian struggles become more radical until they lead to world revolution?*" ⁽⁹⁾ Obviously, such an idea was more of a voluntarist posture than a rigorous Marxist analysis.

Admittedly, after the wave of the second half of the 1960s, social conflicts have remained at a significantly more vigorous level during the 1970s than during the post-war period, but they decreased dramatically (by a factor of six) throughout the 1980s to reach a very low level until today! Such an involution in social conflict should have motivated serious self-criticism. Instead, those who trumpeted the "*opening of a course to revolution from 1968 onward*" persisted in the same ideological posture by declaring that the 1980s would be decisive for the future of humanity: "*In the decade beginning today, the historical alternative will be decided: either the proletariat will continue its offensive, continue to paralyze*

8) "*On the one hand, the student revolt hit nearly all the countries of the Western Bloc and even affected in a certain way the countries of the Eastern Bloc. On the other hand, the massive struggle of the working class which in this year, fundamentally only touched a single country, France.*" ([International Revue n°133](#), 'May 68 and the revolutionary perspective, Part 1: The student movement around the world in the 1960s', Fabienne, April 2008). This idea is repeated twice in the second part of the article: "*It's true that in May '68 in France there existed a situation that wasn't found in any other country, except in a very marginal fashion: a massive movement of the working class developing from a student mobilisation. (...) ... In fact, particular circumstances saw the proletariat in France leading the first widespread battle against the growing attacks launched by capitalism in crisis.*" ([International Revue n°134](#), Part 2: 'End of the counter-revolution and the historic return of the world proletariat', Fabienne, July 2008).

9) [Révolution Internationale n°3](#), 1969.

the murderous arm of capitalism in its death throes and gather its forces **to destroy the system**, or else it will let itself be trapped, worn out, demoralized by speeches and repression and then the way will be open for a new holocaust which risks the elimination of all human society.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Worse still, while this decade has seen a drastic

10) 'The 80s: years of truth', [International Revue n°20](#), 1st quarter of 1980.

decline in social conflicts by a factor of six, this organization still claims at its end in 1989 that “(...) the 80s have above all been years of development of the class struggle.”⁽¹¹⁾ A good example where the dogmatic defense of erroneous analyses borders on blindness in relation to the evidence of the facts.

11) 'The 8th Congress of the ICC: the stakes of the Congress', [International Revue n°59](#), 4th quarter of 1989



Victory or defeat?

If the basis of these labor conflicts, their importance in relation to the student movements and their perspective, are only based on preconceived patterns and have no connection with reality, what about the assessment of their results? Let us judge by this: “The night of May 26/27 the “Grenelle Accords” were concluded (...) Given the importance and strength of the movement, it was a real provocation: the 10% would be wiped out by inflation (which was quite high during this period); nothing on safeguards against inflation in the wage packet; nothing concrete on reduction of the working week; they talked about aiming at “the progressive return to 40 hours” (already officially obtained in 1936!); in the time scale proposed by the government it will take... 40 years! The only workers who would gain significantly were the poorest workers (dividing the working class by pushing them back to work) and the unions, rewarded for their role as saboteurs.”⁽¹²⁾

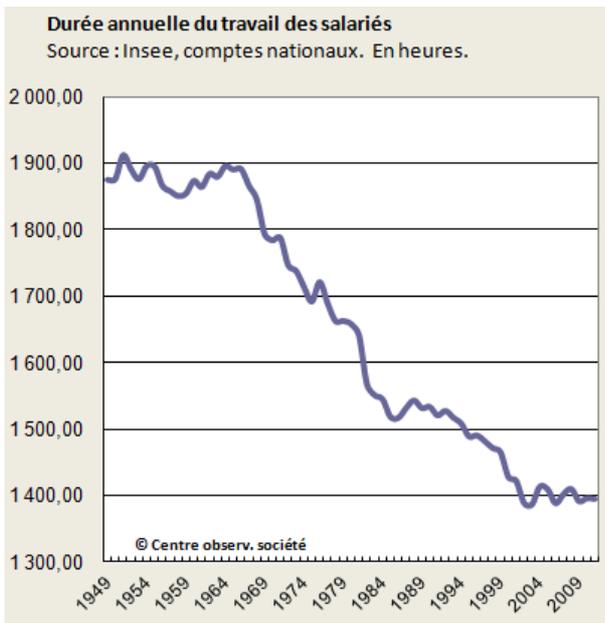
12) [International Revue n°134](#), Fabienne, 2008.

That the poorest workers have gained something significant as well as the trade unions for their role as saboteurs is absolutely true, but is it correct to say that nothing has been obtained for the waged workers in terms of working time and that inflation has annulled the wage increases?

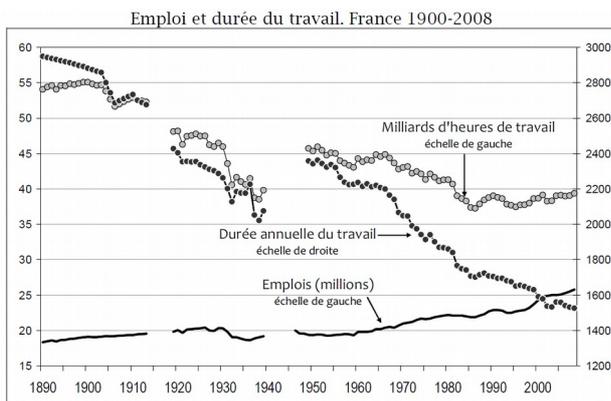
In reality, the average real income in France has been multiplied by 5 (five) between 1945 and 1978, as we have seen above. How can this be explained when inflation would reach 10% between 1975 and 1985? Precisely because the wages have well been indexed to prices, contrary to what this organization claims: “nothing on wage compensation for inflation.”⁽¹³⁾ Such ignorance says a lot about the seriousness of its “analyses”!

13) By the way, it suffices to read the Grenelle accords in order to take notice that they very well mention **real wages** (meaning: wages with inflation deducted). Apparently, either this organization cannot read, or it has not even read the accords it criticizes. This simple observation disqualifies its pretense to unveil the truth to us, as it permanently proclaims.

But that's not all! Let us look at what it claims about the evolution of working time and compare it with the real evolution. While annual working time has stagnated at around 1,900 hours since the 1930s until 1968, it will then decline by 25% in about 30 years to reach 1,400 hours, i. e. 500 hours to be worked less per year, as shown by the two graphs below:



Graph 7: Annual work duration of wage laborers, in hours. (Source: Insee)



Graph 8: Employment and work duration. France 1900 - 2008 (Source: Insee)

This evolution is structural and far from negligible... but this organization simply denies it - "nothing concrete on the reduction of working time" - with the same sovereign contempt for the facts and the search for the truth! It is particularly deceitful on her part to be ironic on the

weekly working time, by recalling that the 40 hours a week had been officially decreed in June 1936, when it 'forgets' to talk about the obtained fourth week of paid leave and the fact that the annual working must be considered to measure its evolution and not just the weekly duration.

Worse still, in an attempt to accredit its speech, this organization deliberately ignores other key measures of the Grenelle accords such as: wage compensation for the planned hourly reductions; payment of half of the strike days; increase of the minimum old-age pension; improvement of the family allowance scheme; (14) the very substantial increase in the minimum agricultural wage; abolition of age-related deductions applicable to young workers; reduction in the maximum legal working time; the reduction of the share of bonuses in the remuneration by integrating them into salaries; the negotiation of measures to ensure the necessary reclassifications, in particular in the event of mergers and concentrations of companies; the non-imposition on wage earners of the withholding tax at source regime (which Macron wants to introduce today); etc. (15) Reading this much more complete list, it is easier to understand why the average real income in France almost doubled again after 1968 and annual working time fell by at least 20%! And also one better understands how the prose of the *International Communist Current* is purely false when it cites only four measures of these accords, measures that would only be pure mystification or quickly annulled!

Finally, if it is correct to assert that these accords were experienced as "a real provocation" by the working class and that it has often blamed and even rejected them in many places (including the flagship factory of Renault-Billancourt), it is not so much for what they contain as for what it still hoped to obtain, particularly on the qualitative level of working conditions, a plan almost absent from these accords when it was central to the demands of the time - we will come back on this. In any case, one thing is certain: if the working class did not welcome these accords with open arms, it was not because they brought almost nothing to

14) The part of social dispenses in the GDP has doubled from 1968 to the present, passing from 12% to 24%. These are vital amounts everyday for hundreds of thousands of wage laborers, pensioners and persons with a modest income... gains that are disdainfully considered non-existent by this organization!

15) The complete text of the Grenelle accords is available [here](#).

its material conditions, but because it felt it had not gained enough... which is totally different!

A minimum of logic and consistency

On this subject and at reading the prose of this organization, the working class would only suffer attacks and defeats since the First World War. Of course, the working class has suffered attacks and defeats, but if the post-war period and May 1968 in France were economic defeats, if no real and lasting reforms have been possible since 1914 and if workers are permanently attacked, ⁽¹⁶⁾ then, logically, the current working class should be in a much worse state than at the beginning of the 20th century! However, its life expectancy has doubled since then, ⁽¹⁷⁾ its real salary has multiplied by five, its working time has been almost diminished by half, and two thirds of the population has been able to become homeowners (compared to 35% in 1955 and still less in 1914). Look for the error!

If the bourgeoisie is still able to nibble on something, it is because the working class was able to bring in gains in the course of the 20th century and it is fighting to preserve them.

The true roots

Explaining an international wave of struggles requires the ability to advance international causes, but reading those whose thesis we are discussing, they only present a meager list of purely conjunc-

tural bad news, gleaned in one country or another: they never take the trouble to validate it objectively at the international level. And for good reason, since no overall data (growth, unemployment, real wages, working time, profit rates, etc.) validates the thesis of a so-called international crisis of capitalism at the end of the 1960s.

In reality, the primary reason for this wave of social conflicts is a classic mechanism at the very heart of Marxist analysis, namely the contradictions that inevitably arise between the development of productive forces and the social relations that envelope them. And for good reason, the strength of the post-war growth during the first two decades (see graph below) was such that inevitable contradictions accumulated and exploded in the second half of the 1960s.

So there is no mystery, but only if we can get rid of a very common idea in the field of groups claiming to be Marxist, namely the idea that this type of contradictions would only occur to reveal a state of weakening of the system that supports them. Nothing is more erroneous because Marxism also conceives systemic growth crises during which tensions and readjustments are manifested between, on the one hand, all the infrastructural changes induced by economic growth and, on the other hand, the backwardness accumulated by the superstructures that coordinate them: economic, political, family, ideological, legal, cultural, moral superstructures, etc.

In other words, the workers' struggles at that time did indeed have an essential economic dimension, but not as the result of an elusive international economic crisis, but according to the following four determinations:

- a) Growing dissatisfaction with the continuing legacy of the exceptional efforts required in the immediate post-war period for reconstruction: increased weekly working hours, high ceiling on the maximum number of working hours per week, etc.
- b) Strong demands aiming at profiting better from the fruits of growth. In effect, in 1968, five million French people still lived below the poverty line, young people entered factory life at the age of 16 and worked 48 hours a week, while income inequalities increased from 1945 to 1968. Results of the struggles: the percent-

16) This is what the [platform](#) of this organization and its [pamphlet on the trades unions](#) clearly express: "Inflation, a permanent phenomenon since World War I, immediately **devoids any wage increases**. (...) The struggle for reforms has become a hopeless utopia. (...) As capitalism entered its decadent phase it was no longer able to accord reforms and improvements in living conditions to the working class." (platform, §6 and §7) "Given this situation, the bourgeoisie even when it is pressurised by the most militant workers' struggles, cannot afford to grant any real reforms. It is obvious that during the last fifty years **all the struggles for wage increases have ended up with nothing**. (...) While during the ascendant period of capitalism the length of the working week effectively fell due to the pressure of workers struggles... under decadent capitalism the number of hours **has remained the same when it has not actually risen...**" (pamphlet, "The unions in decadent capitalism")

17) If the working class would have gained nothing in May 1968, if its wages would not have increased, and its working hours did, while its indirect wages would have constantly eroded; if all social budgets, health care and social services only would have been curtailed... how can this organization explain that [average] life expectancy in France has still increased since 1968 by eleven years?

age of poor was diminished by half between 1970 and 2001 and inequalities decreased from 1968 until the early 1980s.

- c) Numerous struggles broke out to oppose the disastrous working conditions induced by the generalization of the Keynesian-Fordist mode of production after 1945: work on an assembly line and in continuous shifts (three eight-hour shifts).
- d) Finally, there are struggles against redundancies in sectors undergoing restructuring: coal, textiles, steel and shipbuilding.

Such an explanation makes it possible: (a) to be in full accordance with all the facts; (b) to rest on a solid economic foundation; (c) to restore an international dynamic and (d) to integrate the multiple dimensions of all the social movements that flourished during the 1960s, both those related to work and those of the student youth, those linked to the way of life, as well as protests against war

and conflicts in the Third World, etc. This is what makes it heuristic: such an analysis makes it possible to embrace and explain all the data and phenomena encountered, while the “analysis” we have discussed is in direct contradiction with the principal facts, facts that are nevertheless admitted but that it must twist, distort or discard in order to have an air of plausibility, which is characteristic of a purely ideological and idealistic approach.

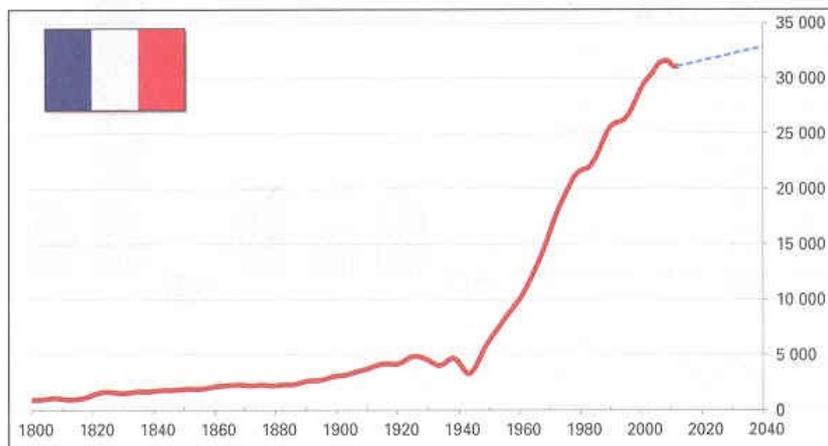
End of the first part.

C.Mcl, May 2018 (Controverses No. 5)

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Évolution historique du PIB par habitant de la France, 1800-2011
(en € constants 2012, puis estimation) [Sources : Maddison, INSEE puis O. Berruyer]



Graph 9: Historical evolution of the GDP per capita of France, 1800 - 2011 (Source: Insee)

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