

December '86

# *Student Upsurge in Imperialist France*

by Claude Duchène\*

December '86 — the abrupt, massive outbreak of French secondary school and university students — has sprung into the air the smug assumptions of the bourgeoisie that the new generation of youth in France since 1968 is silent and bought-off. In addition, it dusted off any notion for revolutionary forces who welcome these sudden upsurges that the inactive, boring and narrow scope of the French political scene is as predictable as its outward appearance has suggested. There was little telling smoke seeping from the volcano.

But erupt it did, quickly and suddenly, with a potent strength that shook this society, throwing the government into a political crisis — including a major retreat from its reactionary offensive — while also richly initiating the newly-awakened youth to political life and at the same time helping to set off tremors in cities in a number of countries, most notably in Spain.

This crisis offered important in-

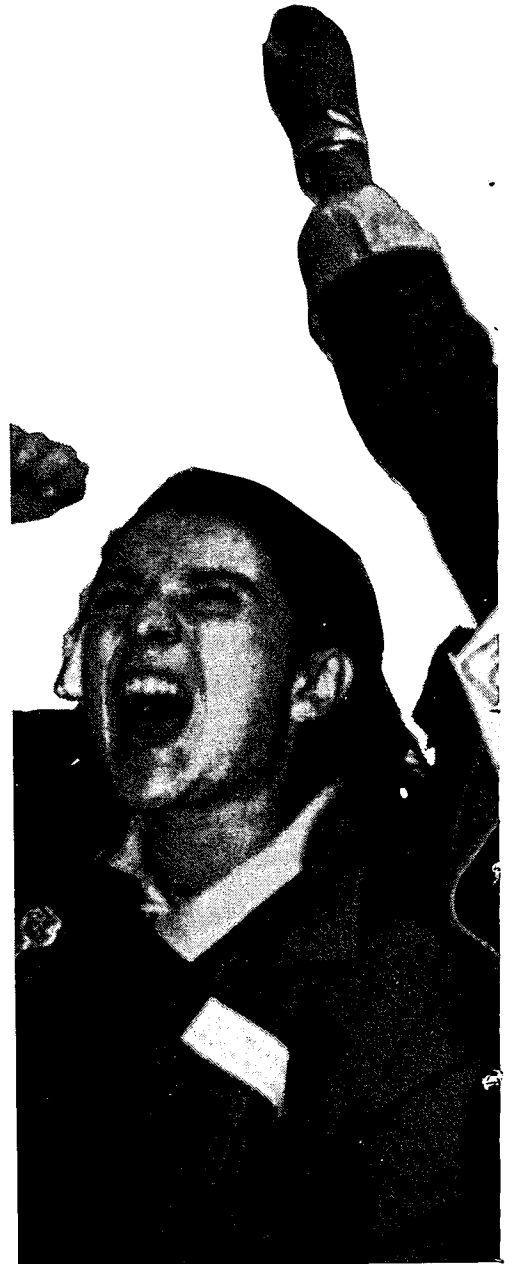
sights into the process of preparing for revolution in the imperialist countries. Such social eruptions punctuating the normal calm of the overall non-revolutionary period are important testing grounds and a terrain for gaining strength for the proletariat. Not the least of this was, as Lenin observed, that crises reveal the mainsprings of the class struggle that ordinarily remain hidden, including the fundamental weakness of the system, the basic nature of the bourgeois dictatorship, and the role and programme of the various class forces in society.

The student upsurges lasted a short three weeks, and although order was restored the ruling class had many wounds to lick, social bridges to try to repair, and most of all a sinking credibility rating that is cause for celebration and stepped-up revolutionary work.

**“We Don't Want Your University Reforms!”**

What triggered the movement was a reactionary bill to redesign and modernise higher education in France, a set of structural and curriculum changes to better prepare its university-trained elite to meet the

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needs of French imperialism which, from the bourgeoisie's standpoint, were long overdue. For students it was one more obstacle blocking what they see as an already uncertain future. From the beginning it was a contradictory movement that required close analysis by class-conscious revolutionary forces.

On the one hand, the movement openly and forcefully targeted increased "selection," the process of weeding out the "poor" students and promoting the "best" into the hierarchy of society. The bottom line of the protest was opposition to new admission procedures which would allow each university (popularly known as *fac*s) to select its own students according to its own criteria, and which would now issue its own diploma instead of the universally-recognised national diploma independent of what school was attended.

Accustomed to being able to enter any of the 78 *fac*s which make up the French university system and to enroll (in theory at least) in any course of study they wanted — provided they had passed the *baccalauréat* (*bac*) exam at the end of secondary school — the students rebelled primarily against further screening both upon entering the university and upon moving into the second cycle after two years.

Other measures which angered the students were the planned increase in tuition fees which would further separate the schools into elite *fac*s and second-rate *fac*s and the breaking up of the universities into more defined, specialised departments, along with tailoring the curriculum to suit the needs of outside, private industry which, in turn, would partly subsidize them.

Accompanying this bill, dubbed the Devaquet reform after Alain Devaquet, a junior minister charged with higher education, was a proposal to modify the *lycées* or secondary schools, which youth go to if they have not already been routed to *Lycées d'Enseignement Professionnel* (*LEPS*), those technical or other non-academic secondary schools which do not deliver a *bac* and are not on the college-bound track. This initial routing process culminates at about age 14, though



in reality is a feature of the education system since the first day of school. This reform, by Minister of Education René Monory, called for condensing the curriculum of the final *lycée* years, eliminating classes not absolutely needed to get the *bac* — such as foreign languages in some courses of study — and cutting back on teachers and special programs. This would amount to further streamlining the broad education students could at least hope to receive at the secondary school level and accelerate selection by reaching downward, reducing opportunities at an earlier point.

On the other hand, this student movement rose to defend their position as an already privileged stratum of society. Although it rejected making education even more elitist, this was from a podium already reserved for society's future elite, those being prepared to take over middle-level administrative and professional posts as well as some upper-level jobs as managers and technicians in the functioning of the imperialist system. Top positions are still generally reserved for the small number of graduates of the *grandes écoles*, highly elite state schools where the really serious preparation for becoming bourgeois rulers and managers takes place and which *bac* holders must test into.

One weekly magazine cynically tried to distinguish the students of 1986 from those of 1968: "in '68 they cried, '20,000 workers are on their way to help (man the barricades in the Latin Quarter). We have to hold strong until then.' In 1986, they say, 'Fine if the workers join us, just as long as we don't have to become one!'"

And while this was a generation of youth raised often by parents who themselves had exploded in 1968 and by and large not at all favourable to the rightward policy shifts being implemented by government, nonetheless before this movement it was a rather unpoliticised generation, raised in the dulling climate of social democracy. These were youth who opposed what they perceived as the deterioration of equal chances and freedoms, but who did so from a certain "anti-ideological" framework that tend-

ed to block fundamental questioning of the roots of these inequalities and preferred cultural points of reference mildly critical of authority, and who especially rejected falling headlong into a bureaucratic, disciplined, boring existence, topped off by the increasing likelihood of ending up unemployed. The prospects of having few alternatives to choose from figured in heavily given the social fabric of France, where unemployment which is about 11% is largely a youth phenomenon. Many had been active in the struggle against racism; at the same time, when the *Rainbow Warrior* ecology ship was sunk by the government while protesting nuclear testing in the Pacific, they did not stir.

After events had escalated and opinions on everything began to be tested, it was evident that many did want to rectify the injustices of the system, but reasonably and one at a time. It was the system itself, of course, which would open their eyes wider and inevitably put much more into question than reorganisation of the universities.

The overhaul of the university system had to be opposed: the only good thing about it was the sharp reaction it provoked; far preferable to being lost in the bureaucratic shuffle, it introduced many to the practical art of political science.

### Spreading like Brushfire

Before November, the student youth were unaware that the authorities were about to reshape their futures. Pro-Socialist Party forces active in the national student organisation, the UNEF — ID (*indépendant-démocratique* to distinguish it from the Communist Party-controlled UNEF, both organisations that came out of the 1968 upheavals) began to take out the issue at some facts, most notably Villetaneuse on the north side of Paris, a campus which had been especially influenced by the SOS Racisme movement that has activated some French youth over the past two years. By mid-November the soon to be familiar mass meetings, called "Assemblées générales," voted to go on strike and spread it to the rest of the

French university system. From there a national meeting of student delegates at the Sorbonne voted to carry the strike movement to defeat the Devaquet reform throughout France. On November 23rd a national teachers' demonstration was held by the pro-Socialist FEN (National Federation of Teachers) Union. Monday the 24th, the students sent a fleet of students out to the lycées to explain the stakes of the Devaquet law, especially to the older classes preparing the bac. The initial test of strength for this budding movement was the national demonstration called for November 27th in Paris. Marches formed up from six or eight different directions flooding into the main artery cutting through the Latin Quarter — Boulevard St. Michel — an unending stream of fac and lycée contingents that literally ringed the interior of the city, pushing their way towards the National Assembly building, where the French Parliament meets. At first the infamous riot police, called the CRS, blocked access to this forbidden area, but then were ordered to retreat to their vans. It was too early for the state to reveal its fangs to the inexperienced young demonstrators, many of whom tried individually to convince the CRS guards of the justness of their cause. "Your children are students too!" some cried.

Only a violent confrontation could have contained the swelling wave of students singing, "Devaquet, if you knew where we'd shove your reform. Don't wait ass-angle moment, Devaquet resign!" On one side of the big iron gates was a Council of Ministers watching, waiting and perspiring; on the other, 200,000 youth, the great majority in the streets for the first time in their lives, jubilantly clamoring to be heard.

### From "Apolitical" to Whose Politics?

The air was electric, politically charged with a sense of awe and expectation at the massive energetic strength they had assembled, without really even knowing it. The freshness and vitality reflected the unmatched initiative of youth,

boldly daring to go out and challenge the status quo and refusing to swallow yet another restriction on their future. Their understanding was, of course, uneven. Some linked this attack with others, chanting "Deport Devaquet not immigrants," but more common that day was the slogan: "Devaquet your paper gets a O." A certain innocence was pervasive — illustrating primarily the newness of political activity to the young predominantly petit-bourgeois students raised in a wealthy imperialist country. But this naiveté was intentionally reinforced from the outset by the student leaders' ambiguous slogan of "We are apolitical."

Their goal was to contain the issue within student bounds — respectably reformist — but the fact that at first the "apolitical" cry was taken up so widely indicated the beginning level of the movement. Partly it was a reaction to the bourgeois press' immediate attempt to portray the movement as already manipulated by left-wing radicals, a false notion stemming from the participation of some in fact very right-wing Trotskyists in the national leadership. Based undoubtedly on a genuine desire to rip off all the labels being pasted on the movement and to reject the claws of institutionalized politics until events changed the terms of the battle the students thought they could retain their unity and independence from vultures of all types if they stayed "apolitical."

The more intermediate and backward students who clung to this safety-zone did so partly to solicit support from and legitimacy in the eyes of bourgeois society, itself quite a political statement. Of course for those who demanded that the movement remain "apolitical" in order to vent against the heritage of May 1968 and the influence of the Maoists and anarchists back then or to proclaim revolutionary alternatives as dead based on looking at the collapse or integration into the system of the entire extra-parliamentary left — this too was highly political.

The question became clearly not how to stay "apolitical," but *whose* politics this movement would em-



brace, and around what political lines it would divide. As it developed its participants' ignorance was rapidly giving way to embryonic political understanding, forcing them to draw some of these lines and defend them.

The bourgeoisie itself tried to polarise the movement politically early on. The students grew furious at the patronising descriptions of the movement as "carefree, uninformed, and glad to get out of



class." Not surprisingly the press paid a lot of attention to shaping the politicisation of the movement, sticking their mikes under the noses of those students who *were* mainly worried about their own narrow interests of getting ahead and finding a comfortable job. They launched a continuous political and ideological barrage against May '68, constantly drawing parallels and dissimilarities to promote the slogan already circulating among students that "'68 is old, '86 is better" on their own terms with such litanies as "look at *our* youth, tasting the sweet democratic right to express themselves freely through festive, well-behaved marches." "In '68 they wanted to reject the system; in '86 all they want is a secure place in it."

The climate of late November was highly charged and pushing to go higher. Through this first day of

protest the youth became conscious of themselves as a powerful social force, noisily obliging the rest of society to sit up and take notice. The lycéens had leapt into the fray, outstripping the university crowd in energy, creativity and numbers. This movement had taken over the streets in cities from Lille to Montpellier, provoking debate on street-corners and in cafés everywhere. Riveted to the sides of the march routes were also thousands of on-lookers, many active just a decade ago, who alternately smiled, cheered and scratched their heads, wondering where the hell this giant wave of "non-violent" youth shouting their lungs out had appeared from.

#### **The Political Landscape in France from '68 to '86**

These were youth who had neither lived through the deep political experience of 1968 and the revolutionary aspirations it had given expression to, nor had they crashed, either demobilised or coopted, into the stony social-democratic embrace of the bourgeoisie some had wanted to hang from the Sorbonne's pillars a little more than a decade before.

The single most influential event

that has shaped the French political landscape in the 1980s was the election of François Mitterrand as President in 1981. The victory of social democracy was the end of a long downhill slide from the mass revolutionary movement launched in 1968; those who had not already been swept into its wake were confused and disarmed to counter its pink, but thoroughly imperialist platform. The brief euphoria of popular triumph against the Right was but a prelude to a long sleep of political inertia and inactivity, the deadening of a generation awakened and initiated in the fury of class struggle of 1968 and a world in turmoil.

May 1968. Two months of deep social and political crisis, the youth at the fore challenging the bourgeois order itself, stung the ruling classes of the stable post-war world, coinciding with the revolutionary struggle of the Vietnamese people and widespread anti-imperialist movements against U.S. imperialism, the high tide of revolutionary struggle throughout the world, and especially the renewed revolutionary mass upheaval in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Although it was launched first by student demands to expand university facilities, the movement developed swiftly into open confrontation with the state, putting into question the very nature of capitalist society itself. Days of pitched fighting in the Latin Quarter followed with battalions of high school youth building and manning barricades and drew in large numbers of workers and working-class youth. One popular slogan "Let's be reasonable, demand the impossible" well illustrated the refusal of the movement to settle for what was acceptable and achievable under the bourgeois system.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were spurred into conscious participation in the class struggle, including opposing the stranglehold of revisionism. Rolling right over the pleas for calm and order of the revisionist French Communist Party (PCF)-controlled trade union, the CGT, they occupied factories, mines, shipyards and government offices, immobilising France in

repeated strike waves and reaching into every cranny of society, debating reform versus revolution.

The revolt was widespread and deep and although this was on a free-spirited basis that ranged from spontaneous rebellion infused with anarchist "down with authority" sentiments, contending with the clamp of revisionist conservatism and Trotskyist reformism, it is also true that Marxist-Leninist influence surged forward, as Red Books and other Marxist-Leninist literature were widely studied. Mao and his revolutionary vision were already a current in the rebellion. Within a week, the revolutionary masses in China, too, were organising large demonstrations and meetings upholding the struggle in France, emphasising the importance of the students' action in propelling the proletariat onto the political stage.

The French bourgeoisie was able to put an end to the May '68 crisis through a combination of repression, mobilisation of a solid base of frightened respectable citizens, and, especially, dramatic economic concessions to the workers. Nevertheless, May '68 was a giant impulsion to the growth of the Marxist-Leninist movement in the country. Mao Tsetung had a big impact not only in the revolutionary movement directly, but far more broadly among intellectuals and others. The spectre of another '68 haunted the bourgeoisie throughout the battles of December '86 and the more they spoke of the "dissimilarities" the more worried they had become.

It took the French bourgeoisie a decade to repair the damage 1968 had done. Ideologically, they launched an assault against Marxism, and particularly against Mao Tsetung Thought. The continued reserves of French imperialism enabled them to carry out a relatively vigorous expansion and continual rise in living standards through most of the 1970s.

The principal vehicle for "recuperating" the May '68 generation back into the folds of the imperialist system was the Socialist Party led by François Mitterrand, under the Presidencies of Georges Pompidou and Giscard d'Estaing respectively.



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This process was conditioned by the developments in the world as a whole, specifically the coup d'état in China and the crisis in the international communist movement, which in France led to the almost total collapse of the Maoist movement.

This was the background for François Mitterrand's election as President in 1981. The results of the coming to power of the Left (originally the French CP had shared in the government) was the complete demobilisation of any (left) opposition to the government. At first, the Mitterrand government of Pierre Mauroy gave out some small concessions (one extra week of paid vacation, for example). But bit by bit the government adopted one openly reactionary policy after another (extradition of Basque refugees to the arms of their Spanish torturers, military expeditions to Chad and Lebanon) with little opposition.

Nevertheless, beneath the surface, sentiment was growing among a new generation that had grown up under the Mitterrand years. In particular, important ferment began to develop among France's "second generation" immigrants — that is, the children of North African workers and others — brought to France to work during the 1960s especially. These "Beurs" (slang for Arab) are the constant target of police repression and face a par-

ticularly bleak future in imperialist France. But, unlike their parents, they are very tightly integrated into the overall social and cultural life of the country and represent a key force among the youth as a whole. The movement called SOS Racisme touched a vibrant chord among French and Beur youth with their anti-police slogan, "Hands off my buddy!" Although SOS Racisme is now led by diehard opportunists linked to the Socialist Party, several activities have also drawn out large numbers of the youth.

It is the stirring of these Beurs that represented the most direct and immediate forerunner of the student movement and has also been a constant nightmare for the bourgeoisie.

### **Capitalism and Education, or Why Reform French Universities**

Selection in education touches a major nerve of bourgeois society: it reinforces class divisions by sharpening up who will have access to upward mobility in the capitalist hierarchy and who will be permanently excluded. For the bourgeoisie it concentrates a lifelong process of culling through and shaping the generation that will be given significant responsibility within its governing structures and its production, academic and scientific domains, which all serve to preserve and enhance both the stability of the nation and vigour of its empire. Education is of course

only one mechanism through which the imperialists guarantee their successors, but more broadly in society it also plays an instrumental role in reproducing both the dominant property relations and the bourgeois superstructure on which they must rely so heavily.

In France the education system has for some time been considered inefficient and unwieldy. Only two-thirds of those students who go to lycées actually obtain the bac. Only 40% continue in the university after the first two years, when the DEUG diploma is delivered.

There has been a corresponding attempt to bring educational policy into line with the overall necessities to rationalise posed by the imperialists' economic crisis. On the one hand they are tightening up the way resources are allocated and adopting an orientation which seeks to minimise free (or low cost) general education at the university level that doesn't directly contribute to the modernisation being carried out in many spheres, an aspect of which is shifting away from heavy subsidisation of the public sector.

On the other hand, the educational reforms were designed for the "better" training of personnel and a new crop of technocrats as part of rationalising industries that France hasn't been as competitive in.

The reforms are also "in sync" with the times. Fundamentally the French bourgeoisie is embroiled along with its Western imperialist partners in an international crisis and is actively taking part in preparations for the world war which that crisis is heading towards. For some time the bourgeoisie has been aware of the need to make structural changes in the French economy, and much of the current overhaul was already begun by the Socialist government including the educational reforms themselves, originally drafted by former Socialist Minister of Education Jean-Pierre Chevènement. The fact that the current right-wing government, headed by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac in "cohabitation" with Socialist President Mitterrand, is under attack for implementing the changes, in no way alters the truth that the ruling class is fundamental-

ly united about what direction to take France.

### An Overall Offensive

Thus consciously and deliberately accompanying these measures is a blatant political and ideological offensive that is enhanced by the neo-Gaullist reactionary rhetoric of the Right's lawmakers, openly designed to whip up French chauvinism and demand that the masses make sacrifices and get into line.

The shift in national politics that escalated with Chirac's taking the helm and translated into an all-around reactionary offensive was apparently silently taking its toll, and the explosion against the university reform was, at least in part, a reaction to this whole campaign. After extraditing more Basques, and expelling Italian, Irish, and other political refugees living in France, the Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua — who himself has come to personify reaction in the government — chartered a plane in October to deport *en masse* 101 Malian immigrant workers whose papers were supposedly not in order.

The open arrogance of the Right was also strengthened during the reactionary series of terrorist bombings against the population in Paris in early fall 1986. This accelerated the process begun last spring when the Right assumed power of giving the police and repressive apparatus in general a highly visible and viciously active profile. While searching people and their belongings in every imaginable circumstance "for bombs" during the anti-terrorist hysteria, the police used the climate to administer the new government clampdown on immigrants which aimed to spread terror among the masses of immigrants and finger some brown-skinned "social parasites" who should "go home" to Africa or Asia or elsewhere and take their "sprawling" non-French speaking families with them.

As part of its ideological offensive — which in the domain of education has meant editorials glorifying the principles of family, hard work and the fatherland for "our youth" — there has also been

lots of television time and indirect (through "critical" interviews, etc.) promotion of the neo-Nazi National Front organisation and its leading rabid spokesman, Jean-Marie Le Pen. This racist defender of "France for the French" incontestably helped to lay the ground in the public opinion mills for the reactionary wave in general and in particular for the government's proposed new nationality code, an open call to put into law greater terror and repression against foreigners on the basis of national chauvinist reaction. This is "selection" in the field of French citizenship, forcing youth born in France of immigrant parents (some of whom at present automatically receive French nationality at the age of 18) to prove they are properly *French* enough to be relied upon for the national unity the bourgeoisie must build and consolidate. It also serves to impose self-control on an explosive section of the population — second generation foreign youth — while terrorising those who might not make the mark by threatening expulsions, which have already begun in earnest.

Then came legislation for building private prisons and imprisoning drug offenders, and the streamlining of access to and content of education. . . all measures that generally targeted youth. But the bourgeoisie must pay a social and political price to implement these offensives. There was certainly ample cause for a major explosion — the student rebellion didn't come from nowhere, even if political awareness seemed low and outrageous actions by the ruling class were not getting the counter-attack they deserved and nobody had even heard of Alain Devaquet before mid-November.

And what a fresh tempest, a fine example of the political situation changing very quickly — and radically — without apparent warning.

### Staring Down the Barrel of a Grenade Launcher

The government promised to restudy the proposed Devaquet bill after the gigantic turnout at the November 27th demonstration



which rippled through cities all over France. 20,000 in Rennes (in Brittany); 20,000 in Lille in the industrial North; 15,000 in Toulouse in the South; 30,000 in Lyon plus thousands of lycéens rarely seen in the streets in dozens of smaller cities and towns as well, had stepped out to confront the government's plans. Some of the most objectionable parts of the bill might be rewritten, the Education Ministry said, but withdrawing the reform was not on the agenda.

Another major national mobilisation was called for the following week. In the daily assemblies, most universities voted to strike starting December 1st and to stay out until the whole bill was dumped. Many lycées followed suit. Some facs were occupied, though rather than becoming a major aspect of the movement this mainly facilitated nighttime preparations for the next day's activities in key centres and at times served to receive out-of-town demonstrators who would repeatedly flock to Paris. The students organised themselves into a thousand committees — to handle press and information, fund-raising, transportation and coordination with other schools. If there were facs in town, active lycéens used them as staging areas to build for December 4th.

Afternoon marches formed up almost daily that week at the Sorbonne and usually wound up near the off-limits National Assembly building in Paris. Some students blocked the toll booths on national highways, offering free passage in exchange for a contribution to the national demonstration. Leafleters spread out calling on the population to support the youth. Daily news updates were written into the home telephone computer system. In Grenoble students raised money outside factory gates. In Strasbourg, they crossed into W. Germany and collected funds there. Everywhere they sold phony shares of their facs, symbolising the privatisation aspect of the bill. Inside the facs they organised concerts, film showings and discussions. They called up the national railroad and ordered 21 extra trains coming into Paris. . . all

eyes were set on the 4th.

December 4th. A massive demonstration it was, probably twice as large as the first one a week before, approaching half a million in Paris, though once it got that big, it didn't really matter whose estimate was closest and by how many hundreds of thousands the police figures lied. In the provinces a total of 300,000 took to the streets. It was a festive outpouring of strength — not particularly militant, certainly neither "apolitical" nor politically unified — full of derision of government ministers and privatised (dubbed "coca cola") American-style education, lively cartoons and banners and singing, and marked by confidence that the numbers themselves would back the government down. The lycéens, although ranked after the university contingents, took the day, overwhelming and greatly outnumbering the others. Confident they would win, the idea was common currency that the "CRS will never attack us. . . we're not even 18 yet!" This and many other illusions were about to be shattered.

A rock concert had been planned as a victory celebration in the wide grassy esplanade by the Invalides, in front of Napoleon's Tomb, to follow the return of a student delegation from a meeting with the ministers next door in the National Assembly. The CRS closed off all avenues leading toward the government buildings and the crowd pushed up against their lines, growing angrier and taunting them. As it grew dark, rocks began to fly and a few arrests were made. The CRS first fired powerful water canons into the section of demonstrators directly confronting them. With the idea that riot police were reserved for Latin American dictatorships the students chanted, "We're not in Chile."

Night fell and the uneasiness of the crowd was reflected in chants that tried to meet the heightening tension, but fell short as people wondered what was going on, the wind grabbed at their necks and march marshals began to bark at people to move away from the streets onto the grassy areas. Those not over at the front lines by the helmeted riot police stood huddled

near the sausage vendors' fires talking in small groups. A tear gas canister or two was lobbed from the CRS lines — the first in 10 days of protests during which the students had been allowed a virtually free rein.

Demonstrators first pulled back and then joined hands to advance toward the cops, shouting, "Pasqua, you bastard, the people will have your hide." The CRS became "SS." Although many fearing a turn for the worse had already left, by 21.00 when the CRS launched its full charge to clear out the demonstration, 50,000 youth still milled around, mad and refusing to leave without some response. This came just as the student delegation — screaming for calm as the tear gas choked the stage set up for the victory rock concert — was preparing to report the government's refusal to scrap the Devaquet law.

There was pitched fighting, red fires lighting up the streets as youth hastily constructed barricades and burned whatever they could get their hands on. The CRS fired concussion grenades directly into the ranks of the demonstrators, blasting one student's eye out and fracturing his skull, and seriously injuring another student in the head, while severing the hand of a third.

Anger flared as high as the smoky clouds of chemical, the rude shock of realisation hit many quickly — behind the government's condescending democratic tolerance of their powerful mobilisation had been a planned attack to clear out and "finish" the student movement, just after the evening news. As this dawned on the tens of thousands who had been swept from the Invalides by squads of CRS, many of them quickly regrouped in the Latin Quarter where sporadic street fighting continued. While the bourgeoisie had hoped by letting its fangs out for all to see that they would polarise this movement and isolate any who dared counter its prevailing "well-behaved" character to take things further, in fact they only accelerated the molding of an advanced section of the movement, while at the same time outraging the student movement and public opinion in society

as a whole.

Not only was the government's gamble not a sound one, it backfired dangerously. Many students began to see how they had been manipulated — not by “outside agitators,” but by the government itself, who while toying with the idea of reworking or modifying their bill, basically had decided that no, they were going to put it into law, punctuated with the crash of clubs and grenades that underscores their power.

### “Turn Off the TV and Open Your Eyes!”

The press began to initiate the fast-awakening youth to the wonders of bourgeois propaganda mills during a social crisis. One editorial writer for the right-wing *Figaro* daily stated that the French youth had been struck with “Mental AIDS,” and a number of progressive artists were accused of being “carriers” of this dreaded disease. The response of the youth was to wear patches and stickers, saying “I have Mental AIDS.” The media also churned out stories which used the possibility some provocateurs had been present to muddy the obvious charge by the police and to obscure the fact that thousands of students had taken a more advanced position against the enemy. While the government quibbled about how to present its “reexamination” of the bill, the students showed up at the Sorbonne. Hot debate flew as illusions and disappointments that “this thing is going to fail” and “why does mass protest always turn violent” gave way to the much more pressing and compelling truth that the government's attack and refusal to budge required them to up the ante.

Some twenty thousand students and youth marched defiantly back to Invalides, first winding around Paris to tell people what had happened the night before. Police vans rushed around to prevent them from taking this or that bridge or grand boulevard. “Our friends' blood is on your hands!” the students chanted as they passed through some of the most chic business districts, snarling traffic, but not sure where more allies were

to be found.

They vowed to not give in to the government's pressure, to harden the movement and persist until the law was withdrawn. Many felt they had now invested a lot, including the well-being of two fellow students. And a new slogan had emerged: “Turn off the TV and open your eyes!” Some youth were seeking deeper and more radical explanations for the developments that belied the average level of understanding and “apolitical” coda.

Although thousands had already been handed out, on Friday students grabbed the “It's Right to Rebel!” leaflet out of RIM sympathisers' hands to help distribute them. “Have you read it?” “Yeah I got it yesterday, It's right. . . .” And others said, “No, I want the other one — the one with Mao on it” (referring to a short pamphlet on the Cultural Revolution). People alternately cheered and booed as they filed past the big red banner also inscribed with Mao's words “It's Right to Rebel!”, flying from the statue of Danton at Odéon.

“What does Mao have to do with our movement here?” That question was in part answered by the mutual repulsion and attraction towards the stand and programme of the proletariat connecting Mao's revolutionary vision to the protest shaking French society. At the corner of St. Germain and St. Michel a *Dazibao*-style big-character poster was put up by some students . . . a wall of raging debate on where to take the movement, who to ally with, the violence.

The next three days the bourgeoisie got little sleep. Friday night December 5th, youth and students from the Paris area joined those from the march who had broken into and taken over the Sorbonne courtyard. Animated discussion in the blocked-off streets of the Latin Quarter, by the light and warmth of burning piles of debris . . . but little direction emerged. One megaphone called on taking the movement out more broadly to the rest of society, another countered that this had to remain a student movement or it would lose its purpose. When the CRS came to clear

out the Sorbonne courtyard things blew up. Cars were overturned and torched, there were running pitched battles with the police. Finally, the “acrobats” — squads of 2-man police teams on motorcycles, one drives, while the other wields a 4-foot club. Instituted in France after May '68, they now swept through to retake St. Michel in the middle of the night. A 22-year-old Beur student named Malik Oussekine was chased into a doorway and clubbed to death.

### A New Leap

The march of mourning the next afternoon needed no publicity. News of the murder of Malik had spread all over, pulling out young and old, people of all social classes and a significant number of immigrant and Beur youth. As the ranks of marchers filed past the hospital where he was pronounced dead, some sections remained silent, others broke into chants. Some of the chants began to touch on various social questions, although the fact that it was a Saturday and had brought out many working people of diverse strata also meant the politics at times got formulated by the revisionist CGT and the Socialist Party-led CFDT trade unions, who had their own political designs on the movement and sought to take advantage of Chirac's crisis to dream of the 1988 presidential elections. Commonly heard: “Chirac, resign, Pasqua resign, the people will have your hide!” “Down with the government that kills students and expels immigrants.” With the eyes of thousands on her, a woman spray-painted on the wall of the Army veterans centre right under the nose of its guards: “Pasqua Assassin!” Devaquet was already a dead letter. He had resigned that morning. But the march was no longer about university reform anyway.

As dusk fell, the CRS moved in, splitting the march into several parts with tear gas. The student march marshals formed chains to discourage the timid from continuing the battle. On the sidewalks, it seemed like all of society was debating the future of France and what they should do, how things could be

changed, what's wrong with the government, is there a whole system behind it. Some middle-aged people talked about '68 and about what their children would get if they didn't fight now. Some youth said "Dump the Right, we've got to bring the Socialists back," or "I wish we could change the whole system, but you can't; you can only fight injustices one at a time." The more controversial, the bigger the circle. A well-dressed, perfectly coiffed woman (no stranger in this affluent neighborhood suddenly beset upon by the march and the CRS assault) piped in nervously, "What about poor Malik — what about *his* future?" The CRS and reactionary tenor of the current state had few defenders that day.

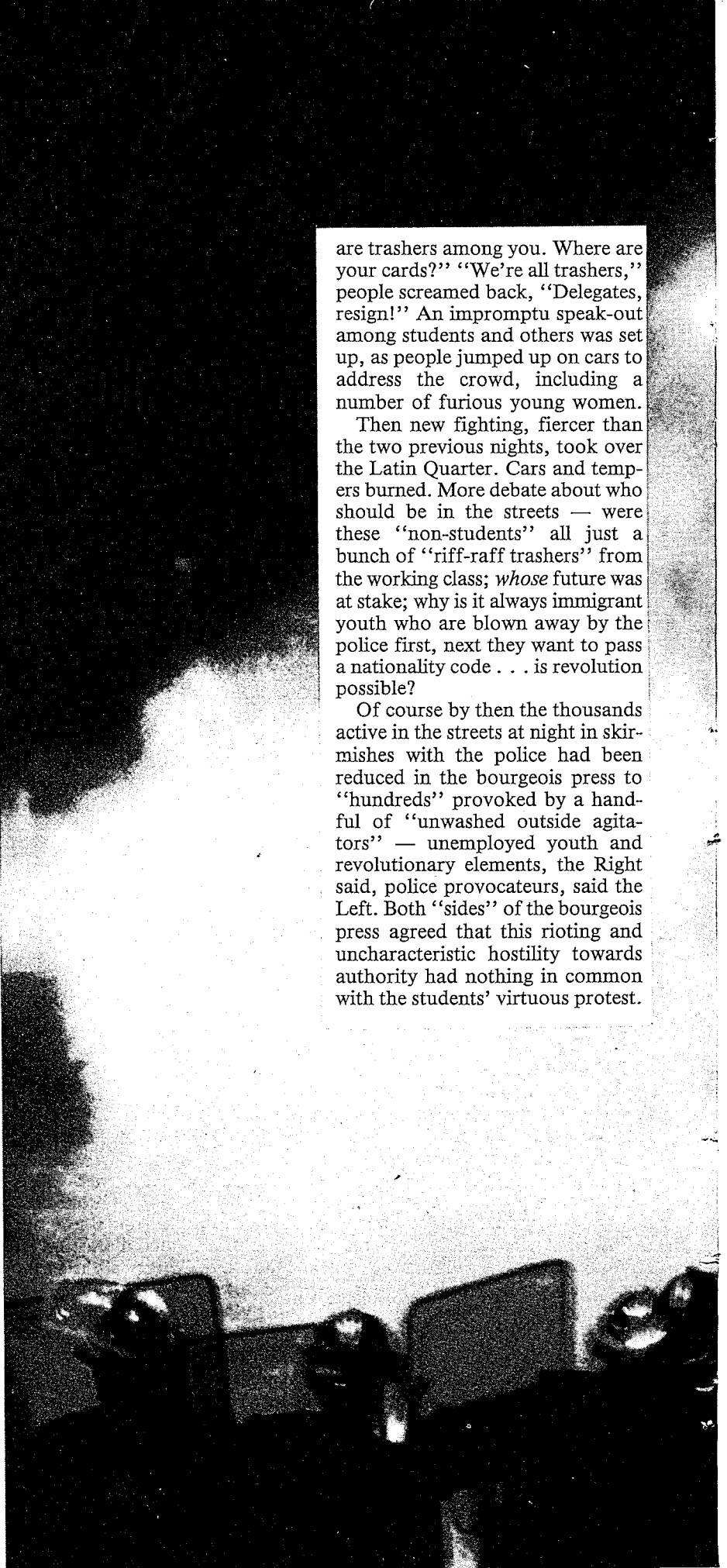
Another major leap in the spiraling of events had occurred and the situation was not favourable for the government to muscle things back under control. A good bulk of the march had already regrouped and was marching to Chirac's Hotel de Ville (City Hall) headquarters. Lines of police vans camped out front, and nervous rows of helmets and visors shone through the night-lit fountains surrounding this seat of power. The crowd surged forward throwing rocks and chanting: "Pasqua, Chirac, resign!" "Pasqua terrorist!" and less often, "terrorist state," turning the anti-terrorist climate of early fall back towards those really responsible. A plumber from the proletarian suburbs, who was active in '68 and never renounced it, said, "This is nothing. Wait and see what happens if we workers come out in the streets again. . . This government is rotten."


All around the air was charged. The CRS positioned itself to clear the downtown area. RIM sympathisers, followed by some anarchists who liked their chant "Imperialist state, terrorist state," called on people to march to the Sorbonne. Several hundred took off across the Seine river passing first through the Latin Quarter and then on to a nearby fac. A student marshal inside the gates with a megaphone refused to let people in to attend the mass meeting going on. "You aren't all students, there

are trashers among you. Where are your cards?" "We're all trashers," people screamed back, "Delegates, resign!" An impromptu speak-out among students and others was set up, as people jumped up on cars to address the crowd, including a number of furious young women.

Then new fighting, fiercer than the two previous nights, took over the Latin Quarter. Cars and tempers burned. More debate about who should be in the streets — were these "non-students" all just a bunch of "riff-raff trashers" from the working class; *whose* future was at stake; why is it always immigrant youth who are blown away by the police first, next they want to pass a nationality code . . . is revolution possible?

Of course by then the thousands active in the streets at night in skirmishes with the police had been reduced in the bourgeois press to "hundreds" provoked by a handful of "unwashed outside agitators" — unemployed youth and revolutionary elements, the Right said, police provocateurs, said the Left. Both "sides" of the bourgeois press agreed that this rioting and uncharacteristic hostility towards authority had nothing in common with the students' virtuous protest.





highly integrated, the ripples throughout society tend to be immediate and their effect extremely concentrated — both extensively (on a national scale) and horizontally (throughout society). This fact, a feature of imperialist society generally, is even more exaggerated in extremely centralised France.

In France, the university system, for example, is organised around a central nationalised structure, with one-third of its branches in the Paris area; this, and the fact that Paris is the centre of every essential aspect of government and ruling class decision, in addition, of course to the students' quite conscious call for national demonstrations and the broadest mobilisation of public opinion in general had all contributed objectively to the rapid spiraling of events way beyond the bourgeoisie's immediate expectations and political preparedness to handle them.

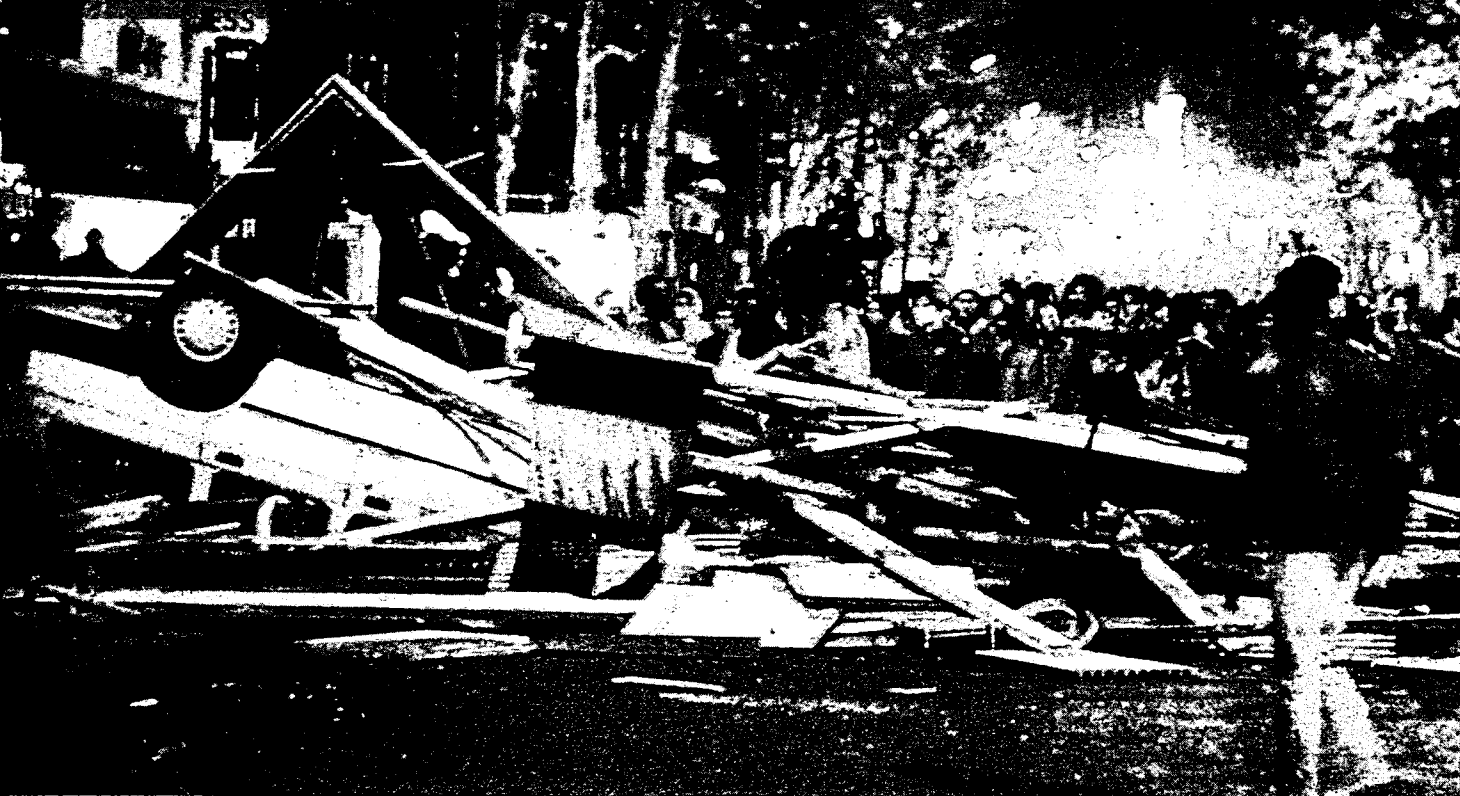
#### **From Student Protest to Major Political Crisis**

What had begun as a seemingly harmless student protest to block reforms of the education system had blown up into a serious political crisis, jolting all of society and posing much bigger questions. The particularities of imperialist France, especially its highly centralised state, had further accelerated this process.

This was certainly not a revolutionary crisis, neither was it a repeat, which it couldn't be, of 1968, though it helped to reveal in a miniature way many of the features that will appear in such a crisis. It also illustrated clearly why when things snap in this type of country, where the economy, transport, communications and the forms of government control are

Though they knew it was not a May 1968, and reassured themselves so daily on the news, they had a December 1986 in a world where the stakes have been considerably raised and they did not know what January would bring. (And it proved a worthwhile question, since a wave of strikes in the national electricity industry and railroad system brought new turmoil immediately after the student movement subsided.)

By Monday, December 8th, its national seat of power had become so hot that the bourgeoisie couldn't sit down: one junior government



*Barricades at the height of the confrontation, with the French flag in the centre as part of the fuel.*

minister had already left, the decision to go ahead with the bill and back it up with force had only escalated the struggle, the franc was tumbling on the international markets, and the Chirac political stable was under attack to be firm from European leaders. Chirac's pleas, "Let's discuss it, we live in a democracy," themselves became a lesson, since his democratic forces of order had spoken more truthfully! Pasqua got on TV and said his police had done just what they were told. Forced to talk compromise and cool public opinion down, Chirac also had to defend this most normal aspect of capitalist rule — its dictatorship by military force — while the slogan in the streets becoming more popular by the hour demanded his resignation and had turned his Interior Minister's name into a synonym for assassination and terrorism!

All weekend, the contending forces within the "cohabitation" government fought over how to defuse the crisis. Chirac even called in the head of the Socialist Party-led trade union for unprecedented consultation on Sunday. The dilemma of the government was real, as the movement threatened to spin wildly out of control. Yet to withdraw the Devaquet law would

also be a giant admission of weakness in the face of the masses.

#### **The Bourgeoisie's Retreat**

Mitterrand, mysteriously quiet, even absent from the turn of events flew home from a London summit meeting to piously denounce the excessive violence on both sides. On Monday the bourgeoisie retreated. Chirac announced that the Devaquet bill would be withdrawn, and the Monory reforms postponed. For the ruling class overall, partisan politics had to be put aside, for their principal concern at this point was whether they were going to regain control of the students at all, and whether this movement would spark further upsurges among the youth more broadly, particularly young immigrant and French proletarians. Clearly such a development bore even greater dangers of engaging the proletariat as a whole into political life, bursting beyond the revisionist and reformist manacles which has held them largely in check and which would polarise the middle classes far more than they were at present.

Undoubtedly mocking PCF leader Maurice Thorez' famous comment, "You have to know when to stop a strike," RPR Secretary Jacques Toubon reasoned on the

news, "You have to know how to stop a movement." But, in conceding defeat, they had paid a heavy price.

Rejection of the Socialists' rhetoric, their sudden and conspicuously noisy applause and encouragement to the student movement — which in non-government circles naturally grew more militant as the crisis surrounding Chirac grew more embarrassing — had already become a dividing line in the movement. While it was a matter of record that key elements of the Devaquet law had originally been proposed by the Socialists themselves and the law sailed through parliamentary procedures with hardly a ripple of opposition from Mitterrand or the minority Socialists, the political implications of this remained obscured to many in the face of the easier solution of "uniting against the Right" and its openly reactionary programme.

As usual, the Socialists won the hypocrisy award of the bourgeoisie hands down. All the while deploring the violence — on both sides, of course — and echoing the student leaders and backward students, spokesmen such as Socialist Party Secretary Lionel Jospin were openly campaigning for 1988 already, suggesting the elections be moved

up given the demonstrated incompetence of the Chirac government etc., and firmly planting the notion that the next phase of the student movement should be voter registration drives!

This left Mitterrand a slightly freer hand to enter the crisis arena at the last moment as "supreme arbiter." Based on the interests of the cohesiveness of bourgeois rule, he both defended the police and called for national unity *against violence*, and for a return to peaceful order. In a typical spectacle of the doubletalk he has become famous for, he declared: "We cannot permit a struggle against one another, nor a struggle of the French against the state. The students are right: Never again. . . I support them."

### "Never Again"

Although some of the most advanced wanted to apply this slogan to banish Mitterrand himself, who in a final sickening wave of his national healing wand visited Malik's bereaved family and sent an assistant to see the wounded CRS in the hospital, unfortunately he suffered only minor political damage in the eyes of the broad masses of students. The "cohabitation" proved to be an ideal shield allowing Mitterrand to remain "above" the dirty work of the government.

The national student coordination called for a final demonstration for December 10th — a "bitter victory" march symbolising the retreat which had been forced at a high price. Its theme was "never again the repression, death and wounded when youth are peacefully demonstrating for their future." But it was an ironic theme indeed, for the lurid workings of the imperialist forces of order were already responsible for the death of another young Beur. The murder of 19-year old Abdel Benyahia by a drunk off-duty cop in a northern Paris suburb, the same Friday night that Malik was killed, was covered up by police all weekend because of the country's volatile political mood. Monday, when reports leaked out, some students went to join the proletarian Beur youth who marched with Abdel's family and friends Monday and Tuesday. More immigrant

youth began to come down to the Latin Quarter to check out the student movement.

On Wednesday December 10th hundreds of thousands marched throughout France with gigantic flower wreaths from many lycées and portraits of Malik. In Paris a somber sense of mourning contended with an angry edge against police repression and the demand for Pasqua and Chirac to resign. The effort to impose silence didn't last long as contingents screamed out, "Pasqua, the law is made in the street, not by you!" Many students wore targets while others lay down in the streets and bucket-toting friends swashed painted silhouettes around them.

At Nation plaza, where the march was supposed to end, student leaders called for dispersion. A counter chant rose from those who wanted to go further: "No to dispersion. . . Yes to Pasqua's resignation." At one point, in the face of the prevailing effort by student (and trade union) marshals to make peace and to extinguish the struggle and the whole movement along with it, some Beur youth electrified the crowd by unfolding a giant banner of Abdel, a defiant symbol that police murder is still standard fare and that justice was by no means delivered. The portrait of Abdel was symbolic of the need and possibility for the movement to go over to take up the fight of the immigrant youth, the refusal to remain simply a student movement and a refusal to see the movement officially declared over.

Scuffles broke out as a section of youth followed the "Dispersion is treason" chant to form up and continue the march. Marshals and PCF goon squads physically tried to block them and the confrontation grew fierce. Finally as many as a thousand people took off hoisting available banners, including one RIM sympathisers had brought which read, "Honor Malik — carry on the struggle!" and singing a wide variety of chants as they swung towards Bastille and their target, the Hotel de Ville, some resurrecting the '68 chant, "Revolution, the only solution!" or "Chirac, guess who's coming to dinner!" while others

focused on Pasqua. When the CRS sealed the route to City Hall, the march fought its way through to the Latin Quarter.

### The Participation of "Deselected" Youth

The student movement of December '86 had the virtue of blasting a wide hole in the social peace of France. The bourgeoisie, caught by surprise and forced to back down, came under serious ridicule and attack by those supposed to be competing to become its most willing disciples. More alarming still — and in large part the reason compelling the bourgeoisie to make important concessions to stop the movement — was the appearance of new elements of the youth. Potentially explosive sections of proletarians and especially immigrants who had not previously emerged as a political force in the early stages of the movement began to step forward as the focus of the movement more and more targeted the state, particularly its repressive apparatus.

The lycéens' participation tended to act as a catalyst more broadly and deeply in society, posing the question of who would be deselected earlier, not just from education, but from the middle and upper strata of society. And this whole rejection of a sinking quality of life and a future armed with an "unemployment diploma" was a lever for some of the "deselected" themselves to join the student movement, particularly the LEP technical school students who weren't in any case destined for a regular bac.

"We're not any dumber than you and we're not going to work in a factory!", a leaflet put out by some of these students from an electronics school warned the university students. It went on to challenge the students to fight against more than just the Devaquet law: "As the future managers of society over us, the ones who are supposed to produce for it, if you want to be loyal government apprentices. . . and become teachers, social servants, journalists, personnel directors so that tomorrow you can teach us, serve us, inspect us and inform us, lead and survey us, then get lost! But if you want, to begin with, to

attack the school system which excludes us, degrades us and fight against social segregation and poverty, then we're with you!"

This was a point of view some students welcomed as it helped sharpen up the real links between selection and capitalism . . . between ruling and being ruled over. The presence of sections of proletarian and immigrant youth of Arab, Antilles and Black African origin had its own impact.

This was a student generation heavily influenced by the "mood" among the youth of opposing police repression and racist attacks generally and they at least wanted to increase equality rather than watch it be eroded. At the same time the petit bourgeois character of the students caused them to hesitate over the possibilities and necessities of linking up with the proletarian and immigrant youth. To some, social change was only a function of how powerful they, the petite bourgeoisie, could be as a social group exerting pressure on the government against various injustices. Up to a certain point (especially if other youth didn't violate the "respectability" line too much) they welcomed the plurality of forces involved.

Other students, however, encouraged and sought out the participation of more proletarian youth in their movement exactly because it tightened the vital link to the broader class contradictions and divisions in society, because it deepened the movement by reaching towards the real dispossessed and victims of inequality. Some students sense, if not always consciously, that this is the force behind any major social change, certainly any revolutionary challenge of the current order that manufactures these injustices.

Furthermore, those who had made a lot of sacrifices to push this movement forward knew that the students by themselves were not likely to take things much further. One third-year accounting student who was going to be kicked out of the program and lose everything he'd worked for because he'd been active in the strike said, "I learned more being in the streets and it was



20, rue Monsieur le Prince, site of the murder of Malik, became a shrine for weeks. Hundreds placed wreaths or wrote denunciations of the state on walls there.

definitely worth it but are *they* (other students returning to class) going to continue to fight?"

#### Favourable Political Terrain

In France today there is no revolutionary party of the proletariat, no Marxist-Leninist vanguard. Moments of crisis and upsurge can serve to train and prepare the awakening masses and strengthen the revolutionary forces as well. The *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement* points out that "the Marxist-Leninist party must be built in close relationship with carrying out revolutionary work among the masses, implementing a revolutionary mass line, and, in particular, addressing and resolving the pressing political questions which must be resolved in order for the revolutionary movement to advance." To remain aloof or turn aside from such mass upsurges would mean that the communist party never will be built.

Joining in these movements, striving to lead them forward and spreading the outlook and influence of the proletariat to the highest degree possible even with small forces is imperative, or it will be impossible to rally revolutionary elements and raise the political and organisational level which can lay the basis for a party.

In this context, there were

numerous "rightist" pitfalls to avoid, such as tailing the spontaneous movements and concentrating only on building them while losing sight of the final goal of revolution. Yet it was equally important for the proletarian revolutionary forces not to underestimate the actual role that the students were playing in stirring up society overall and even more, in propelling the more "dispossessed" into motion and opening up a field for them to act.

Although the class composition of the student movement was petit bourgeois — not the social base of the revolutionary vanguard — it was necessary to cast off reluctance to take positions on the different ideas and slogans put out by the students and not to restrict the activity of the Marxist-Leninists to simply general revolutionary propaganda.

Correctly assessing the student movement required digging deeply into its various aspects and making an analysis of the underlying contradictions which gave rise to the wave of protest. It meant delving in and closely following each development, evaluating the political understanding and questions of the youth involved along with the political tendencies shaping the direction of the movement, in order to develop a revolutionary line to be

able to help polarise the movement on a correct basis, and rally the advanced forces, and also carry out revolutionary work *outside* of the movement, among other strata as well. It was possible to conduct revolutionary activity and agitation that reveals more plainly the partially hidden class nature and interests of various paths and slogans, and links the new-born awareness of some aspects of the system to a broader, more complete picture of the nightmare that is imperialism.

Organisationally speaking, this means being *ready* to shift into high gear: to constantly sum-up the accelerating movement might require, for instance, putting out leaflets every 24 hours, and taking similar measures to ensure the physical presence of the revolutionary line in a myriad of forms and in the key arenas.

This proved to be a complicated process, for events moved quickly and required constant reevaluation and analysis — corresponding in fact to the way that the students themselves were rapidly learning, making new judgments, discarding their summations of twenty-four hours before and then eagerly scouting out and comparing different viewpoints.

### Contending as a Political Current

In these circumstances revolutionary agitation was important, even indispensable as a part of developing a revolutionary *current* among the students and proletarian youth. On the one hand the objective situation in France, in which the Maoist forces are still weak and the overall subjective mood of the students was not very favourable to Marxism-Leninism (in contrast, for example, to the situation that prevailed in 1968) meant that leading, or establishing hegemony in the movement was highly unlikely. On the other hand, the political terrain of December '86 proved fertile enough to allow important headway towards creating such a revolutionary current inside and outside the existing student movement.

It was necessary to give expression to the most revolutionary sentiments of the advanced by using the science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao

Tsetung Thought to synthesise these sentiments and, on that basis, develop the programme and slogans to advance the movement in a more revolutionary direction.

This was not simply a tactical question of seizing on key moments when the marches were splitting into sections of people who wanted to go further, as opposed to those looking for the closest *métro* station in order to disperse as their leaders told them to. It also meant developing the line, policy and slogans which would attract and draw forward forcefully and practically a social base for going further, that is, for more thoroughly opposing the system (and the students do not represent such a force even if they will repeatedly spur and pull other more decisive forces into struggle).

In particular it was possible to give encouragement and revolutionary direction to the embryonic fusion already taking place right within the ebbing phase of the "student" movement between on the one hand those students protesting the government's interference in their futures and the murder of their comrades, on the other hand the proletarian youth (and notably the Beur component) appearing on the scene out of the hatred such events provoke *daily* in the lives of the oppressed. To them police repression was not a first experience! They were linking up with this sea of rebellion against the outrages of the bourgeois state because it typifies their experience and because the movement gave them an opening to step forward.

One of the RIM sympathisers' leaflets, entitled "What next?" pointed to the need for a revolutionary movement among the youth overall. "This movement which started off fighting selection in education should welcome with open arms those who have already been cast aside and tracked out of the lycées and universities." Building such a revolutionary youth movement in France could in fact serve to mobilise the advanced among the youth to play their role and to push the overall events in a direction that activates the more key strata of the youth against the numerous attacks coming down to-

day. . . from nationality codes to expulsions, to police repression and murder, to even more ultimately decisive questions such as the invasion of Chad and heightening preparations for world war. . . and the not-too-distant calls for youth to step forward as imperialist cannon-fodder. For isn't all this, even more than stiffer admission criteria to succeed in society and greater restrictions on any individual's control over their future, fundamentally what is really up the road for the masses of people as a whole, including the masses of students? In this light, the same leaflet stressed, opposing all the injustices and outrages of this system is necessary, but there is in fact a *whole* unjust *system* of capitalist exploitation, to be attacked and done away with.

The goal of pushing the movement, or at least a section of it, onto a higher political plane must be carried out in view of preparation for revolution. This is always true for genuine communists, but there exists a particularity of these sudden upsurges which actually heightens the possibilities of making more rapid, qualitative gains, provided that preparation is seen from the Leninist starting point of what these minor crises represent and seeks to enhance and take advantage of the openings as a sort of dress rehearsal for the future, when heavier shocks to the system can give rise to actual opportunities to seize power. Without such an approach, it is difficult to avoid the pitfall of treating the movement as something unto itself.

### Swimming Upstream and Exposing Dinosaurs

Doing communist work required exposing from many different angles the other political currents within the movement, particularly social democracy, and to a lesser extent, revisionism, both of which made gains in the face of the Right's rawly-exposed posture.

The militant rhetoric of the Socialists was deceptive to some; their programme corresponded to the easier, non-confrontational route the students wanted to travel at first. There was an infatuation with democracy in the general as-



semblies, for example, as though it was the nub of how things would develop. The students voted on absolutely everything, including whether to vote and just exactly what the limits of the student leaders' responsibilities were, and how long they would stay "in power." Programmatically the Socialists and Trotskyists not only tailed this but used it as a tactic to denounce "trashers" in the Latin Quarter saying this violence didn't represent "students" as democratically constituted and who voted all their own decisions.

In this and other ways, the Trotskyists carried out plenty of self-exposure through the most right-leaning reformism from their position of relative strength in the national student coordination. The PCF, who focused on nominal tuition hikes and tailed the sacrosanct "autonomy" of the student movement, proved themselves nearly irrelevant, although they have stepped up their youth work in earnest since the movement has subsided.

Taking out a genuinely communist line into this movement inevitably did provoke not just the demoralised and backward, but also those consciously or otherwise affected by the bourgeoisie's efforts to erase the legacy of Marxism-Leninism. More than once the Maoists were called "dinosaurs" here in the land of the dead Marxists, where a major ideological current (including many former pro-Maoist intellectuals) has proclaimed Marxism as *dépassé*. There were ripe opportunities for exposing how it is actually social democracy that is *dépassé*, and it is the system of imperialism which has nothing new to offer the masses except further "deselection," further misery and oppression, and war, and whose state dictatorship will not hesitate to murder rebels and potentially volatile elements.

There were times when the same qualities of youth — freshness, boldness and fewer encumbrances with revisionist and totally wrong summations of the revolutionary path — also seemed shockingly naïve and "apolitical." Their rejection of "politics" as they knew it

for cultural or other points of reference revealed that a sense of class contradictions was missing. What has been referred to repeatedly as "anti-ideological" prejudices in the press itself divided into two: the more the bourgeoisie insisted on this, the less true it became in a sense, since part of what the youth wanted to escape from was the bourgeoisie's summations too. The "anti-" wasn't in fact very deep, and as the movement escalated, the youth were not much in the mood to go along with everything which had shaped their prejudices before. A minority emerged who actively sought out a broader view of things, breaking out of the confines of a "student" perspective, even at times seeking revolutionary views.

All this proved to be much more favourable ground than it initially "felt" like, and made it all the more

necessary to show the freshness and the utility of Marxist analysis which has not been seen much in this country for a long time. This helps enable new forces to grab onto and take up this science for themselves, in turn using it to forge a more advanced section that can better lead future outbreaks as the system lurches into deeper crisis.

December '86 happened to coincide with the international campaign called by the RIM — "Forward along the Road Charted by Mao Tsetung" — and this also created favourable conditions for carrying out revolutionary work in the student movement. Not the least of these links was the incendiary and rebellious role of youth in pulling the workers and peasants into the tumultuous struggle of the Cultural Revolution. But more fundamental was the fact that this



Photo of a Paris wall, from an article in *Libération*. Their headline and caption reads: *The great helmsman has returned. New Parisian supporters have found inspiration from Turkey, Lebanon and the Shining Path [Sendero Luminoso — CP of Peru — AWTW] The wall painting reads: Forward Along the Path Charted by Mao Tsetung.*

movement needed to be challenged by Mao's revolutionary vision of classless society, so radically different from and opposed to the revisionism and social democracy prevailing in France and thus inevitably shrouding this fresh political outburst of the youth.

Despite the bourgeoisie's constant incantation that 1968 was over and their repeated crowings that they have successfully buried Mao along with Marxism a good decade ago, Mao Tsetung was apparently still a live and fearsome spectre to some, for he was a frequent reference point in the battle of public opinion over how to sum up the current upsurge and especially in contrasting 1986 with the "violence-prone" revolutionary dreamers of 1968. *Libération* (the bourgeois pro-Mitterrand daily edited by a former pseudo-Maoist turned hard-core apologist for French imperialism) felt compelled to attack the mysterious stencil artists who still try to invoke the path of Mao and have been seen opposing expulsions of immigrants back to Mali or supporting other extreme causes like the People's War in Peru. Repeated experience itself showed that a lot of the less severely brainwashed were quite interested in this "dangerous character" and why his line has a lot to do with whether there will ever be revolution in France, or anywhere, for that matter.

#### Linking up with Labour Aristocrats or Sparking Off the Proletariat

A wrong conception of the relationship between students and workers — and class relationships more generally — was shown by the approach of the student leaders towards the final march, December 10, when at least 25,000 union members brought up the rear. Workers were being confounded with the trade unions and the approval of the trade unions was considered key to broadening the movement. This was also promoted by the Trotskyists with their very non-revolutionary conception of a "general strike." In fact, this idea was *not* aimed at spreading the spirit of rebellion to new sections of society but rather at *stifling* the

students and appealing for the trade union bureaucracy to lend its "respectability" to the cause of the students.

It is worth noting that this call to spread the movement to the "working class" (sic) was made by many of the same forces who most vociferously *opposed* the participation of the "riff-raff" and "unemployed trashers" from the working class youth in demonstrations and streetfighting.

The actual relationship between sections of the workers and the student upsurge was revealed more accurately in the way events themselves developed. Wildcat strikes in the national railroad system, the Paris public transportation system, and the gas and electricity industry broke out in mid-December — clearly a spillover from the student eruption. As opposed to the "strikes" which occur every year for a day or a few hours during wage disputes and routinely are nothing more than a negotiating tactic between the labour aristocracy in the form of powerful unions and the government, suddenly angry masses of workers were heard from.

A militant rank and file, relatively independent of the trade union bureaucracy, thrust itself forward and tenaciously fought for its demands (primarily better working conditions), held daily mass meetings like the students and threw the government back into a crisis of sorts while semi-paralysing transportation and normal production in some areas for another three weeks.

For a number of reasons, including the stranglehold of the unions, the government was able to diffuse and smash the strike movement but their alarm at this turn of events, the seemingly contagious disease of protest, was manifest.

#### The Uneasy Social Truce

Although the Chirac government has called a temporary halt to its reactionary legislation and (for now) has shelved the new nationality code, the French imperialists must and will proceed with their political and economic offensive, though now on a different political footing than just a few months ago.

A fierce public opinion battle has been underway since December over how to sum up the student movement and its effects.

Despite Chirac's adjournment of further inflammatory reforms while he tries to "cool out" and recuperate the youth, they and many others in society too no longer look at things as passively and narrowly as before. The broad and active participation of young women in the movement provoked commentary on all sides and this is highly favourable for future developments. The fact that these youth forced the bourgeoisie to back down in a way that ridiculed and exposed aspects of the system will be hard to reverse. And indeed European ruling class figures are bitterly reproaching the French government for this ("We held firm over the Pershings. . .") The campuses are quite alive with political activity around a number of different issues such as South Africa. Chirac's name is scrawled all over the walls in a rhyme with "club." His Interior Minister Pasqua is widely considered a liar and a murderer. In Lille, these "politically unsophisticated" youth chanted "Pasqua, we'll make you pay for the blood you have spilt" only two weeks after they had wanted to reason with the CRS.

The growing number of "Mental AIDS" victims have awakened to some ugly and brutal features of an antiquated system, and have tasted class struggle against the enemy; they are not likely to be put back to bed so easily. But a crucial question hangs at the centre of whether future sudden upheavals and moments of crisis will just give another jolt, however profound, to this imperialist bastion, or will the emergence of an organised revolutionary proletarian vanguard and the development of a revolutionary movement promote a qualitatively different outcome? One of the bourgeois daily *Le Monde's* more hackneyed interviews summed up the present-day sociological trend as "revolt without revolutionaries" — the prospects of this are as unlikely as France falling back asleep. □