While Malcolm Salmon was still in France, as a special correspondent for Tribune, he answered several questions for ALR. His answers provide further information on the events of May and June and indicate some of the perspectives of the French left following the elections.

QUESTION: Various estimations have been made of the political situation in France before and after the elections; some claimed a revolutionary situation existed, others stated that the demonstrations were for urgent demands within the system. What were the various estimations before the elections and how much have these elections confirmed or denied these estimations?

SALMON: Estimating just what the political situation in France was in May and June, whether or not it was “revolutionary,” is the number one preoccupation in the political world here just now. Millions of words are being written about it, not to mention the other millions uttered in the course of the oral debate which is going on everywhere in this post-crisis atmosphere.

The Gaullists, of course, are not on record as to just how they really saw the situation. But actions speak louder than words. And their military gestures in the last week of May, the ring of armour which they then threw around Paris, indicate that they were perfectly prepared to put down an insurrection.

Incidentally, information I have gathered from reliable sources here indicates that these army units had orders to fire on the students if they should go into the streets to demonstrate on the night of May 30-31, immediately after de Gaulle’s hardline, comeback speech. It appears that the CGT intercepted this army order and immediately contacted the student leaders to inform them of it and to advise them against demonstrating that night. The advice was accepted. This was at least one case where student-worker co-operation worked in the May-June crisis, and it’s just as well it did. The unions could not have stood by and seen the students massacred. The general bloodbath which many believe the Gaullists were prepared to stage at this point could not have been avoided. The episode illustrates graphically the interdependence of the student and worker worlds and ought to serve
as a stone — and a big one — in the wall of French worker-student co-operation in the future.

As to the left, the question of whether or not the situation was revolutionary represented the great divide. By and large, the French Communist Party and the Federation of the Left led by Mitterand reckoned it was not. It is fairly clear that there was some hesitation on the part of the Federation at a given moment (Tuesday, May 28) when Mitterand gave his press conference at which he asserted that "the state has ceased to exist since May 3," and expressed his readiness to assume the presidency of the Republic. It is also true that the Communist Party called for a change of government, for a "people's government of democratic union," at the same time as it exerted the utmost pressure on the Federation to agree to a common program of government offering a clear alternative political perspective. The fact that this pressure was unsuccessful is one of the great tragedies of the May-June crisis.

Communist Party calls for a change of government were also always most closely linked with the workers' and students' economic and social demands, which it saw as representing the true character of the movement.

The trotskyist, maoist and anarchist groupings, which formed a sort of amalgam in the crisis, certainly saw the situation as revolutionary. The slogan of "workers' power" was one of the main elements of their agitation. They were joined more and more closely in this estimation by the United Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste Unifié, or PSU) as the crisis unfolded. This fact was particularly clearly expressed by the presence of Mendes-France — a sort of father figure of the PSU — at a big rally (not supported by the FCP) at Charlety Stadium on May 27.

On June 25 between the two rounds of the elections, I heard a PSU orator tell a meeting in the occupied Law Faculty here that France in May "had witnessed the most favourable situation for socialism in any country ever." He went on to excoriate the FCP for being like a general who withdraws his troops from an impending battle and then says, "You see, we had no chance of winning."

From what I have been able to discover in a month of inquiries here, it seems that while there were nine million workers on strike and workplaces were occupied all over the country, the strikers in their majority were acting for the demands they were making and were not determined to carry on and overthrow the existing social order, as were a minority.
If this was true of the strikers, the country at large was certainly not in a revolutionary state. As far as the students were concerned, it is one of the most poignant illustrations of the negative effects of the violent tactics favored by some student leaders that, according to an opinion poll, public sympathy with the student movement plummeted by 20 p.c. in the fortnight after May 13, with the continuation of the tactics of the barricade and the burning motor car.

A secretary of the CGT, M. Marcel Caille, told me that in his organisation's efforts to secure gifts of food in the countryside for striking workers they encountered the same phenomenon. He said peasant opinion swung violently against both students and workers in the first week of June. Sixteen hundred tons of potatoes were thrown on to the roads in Brittany at about this time, because farmers couldn't get a decent price for them. They destroyed their crop, without for a moment thinking of giving it to the strikers.

Of course, in the countryside the anti-communist demagogy of the Gaullists had great effect. In rural France, little distinction was made between the actions of students' and workers' organisations, however eager in fact these were at certain moments to distinguish themselves from one another. It was all a matter of a new wave of madness in Paris, and, of course, the Communist Party, the country's only big revolutionary organisation, "must be behind it." There is unmistakable evidence that opinion in the army underwent a similar evolution.

In an interesting article in *Le Monde* (July 12), Professor Maurice Duverger points out that accumulated social discontents cannot be confused with a will to revolution. He adds: "The absence of a will to revolution in the great majority of the workers last May . . . was not the consequence of the reformism of the CGT and the CP. On the contrary, the reformism of the CGT and the CP was the reflection of this absence."

Far from confirming a revolutionary situation, the elections showed a sizeable proportion of the French population could be scared by the bogey of revolution, skilfully manipulated by the Gaullists. Of course, no political force in the country was fully prepared for the magnitude and sweep of the May-June crisis. Everyone was more or less taken by surprise.

Expressed politically, it seems to me not unlikely that the May-June crisis in France was the first great adventure into the field of the "structural reform" of capitalism in the direction of democracy and socialism, about which marxists in many countries have been talking for some time now. However adroitly the Gaullists
manoeuvre, the educational and industrial structures of French society will never be the same again, after May-June, 1968.

For the Communist Party and the whole French Left, the crisis has posed the problem of just what is the correct appraisal of the modern student movement. The debate on this question is already opened up, and can be expected to continue for a good time to come.

Q: Peter Smark in *The Australian* (July 3) stated: "The experts believe the main reason for the shift of a large segment of working-class votes to the Gaullists was a protest against the needless prolongation of the mass strikes after handsome concessions had been won." What conclusions do you draw from voting patterns?

S: Certainly the prolongation of the strikes in some places had a negative effect. But I wouldn't care to say this was the main factor. The overwhelming element in the rightward shift in the elections appears to have been the visceral one of fear, fear in particular of bloody revolution and civil war. This affected working-class voters too.

It is possibly true that the CP (whose vote fell from 22.46 p.c. in March, 1967 to 20.3) lost some votes to its left, in particular to the PSU. But if the PSU lifted its percentage of the vote from 2.26 p.c. in 1967 to 3.94 in the last election, it is also true that it stood 325 candidates this time as against only 110 in 1967.

An examination of the June 1968 vote in 92 of the 110 constituencies it contested in 1967 shows that, like the other leftwing parties, it lost votes — more than 26,000 in fact. In a Latin Quarter constituency its vote fell from 6,678 in 1967 to 3,861. The Federation of the Left (18.79 p.c. in '67 to 16.50 p.c.) also lost votes, presumably mainly to the right.

One of the curious phenomena of the '68 election was the failure of the centre, expected by many to do very well. Representing the most pro-American elements in French politics, the centre saw its vote fall from 12.79 p.c. in '67 to 10.34. The centre's lavishly mounted attempt to present itself as the third force can only be said to have been an abject — and, in fundamental political terms, highly significant — failure. The winning swing to the Gaullists took them from 37.75 p.c. in 1967 to 43.65 p.c. this time. Under their doctored electoral system 43.65 p.c. of the vote gave them 350 seats. Under proportional representation they would have got 205.

Abstentions play a big part in French elections. And of course they hit particularly at the side against whom the tide appears
to be running. The cry of “Tous aux urnes” (“Everyone to the polls”) was much heard in the land in the week between the two rounds, especially from the Left. But this did not prevent left abstentionism from being a quite significant element. On the other hand, reports from the booths indicate that a significant proportion of Gaullist voters hadn’t voted in any election since 1958, evidenced by their election registration cards being void of date stamps for all elections in the last ten years until this one.

Q: What were the reactions to De Gaulle’s threats to use the army, to the release from jail of right-wing forces and to the banning of some political groups? And what actions were taken in response?

S: Of course democratic opinion in France, including the FCP, denounced de Gaulle’s release of Salan and other OAS conspirators for the barefaced pre-election manoeuvre that it was. He just appeared to have so much trouble on his left he couldn’t afford any opposition on his right. So the deed was done.

When the regime proscribed the ultra-left groupings there were limited protests. But it is profoundly characteristic of the time in France that the FCP made no protest. The stakes in the crisis were so great and political tempers at such a pitch that the CP’s audience probably would not have understood a protest at the banning of groups who were acting as “objective allies” of the Gaullist power. Some people feel that a CP statement pointing out that while ultra-lefts had been banned, the ultra-right Occident organisation was left free to do its dirty work, and that this was an example of Gaullist bias, would have been appropriate. But not even this was done.

On the other hand, I have heard of no protests from the ultra-left against the murder in Arras of a young communist by Gaullist thugs on June 29. Though I suppose it should be said in fairness that since they are banned it is probably hard for them to raise their voice.

On this whole matter of the OAS and the “gauchiste” groupings, the remarkable thing to me has been how little comment and attention the pardons and the bannings have aroused. I expected there would be much more. I suppose it’s an illustration of how really hard the game is played here. When the decisive issue was the possibility of a bloody confrontation between the big battalions of the working class and the repressive machinery of the state, a confrontation to which the OAS and the “gauchistes” alike are fundamentally irrelevant, it’s probably not surprising that their different fates have aroused relatively little public attention.
Q: Various reports suggest that students and young workers are critical of the CP, that some student leaders are former CP members and that mercenaries joined in, and even took over some student protests (e.g. the stay-in at the Sorbonne and the Odeon Theatre). Could you comment?

S: When we speak of the students in France today, I think we should have firmly in mind three different things.

Firstly, that the majority of France's 600,000 students are not left at all, but conservative. The biggest student participation in any demonstration in Paris in the course of the crisis was a rightwing one — the Champs Elysees parade after de Gaulle's speech on May 30.

Secondly, that there is a strong left trend among the students, a profoundly healthy and positive trend, born of the rejection by a significant proportion of the student body of the French bourgeois university and bourgeois society in general. This is a trend which is really viable, and will, one hopes, determine the complexion of French university life in the future and for a long time to come.

Thirdly, that there are ultra-left political groupings of long standing, not necessarily connected with the student world at all — the PSU, the trotskyists, the maoists (not so old and not so influential) and the anarchists (not so influential as the world publicity given to their black flags in the May-June student demonstrations would make them out to be) — which had a determining influence on the left student movement during the crisis. This influence is being contested now, and no doubt will continue to be contested in the future.

Certainly in these circumstances a number of students are critical of the CP. It is also true that a number of former members of the Communist Students' Union, who left after a split in that organisation culminating in 1965, were active in one of the most important of the ultra-left bodies, the Jeunesses Communistes Revolutionnaires (trotskyist in orientation) in the course of the crisis. There is no doubt that the split in the communist student body had its effect, short and long term, on the whole student scene in France.

The so-called 'Katangais' — an armed group led by a former mercenary in the Congo — did get into the Sorbonne, and a lot of jailbirds and other undesirable elements got in with them too. But one of the really encouraging things about the end of the Sorbonne occupation — it was not a glorious end — was that it was students themselves who booted the Katangais and the other riffraff out.
France's communist youth organisations, especially the students, had a difficult row to hoe in the recent crisis. Fundamentally opposed to barricade tactics, they nevertheless showed great moral — and physical — courage by going into the Latin Quarter day and night selling *Humanité* and explaining their point of view to other students in the heat of the battle. There was a Communist Students' Union stand in the Sorbonne throughout the occupation. In fact the Union gained 2,000 new members in the course of May-June, and now has about 7,000 members throughout the country.

One fact not sufficiently known abroad is that in other University centres in France — Lille, Nancy, Besancon, Lyon are examples — where the Communist Students' Union plays a prominent role in student leadership, there were none of the student-worker contradictions to be seen in Paris, and not much barricade tactics either. Occupations of faculties were carried out, but generally in a way that mobilised public opinion towards the students and did not drive it away.

There is every reason to believe that when the new academic year opens and the student left has had time to digest something of the recent experiences, the Communist Students' Union will find new favor — although no one expects miracles here.

The measure of opposition of young workers to the CP (and the CGT more particularly) was not nearly as significant as in the student world and had nothing like the weight it was given in some press reports. The March 22 Movement of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the trotskyist groupings put in a lot of work in late May and early June trying to mobilise young workers against the CGT. But I haven't been able to come across more than a few isolated cases where they enjoyed any success. The Renault plant at Flins outside Paris, where many of the young workers are fresh off the farm and still go back to it at night, was one such place.

Q: It is well known that Jean Paul Sartre, the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, Claude Bordet and the journal *Nouvel Observateur* have considerable influence amongst sections of the left in France and abroad. It is now stated that anarchists (and presumably their publications) and trotskyists, including *Drapeau Rouge*, have a growing influence. What positions did these men and the various publications take to the recent events? Has Sartre, for example, joined in the view that the CP has abandoned revolution for parliamentarism?

S: Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* and the *Nouvel Observateur* both in slightly different ways are influential among sections
of the left. By and large they take the position that the CP is spent as a revolutionary force. Not only they take this position by the way — it’s very much à la mode here to say this. It’s an idea which runs right across the political spectrum to the Catholic l’Esprit.

In the elections, after slamming the CP and the Federation of the Left for all they were worth, they nevertheless joined in advocating a vote for the single left candidate in the second round. Sartre’s name was on a poster much seen around Paris in which a number of prominent intellectuals made this appeal on the eve of the second round on June 30. The PSU also advocated a vote for the single candidate. The CP and the Federation had an ad hoc agreement with the PSU in the second round.

The trotskyist, maoist and anarchist groupings, with differences between them, largely limited their campaigning to the slogan “Elections Treason.” As far as I know they didn’t advocate a vote for anyone. It could be that some elements among them did. But their publications are hard to come by and I may be wrong here.

Of course, the ultra-left especially the trotskyists, are part of the scene here, and have been for a long time. But apart from the situation mentioned above in the student world, and some tendencies in the leadership of the PSU and (associated with the PSU) in the second trade union centre of France, the CFDT, there is no great rise in their influence.

One of the things the FCP says — and it says it with great firmness and confidence — is that “leftism” is not just a passing phase, but a “permanent temptation” for the working class movement. This is based on experience with trotskyists, for example, going back to 1925.

The FCP also says that its strategy of long and patient work to build the unity of the left and democratic forces in the nation, to create a mass political situation of the isolation of the forces of the right, inevitably carries with it the danger of opening a flank to attack from the ultra-left. This is something they feel they just have to live with — although “living with it” does not mean that the FCP will not, in the light of May-June, launch a full-scale onslaught on “gauchisme.” Waldeck Rochet already foreshadowed it in his report to the FCP Central Committee on July 8-9.

One of the new facts they have to contend with, of course, is that “gauchisme,” in at least some of its elements, is now
actively supported by the Paris Embassy of at least one socialist country. Certainly the trotskyists, maoists and anarchists are not going to disappear overnight. Nor are they going to take Paris by storm.

Q: Reports here say the CGT has grown considerably, as has the CP. Have other left forces grown too and to what do you attribute the growth in each case?

S: The CGT gained 400,000 new members in the course of the strike movement and founded 6,000 new trade union organisations. Unquestionably it emerged, on a national scale, with greatly enhanced prestige from the crisis. M. Marcel Caille, secretary of the CGT, gave me these figures.

The Communist Party gained 23,000 new members in the two-month period, 17,000 of them young people. It has won 48,000 new members since the beginning of the year. These figures are published in l'Humanite.

The PSU grew from 12,000 to 25,000, according to Jean-Pierre Masson, a PSU member and a vice-president of l'UNEF, the student body, whom I interviewed.

In an upsurge of this character, which represents a coming to political consciousness of literally millions of people, it is, I suppose, natural that the Left should grow.

My personal opinion is that in the recent crisis one joined the CP or the PSU (to counterpose these two) on the basis of whether one preferred the calm and sober attitude of the FCP, with all its occasional infelicities of expression, or what one writer called the "revolutionary mysticism" of the PSU. But that, as I say, is only a personal opinion.

Q: Mendes France has been presented as the man most identified with the revolutionary students' and workers' demands, yet was himself defeated in the elections. Could you comment on this?

S: One of the things which has fascinated me most on this visit to France has been the extraordinary mobility of political life. Take the names of parties. The Gaullists up to the beginning of June were the UNR, then for the purposes of the elections they became the UDR (Union for the Defence of the Republic) and then after the elections, when they were safely home and the Republic was no longer "in danger," overnight they became last week, still UDR, but "Union Democratique de la Republique."

Well, of all the mobile elements in French political life, Mendes-France is about the most mobile. He is praised by Cohn-Bendit
(“Mendes is the least bad of the stars”), and he received a handwritten letter (a rare honour) from de Gaulle condoling with him on the death of his wife.

Typical is the fact that while he is a member of the PSU, he is not a leader of this party, although he is one of the half-dozen best known political figures in the country.

But despite all the ambiguity, Mendes has a role. This role, it seems to me, is as left reserve man for the big French bourgeoisie. He lost in Grenoble because his role requires that one constant of his career should be that he holds a position to the left of centre — and the left lost everywhere in these elections, even the big bourgeois left. Mendes demonstrated his position in 1954 when the French bourgeoisie decided it had to liquidate the Indo-China war. No other politician could be found with the necessary qualities to do this. He thought his hour had struck again in the closing days of May, 1968. But he miscalculated. Not that the last has been heard of Mendes-France by any means.

Q: Since some criticism of the CP suggests its “revisionism” is of long duration and one example, often quoted, is the CP’s support for financial credits to the then government during the early stages of the Algerian war, could you comment and provide information of any critical appraisal by the non-CP left of the past record of Mendes-France, who was the head of that Government?

S: No, the non-CP left has a curious blind spot here. Not only did Mendes-France launch the war of repression in Algeria, but when he was piloting the Indo-China peace through the National Assembly a few months before he made it a point of honor that he would not consider he had a majority unless it was a majority excluding the votes of the communist deputies.

Q: If, as it appears, many workers made gains within the system what now is the concept of the various sections of the left to win a majority for revolutionary change?

S: As far as the FCP is concerned, the immediate task of workers is to struggle to consolidate and expand the gains won in the strike movement. The situation in the factories, after the massive upheaval of May-June, should favor this.

The Nanterre meeting of the Central Committee of the FCP made it quite plain that there will be no change in the strategy of left unity pursued with considerable success over recent years. There will be — already are — strains within the Federation...
of the Left over continued association with the communists, but, at least at this stage, the prognostications are not unduly pessimistic as far as the preservation of the alliance is concerned. What will undoubtedly count heavily here is the attitude of the Socialist Party, the big party in the Federation (more than 40 of its 57 deputies). It appears that Guy Mollet, Socialist Party leader, is likely to play a positive role here. The choice before the Federation is whether to seek openings to the centre, aiming at “third force” governments like those of the period 1947-58, or whether to cleave to the left orientation of alliance with the communists.

The PSU, and the various left groupings now in “de facto” alliance with it, are putting a big effort into local action committees, nominally consisting of workers and students. It seems they are concerned to prepare for more “grands soirs” like those of May and June.

There is considerable debate in the ultra-left over whether a new party should be formed. Consensus of opinion at present seems to be that the time is not ripe. But this is certainly on the agenda — a new party designed to supplant and outflank the FCP to the left.

In the student world, the PSU-influenced leadership is putting forward the idea of a “student party,” which would serve as a house for both “reformists” (who want a struggle conducted on student demands in the University) and “revolutionaries” (who want to “contest the capitalist system”). The vice-president of l’UNEF, PSU man Jacques Sauvageot, has off his own bat announced that the revolutionaries in l’UNEF will reoccupy the faculties when the academic year opens.

The FCP appears united in its determination to continue with its “unitary” strategy. As for the rest of the left, there is some confusion, with pressures working for moves both to left and right.

Q: One immediate result of the continuation of Gaullism is a new round of French nuclear tests in the Pacific but what attitude did each section of the left have on foreign policy and what part did this play in the elections?

S: The one aspect of foreign policy which got much attention at all in these egocentric French elections was the Gaullist nuclear striking force. As for the rest of the world, it might not have been there. Certainly there were ritual references to some foreign policy questions, but the elections were the issue of an acute domestic political crisis — and they sounded like it.
Of course, in reality, foreign policy questions are important in France. It is on foreign policy questions, for example, that the greatest obstacles exist to the common governmental programme sought by the communists with the Federation of the Left.

But the many positive aspects of the Gaullist foreign policy have taken much of the sting out of the foreign policy debate in the country over recent times.

One interesting feature of the elections is how de Gaulle’s brazen anti-communist demagogy during the campaign will affect his relations with the socialist countries. It is not the smallest irony of the French crisis that the great man had to fly back from Rumania, where he had been outdoing himself in flattery of the Rumanian leadership, to start accusing other Frenchmen of planning to set up a “totalitarian dictatorship” like the one in which he had just been feted.

I cannot close without a reference to the splendid work being done by the French Communist Party in solidarity with Vietnam. I talked to Henri Martin, the sailor hero of the opposition to the French war in Vietnam in the early ’50’s, about it. It is really most impressive. One of the pleasantest things about being in Paris just now is to be able to observe the cordiality of the relations between the French communists and the Vietnamese delegation to the official conversations with the United States. A very big effort of solidarity with Vietnam is planned here for July 20, 14th anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Agreements.

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EVERY RADICAL OPPOSITION to the existing system; which is attempting to prevent us from creating conditions under which man can lead a creative life, without war, hunger and repressive work; must necessarily be global. The globalisation of the revolutionary forces is the most important task of the whole historical period in which we are living and working for human emancipation.

THE SELF-PRESERVATION of bourgeois society and the destruction of man’s human qualities coincide increasingly all the time.

POLITICAL ACTIONS which do not lead to inner changes of the participants are manipulation by elites.

— from “The Rebellion of Students” by Rudi Dutschke.