The author was an eye witness of some of the events in France in May-June 1968 (see for example the interview with ALR—No. 4 1968). Here he re-examines those events in the light of subsequent developments.

ONE YEAR AFTER France's crisis of May 1968, de Gaulle has at last gone. Some will say that his resignation over the defeat of his April 27 referendum on regional reform and abolition of the Senate came just a year too late, that it was well within the bounds of political possibility to achieve such a result a year earlier. But the connection between the two events is undoubted — his resignation would have been unthinkable without the tremendous erosion of his position wrought by the May crisis of 1968.

The meaning of this crisis still haunts not only those who come after de Gaulle in power in French politics, but the governments of the entire world of advanced capitalism. It is also a source of continuing inspiration and debate for revolutionaries everywhere. The forces unleashed in France's upheaval of 1968 were so characteristic of contemporary capitalism that the temptation to see them as a prefiguration of what may come to pass elsewhere, whether feared or desired, is irresistible.

The May 1968 events in France have already given rise to their own mythology. Two mythical presentations of them are most prevalent on the Left. One is that May 1968 represented a revolution betrayed, that power was there “waiting to be gathered up in the streets” (Jean-Pierre Vigier), but that due to the failure of the leaders of the Parti Communiste Francais (PCF), a clear and simple revolutionary option was passed up. The other is that the “great merit” of the PCF in the crisis was that it “rejected adventurism” (Waldeck Rochet), and thus averted an inevitable bloody defeat for the working class.

Argument about these propositions must necessarily remain fundamentally speculative. The PCF leadership did not move — the alleged “power vacuum” was not tested. Nor, it must be added, can it ever be either convincingly demonstrated or denied, despite the flood of writings designed to achieve these two opposite aims. For while it absolutely convincingly demonstrated the new revolutionary potential of the working class and the intellectually-
trained in modern societies, the 1968 French drama never reached the final act — it did not test the capacity of the repressive machinery of modern bourgeois States to meet revolutionary insurrections. One can only say that the light-hearted dismissal of this capacity is just as inappropriate as the tendency to see the sophisticated contemporary repressive machinery as ipso facto ruling out the possibility of successful revolutionary insurrection. Answers to such questions must await future situations in which, wherever they arise, all parties to the conflict will certainly have done much homework on the French crisis of 1968.

What I feel needs to be said, with the benefit of 12 months hindsight on the French crisis, is that the PCF leaders' unbending refusal to give any credit at all to forces to their Left, their overriding concern with parliamentary strategies (building alliances to their Right), did tend to reduce the scope of the crisis during its course, and to minimise the scope of its eventual effects.

For example, it is my belief that at the peak of the crisis, with nine million wage-earners on strike during the fourth week of May, if the Confederation General du Travail (CGT) had told the Gaullist authorities that it would not negotiate with them for a settlement in the Grenelle talks, but only with a new government formed for the purpose, the government could have been forced to resign and a new one formed in which democratic forces could well have made substantial advances. The agreement to negotiate with Pompidou at Grenelle, it seems to me, tended to legitimise the Gaullist power at a moment when the maximum political and social pressure was being exerted upon it, at the moment of its maximum weakness.

The French-domestic and the international considerations determining the PCF refusal to move against the Gaullist regime at this moment which seems to me to have been a decisive one, will certainly be studied for a long time to come. It should only be noted here in passing that there were very lively fears in the minds of PCF leaders at the time that the Gaullist regime would only in the prevailing circumstances be succeeded by another with a less anti-American foreign policy orientation. Certain reticences in the Soviet press coverage of the crisis at the time would seem to indicate that the Soviet Foreign Ministry had made a similar appraisal. (One responsible PCF official told me in a conversation in Paris in June 1968 that in his view "US imperialist and Zionist influences" had played a determining role in the orientation of the student Left during the crisis.)

In any case, it seems to me that it is here, in this kind of "middle ground" between the two "myths" referred to above, that the truth about possible alternative outcomes to the French crisis of
1968 is to be found. But one does not reduce by a jot the strength of a myth by calling it by its name — the fact is that the two main myths about the French crisis are believed by millions. They are material facts of the most potent kind in the life of the French Left today — facts of division, facts of bitter conflict even.

How do the main actors in last year's French drama stand today? What are the prospects for the healing of the breaches which today scar the body of the French Left? Dominating the French student movement, detonator of the May crisis, is a sharp struggle of influence between the far-Left groupings which were the chief protagonists of student revolt in '68 and the PCF-oriented UEC (l'Union des etudiants communistes). The most recent indications are that the latter forces have made considerable headway, especially in various elections to representative bodies in the university world.

In March, elections were held to the UER (Unites d'enseignement et de recherche) to be set up under the government's new education law. The new bodies, comprising representatives of students, teachers, research workers and administrative personnel, will have as their nominal task the defining of the orientation of the new universities envisaged by the law. The extreme Left, through the leadership of UNEF (l'Union national des etudiants francais) called for a boycott of the elections. But the UEC, acting through the newly-formed UNEF-Renouveau — a broad grouping of Left and moderate Left students — recommended a vote, raising the slogan "Don't leave the universities to the reactionaries." Result of this confrontation was that an estimated 52 p.c. of the student body took part in the vote, with rather wide differences in the level of participation for various disciplines: 42 p.c. in Letters, 43 p.c. in Sciences, 53 p.c. in Law, 68 p.c. in Medicine and Pharmacy and 77 p.c. in the university technological institutes.

Considering that in the only previous nation-wide elections held in the French student body — to designate representatives to handle social security questions — the level of participation has been of the order of 15 to 20 p.c., the vote in the UER poll expresses dramatically the new level of political awareness in the French student body. Voting in all cases of course is voluntary.

Another advance for PCF influence was marked by the March extraordinary Congress of the SNE(Sup) (Syndicat national de l'enseignement superieur), the university teachers' union, whose role in the May crisis was hardly less important than that of UNEF. Basing themselves on a program of socialist-oriented trade union action within the university, PCF activists and their supporters won control of the organisation from far-Left forces headed by former SNE(Sup) secretary Alain Geismar, who with Daniel Cohn-Bendit
and Jacques Sauvageot was the student movement leader most in the public eye last May. Geismar and his supporters favored a program of constant revolutionary contestation of the bourgeois university.

The Congress was almost evenly divided, with 2691 votes for the majority line and 2265 for the Geismar-Herszberg forces. The gravity of the division in SNE(Sup) is underlined by the fact that elected representatives of the minority position refused to accept seats on the leading bodies. At one point the Congress split physically in two, with the Geismar-Herszberg forces leaving the meeting hall singing the Internationale, and for a time holding their own meeting in a neighboring amphitheatre.

It should also be noted that PCF-influenced people are in highly influential positions in the secondary teachers' union (SNES), and in the national committee of the CAL (Comités d'action lyceens), or high school action committees, which organised millions of secondary school pupils in May 1968. The wave to what might be described as moderate-militant positions seems in fact quite general. It would be pleasant if one could react with unalloyed pleasure at these developments. But a sober examination of the French education world shows that the divisions within the Left, the struggles of tendency, are quite as bitter as they have ever been. There are few signs that the vital synthesis of the various Left forces in the world of education is under way, or that their ideological differences are being confronted in other than the spirit of factionalism.

The same is true for the Left as a whole, as the campaign for the presidential election following de Gaulle's resignation is at present (mid-May) so graphically demonstrating. The Federation of the Left, grouping the Socialist Party, the Radical Party and Francois Mitterand's Republican Clubs, which in the past has collaborated electorally with the PCF, has been virtually sprung by the impact of the May crisis. Reduced to its component parts — Mitterand's Clubs are now known as the CIR, or Convention des institutions republique — the various elements of the Federation are now demonstrating publicly the differences which set them at odds privately in the past.

As for the PCF itself, it is impossible to detect much movement in its disposition towards other Left forces in the year that has passed since May. True, the Manifesto of the Central Committee, adopted by the December 5-6 1968 session, makes a relatively more positive assessment of the student movement of May than that made at the time. The Manifesto says at one point:

we can record that as a result of the May-June struggle socialist ideas have reached new strata of manual and intellectual workers, even if it is true
that the ways of conceiving socialism vary from one section to another.

For example, as might have been expected, among white collar workers, intellectuals and students, petty-bourgeois conceptions of socialism have shown themselves to be lively. But the big fact is that the ideas of Marx and Lenin far from remaining cold and dogmatic scholastic formulae, are more and more becoming the property of the masses.

Old and false notions of class collaboration are shown to be powerless in the face of the rise of socialist ideas.

It must be said that this is a good distance from the tone of much PCF comment on the student movement made in the course of the May crisis, and from the frame of mind which inhibited the PCF from making any protest when eleven far-left student and other bodies were banned by the Gaullist regime in June, 1968.

But in the strategic sense, the PCF continues to distinguish itself in relation to other Left forces by describing them as "Left and Rightwing opportunists," and "Left and Rightwing revisionists" (see reports by Georges Marchais and Waldeck Rochet to a conference on communist work in the factories, Bagneux, February 23-24, 1969). With the best will in the world, it is impossible to recognise in these formulations very much of the reality of the ferment of ideas which characterises the French Left today.

It is the refusal to come to terms with this ferment, and in particular the refusal to recognise anyone standing to the Left of PCF positions as a valid interlocutor — as anything else indeed than an "opportunistic" or "revisionist" — which is perhaps the most disturbing feature of PCF practice today. To say this is not to deny the existence of "opportunistic" or "revisionist" currents within the French Left — the spectrum is so variegated that it embraces virtually everything. But one cannot but be concerned to see a Communist Party as important as the PCF contenting itself with the old practice of applying pejorative labels to all other Left trends.

Andre Gorz, a member of the Editorial Committee of Jean-Paul Sartre's Les Temps Modernes wrote recently (in the British New Left Review's special issue on France, Nov.-Dec. 1968) that the "hegemonic capacity" of a revolutionary party "will be measured precisely by its ability to enrich itself from movements born outside the party, to develop with them a common perspective while fully respecting their independence, and to become for them the centre of attraction, the pole of doctrinal reference, the main political outlet.

Such a comment seems particularly pertinent in the context of French political life today.

All this is not to say that the bitter divisions of the French Left, with their roots deep in history, would be resolved quickly and easily, merely as a result of a change in attitude on the part of the PCF leadership. But it is to suggest that the PCF, seed-tree as it is
of many of the Leftwing groupings and incontestably the strongest force on the Left as a whole, has a quite special responsibility in the historic task of striving for unity of the Left. Any move by the PCF to "dialogue" with the trends to the Left of it, such as has been done on the Italian scene by the Italian Communist Party, would have, it seems to me, an incalculable and liberating effect. Such a confrontation of ideas, with its implicit abandon­ment of the exclusivist stance of the PCF, would among other things certainly serve to differentiate those who desire united Left action from those whose hostility to the PCF overrides all other con­siderations.

In inner-party life, the PCF leadership is campaigning rather strongly at the present time in favor of democratic centralism. Singled out for criticism is Political Bureau member Roger Gar­audy, who in a recent book took to task what he claimed was the tendency of the PCF leadership to accent centralism more heavily than democracy in their practice of democratic centralism. Garaudy was named three times in this connection by fellow PB member Georges Marchais in his speech at the Bagneux meeting referred to above.

It is not without interest to recall here that Garaudy, at the height of the May events, wrote the most sympathetic aricle on the student movement yet to appear over the name of a leading PCF member. Printed in the June 1968 number of Democratie Nouvelle (which has since ceased publication), the article stressed "the deep internal connection of this (student) movement with that of the workers," emphasised the relationship of both with the contem­porary developments in science and technology and said: "We who are proud to belong to a revolutionary party, far from making ourselves history's official mourners, welcome with joy this wonder­ful human uprising."

Garaudy said that this disposition had to be maintained despite the fact that "the student movement is troubled by adventurism, by attempts to buy it off for sundry purposes, by provocations that divide and weaken it and facilitate repression."

My own brief personal experience of French communist politics last year was sufficient to persuade me that the PCF, like heaven, is a house with many mansions — that it embraces many tendencies. The assessments of Soviet policy, and of the position within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, made by different French communists, were particularly striking in their variety. It seems to me that a degree of political diversity in such a massive organisa­tion as the PCF is inevitable and must sooner or later be acknow­ledged by the PCF leadership on pain of an internal development of some dimensions. But for the moment at least the current seems to be running in exactly the opposite direction.
The past year has seen a consolidation of organisations to the Left of the PCF. In January, the intellectual-based Parti socialiste unifie (PSU), a nine-year-old breakaway from the Socialist Party which strove to outflank the PCF to the Left in the May-June crisis, published a program which aroused considerable public interest, especially in its treatment of problems of political and economic democracy under socialism. At the Sixth National Congress of the party in March, the PSU's national secretary (and current presidential candidate), Michel Rocard, found himself voted down in his stand for a boycott of the April 27 referendum. The Congress voted by a substantial majority for a "No" vote — the position adopted by the PSF, and the Socialist Party. But despite this "unitary" groundswell, the Congress resolution said the party would address itself to the "masses influenced by the PCF," rather than to that party itself.

On April 9 the formation was announced in Paris of an entirely new Left organisation, the Communist League, which immediately announced it would seek affiliation with the Fourth International (founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938). Inspiration for the new Ligue Communiste came directly from militants of the JCR (Jeunesse communiste revolutionnaire), perhaps the most interesting and important of the Left youth bodies which played leading roles in the May crisis. The JCR is the fruit of a split in the UEC in 1965, a split occasioned by the differences of many UEC militants with the PCF policy of support for Mitterand in the presidential election of that year, and by longer-standing differences connected with policy in the movement of opposition to the Algerian war.

Another body inspiring the new Ligue Communiste is the Party Communiste Internationaliste, which, like the JCR, was banned by the Gaullist regime in June, 1968. It is profoundly characteristic of the times in the French Left that the leaders of the new League plan to "work from the outside in" — explicitly, to work in the student world (which in May 1968 was the seat of the fire which eventually enveloped the working class), and, as far as the working class is concerned, in provincial centres and in sectors of industry where the PCF is least strong. Two-thirds of the membership of the Communist League, which sprang formally from groups around the newspaper Rouge, are aged between 19 and 25, 40 p.c. are students, 15 p.c. secondary school students, 15 p.c. teachers or postgraduate university workers, and 30 p.c. white and blue collar workers.

In general, one cannot avoid noting that the far-Left bodies, small as they no doubt are, are drawing their predominant support precisely from the social strata most closely identified with the new developments in the productive forces — in particular, the students and the intellectually trained. A similar phenomenon has been
remarked upon in the trade union world, where the PSU-influenced Confederation francaise democratique du travail (CFDT), a rival body of the PCF-influenced CGT, is making its most rapid progress in the sectors where the newest productive forces are to be found.

Although the CFDT is only half the size of the CGT, and although the far-Left groupings are mere grouplets alongside the PCF, such trends cannot but be worrying to the PCF leaders. (Is not something of the same reality betrayed by the presentation of 72-year-old Jacques Duclos as candidate for the presidential election by the PCF, while the Ligue Communiste is putting up 28-year-old M. Alain Krivine, and the PSU 38-year-old M. Rocard?)

The strike of March showed that the French working class has lost none of the combativity which characterised it in May-June last year. The struggle to preserve and extend the gains won in the mighty strike movement of those days, and to expose the trickery of the proposed plan for "participation" in industry, dominates the agenda of French working-class action these days. Politically speaking, there is no doubt that socialist awareness is more widely disseminated in the French working class today than at any time in the past, and that young workers in particular have over the past year come to socialist positions in large numbers.

But the transformation of the tremendous potential of the French Left forces into enduring revolutionary achievement clearly awaits progress towards their unification. It is a truism that Communist Parties, if they are to advance, must constantly and ruthlessly examine their positions. Of particular relevance in contemporary circumstances is the re-examination of attitudes to other Left forces, especially those to the Left of the CPs.

Just how valid are traditional attitudes to these forces as they exist concretely in the various national environments, and how justified the traditional prejudices? In a certain sense what is required is a leap back in time to pre-Stalinist, pre-communist-exclusivist positions of the CPs, to an historical moment when it was not too hard to give credit to others for revolutionary sincerity and to examine their ideas on their merits, and when there was not too ready an assumption that the CPs by their nature had all the answers.

Such a "leap backward" in today's circumstances could well be a leap forward in the direction of a revivified and intellectually richer Left than has existed hitherto. It is within the power of the PCF, it seems to me, to make a quite historic contribution to political development by adopting some such attitude in the context of French political life today. Its size, its experience, its authority alike commend it as the initiator of a new atmosphere of dialogue in the French Left, which is at present so tragically divided.