1968 was a vintage political year.

It saw, in February, the Tet offensive by the liberation forces in Vietnam. This shattered US military and political strategy to maintain and strengthen imperialist positions in the region. It battered the already shaky morale of US troops and changed the political situation in the US itself to such an extent that L.B. Johnson announced he would not recontest the Presidency. Tet made it politically impossible for a long period for US ground forces to be committed against liberation movements anywhere - clearly a factor in the struggle in Africa at present. Through the Tet offensive, the "Third World" asserted its growing presence in the life of our times.

1968 also saw the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia, revealing the aspirations of people in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe for "socialism with a human face" through the radical extension of democracy in economic, cultural and political life. It showed that the communist parties of those countries were not necessarily unchangeable and monolithic bureaucracies, but had the potential to perform, once again, the function of articulating the yearnings of the people and projecting the vision of a society closer to that of the founders of Marxism.

But August of the same year also showed the enormous obstacles still to be overcome for the realisation of this aspiration. The Soviet Union led the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact countries, except Romania, in an invasion aimed to restore the previous type of regime by the use of force, relentless pressure, duplicity and persecution of those who opposed them.

1968 also saw, in May, the upheaval in France. This demonstrated that the contradictions of capitalism had not disappeared with modern economic development and the measure of working class affluence which had been won in the course of it. In a way, it showed that these contradictions had intensified, and that given expression - in this case by the student movement, however unclearly - they could unleash tremendous political forces for radical social change. The working class, which many were beginning to write off, along with the developed capitalist countries themselves, as a source of social advance,
stepped back into the limelight.

Before canvassing the messages from May '68 in more detail, let’s recall briefly the main events which took the participants themselves, and the regime, completely by surprise and electrified the world.

On May 2, 1968, the university authorities closed Nanterre, the complex in the western suburbs of Paris which houses the Faculty of Letters of the University of Paris (the Sorbonne). This action followed several weeks’ agitation by leftwing students culminating in the occupation of a lecture room.

On May 3, students occupied the courtyard of the Sorbonne and tried to occupy a lecture room in protest at the summoning of a student leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and five others before a university disciplinary court because of their involvement at Nanterre.

The Rector, M. Jean Roche, called in police who used tear gas to clear the quadrangle, and suspended all courses. Violent clashes between police and students then took place in the nearby Boulevarde Saint-Michel, about 600 students being arrested. Most were released later, but on May 5, four were sentenced to two months’ jail for carrying “arms” (clubs, etc.) “with intent to commit violence”.

On May 6, 10,000 students became involved in a pitched battle in the Latin Quarter with the riot police (CRS - Compagnies Republicaines de Securite). About 600 students and police were injured and 422 demonstrators arrested.

The students were protesting over the closing of Nanterre and the Sorbonne, over the arrest and imprisonment of their colleagues, the brutality of the police and the defects in the French system of university and higher education. These included severe overcrowding (the number of university students was about 600,000 compared with around 180,000 in 1958); the housing of great numbers in impersonal quarters (cites universitaires); the lack of personal contact between students and teachers; lack of job opportunities for graduates, particularly in the social sciences; the irrelevance of course content, and the bureaucratic way in which the institutions were run.

May 7 saw further mass demonstrations, this time with few clashes, and a student strike at all Paris universities and many provincial centres.

On May 8, 20,000 people demonstrated in the Latin Quarter, but no attempt was made to break through the police cordon around the closed Sorbonne. The Minister for Education, M. Alain Peyrefitte, and President de Gaulle made noises about democratising the universities and adapting them to the requirements of the modern world.

On May 9, the university authorities decided to resume lectures at the Sorbonne and Nanterre, but the Minister vetoed this because of fears that the students would occupy the buildings.

On the night of May 10, students erected up to 60 barricades in the Latin Quarter. These were stormed by police using tear-gas, and return fusillades of paving stones were thrown at them by the demonstrators. The better trained and equipped police won the physical encounter but politically the ground was opening beneath the government.

Returning from a nine-day visit to Iran and Afghanistan on May 11, Prime Minister Pompidou announced that, with de Gaulle’s agreement, the Sorbonne would be opened next day, that measures would be taken to enable candidates to sit for their examinations and that the Court of Appeal would consider the petitions of the jailed students for an amnesty. These decisions, he said, were “inspired by a profound sympathy with the students and by confidence in their good sense” and that “indispensable” university reforms would be carried out. He called on students to “spurn the provocations of a few professional agitators and cooperate towards a rapid and total concord”.

But it was too late. By now, the communist-led union confederation (CGT - Confederation Generale du Travail) and the originally Catholic-oriented CFDT (Confederation Francaise Democratique du
Travail) called for a 24-hour general strike (the Socialist Force Ouvriere did not come in at this stage). The strikers denounced police suppression of student demonstrations and demanded an amnesty for those arrested, the reopening of the Sorbonne and Nanterre and the removal of police from the premises. 200,000 workers and students marched in Paris while similar demonstrations took place in other centres.

All those held in custody by the authorities were released, the police were withdrawn from the Sorbonne, and meetings of university staff from all over France were held. One of these meetings unanimously passed resolutions expressing solidarity with the students' feelings of disquiet and the "incomprehension" they were experiencing. It condemned as absurd the centralised running of the universities, the delay in implementing expansion plans and demanded far-reaching reform of university education "to adjust teaching and research to the needs of contemporary society".

On May 14, students occupied the Sorbonne without resistance. Prime Minister Pompidou told the National Assembly that everything concerning the universities had to be "rethought" along the lines of greater autonomy and adaptation to economic and social realities.

But occupations spread like a huge wave. Universities all over France were taken over on May 15 and 16 by action committees in the name of "student power". Many declared themselves independent of the authority of the state. One of Paris' three national theatres, the Odeon, was taken over by 3,000 students after one of them had proclaimed from the stage at the end of a performance that it was "closed to bourgeois audiences" and had "become a permanent centre of cultural exchanges, contacts between workers and students, and uninterrupted meetings".

Factories were occupied all over the country. All the plants of the nationalised Renault works, the Sud-Aviation plant, Berliet (heavy vehicles), Rhodiaet (synthetic textiles), shipyards at Nantes, Saint-Nazarre (including naval yards), le Havre and Marseilles, a government armament factory at Bayonne and many others. By May 19, more than 2,000,000 workers were "out" - or "in" 120 occupied factories.

All transport in Paris came to a halt and most air traffic. Power plants were occupied, but the workers continued to supply electricity for domestic use. A number of coal mines were taken over and strikers occupied most of the large railway stations throughout the country. The Cannes film festival was abandoned when technicians came out on strike and film directors, in support, refused to let their works be screened.

By May 20 over six million were on strike; by May 21 over eight million and by May 24 over ten million. Schools were closed or occupied by pupils, as were many department stores by their staff. The workers in state radio and television services (ORTF) came out demanding official assurances of greater objectivity in the presentation of televised programs, especially of news. Strikes occurred at the Marcoule and Pierrelatte nuclear plants and artists, dressers and stage hands came out at the Folies Bergere.

A vote of censure on the government-in the National Assembly moved by the Communist Party and the Federation of the Left was narrowly defeated, and the CP and others demanded an end to the de Gaulle regime. But the government, while promising to negotiate with the unions over wages and giving lip service to the desirability of "participation" (by the workers in the running of the factories, by state employees in the government enterprises and students in universities), refused to discuss political issues.

The unions fell in with this offer and on May 26-27 a tentative agreement was reached between union, government and employer representatives providing for:

- a 30 per cent increase in the minimum wage
- a 10 per cent wage increase (7 per cent in June, 3 per cent in October)
- reduction of working time by one or two hours
- adjustment of wages according to the cost of living
- a five per cent reduction in basic contributions to social security benefits
* increased family allowances and an increase in pensions
* promises to end discrimination between the sexes in employment, for a greater voice for trade unions in management and welfare matters and legislation on union rights in enterprises
* the days lost through strikes to be gradually made up by the workers, who would receive immediately a 50 per cent advance on wages lost during the strikes.

These proposals were apparently favored by the union leaderships, though the CGT said they were “insufficient”. But in any case many meetings at occupied plants and elsewhere overwhelmingly rejected them.

The Minister for Education resigned (this was one of the student demands), and de Gaulle announced a referendum for June 16 promising university, social and economic reform, including adapting the teaching and training of the young to the evolution and needs of the country, participation of students in the running of universities, distribution of the benefits of industrial expansion, especially to the least favored, participation of workers at all levels of management and maintenance of full employment.

But for reasons discussed later, the peak of the struggle had been passed, and the initiative was passing to the government.

While the Federation of the Left (led by Francois Mitterand) and the Communist Party were belatedly discussing possibilities for an alternative government, de Gaulle, with his wife, bodyguard and staff left Paris by helicopter, ostensibly to fly to his country home at Colombey, about 300 km away. The journey took eight hours, and it later emerged that de Gaulle had, in fact, landed at Baden-Baden, HQ of French forces in West Germany, to confer with Commander-in-Chief Massu and other officers.

On May 30 de Gaulle returned to Paris, dissolved the National Assembly, declared general elections for June, postponed the referendum and declared that France was “threatened by a totalitarian Communist dictatorship”. He said that if the French people were prevented from expressing themselves (in the elections) “at the same moment when they are prevented from living, by the same methods which are used to prevent the students from studying, the teachers from teaching, the workers from working” he would “be obliged, in order to maintain the Republic and in conformity with the Constitution, to adopt other methods than an immediate vote by the country”.

Communists and Socialists correctly labelled this as a threat of civil war and coup d’etat, but were clearly on the defensive.

Troops, including tank units, concentrated around Paris. The right also organised politically, and about half a million marched through Paris chanting “de Gaulle is not alone”, “Communism shall not pass”, “Mitterand to the firing squad”, “the Communists to Moscow”, “Cohn-Bendit to Peking”.

A new government was formed with Pompidou remaining as Prime Minister. Nine new people entered the government, twelve ministers remained but with new portfolios, while another eight held on to their old ones. The elections were announced for June 23 and 30.

Workers now began to return to work, police cleared strikers from communications centres and certain sectors of industry agreed to implement the tentative agreement of May 27. By mid-June, most strikes were over, the last to end being that of the journalists of ORTF on July 12.

From June 10 to 12 students and other demonstrators clashed with police in various parts of the country. In the Latin Quarter of Paris, 1500 were arrested for “identity checks”. The Odeon surrendered to police on June 14, the Sorbonne on June 16, and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on June 27.

In the first round of the elections the Gaullists and others of the right got 10½ million votes and the left 9 million. In the second round the figures were 6.7 million and 6.1 million respectively. Because of the electoral system, Assembly seats went 350 to 91.

Events of such vast sweep do not lend themselves to simple assessment, even in retrospect. Many labels which have been applied such as “a revolution betrayed”, “a bloodbath averted”, “ultra-left fantasy (or provocation)” can find support in this or that
episode. But they throw little light on the motivating forces and issues, serving rather to plug partisan judgments previously arrived at.

One thing that stands out is the quality of the demands and the methods of struggle adopted in pursuing them. The demands included:

* for autonomy - against authority
* for direct democracy - against rigid institutionalisation of human relationships
* for meaningfulness in learning and links with social realities - against use of the great potential of knowledge and the strangling of its excitement to shore up an irrational system.

These attitudes of the students were adopted not only towards university and state authorities, but were also displayed in disenchantment with the model of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and with the existing working class political and union organisations. These were felt to reproduce many of the aspects felt to be so repellent in society at large.

The methods of struggle included massive demonstrations, strikes and erection of some barricades, but the characteristic one was occupations of institutions and workplaces (by no means new in France - though far greater than ever before in extent - showing also the importance of building on good traditions).

Both the demands and the methods of struggle, which were adopted to one degree or another by millions, reveal how deep and potentially powerful as a means for social transformation is the striving of people for control over their own lives, for human community, for "self-management". This expresses positively what is felt negatively as humiliation, boredom and alienation.

While it would be a great exaggeration to locate in such demands the sources of the movement for women's liberation, there is little doubt that there are strong connections, as in the stress on control by women of their own bodies and fertility as well as the end of sexist discrimination and attitudes which treat women as sex objects and subordinates them to the control of men.

Similarly, the demands for self-determination of Aborigines, American Indians and other oppressed minorities which exist in a larger society, while not having their origin in the demands of '68, are powerfully reinforced by the currents which burst forth then.

When Prime Minister Fraser promises self-management to Aborigines in Queensland (self-management like the rest of us have, he says - how true!) he is not only displaying his customary duplicity, but is recognising the power of a deep aspiration running through the whole of society.

May 1968 was in a period of boom rather than of the chronic economic crisis the capitalist world is experiencing ten years later. This further highlights its significance, though the adding of new expressions of capitalist contradictions does not automatically lead to a fusion into a stream of still more powerful revolt. In fact attitudes which overstress the directly economic as the road to socialist consciousness and action ("economism") have had some resurgence in the crisis. But the potential for fusion is there.

The greatest failings of the political parties and union organisations of the working class were that beneath some student fantasies and actions taken without thought of consequences they did not discern, or sufficiently discern, a new and positive content. Thus they could not produce, however imperfect, the elements of a political and social program which was needed to bring about the final demise of a virtually impotent government, but gave it the latitude for revival. (The mobilisation of military power which could have been effectively used was a later development greatly assisted by the loss of momentum manifested in the economist direction given to the workers' demands.)

A different conception, designed to win the maximum extension of real people's power within workplaces and institutions (and even organs of the state itself) could have altered the conditions under which future struggles took place to the substantial advantage of the forces of social transformation.

This would have been so whatever the immediate fate of the great upheaval itself,
which in any case could not be maintained forever. Few analyses hold that a social revolution was there just asking to be made.

Reinforcing these lacks was another weakness of most, if not all communist parties of the period. They came, to a great degree, to so over-emphasise the role of leadership as to almost reject spontaneity, coming, in effect, to regard struggle as a product of the organisation. The organisation was also seen as the source of all consciousness and the ultimate authority as to what was right and what wrong, what possible and what not. Marxism had become so congealed as to appear to give all this theoretical imprimatur.

A more favorable development apparently occurred in Italy. In his interview with historian Eric Hobsbawm, Giorgio Napolitano, member of the secretariat of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) says:

Between the end of 1967 and the beginning of 1968, we went through a critical period: we were acutely aware of the danger of a break with new forces: especially but not only students that were moving in a revolutionary direction, even if in confused and often unacceptable forms, and did not identify with our Party, with its political and ideological heritage. Instead they challenged it; they seemed almost beyond our reach. In our ranks there were different reactions, and certainly not all of them were correct.

Some tended toward total rejection, some toward excessive concessions. All in all, a line of self-critical investigation prevailed. We tried - without ‘selling out’ our heritage, without demagogically pursuing or taking over as ours the positions that were raised in opposition to us - to analyse the diverse roots and components of the student protests, social, ideological, political or cultural. We tried to see how much influence our own insufficiencies at all levels might have had and to draw conclusions even to the point of correcting certain of our attitudes, of overcoming some of our inertia.

Napolitano also says of the so-called “hot autumn” of 1969, which extended over a much longer period than the events in France:

The great strike movement which developed in Italy in the autumn of 1969 cannot in any way be called spontaneous. In 1968 and 1969 the unions had serious difficulties and had to carry out a major effort at renewal, but they fully affirmed their leadership in shaping the struggles of 1969, precisely because they had understood the lesson and the thrust which had come from the young people’s protest - the push, above all, for a new democratic relationship between organisations and masses, for more active and direct participation by the workers (especially the younger generation of workers) in the conduct of the struggles. So the protest touched only the fringes and did not penetrate deeply into the working class. (The Italian Road to Socialism, pp. 35-37.)

It is known, of course, that not all share the view that the PCI responded adequately to the situation, and that a group led by Lucio Magri left the party and formed the II Manifesto group.

Magri nevertheless partly confirms Napolitano in a backhand way when he says:

...Italy is the only country in the West where the crisis of ’68 and the following years has had the working class as its protagonist, and not only students and intellectuals. And it didn’t last a month like a May in France, but it lasted for years... Even in these last eight or ten years, there has been a steady growth in the mass character of Italian democracy - and not only the mass character but often the anti-capitalist character of the mass struggles, above all, of the workers’ struggles. One can never emphasise enough the new and different character of the working class struggle in Italy, the ways in which it differs from everything in the other capitalist countries.

In its aims and forms, from 1968 on, the working-class struggle has not been simply a militant but narrow economic struggle... For example, I don’t think there’s ever before been in the history of workers’ struggles in the West, a struggle that took on as its characteristic trait, at the mass level, the demand for equality. All Western unionism is characterised by a strong competition among the various strata of workers. In Italy, precisely the poorest workers - the mass workers, the assembly line workers - became the protagonists of a demand not for their own advancement, but for general equality. Even technicians, white-collar workers, professionalised workers made the demand for wage equality and general equality in living conditions their own. This shows a very high political level, as does the struggle for control over the organisation of work, the struggle against overtime, the struggle against the commercialisation of health care, the struggle for control over investments, and the struggle to obtain 150 hours of study each year for workers.

Then there are the forms of struggle: the building of the workers’ councils, the struggles run daily not by the union bureaucracy but department by department in the workplace, the fact that the workers’ councils are not elected from within the unions, but by all the workers, who choose their delegates to the council and have the right of immediate recall.
Beyond the aims and the forms of these advances, there is also the concrete democratic result, not only in terms of legislation...but also in terms of real power relations. By means of this pressure from the mass movement, Italy has become the only country where mass layoffs in the factories have been almost impossible during the course of a very violent crisis...Then there is the cost of living escalator mechanism. Italy is the only country that has succeeded, even in periods of crisis, in consolidating and developing this mechanism. Because of this, inflation still has not been able to cut real wages, at least for the employed working class. (Socialist Revolution, No. 36, Nov.-Dec., 1977)

Tackling the period from a somewhat different angle, Santiago Carrillo, general secretary of the Communist Party of Spain says:

The way, even within existing society, even before socialist forces enter government, is through energetic and intelligent action for the democratisation of the State apparatus. The starting point lies precisely in obtaining a situation in which bourgeois ideology loses its hegemony over the ideological apparatuses.

To the extent that this objective is achieved, even partially, the results will be reflected in the coercive apparatus.

In this respect, May 1968 in France was an interesting experience. At the outset the forces of public order operated with brutality; but in the course of the struggle, these forces resisted their being used by authority as a repressive instrument against the people. A series of stands were taken in the professional police unions which protested against being used by the authorities and showed a wish not to confront the people. Some moments of wavering also occurred within the army.

Perhaps the reason why these tendencies did not go further was that, at that time, there was no real alternative power facing the established power. The left was disunited. I think it is not unjust to say that the political forces representing it were taken by surprise by the magnitude of the crisis and were not ready to overcome the disunity and lack of preparation in the short time during which the disturbance of the established power lasted.

At the same time, the new characteristics of that crisis, which could not be resolved by street action alone, or by a frontal attack against authority as in other classic crises, required various democratic initiatives, including new elections, to support the mass struggle with a serious and responsible alternative such as that offered today by the Union of the Left. The lack of such initiatives facilitated the action and the excessive weight of immature, anarchist groups, which intimidated broad sections of the middle strata as well as the State apparatus itself, and reduced the influence of the left which had for a moment been so high among the masses.

This enabled the authorities, after weeks of impotence, to regain the political initiative and to benefit from the holding of elections. (‘Eurocommunism’ and the State, p. 52.)

The first and most vital message from the events of a decade ago is that the content of socialist demands in developed capitalist countries must firmly embrace self-management (whatever the words used to describe it). The forms of struggle, so far as they can be chosen, should also assert elements of self-management in practice - for example, occupations and work-ins, and in general extension of the rights of workers on the job, students in schools and universities, service and state workers in their institutions and departments. These are not only very effective means of winning even small demands, but they also shift the power relations between the classes, build up a tradition, and prefigure the new society.

Self-management and the great extension of democracy it embodies - especially direct democracy - does not do away with all the problems of developing an effective representative democracy under socialism, or answer all policy questions at the level of the "macro-economic" or society-wide planning. But it forms the basis for these too.

The next, not entirely unrelated, lesson is that revolutionary parties should re-think the relations between their work, and/or leadership, and the mass movements which develop independently of them (in the sense that the party does not “call them forth”, though party members may participate in them).

Lenin's formulations about the limitations of the spontaneous movement, about it being able only to produce trade union, not socialist consciousness, which had to be brought from “outside” are open to question in a number of ways. But it should not be forgotten that his central stress was that socialist consciousness did not arise directly from the economic relations or conflict between workers and employers, because these were too narrow to effectively generate it.

Today there are more movements (often called social movements) than ever before: women's liberation; Aboriginal rights to
land and self-determination; anti-uranium; defence of the environment; citizens for democracy and so on, as well as the traditional trade union or industrial ones.

They should not be posed one against the other ("class" issues here, "trendy, middle class" issues there) but all be seen as related and that mutual inter-relations and influence along with general political activity are needed to generate an adequate socialist consciousness.

Similarly, while the views of political trends and parties will inevitably find expression in social movements as they do in unions, those who put them forward should not seek to dominate as though all the flow of wisdom was one way (1968, not to mention struggles in other years show this is certainly not the case), or as though members of a party are a "special mould" of people different from ordinary mortals.

Political parties - for us, of course, the Communist Party - are still essential. We should concentrate on defending socialist principles against opportunism from right or left (be a more effective "conscience" of the movement), elaborating realisable perspectives which lead in a socialist direction and have the potential of helping the progressive and left movement regain the initiative it has lost and rebuild its unity, putting our organisational and tactical skill as well as our personal dedication at the service of the movement, and living to the maximum extent we can the new values we espouse. By doing these things we will certainly attract new adherents, enrich ourselves, and become a greater "weight" than we are now in the political arena.

It is interesting, if rather regrettable, that one reaction among students to the recession of the 1968-69 tide was to seek to build rigidly-disciplined "cadre" groups with many of the characteristics they had formerly criticised in communist parties and other organisations at the time. There was also a trend in the field of theoretical analysis which often tended to separate from practice and gravitate towards a new dogmatism.

Old lessons often have to be learned anew. Somewhat similarly, achievements made in the period have sometimes produced unforeseen negative effects. For example, the protection against the sack won by Italian workers has helped, in the view of journalist Flora Lewis, the upsurge of the ultra-left and terrorism. She writes:

*It is virtually impossible to fire a registered worker in Italy... Registered workers and union members have become a kind of privileged class, regarded with anger by that new part of the proletariat which is confined, without protection to the hidden economy (under-the-lap without proper rates, social security provisions etc. - E.A.). The growth of the extreme Left - militant, anarchist, anti-communist and often violent - is based on this new proletariat, as well as on the students, who are really a subclass of the same group.* *(Financial Review, April 12, 1978.)*

Political battles are seldom finally disposed of, but often have to be re-won in new forms. This is generally true of programs. While their careful formulation is important, still more important is that their even partial achievement creates a new political situation, including a new state of consciousness among the participants in the struggle, requiring extensive revision of the original program. Programs are not fixed "blueprints" for the future, though principles of course remain, but means to advance through struggle towards the future.

This bears on a third major lesson. That is, that the forms of struggle are likely to have to change rapidly as the situation itself changes. Political parties have to master the art of shifting rapidly from one form to another, if they wish to retain the initiative. Their progress in this respect is unlikely to be furthered by dreams of a re-run of 1917 (or 1968) or, especially, by an "all or nothing" approach which rejects the need to advance through struggles for more limited objectives. Those who want all at once are likely to get nothing. Such approaches fail by focussing on the demands as such independent of the existing level of consciousness of people, and the struggle needed to transform it along with the situation.

When upheavals occur, up to and including ones of the exceptional scope of May '68, those with the "all or nothing" attitude will not have prepared even themselves to take advantage of it, let alone decisive sections of the people.

Development of a "counter-hegemony" is a long and painful process.