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Is May 1968 About to Happen Again, or Be Surpassed? Mass Strikes, Occupations and the Fight for the Future Perfect in France



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In anticipation of the 50th anniversary of May 1968, the Macron government had been making plans to commemorate this historic uprising by celebrating how it had purportedly contributed to the liberal “modernization of French society.” Allied with the mass media and the ownership class, what better way for the relatively young neoliberal government to lay claim to the future than by taking over the past, using the ritualized burial rites of state-honored commemoration to spin a teleological tale according to which the legacy of ’68

was alive and well in contemporary ‘liberalization’? [According to a spokesperson for the French President](#), this was of course to be done “without dogmas or prejudice,” in order to show that “’68 was the time of utopias and disillusion, and we no longer truly have utopias.”

Apparently, many French students and workers disagree with this peremptory judgment. Massive uprisings have pre-empted Macron’s plans, and they continue to build momentum by directly challenging a government that projected to rule over the past as well as the future. Halting in its well-trodden tracks the *politics of commemoration*—which would sever ‘68 from the deep history of anti-capitalist struggles and the broad internationalism of anti-imperialism in order to put it in the service of the current world order—a radical *politics of rejuvenation* has risen up to challenge Macron’s ‘non-dogmatic’ anti-utopianism. Although the international press is still largely ignoring these developments ([as it did with the Nuit Debout movement](#) in 2016), and the French mass media regularly mischaracterize them, a vast uprising is underway that is consistently growing, and there are already clear signs of a convergence of struggles.

Like other major social movements, it is impossible to identify a single beginning point. However, the student protests and occupations began early in 2018 against the Macron government’s proposed changes to the *baccalauréat* (the French high school diploma) and its restrictions on access to the university. To address the problem of [the growing number of university students and the simultaneous reduction in the number of teaching positions](#), the government has chosen to exclude more students instead of investing in more education. More specifically, rather than providing more resources for a university system that is—at least in principle—open to all who complete the *baccalauréat*, the current administration has opted for a system of exclusion and selection that provides preferential opportunities for those from privileged backgrounds and areas. In so doing, the university would thus be made to further conform to the reigning dictates of a competitive system of social triage and vocational training.

The state’s response to student resistance has not been unlike that of Charles de Gaulle’s administration in 1968: the way to deal with non-violent protesters and student occupiers organizing peaceful general assemblies is to brutally attack them with billy clubs. Every day that goes by there are more cases of students being beaten by the French riot police and malevolently provoked to react in self-defense. On March 22, which was the same date on which the ruthless police crackdown on students occupying the University of Nanterre garnered more media attention for the ‘68 movement, armed [academic black](#)

[shirts](#) were unleashed on students in Montpellier under the watchful and protective eye of the French police (who assured the fascist band, which included professors, safe escort out of the building). The [bloody footage](#) and the complicity between the administration, the security staff, right-wing students and the police led to an increase in mobilization. Meanwhile, the inquiry opened by the state has not led to the prosecution of some of the professors identified by students, and the police have been recorded [harassing witnesses](#) to encourage false testimony.

According to an [interactive map published by Libération](#), there are now 25 cities in France where there have been university occupations, general assemblies and/or protests. Beginning in the Southwest with Toulouse, Bordeaux and Poitiers, the movement spread to Nantes, Lille, Paris, Montpellier, Grenoble and beyond. Far from simply blocking a significant percentage of France's 73 universities, the movement has insisted on *opening them*, meaning seizing the means of intellectual production to hold public seminars, debates, film projections and general assemblies with thousands of people, some of which have had to move outside in order to accommodate the large crowds. In taking universities away from their neoliberal administrators, students have organized critical discussions of the Macron government, capitalism, fascism and the military assault on [the "ZAD"](#) (see below), as well as alternative courses on political strategy, struggles in the *banlieues*, revolutionary history and grassroots organizing. Although the violent incursions of the riot police and [their fascist allies](#) persist, forcing the students to regroup and sometimes change locations, the struggle continues unabated and is spreading. [Three new attempted occupations](#) occurred in Paris just this week (Paris 3-Censier, EHESS, Paris Nanterre), which is in addition to ongoing occupations at Paris 1 (Tolbiac and Saint-Charles), Paris 8 and Paris 4 Clignancourt. High school students have joined the movement, and more than [400 professors have denounced](#) the government's plans as absurd and full of misleading propaganda.

In addition to the students seizing the means of intellectual production, French rail workers [have announced](#) three months of rolling strikes to protest Macron's pro-business privatization campaign against the public sector. The latter proposes to cut worker's employment rights so that new hires would not have the same job security or retirement provisions, and he aims to transform the public railway system (the SNCF), into a publicly listed company in what is seen as the first step toward privatization. Participation in the strikes has been [very high](#) among train conductors (75%) and controllers (71%), and the Macron government has been constantly shifting and changing its 'reform'

project, [creating obscurity and dissension in the Parliament](#). In 1995, the former Prime Minister Alain Juppé was forced to abandon his project of changing rail staff's benefits due to strikes that paralyzed France for weeks.

Striking rail workers have been collaborating with students, and their actions have been accompanied by other strikes in the public and private sectors, including garbage collectors demanding a national public service for trash collection, Air France pilots, and electrical and gas workers. There are numerous calls for coordinated actions in the near future, and a number of dates have been chosen for convergent struggles. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT), one of France's largest confederations of trade unions, has called for [a general strike on April 19](#) in order to bring together public sector workers and many others affected by the Macron government's liberalization projects (to which one could add his draconian [immigration policy](#) and the hardline policing powers ushered in as ['anti-terror' measures](#)). Moreover, there is an increased mobilization around the ongoing military-style expulsion and attempted [destruction](#) of the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes. This autonomous 'Zone to Defend' is a collectively run region that not only succeeded in throwing off the yoke of the French state, and its project of seizing land to build an airport, but also established a collectively self-managed society. If the elected representatives of France are bent on a top-down war against the autonomy of the ZAD, many are asking, is it not time for a bottom-up insurrection and a ZADification of France to clear out those who seek to *govern the people* by eliminating *governing people*?

Every historical conjuncture has its own specificity, and there are, of course, plenty of important differences between France in 2018 and in 1968. With students and workers rising up across the country, however, there is a combined and growing struggle against the relentless privatization of the world, and this raises urgent questions for the future, as well as for the past that it will have remade. The events that are currently unfolding could lead to a politics of placation in which the government stalls and then makes minor concessions in the hopes that the activists, tired out from weeks of occupation and assaults, will accept them as a symbol of success. Their stalling will also bring us closer to the dormant summer months, with the anticipation that movements often fizzle out in France around the vacation period in July and August.

There could be no better time, then, for intensifying current struggles, developing new strategies and pre-empting setbacks that have regularly occurred in the past. If the movement ends up being primarily focused on minor changes to the educational system and the public sector, or if it simply concentrates on Macron and electoral politics, the bar

will certainly be set too low. If anything changes, it will only be a matter of time before similar measures return, perhaps in a slightly different form. If, however, the project of mobilization is one of building alternative communities of critical public education, free and ecological public transportation, as well as other collectively run social services, political organizations and autonomous councils, then we could have the beginning of a future unmoored from the stagnation of the past. By having struggles converge not only around the *particular content* given to the *general form* of capitalism in contemporary France, but around *the general form itself*, whose content is always shifting, it is possible to construct—as many are already doing—a new social order in which reactive resistance to particular initiatives is transformed into proactive collectivist organizing and the building of anti-capitalist communes that will persist and grow in the coming years. Mobilizing all of the organizations and associations already in place—while drawing on historical experiences such as *Nuit Debout*, the protests against neoliberal French labor laws, the organized support of the *sans-papiers*—such a movement could also further cross-pollinate with movements abroad, developing an internationalized front of coordinated anti-capitalist communities.

It is unclear what has become of Macron's anti-utopian plans to recuperate the spirit of '68 for the purposes of liberal modernization. Whatever becomes of them, they have already been powerfully pre-empted by a politics of rejuvenation and transformation that many hope will outstrip '68 (slogans like 'You are going to wish this was as small as '68!' or simply 'Fuck '68' are already circulating). Much remains to be seen and done, however, and the past political education of all of those involved will now confront the immediacy of a situation in which it is forced to be actualized. The past is only truly alive in the future, after all, meaning in the future perfect that it will have become. The best way to commemorate May 1968 would not only be to rejuvenate it, bringing it back from the dead as it were, but to surpass it. Tearing it out of the mausoleum of consecration by making it into a living transformation, May will only be what it will have become in its future perfect after 2018.