

May 1968 in Senegal



This is the last part of our series of five articles on the class struggle in French West Africa, centred in particular on Senegal. The series covers the period from the end of the 18th century up to 1968 and began publication in *International Review* n°145.

May 1968 in Africa, an expression of the recovery of the international class struggle

A “May 68” actually took place in Africa, more precisely in Senegal, with characteristics very similar to those of the “French May” (student unrest forming a prelude to the emergence of the workers’ struggles) – which is not surprising given the historical ties between the working class of France and that of its former African colony.

If the global nature of “May 68” is generally acknowledged, its expression in certain corners of the world is nonetheless little known, or simply ignored: “This is largely explained by the fact that these events occurred at the same time as others of a similar nature around the world. This has made it easier for analysts and propagandists who followed the events to blur the significance of the Senegalese May 68, by opting for a selective reading emphasising the university and high school student side in the crisis at the expense of its other dimensions.”[1]

In fact the “Senegalese May” was better known among students: students sent messages of protest from around the world to the government of Senghor which was suppressing their fellow African comrades. We should also note that the University of Dakar was the only university in the colonies of French West Africa (FWA) until after “independence”, which explains the presence within it of a significant number of foreign African students.

The organs of the bourgeois press had different interpretations of what caused the outbreak of the May movement in Dakar. For some, like *Afrique Nouvelle* (Catholic), it was the crisis in education that was the root cause of the movement. *Marches Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* (for the business community) considered it an extension of the movement in France. *Jeune Afrique* pointed out the connection between the student political unrest and the social unrest of wage earners.

There was another point of view that made a connection between this movement and the economic crisis: it came from Abdoulaye Bathily, one of the oldest participants in the famous revolt when he was then a

student; later, in his role of researcher, he would make a general appraisal of the events of “May in Dakar.” We will quote him a lot in this article for his testimonies from inside the events.

The Sequence of Events

“May 1968 has gone down in history characterised across the world by the massive social upheaval in which students and high school pupils were the spearhead. In Africa, Senegal was very clearly the theatre for the university and high school protests. Many contemporary observers concluded that the events in Dakar were nothing more than an extension to May 68 in France [...] Having participated directly, and at the highest level in the students’ struggle in Dakar, in May 68, this thesis has always appeared to me to be wrong. [...] The explosion of May 68 was undoubtedly fostered by a particularly tense social climate. It was the culmination of an unprecedented agitation by employees in the towns, the unsatisfactory national economic indicators from the continued French rule, and members of the bureaucracy disgruntled that the technical advisers were in control of the state. The agricultural crisis also contributed to the growing tension in the towns and in Dakar, notably from the influx from the rural areas [...]. The memorandum of the Union Nationale des Travailleurs de Senegal [UNTS] on May 8th calculated that purchasing power had declined by 92.4% since 1961.”[2]

So, this was the context in which Dakar, between May 18th and June 12th, also experienced a “May 68” which almost definitely undermined the pro-French regime of Senghor with wildcat general strikes by the students and then by the workers, before the government stepped in to end the movement, with the police and military imposing a brutal clampdown and with French imperialism providing critical support.

The “Senegalese May” had been preceded by several clashes with the Senghor government, especially between 1966 and 1968, when students organised demonstrations in support of “national liberation” struggles and against “neo-colonialism” and “imperialism”.

Similarly, there were “warning strikes” in high schools. Students at the high school in Rufisque (a suburb of Dakar) walked out of lectures on 26th March 1968 following disciplinary measures taken against a student. The movement lasted three weeks and the agitation and protests against the government spread to schools across the region.

The trigger for the movement

The movement of May 1968 was initially sparked off by the decision by the government of President Senghor to cut the number of monthly instalments of student grants from 12 to 10 per year, and by so doing to greatly reduce the spending on these, citing “the difficult economic situation facing the country”.

“The news of the government decision spread like wildfire on the campus, causing widespread anxiety and provoking a general feeling of revolt. It was the only topic of conversation on the campus. Upon election, the new executive committee of the Democratic Union of Senegalese students [UDES] started to campaign over student grants, amongst students in the high schools and also with the trade unions.”[3]

Indeed, after this government announcement there were constant protests and the opposition to the government grew, especially on the eve of the elections that were denounced by the students, as the heading of one of their leaflets demonstrates: “From the economic and social situation in Senegal to the eve of the election farce on February 25th...” The agitation continued and on May 18th students decided to announce a “general strike” following the failure of negotiations with the government about their conditions, and there was a massive strike in all the faculties.

Galvanised by the clear success of the strike, and angered by the government’s refusal to meet their demands, the students called an unlimited general strike and a boycott of exams from May 27th. Already, before this, meetings were taking place on campus and in high schools generally; in brief, this was a

showdown with the government. For its part, the government seized control of all the official media and announced a series of repressive measures against the strikers, hoping to stir some opposition from the workers and peasants to the students, who it labelled "privileged". And the Senegalese Progressive Union (Senghor's party) tried to denounce the "anti-nationalist position" of the students' movement, but without any real echo; quite the contrary, the government campaigns only increased the anger of the students and gave rise to workers' solidarity and won sympathy from the public.

"The meetings of the Student Union of Dakar (UED) were the focal point of the agitation on the campus. They attracted a considerable number of students, pupils, teachers, unemployed youths, political activists and, of course, many government spies. Over time, they were the barometer indicating the size of the political and social protest movement. Each meeting was a sort of gathering of the Senegalese opposition and of those on campus from other countries. The interventions were punctuated by pieces of revolutionary music from around the world." [4]

Indeed, a real showdown was on the cards. In fact, at midnight on May 27th, students awoke to hear the sound of boots and to see the arrival en masse of police who cordoned off the campus. Then a crowd of students and pupils gathered and converged on the residential quarters to mount picket lines.

By encircling the university campus with police, the government hoped to prevent any movement onto or out of the campus.

"So, some of their colleagues were deprived of meals and others of their beds because as the UED repeatedly said, the social conditions were such that many of their colleagues (those without grants) ate in the town or slept there from the lack of housing on campus. Even medical students who treated patients in the hospital would be stuck in the town along with the other students in a medical emergency. It was a typical example of where academic freedoms were violated." [5]

On May 28th, during an interview with the rector and the deans of the university, the UED demanded the lifting of the police cordon, while university authorities required students to make a declaration within 24 hours "to declare that the strike is not aimed at overthrowing the Senghor government". Student organisations responded that they were not allied with any specific regime and that within the time granted to them, they wouldn't be able to consult their members. After this, the President of the Government ordered the closure of all the academic institutions.

"The anti-riot squad, reinforced by the police, went on the offensive and entered the living quarters one after the other. They had orders to remove the students by all means possible. So with truncheons, rifle butts, bayonets, tear gas grenades, sometimes crazed, smashing doors and windows, these henchmen entered the students' rooms looking for them. The riot squads and the police behaved just like looters. They stole what they could and smashed up things blocking their path, tore up clothes, books and notebooks. Pregnant women were abused and workers mistreated. Married women and children were beaten in their homes. There was one death and many wounded (around one hundred) according to official figures." [6]

The explosion

The brutality of the government's reaction led to an outburst of solidarity and sympathy for the student movement. There was strong disapproval throughout the capital of the regime's brutal behaviour and against police cruelty and the confinement of large numbers of students. On the eve of May 29th all the ingredients were present for a social conflagration because things had reached fever pitch for the students and salaried workers.

The high school students were already massively involved in the “warning strikes” of March 26th, and on May 18th were the first to start an indefinite strike. After this the university students and those in the high schools started to link up. And one after the other, all the institutions in secondary education declared a total and unlimited strike, formed struggle committees and called for demonstrations with the university students.

Alarmed by the increased numbers of young people joining the protests, on the same May 29th President Senghor made an announcement to the media of an indefinite closure of all learning establishments (high schools and colleges) in the vicinity of Dakar and St. Louis, and called on parents to keep their children at home. But with little success.

“The closure of the university and the high schools only increased social tension. University students who had escaped the police cordons, high school students and other young people began erecting barricades in neighbourhoods like Medina, Grand Dakar, Nimzat, Baay Gainde, Kip Koko, Usine Ben Talli, Usine Nyari Talli, etc.. On the 29th and 30th particularly, young demonstrators occupied the main streets of Dakar. Vehicles belonging to government officials and the leading personalities of the regime were tracked down. It was rumoured that many ministers were forced to abandon their official cars, famous cars like the Citroen DS 21. In people’s eyes, and those of the university and high school students in particular, this type of official vehicle symbolised ‘the lavish lifestyles of the comprador and political-bureaucratic bourgeoisie.’”[7]

Faced with growing combativity and the escalation of the movement, the government reacted by tightening its repressive measures, extending them to the whole population. So, the government issued a decree that from May 30th all public buildings (cinemas, theatres, cabarets, restaurants, bars) would close day and night until further notice; and also, that meetings, demonstrations and gatherings of more than 5 persons would be prohibited.

A workers’ general strike

Faced with these martial measures and with continued police brutality against young people in struggle, the whole country stirred and the revolt intensified, this time with more of the salaried working class becoming involved. It was at this point that the official union apparatus, notably the National Union of Workers of Senegal, the umbrella body for several unions, decided to make its play to avoid being bypassed by the rank and file workers.

“The rank and file unions pressed for action. On May 30th, at 18.00 hours, the regional union, UNTS de Cap-Vert (a region of Dakar), following a joint meeting with the National headquarters of UNTS, announced plans for an indefinite strike from midnight on May 30th.”[8]

Given the difficult situation facing his regime, President Senghor decided to address himself to the nation and spoke threateningly to the workers urging them to disobey the call for a general strike, while accusing the students of being “under a foreign influence”. But despite the real threats of the government to requisition certain categories of workers, the strike was well supported in both the public and the private sectors.

General assemblies were planned in the labour union hall for 10am on May 31st, in which the invited strikers’ delegations would decide the next steps for the movement.

“But the police had cordoned the area off. At 10 o’clock the order to attack the workers inside the hall was given. Doors and windows were smashed, cabinets pulled apart, records destroyed. Tear gas and truncheons overwhelmed the most foolhardy workers. In response to the police brutality, the workers in amongst the students and the lumpen proletariat, attacked vehicles and shops, some of which were

torched. The next day Abdoulaye Diack, Secretary of State for Information, revealed to reporters that 900 people were arrested in the labour union hall and the surrounding area. Among these, there were 36 union leaders including 5 women. In fact, during the week of crisis, no less than 3,000 people were arrested. Some union leaders were deported [...]. These actions only heightened popular indignation and readied the workers for the fight.”[9]

Indeed, directly after this press conference when the government’s spokesman gave statistics about the victims, the strikes, demonstrations and riots were intensifying and so the bourgeoisie decided to call a halt.

“The unions, allied to the government and the employers, felt it was necessary to make concessions to the workers to avoid them adopting a hard line, since in the demonstrations they had been able to sense their power.”[10]

Therefore, on June 12th, after a series of meetings between government and unions, President Senghor announced an 18 point agreement to end the strike with a 15% increase in wages. Accordingly, the movement officially ended on that date, which did not prevent further discontent and the resurgence of other social movements, because the strikers were really suspicious regarding any promises from the Senghor government. And, in fact, just weeks after signing the agreement to end the strike, social movements were spreading more than ever, with some lively episodes, right up until the early 1970s.

Ultimately, it is worth noting the state of disarray in which the Senegalese government found itself at the height of its confrontation with the “May movement in Dakar”:

“From June 1st to 3rd, it seemed that there was a power vacuum. The isolation of the government was expressed in the inertia of the ruling party. Faced with the scale of the social explosion, the party machine of the UPS (Sengho’s party) did not react. The UPS Students’ Federation was happy to covertly distribute leaflets against the UDES in the early stages. This situation was all the more striking since the UPS had boasted three months earlier about having won a landslide victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections in Dakar on February 25th, 1968. But now it was unable to provide an acceptable response to what was happening.

“Rumour had it that ministers were holed up in the administrative building, the seat of the government, and that senior party and state officials were hiding in their homes. This was very strange behaviour from party leaders who claimed to have a majority in the country. At one moment, the rumour ran that President Senghor had taken refuge in the French military base at Ouakam. These rumours were made even more believable following the news in Dakar that De Gaulle had “fled” to Germany on May 29th.”[11]

Indeed, the Senegalese government was truly reeling and in this context, it was quite symptomatic that de Gaulle and Senghor were seeking the protection and support of their respective armies at the same time.

Moreover, at the time, other more persistent “rumours” clearly indicated that the French army had forcibly intervened to prevent the protesters marching on the presidential palace, inflicting several deaths and injuries.

Let’s also recall that the Senegalese government did not only use its normal guard-dogs, namely the police, to bring an end to the movement but that it also had recourse to the more reactionary forces like the religious leaders and peasants from the remote countryside. At the height of the movement, on May 30th and 31st, the leaders of the religious cliques were invited to use media day and night by Senghor to condemn the strike in the strongest terms and to urge the workers to go back to work.

As for the peasants, the government tried unsuccessfully to turn them against the strikers, by making them come to town to support pro-government demonstrations.

“The recruiters had led the peasants to believe that Senegal had been invaded from Dakar by a nation called ‘Tudian’ (student) and that they were being called on to defend the country. Groups of these peasants were actually located in the alleyways of Centennial (now Boulevard General de Gaulle) with their weapons (axes, machetes, spears, bows and arrows).

“But they very quickly realised that they had been taken for a ride. [...] The young people dispersed them with stones and divided up their food amongst themselves. [...] Others were vilified on their way to Rufisque. In any event, the riot revealed the fragility of the political standing of the UPS and of the regime in the urban areas, particularly in Dakar.”[12]

Undoubtedly, the government of Senghor would utilise every means available, including the most obscure, to bring the social uprising against its regime to an end. However, to permanently extinguish the fire, the most effective weapon for the government could only be that in the hands of Doudou Ngome. He played his part at the time as the leader of the main union, the UNTS. He would “negotiate” the terms for smothering the general strike. Moreover, as a thank you, President Senghor would make him a minister a few years later. It’s another illustration of the strike-breaking role of the unions who, in cahoots with the former colonial power, definitely saved Senghor’s neck.

The high-school students’ role in starting the movement

“The high schools in the Cap-Vert region, ‘aroused’ by the strike at Rufisque High School in April, were the first to spring into action. These students were especially quick to take to the streets as they saw themselves, like the university students, as victims of the education policy of the Government and were concerned in particular by the cut-backs in the grants. As future university students themselves, they were actively involved in the struggle of the UDES. The strike spread rapidly from Dakar to other secondary schools around the country from May 27th [...] The leadership of the students’ movement was very unstable, and from one meeting to the next, the delegates, and there were many, changed. [...] An important nucleus of very active strikers also drew the attention of the teacher training college for young girls at Thies. Some student leaders even moved to the old town and coordinated the strike from there. Subsequently, a national committee of the high schools and other secondary education colleges in Senegal was formed, becoming a sort of general staff of the student movement.”[13]

Here the author is describing the active role of the high-school students in the mass movement of May 68 in Senegal, in particular the way the struggle was organised with general assemblies and ‘co-ordinations’. Indeed, in every high school, there was a struggle committee and general assembly with an elected and revocable leadership.

The magnificent involvement of the high school students, both male and female, was highly significant as this was the first time in history that this part of the youth were mobilised in large numbers to protest against the new ruling bourgeoisie. If the starting point of the movement was a solidarity action with one of their comrades, victimised by the school authority, the high-school students, like the other students and workers, also saw the need to fight against the effects of the capitalist crisis that the Senghor government wanted to make them pay for.

Western imperialism comes to Senghor’s aid

At the imperialist level, France was keeping close track of the crisis that the events of 1968 had given rise to, and for good reason; it had a lot invested in Senegal. Indeed, apart from its military bases (sea, air and land) located around Dakar, Paris had appointed a “technical advisor” to each ministry and to the

president's office to steer the policies of the Senegalese government in a direction that would clearly serve its own interests.

In this respect, we can recall that before being one of the best "pupils" of the Western bloc, Senegal was for a long time the principal historic bastion of French colonialism in Africa (from 1659 to 1960) and for this reason Senegal participated with its foot soldiers in all the wars that France was involved in around the world, from the conquest of Madagascar in the 19th century, to both World Wars and the wars in Indochina and Algeria. It was therefore only natural for France to use its role as "local gendarme" of the Western imperialist bloc in Africa to protect Senghor's regime using every means at its disposal:

"In the aftermath of the events of 68, France intervened with support from its EEC partners to rescue the Senegalese regime. The State was not able to meet its debts following negotiations that took place on June 12th. In a speech on June 13th, President Senghor said that the agreement with the unions would cost 2 thousand million francs (local currency). A week after these negotiations, the European Development Fund (EDF) agreed to the stabilisation fund for groundnut prices with an advance of 2 thousand and 150 million francs (local currency) 'intended to mitigate the effects of the fluctuations in world prices during the 1967/68 campaign'. [...] But even the U.S., which had been taken to task by the President Senghor during the events, participated with the other Western countries in restoring a peaceful social climate in Senegal. Indeed, the U.S. and Senegal signed an agreement for the construction of 800 housing units for middle income groups for a total of 5 million dollars." [14]

It is clear that in doing this the main issue for the Western bloc was avoiding the collapse of Senegal and its defection into the enemy camp (that of China and Eastern Bloc).

Thus, having regained control of the situation, President Senghor immediately set off to visit the "friendly countries", and Germany, amongst them, welcomed him to Frankfurt, just after the bloody suppression of the strikers in Senegal. This welcome in Frankfurt is also highly instructive because Senghor went there to get help and to be "decorated" by a country that was a leading member of NATO. On the other hand, this visit was an opportunity for the German students, for whom "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit was the mouthpiece, to show support in the streets for their Senegalese comrades, as the newspaper *Le Monde* reported, 25/09/1968:

"Daniel Cohn-Bendit was arrested on Sunday in Frankfurt during demonstrations against Mr Leopold Senghor, President of Senegal, and he was charged on Monday afternoon (along with 25 of his comrades) by a local German magistrate of inciting riot and illegal assembly..."

In their struggle, the Senegalese students would also receive support from their comrades overseas who often occupied the Senegalese embassies and consulates. News of the movement in Senegal reverberated throughout Africa:

"In Africa, there were further repercussions from the events in Dakar owing to the actions of the national unions (student unions). On returning to their home countries African students, expelled from the University of Dakar, continued campaigning. [...] The African governments of that time regarded the students from Dakar with suspicion. And in so far as most of them showed their irritation at the way their nationals were expelled, they also feared the contagion of their country with the 'subversion arriving from Dakar and Paris'." [15]

Actually, almost all African regimes feared "contagion" and "subversion" from May 68, starting with Senghor himself who had to resort to violent repressive measures against the educated youth. Hence, many of the strikers experienced prison or forced military service not dissimilar to deportation into

military camps. And equally, large numbers of foreign African students were expelled en masse; some of whom were ill-treated on their return home.

Some lessons from the events of May 68 in Dakar

“May in Dakar” was unquestionably one of the links in the chain of a worldwide May 68. The significance of the involvement of the Western imperialist bloc in saving the Senegalese regime was an indication of the power of the movement of the workers and the university and high school students.

But over and above the radicalism of the student action, the movement of May 68 in Senegal, with its working class involvement, came about through a return to the spirit and the form of the proletarian struggle that the working class of the colony of French West Africa had achieved at the beginning of the 20th century, but which the African bourgeoisie in the government had succeeded in stifling, especially during the early years of “national independence”.

May 68 was thus more than an opening to another world breaking with the counter-revolutionary period; it was a moment of awakening for many protagonists, especially the youth. Through their involvement in the fight against the forces of the national capital, they exposed a number of myths and illusions, including the “end of the class struggle” under the pretext there was no antagonism between the (African) working class and the (African) bourgeoisie.

It should also be noted the police repression and imprisonment of thousands of strikers proved insufficient for achieving victory over the social movement; it also had to be lured into the union trap and the intervention of France and the Western bloc in support of their “favourite junior partner”. But it was also necessary to meet the demands of students and workers with a large increase in pay.

The basic thing is that the strikers did not “sleep” for long after the agreement that ended the strike because the following year, the working class took up the fight more than ever participating fully in the wave of international struggles that May 68 set in train.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this movement used truly proletarian modes of organisation, proletarian strike committees and general assemblies, strongly demonstrating self-organisation; in short, a clear taking of the struggles into their own hands by the strikers. This is one specific aspect that characterises the struggle of a fraction of the world working class, fully involved in the battle to come for the communist revolution.

Lassou