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Workers in a Repressive Society of Seductions: Parisian Metallurgists in May–June 1968

Michael Seidman

Much of the historiography of May–June 1968 has understandably focused on the student movement. After all, it was the student activists who began the chain of events that, many either hoped or feared, would lead to revolution in France. Furthermore, the novelty and energy of the student actions and ideas distinguished 1968 from previous protests and revolutions. Given the fascination with student activists' radical and revolutionary desires, the literature on 1968 has logically taken a political and intellectual orientation. We know much about *groupuscules* and revolutionary ideologies; in contrast, our knowledge of workers is more limited, even though wage earners were at least as important as students in determining the outcome of the events. An examination of wage earners in metallurgy, where the strike movement was particularly powerful and influential, may help to fill a historiographical gap. Striking blue-collar workers in this sector were uninterested in the global social and political project that student and other revolutionaries were proposing. Instead of supporting revolutionary visions inherited from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, workers fought in favor of bread-and-butter demands. Their actions demonstrated how far they had adjusted to what may be called the "repressive society of seductions." Wage earners took advantage of the momentary weakness of state power in the middle of May to initiate the largest strike wave in French history. At the end of the month, the state was able to reassert its authority, and in June state repression and the seductions of

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consumer society induced metallurgical workers to return to their jobs. Thus, a combination of coercion and the appeal of consumption forced and persuaded wage earners to reenter the factories. With the spread of new possibilities of consumption during the Fifth Republic, French workers entered an era where demands for commodities largely replaced any lingering revolutionary yearnings and even proved much more popular than workers' control or *autogestion*.¹ In the society of seductions, consumption became a powerful force for social cohesion. The seductions of consumption promoted the purchase of commodities by those who had been deprived of them.

The strike movement of 1968 confirmed and reinforced a postwar pattern which showed that most workers were reluctant to become involved in a global social or political project.² For many wage laborers immediate personal and familial concerns took precedence over broader political and social issues. The strikes of 1947 and 1948 were unsuccessful because large numbers of workers were reluctant to follow politicized and sometimes violent militants against a government quite willing to use massive state repression. Neither the anti-American "peace" campaigns of 1949–50 nor the *Ridgway la Peste* sloganeering of 1952 was effective in winning over the masses. The success of the strikes in the public-service and nationalized sectors during August 1953 contrasted sharply with previous defeats. The militancy of the base took union leaders by surprise and demonstrated that a rank and file that was concerned with bread-and-butter issues had a different appreciation than union leaders of the proper moment to protest. In 1953 millions of strikers, backed by the major trade unions—Confédération générale du travail (CGT), Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC), and Force ouvrière (FO)—were able to defend their promotion and retirement benefits.

The 1953 work stoppage showed the effectiveness of mass action by

¹ Cf. Alain Touraine, *The May Movement*, trans. Leonard F. X. Mayhew (New York, 1971), chap. 5; Laurent Joffrin, *May 68* (Paris, 1988), which emphasizes the desire for "individual participation" during May; Pierre Dubois, Renaud Dulong, Claude Durand, Sabine Erbès-Seguin, Daniel Vidal, *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques: Acteurs, pratiques, sens du mouvement de mai* (Paris, 1971), also stresses the *autogestionnaire* discourse; Cf., too, David Caute, *The Year of the Barricades* (New York, 1988), 235: "Everywhere the workers were keen to display their capacity to administer the means of production"; Lucien Rioux and René Backmann, *L'Explosion de mai* (Paris, 1968), 615: "This will to participate in decisions and the desire to be able to question them . . . will not be forgotten."

² Useful for this period are George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982); Jean-Pierre Rioux, *La France de la Quatrième République*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980 and 1983); Serge Berstein, *La France de l'expansion* (Paris, 1989); Georges Lefranc, *Le Mouvement syndical de la libération aux événements de mai-juin 1968* (Paris, 1969); and the review, *Socialisme ou barbarie: Organe de critique et d'orientation révolutionnaire*, 1953–57.

a rank and file backed by the major confederations. Given the political and religious divisions among the unions, unity among them could be constructed in one of two ways: either the confederations could act together on the basis of concrete workplace demands desired by an often apolitical and individualistic rank and file, or they could rely upon the lowest common political denominator, that is, the defense of democracy against a military or anti-Republican *coup d'état*. On the latter foundation, at the end of the Algerian War from 1958 to 1962, the confederations came together sporadically to defend the Republic. During the miners' strike of March-April 1963, an alliance was reconstituted, but this time, as in 1953, on the basis of specific wage-and-hours goals. Union unity contributed to an important victory against an intransigent Gaullist regime which seemed to be no more reluctant to use its repressive forces than its counterpart had been in 1947–48. Several years later, in 1966, the two major confederations—the CGT and the re-named CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail)—solidified their alliance by signing a common platform. This platform included demands which, at least partially, prepared the way for the May 1968 strike wave. Both unions affirmed their opposition to the regime's wage policies and emphasized their determination to increase the salaries of the lowest-paid workers, who were often female, foreign, or young.

To understand workers' actions in 1968 some reference to the student movement is needed as well as background to the history of the postwar working-class movement. After all, what distinguished the French situation from that of other nations that experienced unrest in 1968 was the unique juncture of student and worker actions. It was the student revolt that eventually sparked the enormous work stoppage during the second half of May. Knowledgeable discussions of the origins of the student movement can be found in other works on 1968. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the agitation which began at the Nanterre campus in the winter of 1967–68 increased sharply during the spring, an habitual season of French revolts and revolutions. In early May the movement spread from Nanterre to Paris, that is, from the periphery of the capital to its center. On Monday, 6 May, student-police confrontations resulted in almost eight hundred injuries and over eighty arrests.³ The following day, student leaders formulated three major demands: freedom for those arrested, withdrawal of police forces from the university, and reopening of all campuses. These demands

³ Adrien Dansette, *Mai 1968* (Paris, 1971), 96.

demonstrated that the crisis of the university had quickly affected the state, a relation that was natural given the centralization of the French educational system. A protest against the university was rapidly transformed into a protest against the state, in particular against what were considered its repressive policies and actions toward student demonstrators.

On 8 and 9 May discussions between student leaders and government officials proved incapable of resolving the conflict. During the night of 10–11 May, police attacked the barricades which the students had erected in the Latin Quarter. In the ensuing street battles, 274 police and 116 demonstrators were injured, 128 vehicles were damaged, and 60 set aflame. The major unions—CGT, CFDT, FO, various teachers' unions, and even the usually conservative *Confédération générale des cadres* (CGC)—reacted by momentarily overcoming their longstanding divisions to organize a twenty-four-hour general strike whose main goal was to protest government repression and to demonstrate solidarity with the students. On the night of 11 May, Georges Pompidou, the prime minister, attempted to calm the agitation and resolve the student/state conflict by ceding to the demands of the student demonstrators. Pompidou ordered the reopening of the Sorbonne and amnesty for students who had been arrested. Thus, the state exhibited Janus-like behavior which alternated between repression and concession.

It is difficult to know to what degree the new lenient phase, which was characterized by Pompidou's concessions, encouraged participation in the general strike of Monday, 13 May. General de Gaulle, the president of the Republic, may have been correct in questioning the wisdom of what he considered his prime minister's surrender to disorderly students. At any rate, the Right in general and a major Parisian employers' organization, the *Groupement des Industries Métallurgiques* (GIM), in particular, attributed the success of the general strike of 13 May to the "weakness" [*faiblesse*] of the government.⁴ Whatever the verdict on the repercussions of government concessions to the students, the general strike of 13 May demonstrated union power and popular distrust of the police. On that day, although the "immense majority" of Parisian metallurgists reported to work, their workday was interrupted

⁴ *Grève politique du 13 mai*, 3 October 1968, *Groupement des Industries Métallurgiques*, Neuilly (hereafter cited as GIM). See Dansette, *Mai*, 138; see also Jean Rochet, *Cinq ans à la tête de la DST* (Paris, 1985), 70–90, which also argues that the movement was a result of Pompidou's lack of firmness. According to Maurice Grimaud, prefect of police during the strike wave, Pompidou wanted to avoid a savage repression which might have been the only way the movement could have been halted but which would have damaged his political career. See *En mai, fais ce qu'il te plaît* (Paris, 1977).

by the strike. The employers evaluated strike participation at 19 percent of the workforce, but the number of those affected by transportation stoppages and the closing of firms was much higher. Workers of large firms were more likely to strike than their counterparts in medium or small enterprises. Most small businesses (under fifty workers)—which employed over a third of wage earners in commerce and industry—remained untouched by the movement; however, almost 25 percent of wage earners in large firms participated, and 78 percent of big businesses were affected by the strike. These figures were a bad omen for the government and employers, because these large firms included aviation and automobile firms that were in the avant-garde of industrial development and represented the new, more concentrated and competitive sectors of the French economy in the late 1960s. The following weeks would show that many wage earners in these key sectors were responsive to work stoppages.

Immediately after the general strike on Monday, five strikes continued in metallurgical plants in the Paris region, and important work stoppages broke out in aviation and automobile firms in the provinces.⁵ Sud-Aviation near Nantes led the way on Tuesday, 14 May, by embarking upon the first major strike with occupation. Its example was followed by the Renault plants at Cléon on the fifteenth and by other Renault factories, including Boulogne-Billancourt, on Thursday the sixteenth. Georges Séguy, the secretary general of the CGT, noted that “workers understood that the government was put to the test and weakened by the confrontation [with the students] and that the moment had come to settle accounts.”⁶ The head of the CGC, André Malterre, believed that the student strikes had opened the way for the factory occupations “by revealing the weakness of the government.”⁷ Just as they did during other periods of French history, such as the Popular Front, wage earners took advantage of perceived permissiveness to advance their own interests. The sit-down tactic was chosen because strikers calculated that the government would be reluctant to use force to evacuate the factories.

A few strikes seem to have been undertaken spontaneously. The most important occurred at the Renault factory at Flins, where workers stopped laboring “without formulating demands.”⁸ This indicates that some workers were rebelling against everyday routine or, as the popular

⁵ On Parisian strikes, *Situation sociale*, 27 May 1968, GIM.

⁶ *L'Humanité*, 18 May 1968.

⁷ *L'Aurore*, 21 May 1968.

⁸ *Situation sociale*, 13–26 May, GIM.

expression put it, “*méto, boulot, dodo . . . ras le bol.*” Usually though, in almost all striking metallurgical firms, union militants interpreted workers’ desires and formulated bargaining positions. Parisian metallurgical employers claimed that in their firms the strikes that immediately followed 13 May were not, contrary to many accounts, “spontaneous” but rather, caused by CGT militants,⁹ whose demands usually included salary increases, a reduction of the workweek, and job security.

The strike movement, usually led by CGT activists, acquired increased momentum on Monday, 20 May. Recalling the tradition of *Saint Lundi*, Mondays remained pivotal in May. Throughout the decade of the 1960s, Monday was the day of the highest absenteeism.¹⁰ Striking on Monday may have been an effective way of joining men and women, because the latter had especially high rates of absenteeism on the first workday of the week. Monday was the day when workers engaged in a general strike (13 May), stopped working in large numbers (20 May), and as will be seen, rejected the agreement among the government, unions, and employers (27 May). Nationally, by the end of Monday, 20 May, over five million workers had stopped laboring in transportation, energy, communication and financial services, education, and metallurgy.¹¹ In Argenteuil and Bezons, in the industrial *banlieue*, the strike movement “developed massively” from that Monday onward.¹² The employers noted that on Monday, 20 May, strikers became more subversive. A few workers ignored the CGT’s condemnation of illegal sequestrations and expelled management from factories. More commonly, strikers frequently violated the “right to work of non-strikers.”¹³ Thus the occupations contested management prerogatives, industrial hierarchy, and property rights. Many were illegal, because the five-day advance notice, which had been established by the law of 31 July 1963, was not respected. Employers complained bitterly of the collapse of state power and especially of the failure of the police to come to their aid.¹⁴ They may have felt particularly vulnerable, because prior to

⁹ Situation sociale dans les industries des métaux de la région parisienne, 27 May 1968, GIM.

¹⁰ AN, 39AS 287, “Absentéisme (1964).”

¹¹ *Les Echos*, 21 May 1968.

¹² Groupement des industriels d’Argenteuil-Bezons et communes avoisinantes, “Enquête concernant les conflits sociaux” (hereafter cited as Enquête) July–November 1968, GIM.

¹³ Situation sociale, 27 May 1968, GIM.

¹⁴ Crise de mai 1968, 22 May, GIM; On the pre-May history of employers’ relations with strikers, see Jacques Capdevielle and René Mouriaux, *Mai 68: L’Entre-deux de la modernité, histoire de trente ans* (Paris, 1988), 51. On the failure of Citroën management to get police to confront the occupiers, see Rioux and Backmann, *L’Explosion*, 438.

May, a number of them had systematically relied on police to combat strikes.

Industrialists in the western suburbs charged that CGT militants from Avions Marcel Dassault and other large enterprises encouraged the work stoppages while local municipalities controlled by the Left fed the strikers.¹⁵ Employers continued to attribute “responsibility” for most strikes to union militants, especially the CGT.¹⁶ Of the 77 strikes enumerated, CGT militants were responsible for 68, CFDT for 6, and FO for 3. In addition, industrialists reported that older and more experienced workers provoked the stoppages. Fifty-one out of 88 strikes (58 percent) were started by wage earners between 30 and 40 years old. Twenty-four (27 percent) were begun by 20- to 30-year olds. Only 7 (8 percent) were initiated by those under twenty. Workers who had labored in the firms for more than one year were leaders of 67 percent of the strikes. The *meneurs*, as employers called them, were largely French. Only 9 percent were foreign—3 Spanish “anarchists,” 2 “insolent” Algerians, and several Poles, Italians, and Portuguese.

This information is significant because it modifies the common interpretation of May 1968 as a youth revolt. Instead, the employers’ questionnaires indicate that relatively mature, stable, and unionized French workers were largely responsible for initiating metallurgical strikes in the Paris region. Maturity, though, did not exclude boldness. The industrialists noted that in 35 out of 41 reported strikes, workers used threats to convince their colleagues to stop work. In 16 of 60 strikes, militants resorted to force; yet they did not usually insult their bosses or sequester management. In only two cases was property damaged, but the threat of sabotage certainly existed. For example, several persons entered a factory at night and set a truck on fire. A police investigation was unable to conclude if the incident was caused by strike tensions or by a desire for “vengeance” on behalf of a worker who had been fired before May.

According to employers, the militants were seldom revolutionaries. Only 2 of those who fomented strikes belonged to organizations of

¹⁵ Enquête, GIM; See also Grimaud, *En Mai*, 217, who states that the mayor of Gennevilliers threatened to have his supporters “massively occupy” a fuel distribution center if police intervened to break the strike.

¹⁶ Enquête, GIM; Cf. Centre national d’information pour la productivité des entreprises, *Les Événements de mai-juin 1968 vus à travers cent entreprises*, 16, 25. For the union role at Citroën, see Patrick Hassenteufel, “Citroën-Paris en mai-juin 1968: Dualités de la grève” (Mémoire de maîtrise, Paris I, 1987), 44. For the industries of the Nord, Pierre Dubois, “Les Pratiques de mobilisation et d’opposition,” *Grèves revendicatives*, 342–45; Jean-Philippe Talbo, ed., *La Grève à Flins* (Paris, 1968), 90, underlines the role of “active minorities” in initiating strikes.

gauchistes—Maoist, Castroist, Trotskyist, and so on. Nor was the direct influence of revolutionary or radical students consequential. Among strikers in the western *banlieue* (Argenteuil-Bezons) which bordered on Nanterre, student radicals had contact with workers during only 9 of 88 strikes, and these were probably in the larger factories. Thus the brief fusion of the student and worker movements after 12 May was, in all likelihood, destined to unravel. The Parisian *métallos* were neither seeking the “correct” party nor the “right” revolutionary ideology. *Immigrés* seem somewhat marginal in this struggle. They often viewed the strike as a French work stoppage in which they played only a passive role.¹⁷ Their relative passivity was significant, because they composed approximately 15 percent of the workforce in Parisian metallurgy and were overwhelmingly present in the lowest-paid and least-skilled jobs. On assembly lines they might compose over half the workforce.

A number of working-class organizations encouraged strikers to demand *autogestion* or *cogestion*. The most forceful advocate of workers’ control was the CFDT, whose secretary-general, Eugène Descamps, believed that the worker and student movements had the same democratic aspirations. He argued that the administrative and industrial “monarchies” must be replaced by democratic workers’ control.¹⁸ The CFDT saw *autogestion* as a way of distinguishing itself from its major rival and of bolstering its militancy on the shopfloor. The Action catholique ouvrière, which had fostered an important number of CFDT militants, was in complete “solidarity with the workers struggling to gain power in their firms and in society.”¹⁹ Even André Bergeron and the leadership of the Force ouvrière, the most moderate of the major workers’ unions, advocated *cogestion*.²⁰ Although many have seen the novelty and uniqueness of May in the generalized demand for *autogestion*, workplace democracy was seldom found in the lists of demands formulated by metallurgical union militants. Rather than reflecting worker sentiment, the call for *autogestion* may have served as a facile solution to the genuine and thorny problem of worker dissatisfaction with industrial discipline in particular and wage labor in general.²¹

¹⁷ See Hassenteufel, *Citroën*, 108; Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Bomelle, 20 July 1990; Talbo, *Flins*, 17; Danièle Kergoat, *Bulldozor ou l’histoire d’une mobilisation ouvrière* (Paris, 1973); on *immigrés* as percentage of metallurgical workforce, AN, 39AS287, “La Main d’oeuvre étrangère—les industries des métaux de la région parisienne, 31 December 1969.”

¹⁸ *Le Figaro*, 17 May 1968 and 21 May 1968.

¹⁹ *Le Monde*, 23 May 1968.

²⁰ *L’Aurore*, 21 May 1968.

²¹ Cf. Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class*, trans. Dick Howard and Dean Savage (St. Louis, Mo., 1975), 62–67, who argues that workers’ struggles against industrial discipline and hierarchy were entirely compatible with their supposed desire to manage the workplace in an efficient and modern way.

Instead of *autogestion*, the major unions in metallurgy, the CGT, and even the CFDT, demanded less worktime and more pay, particularly for the lowest-paid workers, who were often foreigners, women, or young people.²² The latter demand signaled the resolve of union activists (generally male and French) to reach out to other social groups. Well before May, the CGT had made efforts to appeal to different sectors of the working class.²³ In 1965 the CGT had called for a reduction of working hours for women. It campaigned in 1967 for equal wages and opportunities for working females. It was aware of “the double and profoundly social role of female workers as both wage earners and mothers.” CGT militants demanded “the end of any type of discrimination against women” who composed approximately 20 percent of the metallurgical workforce.²⁴ The CFDT too had called for equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex. In a special edition of its women’s magazine, the CGT argued that females should also work less. Its activists claimed that a work-free Saturday and reduced worktime were even more necessary for women because “time-measurement and piecework has pushed them to the brink.”²⁵

Women were not the only objects of the unions’ attentions. The confederations also wanted young workers and foreigners to participate as equals in the worlds of labor and leisure. Recognizing that “one out of four workers is foreign,” the CGT lauded its “long tradition of internationalism” and supported the demands of the *immigrés*.²⁶ The unions urged the end to discrimination against foreigners and youth and demanded the suppression of the practice of paying lower wages to youthful wage earners. In 1967 Georges Séguy was named secretary-general of the CGT to rejuvenate the organization and to appeal to youth. Prior to May, the CGT made special efforts to recruit youth rebels who resisted factory discipline and the authority of supervisory personnel and who might otherwise have gravitated to *gauchisme*.²⁷ Young activists insisted that employers pay for educational courses and sporting activities undertaken during working hours, housing for

²² Situation sociale, 13–26 May, GIM.

²³ For the CGT’s attitude prior to May 1968, see René Mouriaux, “Le Mai de la CGT,” in *Colloque: Acteurs et terrains du mouvement social de mai 1968*, 24–25 November 1988, Centre de recherches sur l’histoire des mouvements sociaux et du syndicalisme, Paris. On the central and thus “non-marginal” role of women and immigrants, see Thierry Baudouin, Michèle Collin and Danièle Guillermin, “Women and Immigrants: Marginal Workers?” in *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968*, ed. Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno, 2 vols. (New York, 1978), 2:83.

²⁴ BN, CGT, Chemins de fer, 28 May, Tracts de mai 1968; BN, CFDT, 23 May, Tracts de mai 1968.

²⁵ *Antoinette* [1968].

²⁶ Mouriaux, “Le Mai,” 6; Ross, *Workers*, 165.

²⁷ *Informations correspondance ouvrières*, April 1968.

young married couples, and a fifth week of paid vacation. Displaying their desire for certain key commodities of consumer society, youthful automobile workers at Citroën demanded the right to discount car rentals during their vacations.²⁸

With demands escalating and strikes spreading rapidly, on 25 May national negotiations opened among the government, employers, and workers' organizations. Negotiations among the three parties eventually resulted in what was called the Grenelle Agreement. The employers, represented by the CNPF (Conseil national du patronat français), conceded a 35 percent hike in the minimum wage. Women, youth, and foreigners would tend to profit from this dramatic increase more than other wage earners. Madeleine Colin, a prominent official of the CGT, argued that "women and young people were among the principal beneficiaries of the raises" because "they constitute the majority of workers who earn the minimum wage." Some young women, she claimed, "saw their salary double."²⁹ In comparison, higher-paid workers gained only a 10 percent increase. Thus, the CGT and the CFDT delivered on their 1966 promise to fight to win an increase in the minimum wage. The government quickly conceded the augmentation perhaps because it affected small- and medium-sized firms much more than the dynamic, large enterprises which the regime had continually favored.³⁰ The Grenelle Agreement also guaranteed a reduction of the workweek—two hours for wage earners laboring more than 48 hours and one hour for those laboring between 45 and 48 hours. The agreement gave the employers the authority to recover the hours lost because of the strike. It recognized the unions' right to organize members, collect dues, and distribute literature.

When union leaders attempted to sell this agreement to the rank and file, strikers in certain large firms reacted with considerable hostility. Many *métallos* may have felt that the greatest strike wave in French history could and should produce more significant results. The ineffectiveness of the limited and partial strikes prior to May had frustrated large numbers of metallurgical workers who were anxious to take advantage of opportunities created by the mass movement.³¹ The momentum of the strike wave encouraged more ambitious demands. The most

²⁸ BN, Citroën, 26 May 1968, Tracts de mai 1968.

²⁹ *Le Peuple*, August 1968.

³⁰ On the protests of the PME against Grenelle, see Rioux and Backmann, *L'Explosion*, 396.

³¹ *Ouvriers face aux appareils: Une Expérience de militantisme chez Hispano-Suiza* (Paris, 1970), 107; On the isolation of the Peugeot strike of 1965, see Lefranc, *Le Mouvement syndical*, 190. See also *Socialisme ou barbarie* for the failures of a national strike movement and consequent frustrations among workers prior to 1968.

famous incident of the rejection of the Grenelle protocol occurred on Monday, 27 May at Renault, where Georges Séguy and Benoît Frachon, the veteran leader of the CGT, and André Jeanson of the CFDT were not able to convince the crowd of five to six thousand workers that the agreement should be endorsed. The rank and file especially objected to the clauses granting employers the right to recover hours lost because of the strike.³² Similar disapproval of the Grenelle agreements occurred at other major metallurgical firms, including Citroën and Sud-Aviation. Some analysts have interpreted the workers' rejection of the protocol as an indication of the growing revolutionary sentiment of the working class or a desire for workers' control.³³ Wage earners might have desired to limit the "arbitrary" authority of supervisory personnel and to slow down production rhythms, but little evidence exists to suggest that workers in large metallurgical firms wanted to take over their factories. As has been seen, the influence of revolutionaries—whether *gauchistes* or *autogestionnaires*—was relatively insignificant in Parisian metallurgy. Metallurgists demanded higher pay (especially for the lower-paid personnel), a further reduction of worktime, payment for days lost to the strikes, a minimal recuperation of strike time, and for the activists a union presence in the factory. Thus the compromise among national elites did not satisfy many wage earners who felt that they had an unprecedented chance to get even more.

The failure of the union leadership to get approval of the original package from the rank and file in certain large metallurgical factories has led some observers to emphasize either the weakness of French unionism or its supposed non-representivity. The Catholic newspaper, *La Croix*, lamented that "even when they conclude an agreement, the unions are not strong enough to convince the workers to ratify it. The French economy and the employers have paid dearly for twenty years of contempt for unions."³⁴ *Gauchistes* of various sorts have claimed that the unions, especially the CGT, betrayed the revolutionary desires of the rank and file.

Yet the unions adjusted quickly and without much difficulty to the unpopularity of the protocol in large firms. In his speech to the Renault workers on 27 May, Jeanson, president of the CFDT, congratulated the strikers for refusing to return to work and hoped that other factories

³² Dansette, *Mai*, 249; *Le Monde*, 28 May 1968; Alain Delale and Gilles Ragache, *La France de 68* (Paris, 1978), 111, estimated the crowd at Renault at 10,000 workers; Rioux and Backmann, *L'Explosion*, 406, put the figure at 15,000.

³³ Delale and Ragache, *France*, 113.

³⁴ *La Croix*, 30 May 1968.

would follow the Renault example.³⁵ At the same meeting Séguy declared that because the CGT had not issued the strike order, it could not ask the workers to return to their jobs. Several hours after the Renault meeting, the Administrative Commission of the CGT endorsed the refusal of its Grenelle delegation to sign the agreement because of the employers' "insufficient concessions."³⁶ The union recommended that negotiations be conducted by industrial branch and profession, but discussions quickly reverted to the level of the individual firms when metallurgical employers' organizations and unions could not agree on a national or even regional bargaining agreement. Parisian employers, in particular, resisted a regional accord that would have been more generous than Grenelle and preferred to negotiate on a firm-by-firm basis.³⁷ The GIM wished to protect the autonomy of its members, especially owners of small- and medium-sized firms who were very reluctant to make further concessions.

The failure of Grenelle and the continuation of the strikes diminished the already shaken authority of the state. The parliamentary Left began to propose serious alternatives to Gaullist rule. On 28 May François Mitterrand offered his candidacy for president and suggested Pierre Mendès-France as prime minister. At the same time, the Communists demanded a "popular government" in which they would have a strong voice. De Gaulle abandoned the capital on 29 May, leaving a growing power vacuum which politicians and parties of the Left were trying to fill. After consulting with army commanders, he returned the following day with determination to regain control of the situation. The general's speech to the nation on 30 May initiated a new period in the history of the work stoppage. The talk was a dramatic step in the reconstitution of a strong state and had immediate repercussions on Parisian metallurgists.³⁸ At Renault, CGT activists charged that the general wanted to impose a dictatorship and noted "important troop movements, notably armoured cars and parachutists who are being called up to Paris. In addition, a large number of OAS [extreme right-wing] officers are being freed [from prison]."³⁹ At Hispano, a firm employing 4,300 workers, the strike committee interpreted the speech as an attempt to "blackmail [workers] with civil war."⁴⁰ Communists pro-

³⁵ *Le Monde*, 28 May 1968.

³⁶ *L'Humanité*, 28 May 1968.

³⁷ *Situation sociale*, 27 May–30 June 1968, GIM.

³⁸ *Aujourd'hui*, 31 May 1968; *Ouvriers chez Hispano-Suiza*, 183; F. de Massot, *La Grève générale (mai-juin 1968)* (Paris, 1968), 216–17.

³⁹ CGT de la Régie nationale des usines Renault, *33 jours 34 nuits*, 12.

⁴⁰ BN, Comité de grève Hispano-Suiza, Tracts de mai 1968.

tested the scare tactics of Gaullist “mercenaries,” that is, members of civic action committees whom the general had encouraged to fight against the “subversion” of “totalitarian communism.”⁴¹ Working-class militants became intimidated by threats to use military intervention against the strikers and by de Gaulle’s success in rallying the entire Right. The CGT would later claim that its moderation prevented a Greek- or Indonesian-style coup in France.⁴²

Following de Gaulle’s address, pressure mounted for a return to work. The first strikers who returned were largely workers of small firms (employing between 20–300 wage earners) whose union representatives signed accords closely resembling the Grenelle settlement. These agreements were concluded during the first week of June, usually between Tuesday 4 and Friday 7.⁴³ The relatively rapid return of the small firms was not surprising because their participation in the strike was much lower than that of the larger firms. Seventy-eight percent of the workers were affected by the strikes in large firms (over 2,000 workers), 76 percent in medium-sized firms (300–2,000 workers), and only 33 percent in small businesses (under 200 workers). An employers’ organization in the eastern *banlieue*, whose members were mainly bosses of small- and medium-sized firms, reported that only 17 percent of their businesses went on strike.⁴⁴ A left-wing Catholic activist concluded that “fear [of striking] affects small firms in particular, because they are not organized, offer low wages, and employ large numbers of women.”⁴⁵ A radical in one diminutive metallurgical factory (50 workers) noted the difficulty of organizing his fellow workers, even though the majority were under 35 years old. His workmates were reluctant to pay union dues and were skeptical of the union’s effectiveness.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the intensity of the strike diminished as firms decreased in size. In big firms each striker missed on the average 175 hours of work (almost 4 work weeks); in medium firms each striker averaged 117 hours (over 2.5 weeks); in small enterprises only 27 hours.

Monday, 10 June, saw a continuation of the pattern of a resolution of issues in moderate-sized enterprises but also initiated a workweek (Monday, 10 June to Friday, 15 June) which witnessed a return to work

⁴¹ BN, PCF St. Cloud, Tracts de mai 1968; BN, Comités d’action Meudon, Chaville, Sèvres, Tracts de mai 1968.

⁴² Jacques Fremontier, *La Forteresse ouvrière: Renault* (Paris, 1971), 366.

⁴³ See reports, Situation sociale, 6 June–7 June, GIM.

⁴⁴ *Revue d’informations interprofessionnelles des industries de la région est de Paris*, July–August 1969.

⁴⁵ Jean-Marie Leuwers, *Un Peuple se dresse: Luttes ouvrières mai 1968* (Paris, 1969), 149.

⁴⁶ *Informations correspondance ouvrières*, May 1968.

by strikers in more than a dozen Parisian metallurgical firms employing over 1000 wage earners.⁴⁷ These settlements put pressure on the remaining strikers and especially on the activists who actually participated in the occupations. Although militants occupied many factories—for example, 31 out of 39 striking firms in Issy-les-Moulineaux and 20 out of 40 in Boulogne-Billancourt—the occupations revealed that the rank and file had little desire to engage actively in the sit-down strikes. Perhaps the militants selected the occupation tactic because it permitted them to neutralize the hostility or, more usually, indifference of part of the base. In general, the number of workers actually engaged in the occupations remained a tiny percentage of the workforce. Only several hundred out of a workforce of 5,000 occupied the Renault factory at Cléon.⁴⁸ A few hundred of the 30,000 workers at Boulogne-Billancourt remained inside the flagship plant. The occupations were the greatest wave since 1936, but the small number of occupiers suggested that the number of engaged militants was proportionally small. Usually it was the same group who initiated the strikes—mature male French workers close to the CGT—who conducted the occupation. Sometimes they were joined by young *gauchistes*. Foreigners usually played a minimal role, perhaps because the French sometimes regarded them as strike-breakers or as disinterested trade unionists.⁴⁹ Yet some nationalities were more willing to participate than others. For example, at Citroën-Levallois Spanish workers were active during the work stoppage, whereas North African workers were largely passive.⁵⁰ Initially, women were excluded from certain occupations for “moral reasons,” but in others they played an important role.⁵¹ Yet the overwhelming majority of workers—female or male, foreign or French—preferred to avoid spending much time at the plant. At Citroën, the strike meetings as well as occupation revealed the passivity of the rank and file.⁵² In the Citroën branch in the fifteenth arrondissement usually no more than 100 occupiers out of a workforce of more than 20,000 were present. The Citroën strike committee was charged with being more concerned with arranging ping-pong and card games than with educating workers politically.

⁴⁷ Situation sociale, 18 June, GIM.

⁴⁸ *Le Monde*, May 17.

⁴⁹ *Lutte socialiste*, 20 October 1968; Hassenteufel, *Citroën*, 36; *Ouvriers chez Hispano-Suiza*, 93; cf. *33 jours*, 31, 181; *La Vie ouvrière*, 29 May 1968; *L'Anti-mythe*, 21 Aug. 1968; Fremontier, *Renault*, 344.

⁵⁰ Leuwers, *Peuple*, 185.

⁵¹ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 30 May 1968; BN, CGT aux femmes, Tracts de mai 1968.

⁵² Hassenteufel, *Citroën*, 49–101. For a different perspective, see Dubois, “Les Pratiques,” 361.

During the long weekend of *Pentecôte* (1–3 June), when gasoline became readily available, only 12 workers remained in the factory.

Large numbers of wage earners displayed little commitment to the electoral process at the workplace, and participation in strike votes varied widely from 40 to 75 percent.⁵³ Reflecting on this passivity in a pamphlet written at the beginning of June, union and non-union strikers of some of the most important Parisian firms—Otis Elevators, Sud Aviation, Nord Aviation, Thomson-Houston, Rhône-Poulenc—argued,

In order to win, a greater number of workers must participate. While the strike forces everyone to make material sacrifices, many comrades rely on a minority and do not participate actively. This allows the government to divide workers by playing on the weariness of some and on the poor information of others. It attempts to wear down the strike in each branch and in each factory. . . . There is only one reply to these tactics of division: massive participation of all workers who have stayed away from the occupied factories.⁵⁴

To encourage non-committed or apathetic workers to join the movement, the pamphleteers recommended adopting the model of strike organization of Rhône-Poulenc (Vitry), where rank-and-file strikers elected strike committees whose members were easily revocable. Militants regarded the occupation of this firm as particularly impressive, because 1,500 out of a workforce of 3,500 (or 43 percent) were actively involved.⁵⁵

Even in this example of relatively high participation, 57 percent of the personnel avoided activism. It is therefore not surprising that wage earners seemed uninterested in suggestions from an interunion committee which proposed an innovative and more participatory form of striking. The committee recommended that workers engage in “freebie strikes” to rally public opinion to their side and direct public anger against the government. Transportation workers should permit free rides, postal employees should allow free postage and telephone calls, and garbagemen should pick up the accumulated trash.⁵⁶ The uncommitted strikers, though, had different ideas. Instead of serving the public, they used the free time which resulted from the strike to pursue their own personal or familial interests. Some engaged in moonlighting.

⁵³ Situation sociale, 6 June, GIM; Fifty-five percent of French industrial workers surveyed in 1969 declared that they had never participated in a union meeting. See Gérard Adam, Frédéric Bon, Jacques Capdevielle, René Mouriaux, *L'Ouvrier français en 1970* (Paris, 1970), 21.

⁵⁴ BN, “Défendons notre grève,” Tracts de mai 1968.

⁵⁵ *Lutte socialiste*, December 1968.

⁵⁶ BN, Groupes inter-syndicaux des salariés, Tracts de mai 1968.

The low level of participation in most occupied factories prefigured the poststrike atmosphere in which the overwhelming majority of workers were more concerned with surviving in a consumer society than with collective action against the state or employers.

The minority of wage earners who were actively involved sometimes did so not because of trade-union or political concerns but rather for immediate, pragmatic reasons. In a number of factories, strike committees were responsible for distributing pay. In others, militants rationed gasoline, a scarce commodity during the latter half of May. Insufficient supply of gas provoked "a rush—a great demand" in a number of firms.⁵⁷ An activist remarked: "We never occupied the factory but instead used it to supply our needs. . . . When we needed something we took it with or without the consent of the management. . . . Gas became scarce. . . . In order to get fuel you had to have connections with the CGT. Gas produced envy and required discipline."⁵⁸ One CGT member quit the union because it would not provide him with fuel.⁵⁹

Given the desire and need to consume, pressures mounted for a return to work. Many wage earners were deep in debt before May, because large numbers of workers had been collectively responsible for the four-fold increase in credit purchases that had occurred during the 1960s.⁶⁰ By 1968 almost all durable goods could be purchased on installment plans. At Renault, for example, young workers were often in arrears, and many older workers also had mortgage and car payments to meet. In fact, large automobile makers encouraged their personnel to purchase automobiles on credit by offering them considerable discounts. Other wage earners could purchase a vehicle with as little as 15 percent down. These policies were effective. Whereas only 23 percent of households of skilled workers possessed automobiles in 1959, 40 percent had them in 1963, and 75 percent in 1972. Unskilled workers saw a similar, although slightly smaller, increase in automobile ownership. The availability of private automobiles (and consequent expenses) was a

⁵⁷ *Syndicalisme*, 6 July 1968.

⁵⁸ Leuwers, *Peuple* [not paginated].

⁵⁹ Fremontier, *Renault*, 225.

⁶⁰ Bruno Moschetto and André Plagnol, *Le Crédit à la consommation* (Paris, 1973); Victor Scardigli, "Les Grèves dans l'économie française," *Consommation* 3 (1974), 99; Fremontier, *Renault*, 115–33. In 1969 three out of four workers considered credit positively. See Adam et al., *L'Ouvrier français*, 95. On ownership of automobiles and other durable goods, see Fernand Pascaud, "La Consommation des ménages de 1959–1972," *Collections de L'I.N.S.E.E.* 134 (June, 1974), 27; *Syndicalisme*, October 1968.

major change for a class whose main means of individual transportation before the Fifth Republic had been the bicycle.

In addition to purchases of motor vehicles, houses, and apartments, a wide variety of other commodities were commonly found in working-class homes in 1968. In 1959 only 22 percent of skilled workers had refrigerators; in 1963, 50 percent did; and by 1972, 91 percent. Possession of refrigerators by unskilled workers' households jumped from 11 percent in 1959 to 83 percent in 1972. The expansion of ownership of washing machines was similar: 74 percent of skilled workers' homes and 66 percent of unskilled workers' homes had one by 1972, a more than threefold increase since 1959. However, television was by far the most rapidly growing commodity of the Fifth Republic. Twelve percent of skilled workers' households had one in 1959; 35 percent in 1963; 85 percent in 1972. Ownership of *télé*s by the unskilled jumped even more dramatically, from 7 percent in 1959 to 77 percent in 1972. In 1968 the 25 million regular television viewers outnumbered the 22 million regular readers. The lower the income, the more time was spent watching television. These figures indicate important changes since 1955. In that year 40 percent of the unskilled and 28 percent of the skilled declared that they did "not want" to purchase a washing machine; 45 percent of the unskilled and 35 percent of the skilled did "not want" a refrigerator; 34 percent of the unskilled and 24 percent of the skilled did not desire an automobile; 44 percent of the unskilled and 37 percent of the skilled were uninterested in purchasing a television.⁶¹ Therefore, consumption had to be taught, and workers had to learn to appreciate the attractions of the new commodities. By 1968, with the help of advertising, most workers had been well instructed.

As the strikes continued, debt mounted, and consumerist desires remained unfulfilled, thereby sharpening family tensions:

Five weeks on strike has created an emotional strain between the married couple, Pierre and Nicole. They lived in two different worlds. He is a union representative, a devoted militant who is always active at the workplace. She is stuck in the housing project, dealing with personal problems, with unpaid rent, and with kids to feed. She feels abandoned. Suddenly their relationship turned sour.⁶²

⁶¹ Richard Hamilton, *Affluence and the French Worker in the Fourth Republic* (Princeton, N.J., 1967), 84: "Since the workers might simply be adjusting realistically to lower income and less job stability, we compared persons having equivalent earning situations. . . . We find that on every item white-collar ownership is nearly twice that of workers."

⁶² *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15–21 July 1968; see also *La Vie ouvrière*, 15–21 July 1968. For familial tensions in the Nord, Pierre Burel, *La Crise économique dans les événements de mai 1968* (Caudry, 1970), 130.

Many workers continued working, because their “women at home did not look favorably upon the strike.”⁶³ Many wives opposed the work stoppage because it unbalanced the family budget or, in higher income households, destroyed vacation plans. A Flins worker with radical tendencies explained to a strike sympathizer that his wife did not want to see him involved in the movement. Wives had a further reason for hostility to the work stoppages: school closings meant added child-care duties for them.⁶⁴ As the strikes endured, women, perhaps even more than men, feared “politicalization,” that is, the subordination of material demands of the movement to the political goals of parties and unions of the Left. Yet during the strike they pragmatically accepted the meals offered by municipalities controlled by the Left. As the work stoppages persisted, mature breadwinners seemed less determined to continue them than younger wage earners.⁶⁵

In those firms that rejected the Grenelle accord, the union delegation of each enterprise bargained directly with management and appealed to debtors and breadwinners by fighting to extend the gains of Grenelle. The duration of the strike in the biggest concerns may be attributed to the power of the unions (especially the CGT) which was able not only to appeal to the needs and desires of some workers but also to establish picket lines and discourage strikebreakers from returning to work.⁶⁶ In a number of cases, these militants violated “the right to work” to prevent strikebreakers from entering the workplace. Employers cited four violations in early June, and conservative newspapers reported others, including incidents at the Flins Renault plant, which employed 10,000 workers.⁶⁷ The CGT and other unions generally preferred to hold a public vote (with raised or lowered hands) to determine strike action. Employers believed that an open show of hands intimidated voters and argued that a secret ballot would facilitate a return to work. The government sided with industrialists on this issue, and its spokesman declared that “everytime a secret vote is taken, workers almost always decide to go back to work. What is certain is that the government must protect the right to work in order to fulfill its duty to the workers.”⁶⁸ Shortly thereafter, the police intervened spectacularly—and bloodily—at Flins.

⁶³ Leuwers, *Peuple*, 64; *L'Anti-mythe*, 9–10 June 1968; *Cahiers de mai*, August–September 1968; Lefranc, *Le Mouvement syndical*, 252, which argues that wives of workers reacted against the strike wave by voting for the Right in elections at the end of June.

⁶⁴ Leuwers, *Peuple*, 319.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 273; *Ouvriers chez Hispano-Suiza*, 198.

⁶⁶ *Situation sociale*, 6 June, GIM.

⁶⁷ See *Situation sociale*, 6–7 June, GIM; *Le Figaro*, 5 June 1968.

⁶⁸ Cited in *L'Aurore*, 6 June 1968.

This is not the place to repeat the story of the most famous death of the strike wave. Detailed histories of the circumstances surrounding the demise of a nineteen-year-old *lycée* student, Gilles Tautin, may be found in other histories of May–June 1968. For our purposes, it is more important to assess the role of state repression in encouraging workers to return to their jobs. Ultimately state power proved to be as necessary in achieving a return to work as the seductions of consumer society.

On Wednesday, 4 June, the management of the Renault factory at Flins attempted to organize a vote on a return to work.⁶⁹ Strike pickets “sabotaged” the election. Management protested and indicated that 80 percent of the personnel had been present for the vote.⁷⁰ Early in the morning of 6 June, one thousand CRS arrived in order to protect “the right to work” and to force an end to the occupation. Strikers retaliated by establishing another picket line to prevent workers from entering the plant. On Friday, 7 June, several hundred young strikers—with support from the municipality—began to harass and attack police.⁷¹ Street battles ensued, and police detained over three hundred demonstrators and onlookers. Confrontations continued over the weekend, and at a press conference on Sunday evening Pompidou justified what was becoming known as “Operation Flins” by arguing that it was necessary to ensure the “right to work.”⁷² The prime minister added, “the motto, ‘To Work,’ must be France’s slogan at this moment.”

On Monday, 10 June, the skirmishes continued as police fought with workers and students on the streets of Flins. The skirmishes culminated in the drowning of Tautin, who belonged to a Maoist organization. On the same day, at the giant Peugeot plant at Sochaux, the CRS shot a twenty-four-year-old striker. The deaths and repression provoked worker-student anger and violence. In Paris on the night of 11–12 June, police confronted young demonstrators, who now seemed to be mainly workers, not students.⁷³ Not content with chanting slogans, such as “Funerals no, Revolution yes,” militant youth damaged 75 automobiles, sacked 10 police vehicles, and attacked 5 police stations. Police forces reported 72 officers injured and detained 1,500 demonstrators.

⁶⁹ Situation sociale, 6 June 1968, GIM; Cf. Ragache and Delale, *France*, 147, who state that the vote occurred on 5 June.

⁷⁰ Situation sociale, 6 June, GIM. Union militants later argued that they were justified in violating the right to work because strikebreakers had not pledged in writing that they would refuse any increases in salary and benefits which resulted from the strikes. See *Combat*, 12 June 1968.

⁷¹ *Le Monde*, 8 June 1968; Ragache and Delale, *France*, 147.

⁷² *L’Aurore*, 10 June 1968.

⁷³ *Le Monde*, 13 June; Ragache and Delale, *France*, 153.

The police operations, which employed new and offensive tactics against demonstrators, were effective in showing the state's determination to keep order at all costs. The new interior minister, Raymond Marcellin, did not repeat the wavering of early May.⁷⁴ On 12 June, the government adopted stringent legal measures. It banned all demonstrations for several weeks and—by using a 1936 statute that the Popular Front government had employed to outlaw extreme right-wing organizations—it dissolved leftist groups (including the Maoist group of which Gilles Tautin had been a member). The regime freed former OAS officers and tolerated the activities of extreme right-wing *groupuscules*. The government expelled all foreigners who had been detained by police during the demonstrations.

The repressive acts of the national government again reverberated in Paris. After 11–12 June metallurgical industrialists stopped complaining about “violations of the right to work” and “the total absence of police [which] permitted the right to work to be completely disregarded.”⁷⁵ They ceased accusing “troublemakers” of forming “motorized and radio-operated commando units which intimidated one factory after another.”⁷⁶ The CGT and CFDT called for a one-hour work stoppage on Wednesday, 12 June, to protest CRS repression and the government's “attempt to impose a military dictatorship,” but the strike call did not seem to be widely followed.⁷⁷ On the other hand, anti-strike demonstrations gained momentum. On 11 June, “several thousand workers and employees of Citroën,” marched through the streets of Paris shouting slogans such as “Right to work,” “Free our factories,” and with reference to the occupiers, “Throw out the garbage.”⁷⁸ Thirty-five hundred Renault workers and employees walked from Paris to Flins to demonstrate their desire to return to work. A Citroën group, which called itself, “Right to Work,” claimed that 17,000 demonstrated against “disorder and anarchy” on 12 June. In a company known for its anti-unionism, the group attracted supervisory personnel and substantial numbers of French and foreign workers who had joined right-wing and company unions.

⁷⁴ Marcellin had served with Jules Moch during the repression of the 1948 strike wave. When de Gaulle replaced the previous interior minister—Christian Fouchet—with Marcellin, the General was reported to have said, “Enfin Fouché, le vrai.” See Georges Carrot, *Le Maintien de l'ordre en France au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1990), 323.

⁷⁵ Situation sociale, 11 June, GIM; Groupement interprofessionnel de la banlieue parisienne, 12 June 1968, GIM.

⁷⁶ Groupement interprofessionnel, 12 June 1968, GIM.

⁷⁷ *Le Monde*, 13 June 1968; BN, 11 June 1969, Tracts de mai.

⁷⁸ *Le Figaro*, 12 June 1968. Crowd estimates vary according to source.

Given these pressures, the workweek of 10 June to 15 June saw an end to the work stoppage by most of the remaining large metallurgical firms of the Paris region. The votes on ending the strike stimulated a much greater turnout than the occupation itself. On 18 June, the day Renault returned to work, the president of the GIM reported that “almost all” the strikes had ended and that a maximum of 75,000 workers out of 750,000 remained engaged in work stoppages.⁷⁹ Most of these strikes were settled by Monday, 24 June. Almost all sources indicate that those who resisted the return to work were young, and the delayed resumption of production can be attributed to their combativeness. Many were not as resigned to a life of wage labor and industrial discipline as older workers with greater familial responsibilities. The propensity of youth to be willing to participate in extended strikes was not, however, unique to 1968 and has occurred during other strike waves.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the heavy demographic weight of youth in the workforce had the probable effect of prolonging the strike wave in 1968.

In the second half of June, the gains of workers in the most advanced branches which had initiated the strikes—aviation, electrical construction, and automobiles—were the most impressive.⁸¹ In keeping with desires manifested during the first days of the strikes, management was forced to raise the salaries of its lowest-paid personnel even more than the Grenelle protocol had required. Youth, women, and foreigners were especially helped by this measure. In some enterprises, these categories won special treatment. In a number of firms, pregnant women gained one paid hour of rest per day and longer maternity leave. Mothers were also granted paid leave to care for a sick child. In others, those under eighteen won an additional two days of paid vacation. In keeping with wage earners’ preference not to recover strike time, the union also won partial compensation for time missed. In other words, workers wanted the work stoppages to be treated as though they were paid vacations. This was especially important because the strike had aggravated an already considerable personal indebtedness. In addition, most wage earners in large metallurgical factories won a shorter workweek than Grenelle had offered without a

⁷⁹ Procès-verbal, Conseil d’administration, 18 June 1968, GIM; *Grandes entreprises en grève*, 24 June 1968, GIM.

⁸⁰ Jules Verger, who had been a leader of small businessmen against the Popular Front and a supporter of Vichy, used the same pro-family strategy, that is, the employment of breadwinners, to insulate his firm from the great strike waves of 1936 and 1968. On Verger, see *Informations correspondance ouvrières*, April, May, and November 1968; *Anti-mythe*, 26 July 1968.

⁸¹ *Situation sociale dans les industries des métaux de la région parisienne*, période 27 May–30 June, GIM; *Situation sociale*, 30 January 1969, GIM.

reduction of pay. Finally, the union militants were to be compensated for devoting a certain number of hours to union duties.

The unions emerged strengthened from their combat against the employers and the government. In Parisian metallurgy the CGT had led the greatest strike wave in history.⁸² Union activists reached out to youth, women, and foreigners. After the strikes ended, the CGT was able to enroll 400,000 new members nationally, many of whom may have been from the less remunerated categories of larger firms.⁸³ The confederations were particularly effective in the larger metallurgical enterprises where they were able to broaden the gains of the Grenelle Agreement. For example, at Flins, union (CGT and CFDT) membership jumped from 7 to 15 percent. At Citroën, the CGT attracted 4,000 new members.

But union power had definite limits. It reached its zenith in May, when the state was weakened by its confrontation with students. The state's efforts to restore its authority in June placed militants on the defensive. At the same time, activists and their sympathizers also had to confront a largely uncommitted and sometimes hostile rank and file which was experiencing increasing social and familial pressures to return to work. Undoubtedly the seductions of consumer society were instrumental in convincing many workers to resume their posts, but a repressive state which was determined to make wage earners reenter the factories was also a key factor in ending the strikes in some of the most important enterprises in France. Following the strike wave, repressive government action encouraged a return to order and discipline in the factories. Encouraged by the state's coercive example, employers acted quickly to limit the influence of militants by employing private security forces and by restoring the authority of the supervisory personnel over both activists and rank and file.⁸⁴ Discipline imposed in the streets and at the workplace furthered the development of the society of seductions. Workers continued to be more interested in acquiring commodities than in either revolutionary or reformist *autogestion*. They placed

⁸² In 1950, the most agitated year in the period, 1950–1967, 2,400,000 days of work were lost; in 1968, 6,420,000 days were lost. See *Situation sociale*, 30 January 1969, GIM.

⁸³ *Le Peuple*, 1–15 October 1968; *Cahiers de mai*, August–September 1968. On the tendency of women and immigrants to join unions after strikes, see Baudouin et al., "Women and Immigrants," 89; Cf. Pierre Dubois, Claude Durand and Sabine Erbès-Seguin, "The Contradictions of French Trade Unionism," in Crouch and Pizzorno, *Resurgence*, 88–89. The 1969 survey of Adam et al., *L'Ouvrier français*, 111, contrasts the sympathy towards unions in large firms with the hostility towards them found in small ones.

⁸⁴ Carrot, *Le Maintien*, 336.

their own desires for more pay and less work before the political demands of the parties and unions of the Left.⁸⁵

Thus, the commitment of many union members and, of course, non-members to the broader goals of working-class organizations after 1968 may be questioned. The rejuvenation of the CGT had little effect in reversing the long-term decline of French heavy industry (including metallurgy) or the decline of the PCF itself. The CFDT remained committed to *autogestion*, but the disinterest in workers' control among metallurgists in 1968 prefigured its gradual decline in the 1970s and 1980s. Ideologies of *autogestion* may have been based on the mistaken assumption that wage earners—many of whom had a purely utilitarian attitude toward their jobs—really wanted to take over the workplace. The global projects of the *gauchistes*—Trotskyist, Maoist, Castroist, and so on—suffered a similar fate. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Gaullist idea of worker participation met with equal apathy from wage earners.

The failure of ambitious projects of social and political transformation, which were rooted in nineteenth-century Marxist, anarchist, and social Catholic traditions, may have encouraged some of the key beneficiaries of May—women, youth, and foreigners—to follow their separate paths. Numbers of women and young people abandoned a class-based global project in favor of feminist, ecological, or regionalist activism. Furthermore, in the 1970s rising unemployment affected the three groups disproportionately and contributed to their relative marginalization. Foreign workers—whose isolation was reinforced not only by joblessness but also by a renewal of intolerance—maintained their distance from trade-union activism, thus abstaining from taking one of the modern paths of assimilation into the French mainstream.

Despite the fragmentation and weakening of the workers' movement, the French state maintained its repressive powers. The authorities placed a massive and intimidating police presence in certain immigrant neighborhoods. The forces of order added the surveillance and control of ecologists and regionalists to their traditional task of checking workers' organizations.⁸⁶ Private security forces complemented public ones and branched out from their customary functions

⁸⁵ Cf. Bertrand Badie, *Stratégie de la grève* (Paris, 1976), 90–108, which argues that the PCF effectively controlled and moderated the strikes; Cf. also Caute, *Year*, 255, “but it was the trade-union leaders and the PCF who got [de Gaulle] off the hook by driving the strikers back to work.”

⁸⁶ Robert Le Texier, *Les Compagnies républicaines de sécurité* (Paris and Limoges, 1981), 22–23, 166–68.

in large factories to attempt to maintain order in new spaces of mass consumption, such as supermarkets, shopping centers, and malls. While expanding their activities in the urban areas of consumption and production, police took on additional tasks in the leisure zones along the coasts and in the mountains. Thus, the decline of a class-based revolutionary project and the expansion of consumption and leisure by no means rendered the repressive forces superfluous. After May, adaptation to the society of seductions remained incomplete.