Realists Demand the Impossible

Review of Daniel Singer's 2000 version of *Prelude to Revolution*
by Herman Rosenfeld

This book deals with an extraordinary event - the outbreak of the student rebellion and worker general strike in France in May-June 1968. In all of the social upheavals of the period, it was the only one where the students touched a chord amongst the workers. The book traces the developments from the student strike, clashes with the police, the unexpected and incredible development of the working class general strike, and its ultimate decline into repression, betrayal and electoral opportunism. It continues from there, analysing key actors in the struggle, and ending with some ideas for future struggles for social transformation.

The brilliance of the book - originally written in 1970, and republished in again in 2000, just before the death of the author - lies in the depth of its political analysis, and its almost lyrical turn-of-phrase. Singer was a journalist and political thinker, who wrote in the tradition of the great Trotskyist writer, Isaac Deutscher - to whom the book was dedicated.

Singer explores the critical themes initially raised by the student revolutionaries - and describes how the issues, potential and openings were deepened and transformed, as the struggle moved to the industrial working class and other social strata. Overall, the content of this critique showed the continued relevance and potential of the traditional Marxist critique of capitalism in a form that is appropriate for the so-called post-industrial era. Looking at it from the perspective of today, it literally forces the reader to ask him or herself, "What does this tell me about the potential for building a working-class based movement for socialism in this era?"

The 1968 upheavals started as a student and intellectual rebellion, based in the university. The students were led by a number of left grouplets and movements, most of which were influenced by various strains of radical thought. While the protests revolved around easily identifiable themes of youth/student rebellion of the time, the student radicals went further.

They gave leadership to the protests against overcrowded and dehumanizing institutions as they argued that education should serve as a tool to eliminate exploitation. They raised key questions about the role of professional and technical workers in capitalist society. They organized against the war in Vietnam and imperialism. They argued for a kind of revolutionary self-activity as the organizing principle of social change.

Through debate, discussion and mobilization, they developed an extremely sophisticated critique of various elements of contemporary capitalism: consumer society, attacked as a way of keeping people distracted from the alienation and oppression of work; the lack of creative and socially relevant employment open to young

people; the differing conditions of life and social roles that separated people who worked with their brains and those who worked primarily with their hands; the degradation of the environment, and a whole host of other themes.

They invented richly creative cultural forms of protest, such as the posters and slogans, that called out for a new society - with slogans like, “Be realistic, demand the impossible”.

Workers, especially the young, responded to many of the themes raised by the students. While not consciously embracing the radical socialist analysis of the grouplets, the general strike reflected longstanding worker frustration with conditions in the workplace, such as the military-like hierarchy and discipline, the assembly line, and the soul-denying alienation of leaving your intellect and creativity at the door, in exchange for the benefits of being able to by consumer goods. Many of the workers had educational credentials and skills that were denied in their work life.

In this, French workers weren’t alone. Less dramatic outbursts of worker frustrations were also happening about this time, even in North America, where auto workers in places like Lordstown, Ohio, Detroit and Southern Ontario rebelled against harsh working conditions.

Worker unrest was widespread and growing and had the potential to move in a revolutionary direction. The workers took over workplaces throughout the country and began to develop links with the student revolutionaries. They raised issues about power in the workplace. In some places they created action committees, the basic forums for organization and discussion that the students had pioneered. (Singer argues that these institutional forms could have been developed into the equivalent of soviets).

There were particular conditions that allowed the worker-rebellions in France to become potential components of a bigger struggle. In the context of ongoing structural changes to French economy and society, the role of the Communist Party and the union which it dominated, the CGT, were crucial, in both creating the conditions for rebellion, and closing them off.

The party had deep roots in the working class, and the CGT was the dominant union in the main industrial sectors. They came with a long tradition of rhetorical commitment to revolutionary struggle and the transformation of capitalist society by the working class. The union central also had a long institutional experience with mass action. Steeped in this history, workers were able to translate frustration with their conditions of daily life, into a discourse of class struggle. While the effects of those ideas and traditions were lasting, the actual practice of the CP and the CGT no longer reflected it in the least.

The Communists fought tooth-and-nail against the student radicals, and when the general strike began, they tried to limit it to a struggle for higher wages and better working conditions. They did everything they could to divide workers from the students and even during the occupations, they refused to organize the kinds of educationals and

collective discussions that might have helped deepen peoples' political understanding. The CP was not only concerned about defending its hegemony over the workers' movement but was obsessed with legitimating itself as an electoral force. Ultimately, it helped the state smash the rebellion.

According to Singer, for the movement to have developed into a revolutionary challenge to the system, it would have needed a political instrument fundamentally different than the CP. It would need a democratic organization willing and able to stimulate the self-activity of working people, direct the various forces towards revolutionary conclusions and actions, as well as perform the preparatory education with the working class, so that they could have "groped towards a strategy", on their own.

As the "negative hero" of May-June 68, the CP occupied the space that a genuine revolutionary organization would have had to occupy in order to build the movement. Its strength and influence amongst the working class (in contrast to that of the student revolutionaries) made it the only political actor capable of creating the conditions for a revolutionary challenge. Given the reality of what the CP had become, it was therefore impossible to realize the potential of the upheaval. A contemporary comment from a journalist summed it up well: "Those who could, wouldn't, and those who would, couldn't."

This book was written before the triumph of neo-liberalism, the end of the cold war and the communist movement, the final accommodation of social democracy to capitalism and the so-called age of globalization and the anti-globalization movement. Yet, it provides important insights about the potential for fundamental social change today.

The following ideas came to mind, while reading this book:

- Young radicals, whether in the anti-globalization movement or other social justice movements need to find ways of using their energy, dynamism and fresh insights, to address the interests and struggles of the working class, and familiarize themselves with and help apply Marxist theory to the present context.

- Many of the social roles in our society that involve key elements of production, administration and co-ordination - such as carrying out technical and scientific tasks - are now organized within the managerial strata. Some of these sections of the professional middle strata of our society can end-up siding with a working class critique of the system. Their participation could help develop the capacities of the working class to co-ordinate social activity, and contribute to breaking down the barriers between manual and mental labour.

- The working class - even the so-called "affluent workers" - retains the potential to challenge the system. Its seeds are there, in the everyday lives that we live: in our alienated, oppressive and precariously-held jobs; in the difficulty we face in developing healthy communities and families, and in the declining prospects for our children and environment.

- In order for the working class to have any chance of developing its capacities to build a different kind of society, it needs access to a critique of the system - couched in its terms and integrated into its everyday experiences and struggles in the workplace and communities. Without this, it is impossible to translate its concerns into a movement for fundamental change.

- In societies like ours, where there is no political movement even raising the elements of such a critique, one must be built. It needs to be democratic but well-organized, able to help direct struggles towards a central goal. Such a movement needs to respect and foster self-organization from below as an essential condition for developing revolutionary experience and consciousness.

- We are living in an era without models. Not having a model of what a socialist society or a movement for revolutionary change would - or should look like - is not necessarily a bad thing.

- We cannot predict when social upheavals will break out. We were surprised in 1919, 1937 (when mass unionization succeeded in the midst of the great depression), and, of course 1968. Perhaps we will be surprised again. When such struggles do break out - the gains must be consolidated and built-upon for a sustained and longer-term movement to take root.

The book also contains sections on suggested political program and strategies for social change. Many of these ideas retain their validity for today, but others are too rooted in the times. Not every prediction of Singer's has panned out, and not every element in his analysis rings true to the world of the early 21st century. But it is rich and deep and worth the time to get to know this classic.