French students and workers campaign for reform (May Revolt), 1968

May 3, 1968
to: June 1968

**Country:** France

**Goals:** Varied depending on actor. Student revolutionaries who began the movement initially called for educational reform, the release of arrested students and the reopening of the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris. However, as the campaign progressed they began to call for revolutionary social change, including the fall of the de Gaulle administration and the formation of a more socialist state. Many workers seem to have supported these latter goals, but union leaders wished to fight for improved conditions within the system instead of disrupting the power structure.

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 038. Marches

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike
- 117. General strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

**Notes on Methods:**
Scattered protests continued after the 3rd segment, but the methods are not clear after that point.

**Classifications**
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
Human Rights
Group characterization:
  • students
  • unions
  • workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Daniel Cohn-Bendit Jaques Sauvageot, student organization Union Nationale des Etudiants de France (UNEF) and Alain Geismar university teachers union (SNESup)

Partners:
Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) - communist labor union
Confederation Française Démocratique de Travail (CFDT) - socialist union
leftist political parties

External allies:
Citizens who joined the general strike, including small business owners, white collar workers, and clerical workers.

Involvement of social elites:
Not known.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
  • SNESup
  • UNEF

Groups in 2nd Segment:
  • CFDT
  • CGT
  • citizens
  • leftist political parties

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 10 days
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
President Charles de Gaulle and his government
Radical rightist students

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Students of the radical right marched towards the Sorbonne to lead a counter-protest in response to the protest in progress by leftist students.

**Campaigner violence:**
Some protests turned violent when protesters threw rocks and paving stones at police, this was in response to police initiated violence. There was also extensive violence against property in the process of barricade building.

**Repressive Violence:**
Police attacked protesters during protests

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
0.5 points out of 1 point

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
The campaign was largely unsuccessful. Number and constituencies grew, but their actions were not able to bring about much reform. The government did pass many new bills that changed the structure of the university system, and other aspects of social life, but de Gaulle was easily reelected in June and his political party acquired more seats than it had had before.

The May revolt started as a student protest over the closing of the University of Paris’ Nanterre campus. The campus closed after months of escalation of student protests. These protests initially stemmed from a fight for sexual liberation (or the right to have visitors of the opposite sex in dorms) that later radicalized to become a fight for more student influence in the education system, and finally for a complete change of economic and social structure. On May 3rd students marched on the Sorbonne, the campus considered to be the heart of the University of Paris, to protest the closing of the Nanterre campus. Students of the radical right marched towards the Sorbonne to counter protest, leading the rector, Jean Roche, to call in the police to clear the courtyard and prevent clashes. Police officers removed demonstrators in the courtyard from the area and checked their papers. On-lookers, however, thought the police were arresting them and began to throw rocks at the police vans. The first riot began and police officers arrested four students, leading to the initial rallying cry of the campaign “Libérez nos camarades!” (Free our comrades!). The brutal response of the police, which affected innocent bystanders as well as the rioting students, won the student movement broad popular support.

In the weeks that followed protests escalated and gained more popular support, because of continuing police brutality. On May 13th many different sectors of society participated in huge protests against the repression. On May 14th the workers continued to protest, initially with independent strikes and factory occupations, and later with the support and encouragement of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) communist labor union. Within the next week many other sectors, including doctors, lawyers, shop workers and administrators, joined the general strike and staged their own occupations of work places. As the campaign grew in number, the radical students who began the campaign lost control and less radical groups such as the CGT, Confederation Francaise Democratique de Travail (CFDT) socialist union, and leftist political parties began to direct the protest.
The general strike continued through the end of May. On May 30th president De Gaulle announced that there would be new legislative elections unless the people were prevented from voting by “intimidation, intoxication, and tyranny,” clearly referencing the protests. After this announcement the campaign lost most of its momentum, partly because one of its requests had been a new election, and because its complaint that the government was oppressive was not as believable after the president had just called for the people to show their voice through the political system. People began to return to work. However, the radical student groups considered accepting the election to be giving up their ideals and protests continued. Throughout the next two weeks these protests became more violent and the people of Paris turned against the protesters.

In the elections held June 23rd, President De Gaulle's party won the majority, with more seats then they had previously. After the elections life in France pretty much returned to normal. Although the revolt may appear to have been a complete failure, there is some success to acknowledge. Because of the revolt the government did pass many new bills that changed the structure of the university system, and other aspects of social life.

One element of the success of the revolt was the ability of the students to incorporate other parts of society into the campaign. They were able to use the brutal police repression to create moral outrage in the population, instead of letting it create fear. The result differs significantly from the protests that took place in Mexico several months later, in which a brutal massacre shut down the campaign. It is difficult to say if this difference is due to the more repressive nature of the Mexican state and civil society, and how much is due to the choices made by the two student campaigns.

Research Notes

Sources:

Additional Notes:
Edited by Julio Alicea (13/05/2011)
Edited by Max Rennebohm (16/05/2011)
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Shandra Bernath-Plaisted 20/10/2008
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants