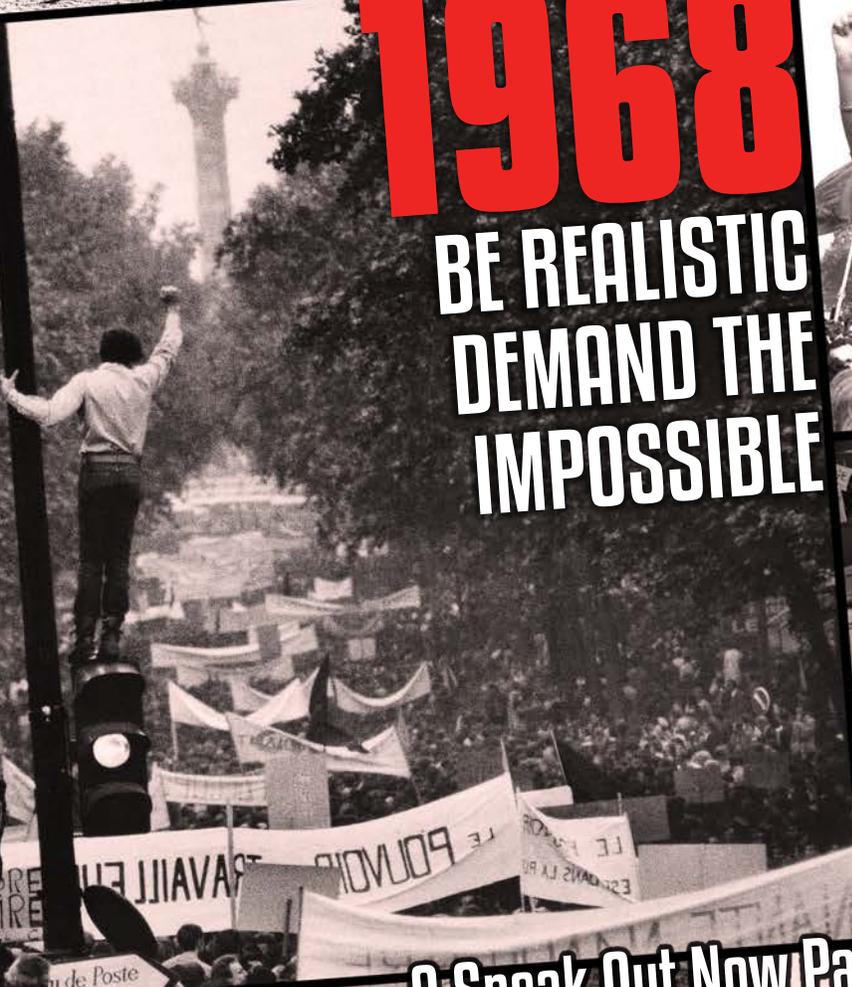


\$3.00

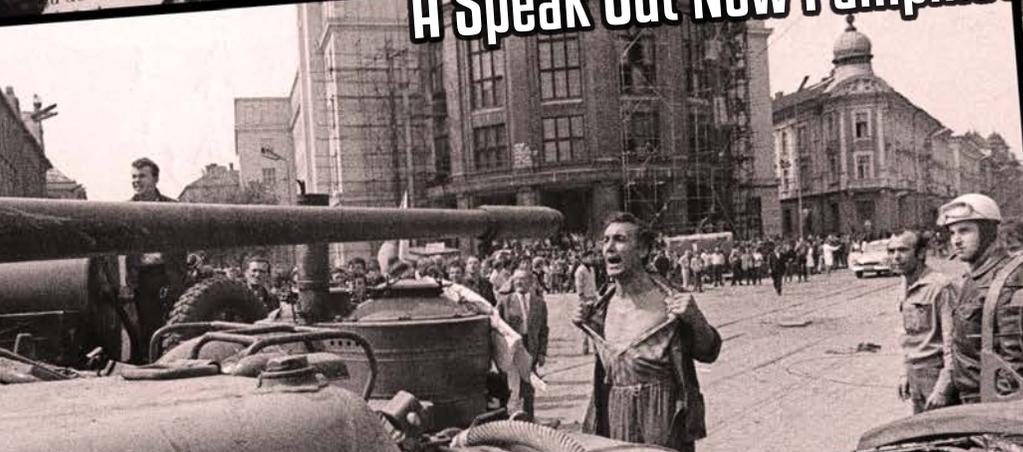


# 1968

BE REALISTIC  
DEMAND THE  
IMPOSSIBLE



A Speak Out Now Pamphlet



*I greet the year 1968 with serenity.*  
–Charles de Gaulle, President of France  
in January 1968

*The student movement was an unexpected  
opponent.*  
–Ousmane Camara, Director of National  
Security of Senegal

*Silence is sometimes a disgrace.*  
–Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Russian dissident poet

*Those who long for peaceful times are longing for not  
the alleviations but the silencing of misery.*  
–Albert Camus, French existentialist poet

*Everything in this world can be robbed and stolen, except one thing;  
this one thing is the love that emanates from a human being towards  
a solid commitment to a conviction or cause.*  
–Ghassan Kanafani, People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine

*Where else could one find such a perfect combination of American values –  
racism, materialism, capitalism – all packaged in one ideal symbol, a woman.*  
–Robin Morgan, feminist activist commenting on the Miss America Pageant

*If you bend your back, people can ride it. But if you stand up straight, people  
can't ride your back. And that's what we did. We stood up straight.*  
–Taylor Rogers, organizer in the Memphis sanitation strike

*Hope determines our priorities. Hope requires you to be active...It reminds us that  
there are moments when even the wildest dreams of revolutionaries become reality.*  
– Ian Birchall, British Trotskyist

*The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in  
Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia;  
Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee – the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."*  
–Martin Luther King Jr.

1968



# Table of Contents

Introduction: “Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible”	4
The War on Vietnam	14
The U.S. Anti-war Movement	19
The Black Freedom Movement	25
Sex, Drugs, Rock ‘n’ Roll, and Politics in the U.S.	32
France: May ‘68	36
Germany: Students Take the Lead	39
The Revolt Across Europe	40
Czechoslovakia and Poland: Revolt Against Soviet Domination	42
Japan: A Militant Student Movement	45
Mexico: “Hunger and misery are the agitators, not us”	48
South and Central America: A Long History of Student Struggles	52
Africa: A Continent in Revolt Against Colonialism	55
The Middle East: A Year of Hope	58
Timeline of Major Events	60
Selected Labor Struggles Around the World	61
Further Reading	64
Speak Out Now: Where We Stand	65

---

# Introduction

## “Be realistic, Demand the Impossible!”

This was a slogan on a wall in Paris in 1968. Today as we face the existential threat of climate change and nuclear war, these words from the past feel quite appropriate.

1968 was a year when people all over the world saw themselves in solidarity, felt their collective power and participated in trying to create a different society. The movements of 1968 were spearheaded by students and young people and later inspired others to join them. This led to some very significant revolts, some which went much further than those who ignited them probably imagined.

There are certain years that are pivotal in history, when cataclysmic changes in consciousness take place and this paradigm shift spreads contagiously. 1968 was probably the best example up until now of a consciousness shift spreading on a global scale. These shifts are difficult to predict, and we don't know what exactly causes them, or the exact moment that they begin, or even how the process really happens. We can describe them after the fact, but no one can really tell why at the same moment, in many different societies, people feel fed up at the same time, experiencing what appears as a spontaneous anger that seems to come out of nowhere. In reality, these events are not precisely simultaneous and those that come first no doubt have some stimulating influence on those that come later. Suddenly, people are ready to try to transform the world when most of the time this would seem unthinkable. These are the most exciting times to be alive!

1848 was such a year in Europe. Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, calls that year “the springtime of the peoples.” It was a time when people all over Europe rose up attempting to overthrow their rulers. They followed the lead of the French Revolution of 1789, fighting for liberty, equality, and fraternity.

1917 was another such year but on a broader scale. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, there was a celebration in many parts of the world in response to the new workers' state. It began with the revolutionary contagion in Europe; the end of the First World War not only sparked a revolution in Russia but also a revolution

in Germany in 1918 and 1919 with the creation of workers' councils or “soviets.” A revolutionary crisis in Central Europe posed the question of workers' power in Finland and Hungary. There were soldiers' mutinies in France and Italy.

Between 1918 and 1920, there was a wave of working-class activism in cities on a global scale – from sit-down strikes, to general strikes and occupations, to the formation of workers' committees in Glasgow, Belfast, Winnipeg, and Barcelona. In Britain, workers launched a wave of strikes led by committees of shop stewards. In the United States, workers in the course of a general strike took over Seattle and ran the city for three days. They included a demand to end attacks on revolutionary Russia.

In Japan, workers seized rice that the capitalists were hoarding. Major anti-imperialist demonstrations took place in China, Egypt, and Iraq, and there was massive civil disobedience against colonial power in India. A huge general strike wracked British-occupied Palestine in 1919. War and economic crisis marked the political movements of 1848 and 1917. The causes of the revolutionary wave of 1968 were quite different.

### The Roots and the Causes of the 1968 Movements

There was a common thread to the 1968 events in the alienation felt by many young people around the world. The movements of 1968 linked together a generation that rejected authority, politicians, and political parties. Many questioned the morality of a society that was based on materialism and consumption. These movements were more a challenge to the values of the capitalist system, rather than a challenge to the system itself.

But the circumstances and characteristics of the events and movements in the different parts of the world were certainly not uniform. Some of the movements we are highlighting in this pamphlet on 1968 began before or continued after 1968. So we are focusing on the part of the story that took place during that year – a snapshot rather than a motion picture.

### In Western Europe, the U.S. and Japan

The revolutionary upheaval that followed 1917 was the result of economic crisis and war. On the contrary, the movements of 1968 in Europe and the U.S. took place during a period of economic growth and relative stability. The U.S. had emerged from World War II as the dominant political, military and economic world power. It experienced a post-war economic boom based on war production as well as the rebuilding of Western Europe. The economies of the West were growing and expanding. Following an immediate post-war strike wave, the working class was relatively quiet, as wages and benefits increased and there was low unemployment.

At this time the Social Democratic and the Stalinist parties fundamentally supported and defended capitalist interests at home and around the world, while holding on to the brand name that originated from their revolutionary past and resonated with their base. The Socialist Parties tried to appear as the representatives of “capitalism with a human face.” The Communist Parties (CPs), though linked to the Soviet Union, had embraced reformism, and had abandoned any revolutionary perspective in spite of their Marxist label and their militant-sounding, class-struggle phraseology. Far from espousing Marx’s “Workers of the world, unite!”, the

CPs became nationalistic: The French Communist Party participated in the government of de Gaulle in 1945, with its nationalist motto, “rebuild France.” At the same time, when it found itself in the opposition because of its connection to the Soviet Union, there were times when the French CP during the Cold War initiated very radical anti-American demonstrations and even strikes. The result was a confusing blend of nationalism, radical anti-Americanism, and reformism, but never communism in its true sense.

The baby boom produced a greater number of youth attending universities than ever before. In 1967, there were 6 million university students in the U.S., 2.5 million in Europe, and 1.5 million in Japan. And they were no longer just the youth from affluent families, but from the middle class and even the working class. They were much less worried than previous generations about their economic prospects. They wanted intellectual and social alternatives to what society was offering them even if they came from affluent backgrounds. They were critical of their parents’ generation, and dissatisfied with the choices in front of them. All of them, regardless of social class, were threatened for the first time by the existential threat of nuclear war. In Japan, Germany, Italy and Spain,



*Protests in Paris, May '68*



*U.S. troops torture Vietnamese villagers*

youth were also revolted by what they saw as their parents' capitulation to fascism and dictatorship.

### **In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe**

The Soviet Union survived World War II and used its military presence in Eastern Europe at the War's end to create a buffer zone to protect it from a future attack from the West. They created puppet states, dominated by the Soviet Union's bureaucracy, which also exploited the resources and controlled the economies of these new Eastern European states.

The youth and intellectuals of the Eastern bloc found it harder and harder to tolerate the domination of the Soviet monolith, which proclaimed socialism but imposed authoritarian, conformist societies. Here there was a yearning for the basic freedoms enjoyed by their peers in Western Europe.

### **In the Rest of the World**

In the post-World War II period, the Indian Revolution of 1947 and the Chinese Revolution of 1949 shifted the world order. The ongoing and successful resistance of the tiny country of Vietnam against the French and later the U.S. military inspired people all over the world. Students and young people around the world saw the Chinese and Vietnamese as a revolutionary leadership.

There were also numerous anti-colonial revolts in Africa, leading to national independence for many African nations. Some of these new states proclaimed themselves socialist or communist, receiving support from the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Some militants in the U.S. Black Liberation Movement identified with these struggles and admired this new generation of African leaders and their governments.

In 1959 the Cuban Revolution also inspired many young people around the world, who saw Fidel Castro and especially Che Guevara as revolutionary heroes. Some U.S. activists made trips to Cuba, helped in the sugar cane harvest, and attended several international conferences there. Fidel called 1968 "the year of the Guerillero" in honor of Che.

### **The Major Struggles of 1968**

#### **Vietnam**

In the Tet offensive of 1968, North Vietnamese forces invaded South Vietnamese cities and even temporarily occupied the U.S. embassy in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. Tet exposed the lie that the U.S. military was winning the war and that the National Liberation Front (NLF) was in retreat. Another sign of U.S. military failure was that there were more U.S. casualties in 1968 than in any other year of the war.

This small country, of around 40 million people, had resisted the French in a war ending in 1954, when the U.S. took over. Despite massive bombings, the use of napalm and herbicides, and an invading force of half a million U.S. troops, the Vietnamese resistance continued. The U.S. puppet government of the South was a corrupt and unpopular dictatorship that ruled with torture and jailed any dissenters. The South Vietnamese army, despite massive U.S. expenditures, was unwilling and unable to fight effectively against the NLF and the North. The NLF organized youth, students, intellectuals, artisans, shopkeepers and peasants who fought back in a guerrilla

war. They lived in forests and hid in tunnels to avoid the massive bombing. They set up networks of supporters throughout the South. The NLF was backed by a more conventional war effort by North Vietnamese troops, which had the support of the Soviet Union and China. The fight by the Vietnamese won the support of people all over the world, and their struggle was interwoven with the other movements of 1968.

### **The U.S.: The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements**

By 1968, The Civil Rights Movement had already been developing for over a decade, focused primarily in the South. It mobilized a mass movement of ordinary people who challenged segregation and the racism that Black people faced. It engaged the participation of some white activists as well, especially students. The Black Power Movement began in the mid-sixties, and to some extent shifted the focus and leadership of the Movement.

In the summers of 1964 through 1967, riots erupted in several U.S. cities. They were an angry reaction to the slow progress in response to the Movement's demands. In March 1968, a federal government report by the Kerner Commission, written primarily in response to the 1967 rebellions, stated: "A new mood has sprung up among Negroes, particularly among the young, in which self-esteem and enhanced racial pride are replacing apathy and submission to 'the system.'"

One month later in April 1968, a wave of surprise and fear went through U.S. ruling circles, when in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., there were urban insurrections in over 100 U.S. cities. U.S. troops were now not only fighting guerrilla warfare in Vietnam but also in major cities at home.

The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements sparked other movements in oppressed communities, including the founding of the Native American group, AIM (American Indian Movement) and the Chicano student walkouts that took place in East Los Angeles in 1968.

### **The Growth of the Anti-war Movement**

From the mid-1960s on there were rallies, demonstrations and protests all over the U.S., on college campuses and in Washington D.C. and other major cities. Religious groups, peace groups, women's groups, student groups, civil rights groups, and at different points individual

leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. connected the fight for civil rights with the fight against the U.S. war on Vietnam. The opposition spread like wildfire, and even well-known figures opposed the war. This included Dr. Benjamin Spock, a nationally known pediatrician. In academia, linguist Noam Chomsky and historian Howard Zinn spoke out and participated in anti-war rallies and protests.

The anti-war sentiment spread to the military. Some of the people being drafted refused induction into the military and some left the country. U.S. troops became less and less reliable, some actively speaking out against the war, and some openly demonstrating against it. In San Francisco in 1968, in a demonstration of 15,000 protesters, there were 500 active duty GIs. Veterans played a big role in recounting the horrors of the war and exposing what the U.S. military was doing. Some deserted or refused to follow orders. Some went much



*U.S. cities in flames after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968*

further and used grenades to attack their officers instead of against the Vietnamese. This was called “fragging,” and showed not just dissatisfaction but active opposition to the U.S. military command. Hundreds of underground newspapers by and for soldiers appeared in Vietnam and at military bases across the U.S.

### Student Struggles

A student movement in the U.S. had been active since the early 1960s. SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) had chapters all over the country and organized on and off the campuses. In 1968, the student movement engaged in a number of important fights. On February 8, Black students at South Carolina State University protested against a segregated bowling alley. Police opened fire, killing three students and wounding 27 others. In New York City, at Columbia University, a private college, there was a student protest movement in part over the University’s plans to build a gym in the neighboring Black community of Harlem, displacing residents. Students also protested the University’s links with the U.S. Defense Department and the C.I.A. Protesters called for “two, three, many Columbia’s,” echoing the call for “two, three, many Vietnams.” There was also an important student protest in December at San Francisco State College begun by Black students, who demanded Black Studies courses. They sparked a larger coalition of students of color who demanded an Ethnic Studies program. The

administration responded with a police occupation and temporarily closed down the campus, but the students eventually won the department they fought for.

### Beginnings of the Women’s Liberation Struggle

On September 7, 1968 feminists organized a protest of the Miss America Pageant, a beauty contest in Atlantic City, to challenge stereotypical images of women. Another group of protesters challenged the racist nature of the Pageant by holding a separate Black Miss America event. Robin Morgan, a feminist leader at the protest, summed up the problems: “Where else could one find such a perfect combination of American values – racism, materialism, capitalism – all packaged in one ideal symbol, a woman.” This marked a public announcement of the new Women’s Liberation Movement.

Women activists in the student movement and the Civil Rights Movement were discussing the sexist attitudes of male activists within these movements and challenging the commonly expected role of women activists as the makers of coffee, the typists of leaflets, and as sexual objects.

### Counter-culture and the Arts

After the drought brought on by the McCarthy period and the Cold War, there were poets, writers, artists, musicians and theater troupes that linked culture and art to social activism and played a role in supporting both the



*U.C. Berkeley student demonstration against the war on Vietnam*



*Anti-war protest outside U.S. embassy in London*



*London Police beating protesters*

Civil Rights and anti-war movements. Poets like Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and folksingers like Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Joan Baez participated in the different social movements. The San Francisco Mime Troupe put on political theater for free in the parks. There was also a thriving underground press with newspapers that came out locally all over the U.S., written and produced by activists.

Rock'n'Roll combined blues, country and urban street corner singing to provide a cross-racial genre of music. Some of the music had an international flavor, blending different cultures as the Beatles did with India's Ravi Shankar and Moroccan musicians. Hollywood movies of 1968 like "The Graduate" and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" reflected the social issues of the day.

There were attempts at establishing communes and collective living, which challenged traditional family life and gender roles. Hippies talked of peace, love, music, drugs and sex, while the Yippies combined all the former with their own brand of political activism.

### **The Role of Television and the Press**

Another important factor that contributed to the U.S. movements of 1968 was television. TV was a growing phenomenon that created a global village where people could watch what was going on both in the U.S. and all over the world, close to the time when the events actually happened. For example, TV allowed people

to witness and admire the grassroots activism of the Civil Rights Movement as it challenged Southern segregation. It exposed the brutal violence of the U.S. military in Vietnam. It made people aware of the French demonstrations and general strike and the Soviets sending their tanks against the people of Czechoslovakia.

In 1968, U.S. press and TV journalists were regarded more as thoughtful and knowledgeable interpreters of the news rather than as entertainers or people selling products. The media was not yet as controlled, distilled and packaged as it is today. When Walter Cronkite, a well-known and respected CBS News anchor, came back from a trip to Vietnam and said that the U.S. could not win the war, it had a big impact on public opinion and sent shock waves through the political establishment.

### **France**

Student movements in the U.S., Japan and Germany, as well as French strikes in 1967 and the beginning of 1968, preceded the student movement in France. Then French students began protests against the educational system, which was highly centralized, elitist and conservative. Students demonstrated and organized meetings and occupied their universities. The protests about education quickly spread to broader issues. This won the students support from other sections of the population. Activists wrote and printed 100,000 copies of 350 different posters, printed at the Ecole des Beaux Arts that they pasted up



*Nonviolent protest in Prague against the 1968 Soviet invasion*

on the walls of Paris. Journalists and technicians also produced films that chronicled these events.

The students fought against the police behind barricades with cobblestones. The pitched battles in the student Latin Quarter on the Left Bank affected the rest of the French population. After police repression on the night of May 11, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the student leaders, called on the rest of the population for support. Two days later the student struggles ignited a general strike by French workers.

### **Czechoslovakia**

Not since the 1950s had there been real open opposition movements to Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. The events leading to the Prague Spring began in December 1967, when some Communist Party (CP) reformers reshuffled the Communist Party deck, choosing Alexander Dubček as the new First Secretary of the Czech Communist Party. Dubček, describing the new situation, said “The people were dissatisfied with the party leadership. We couldn’t change the people, so we changed the leaders.”

The changes initiated by CP reformers followed several years of struggles to win economic and political reforms. They were supported and extended by a movement of young people and a big part of the population, who actively challenged state censorship, pushing for a free

press and open discussions on radio and TV. They also pushed for political reforms, which would allow for democratic, popular participation in the country’s political life.

The Prague movement continued for seven months. This act of courage by the people of Czechoslovakia inspired people all over Eastern Europe. In March, students in Poland carried a sign: “Poland Awaits its Dubček.”

The movement was eventually put down by a Soviet invasion in August with tanks and half a million troops. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, like that in Hungary in 1956, exposed the hypocritical claim that the Soviet Union represented socialism and the interests of the workers of the world.

### **Mexico**

In the summer of 1968, students in Mexico City began a movement in response to the violent repression by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) government, which had been in power since the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1929. The movement called into question the right of the PRI’s continued one-party rule.

Students occupied schools and universities around the country to demand change. After a brutal repression by

the police force, the students' families, joined by workers and peasants, demonstrated in support of the students.

On the eve of the summer Olympics in Mexico, there was a brutal attack by the Mexican police and armed forces. They fired on a crowd of 15,000 in Mexico City, killing hundreds of people and arresting thousands. Students' bodies were dragged from the square in nets dangling from army helicopters. It is believed that some bodies were dumped in the Gulf of Mexico. The PRI government was desperate to hide their crimes from their own people as well as the international athletes and world dignitaries and press arriving at the Olympics. The movement of 1968 didn't remove the PRI from power, but it certainly discredited its rule for many people across the country and the world.

### **Around the Globe**

In many other countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Middle East, there were also student demonstrations, marches and protests, as well as strikes and rebellions involving workers and the general population.

1968 produced an international network of struggles. A global movement supported the struggle of the people of Vietnam against U.S. imperialism. The struggle of the Vietnamese gave hope to those still living under imperialism's rule. It inspired students and many others. An entire generation, on every continent, shouted similar anti-war slogans. On April 26, 1968 there were anti-war protests in Paris, Tokyo, Prague, and Rome. In New York City, 90,000 people gathered to hear Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King Jr., read the anti-war speech he had written before he was killed. Many militant Black activists in the U.S. identified themselves with the struggle by the people of Vietnam. One button put out by SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) proclaimed: "No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger".

During 1968, a number of different movements began to work together. The Memphis sanitation workers' strike, with the participation of Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) activists, linked the Civil Rights Movement and a struggle of Black workers. The SCLC's call for a Poor People's Campaign to go to Washington D.C. linked the Civil Rights Movement to a broader constituency fighting against poverty.

The Peace and Freedom Party in California created an alliance between Black activists and white activists from different movements who were fed up with the limited choice between the Democrats and Republicans. They ran Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver as a candidate for president. This effort spread to other places and raised the idea that third party politics were possible.

U.S. Black athletes called for an international boycott of the summer Olympics in Mexico because the Olympic Committee had agreed to allow an all-white South African team to compete. Their boycott was supported by some African countries and by other athletes from around the world. This protest was not well-known until two Black U.S. athletes raised their fists in a Black Power salute as they received their Olympic medals on the winner's podium – an event shown on TV.

The French example inspired youth around the whole world. As they watched the French events unfold, they had the feeling that anything was possible. "The Black Dwarf," a British left-wing paper, ran the headline: "We shall fight, we shall win, Paris, London, Rome, Berlin." Protests and in some cases even strikes in support of the French movement took place all over Europe.

In France, the struggles by students led to a general strike involving seven million workers. The strike by woman factory workers in a Ford plant in Dagenham, England quickly showed the linkage between the struggles of the working class and the fight by women for equal rights.

When Danny Cohn-Bendit, an anarchist activist, was arrested in Frankfurt, Germany, he appeared in court at the same time as a trial began for student activist leaders in Warsaw, Poland. In court, when Cohn-Bendit was asked to state his name, he said "Kuron and Modzelewski," the names of the Polish student leaders.

### **Consequences for U.S. Imperialism**

The U.S. war in Vietnam later became the rack that temporarily broke the back of U.S. imperialism, showing that a tiny country could defeat a giant by its courage and resistance. The war and the resulting dissent caused divisions in the U.S. ruling class and split the Democratic Party.

In March, Eugene McCarthy challenged President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Following this primary result, Johnson shocked the

country, announcing in a special speech on TV that he would not accept the Democratic Party's nomination and would not run for President in the coming elections. Robert Kennedy, seeing the disarray, proclaimed his candidacy and began his campaign, only to be assassinated in June in California. After King, he became the second major U.S. figure killed in 1968.

In August, the Democratic Party Convention nominated Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president, as thousands protested the Vietnam War in a Chicago park and in the streets. They were beaten and gassed by Chicago Mayor Daley's police. People watched the Convention and the police riot on TV. After this fiasco, and the refusal of the Democrats to oppose the war, many decided that they would refuse to vote in the coming election. When the dust settled, it was the right-wing Republican, Richard M. Nixon, who won the presidency.

### **Balance Sheet of 1968**

In 1968, much like today, it was much easier for people to agree on what they were against than to decide exactly what they were for. The distrust of organizations and leaders often meant a lack of order and cohesion. Anarchist militants like Danny Cohn-Bendit were seen as spokespeople, particularly in the media. The lack of viable alternative groups and new leaders allowed the existing major political parties and personalities to continue to dominate the political scene. For example, due in part to what appeared as his support for the student movement, François Mitterrand, a leader of the French Socialist Party, was able to win the support of sections of the 1968 New Left in the early 1970s.

Some well-known activists of 1968 later became politicians, enthusiastically serving the ruling class. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a Marxist intellectual, became a neo-liberal President of Brazil in the 1990s, and Chandrike Bandaraiké, a Sri Lankan student activist in Paris in 1968, became the neo-liberal anti-union president of Sri Lanka. Tom Hayden, one of the main U.S. student leaders, became a Democratic Party politician in California.

In France, the activism of 1968 challenged the stranglehold over the French working class by the Communist Party and its affiliated labor union, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). The movement

of 1968 modified the map of the French left, giving a boost to the revolutionary groups.

Looking back, we can see that the events in Czechoslovakia were a major contributing factor to the next 20 years of opposition that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet empire.

While the PRI continued in power for decades, the student struggles in Mexico further undermined its legitimacy. And after 1968, it was no longer able to continue its rule unopposed.

### **The Role of Revolutionaries**

For young people looking for revolutionary ideas, Maoism held a great attraction. Mao Zedong, chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and ruler of the Chinese state, had openly declared his opposition to imperialism, supported the Vietnamese NLF, and even declared his support for Black liberation in the U.S. Maoist groups proliferated around the world, either as nationalist movements, splits from the official Communist Parties, or parties formed from scratch by young activists. These organizations carried out a range of daring activities. In the U.S., Maoist groups were very active in the anti-war movement. They organized resistance within the U.S. military and worked to expose the brutal atrocities committed by the U.S. military. Some groups, most famously the Weathermen, carried out bombings and attacks on the symbols of U.S. police and military power. Other Maoist organizations carried out important activity in the working class, in factories and coal mines, and some of the best militants of the Black struggle were drawn to these groups. But in spite of their heroic and honest attempts at revolutionary activity, these groups were hampered by their political framework. Maoism was a nationalist movement developed in the midst of the struggle of the Chinese peasantry against colonial domination, and had little to offer strategically to the working class in the industrial centers of Europe and the United States.

The Trotskyist movement around the world was relatively small, and while their militants participated in the movements of the '60s, they were rarely in a position to offer an alternative perspective. They had little impact in the working class, focusing instead on the student and middle-class movements of the time. Even worse, when the Trotskyist movement did have an influence, it often

looked to social forces other than the working class, claiming they were the new revolutionary vanguard. This included Ho Chi Minh, Mao, Castro and Che Guevara in the Third World. They romanticized guerrilla warfare or terrorist activity. And in the West they often continued to look to traditional Left and social democratic organizations like the Greens, Socialist Parties (SPs), or in the U.S., the Democratic Party. The SWP (Socialist Workers Party) in the U.S. played a leading role in the anti-war movement. But their strategy was to build broad-based coalitions, which in some cases included anti-war politicians from the Democratic Party. They often organized rallies and demonstrations in such a way that no one would have known that revolutionaries were an important component of this organizing.

Nonetheless, 1968 did bring revolutionary ideas back into the mainstream and exposed young and working-class people to politics left of the CPs and SPs. As a result of the movements of 1968, the years after did allow for a much more visible presence of different revolutionary groups.

The events and movements of 1968 didn't transform the world, but they did allow many people at the time to view it through a new lens. Under the grim surface of the society, these movements showed that there was hope and real possibilities for a different world. 1968 was a time of joyous experimentation, a challenge to business as usual, and an attempt to construct a freer and collaborative society. The events of the year showed that revolts can appear very suddenly in what may seem to be a period of calm.

The movements of 1968 demonstrate that there are real opportunities to change this society. The problem today, as then, is to build the kind of revolutionary organizations, which have deep roots in the working class and the oppressed of the world. What is needed is a revolutionary organization built on an international scale that is ready and able to lead future struggles to go beyond the limits of reform. Then we will make the impossible a reality, as the generation of 1968 imagined and demanded.



*Protesters flood the streets of Paris, May '68*

---

# The War on Vietnam

The U.S. war in Vietnam had a transformative effect on the political landscape of the world. By the end of 1968, the struggle of the Vietnamese against U.S. domination not only represented the possibility of resisting the forces of the most powerful imperialist power, but of actually defeating the U.S. The brutality of the war had been exposed to the world and there was deepening opposition. 1968 was a turning point.

## Background

For the people of Vietnam, this war was a continuation of a decades-long fight against foreign domination, mainly against the French who claimed the region as its colony. At the end of World War II, there was a power vacuum. No foreign power or Vietnamese political grouping was in control of the country. The Viet Minh, a coalition of nationalist groups, was the most powerful force. It had eliminated its opposition, turning its forces against the revolutionary organizations that had been organizing in the working class, murdering their members or driving them into hiding.

The Viet Minh was prepared to work out a relationship with France for governing the country. The French refused, wanting to reestablish their colonial control. The armed nationalist forces of the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, mobilized against the French. The possibility for French rule was ended in 1954 at the battle of Dien

Bien Phu, when after a two-month-long battle the French military was defeated.

Direct U.S. involvement had already begun. In 1950, in addition to sending weaponry (including the offer of nuclear bombs), the U.S. sent military advisors to assist the French. The U.S. ended up paying for 80 percent of the costs of the French war in Vietnam.

Under a United Nations agreement, Vietnam was divided into two provisional states, North and South, with elections scheduled to unify the country in 1956. By 1956 the U.S. was the dominant imperialist force in southern Vietnam. It was clear that Ho Chi Minh would win the popular vote for President, so the U.S.-backed dictator in the South, Ngo Dinh Diem, rejected the UN agreement. The U.S. War in Vietnam began.

Many people in the South, who had fought against the French and had been waiting for the unification of the country, left their homes and went to the forests to fight a guerrilla war. In 1960, the NLF (National Liberation Front) was established to bring down the government of South Vietnam. This began the military struggle that would continue until 1975. It became a “proxy war,” with the U.S. attempting to establish its control over the South through various South Vietnamese dictatorships. The government of the North, with the support of China and the Soviet Union, attempted to mobilize the people of Vietnam under the slogan “Defend the North, Free the South, and Unite the Country.” The North Vietnamese government began to send trained fighters to build up its forces in the South.

## 1968: A Turning Point

By 1968, the U.S. government had spent several years using the most powerful military in the world to unleash its destructive forces against this small nation of 40 million people. U.S. troops, which numbered 700 in 1959, were increased to 536,000 by 1968, the largest number the U.S. would deploy in this war. More than a million tons of bombs and rockets had been dropped on the North. Movements demanding an end to the war were growing around the world.



*Thích Quảng Đức, a Buddhist monk, burns himself to death in protest against U.S. imperialism, 1963*



*U.S. bombing leaves the city of Hue in ruins*

The war had become a central focus of political life in the U.S. Increasing numbers of wounded U.S. soldiers were returning home, bringing with them the horrors of the slaughters in which they had been involved.

### **The Year Begins: Tet**

At the start of 1968, public opinion in the U.S. regarding the war was rocked by the Tet Offensive. Early in January, General Westmoreland, who headed the U.S. military occupation, had said that with an additional 206,000 troops a U.S. military victory was assured. Soon after, on January 21, 1968, North Vietnamese forces began a massive artillery bombardment of the U.S. Marine garrison at Khe Sanh, located on the principal road from northern South Vietnam into Laos. The attack drew more than 30,000 U.S. forces into the defense of this key base. And over the previous year, the NLF forces from the North had been moved into position to prepare for another extraordinary attack against U.S. forces.

The observance of Tet, the lunar New Year, provided a distraction with celebrations all over the country. On January 31, the NLF began the offensive with the goal of sparking a massive popular uprising to defeat the U.S.-trained South Vietnamese Army, and drive the U.S. from Vietnam.

Attacks were launched on 36 of 44 provincial capitals and 64 of 242 district towns, as well as 5 of South Vietnam's 6 autonomous cities, among them Hue and Saigon. The forces of the South Vietnamese and the U.S. were taken by surprise. Dramatic footage of the uprising was seen around the world. The claims of an

imminent U.S. victory were shattered; it was clear that the nationalist forces were far from defeated. North Vietnamese forces attacked strategic military and political sites. In Saigon, the capital of the South, the targets were largely political, including the dramatic seizure of both the U.S. Embassy, and the National Radio Station, where they played a tape recording of Ho Chi Minh, calling for a national uprising. Those two occupations only lasted six hours, but the political impact was enormous. The fighting continued elsewhere for weeks. It was clear to the world that a U.S.-led victory was far from certain.

The heroic efforts of the nationalist forces gained increasing attention and support from Americans. The media played an increasingly important role in portraying the war to the people in the United States. The photograph of the street execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém, a NLF fighter, by Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, South Vietnam's chief of National Police, symbolized the ruthlessness of the regime in the South. For increasing numbers of people, the war in Vietnam was not just a mistaken foreign policy – it was criminal. And for some activists, it no longer was a matter of calling for a U.S. withdrawal. Increasing numbers of anti-war activists wanted to see the U.S. beaten. Although the NLF did not achieve a military victory with the Tet Offensive, it was a major political victory. It raised the real possibility that the forces of the most powerful country in the world could be defeated.

The Tet Offensive was not the only political blow to supposed U.S. invincibility. The week before there had been another challenge to U.S. military dominance in the region. On January 23, North Korean forces captured a ship, the USS Pueblo, which was accompanying a U.S.



*Execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém*



*U.S. planes spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam*

Navy spy ship. The *Pueblo* had intruded into North Korean waters several times, a fact which its logbook confirmed. The North Koreans released the crew after 11 months but kept the ship. The *Pueblo* still remains in North Korea and is on display as part of the North Korean War Museum.

While the Tet Offensive did not bring an end to the war – the U.S. war in Vietnam would continue for another seven years – it was a political turning point. Both forces were under great strain. The forces of the NLF had lost 50,000 to 75,000 troops during the Tet Offensive, which had taken a deep toll. The merciless bombing campaign in the North, known as Rolling Thunder, had devastated parts of the North and drained its resources. The massive bombing continued through most of 1968 with enormous B-52 bombers carrying out 20,500 bombing missions, which dropped 533,000 tons of bombs in one year! This surpassed the 503,000 tons dropped in the Pacific region during the Second World War.

In addition, “Operation Popeye” had been in place since the previous year (and would continue through 1972 in Laos and Cambodia as well.) This was a highly classified weather modification program, a cloud seeding operation in which lead iodide and silver iodide were dispersed in the atmosphere in order to increase rainfall. The goal was to extend the monsoon season, specifically over areas of the “Ho Chi Minh Trail”, where troops and supplies were moved from the North to the South. The increased rainfall caused landslides, and washed out river

crossings and bridges. It also disrupted rice production, and other agriculture in the North.

Despite having far superior technological forces, and the willingness to unleash an unimaginable amount of destruction on the people of Vietnam, the U.S. was fighting a losing war. Those who had been sent to fight it learned this first-hand. In the eyes of the vast majority of people in the South, the enemy was the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) the U.S. had tried to pull together. The U.S. military faced a guerrilla war, involving much of the population. This included guerrilla fighters, children providing logistical information, and people helping with the movement of food and ammunition to support organized Northern troops. The bombing campaign, and the use of chemical weapons like napalm, a sticky petroleum bomb which burned everything it came into contact with – from trees to village houses to humans – gave people no choice but to resist. Their crops were destroyed by horrific herbicides like Agent Orange, the full impact of which wouldn’t be known for a few more years.

Whole villages moved underground as the U.S. bombing tried to drive them from their lands. U.S. forces rained up to 500 rockets a day on the region. Instead of fleeing, the villagers built tunnels. The village of Vĩnh Mốc, close to the border of North Vietnam, was an impressive example. This village of 60 families built an underground tunnel complex to shelter themselves from the incessant U.S. bombing. The tunnels, which led to rooms for eating, sleeping, and conducting daily activities were more than 30 feet beneath the surface. Failing at first to destroy these shelters, the U.S. built bombs that could reach further into the ground. So the people dug deeper, building an entire underground village as far down as 75 feet. This subterranean world had three levels, and took six years to build by hand. There were wells for water, kitchens, rooms for each family, storage for food and weapons, and a clinic. At least 17 children were born there. Children played, running through the tunnels in total darkness. The only bomb that ever penetrated the shelter killed no one, and the hole it made was turned into a ventilation shaft. Around 400 people from 60 families frequently took refuge there until 1972; their longest continuous stay underground was for 18 months.

A large U.S. Army base was established in the South, in a suburb of the capital, Saigon, in the district of Cu Chi.

Beneath the Cu Chi district was a sophisticated system of tunnels and rooms running for a length of 200 miles! The complex of tunnels linked the region together for communication as well as the for the transit of people and supplies. It had as many as four levels, with elaborate ventilation systems. There were military hospitals to care for the wounded, clinics, barracks for traveling soldiers, sleeping rooms, theaters, kitchens, weapons factories, wells, and more. All these were dug by hand with the dirt being disposed of at night, spreading it on the fields or in nearby rivers.

At the end of the Tet Offensive, Vietnamese fighting units carried out successful attacks on the U.S. military base at Cu Chi and then quickly disappeared into their underground network.

As the war went on, the U.S. government developed increasingly destructive weaponry to try to destroy the will of the Vietnamese people, as a military defeat of Vietnam now seemed impossible. Among them were anti-personnel weapons, which took on increasingly horrific forms – like cluster bombs, or the “pineapple bomb.” Gloria Emerson, a reporter in Vietnam, witnessed their use: “An American plane could drop a thousand pineapples over an area the size of four football fields. In a single air strike two hundred and fifty thousand pellets were spewed in a horizontal pattern over the land below, hitting everything on the ground.” This was followed by cluster bombs with plastic fragments or “dragon teeth” that ripped through the body and could not be detected by x-rays. The idea was to force increasing numbers of Vietnamese people to attend to those slowly dying, which would remove them from other combat operations as well as weaken their morale. Usually at least 25% of the bomblets failed to explode. Children were most likely to pick up the often brightly colored, unexploded ordinance, making them the most common casualties. This situation continues today, with unexploded bombs remaining throughout the former war zones.

### **The Impact of the War in the U.S.**

The growing anti-war sentiment and movement impacted politics in the U.S. Following the Tet Offensive, and facing the growing opposition to the war around the world, the political will of the U.S. ruling class to continue the war was eroding. There was a growing unrest among U.S. troops, and the massive urban rebellions following

the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, made the prospects of finding young men willing to submit to the discipline of the military increasingly unlikely.

The Democratic Party, the party that had expanded the war, was facing major internal disruptions. Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy and Senator Robert Kennedy, the former Attorney General, both announced their candidacy for president, running as anti-war candidates. President Johnson relieved General Westmoreland of his command of U.S. troops in Vietnam, and a little over a week later announced that he would not seek another term as president.

On May 10, U.S. and North Vietnamese delegations met in Paris to discuss a U.S. withdrawal. Negotiations dragged on for five months. On September 30, the 900th U.S. aircraft was shot down over North Vietnam.

On November 1, President Johnson announced the end of the three-and-a-half year bombing of North Vietnam known as Operation Rolling Thunder.

The day before the November Presidential Election, as an agreement was being reached, the representatives of the South Vietnamese government walked away from



*Devastation from U.S. bombing*



*Vietnamese guerrilla fighters*

the negotiating table without any explanation. Days before, a representative of the Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon communicated with top South Vietnamese officials. He told them that Nixon would win the election and that they should stall on further negotiations until after the elections to get a better deal with Nixon in the White House. Whether this had an impact on ending the war, with the majority of U.S. troops leaving in 1973, and a total withdrawal two years later, is an open question.

From that point on, the question confronting those in the U.S. government and the military was how to withdraw. At least another million Vietnamese were killed before the U.S. finally withdrew its last troops on March 29, 1973. The war would finally end two years later with the last Marines leaving the U.S. embassy on April 30, 1975. The combined forces of the people in the South and the North had defeated the U.S. attempt to control Vietnam. The organized forces from the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, became the political power uniting the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The people of Vietnam paid an enormous price for this war: an estimated 2 to 3 million civilians were killed, another 5.3 million injured, and about 11 million were displaced. Much of the country was left in ruins as a result of the massive bombing, with 5 million tons of defoliants

sprayed throughout the forests and agricultural regions in 1968 alone. Millions of acres of forest were destroyed. Agent Orange, one of the main defoliants used, contains a powerful carcinogen, dioxin, which causes cancer and severe birth defects. It is estimated that the spraying of Agent Orange led to the death or severe disability of more than 400,000 people. More than 500,000 children in Vietnam were born with mild to severe birth defects as a result of contamination. Agent Orange alone killed 10 times more people than all other chemical weapons combined.

The U.S. government denied the existence of any impact of Agent Orange on U.S. troops who had been exposed. And it wasn't until a number of years after the war that veterans' groups who returned to Vietnam were able to receive support from Vietnamese organizations that were dealing with the affliction. It was only in 2015 that the the U.S. government was finally forced to acknowledge the impact of Agent Orange on U.S. troops and provide some support through the Veterans Administration.

### **The Impact of the War in the Region – Laos, Cambodia and Thailand**

The Vietnam War was not limited to the territory of Vietnam. The conflict engulfed the surrounding states. This was not known to most people outside of the region. When these "secret wars" became known to more people it had a huge impact on the anti-war movement.

More than 500 thousand tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia and close to three million tons were dropped on Laos. Targeted areas were hit by an average of one B-52 bomb-load every eight minutes, 24 hours a day. Huge areas, like the Plain of Jars in central Laos, were totally destroyed. Laos was the most heavily bombed country in history. Nearly a ton of bombs was dropped for every person in Laos! In addition to suffering massive bombing raids, Laos and Cambodia had millions of gallons of highly poisonous herbicides sprayed on their fields and forests.

Thailand was ruled by a military dictatorship and much of the country was turned over to the U.S. war effort. Thai troops fought alongside U.S. troops in Vietnam. Almost 50,000 U.S. military personnel, mostly air force, were stationed in Thailand. It was the main airbase for the U.S. to conduct its bombing raids.

---

# The U.S. Anti-War Movement

The U.S. war in Vietnam was central to many of the movements of 1968. The growing awareness of the brutality and disregard for life displayed by the U.S. military, carried out in the name of spreading democracy, shattered the illusions many people had about the U.S.

Most people's opposition to the war began as a moral outrage. The relentless fight of the Vietnamese people served as an inspiration in their opposition to the war. And as the war went on, it became clear that the U.S. military could not emerge victorious without escalating the war to a point that would provoke open conflict with the Soviet Union or China.

The growing anti-war movement put the U.S. government on trial in the court of public opinion. No longer could it claim the moral authority of being the world's greatest democracy. The government had lost its credibility in the eyes of millions of people who witnessed the atrocities of the war on television every day. Many people experienced the horror of the war when young men they knew returned from Vietnam, often shattered physically and mentally by their experience. By 1968, the war had created a deep divide within the U.S., which became reflected on the political and social level.

But it took a while to reach this point. The anti-war movement started out small – 100 people protesting on Boston Commons in 1965, and similarly sized demonstrations around the country. However, the opposition grew and spread. It included very diverse segments of the U.S. population, and a cast of characters that few would have expected to be active against the war and the U.S. government.

The religious community played its part, exposing the immorality of the U.S. war against the Vietnamese people. Two priests, the Berrigan brothers, engaged in anti-war actions. In the first one, Philip Berrigan, along with other activists, went into a draft board office in Baltimore, Maryland, and drenched draft records in blood. While out on bail for that action, Philip Berrigan, joined by his brother Daniel and others, went to the draft board in Catonsville Maryland. They removed the draft records and burned them outside while reporters watched. Norman Morrison, a 32-year-old Quaker pacifist and

father of three, doused himself with kerosene, lit himself on fire, and burned to death in front of the Pentagon.

Women's groups like WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and Women's Strike for Peace provided draft counseling for young men facing the draft. They also organized vigils and anti-war marches. Many artists became politically active, expressing their opposition publically. Singers like Eartha Kitt, writers like Norman Mailer, filmmakers and actors like Jane Fonda, poets like Amiri Baraka, playwrights like Arthur Miller, and journalists like Seymour Hersh used their talents and their stature to publicly expose the war atrocities and build the anti-war movement. Academics like Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky went to anti-war protests and risked their academic careers to oppose the war. Benjamin Spock, a respected pediatrician whose book was the childrearing bible for millions, spoke out against the war.

These voices were joined by two other major forces: those of the student and youth movement, and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. Student activists spearheaded campus protests, as well as local and national anti-war demonstrations. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Muhammad Ali, the world champion boxer, spoke out to oppose the war. The leaders of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee) actively organized against the war and produced a button that read: "No Vietnamese ever called me a Nigger." These leaders and groups greatly contributed by exposing the link between the war in Vietnam and the racist war against Black people and other people of color at home.

The third and significant element in bringing the war to an end was the role played by those who made up the ranks of the U.S. military. In Vietnam, these ranks were made up largely of young men who had been drafted. Their views regarding the war might have differed, and they might have been convinced of the propaganda they received in basic training. But being "in country" in Vietnam was a different matter altogether. The fighting ability and dedication of the Vietnamese who were in a struggle to defend their homeland was an outstanding fact. The anti-war sentiment that most soldiers had been exposed to stateside gave them a framework to understand

their place in the war once they were there: being used for a fight that had nothing to do with the values they were supposedly defending. It was their opposition, and their contempt and disregard for the authority of their officers, that led to a deep erosion inside the U.S. military. These three elements – the Vietnamese resistance, the deep opposition to the war, and the opposition within the military itself – brought an end to the war, and led to the victory of the Vietnamese people over the most powerful military in the world.

### **Student Movements Set the Country Alight**

Student activism grew in the 1960s and played an important role in the events of 1968. After World War II, university education became more accessible and the demographics of students attending college also changed. While a majority still came from wealthy families, there were more middle-class and working-class students able to attend college due to low tuition costs and government programs such as the GI Bill. These students were not as impacted by the fears of anti-communism that were used to stifle dissent during the McCarthy period their parents had lived through.

With the U.S. economy expanding and low unemployment, many students were less worried about their future prospects than former generations. First-generation college students were now exposed to new ideas and politics. Students of color drew inspiration from the anti-colonial revolutionary movements and the Civil Rights Movement. By 1968, some students found the idea of becoming an activist much more appealing than

simply looking to settle down and get a good job. Many wondered, what good was “The American Dream” if it was taking place in such an openly racist and oppressive society?

### **Students in the Anti-War Movement**

By 1968, there was a layer of experienced student activists coming out of a number of different social movements. In 1960, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was formed. This became a national radical student organization that was active on and off campuses over the next nine years. SDS, student activists in the Civil Rights Movement, and student activists around the free speech movement in Berkeley all brought student activism front and center in 1968. In the mid-60s, the student movement actively began to oppose the Vietnam War and played an important role in undermining popular support for the war.

Student participation in the anti-war movement grew however, because of another important factor affecting young people – the draft. The U.S. war machine relied on conscripting young men into the military, making the war a matter of life and death for young people. Going to college meant a temporary deferment while they were enrolled in school. Young male students felt real pressure, because if they flunked out of college they could be on the next flight to Vietnam. These factors forced students who otherwise might have chosen to ignore the reality of the war to confront it head-on.

The students and young people who actively protested against the war in Vietnam made it easier for others to express their opposition as well. This student movement helped some in the military to find their voice and join the protests against the war.

### **Columbia, Orangeburg and San Francisco**

Young people organized on their campuses and where they lived, around local issues, educational issues, and of course the war in Vietnam. The following three examples give a sense of the issues and organized activism on U.S. college campuses in 1968.

One of the most important struggles took place at Columbia University, an elite private college in New York City. Throughout the spring and into the summer of 1968, the University became a flashpoint for large-scale protests against racism and the University’s links to the



*Women burn their sons’ and husbands’ draft cards in protest*

Vietnam War. Starting in 1965, deals had been struck for the University to build a gymnasium in Morningside Park, a public park which served Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood. The gymnasium's construction was opposed by the Harlem community because it was a land grab in which public property was being appropriated by the University. Harlem community members were going to have a "back door entrance" and "community facilities", in the basement of the gym. This was an unofficial way to segregate the gym and give Harlem residents minimal access to the facility. By 1968, the Morningside project was known in Harlem as "Gym Crow."

In 1967, student activists from SDS discovered documents linking Columbia University to the IDA (Institute for Defense Analyses), which was a weapons research think tank connected to the U.S. military. Up to this point, the University had not made its involvement public knowledge. Students were outraged that their university was helping to develop weapons technology during the war in Vietnam.

On February 28, 1968, about 150 people participated in a demonstration against the Morningside Park project. 12 students were arrested. A stone's throw away, about 200 SDS members protested against Dow Chemical recruitment on their campus. Dow Chemical was the company responsible for helping to create "Agent

### **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**

Students for a Democratic Society was a national student activist organization that started at the University of Michigan in 1960. By 1968, it had blossomed into an organization of thousands of members across the country and many of the most militant student activists and student movements in the US were connected to SDS. The initial growth of the organization centered on supporting the Civil Rights Movement and evolved to focus on the movement against the war in Vietnam. By the late '60s and early '70s, as the war in Vietnam wound down, the group slowly fragmented into several different factions with different political perspectives, and by the mid-70s the organization no longer existed.



*Students occupy Columbia University buildings*

Orange," an herbicide and defoliant chemical used by the U.S. military to destroy the plants and vegetation of Vietnam. This chemical wreaked havoc on the Vietnamese landscape and poisoned millions of Vietnamese people and U.S. soldiers. By March 15, the student frustration had found a larger expression. 3,500 students and 1,000 sympathetic faculty members engaged in a day-long boycott of classes to publicize and speak out against the University's collaboration with the military apparatus. Another 1,500 students demonstrated again on March 27, demanding an end to the University collaboration with the IDA.

Several weeks later, after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, the university administration held a vigil honoring Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and work. This vigil was disrupted by militant students. They called the whole thing an "obscenity" and called out the University for its hypocrisy with its gymnasium project. By April 23, some 300 students from SDS and the Student Afro-American Society (SAS), a Black political organization at Columbia, occupied major buildings on the campus to protest the war and the gym. Buoyed by the occupation, 4,000 students went on strike at Columbia the next week. The occupation of the buildings lasted six days before the police brutally repressed the students and arrested 700 people. These arrests radicalized thousands of students. In the aftermath, Columbia University was shut down for the rest of the semester. By the end of the school year, the protests and the negative publicity forced Columbia to cancel the Morningside gym construction and

disassociate itself with the IDA. Student activists across the country called for “two, three, many Columbias.”

February 1968 witnessed one of the most violent incidents on a college campus in U.S. history. On February 5, students from South Carolina State University, a historically Black college, set out for All-Star Bowling Lanes in Orangeburg. The bowling alley was still segregated despite the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The students went to the bowling alley and staged a sit-in until the police were called; then the students left peacefully. The next day, more students returned to the bowling alley to sit in again. The cops arrested 15 students and brutally beat several others. Angered by the police repression, more than 100 students gathered at South Carolina State on the evening of February 8 to protest the racist policies of the state authorities and the bowling alley. Over the course of this gathering, the demonstrators built a bonfire on campus, which the police tried to put out. In the process of putting it out, one of the officers was hit by a projectile from the crowd. The police used this as a pretext to begin openly firing shotguns into the unarmed crowd, killing three Black students and injuring 27 other protesters. In the aftermath, all nine officers who took part in the shooting were acquitted of all charges. The only person who was sent to prison after the events was Cleveland Sellers, a local student leader with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chapter at South Carolina State. He was accused of inciting a riot by playing a part in organizing the gathering that night.

At San Francisco State late in 1968 the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) organized strikes against the campus administration. These strikes were initiated by broad coalitions of students of color. Chicano, Black, Chinese, Filipino, and Native American student organizations all participated. They demanded Ethnic Studies programs in the school system of California, which was completely dominated by a Euro-centric curriculum.

The TWLF viewed its struggle as part of the Third World struggle against U.S. imperialism, which not only was waging wars in places like Vietnam but also at home through the oppression of people of color. Students staged several direct action sit-ins to demand Ethnic Studies classes. They also sought to stop the University from sharing their academic standing with the Selective Service office, the government agency that determined

eligibility for military conscription to Vietnam. The TWLF forced the resignation of SFSU President Dr. John Summerskill. This was only a temporary concession, however, as the new administrators still had no plans to give in to the demands of the TWLF.

After months of struggle, on November 6, 1968, students and sympathetic faculty started the longest-lasting student strike in U.S. history, striking until March 21, 1969. Strike tactics included informational picketing, direct actions to block access to the campus, as well as rallies and teach-ins. The strike was met with strong repression from the police, including one sweep in which 450 demonstrators were arrested. The strike crippled operations on the campus and effectively shut down the University.

By the end of the strike in March 1969, the University agreed to meet the demands of the TWLF. This led to the creation of the first U.S. School of Ethnic Studies at any university, as well as an increase in the number of Black professors at the University. Students also had major input on the hiring process of new Ethnic Studies faculty. Today, there are hundreds of Ethnic Studies departments across the country.

### **Resistance In The Military - From Individual To Organized Resistance**

In 1968 there were a record number of U.S. troops in Vietnam (536,100). There were also a record number of casualties: 16,592 in 1968, versus 11,153 in 1967 and 6,143 in 1966. With Johnson's proposal to begin peace talks to end the war, the troops questioned why they were being ordered to continue fighting for a military victory. Many soldiers had been drafted, and a large number had enlisted in the hopes of avoiding a combat role. They had no interest in risking their lives or killing Vietnamese people.

Among GIs, resistance to the war grew over time from individual to collective actions. Combat units were increasingly led by inexperienced officers who were incompetent or only interested in the promotions they could receive in combat. These officers often seemed willing to sacrifice the lives of those under their command for their own personal gains. As a consequence, the discipline in the Army began to slowly unravel. Some soldiers openly refused to follow orders, especially when they were sent into a combat situation. This disobedience

might be followed by discipline of some sort, or not. Sometimes entire combat units pretended to follow orders. Instead of going out on a night patrol, they might find a safe place to sit and even get high; they would return to camp hours later, claiming to have completed the patrol. As the war dragged on, the threat of “fragging” hung over the heads of commanding officers. The term “fragging” described the use of a fragmentation grenade against an officer, often under the cover of darkness while they were asleep, killing or seriously injuring the intended victim. There were hundreds of reported cases of fragging, some of which were prosecuted by the military. The threat and fear of fragging served to limit the unreasonable demands that officers might place on their troops.

### **Organized and Open Opposition**

Black soldiers often came to the war with a different consciousness than many whites. By 1968, much of the Black Freedom Movement, especially in the northern U.S., had shifted from Civil Rights to Black Power. Some began to see strong similarities between their own condition within the United States and that of the Vietnamese people fighting for self-determination against foreign domination. It became clearer that the U.S. military apparatus played a role as both the oppressor abroad and the oppressor of their own communities at home.

Urban rebellions swept the country as Black people responded to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April. Detachments of the Army and National Guard were sent in to suppress the riots, and these units often were composed of Vietnam veterans. Black Vietnam veteran Terry Whitmore, who grew up in Memphis, reflected on this:

*You actually see what I saw, what was going on in the States...dudes are runnin' down the streets wearing the same kind of uniform I got on. They're in Memphis, they beating up on people, wait...we're over here (in Vietnam) beating up on people...and you beating up Black people.*

The hypocrisy of Black GIs being asked to participate in the killing of Vietnamese people, while military forces were used against them in the U.S. was not lost on Black soldiers like Whitmore.

This led to more organized opposition. An example of this occurred in August 1968, when National Guard units from Fort Hood in Texas were ordered to travel to Chicago to put down a massive anti-war demonstration that was planned outside the Democratic Convention. Approximately 100 Black soldiers stationed at Fort Hood organized a midnight sit-down demonstration to protest their orders to fly to Chicago the next day. By morning, 43 of the Black soldiers that refused orders were arrested and faced court martial. The others, labeled as “subversives,” were not sent to Chicago. The actions of the “Fort Hood 43” was one of the largest recorded acts of defiance by soldiers in American military history. Other smaller but dramatic collective actions happened in the following years.

The open defiance of Black soldiers and urban Black communities came at a time when the U.S. military was at a crossroads in Vietnam. After the politically and militarily demoralizing spectacle of the Tet Offensive, which was accompanied by rising opposition to the war, deploying additional troops was less feasible. The majority of soldiers sent to the front lines were poor, often including many young Black men from the inner cities. The idea that this generation would provide a reliable fighting force was a bet the ruling class was no longer willing to make. The resistance in the streets of the U.S. further undermined the U.S. war effort.

### **Underground Newspapers: An Organizing Tool of Soldiers**

The mainstream media may have reported on some aspects of the war, but it was not going to help organize an anti-war movement. The growing opposition in the military needed its own tools. There were hundreds of alternative or underground newspapers across the country reflecting an opposition to the repressive aspects of U.S. society. Anti-war activists and politicized soldiers began to publish newspapers aimed at GIs. These papers gave voice to the rank and file and served to inspire dissent and organizing efforts. Newspapers were developed mainly at Army bases. They reflected the concerns and perspectives of soldiers, and quickly became poles of attraction for more outspoken and radical soldiers to speak out against the war and organize their fellow soldiers. These newspapers often had clever titles and cartoons. One publication played on the military recruiting slogan

FTA: Fun, Travel, and Adventure, instead calling itself FTA: Fuck the Army. It is estimated that around 300 GI newspapers existed over the course of the Vietnam War. If soldiers were found reading or distributing an underground newspaper, they faced the threat of being court-martialed and sent to prison. To prevent this from happening, soldiers found clandestine ways to print and distribute the newspapers within each base.

A network of coffee houses was also organized near military bases. These coffeehouses served as a communal gathering point for soldiers when they were off-duty, and offered a place where they could gather to discuss the war and hear radical political analysis away from the prying ears of their commanding officers. As the war dragged on, resistance increased and networks were built to assist those soldiers who refused to fight. There were record levels of desertions, with 50,000 soldiers deserting over the course of the war. Sweden offered U.S. deserters the opportunity to apply for political asylum and these networks helped arrange travel.

The U.S. military may have been the most powerful and destructive force on the planet, but its forces, especially those in the Army, were not a reliable part of this

advanced killing machine. The victory of the Vietnamese over the U.S. military was looming. The ruling class of the U.S. sent more than 2.5 million men into this war, and some women as well; 58,220 were killed and 303,644 were wounded. The Vietnamese people defeated the U.S., but they paid an enormous price. Much of Vietnam was laid to waste, with an estimated 2.5 to 3.5 million people killed in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

## Conclusion

Nevertheless, the emerging victory of the Vietnamese against U.S. imperialism, combined with the student movement, the Black Freedom Movement, and the radicalization of U.S. soldiers, made a dramatic mark on U.S. society. Along with outrage and horror at the atrocities committed by the U.S. government, a key phenomenon of 1968 was a shift in the perception of what was possible. The movement felt its own power, and with the growth of this power there was a surge in the confidence that people could change society from below, and create a world without the brutal violence of racism and oppression. A generation was imbued with idealism in the best sense of the word.



*Anti-War protest in Philadelphia*

---

# The Black Freedom Movement

*We are only walking corpses as long as we don't struggle.*

—James Foreman

## Black America in the '50s and '60s

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Freedom Movement in the United States fought to free Black people from the shackles of racism, poverty, and repression. Civil rights organizations focused on reforms related to questions of basic dignity and access to resources, such as having access to the same lunch counters and the same seats on buses as whites. These demands gained widespread support. Organizations like the NAACP and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for desegregation through nonviolent protests.

By 1968, young Black radicals had a different perspective: it was time for Black Power, and it was time to bring an end to white supremacy and colonialism at home and abroad. James Forman put it plainly: “Our struggle is clearly against racism, capitalism, and American imperialism.”

To really understand what was happening in 1968, though, we have to take a quick look at the previous decades. In the 1950s, Black Americans in the South lived in an apartheid state – a system of total segregation. It was a brutal system, maintained by vicious police forces and violent terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Between 1877 and 1950, more than 4,000 Black people were lynched in the United States. Black bodies hanging from trees were a warning to Black people: any resistance to the status quo would be met with brutal violence.

In the North, racism took different forms. There were few signs declaring “Whites Only,” there was no poll tax, and no sharecropping. Nonetheless, the twin logics of white supremacy and capitalism produced a similar outcome. Black people in the North typically lived in segregated, overcrowded neighborhoods, attended poorly funded, segregated schools, felt the blows of police brutality, and many were condemned to a lifetime of poverty.

## The Civil Rights Movement Begins

It was under these circumstances that the Civil Rights Movement exploded. It was under these growing pressures that, in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. It ordered public schools to desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” an unclear phrase that racists used to obstruct desegregation at every turn. This Supreme Court ruling changed very little in the schools, let alone the discrimination in housing, employment, and income. But many felt that this ruling gave them a legal basis for their demands, and the decision encouraged organization for further civil rights.

The lynching of Emmett Till in the summer of 1955 followed this legal victory. Till was a 14-year-old Black youth from Chicago who was visiting family in Mississippi. His mother had his body returned to Chicago and held a funeral with an open casket. Pictures of Emmett Till’s mangled body sparked outrage across the country. That same year, the Black community in Montgomery boycotted the public bus system until it was forced to desegregate. Over the next few years, Black activists organized their communities and built up organizations. This set the scene for the militant struggles of the early 1960s; the sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives, and more. The success of African nations that had overthrown their colonial overlords further inspired activists in the U.S.

The Black Freedom struggle was one of the most powerful mass movements in U.S. history. Although the history books have re-written it as the story of a handful of men in leadership positions, the strength of the movement lay in the fact that it was a grassroots movement that tapped the talent and commitment of everyday people. Local struggles were often led by women and young people, many with very little education.

## A New Era: Black Power

By 1968, many in the Black community were sick of the lack of results from the civil rights struggle. Stokely Carmichael captured the new mood: “We want Black Power. That’s right... Black Power. We don’t have to be



*Election night in Lowndes County, Mississippi, 1966*

ashamed of it... We have begged the president... that's all we've been doing, begging and begging. It's time we stand up and take over."

Back in 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer and other activists had formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the legitimacy of the Democratic Party in the state, which held illegal, all-white elections to choose its all-white leaders. The MFDP traveled to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City and fought to be seated as the true democratic representatives of the people. National leaders refused to seat them, offering "honorary" spots instead. The disappointment led many activists to believe that fighting for a spot in mainstream political parties was pointless. Organizers in Alabama formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, an independent political party rooted in the Black community. It was known by its symbol – a black panther.

As disappointments like the failure of the MFDP stacked up, the fury boiled over. The Civil Rights Movement had won federal laws making racial discrimination in public accommodations and voting illegal. But segregated and inferior employment and housing remained. Police departments throughout the country continued all sorts of racist practices. In the summer of 1967, the country erupted in a series of urban rebellions. Detroit and Newark were among the biggest. But the uprisings weren't restricted to major cities.

This new mood led to new organizations, the re-organization of old ones, and the dissolution of others. In 1966, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California,

adopting the symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.

After the urban rebellions of 1967, the FBI intensified its attacks on the Black freedom movement. It used its Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which it had created in the 1950s to "increase factionalism, cause disruption and win defections" inside the Communist Party USA. The new goals of the program were clearly outlined in an internal FBI memo:

- *Prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups...*
- *Prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement. Malcolm X might have been such a 'messiah...' King could be a very real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed 'obedience' to 'white, liberal, doctrines' (nonviolence) and embrace black nationalism...*
- *Prevent the long-range growth of militant black organizations, especially among youth.*

All of these factors combined to set the stage for 1968: a mass movement built on grassroots organizing, a decade of mobilization, increasing frustration with the glacial pace of change, and intensifying government repression.

### **The Orangeburg Massacre**

On February 5, 1968, Black college students sat at the lunch counter at All-Star Bowling Lanes in Orangeburg, South Carolina and waited to be served. The white owner refused to serve them, called the police, and closed up shop. The following day, the police arrested 15 students for simply walking into the bowling alley, and battered several other protesters with their nightsticks.

Tensions were high, and on February 8, about 200 protesters assembled at South Carolina State University. Their protest marked the shift that was taking place; while some students sang "We Shall Overcome," others began chanting "Black Power! Black Power!" When police tried to shut down the students' bonfire, someone in the crowd threw a piece of bannister that hit an officer. Nearly five minutes passed, and then the cops opened fire on the crowd. The unarmed students fled. All but two of the thirty who were shot were hit "in the back, side, or through the soles of their feet," some as they lay on the ground to try to avoid the bullets. The police killed

three students and injured twenty-seven. The nine cops that unleashed a hail of bullets into the backs of unarmed students were exonerated of any wrongdoing in a trial in 1969. While the events received little attention from the majority of U.S. society, they were covered extensively in the Black press. The Orangeburg Massacre helped fuel the shift that was taking place in the movement, as many Black activists saw it as further proof of the need for much more radical change.

### The Memphis Sanitation Strike

Just a few days after the Orangeburg massacre, sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike. It had been a long time coming. The work was grueling, the conditions were dangerous, and the pay was so low that many workers needed food stamps to survive. Although almost all of the workers were Black, the showers at the end of a shift were reserved for the handful of white workers employed as drivers.

On February 1, two sanitation workers were crushed to death in a malfunctioning truck. On February 11, some 700 workers voted unanimously to go on strike. They wore placards that declared “I AM A MAN,” an assertion of their dignity in a system that dehumanized

them at every turn. They had attempted a previous strike in 1966, but failed to connect with the larger community. This time they had learned from experience and reached out. The Black community in Memphis, often linked by Black churches, provided strong support for the striking workers. After police maced peaceful demonstrators, local church leaders created Community on the Move for Equality. The group helped local students to organize and called in national civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. A workers’ movement and the Civil Rights Movement came together in Memphis.

After more than a decade of marching and jail cells, King understood that the focus on public accommodations and voting rights had not done much to change the daily living and working conditions of most Black people in the U.S. He saw a need to expand the movement to include economic struggles, and was in the midst of planning a Poor People’s Campaign when the Memphis strike broke out.

The police played their usual role in the strike. After young protesters broke storefront windows during a march, the police shot and killed a 16-year-old named Larry Payne, deployed tear gas and mace, and beat several marchers while they were lying prone on the floor of a church. The city’s white mayor, Henry Loeb, declared martial law and called in 4,000 National Guard troops.

The violence deeply disturbed King, and he decided to organize a follow-up march in Memphis. On April 3, King was persuaded to address the striking workers in what would come to be known as the “I’ve Been On the Mountaintop” speech. The next night he was murdered on the balcony of a local hotel. In response,

### The Kerner Commission Report

After the urban rebellions of 1967, President Johnson established the Kerner Commission to answer three basic questions: “What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?”

In response, the Kerner Commission provided a searing condemnation of the impact of racism and poverty in the United States. The Commission warned that:

*Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.*



Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike

people took to the streets and urban rebellions broke out across the country, including in Memphis. Just four days later, his wife, Coretta Scott King, led over 42,000 people through the city on a silent march to demand justice for the sanitation workers. On April 16, the city finally capitulated, agreeing to higher wages, benefits, and union recognition for the workers. But the workers had to threaten to strike again to get city officials to honor the agreements.

### **SNCC and the Black Panther Party February 17–July 10**

In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California. The Panthers legally carried loaded guns and policed the police. Their militant presence was meant to deter police brutality. They called for revolutionary change in U.S. society, and as local chapters spread throughout the country, the image of these militant Black men and women inspired millions but threatened the country's elite. Huey Newton noted, "We have two evils to fight, capitalism and racism. We must destroy both."

At an Oakland rally on February 17, 1968, H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC were made honorary officers of the Black Panther Party. Carmichael actually hoped the two groups could merge and build a formidable organization with roots in the deep South where SNCC organized and in the urban communities where the Black Panthers were growing. The FBI had other ideas. A July 10 COINTELPRO memo recommended that "consideration be given to convey the

impression that Carmichael is a CIA informer." Within a few years, the Black Panthers accused Carmichael of being a CIA agent, SNCC dissolved, and Carmichael lost much of his credibility in the Black freedom struggle. His experience was a prime example of how the state deliberately disrupted and destroyed radical Black organizations that had gained popularity by '68.

### **COINTELPRO**

At the beginning of March, the FBI released an internal memo to its field offices regarding its program to destroy militant Black organizations. The memo outlined the goals of the program, as well as its most important targets:

- *Prevent the COALITION of militant black nationalist groups...An effective coalition of black nationalist groups might be the first step toward a real "Mau Mau" (Black revolutionary army) in America...*
- *Pinpoint potential troublemakers and neutralize them before they exercise their potential for violence.*
- *Primary targets of the Counterintelligence Program, Black Nationalist-Hate Groups, should be the most violent and radical groups and their leaders. We should emphasize those leaders and organizations that are nationwide in scope and are most capable of disrupting this country...*
  - *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*
  - *Southern Christian Leadership Conference*
  - *Revolutionary Action Movement*
  - *Nation of Islam*

### **The Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.**

A year prior to his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "Beyond Vietnam" speech. It was a direct strike at U.S. capitalism. King called for the defeat of the "giant triplets of racism, materialism, and imperialism." He was assassinated when he began to link the Civil Rights Movement to global issues at the core of capitalism, including the anti-war movement and economic struggles.

He called the war in Vietnam an "enemy of the poor," appealed for a "shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society," and criticized U.S. military intervention in Latin America as a mission to "maintain social stability for our investment accounts."



*Kathleen Cleaver and Bobby Seale at a "Free Huey"  
Black Panther rally*

After linking the Black freedom struggle to the anti-imperialist struggle in Vietnam, King supported the striking sanitation workers in Memphis and began to plan a Poor People's Campaign for that summer. It was all too much for those in ruling circles in the United States. This was the context of King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4.

### **The World Burns**

King's murder proved unbearable for millions of Americans. Riots erupted in over 100 cities. News broadcasts replayed clips of King advocating nonviolence on an endless loop, but it did little to contain the visceral rage that engulfed cities and towns across the country.

National Guard and U.S. Army troops were deployed in multiple cities to bring the unrest to a halt. Nearly 40 people were killed, 2,600 injured, and 21,000 arrested in the suppression of the rebellions.

In addition to the uprisings, King's assassination had another important effect: it added to the radicalization of young Black activists and strengthened the Black Power movement. But the government responded as well. Richard Nixon promised to restore "law and order" as part of his campaign to get elected president in 1968. One of Nixon's aides, John Ehrlichman, later recalled:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and Black people. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.

The historical record corroborates these claims, as the end of the '60s witnessed widespread attacks on radical Black organizations, ranging from FBI infiltration to the imprisonment and assassination of Black leaders.

### **The Execution of Bobby Hutton**

The Black Panthers built significant networks in several cities. They created free breakfast programs, policed the police, and inspired feelings of pride and self-empowerment. They began to build coalitions with other radical organizations, and they developed international links with radicals around the world. However, as an



*National Guard patrolling a burning Washington, 1968*

above-ground, highly public organization, they made easy targets for the police and the FBI.

For two days after King's assassination, the Black Panthers patrolled Oakland and warned young people to keep cool and calm; they feared that the Oakland police were looking for even the tiniest excuse to unleash terror on the Black community. On the night of April 6, some Panthers got into a shootout with the Oakland police. Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Hutton ended up in the basement of a house. More than fifty police officers assaulted the building with bullets and tear gas. When the house caught fire, Cleaver and Hutton were forced to emerge. The older Cleaver warned 17-year-old Hutton to come out "butt-naked" so that the police couldn't claim they had a gun. Hutton, however, left his pants on. As Cleaver recalled, "the pigs pointed to a squad-car in the middle of the street and told us to run for it... Little Bobby, coughing and choking from the tear-gas, stumbled forward, best he could, and when he had got about ten yards from me, the pigs cut loose on him with their guns."

### **Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement**

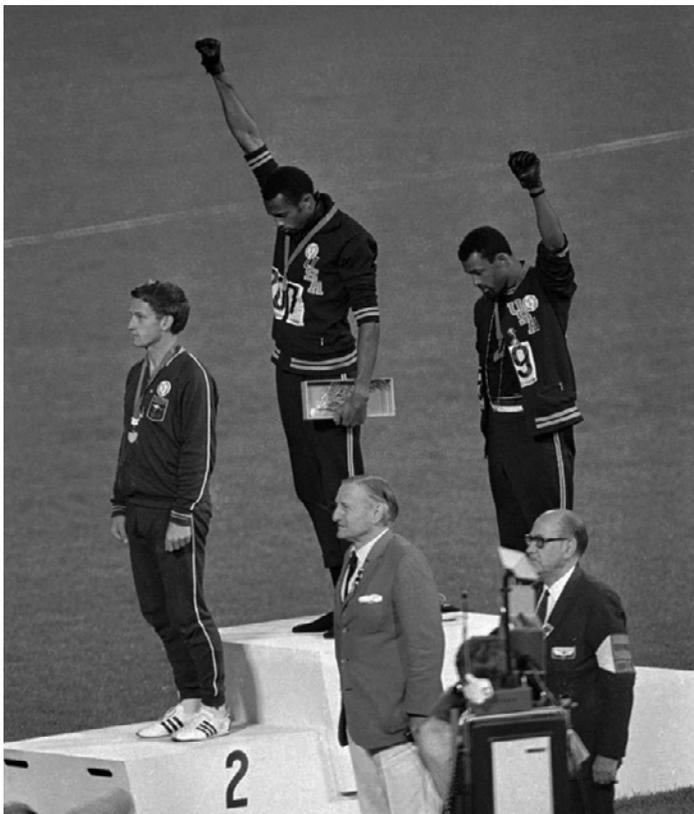
In Detroit, the month of May brought a brutal speed-up of the assembly line at the Dodge Main auto plant. It was almost impossible for the workers to keep pace, and so 4,000 people walked off the job on May 2 in a wildcat strike. Although both Black workers and white workers participated, Dodge punished the Black workers most harshly and fired several of them. This exacerbated tensions at the plant, as Black workers were fed up with

an extremely racist, hostile climate. They were often relegated to the most difficult, low-paying jobs, mistreated by foremen, and had few opportunities for advancement. The conservative white leadership of the United Automobile Workers union (UAW) was unresponsive to their concerns.

At this point, several Black workers formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) to challenge racism and exploitation in the plants, as well as within the union. They published a paper, which declared:

*DRUM is an organization of oppressed and exploited Black workers. It realizes that Black workers are the victims of inhumane slavery... It also realizes that Black workers comprise 60% and upwards of the entire work force at Hamtramck Assembly Plant, and therefore hold exclusive power.*

The paper also attacked police brutality and the systemic racism that Black people faced in Detroit and across the U.S. On July 8, DRUM organized nearly 3,000 Black workers in a wildcat strike that lasted for three days. Many white workers respected the picket line.



*Peter Norman, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics*

DRUM inspired the creation of similar organizations at other factories and workplaces across the city. It spurred the launch of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1969, which hoped to coordinate the separate groups into a militant working-class organization. The League wanted revolution, not reform. Although they ultimately dissolved in the 1970s, DRUM and the League offered a new way forward for the Black liberation movement. Members of the League were clear that Black liberation required the end of capitalism, and they believed in the power of the Black working class to lead the charge to transform society.

### **The Poor People's Campaign**

The Poor People's Campaign that King had proposed had a simple but effective premise: every human being deserves the right to a job and a living wage, and every human being has the power to fight for a better society. Much as civil rights activists had mobilized everyday people to lead their own struggles, the Poor People's Campaign believed that poor folks of all races could mobilize and lead the fight for a better society.

In May, three thousand people built a shantytown in Washington D.C. and named it Resurrection City. They camped out for several weeks, and participated in a multi-racial coalition of anti-poverty groups that came from Native American reservations, tiny Appalachian towns, and impoverished inner cities across the country. They demanded full employment, a guaranteed basic income for all Americans, and \$30 billion to fight poverty. Their demands were effectively ignored by the government.

### **Black Power at the Olympics**

Tommie Smith and John Carlos were U.S. Olympians at the Mexico City games in October, 1968. After sprinting to bronze and gold in the 200 meter race, they climbed the podium to receive their medals. As the Star-Spangled Banner boomed through the loudspeakers, they raised their black-gloved fists into the air. What so proudly they hailed was not the flag, however, but the struggle against racism. They wore black socks with no shoes to symbolize Black poverty. John Carlos recalled that "I looked at my feet in my high socks and thought about all the Black poverty I'd seen from Harlem to East Texas. I fingered my beads and thought about the pictures I'd seen of the 'strange fruit' swinging from the poplar trees

of the South.” He unzipped his tracksuit in support of “all the working-class people – Black and white – in Harlem who had to struggle and work with their hands all day.” A bead necklace dangled from his neck, representing “those individuals that were lynched, or killed and that no one said a prayer for, that were hung and tarred. It was for those thrown off the side of the boats in the Middle Passage.”

Tommie Smith and John Carlos were punished for criticizing racism, kicked off the Olympic team, stripped of their medals, and bombarded with death threats. Much like John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Colin Kaepernick and other athletes in recent years could no longer look past the brutal reality that Black people still face in this country. “I couldn’t see another #SandraBland, #TamirRice, #WalterScott, #EricGarner. At what point do we do something about it?” Kaepernick wondered.

### **Fred Hampton and the Rainbow Coalition**

In Chicago, Fred Hampton established an Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. Bobby Lee joined soon after. Lee and Hampton met with members of the Young Lords, a radical Puerto Rican political group, and the Young Patriots, a radical group of poor white migrants from the South. Bobby Lee recalled that, “I had to run with those cats, break bread with them, hang out at the pool hall. I had to lay down on their couch, in their neighborhood. Then I had to invite them into mine. That was how the Rainbow Coalition was built, real slow.” The idea of a multi-racial alliance that united poor and working-class people alarmed Chicago’s ruling class and the FBI. Lee called the Rainbow Coalition a “code word for class struggle,” while Fred Hampton urged activists to fight racism with “solidarity. We say we’re not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, but we’re going to fight it with socialism.”

At the end of 1968, Hampton and Lee laid the groundwork for the Rainbow Coalition. Soon after, the Coalition began to participate in shared struggles against poverty and police brutality. They set up neighborhood clinics, free breakfast programs, and held unity demonstrations. Just one year later, in December 1969, Fred Hampton was brutally murdered by the Chicago police, supported by the FBI, while he slept in his bed. Another Panther, Mark Clark, was also murdered in the

raid, and several other Panthers were wounded. None of them fired a shot.

### **Conclusion**

The Black Freedom Movement was one of the most powerful forces in U.S. history. Everyday people showed that by mobilizing and organizing themselves, they could challenge a racist system that had tyrannized Black people for five hundred years. Over the course of nearly two decades, this movement dismantled Jim Crow segregation and won victories ranging from desegregating lunch counters and buses to voting rights. This movement inspired and activated others who were instrumental in building the American Indian Movement and the Chicano movement. And most importantly, they showed the only way that real change will happen: when everyday people step up, lead their own struggles, and work collectively to fight for a new world. By doing it, they learned that it was possible and they gained tremendous confidence in themselves.

Ultimately, the movement ran its course by the early 1970s. There were several causes of this decline: intense government repression of militant Black organizations; targeted assassinations of key leaders; divisions within the Black community about strategy; and a feeling of general exhaustion after nearly two decades of struggle that hadn’t engaged other poor and working people to fight for their common interests. In addition, the Democratic Party funneled the energy of many activists away from mass-movement politics and into electoral politics. Today, the failure of that strategy has been laid bare. While the post-Civil Rights era created a new Black political elite, with Black mayors from Detroit to Oakland to Baltimore, and even the nation’s first Black president, the majority of Black people still face conditions in those cities and across the country that are all too similar to those of 1968. “I AM A MAN” has been replaced by “Black Lives Matter.” It’s a cry for justice made necessary by the fact that the quality of life of most Black people in the U.S. is still incredibly compromised by the brutal, pervasive nature of systemic racism. Poverty, mass incarceration, police brutality, and many forms of discrimination remain the cruel realities of twenty-first century capitalism and racism. The legacy of the Black Freedom Movement is the knowledge that everyday people have the power to change that.

---

# Sex, Drugs, Rock'n'Roll, and Politics in the U.S.

In 1968, mass political movements coincided with rebellious trends in the arts and culture. In the U.S., this included overtly political songs, movies, and theater embracing themes related to the Vietnam War, Black liberation, and youth alienation. These were part of long-term trends with roots dating back to at least the 1950s.

In the U.S., the 1950s were a period mostly of post-war economic boom that featured the development of white middle-class suburbs and the expansion of manufacturing jobs in the cities, opening up many jobs to Black workers. The government, mass media, and Madison Avenue promoted a vision of limitless possibilities for both middle-class and working-class families. It was also the period of the Cold War's accelerating nuclear arms race, anti-communist McCarthyism, conformity, and crass materialism. While many white middle-class and working-class youth generally had high expectations for what they might do in life, they also experienced anxiety and alienation. Anti-communism not only discouraged political action, but also the questioning of society's norms and values. But a rebellious youth culture rejected the conformity imposed on their parents' generation.

Rock'n'roll music became popular in the 1950s among both Black teenagers and white teenagers. Musically, much of it was indistinguishable from the jump blues and rhythm'n'blues that their parents enjoyed. Sub-genres also integrated country music, jazz, and urban street-corner singing styles. By the mid-1950s, millions of white teenagers were dancing to records by Black artists. Many of their parents and other older whites were outraged by the implied cross-racial sexuality in much of the music, lyrics, and dancing. Along with rock'n'roll music, the subculture included its own slang, hairstyles, clothes, movies, cars and motorcycles, especially among working-class youth. Adults often criticized these cultural phenomena as much as the music. And that just reinvigorated the teens' embrace of their rebellious subculture.

Meanwhile, the Beat Generation, mainly young white adults in urban centers like New York City and San Francisco, rejected mainstream culture. They produced poetry, art, and theater, reflecting their alienation while

embracing modern jazz. While often more cerebral than rock'n'roll culture, the Beats' alienation from the mainstream was just as visceral.

One of the most important cultural as well as political phenomena in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s was the Black Liberation Movement, known first as the Civil Rights Movement and later as the Black Power Movement. Music was a central element of the Civil Rights Movement. Whether marching, picketing, or being dragged to jail, activists were always singing freedom songs. Many of the songs had their roots in spirituals and gospel music. Others were adapted from the labor movement and folk music.

Also in the early 1960s, folk music swept college campuses and developed a following among white teenagers. The term folk music was used to describe music in any culture that was created and performed by amateur musicians. The '60s folk revival focused mostly on Anglo-Saxon traditions, but increasing numbers of young people were drawn to the blues, especially the Mississippi Delta Blues. The Civil Rights and anti-nuclear war movements of the late '50s and early '60s engaged a number of U.S. folk musicians who began adapting traditional songs and writing new ones to address current political themes. Among the leaders of this trend were Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Phil Ochs. Peter, Paul, and Mary popularized some of their songs, as well as those of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and others.

## Music

In the late 1960s, the Anti-war Movement was growing and the Black Liberation Movement was evolving from focusing on Civil Rights to Black Power. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit was addressing Black liberation and working-class issues jointly, and the women's liberation and gay liberation movements were beginning.

During this period, early 1960s musical trends came together in more or less overtly political popular music. The line between folk music and rock'n'roll (now often called "rock") became blurred in the new genre of folk-rock. Many folk music enthusiasts were outraged



*Johnny Cash performs at Folsom Prison, January 1968*

when Bob Dylan began playing electric guitar and writing rock-style songs. Folk-rock stars like the Byrds (covering Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom") and Simon and Garfunkel ("The Sounds of Silence," "Mrs. Robinson," and "America") often embraced social criticism in their songs. Other sub-genres of popular music also became more political.

At the same time, many Black artists were no longer subjected to the control of white-dominated labels. Berry Gordy's Motown records in Detroit was having a huge impact, giving young Black artists an opportunity and exposing people across the country to the Motown sound.

The intermingling of genres reflected the intermingling of a generation – breaking down the barriers of race, challenging narrow gender roles, and most of all challenging the narrow-minded views that dominated the society. Just listen to Aretha Franklin's version of "Respect" (1967), The Temptations singing "War" (1969), James Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black And I'm Proud" (1968), The Doors "The Unknown Soldier" (1968), Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" (1969) and many more. These were the soundtracks of the times.

1968 appears to have been the peak year for music with progressive social and political themes. Some songs were about peace, love, and understanding, others about the war in Vietnam, others about standing up to racial oppression, and others about just rebelling against the

existing order. Some were rock'n'roll, some soul, and some funk.

1968 was also the year that country singer Johnny Cash released an album whose very existence was a social and political statement. In 1955, Cash had released his record "Folsom Prison Blues," written from the perspective of the prisoners themselves. In 1968, he organized two concerts at Folsom Prison to entertain the prisoners and had the concerts recorded. The result was *Live At Folsom Prison*, a live album of material from the concerts. Several of the songs were about prisoners' experiences. The album was recorded in January and released in May 1968 in a period of incredible social and political upheaval in the U.S. and around the world. Through his music, Cash threw a spotlight on the prisoners, his actions making a statement that the incarcerated deserved the same measure of human dignity as anybody else. In some ways it also brought country and rock fans together around a common opposition to the cruelties of the system. The album eventually sold over three million copies.

Although rock music was at the center of 1968's cultural action, it was influenced by—and had an influence on—music around the world. Indian sitar player Ravi Shankar inspired the Beatles and other popular performers. South African jazz musician and anti-apartheid activist Hugh Masekela's recording of "Grazing in the Grass" was a big hit in the U.S. and around the world. Miriam Makeba, a South African jazz and world music singer as well as human rights activist, developed a large following in the U.S. She became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and in 1968 she married Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who, at that time, was in process of leaving SNCC and joining the Black Panther Party.

This confluence and expansion of musical traditions brought many older, traditional musicians and younger musicians together. In 1968 jazz great Miles Davis began using electronic instruments in his ensembles. Other jazz musicians like Davis's collaborator Chick Corea began experimenting with their music, and jazz-rock groups including Chicago, Traffic, and Blood, Sweat, and Tears had great success. Jazz musicians often appeared on the same shows with rock groups, sometimes jamming together.

## Movies, Theater, TV, and Poetry

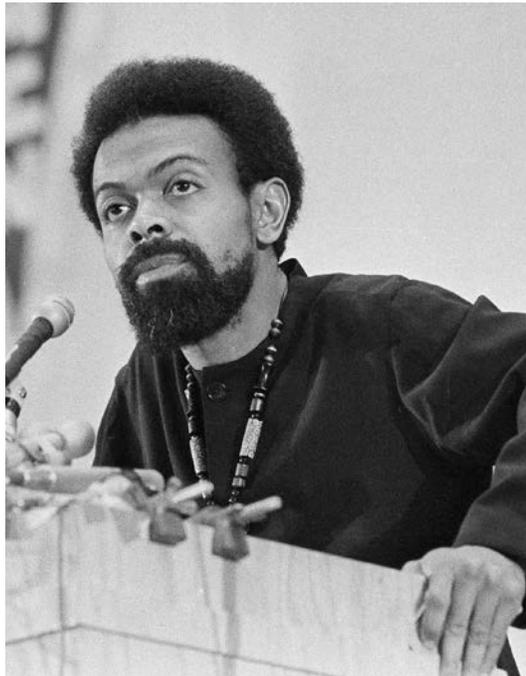
Some of the most popular movies of 1968 had themes of alienation or socio-political criticism. Alienated youth were at the center of *The Graduate*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* addressed issues of race, while *Bonnie and Clyde* focused on class. Less popular at the time, but later a cult classic, *Wild in the Streets* was about a youth movement demanding (among other things) that the voting age be lowered to 14. Science fiction and horror movies challenged the establishment's view of the morality and superiority of the dominant culture. These included *Planet of the Apes*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Night of the Living Dead*. The documentary *Monterey Pop* recapped the 1967 music festival, featuring Ravi Shankar, Hugh Masekela, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Otis Redding, The Who, Big Brother and the Holding Company with Janis Joplin, Country Joe and the Fish, and many others, reflecting the social and political alienation of youth.

While not a box office hit, the movie *Uptight* dramatized significant issues of the times. It was based on Liam O'Flaherty's novel *The Informer* and the 1935 film of the same name, which told the story of the Irish Republican Army in the early 1920s. *Uptight* was about a Black revolutionary group in Cleveland in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination and their debates on strategy and organization. The film's director Jules Dassin, actor and co-producer Ruby Dee, and others involved in the production managed to write, produce, and release the film by the end of 1968, less than nine months after the events portrayed would have happened. They felt a strong sense of urgency that they captured in the film.

Street theater performances, often called "guerrilla theater," as well as traditionally staged plays, were political acts addressing current issues. Many grassroots groups formed around the U.S. and the world. Some already existing anti-establishment theater groups, such as the Living Theater (which began in the 1940s) and

the San Francisco Mime Troupe (started in 1959), found new audiences in the late '60s. In 1968, The Boys in the Band focused on gay life and began a two-year off-Broadway run. *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* opened off-Broadway in late 1967, but moved to Broadway in April 1968. Its major themes were youth culture, including sexuality, communal living, resistance to the war in Vietnam, and middle-class morals. It was a huge hit and was made into a popular film.

Television saw the launch of one of the first weekly series with an African-American lead character, *Julia*, featured Diahann Carroll. She played a nurse and single mother whose husband had been killed in Vietnam.



Amiri Baraka

The *Mod Squad* cashed in on youth culture and featured three young undercover cops (one Black male, one white female, one white male) who dressed and talked in Hollywood's version of youth culture. The *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1969) focused on political satire from a liberal and left perspective as well as music popular with rebellious youth. Musical guests included Pete Seeger, who had been blacklisted in the McCarthy period, Buffalo Springfield, The Who, and Cream. The *Smothers Brothers* were often in conflict with NBC over the show's political content and the network dropped the show abruptly in 1969

as a result. And a 1968 episode of *Star Trek* featured the first interracial kiss (between William Shatner and Nichelle Nichols) on U.S. television.

Poets Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones) and Allen Ginsberg had gained fame well before 1968, but they were still major literary figures at that time who were embraced by the political movements of the day. Baraka was a poet, playwright, and author focusing on themes of Black oppression and the struggle for liberation. Ginsberg was a leader of the Beat Generation of the 1950s. In the '60s he was outspoken on gay rights, opposed the war in Vietnam, favored the legalization of marijuana and psychedelic drugs, and advocated for the value of Buddhist chants.

## Hippies and Yippies

While the arts were an important part of the era, youth culture in 1968 went far beyond artistic expression. Young people in the U.S. had been rejecting the dominant society's values for several years. Many rejected the conformity, the racism, and the nuclear death wish of the '50s and early '60s. The U.S. war against Vietnam intensified their alienation. One of the most important factors was the military draft, which threatened young men's expectations that they would pursue lives more or less of their own choosing. That was certainly one of the main reasons that the anti-war movement was so strong on college campuses.

For some young people, their radical reaction to societal norms took the form of political activism. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a radical organization, started in 1960 and grew rapidly with the escalation of the Vietnam war. By 1968, some were joining the Young Socialist Alliance and other Marxist organizations or forming political collectives.

For others, the main reaction was to develop a lifestyle rejecting normative behaviors. They valued peace, love, communal living, and "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll." The media called them "hippies" and "flower children." The hippie movement was associated with the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, particularly beginning with the "Summer of Love" in 1967, but it quickly appeared throughout much of the country. One thing that set young people of this generation apart from their parents was their use of marijuana and various psychedelic substances, most of which were illegal. The purpose of this experimentation was to expand one's consciousness or to get high without the violence often associated with alcohol. Possession of even small amounts of these illegal substances was a felony, which gave the police a cover to engage in random and targeted searches and seizures. And if there was nothing to seize, they could easily plant some evidence.

Some hippies completely rejected political protest in favor of lifestyle protest. But many combined the two, participating in organized demonstrations against the war while living the hippie lifestyle. The Fugs were one example. They were a rock'n'roll band based in New York City, led by poets who were survivors of the Beat Generation. They participated in the March on the Pentagon in October 1967, where activists attempted

to encircle and levitate the Pentagon to protest the war in Vietnam. The Fugs featured a recording of the event on their 1968 album, *Tenderness Junction*, entitled "Exorcising the Evil Spirits from the Pentagon Oct. 21, 1967." As heard on the album, the Fugs gathered a large crowd in front of the Pentagon and repeatedly chanted, "Out, demons, out!"

On December 31, 1967, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and several others declared the formation of the Youth International Party or Yippie! The Yippies eschewed formal organization and combined revolutionary politics with aspects of the hippie counter-culture and a sense of humor. They engaged in street theater on a national stage. Yippies were among the leaders of the anti-war demonstrators outside the Democratic Presidential Convention in Chicago in August 1968. Three days before the convention, they announced they were running a pig (not a cop, but a real pig named "Pigassus") for U.S. president in the 1968 election. Mayor Daley assembled 23,000 police and national guard troops to break up demonstrations outside the convention hall. The police rioted, gassing and beating protesters, much of which was captured live on TV. Protesters chanted, "The whole world is watching!" Hoffman published a book called *Revolution for the Hell of It*. He, Rubin, and five others (the "Chicago Seven") were indicted for inciting a riot and other charges. The other defendants included Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, and Tom Hayden, co-founder of SDS.

An underground press arose during this period. Hundreds of local publications around the U.S. presented revolutionary political ideas as well as cultural material including music and movie reviews. This was decades before the internet and cell phones, let alone social media, so these print publications played an important role in the movements of the time.

## Conclusion

Along with the political upheavals around the world in 1968, there was cultural turmoil as well. It's hard to imagine one without the other; after all, revolutionary upsurges require anthems. And alienated youth need to create outlets for artistic and political self-expression. 1968 was a year that epitomized these tendencies.

---

## France: May '68

In March of '68, the French student movement began. It started in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, at a brand new university campus. The campus had been built four years earlier on a sort of no man's land, next to an Algerian workers' shantytown.

Some of these students were organized in mini-groups of what were then called the "extreme left." These Trotskyists, anarchists, and Maoists mobilized against the U.S. war in Vietnam. Among them, six demonstrators were arrested on March 20 after a few stones were thrown against the windows of the American Express headquarters in Paris. To protest the arrests, the students of Nanterre occupied the administrative tower of the university. Following their expulsion and the closure of the campus, these students went to join those of the Sorbonne University in Paris, located in the Latin Quarter. The student revolt had begun, confronting the police force of the French state, which was led by President Charles de Gaulle.

### Working Class Premises

Contrary to popular belief, the student protests were not the only spark for the May '68 uprisings. In January of the same year, workers at Saviem, a large truck factory in the city of Caen, went on strike. They demanded a wage increase, and the strike spread to other local factories. Clashes ensued between the police and the workers, who were joined by students. This lasted the whole month of January. It was a dress rehearsal for May '68, and young workers started it all.

In fact, we can see roots of May '68 in 1967, when France experienced intense social unrest. In February '67, workers at Dassault, an airplane manufacturing factory in Bordeaux, occupied their workplace. The same thing occurred in textile factories in the eastern and northeastern regions of France. Each time, a workers' procession, often joined by students, fought with the police. Young workers were at the lead, their pockets full of bolts to respond to tear gas from the cops. But the workers weren't the only ones protesting. In Normandy and in Brittany, farmers rebelled. In October 1967, some 20,000 farmers marched through the streets of

Quimper, some holding a portrait of Che Guevara. Dozens of protesters and policemen were wounded. The same occurred 300 kilometers away in Le Mans, where 6,000 farmers assaulted the administrative offices of the police. At this point the workers of the region joined the protests. This was not really surprising, as workers in these regions came from rural families. Very often students joined the workers and farmers. The local police chief reported to the Minister of Home Affairs that they were experiencing the "rehearsal of a Revolution." This was still several months before the events of May '68.

### From Student Barricades to the General Strike

Solidarity between students and workers was therefore not new. In May of '68, students occupied the Sorbonne University. The government sent the police to expel them, and more than 500 people were arrested. Two



*Mass protest in Paris*

thousand young men and women swarmed the streets of the Latin Quarter in response, clashing with the police and shouting the slogan “libérez nos camarades!” (“Free our comrades!”) Then high school students joined the protests and there were more street clashes with the police. The student movement grew, following what was later called the “nuit des barricades” (“night of the barricades”) on May 10 and 11. The following morning, 400 more people were arrested. The public was outraged at the extent of the repression.

Public opinion quickly shifted in favor of the students. The teachers’ unions and other workers’ unions, siding with the main student union, called for a demonstration to take place on Monday, May 13, to protest the repression. To everyone’s surprise, an immense crowd of around 500,000 people overran the streets of Paris. Huge demonstrations also took place in different cities all across the country. Among the most common slogans was: “Ten Years is Enough,” which reflected the fact that de Gaulle had been in power since 1958. The CGT (General Confederation of Labor), the most influential union at the time, was linked to the French Communist Party. Up to that point, the CGT had not sided with the movement and had denounced the protesters as “leftists.” When the CGT called for a one-day strike on May 13, they intended it to be a purely symbolic action and hoped to bring the confrontations to an end. History decided otherwise.

The next day, the workers of Sud-Aviation in Brittany went on strike and occupied their factory, thanks to the initiative of a Trotskyist activist from the Internationalist Workers Party. They formed a strike committee despite fierce opposition from the CGT militants. The strike expanded quickly to the factories of Renault Cléon in Normandy. Step by step, the rank and file spread the movement to the whole country. It became a general strike, as 7 million workers participated. It lasted for more than a month.

### **The Politics of the French Communist Party and of the CGT**

The Stalinist French Communist Party was completely overwhelmed by the student protests. It had not ceased denouncing “leftist” students, calling them “the offspring of the bourgeoisie”, or “daddy’s boys.” They even went as far as to call the student leader of Nanterre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a “German anarchist.” Others also attacked



*French students confront police in the streets of Paris in May*

him for being Jewish. Hence the slogan in student demonstrations in May: “We are all German Jews!”

When they finally realized that the strikes were generalizing, the Communist Party and the CGT became afraid that rank-and-file workers would bypass their leadership. This is why the CGT, which never explicitly called for a general strike, chose to join the movement, the better to control it.

CGT militants therefore went along with the movement of factory occupations, but in their own way: the objective, as they put it, was to maintain good order in the factory, to “protect the tools,” to maintain discipline, and to be responsible. In a number of big factories (such as Renault Billancourt near Paris, with 30,000 workers), they encouraged the workers to strike by staying home, coming to their workplace only to attend general assemblies, where they could receive the union’s updates. They asked the workers to trust union delegates to manage the factory occupation. This meant that they hunted dissenters, and they prevented the students from joining the workers and making contact with those who were on strike. As a result, in a number of sectors, young workers and employees deserted their workplaces to join the student demonstrations, and to make contact with extreme left groups.

### **May 27: The “Grenelle Agreements”**

The CGT’s objective was to put a quick end to the general strike, by negotiating with the employers and with the government. These negotiations took place at the Ministry of Labor in Grenelle Street in Paris. The

result of these agreements was a general 10 percent increase in salaries and, more importantly, the creation of “Workplace Union Sections.” This was a gift to the union bureaucracies; it provided each union in the workplace with a hall, as well as paid hours for stewards who were chosen without even having to run for election.

The General Secretary of the CGT, George Séguy, thought that the deal was settled, and went on to present the outcome of the negotiations to a general assembly of 10,000 workers in Renault Billancourt. However, when he announced that the employers refused to pay for the strike days, a wave of indignation rose from the audience, and he was booed by thousands of workers. As a result, the CGT did not immediately give the order to go back to work, and instead encouraged workers to negotiate at the local level, company by company, in order to decide under what conditions work should be resumed. It meant that these negotiations took place in isolation from one another, without benefiting from the general strike. The strikes continued for at least three more weeks, until the end of June. However, when they resumed work, many workers did so with a bitter taste in their mouth, and a feeling of anger.

### **De Gaulle Leaves... and then Returns**

As to the government, it had a moment of panic after the rank and file refused the Grenelle Agreements. On May 29, President de Gaulle canceled the meeting of the Council of Ministers and secretly flew off to Baden-Baden in Germany. He sought advice from General Massu, who had commanded French forces in the Battle of Algiers in 1957. De Gaulle wanted to verify whether the French army would be ready to take action in case a revolutionary situation developed. When he returned to France on May 30, he was a reassured man. He announced the dissolution of Parliament, meaning that new legislative elections would take place. Meanwhile, a massive, reactionary demonstration was organized. Up to 300,000 members of the bourgeoisie and its middle-class supporters marched on the Champs-Élysées to support the government.

Nevertheless, the workers were not impressed. Strikes went on until the end of June, despite the instructions of the CGT union to go back to work. The bonds between students and workers strengthened.

The French Communist Party was happy to take part in the electoral game, hoping this would restore order. Students and workers, on the other hand, preferred shouting “élections, piège à cons!” (Elections: a trap for fools!) And a trap for fools they were indeed. The reformist Communist and Socialist Parties didn’t win the elections, and ended up in the minority as the Gaullist Party got the majority of seats in the new Parliament.

### **The Extreme Left Organizations**

Some French youth became politicized and radicalized during the Algerian War, which ended in 1962 with the independence of Algeria. These young people broke loose from the Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party, and Trotskyist groups started gaining new recruits. Some youth left the Etudiants communistes, the Communist student organization, to give birth to the JCR, the Revolutionary Communist Youth. A group called the Lambertists established themselves in the FO (Workers’ Force) union, and there was also the Voix Ouvrière (Workers’ Voice) group. After 1968, Worker’s Voice became Lutte Ouvrière, or Workers’ Struggle. Lutte Ouvrière managed to gain a foothold in major factories around the country thanks to its local workers’ newsletters.

Even if the Communist Party and the CGT eventually managed to quell the general strike, the extreme left acquired a brand new audience not only among students, but also among the working class. Revolutionaries were no longer marginal and established themselves firmly in the working class in the ensuing years. The extreme left organizations had not accounted for more than a hundred activists each before 1968. After ’68, these groups grew tenfold and each counted between 1,000 and 2,000 activists.

### **What to Make of it All?**

The government and the right did win the elections. But the whole political and social scene was altered. From the 1970s on, the number of workers’ strikes increased, especially fights for wage increases. Some strikes were led by revolutionaries and organized by democratic strike committees of rank-and-file workers. Fifty years later, this achievement is still an inspiration.

---

# Germany

## Students Take the Lead

One cannot understand the movements in 1968 in Germany without considering the legacy of Nazism. Unique to Germany at this time was the country's reckoning with its recent Nazi past – particularly young people thinking about the role that their parents' generation played during the Nazi period. Young people in Germany paid close attention to the trials of Nazi war criminals and became politicized as they watched them take place. This confrontation with the Nazi period, in addition to the anti-Vietnam War movement and support for various third world liberation struggles, represented a challenge by the youth to the conservatism of post-war Germany. These were the main focal points of the 1968 movements.

The political and ideological arm of the the 1968 movements was the German Socialist Student Association (SDS). Their charismatic spokesperson was Rudi Dutschke. The SDS had its roots as a student organization within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), but was pushed out in the early '60s as the SPD shifted to the right politically while the SDS was moving increasingly left.

Street revolts by young people were common throughout the '60s, with young workers and high school students often involved in violent confrontations with the police. In 1962 in Munich, for example, there was a four-day street battle between approximately 4,000 young people and the police after the police arrested five musicians for playing music after 10 p.m. In 1965, there was a large high school and university movement against the poor conditions in schools and universities. These demonstrations included 200,000 students of various ages protesting in 30 different cities.

One of the most important events in the political formation of many German students was the visit of the Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to West Berlin in June 1967. At the time, the Shah was well-known for his brutal regime. Many members of the Iranian left were in exile in Berlin at the time and exposed the brutal conditions in Iran. During the visit, there was a confrontation between protesters, the police, and the Shah's private security detail in which a student was shot

and killed by the police. Many students were radicalized as the German government blamed the death on the student protesters. Overall, the political climate in Germany, and in particular in Berlin, grew more and more tense going into 1968.

Three large protest waves shaped 1968: protests against the Vietnam War, against the proposed German Emergency Act, and against the right-wing (yet very popular) tabloid BILD. The highpoint of the anti-war protests was the international Vietnam conference held at the Technical University of Berlin in February of 1968, which hosted 6,000 participants. After the conference, about 12,000 people marched through West Berlin.

The second protest wave was against the German Emergency Act. The German state wanted to adopt laws that allowed the government to limit basic democratic rights and institute martial law in the event of any "emergency." This was the biggest protest of the year, with many large labor unions taking part. In May 1968, more than 60,000 people demonstrated in the West German capital Bonn. Students tried to build links with workers but had little lasting success. These protests pressured the government to make insignificant alterations to the law, but ultimately the law passed despite public opposition.

Following these protests, the BILD tabloid attempted to incite popular hatred against student protesters, particularly Rudi Dutschke. In April 1968, Dutschke was shot and badly injured in an assassination attempt by an extremist right-wing worker. After this, students blamed BILD for helping cause the assassination attempt. Under the slogan "BILD shot the gun too," student activists attempted to prevent the distribution of BILD tabloids throughout the country. Various street fights ensued. In Berlin, students attacked and set fire to a BILD distribution truck, while students destroyed the BILD editorial offices in Hamburg and in Munich. In essentially every city with a large student population, there were massive protests and activities against BILD. But the distribution of the tabloid was not significantly affected.

After the protests, there was a trial of a popular left-wing attorney, Horst Mahler, in Berlin. Mahler had

participated in the student movement and, as a lawyer, defended left-wing activists in court. On the day of his trial in November 1968, over 1,000 students, young workers, and musicians gathered to protest the trial. Soon there were violent clashes with the police. After the dust cleared, the skirmish resulted in 122 injured policeman and 22 injured protesters. To this day, this event is known as the “Battle of Tegeler Way,” named for the street on which it took place.

This event was a significant turning point within the whole 1968 movement in Germany. The SDS started to fracture due to internal disagreements on the question of the role of violence in protests, and many students

were no longer sure what was possible after a year of unsuccessful protests.

Ultimately the student movement broke apart into different political tendencies. Some activists, frustrated with the slow pace of change, formed militant groups that relied on terrorist tactics. Most of them, however, became absorbed into mainstream politics. The majority of student activists joined the reformist Social Democrats. In all, about 100,000 people between the age of 18 and 25 joined the party. Another part of the movement joined the Stalinist German Communist Party. This party remained the largest left party in Germany until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.

---

## The Revolt Across Europe

The year 1968 saw a wave of social struggles spread across Europe. A new generation, born after World War II, questioned the old society that had caused the war and began to struggle against the established order. Many struggles by historically oppressed religious and ethnic minorities took on a new life, alongside the struggles of youth and workers. The movements of 1968 laid the ground for the overthrow of many repressive regimes, and these events continue to be a reference point for radical politics across Europe.

### Italy: the Temperature is Rising

The year 1968 is remembered in Italy as a year of student rebellion. Historically, Italy’s industry had lagged behind its other European neighbors, but it experienced rapid economic development in the two decades after World War II. In order to keep pace with the rest of Europe, profits had to be kept high to ensure industrial growth. Developing industry also required an expansion of the universities, but in the struggling Italian economy this was growth with a tight belt. University budgets did not keep up with the increase in student population and facilities were inadequate. In 1966, students organized campus occupations and protests. The movement picked up again in 1967 and there were many clashes with police. The demands grew in response to the repression, and there were calls for “Student Power” – meaning students’ democratic control over the universities.

In the workplaces, the rapid industrialization pulled in younger, less-skilled workers, who were more inclined to defy their conservative unions. When the big unions prematurely ended a strike in early 1968 with little results, the workers responded with a wave of spontaneous factory strikes and protests all over Italy that intensified well into 1969, including a general strike that shook Rome. The unions called for an end to the strikes, but the workers pressed on nonetheless. Many of the strikes had been led by militant rank-and-file groups independent of the unions. They elected thousands of workers’ councils to manage negotiations with the factory owners.

These struggles in 1968 were just a preparation for the “Hot Autumn” of 1969, which saw strikes and workers’ mobilizations sweep the country.

### Spain: Cracks in Franco’s Authority

In 1968, Spain was ruled by the fascist dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco. Union struggles began to break out as workers built underground unions, led by the Communist Party. Despite the governments’ threats, Spanish workers held the first May Day demonstrations against Franco for decades in Madrid, Barcelona, Seville and several other cities. Police attacked and arrested the demonstrators. At the end of the year, 43 political prisoners (many of whom were revolutionaries and illegal union leaders) went on a hunger strike that lasted for four days, demanding amnesty, political rights and independent trade unions. Meanwhile, students began to

revolt against the intensely repressive culture of Franco's Spain. Huge student strikes and demonstrations spread throughout the university system.

These movements shook the Spanish fascist state, though it remained standing until the death of Francisco Franco in 1975.

### **Portugal: Revolt Against a Decaying Empire**

In the 1960s Portugal was ruled by Europe's oldest dictatorship, called the Estado Novo, led by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. Portugal was the least developed country in Western Europe. By 1968, it was seen as an ideal site for investment for multinational corporations. As the urban working class grew, so did the shantytowns in which many workers resided. Portugal was beginning to lose its empire, as anti-colonial uprisings in Africa rose up against Portuguese colonial governments. In an effort to hold onto these colonies, the Portuguese government instituted conscription for students who failed their exams and sent them to join the colonial forces in Africa. This threat of conscription added fuel to the fire and brought many students to identify with the anti-colonial movements.

In November, inspired by movements around the world, 2,000 students at the University of Lisbon held demonstrations and boycotted the opening ceremony of the new school year to protest the political repression. On November 25 and 26, around 5,000 students at the University of Coimbra demanded university reforms and clashed with the police.

The dictatorial Estado Novo regime was eventually overthrown in 1974 when a group of dissident military officers organized a popular coup. While the regime ended in 1974, it was the dissent of the 1960s that prepared the way for its overthrow.

### **Greece: Beginning the Struggle Against the Military Junta**

In 1968, Greece was ruled by a military dictatorship, or junta. In April 1967 a group of fascist officers had seized power in a coup d'état, arguing that Greek society needed to be cleansed of all communist influence. This military dictatorship, led by Georgios Papadopoulos, banned all political parties. It imposed strict control on the press while arresting and torturing thousands of people. As the year continued, more officers within the military and

former politicians were purged and forced into exile for their alleged disloyalty to the regime. Even people loyal to the king were persecuted. In Stockholm, Sweden, about 3,000 Greeks and Swedes protested against the junta in front of the Greek tourist office. Similar demonstrations of solidarity took place in Norway and Denmark.

These demonstrations, though small, marked the beginning of movements which would eventually overthrow the regime in 1974.

### **Belgium: the Struggle for Flemish Autonomy**

In Belgium, Flemish people in the North launched a struggle for their own cultural autonomy from the enforced dominance of the French language in schools and public life. In January, the French speaking section of the Catholic University of Leuven decided to expand into the Flemish region. Flemish nationalist student responded by disturbing French-speaking classes and students. Riot police were called in to clamp down on protesters with teargas, water cannons and riot sticks. Hundreds of students were arrested. Firebombs were thrown into the auditorium of the Catholic University of Louvain, causing major damage. Violent clashes continued between demonstrators and the police throughout the month. The crisis in Leuven forced the Belgian cabinet and Prime Minister to resign on February 7.



*London police beating anti-war protesters*

Later in the year, the Flemish students ultimately got what they had demanded – their own autonomous Flemish university.

### **England: Youth Radicalization and Worker Reaction**

As in the United States, English students took up the struggle against the U.S. war on Vietnam. In mid-March, tens of thousands of demonstrators protested at the American embassy in London, where they were met by 1,300 police officers. Students continued organizing and by March 27, 50,000 people in London took to the streets against the war in Vietnam. About 4,000 marchers broke away from the main demonstration and marched to the American embassy and clashed with the police.

By the end of 1968, Black people and immigrants began to organize against racism. On December 1, a national conference of the new Black Power Movement was held in Birmingham, with more than 700 immigrants participating.

### **Ireland: A Civil Rights Struggle**

1968 represented a major turning point in the politics of Ireland. Ireland had been split up into two sections with 26 counties in the south under Irish control and six counties in the north under British control. In Northern Ireland, all major political and economic power was in the hands of the British ruling class, who granted more privileges to Protestants. As a result, Catholic workers were a poorer section of the working class compared to their Protestant counterparts.

Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the subjugated Catholic minority rebelled in Northern Ireland. Mass nonviolent marches and protests were met with intense violence by the British Army as well as Northern Irish paramilitaries.

The struggles in 1968 foreshadowed a shift in perspectives within the movement for Irish independence. Some people became disillusioned with the nonviolent tactics of mass movements and were attracted to militant guerrilla tactics against British forces, launching attacks during the period known as “The Troubles”.

---

## **Czechoslovakia and Poland**

### **Revolt Against Soviet Domination**

The 1950s and ‘60s in Eastern Europe saw a series of struggles led by workers and students against the states installed by the USSR after the Second World War. In the mainstream literature, these uprisings are portrayed as struggles against “socialism” or “communism,” since these states, following the lead of the USSR, falsely labeled themselves as such in order to legitimize their rule. In reality, although the USSR was born out of a genuine socialist revolution led by the Russian workers in 1917, a bureaucracy rose to power. It betrayed the revolution and set up a massive repressive regime headed by Stalin. The outcome of the Second World War enabled Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy to extend their rule to a number of Eastern European states – the spoils of war, not the product of revolution.

Forced to produce both for their own rulers and for Russia, the doubly-exploited workers of Eastern Europe fought back in a series of strikes and uprisings in the 1950s – most notably in East Germany in 1953, and in

Poland and Hungary in 1956. The first two uprisings were put down violently by the internal police and military. In the case of Hungary in 1956, however, internal repression failed. The revolt turned into an all-out revolution, the government collapsed, and the newly-formed workers’ councils took power in several cities, much like the Russian Soviets did in 1917. The leaders of the USSR recognized the situation as extremely dangerous for them. If a workers’ revolution succeeded in Hungary, it could spread to the rest of Eastern Europe and threaten to regenerate the revolution in Russia itself. The Russian Army invaded Hungary and crushed the revolution with extreme brutality, causing thousands of deaths and 200,000 refugees.

### **Czechoslovakia in 1968**

In Czechoslovakia, mass resistance to the Stalinist regime began later – in the late 1960s. This was mainly due to Czechoslovakia being the most industrially advanced

country after East Germany among the postwar satellite states of the USSR. This ensured relatively tolerable living conditions for its workers. Due to the incompetent Communist Party leadership, however, the competitive advantage of their economy did not last. By the 1960s, their industrial infrastructure lagged behind their competitors, including East Germany. As a result, exports to Russia declined and Czechoslovakia sunk into economic crisis, with falling wages and living standards.

In 1967, a few prominent writers and students expressed their grievances against the regime and were swiftly dealt with by the state. The writers' union was shut down, and the students were beaten and arrested by the police. Soon after, however, the mass unrest that had been simmering below the surface erupted, thanks to a minor government shake-up. The conservative Party Secretary Antonin Novotny was replaced by the more liberal Alexander Dubček. Although openly loyal to the USSR, Dubček represented the growing "reform" wing of the Communist Party, which called for a moderate easing of state repression, and greater freedom of speech. Desperate to hold on to power, Novotny tried to stage a military coup. When that failed, he tried to rally workers' support by sending his associates to the factories to agitate in his favor.

The reform wing behind Dubček responded with political agitation both in the factories and among writers and journalists, who seized the opportunity to expose the rampant corruption of Novotny's government. There was a media frenzy, with scandals implicating government officials. Novotny's personal corruption was exposed, as well as that of many politicians who were forced to resign, with some even committing suicide. This massive outpouring of popular dissent took even Dubček and his reformist colleagues in the Communist Party by surprise. Newspapers and films from all over the world suddenly became available, and there were openly political theater productions. This eight-month period has become known as the "Prague Spring."

Dubček was warned by Moscow to keep order, and Russian tanks entered Czechoslovakia under the excuse of routine maneuvers – though this was a clear warning of what would happen if the government failed to halt the reform movement. Dubček repeatedly implored his people to show "restraint," but it was too late – the popular mood had been unleashed. As the reform



*Soviet tanks enter Prague*

movement picked up, it caused a near collapse of media censorship. Workers in the factories began to kick the hated state officials out of their unions and put forth their own demands, such as workers' councils that would elect factory managers democratically. Strikes were even announced without the approval of union officials.

When the Soviet leaders in Moscow saw that Dubček's government failed to stop the reform movement, they decided to step in. On August 20, Soviet tanks invaded major Czech cities. Dubček and his colleagues were arrested and taken to Moscow to be disciplined. The small Czechoslovakian military was powerless against the Russian tanks, and no counterattack was even attempted. There was widespread nonviolent resistance, however. Huge demonstrations were held in Prague. Demonstrators obstructed the path of tanks, often with their own bodies, and tried to reason with the invading soldiers. They sabotaged railways and communication



*Nonviolent protest against the invasion in Prague*

stations and altered street signs, sending invading tanks on wild goose chases across the countryside.

Although the military invasion was accomplished in days, it took the USSR more than a year to effectively re-impose censorship and rein in the reform movement. Dubček was sent back to Czechoslovakia to announce the beginning of a “normalization” period, in which the USSR would increase its control over the state and restore full censorship of the media. The so-called normalization aroused further indignation among students and journalists who continued to denounce the invasion. Just before being shut down, the magazine *Student* denounced the government for its “betrayal of the historical role assigned to this country: to shake the inhuman structure of Stalinism and to find a human form for a socialist order.” The militancy among workers also increased in response to this policy of normalization. Factory workers rallied in solidarity with the students and journalists. They joined student anti-normalization protests on campuses and formed hundreds of “Workers’ Committees for the Defense of Freedom of the Press.” Between November 1968 and March 1969, hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrated against normalization and in support of a free press.

Despite these protests, the normalization process continued at a cautious pace. Dubček began purging the Communist Party leadership of its more actively pro-reform members. Eventually, even Dubček himself was forced to resign and was demoted to a position as a minor functionary. The heads of the unions, whose positions and authority were being threatened by the surge of workers’

self-activity from below, cooperated with the state and purge the unions of dissidents. Tens of thousands of union representatives were removed. Pro-reform teachers and journalists were fired, and activists who were publicly critical of the state were even imprisoned. The last wave of protest was in August 1969, the anniversary of the USSR invasion, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets. This time, Moscow didn’t have to intervene, as the protesters were put down violently by the Czechoslovakian police.

### **Poland from 1956 to 1968**

Four months before the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the workers of Poznan, Poland organized strikes and protests against their miserable living and working conditions. The violent police response fanned the flames, and workers seized police stations, freed prisoners, and armed themselves. Unlike what would soon happen in Hungary, however, the uprising did not spread to the rest of the country. Military detachments were sent to crush the Poznan uprising before it could turn into a nationwide revolution. After state control was restored, the Polish government managed to disarm the working class with a combination of minor concessions and false promises. And when the workers dared strike again in 1957, they met with brutal police repression.

In this way, the government quelled mass resistance – but only for a decade. In 1968, the people of Poland rose up again. As in Czechoslovakia, protests began with students and writers. In January 1968, the government banned the allegedly subversive play *Dziady*. Although it was written in the early 19th century, it exhibited anti-Russian sentiments that were viewed as a subtle critique of the USSR. Students and intellectuals, who had been protesting the strict censorship of their regime throughout the 1960s, were often harassed and arrested. This ban was the last straw, and it incited a wide public petition against censorship. The police repression that followed spurred the movement, and in March tens of thousands of students protested against the repressive policies of the state and in solidarity with the people of Czechoslovakia. Many had read Marx and Lenin’s writings on socialism and were not fooled by the false labels of their imposed government. They wanted Poland to take steps towards building real socialism, based on the idea that working people can govern society. They

demanded democracy, freedom of speech, workers' control of production, and independent unions.

Unlike in Czechoslovakia, however, state repression came down hard and fast on the Polish movement before it could ignite the forces of the working class. Thousands of students were beaten and arrested by police, and intellectuals associated with the protests were exiled. Resorting to one of the time-honored ruling-class traditions, the Polish government used racism to divide the people against themselves and weaken the movement. They took advantage of the about-face of the USSR

from pro- to anti-Zionist following Israel's 1967 War and launched a virulent anti-Semitic media campaign, blaming Polish Jews for the unrest ("Zionist" simply became synonymous with "Jew"). Communist Party First Secretary Władysław Gomułka, the de facto leader of Poland, called the Jewish citizens a "fifth column" on television. The resulting wave of harassment and intimidation drove 13,000 Jews to emigrate from Poland. It wasn't until 1970 that the Polish workers rose up again in a wave of strikes that hadn't been seen in the country since 1956.

---

## Japan

### A Militant Student Movement

Some of the most dramatic anti-war, anti-government demonstrations of the late '60s took place in Japan. Thousands of helmeted students armed with long staves, organized in the Zengakuren (the National Union of Autonomous Committees of Japanese Students), a radical wing of the student movement, snake-danced through the streets of Tokyo and other cities battling with the police. Like the students in the United States, they rarely reached out to broader sections of the population. As a result there was often a shifting attitude in the general population toward their actions – sometimes one of disapproval, and other times, in the face of police repression, one of support.

At the end of World War II, Japan was occupied by the U.S. The island of Okinawa, where the majority of U.S. bases were located, was still under direct U.S. military rule. In addition there were 147 bases in other parts of Japan. The Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty (AMPO, Japanese abbreviation) between the United States and Japan established U.S. domination over much of Japanese life. By 1960, when the treaty came up for renewal, there was a deep opposition to U.S. domination. A coalition was formed made up of 1,633 organizations. These groups included labor unions, farmers' and teachers' unions, poetry circles, theater troupes, student and women's organizations, mothers' groups, and groups affiliated with the Japanese Socialist Party and the Japanese Communist Party.

In May and June 1960, mass demonstrations took place outside the Diet building (the Japanese Parliament), opposing the adoption of the revised treaty. In one of

the clashes with police, a student from the University of Tokyo was killed. Her death reinforced the feeling among many that the government ignored the wishes of the people. Japan was undergoing rapid changes. Twenty-eight percent of the population lived in the city in 1945, but by 1970 this number had risen to 72 percent. The economy was growing rapidly. In 1948, annual per capita income was approximately \$100 US dollars, compared to \$1,269 per capita in the United States. Yet by 1968, Japan had surpassed West Germany to become the second largest economy in the capitalist world.

In the cities, nearly 50% of the population was between 15 and 34 years old. The number of universities also expanded, from 71 public and 116 private universities in 1952, to 74 public and 258 private universities by 1967. The common view was that you had to attend a university to succeed. The result was fierce academic competition dubbed "entrance exam wars" (*juken sensō*). Like elsewhere in the world, students in the universities and high schools were increasingly discontented with the regimented conditions they faced in the schools. As one activist said:

Rather than places for research, universities had become nothing but preparatory schools for entering the workplace, just as high schools had become preparatory schools for university entrance exams....I lost faith in universities that bowed only to the demands of government and big business.

Student activism began on the campuses, and as the U.S. war on Vietnam escalated, students and the rest of the Japanese population found themselves involved.



*Students marching in Tokyo*

Japan was a major staging area and supply zone for the U.S. military. In addition, a significant portion of Japanese industry was devoted to the U.S. war on Vietnam, producing ammunition, napalm, phosphorous and other elements of the U.S. war machine.

### **The Movements of 1968**

The youth movements of 1968 actually began in October 1967, when student activists, along with young workers, tried to prevent Prime Minister, Satō Eisaku, from traveling to South Vietnam. His trip was viewed as deepening the Japanese commitment to the U.S. war in Vietnam. More than 4,000 riot police were called in to seal off the airport. Members of militant Zengakuren student groups clashed with the police. One student activist was killed in the confrontation. People throughout Japan witnessed the confrontation on national television. This would continue throughout the period; demonstrations received live coverage, not the predigested short clips the media feed us today. Sympathy for the student activists grew. At the time an estimated 80% of the population opposed the U.S. war on Vietnam and increasingly resented the U.S. domination of Japan.

1968 began with the U.S. military announcing its plans for the USS Enterprise to dock at the U.S. naval base at the port of Sasebo on its way to Vietnam. Not only was this enormous 75-ton aircraft carrier nuclear-powered, it was rumored to be carrying nuclear weapons. Whether this port was chosen consciously or not, the town of Sasebo is less than 50 kilometers to the north of Nagasaki, where the U.S. dropped the second atomic weapon on the Japanese civilian population in 1945. This was a major affront to a population that had suffered horribly under

the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many looked at this decision as a test or provocation of the deep anti-nuclear attitudes of the Japanese people.

In preparation for the arrival of the Enterprise, student groups from Tokyo and other universities set up their headquarters in the University at Sasebo. On January 17, two days before the Enterprise was to dock, Japanese riot police battled students who were attempting to cross a bridge to the U.S. naval base. The police attacked with tear gas and water cannons, driving the students back. The police continued their attack on the retreating students. As one Japanese writer observed:

The students were trapped like mice in a bag...the police kept raining blows on the students who, taken by surprise, were running around defenseless, but they kept beating the students until they fell unconscious and lay motionless on the ground.

Again, the confrontation was broadcast across Japan. The brutality of the police left 450 injured and shifted popular opinion, which had been somewhat negative toward the militant stance of the students. When the Enterprise pulled into port, 50,000 students assembled on the shores of Sasebo in opposition. At the bridge where the policed attacked the students, 5,000 local people turned out to protest their brutality.

### **The Student Movement**

*“Turn the Kanda into the Latin Quarter”*

This was a slogan taken up by students at the University of Tokyo – the Kanda is the university quarter of Tokyo, and the Latin Quarter is the university quarter in Paris, the center of the French revolt of May '68.

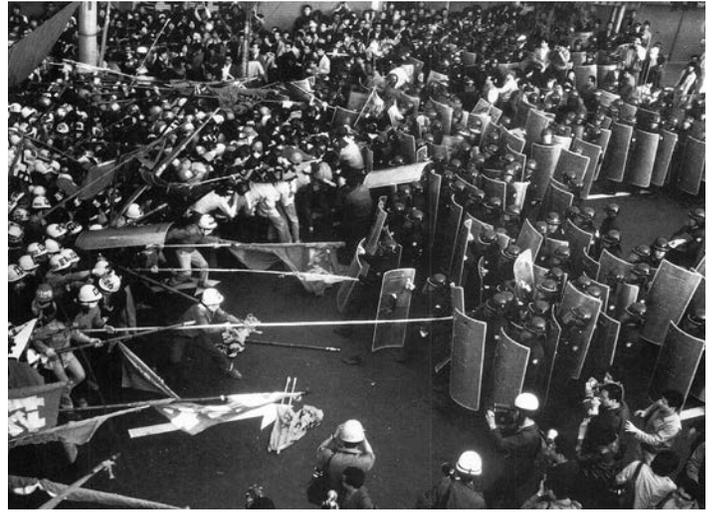
1968 witnessed a growing opposition on university campuses to tuition increases, narrowly focused curriculum, corruption and the oppressive nature of education. A national federation of Zenkyōtō (All-Campus Joint Struggle Councils) was established. The Zenkyoto were open to all, regardless of political affiliation, and were guided by open democratic discussion and decision-making. The “Zenkyōtō movement” spread to hundreds of universities and thousands of high schools nationwide.

In June 1968, students at the University of Tokyo, Japan’s most elite university, and at Nihon University, a huge university with nearly one-tenth of Japan’s

total university student population, both established Zenkyōtō, and seized and barricaded their campuses. The barricaded universities were declared “liberated zones,” and defended by helmeted students armed with heavy sticks. The media gave sympathetic coverage to students resisting police in the name of greater academic and personal freedom. Similar strikes and occupations spread to schools across the country.

The most widely known action at this time was at the University of Tokyo. Medical students were protesting the conditions of interns who were forced to work in the hospital without pay after completing their coursework. The administration and faculty refused to recognize their demands. The medical students went on strike and 17 students were expelled. The confrontations escalated over several months until June, when around 40 medical students occupied the main auditorium. Two days later, 1,200 riot police were sent in to remove the students. The School of Literature went on strike and the president of the University called a meeting in the University’s main building, the Yasuda Auditorium. More than 6,000 students showed up. He began to lecture all the students, who had expected to have a discussion. The students refused to be lectured to, and the President, claiming heart problems, fled the meeting. The University Zenkyōtō organized an occupation of the auditorium building. Other schools within the University soon joined the strike, which lasted for six months.

By January 1969, most strikes around the country and strikes in the schools at the University of Tokyo had ended. Nevertheless, the central auditorium, with its prominent tower, became the symbol of student resistance. Students and young people from around Japan had joined the occupation. The government demanded an end to the occupation and sent in 8,500 riot police. Helicopters dropped tear gas and trucks were sent in with powerful water canons. They attacked the students who had barricaded themselves in the building. Those inside the building fought back, throwing stones, bricks and Molotov cocktails. Young people from around the country poured into Tokyo to join the fight, attacking the police from behind. The assault lasted 21 hours and was broadcast live on national television, with an estimated 70% of households watching the conclusion on Sunday. In the two days of fighting, 653 police, 141 students and 6 bystanders were injured, and 819 students arrested.



*Students battle riot Police in Narita Airport*

Not all occupations ended so dramatically. At Nihon University, 35,000 students had called a strike and occupation around the same time, over massive corruption in the University and “mass-produced” education. They ended their strike without the same level of confrontation. After six months their strike ended with the resignation of various university officials.

Following the attack on the University of Tokyo, Zenkyōtō organizations at nearly 200 universities throughout Japan went on strike. In July 1969, the Diet passed a University Control Law that permitted the Ministry of Education to take control of any school that was unable to end a campus conflict within six months. With this threat hanging over them, the campus occupations ended.

### **The Movement is Not Limited to the Campuses**

Although much of the attention focused on the students’ demonstrations and militant occupations, increasing numbers of other people were mobilizing around their own grievances and in opposition to the U.S. war on Vietnam. There were movements, small and large, across the country.

On March 31, 1968, thousands of students joined farmers who had been opposing the construction of the Narita International Airport and battled the riot police. The struggles over the airport continued for years and some farmers still refuse to leave their land today.

In July, railway workers called on students at two universities to help stop a freight train carrying munitions bound for Vietnam. Students and workers swarmed onto

the tracks, and climbed aboard the engine to talk with the workers in the cab. After nine hours, the police cleared the protest and the train continued its deadly journey.

On October 9, in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, clashes between police and students ended with 80 wounded and 188 arrests. The anti-riot law, which had been suspended, was restored and 800,000 people took to the streets to protest this decision.

The radical student movements of the late '60s began to subside in the following years. Like in other parts of

the world, some activists in the militant movements of the late '60s turned to terrorist solutions attempting to inflict blows on the empire. They formed small military groupings and resorted to terrorist attacks, engaging in high-profile kidnappings, airplane hijackings and assassinations.

The student movements served as a spark for broader movements of the population in opposition to the war in Vietnam and the continued occupation of Okinawa by the U.S. military. These movements continued to grow.

---

## Mexico

### “Hunger and misery are the agitators, not us.”

In 1968, Mexico may well have been regarded as a modern and stable nation by the outside world. It had recently undergone a period of economic boom known as the “Mexican Miracle” and was on its way to becoming the first Latin American nation to host the summer Olympic games. By these standards, Mexico was quickly developing into a progressive nation that was ready to join the world stage of advanced democracies.

But for the majority of Mexicans, life was quite different. Although Mexico was growing richer, its class inequalities remained unchanged; the economic growth had mostly benefited the wealthiest people while the majority of the population remained in poverty. Though some experienced minor improvements in their standard of living, most Mexicans continued to live in slums or poor villages with little access to social services including education, healthcare, and housing.

At that time the Mexican government was headed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI had governed Mexico since its founding in 1929, and was referred to as the “perfect dictatorship.” It pretended it was promoting democracy while in reality exerting an authoritarian, corrupt, and repressive rule. Under the leadership of President Diaz Ordaz, the PRI government was primarily self-serving, and put forth policies that valued so-called stability over democracy.

Freedom of speech, organization, and politics were practically non-existent. The mainstream media was state-operated and any news outlets that criticized the government were completely censored. Independent

labor unions were prevented from forming, and all types of public protest were immediately shut down by the granaderos (riot police). Even politicians who questioned the rule of the PRI were quickly forced to resign or face fatal consequences. However, this all started to change in 1968.

### The Olympic Games

1968 was a special year for Mexico; it had been chosen as the first developing country to host the Olympic Games. Mexico's leaders thought this was the perfect opportunity to show the world, for the first time, how modern and successful Mexico had become. In doing so, the government spared no expense on infrastructure and accommodations to host the world event. The final price tag to organize the Games was \$176 million dollars, equivalent to \$1.2 billion dollars today.

While hosting the Games was viewed as an accomplishment by Mexico's elite, it did not come without harsh criticism. There was widespread discontent as the government was spending this massive amount of money on the Olympics while so many Mexicans were struggling to survive. Many became agitated at the government's portrayal of Mexico as a secure and prosperous nation when for many the reality was one of poverty, repression and censorship. Nonetheless, President Diaz Ordaz and his government officials believed that hosting the Games was of the utmost importance, and that nothing could be allowed to stand in their way.

## A New Generation is Born

Beginning in 1940, Mexico had experienced a period of tremendous economic growth. After World War II, there was a big push for rapid industrialization. The economic expansion that followed led to an increase in urban populations, and the development of an industrial working class. As cities grew rapidly, the government increased its investment in public services, including higher education. For the first time in Mexico's history, families who were not members of the elite were able to send their children to college, and a new generation of middle-class Mexican students was born.

However by 1968, these students were undergoing a process of radicalization, like many others in the world at the time. With their newly acquired college education, and influenced by their exposure to movements against exploitation and oppression all over the world, they began to examine and question the society they lived in. They became increasingly bothered by the widespread despair, the level of inequality that surrounded them, and the overall lack of freedom and democracy they experienced. Even though they came from diverse and relatively privileged backgrounds, the fact that they were doing so well while most Mexicans were not, created guilt and anger among them. Some felt ashamed of their parents' generation for having accepted this inequality. In defiance, many students broke culturally from the past and began developing their own norms and ideas. Influenced by the growing counterculture of La Onda (The Wave), they began adopting long hair, casual clothing, and "rocanrol" (rock'n'roll) music not only as forms of self-expression, but also as a way of challenging the status quo. Their perspectives put them into profound conflict with the established conservative and controlling ideals of the PRI government, and in the summer of 1968 a student opposition movement began to emerge.

The 1968 student movement was not the first to occur in Mexico. In 1956, students from the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) in Mexico City went on strike to demand more university autonomy and student resources. Two years later, students from the neighboring campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) organized a strike in support of striking bus drivers, and in 1966, student strikes broke out at the University of Sonora, University of Puebla, and University of Michoacan, over multiple issues including

elections and the privatization of public services. But unlike the students that came before them, the generation of 1968 was the first to come out in massive numbers, and put forth political and social demands directly opposing the rule of the PRI government.

## The Spark of the Student Movement

The 1968 student movement in Mexico began on July 22 when riot police in Mexico City violently suppressed a typical brawl among high school students over a football game. The police attack was so brutal that days later, students from various high schools and universities initiated hunger strikes and occupied several buildings of the National Preparatory School #1 in protest. Rioting and fighting broke out between students and the police. On July 30, army and police units were directed to move in and end the protest. Several students were killed when the army used a bazooka to force its way into the occupied buildings to arrest the protesting students.

## Students Begin to Organize

The government's brutal response to the protests created more anger and discontent among students. The more the government repressed them, the more determined and radical the students became. A growing number of them began speaking out and mobilizing. After the bazooka attack, faculty and students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), who had not been involved yet, joined the protests. On August 1, UNAM faculty and students led a march of 100,000



*Tanks occupying the Zócalo Plaza on August 27*

people through the city. Days later, National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) students and faculty held their own march in support. Strikes and protests quickly spread to other universities and cities across the country.

To facilitate their growing movement, students formed the National Strike Committee (CNH) on August 2. The CNH was a coalition of students from UNAM (Autonomous University of Mexico), from IPN (National Polytechnic Institute), from the College of Mexico (ColMex), and other universities. The CNH became the primary organ of the student movement.

Initially, the students' demands were limited to university autonomy from the government and greater employment opportunities. Later, however, they began putting forth additional social and political demands. Students also started openly criticizing and vilifying the presidency, which was unheard of at the time. The movement encouraged all people to participate, and many became convinced it was time for serious social change.

On August 9, the CNH called a university strike and announced further action against the government, including mass demonstrations and a general strike, unless it met the following demands: release political prisoners, dismiss the Mexico City police chief, dismantle the *granaderos*, provide reparations to the families of students killed or wounded by government forces, and repeal the laws that restricted free speech and press. But the students' hopes went much deeper. The basis for their revolt became a general desire for social equality, government accountability, and a more open democracy. They wanted the state to stop investing its resources for the benefit of Mexico's elites and start addressing the needs of ordinary people.

### Government Repression

Under the leadership of the CNH, student protests became commonplace, but so too did the government's intense efforts to suppress them. The CNH organized large demonstrations including one on August 27 at the *Zócalo*, Mexico City's main square. This demonstration drew an estimated half a million people, including students, parents, teachers, nurses, railway workers, taxi drivers, and other workers. Because the *Zócalo* was located near its centers of power, the government saw this as a direct threat to its authority. As a result, military and



*Students protesting against the PRI government on September 13*

police units were sent in to forcibly remove demonstrators who refused to leave the square.

Throughout the movement, the PRI government attempted to tarnish the image of the student protests. President Diaz Ordaz accused the students of being impatient, out of control, and unreasonable. He alleged that the movement was under the leadership of communists and foreign agitators. As a counter to the movement, pro-government demonstrations were organized by the PRI to try to win over public support. However, these often backfired; the participants would start cheering for the students instead. In spite of the growing opposition, President Diaz Ordaz dismissed the demonstrations as irrelevant during his state of the union address on September 1. He also declared his refusal to satisfy any of the students' demands and asserted that his government would no longer tolerate demonstrations, even if it meant using violent force against protesters.

Nonetheless, the students continued to demonstrate. On September 13, they organized a silent march to prove to the public that they had no interest in being unruly or violent, as the government claimed. As the October 12 start date of the Olympic Games approached, President Diaz Ordaz and his government became increasingly determined to control the situation. Mexico's image and its reputation would be on the line if the protests were to interfere with the Games. As a result, the Mexican Army was ordered to occupy the campuses of UNAM and IPN, which had become the organizing centers of the movement. People were outraged at what they

saw as a violation of the long-standing autonomy of UNAM – a tradition that prohibited the presence of security forces on the campus. Battles erupted between demonstrators and security forces for several days, during which hundreds of students and teachers were beaten and arrested. In response, the CNH called for a rally and march on October 2 at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, in the Tlatelolco area of Mexico City, to protest the military occupation of their campuses.

### **The Tlatelolco Massacre**

On October 2, approximately 15,000 people gathered peacefully at Tlatelolco to listen to speakers and prepare to march to the Casco De Santo Tomas campus of IPN. During the speeches, government helicopters that were flying above were seen dropping what appeared to be signal flares into the gathering crowd. Immediately after, special military units moved in with tanks to surround the students. As they approached, snipers in nearby buildings suddenly began firing indiscriminately into the crowd, shooting both students and soldiers. Chaos soon followed. Soldiers started firing back, and people began fleeing for their lives, not knowing who was shooting at whom. At the same time, a group of armed men wearing civilian clothes and white gloves on their left hands, stormed into a building where CNH student leaders were giving their speeches and arrested them. When the shooting stopped, more than 300 people were dead (the actual figure may be much higher). Among those killed were students, military personnel, and civilians, and the government reported that 1,345 were arrested.



*Bodies of five victims of the Tlatelolco massacre*

The massacre was a planned government attack against the students called Operation Galeano. Military forces were ordered to attempt to end the movement permanently by taking over the plaza and arresting the student leaders. The armed men with white gloves were members of the Olympic Battalion, a unit that was organized to protect the Olympic Games. The military units were not aware that the government also had elements of the Presidential High Command (EMP) placed in the upper floors of buildings surrounding the plaza. They were instructed to fire into the crowd in order to induce an armed response from the soldiers and provoke a massacre affecting both sides.

Following the carnage, the government attempted to cover up the incident. The massacre was falsely represented by the government media as a violent student uprising, which had forced the military to take action. Government officials claimed that only 43 people were killed. Many went missing and it was reported that some bodies were dropped into the Gulf of Mexico from airplanes. No formal investigation was ever conducted by the government. It took a very long time for people to find out what had happened to their friends and loved ones. Some never got any information at all.

### **Aftermath**

After the Tlatelolco massacre, the students continued to denounce the government's repression. The CNH had agreed to a truce beginning on October 9 in preparation for the Olympics, but after the Games ended, there were only a few student protests. The brutal crackdown by the government had been a deep blow, and on December 4 they decided to dissolve the CNH and return to school, officially ending the student strikes.

Although the student protests in Mexico City didn't lead to any immediate political or social change, they did bring to light the repressive and corrupt nature of the Mexican government. This transformed the mindset of not only the students, but also the general population. Many ordinary people were now more willing to criticize the system and demand change, making it difficult for the PRI government to continue to rule unchallenged. Eventually, the government conceded some token reforms, and decades later the PRI was voted out of power.

---

# South and Central America

## A Long History of Student Struggles

*If you believed the revolution would come in five years, you were called a reformist.*

–A Uruguayan recalling 1968

By 1968, the student movement in Latin America already had a long history. In the early 1900s, students in different Latin American countries began fighting to democratize the universities and to make higher education accessible to the majority of the population. At the time, the universities of many Latin American countries were run by the church and the conservative capitalist class. The student movement rebelled against this control and demanded independence for each university to elect its own government, to have the freedom to develop its own curriculum and to make university education accessible to all students graduating from secondary school.

Depending on the country, each movement confronted its own obstacles such as military dictatorships, police repression, or manipulation by the U.S. government. But most shared the common goals of wanting greater access to resources and the creation of democratic bodies to be in charge of educational institutions.

### Argentina

The Argentinian student movement had been at the forefront of demanding university reforms since the beginning of the century. By 1958, a tri-party university government was established. It was made up of students, alumni and faculty, which replaced the government and church as administrators. Numerous scholarships were granted to students interested in attending a university. Millions of books on science and literature were produced and sold at accessible prices. One of the slogans of the time period was “books for all.”

For decades, the conservative and wealthy classes opposed these reforms and fought to return to the times when education was reserved for the privileged few. The military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía considered the universities to be the birthing ground for communist ideas. He was determined to eliminate the student governments. The government implemented Law 16.912 in 1966, which did away with university autonomy and

banned the university “co-government” of students and faculty.

The students responded to this repression with demonstrations, and in 1968 the fight to regain student autonomy and control of the universities continued. Throughout the year, the students organized several demonstrations. By June the police had stepped up their repression to such an extent that a federal judge ruled against police actions, describing them as “hooliganism.” Nevertheless, in June 1968, when the students were granted a permit for a demonstration, the police used tear gas and physical force to break up the protest. A judge called for the arrest of the police chief and other police officers involved in the attack against the students.

The authoritarian Onganía government also used other methods to undermine student organizing, such as demanding that radio and TV stations not report on the student demonstrations. Still the protests continued, and just one week after the arrests, students called another large anti-government demonstration. Another 160 people were arrested.

The Argentinian movements of 1968 were a continuation of the activity of previous years. While major shifts did not occur during ‘68, the year was used as a dress rehearsal for what would one year later become known as the Argentinian May, a movement which culminated in a general strike.

### Brazil

The Brazilian student movement’s history also dates back to the beginning of the century. During 1968, the country was under a military dictatorship. It came to power during a military coup in 1964 that was supported by the U.S. government. The new authoritarian military government opposed the student organizations and accused them of spreading communist ideas. On the first day of the coup, the UNE (National Student Union, formed in 1937) was outlawed by the government and its offices were burned down by the army.

The government also imposed the Suplicy Law in 1964, which outlawed strikes and political propaganda.

The students responded accordingly, organizing several demonstrations, including a demonstration in 1967 during the visit of the U.S. ambassador to the University of Brasilia. Students also protested the U.S. war on Vietnam by burning a U.S. flag.

This unrest continued into 1968 when the Brazilian Ministry of Education and the United States Agency for International Development passed the MEC-USAID agreement. The agreement granted the Ministry of Education loans in exchange for the development of a new educational system which privatized universities and called for English language programs in elementary schools. The students were outraged. Not only had their democratic institutions been outlawed, but now the U.S. government had more say in their education than they did.

Another aggravating factor was the large number of students who didn't have access to universities due to the reduced number of admissions. During this time, several students gathered in a restaurant called the Calabouço (Dungeon), where they discussed their grievances against the dictatorship. The police stormed the Calabouço on March 28, and killed high school student Edson Luis de Lima Souto. During the week following his murder, there were at least 26 protests in 15 different cities.

The demonstrations started again in June, mostly centered in Rio de Janeiro. On June 21, during what became known as "Bloody Friday", over 100 people were arrested. According to hospital records, twenty-eight protesters were killed, and dozens were injured by the police. Many working people witnessed the police violence against the students and joined the student demonstrators by throwing objects from their office windows and building barricades in the streets to protect themselves from the teargas and bullets. The majority of those arrested during Bloody Friday weren't students, but working people who had joined the protests.

The outrage after Bloody Friday was widespread and led to school occupations in over ten

different cities. On June 26, the March of the Hundred Thousand took place. After the violent actions of the police, the government found itself forced to allow the demonstration to take place. Students, workers, artists, religious leaders and many others marched in protest against the dictatorship, the lack of democracy in education, and the police repression. One hour into the march, the protesters numbered one hundred thousand, making it the largest demonstration in Brazil's history.

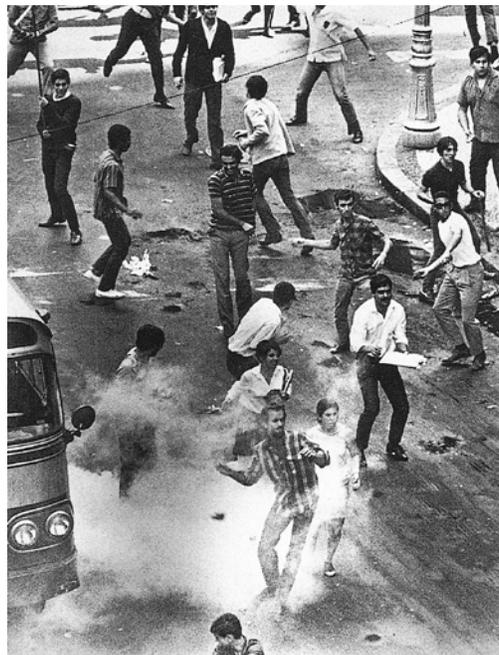
The events in Brazil during 1968 shook the whole society and panicked the government. The dictatorship knew that drastic measures would be required in order to stop the mobilizations. They issued Institutional Act No. 5, which allowed the government to take away the political rights of citizens, remove elected officials, try political crimes in military court, and imprison those who opposed the dictatorship. Thousands of students, activists, workers, and other opponents were arrested, tortured, killed, or forced out of the country during the years that followed.

## Uruguay

Known as the Switzerland of Latin America due to its history of democracy, social equality and economic stability, by 1955 Uruguay's economic decline endangered many of these advantages. The economic crisis that followed this decline led the government

to implement austerity measures, including wage freezes that quickly destroyed the standard of living of many Uruguayans. The budget cuts imposed by the government were strongly opposed by the National Convention of Workers (CNT). This 400,000-strong communist-led organization called for marches and strikes against the government's policy. President Jorge Pacheco took office in early 1968 and immediately began a repressive campaign against the organizations responsible for the mobilizations, calling for a ban on publications and meetings.

By May Day, 1968, the extreme force used by the state led the students and workers to join forces



*Student protest in Brazil is met with police tear gas*

against the government. In June, a series of strikes all but halted industry across the country and closed virtually all the universities and secondary schools. The government tried to break the solidarity of students and workers by revoking the student transportation fee hike that had led many students out in protest, but the students then called for the revocation of the fee hike for everyone. The police responded by shooting at demonstrators.

During the following days the students built barricades and used make-shift slingshots to defend themselves against the police.

The government instituted a state of emergency that prohibited union meetings, demonstrations, and left-wing publications. President Pacheco also called for a militarization of public employees, forcing public workers to go to the barracks in order to prevent them from participating in the demonstrations. Striking became as serious a crime as desertion from the military.

During the course of these events, the student organizations joined with the workers and the CNT. Textile workers organized factory occupations and the CNT called for a nationwide strike in the private sector. The students used a tactic popularized in Brazil of calling for impromptu gatherings of several hundred people during which they would block traffic and give speeches until the police arrived. These "lightning demonstrations" tended to end in violent confrontations with the police but continued every night for weeks.

The demonstrations and violence continued into August when the National Liberation Movement, an urban guerrilla group also known as "The Tupamaros," kidnapped the president of the government's communication company, who was a close friend of President Pacheco's. In response, the military took over the university. The students responded to this with more street fighting. In one such fight, a student, Liber Arce, was shot and killed by police. This only intensified the confrontations, which some started to call a "civil war" between the police, who were now routinely using firearms against the protesters, and the protesters, who used giant slingshots to shoot Molotov cocktails at the police.

By September, after many more confrontations, the military occupied most universities and secondary schools, and announced that they would be closed until October 15. This occupation, the militarization of public

workers, and the violence against the demonstrators weakened the energy of the protesters. The state of emergency went on until March 1969.

### **Other Latin American Countries**

While Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay had the most dissident activity during 1968, many other countries in Latin America also experienced mass mobilizations during this momentous year.

In Bolivia, a state of emergency was called after students staged massive demonstrations and, in June, the March for University Autonomy took place, joined by students, teachers and workers. In August, 300 students occupied a university in Cochabamba. Two protesters were killed and ten injured when police and militiamen broke up the demonstration. In September, President Rene Barrientos closed the schools for two months in response to a strike of 25,000 teachers for higher pay.

In Chile, protests broke out after the police arrested eight students when they stormed the university television station. In April, a strike of more than 30,000 longshoremen demanding higher pay halted port activity. In May, university students occupied radio stations, broadcasting stations, and university buildings demanding changes to the administration of universities. In August, 200 Chilean Catholic priests and other individuals occupied the Santiago Cathedral to protest what they called the church's alliance with the rich.

In Ecuador, students protested against transportation fee hikes by burning buses. In November, after three days of protest, five people were killed and several wounded in the city of Machala. Students demanded that a technical university be established in Machala. In December, all ports in Ecuador were shut down by a strike of port workers demanding higher wages.

In Peru, President Belaunde suspended constitutional rights in order to put an end to a nation-wide transportation strike. In September, riots broke out during a military coup against President Belaunde. Police used tear gas to break up the protest. In November, newsmen and printers went on a 24-hour strike to protest the closure of newspapers that the new military government accused of publishing false information.

In El Salvador in February, a 58-day-long teacher strike began in opposition to government reprisals against teachers who had participated in an October 1967 strike.

To stop the movement, the government tried to send the teachers to remote locations. Demonstrators occupied the plaza in front of the Ministry of Education for 33 days during the strike. In July, over 1,000 people participated in an anti-U.S. demonstration during the visit of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Demonstrators carried signs saying “Viva Viet Cong” and “Johnson, Murderer!”

Altogether, over 13 Latin American countries had mass mobilizations during 1968. They all continued the legacy

of activism that dated to the beginning of the century, and they demonstrated the common ground for the struggles of students and working people. This solidarity between students and workers terrified governments and led them to use extreme repression against these movements. Just as in the rest of the world, the Latin American '68 was a year full of struggle that awakened and transformed the political consciousness of a generation.

---

## Africa

### A Continent in Revolt Against Colonialism

While student and labor movements erupted in Europe and the Americas in 1968, for people in Africa, the context was decades of struggle against colonialism and white supremacy. There had always been widespread resistance to European colonial rule in Africa, but after World War II these movements for self-determination became overwhelming. Between 1950 and 1968, 39 different African countries won their independence from the European powers that had violently oppressed and exploited them since the 1800s.

In 1968 this process of de-colonization was still ongoing. Three new nations won independence that year: Mauritius, Swaziland, and Equatorial Guinea. Meanwhile, Angola and Mozambique were engulfed in independence wars against Portugal which would not be won until the mid-1970s. And in the southern part of the continent, local white-supremacist regimes still controlled South Africa, South West Africa (modern-day Namibia), and Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe). The fight for Black liberation in these extremely repressive countries was only beginning.

Nevertheless, by 1968 most of the continent had freed itself from direct colonial rule. The political relationship between Africa and Europe was forever changed as new national governments asserted themselves. The success of these struggles for self-determination had a deep cultural impact around the world, providing a new source of pride and inspiration to Black people everywhere, including those struggling for Black liberation in the United States.

#### Anti-colonialism and Neo-colonialism

However, as a new generation of African students, workers, and farmers were growing up in a post-colonial

world, they were discovering limits to their freedom and equality which national independence alone could not overcome. Though these nations were politically independent, they continued to be economically dominated by European banks and corporations. The new national leadership that emerged in these revolutions typically had to compromise with European or U.S. imperialism to maintain power, and often relied on brutally repressive policies to stamp out resistance. African leaders who were too uncompromising in their resistance to foreign domination were vulnerable, like Patrice Lumumba of the Congo or Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who were overthrown in violent coups sponsored by the U.S. and European powers. Instead, many African politicians sold out their countries to their former colonizers. One alternative was to seek the protection of the Soviet Union, but of course this came with its own strings attached. So for many African countries (and former colonies around the world), the 1960s was a period of transition from one version of imperialism to another – from the age of colonialism to the age of neo-colonialism which persists to this day.

The year 1968 saw a number of significant revolts by both students and workers who were reacting to this neo-colonialism, equally outraged by their own governments and by foreign imperialist powers. Nigeria and Ethiopia, for instance, were engulfed in bloody civil wars which were used by NATO and the Soviet Union as arenas in the Cold War. Nigerian and Ethiopian demonstrators clashed with police on several occasions while protesting against this foreign interference.

## Student Movements

For many young Africans, there was also a deep awareness of international solidarity against global imperialism. University campuses in Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Congo all saw demonstrations against the U.S. war in Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The university population in many of these countries was relatively small compared to those in wealthier nations like the U.S., Germany, and Japan, but even so they had a serious cultural impact. The student movement in South Africa was still small in 1968, but that year, a young medical student named Steve Biko and other activists formed the South African Students' Association, a Black student union focused on anti-apartheid activism. This organization would soon make major contributions to the growing Black Consciousness Movement, which linked college students with workers and other members of the segregated Black communities in the struggle against apartheid. Indeed, as in Europe, student movements in Africa had an especially big impact when linked with workers and the larger community.

While the student and labor movements in Africa were born out of unique struggles around particular problems in each country, they were undoubtedly connected to the global wave of revolt taking place at that time. In South Africa, university and high school students borrowed the tactics of U.S. and French students to stage a ten-day occupation of the administration building at the University of Cape Town after the school refused to hire a popular Black professor. We can also see examples of international links in the West African nation of Senegal. There, a student uprising in May '68 led to a general strike which nearly brought the government to its knees, right when very similar events were taking place in France.

### Senegal: A Neo-colonial Regime

Senegal was a colony of France until a revolution in 1960 won its independence. Senegal's first president was Leopold Senghor, who by the mid-1960s had concentrated a significant amount of power around his presidency. Senghor claimed to be a socialist and paid lip service to building Pan-African solidarity and resisting French domination, but in reality the neo-colonial ties between Senegal and France were very strong. The vast majority of Senegalese industries were owned by French

banks, trusts, and corporations. Meanwhile, many of the more highly skilled jobs in the public and private sectors were in practice reserved for the French population living in Senegal.

In an African country where the best jobs were still held by Europeans, people might look to education as a way to equalize opportunity and overcome the legacy of colonialism. But under agreements signed between the French and Senegalese governments, French laws and regulations relating to higher education still applied in Senegal. The administration of the university in Dakar, Senegal's capital city, was still determined by the French government. The vast majority of the teachers and administrators were French and were paid by France, and the content of the education was still centered on France. In fact, many Senegalese students saw the University of Dakar as a French university which just happened to be located in their country.

This was not simply a matter of national pride. French control over education had a real impact on the quality of education. The French government budgets did not make Senegalese education a priority. They did not set aside enough funds to keep up with rising enrollment, leading to major overcrowding. The education itself was designed to steer students into jobs which suited Senegal's role as a dependent trading partner with France – in other words to suit the French economy rather than to develop Senegal's own economic independence. This story was repeating itself in one version or another under neo-colonial regimes in many parts of Africa and around the world. But in 1968, Dakar briefly became a major center of resistance to neo-colonialism. This was partly because the city of Dakar, with its major port, is one of the most economically important cities in West Africa. It was also partly because the university served a population of students coming from a variety of French-speaking countries across Africa and the Middle East. (Roughly a third of the student body was French, a third was native Senegalese, and a third came from other former French colonies.)

By 1968, students in Senegal had already demonstrated their frustration with the "neo-colonial regime," as they called it, on several occasions. In 1963, 50 students were shot by police while protesting the re-election of President Senghor. Another student demonstration against Senghor took place three years later: in 1966,

the U.S. and U.K. sponsored a coup in Ghana, another West African country, overthrowing Ghana's anti-colonial president Kwame Nkrumah. Senegalese students reacted with a demonstration surrounding the U.S. and British embassies in Dakar, expressing Pan-African solidarity against imperialism. During the protest, they also condemned their own President Senghor for his neo-colonial policies and his growing monopoly on power.

Another important aspect to the growing unrest in Dakar was the link between students and workers. Workers demanded more Senegalese control over businesses and administration, but they also fought for improved education policies. Likewise, students demonstrated against all of the policies of President Senghor's governing party, whether they related to education or the economy. Many Senegalese students were aware of the effects workers' demands could have on their quality of life once they graduated and entered the job market.

In the spring of '68, the student union at the University of Dakar began staging protests against a new policy which had the effect of reducing the number of scholarships handed out to students. Meanwhile, more and more workers in the major Senegalese trade union were pushing for their leadership to break its remaining links with Senghor's governing party in order to pursue its own fully independent policy.

### **May '68 in Dakar: Students and workers strike**

*"The student movement was an unexpected opponent."*

—Ousmane Camara, Senegal's Director of National Security

Things finally came to a head in May. Workers and students staged a joint demonstration in Dakar on May 1 demanding lower prices and more jobs, and condemning the close ties between company bosses and Senghor's governing party. By May 12, the university student union was calling for the complete "liquidation of the current regime." Student actions continued to escalate over two weeks. Finally, the student union organized a general assembly of university and high school students, which voted to boycott exams and stage an indefinite strike. On May 27, high school and university students occupied the university campus and shut it down completely. The

following day, all schools in the capital city were closed as over 20,000 striking students met on the University of Dakar campus. Students held mass meetings to discuss their demands and political ideas. They circulated literature by revolutionaries like Marx and Lenin, as well as more contemporary writings by Chairman Mao and the Caribbean Marxist theorist Frantz Fanon. Then, on the morning of May 29, the government crackdown began.

The city administration had been caught off guard by the student strike, which is why it took the authorities several days to respond. When they did, however, it was President Senghor himself who ordered the assault on the campus. In the clashes that followed, 600 students were arrested, 80 were hospitalized, and one student was killed. Police used teargas, and students responded by throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails. The violence soon spread off-campus and there was rioting in the city center. Security forces were ordered to shoot looters and arsonists on sight. President Senghor declared a state of emergency.

The day the assault on the University began, workers organized a demonstration in support of the students, and 800 workers were arrested. That afternoon, members from six major trade unions came together and voted for a general strike in Dakar to begin the following day, May 30.

On the night of May 30, Senghor imposed a curfew on the city, enforced by the army, and made a radio address to the whole country. In an attempt to reinforce his image as the real hero of anti-colonial struggle, he accused the student protesters of being agents of foreign interference. Senegal's pro-government newspapers repeated the President's claim, while other media were censored. That same evening, Senghor requested military support from France.

On May 31, all economic activity in Dakar was shut down by a general strike. Police entered trade union headquarters and arrested union leaders. Workers and students held mass demonstrations condemning the government for these arrests and all its actions and policies. Troops surrounded the demonstrators and hundreds more were arrested.

On June 1, union and student leaders began negotiating with the government, but the uprising continued for weeks. Trying to win back some support,

Senghor replaced all his government ministers, announced a completely new program of anti-colonial policies, and released the imprisoned students. By mid-June, with the help of a heavy French military presence and even French air support, Senghor's government had regained complete control of the capital and the uprising was over.

Though the general strike had spread to some other areas of Senegal, for the most part it was confined to Dakar. Most of the country only heard the government's version of events. In addition to being isolated, the movement was deflated when its leaders, while negotiating with the government, were persuaded to step back in line behind Senghor's empty promises of reform. But despite

its ultimate failure to bring down the neocolonial regime, the movement of May '68 left a lasting mark on Senegal. A year later, another series of mass demonstrations by students and workers held to commemorate May '68 pressured the government once again to adjust its policies.

For a moment, Senghor's monopoly on power was seriously challenged, and the neo-colonial path of the country was called into question. Two sides were fighting over the soul of anti-imperial struggle. On one side was Senegal's ruling party of elites, with their close ties to the former colonizer. On the other side were the students and the workers, who saw that national independence was not enough to challenge imperialism.

---

## The Middle East

### A Year of Hope

The Middle East was swept up in the wave of anti-colonial resistance that shook the world in the 1950s and 1960s. Already, after World War II, the Middle East had seen a wave of revolutions that challenged imperialism. In 1952, the Free Officers in Egypt, led by the charismatic and popular leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, led a revolution against the British-imposed monarchy. The Egyptian revolution sparked similar movements and revolutionary attempts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, and Tunisia. The Middle East threw off decades of colonial rule, and these revolts promised to fulfill the great dream, to unify the Arabic speaking world and form a new political unity – an Arab national state.

The dream of Arab nationalism was undermined by two forces – externally by military defeat and internally by its own limitations. On the one hand, the regimes that emerged from the wave of anti-colonial revolt were faced with intense hostility from Israel and its European and U.S. supporters. In 1956, the British, French, and Israelis joined together to invade Egypt and crush the Arab nationalist regime there. This war was unsuccessful only because the Soviet Union supported the Arab nationalist regimes as a counterbalance to imperialism, and even threatened nuclear war against Britain and France. By 1967 Soviet support had waned and Israel waged a war that crippled Nasser's regime. This signaled to the U.S. the utility of using Israel as an agent of imperialism in the

region, leading to billions of dollars of U.S. military aid continuing to this day.

On the other hand, even before 1967, Arab nationalism had failed from within. The military elites who seized power in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq rode a wave of popular enthusiasm, but they had their own class agenda. The officers in each regime promised unity to each other, but quickly came into competition with one another for economic and territorial reasons. In 1967, Israel supported by the Western capitalist powers was able to defeat a fragmented Arab nationalist movement, and put the West Bank and Gaza Strip under permanent occupation.

In 1968, young people in the Middle East rejected the limitations of Arab nationalism. New forces, inspired by the Vietnamese resistance to U.S. imperialism, organized left-wing guerrilla struggles. The Palestinians, whose hopes had been dashed by the defeat of Egypt in 1967, began to organize their own struggle under the banner of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its various parties. Thousands of young Arab activists saw Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara as leaders of the anti-imperialist struggles around the world. They hoped that a similar struggle would finally kick imperialism out of the Middle East, and create a socialist society.

The two Arabic-speaking countries with the largest youth movements were Egypt and Lebanon, but even in Israel young people revolted against their role as citizens of that brutal colonialist state.

### **Egypt**

On February 21, 1968, workers in the city of Helwan went on a political strike against the army which they perceived as having sold out and failed to defend Arab interests in the 1967 war. This strike, with its political criticism of the regime, inspired Egyptian university students to take to the streets and add their voices to the protests. For over a week, students and workers mingled in demonstrations of 100,000 people. Demonstrators demanded freedom of the press, a representative parliament, and laws to protect the rights of people to organize politically. The Egyptian tradition of wall-magazines and posters with political articles flourished. Slogans and critiques of the regime appeared everywhere. This demonstration opened a decade of left-wing activism by young people in Egypt, culminating in the 1977 Bread Intifada.

### **Lebanon**

Palestinian refugees make up part of the population of Lebanon, having been expelled from their lands during the 1948 creation of Israel and the 1967 war. The Palestinian refugee camps became political centers of the PLO. Not only did this give new life to the Palestinian movement, the PLO had enormous sympathy among the youth in the other Arab countries. This terrified the Lebanese regime, and in 1968 they launched military attacks on the Palestinian refugees. Then, on December 28, Israel launched an attack against the Beirut airport to punish Lebanon for harboring the Palestinians. Lebanese university students launched a movement in support of the Palestinians, and the American University of Beirut (AUB) became a hotbed of radical politics. The AUB speakers' corner was flooded with crowds listening to political speeches from the Communist Party, Arab nationalists, Palestinian guerrillas, and all sorts of radicals. Students climbed the minarets of mosques and read the Communist Manifesto from the loudspeakers.

From 1968 onward, the Palestinian struggle would inspire grassroots protests and struggles in Lebanon led by the youth, until these movements were overtaken by the Lebanese Civil War in 1976.

### **Israel**

Israel's role in the Middle East, as a servant of imperialism, became increasingly clear after U.S. military aid to Israel increased by a factor of ten after the 1967 war. U.S. military leaders decided that Israel would be a useful "cop on the beat" in the Middle East. Some young people in Israel were disgusted Israel's role, and developed a critical stance towards the occupation and the state of Israel itself. In 1964, an organization called Matzpen, the Israeli Socialist Organization, was created by young radicals who had been part of the youth organization of the Israeli Communist Party. They were joined by veteran Palestinian communists such as Jabbra Niccola, a Palestinian who wrote the Matzpen thesis on revolution in the Middle East. Matzpen argued that only the working class, supported by the poor rural population, could transform the Middle East. They argued that Israel, a colonial settler state, had to be dismantled, and the populations of the Middle East needed to unify in a socialist federation that recognized the rights of all nationalities, especially the historically oppressed Palestinians. In 1968, Matzpen developed contacts with the left wing parties in the PLO and attempted to put its politics into practice by organizing opposition to Israel across the national boundaries imposed by imperialism. Matzpen activists were harassed, jailed, and driven into exile from Israel. Nonetheless, Matzpen demonstrated the aspirations of a new generation to rectify the injustices their parents had perpetrated.

### **Showing the Potential for Hope**

The year 1968 opened a period of intense activity in the Middle East which would have far-reaching effects. The activity begun by the generation of 1968 laid the basis for political protest and organization in countries across the Middle East for the next 50 years. Overall, 1968 pointed the way towards a different kind of Middle East, with political freedom, solidarity, and the end of a state system that is a product of imperialism. The youth of countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel struggled against the divisions of the past. This shows that, in 1968 or in the present, people do not have to be bound by the systems of oppression into which they are born. The challenges posed by 1968 in the Middle East remain, but so does the potential for hope.

---

# Timeline of Major Events

<b>January 5</b>	Czechoslovakia: Prague Spring begins after Alexander Dubček is chosen to head the government.
<b>January 17-19</b>	Japan: University students demonstrate against the presence of the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise at Sasebo.
<b>January 21</b>	Vietnam: Battle of Khe Sanh begins.
<b>January 23</b>	North Korea seizes the USS Pueblo.
<b>January 31</b>	Vietnam: The Tet Offensive begins. The NLF attack the US Embassy in Saigon.
<b>February 1</b>	Vietnam: NLF officer Nguyễn Văn Lém is executed by Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, South Vietnamese National Police Chief. The event is photographed by Eddie Adams.
<b>February 8</b>	US: Highway Patrol officers shoot student protesters in Orangeburg, South Carolina.
<b>Feb. 11 – Apr. 16</b>	US: Sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee.
<b>March 12</b>	Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, gains independence from Britain.
<b>March 12</b>	US: Anti-war presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy comes within 300 votes of defeating President Lyndon Johnson in the first Democratic Party primary election, in New Hampshire.
<b>March 16</b>	US: Robert Kennedy announces he is running on an anti-war platform.
<b>March 16</b>	Vietnam: My Lai Massacre
<b>March 31</b>	US: President Lyndon Johnson announces he will not seek re-election.
<b>April 4</b>	US: Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.
<b>April 4-8</b>	US: Riots erupt in over 100 cities in reaction to King's murder.
<b>April 6</b>	US: Black Panther Bobby Hutton is murdered by police in Oakland, California.
<b>April 11</b>	US: President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968.
<b>April 20</b>	UK: Politician Enoch Powell makes his anti-immigrant "Rivers of Blood" speech.
<b>April 23-30</b>	US: Students occupy Columbia University.
<b>April 25-26</b>	Bermuda: "Floral Pageant Riots" against white supremacy
<b>May</b>	US: DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) formed in Detroit, Michigan.
<b>May 10</b>	France: Peace talks between the US, South Vietnam and North Vietnam begin in Paris.
<b>May 12 – June 24</b>	US: Anti-poverty activists conduct the Poor People's Campaign.
<b>May 14 – mid June</b>	France: Mass student revolt and general strike takes place across the country.
<b>May 27 – mid June</b>	Senegal: Mass student revolt and general strike takes place in Dakar.
<b>June 5</b>	US: Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy is assassinated.
<b>June 15</b>	Japan: Students begin an occupation of the auditorium at the University of Tokyo.
<b>June 21-23</b>	Brazil: "Bloody Friday" riots – police fire upon student protesters.
<b>June 26</b>	Brazil: March of the One Hundred Thousand in Rio de Janeiro.
<b>August 20-21</b>	Czechoslovakia: Prague Spring ends as Soviet troops invade.
<b>August 22-30</b>	US: Police attack anti-war protesters outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.
<b>September 6</b>	Swaziland gains independence from Britain.
<b>September 19</b>	India: Four million public sector workers strike.
<b>October 2</b>	Mexico City: Tlatelolco massacre.
<b>October 5</b>	Northern Ireland: Police attack civil rights demonstrators in Derry marking the beginning of "The Troubles."
<b>October 12</b>	Equatorial Guinea gains independence from Spain.

<b>October 16</b>	Mexico: John Carlos and Tommie Smith give the Black Power salute at the Olympics.
<b>October 16-17</b>	Jamaica: The “Rodney Riots” against white supremacy in Kingston.
<b>November 1</b>	US: President Johnson announces the end of the bombing of North Vietnam.
<b>November 5</b>	US: Richard Nixon elected President.
<b>November 29</b>	Pakistan: Mass student revolts and general strikes begin against the dictatorship.
<b>December 23</b>	North Korea: The 82 crew members of the USS Pueblo are released.

---

## Selected Labor Struggles Around the World

1968 is often remembered as a year of student movements and anti-war protests, but we shouldn't forget that it was also a year of significant economic upheaval, when workers tested their strength against the bosses and in some places began to engage in political struggles as well. The youth revolts around the world challenged the establishment, providing an opening for many workers to challenge the system.

Years of economic growth in the U.S. and Western Europe emboldened workers, who expected to enjoy the fruits of a productive economy. In the United States, many labor struggles, such as the Memphis sanitation workers strike and the Dodge Main wildcat strike in Detroit, overlapped with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. For Black workers, the fights for equal pay, better working conditions, and an end to racial discrimination were all the same fight.

France, Italy, Senegal and Pakistan all saw major labor upheavals in 1968 were closely tied to student movements and posed serious threats to their governments.

The following timeline of strikes is not a complete list, but is simply meant to illustrate the heightened level of labor unrest that took place that year.

### January

**January 11-24** Vietnam: 14,000 South Vietnamese workers in Saigon go on strike.

After years of organizing against appalling conditions and low wages, first under French management and then under the management of the South Vietnamese government, power plant workers in Saigon go on strike on January 11. The South Vietnamese government responds with police repression, arresting the union leadership in the CVT (Vietnamese Confederation of Workers). Within hours, bus drivers and longshoremen join the strike in solidarity. The government responds to this with further police repression. After a thirteen-day struggle, the CVT eventually manages to contain and end the strike, in the false hope of avoiding further government repression.

**January 15** Spain: Comisiones Obreras lead a nationwide strike.

Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions), a grass-roots movement among workers in opposition to the government-controlled unions, organize an illegal strike as part of their ongoing struggle for the right to strike, collective bargaining, and forming independent labor organizations. All the leaders of the strike are arrested for treason and remain in prison for most of the year, igniting a series of protests throughout the year demanding their release.

### February

**February – March** El Salvador: Teachers organize a massive strike lasting 58 days.

The largest protest mobilization in modern Salvadoran history up until that point, this teachers' strike represents the highest point of struggle in a protracted period of protests against the government.

Beginning as a protest against the government's relocation of teachers as punishment for participating in earlier strike activity, this 58-day-long strike involves a month-long occupation of the plaza in front of the Ministry of Education, demonstrations of over 100,000 protesters, and dozens of solidarity strikes. In a nation whose population at the time was just over three million people, the teachers' strike is credited with raising the political consciousness of a generation of Salvadoran students and public sector workers.

**Feb 12 – April 16**

U.S.: Memphis sanitation workers strike.

The sanitation workers of Memphis, Tennessee, who were almost all Black, faced severe racial discrimination by their government employers, and struggled for years with poor pay and dangerous working conditions. In response to two Memphis workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, being crushed to death on the job earlier that month, on February 12 1,300 Memphis sanitation workers go on strike. Some are also emboldened by the fact that two days earlier, sanitation workers in New York had just won a strike. The Memphis workers' goals are for better pay, safer working conditions, and recognition of their union. As public employees, they face bitter attacks from the city's racist mayor, Henry Loeb, who does everything in his power to exploit and promote racial divisions in the city to try to undermine the strike.

The strike unites the struggle of Black workers with the Civil Rights Movement as activists from around the country, including Martin Luther King Jr., join the struggle in Memphis, which faces brutal police repression.

On April 3, King addresses the striking sanitation workers with the "I've Been On the Mountaintop" speech, the last speech he would give before his assassination the following evening. Riots erupt around the country with the news of King's murder, and on April 8, Coretta Scott King and other activists lead a silent march of 42,000 demonstrators through Memphis. Mayor Loeb is finally forced to concede to the strikers' demands on April 16.

**Feb. 19 – March**

U.S.: Teachers in Florida hold the nation's first statewide teachers' strike.

## April

**Apr 24**

Italy: There is a general strike in the city of Parma, which is joined by students. Sit-in solidarity strikes take place nationwide.

## May

**May 14**

France: Sud Aviation aircraft factory workers stage a sit-down strike.

This is the first of several major worker occupations organized in solidarity with the growing massive demonstrations by students and the general public, which began at the beginning of May. In a matter of days these strikes snowball into a nationwide general strike, which causes the president to flee the country, brings the government to its knees.

**May 15 – June 17**

France: Renault autoworkers stage a month-long sit-down strike.

**May 16**

France: The general strike spreads to 50 factories across France.

**May 17**

France: 200,000 people are on strike across the country.

**May 18**

France: 2 million people are on strike across the country.

**May 19 – June 6**

France: Transportation workers strike.

**May 23**

France: 7 million workers (two-thirds of the French workforce) are on strike.

**May 13-25**

Togo: A nationwide general strike in the West African nation of Togo.

**May 31**

Senegal: Workers in the capital city Dakar stage a general strike.

**May – June**

Uruguay: Public sector workers stage a series of nationwide strikes.

**May 27**

W. Germany: In Munich, 20,000 workers demonstrate against the "Emergency Acts."

These new laws, written partly in response to the upheaval of the ongoing student movement in West Germany, would legally empower the government to impose significant limits on individual rights in a period of crisis. Despite additional mass protests in West Berlin and Frankfurt, the Emergency Acts are passed on May 30.

## June

**June 5**

Israel: The Arab population in Jerusalem organizes a general strike.

**June 7-30**

U.K.: Ford Dagenham women sewing-machinists go on strike for equal pay.

In a landmark strike in the fight for equal pay for women in England, workers responsible for operating the machinery that sewed the upholstery at the Ford auto factory in Dagenham, England walked out, leading to a total shutdown in car production for weeks. The workers, almost all women, demanded that their position be classified as high-skilled labor, and therefore be given the same pay as the other machinists in the plant, who were predominantly men.

**June 13**

Uruguay: Public sector workers, teachers, and bank workers strike.

**June 18**

Uruguay: A general strike is carried out against government security forces.

**June 20**

France: The Renault sit-in strike begins again after a two-day hiatus.

## July

**July 8-11**

U.S.: DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) leads a wildcat strike.

Black auto workers at the Dodge Main assembly plant in Detroit, Michigan had formed their own organization in May, called DRUM, in response to the fact that the UAW (United Auto Workers) local was dominated by white workers, while the vast majority of the workers were Black. On top of this, management had punished Black workers disproportionately for a recent strike involving all the plant's workers.

In July, in a bid to draw attention to the grievances of Black workers, assert their independent voice, and challenge the dominance of the UAW, DRUM leads a wildcat strike of 4,000 workers at Chrysler's Dodge Main assembly plant, shutting it down for over 48 hours. (See the chapter on the Black Freedom Movement)

## August

**August 1**

Italy: Montedison plant workers strike at Porto Marghera in Venice.

Striking workers are joined by massive student demonstrations.

**August 23**

Czechoslovakia: Workers nationwide stage a one-hour general strike against the Soviet occupation, which began on August 20.

**August 24**

Czechoslovakia: Workers in Prague declare a general strike against Soviet occupation.

## September

**September 19**

Uruguay: A 24-hour general strike is called by FTU (Federation of City Workers).

India: Over 4 million government employees go on a one-day strike.

Workers demand a raise in the minimum wage to match the cost of living. Thousands of workers and labor leaders are arrested, 50,000 employees are fired, and at a mass rally in the Punjab region, dozens of demonstrating railway workers are killed by police.

## November

- November 1** Israel: Arab general strike against the military administration of Jerusalem.  
**November 14** Italy: 12 million workers across the country participate in a general strike.  
**November 19-20** Italy: A nationwide public sector general strike takes place.  
**November 28-30** Sri Lanka: Government employees stage a nationwide strike.  
**November 29** Pakistan: Students and workers stage a general strike in Rawalpindi, West Pakistan.

From November 1968 to March 1969, there are massive strikes and social unrest in both West Pakistan (known today simply as Pakistan) and East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh). This uprising ultimately forces the military dictator Ayub Khan out of office in March 1969.

## December

- December 10** Pakistan: Journalists stage a nationwide strike against the dictatorship.  
**December 12-15** Spain: The wives of fifteen imprisoned labor leaders go on a hunger strike.  
**December 13** Pakistan: A general strike against the dictatorship brings Dhaka, the East Pakistani capital, to a standstill.  
**December 20** U.S.: On the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, 75,000 dockworkers go on strike for better wages and working conditions.

---

## Further Reading

*1968: Marching Through the Streets*, by Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins (1998). Free Press.

*1968: Memories and Legacies of a Global Revolt*, edited by Phillip Gassert and Martin Klimke (2009). German Historical Institute.

*1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, by Mark Kurlansky (2005). Random House.

*A Chronology of the Global 1968 Protest*, by Rolf Werenskjold (2010). Volda University College Press.

*The Fire Last Time 1968 and After*, by Chris Harman (1998). Bookmarks.

France 1968: “All power to the imagination!” by Ian Birchall, in the book *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, edited by Colin Barker (1987). Haymarket Books.

*Los 68: París-Praga-México*, by Carlos Fuentes (2005). Editorial Debate.



# **Speak Out Now**

## **Revolutionary Workers Group**

---

### **Where We Stand**

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities: the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction — increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

#### **The Force For Change Exists Today**

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

#### **We Stand For Socialism**

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people — not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.

- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

#### **Our Political Heritage**

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

#### **We Must Go Beyond Reforms**

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism — be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people — wage and benefit cuts, attacks on health care, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must

be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

### **What Is Needed To Bring This Change About?**

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

### **Who We Are**

Speak Out Now/Revolutionary Workers Group is a revolutionary group. We believe that a socialist world is possible and can be brought into being by the active

struggles of the majority of the people of the world. We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason our group aims its activity primarily at large workplaces. Our newsletters are distributed at several workplaces every two weeks.

We think it is important to both analyze the current world situation as well as to know and understand the history of past struggles. We have forums on current events and political topics and a yearly weekend called the Revolutionary University. We organize Marxist discussions and classes. We have pamphlets on past working class struggles, the revolutionary movements around the world and the current problems we face. We organize with others around many issues – racism, immigrant rights, climate change, police brutality, and more.

### **Contact us**

#### **San Francisco Bay Area**

speakout@revolutionaryworkers.org

#### **Baltimore**

baltimore@revolutionaryworkers.org

#### **New York/New Jersey Area**

ny.nj@revolutionaryworkers.org

**This pamphlet and other publications are available online:**

**[www.revolutionaryworkers.org](http://www.revolutionaryworkers.org)**



*Wall poster in Paris, May '68*