

# What Happened in Paris

*Our correspondent cables some interesting background on the recent outbreak that brought death to Clichy*

By Paul Nizan

ON Tuesday night, March 23, in the Parisian suburb of Clichy, the police of Paris fired into a crowd of workers. Five were killed, 200 wounded. What are the facts? What were the causes and what are going to be the consequences?

On Tuesday afternoon, the hired gunmen of the fascist Croix de Feu, the leader of which is Count Col. Casimir de la Rocque, poured into the "Recreative" Cinema, next door to the Town Hall of Clichy. There is no question that the decision to hold such a meeting in the very center of a working-class district constituted a provocation which the republican and laboring population could not permit to pass unchallenged. A counter-demonstration was called by the local People's Front committee. The Clichy deputies and the police authorities came to an agreement on the necessary measures. It seemed that everything would go off quietly.

Adherents of the People's Front began to mass in a little street near the Town Hall at six o'clock in the evening. Order was maintained by the police, who, strange to say, had not received helmets. It is clear that if the streets had been kept clear of fascists from early evening, there would have been no bloody scenes to deplore. The fact that this elementary step was not taken makes the whole episode singularly suspicious.

The workers' demonstration came to a close. The crowd began to swarm back into the little street while the Croix de Feu was still locked in the theater. The large number of demonstrators soon overflowed the inadequate barriers which had been erected. Suddenly the arrival of large numbers of police and riot cars and police reinforcements from Paris—a fact still unexplained at the moment of this writing—caused the crowd of workers to become uneasy. The situation grew tense.

Shots rang out from the Town Hall. It appears that they were fired by a tobacco merchant who is also a local leader of the Croix de Feu. The police opened fire. Who gave the order is still a mystery. Then ensued a veritable man-hunt which lasted all evening and even penetrated into the Town Hall itself. During this attack, thousands of shots were fired by the police barricaded behind riot cars.

Another strange element is the fact that M. Marchand, chief of police of the Clichy municipality, who normally would have been in charge of maintaining order, was absent during the entire first part of the evening. He was represented only by a subordinate. It was not until about half past nine that Marchand arrived on the scene of the conflict, accompanied

by Marx Dormoy, Socialist Minister of the Interior.

Premier Léon Blum, accompanied by his wife, also hurried to the scene. He hastened to the Beaujon Hospital, where he spoke to the wounded men. It is worth while to underline this historic detail: Mme. Blum, who had come from the opera, greeted the victims in *decouleté*. Maurice Thorez, general secretary of the Communist Party, arrived on the scene about one o'clock in the morning. An ominous calm now prevailed.

On the next day, the labor and trade-union organizations held special meetings amidst great emotional tension. On Wednesday, the Paris central trade-union council decided to issue a call for a general strike Thursday morning. Depending upon the occupations of the workers, the strikes were to end at either eleven or twelve o'clock.

On Thursday morning, Paris saw for the first time a complete tie-up of all transportation, taxis, subways, and buses. The large factories, banks, and department stores were shut down. It is evident that this demonstration of the anger, power, and discipline of labor played a decisive political role. Once more, it was proven that the French workers are strong enough in their trade-union organization to counteract any fascist threat with a smashing offensive.

Grave difficulties were expected in the Chamber of Deputies. None occurred. The profound desire for the unity of the People's Front is still capable of overcoming every maneuver against it cooked up by politicians of the right or even by "Radicals."

The general causes of the "affaire Clichy" are clear. It is another example of the impunity with which the French Social Party and the French People's Party, crude camouflages of the fascist leagues, are permitted to pursue their activity and stage provocations.

In the past two months, the fascists have spilled much blood without any energetic action by the government. Furthermore, the fascist leagues have gained accomplices among certain police chiefs.

The Blum government initiated certain political measures against the most discredited "Chiappists" [Chiappe is the notorious fascist who headed the Paris police department during the riots of February 6-9, 1934] among the top ranks of the police. These measures were unquestionably inadequate, and even today the leading officials of the *Sûreté Nationale* [national police], the army, the local police, and the courts are polluted with fascist influences. The lower ranks of the police are still greatly

influenced by the police prefect who trained them, Chiappe.

It is clear that the organizers of the provocation hoped that a monster street battle would give them an opportunity to swing public opinion, particularly the Radical Socialist Party, against the Communists, whom they hoped would be held responsible for the "affaire Clichy." It is unfortunate that the Clichy provocation seems indirectly to have furthered the so-called "pause" in initiating reforms which was recently announced by the government.

This "pause" has revealed a certain weakness of the government under the pressure of the reactionaries in French economic and political life. But the provocation succeeded "too well." Its organizers did not expect such a toll of dead and wounded by the police. The very breadth of the demonstration resulted in a popular reaction against the provocation which, to some degree, has balked their plans.

It is clear that in such a situation, the wrath and indignation of the workers would assume immense proportions if measures against the fascists were not immediately taken.

In a great meeting of 40,000 Communists on Thursday night in the immense Velodrome d'Hiver, Maurice Thorez declared that the tragic event in Clichy, the night before, was the straw which broke the camel's back. For, confronted with its martyrs, the working class can point to a whole series of events to justify its wrath, particularly the economic retreat to which the government has consented under pressure from the financial barons of French capitalism. The workers are wrathful against the inadequacy of the steps taken by the government against the fascists.

If a true republican order is really to be created in France, the whole question of the existence of the fascist leagues must immediately be reconsidered by the government. They must be put out of business at once. The civil service, the police, and the army must be purged of fascist pollution at once.

This process must be accelerated if the government wishes to retain its contact with the masses who put it into office. It must not put a brake on the execution of the program of the People's Front. It must take economic measures to aid the lower civil service employees, the unemployed, and the aged.

This is the only road open to continue the great experiment which France began last May.

A "pause"? Yes. But it is a "pause" which must be forced upon the enemies of the French people, not upon the people themselves.



William Gropper

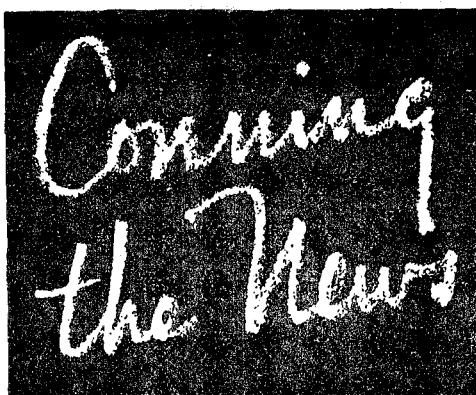


THE sit-down strikes reached a new peak, both numerically and in effectiveness, during the week, with workers from coast to coast employing the militant new tactic. Despite these widespread strikes, however, the eyes of the nation were centered upon Detroit, where 200,000 automobile workers, aroused over the court eviction orders granted to the Chrysler Corp. last week against 6000 employees holding nine plants, waited determinedly for a general strike call. Adding fuel to the fire, Detroit police ignored the general strike threat and continued their eviction of workers from Chrysler and Hudson plants. Homer Martin, president of the Automobile Workers' Union, in a letter to Governor Murphy, demanded a square deal for the workers, and insisted that the Chrysler Corp. abide by the Wagner Labor Act. Murphy had previously been attacked by progressive union leaders throughout the country for his threat to use militia; his words reversed his stand in the first General Motors sit-down strike of a month ago.

With labor taking the lead in Detroit, workers elsewhere responded to the surge of militancy in dozens of cities and industries. A general retail store strike, excepting only food and drug shops, was won in Providence, R. I. The five-and-dime store strikes, which began in Detroit and Chicago a month ago and then spread to the Grand chain in New York, continued to grow, with Woolworth girls sitting down to demand a \$20-a-week minimum wage and a reduction in working hours. In one of the Woolworth stores, police arrested fifty-six strikers and three union officials. The C.I.O., guiding spirit of the sit-downs, opened its campaign to organize the million and a quarter textile workers of the nation. In New Jersey, workers at the Belber Trunk & Bag Co. belonging to the Suitcase, Bag, & Portfolio Workers' Union signed an agreement with the company, further advancing the C.I.O.'s inroads into New Jersey industry in the face of Governor Hoffman's threatened opposition.

IN New London, Tex., a mass of blood-covered bricks, and the dismembered bodies of almost five hundred pupils ranging in age from six to eighteen, were the monument and tomb of "the richest rural school in the world," which crashed when gas seepage from adjoining oil wells (owned by the Rockefellers) exploded. Doctors stated that only sixty or seventy of the injured pupils were expected to live. Gas odors had been detected in the building for many months, but there was no state law requiring periodic inspection of schools. At an investigation under way as this issue went to press, school officials admitted that a "tapped" gas line was responsible for the catastrophe.

Following this disaster, while mass burials were in progress throughout the stricken region, an announcement was made by the C.I.O. that its drive to organize the oil fields would be initiated at a meeting of the International Executive Committee of the Oil Field, Gas Well, & Refinery Workers' Union



*Covering the events of the week ending March 22, 1937*

to be held in Houston, Tex., on April 5. Preparations were under way for the creation of a staff of 200 organizers under the direction of the Oil Workers' Organizing Committee, set up by the recent C.I.O. meeting in Washington.

THE unparalleled wave of sit-downs was not without repercussions in Washington—and for the most part they were repercussions of an ominous sort. The Senate, which had been carefully avoiding the delicate subject, let loose a sudden flurry of denunciation when Senator Johnson (R., Cal.), out of a clear sky, warned darkly of the fascist menace. "The most ominous thing in our national economic life today," said the New Deal Republican, "is the sit-down strike. . . . If the sit-down strike is carried on with the connivance or the sympathy of the public authorities, then the warning signals are out, and down that road lurks dictatorship."

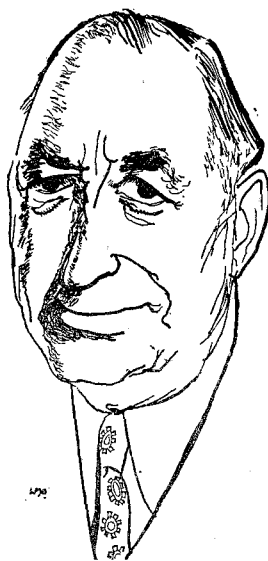
Seconding Johnson's veiled invitation to the administration to step in and smash the rising C.I.O., Senator Lewis (D., Ill.) asked: "Is the United States a government? If these strikes and protests against any and every form of order in society or government circumvent the due processes of peaceful government, what will be the end?" Answering his own question, Lewis predicted "an assault upon every form of peaceful government in Amer-

ica," and reminded the Senate that "in every hour such as this there awaits another Hitler and there lurks another Mussolini." Agreeing with his colleagues that the sit-down was "unlawful," Senator Robinson (D., Ark.) differed only on the question of blaming the administration. "Until the Supreme Court has passed upon the validity of the statute," he said, referring to the Wagner Labor Relations Act, "it is exceedingly difficult to make advancement."

Two days later a similar storm broke when Senator Ellender (D., La.) denounced John L. Lewis as "a traitor to American ideals and a menace to the peace and prosperity of the nation." To which Senator Borah retorted: "We cannot properly appraise that situation by considering alone the physical fact of workmen holding possession of property not their own against the proper owner. We cannot appeal for law and order, or appeal for the majesty of the law, to one sector of the economic circle. . . . If you have an economic system which gathers in the dimes and quarters and the half-dollars from the common people of the United States through artificial prices and pours them into the coffers of a few great corporations . . . you cannot maintain a healthy economic or financial condition in this country." Senator Black (D., Ala.) placed the blame for the sit-downs squarely on the shoulders of the Supreme Court, which he saw as an "insuperable, impossible obstacle to the passage of laws which would correct the abuses that have brought on the strike in Michigan."

OF more immediate significance than the senators' reactionary attempts to check the swift-moving C.I.O. was the authoritative report that important labor legislation has been prepared by the administration for submission to Congress when and if the President's court proposal goes through. The new program, said to have been worked out after a careful study of foreign labor laws, calls for a government appeal board to which both labor and employer would turn in the event of failure to reach an agreement. Should either side refuse to abide by the board's decision, recourse would be taken to publicity, with public sentiment expected to "afford some sort of punishment in the event the public found either side to be in the wrong." Several large employers are said to have been consulted in working out the details of the plan and are reported to be sympathetic. No important labor leader appears to have had a hand in framing the program.

High spots of the week's battle to enlarge the Supreme Court were surprise statements by two of the justices. Speaking extemporaneously at a small gathering, Justice McReynolds hit a new low for judicial intelligence when he attempted to reduce the issue to a question of "sportsmanship." With a majority of the Court committed beforehand to a program of blocking any attempt to relieve the misery of millions of Americans, McReynolds could only conclude that "a man who has had a chance to present a fair case to a fair tri-



Lester Polakov

*Chrysler—Won court ouster*