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Behind the Barricades

Jacqueline V.

September, 1968

[Note in original: The following account was narrated to several co-workers of the first issue of Black and Red by Jacqueline V., one of the thousands of students who participated in the struggle in France last May.]

The police entered the Sorbonne on the 3rd of May and there was a spontaneous demonstration outside. The second step which was very important was the 6th of May, when thousands of people demonstrated. On that day we were sort of going around wondering what we could do. The police were there. The student union had prepared a demonstration for 9 in the morning, and none of the union people were there. They said the demonstration was postponed to 6 in the evening, far from the student area. So everyone was surprised. Not everyone knew about it. There were thousands of people going around. They had never been in the street before and didn't know what to do.

At one point you could see a group singing the International” and walking right toward the cops. Of course when the cops took a few steps, they rushed back in all directions and it was obvious that something really bad could have happened—when you rush back and you have thousands of people behind, it can

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be a perfect mess. They were running in every direction, and there were cops all around. The cops had left a way to get in, but there was no possibility of getting out. All those people went around for hours and hours, and after a while they sort of concentrated and gathered around a large demonstration which went all around shouting slogans.

The fight began about one in the afternoon, or thereabouts. Then people began to defend themselves. The policemen were coming and sending teargas and things like that. The students' idea was to put a car in the middle of the street to prevent the cops from coming too quickly. It was spontaneous, you know, when you feel cops coming towards you; and we were not so numerous. We just pushed a few cars into the street, so there'd be something to keep the police from moving so quickly. This was obvious in the evening, when the official demonstration took place and went on peacefully without anything happening. Then suddenly, when we were on Saint-Germain, the police attacked, and began to throw tear-gas and all that. So of course there was a panic, a real panic, and people rushed back. Those who had been in demonstrations in 1961 and 1962 knew that if people just rushed back they could kill each other. The only thing there was to do was to push a few cars in the middle so that it wouldn't be as bad. People took anything they could find. If there was a construction site in the street, they would tear off a few pieces of wood. Then the others had time to move back slowly instead of rushing back like mad.

It started more or less like that. People took grills from around the trees and used them to dig up cobblestones on the street. They took the grills, and by hitting hard on the cobblestone street, they could separate stones.

But when it was said that people came prepared, it just wasn't true. Hardly anyone had anything in his hand when he went to the demonstrations. I even saw pictures of girls with heels and dresses. People saw the point of having these cobblestones. Of course there was all the past of Paris: the French

Revolution, the Paris Commune; people had read about it. They began to make lines and to pass each other the cobblestones. Some of the stones would be used to throw at the police, and some would just be piled here and there; it was the same idea as when the cars were used: to prevent the police from rushing ahead.

The point was not to stay there. The point was that there was a demonstration which was attacked by the police, and the point was to prevent people from being badly hurt, and to stay there just a while. The point was not that we're here and we're going to stay here. People were rushing back. They'd build another barricade, fight with the police for a while, and then move somewhere else. The point was to keep demonstrating, and not to be pushed away in five minutes. At the same time there were so many people who just rushed back. It really was self-defense. The police were driving hard, and the students were trying to find a way to make them go a bit slower.

Two people can't just go in front and fight with a hundred cops. But if they had those cars, and could throw stones, even if just for ten minutes, then the others had time to congregate in another street and go on with the demonstration.

The great night of the barricades, the night of May 10–11, there were talks on how the problem could be settled. It must be said that on May 6th the student union's three points had been: Let's liberate our comrades from jail, get the police out of the universities, and let us have our courses again. And that was all. The union didn't even ask for anything else. And it's surprising that the government didn't accept right away; it would all have been over. I don't mean it would really have been over, but it would have stopped things for a while. They made a ridiculous mistake. Here was a peaceful demonstration asking these three things—and they sent the police against it. Which is quite funny, in a way.

On the night of the barricades, on the 11th, thousands of people gathered, and the unions felt they couldn't just tell people:

Okay, you've been demonstrating for half an hour, now you can go home. That was really too much. They said, Okay, we'll stay here until the conversation shows we've gotten something. And we were listening to the radio, to the ministers, to see if something at least had been obtained.

But nothing happened. And all those people were there. So they thought: well, if we stay here, we must have something to defend ourselves. Otherwise the police can come, and in ten minutes everything will be over. So they surrounded themselves with all these barricades. And the police had orders not to attack. They were waiting for orders, and they waited until 2 o'clock in the morning, when the discussions reached no conclusion.

So at 2 o'clock in the morning both the students and the police were waiting for an answer from the government; but of course the students thought: here we are, thousands of us, and we can't do anything against the police. So they surrounded themselves with barricades. There were sixty barricades that night, surrounding a certain area.

But everything was just spontaneous. The barricades sometimes faced one way and sometimes the other way. People didn't know where to stand. They were building barricades here and there. I even heard an Anarchist say: "It should have been planned before." And sometimes it really looked funny.

I was walking around the barricades and helping out here and there. And I came to a small street where I saw three boys who had two barricades for the three of them. They were small barricades on a very small street. They asked me to send some people. I went and found some friends and told them those three really needed help. When we got back there, their whole barricade was completely destroyed. They said, "Look, you know, the man came and explained that he was a worker and he needed his car badly. So we gave it back to him." Then we helped them build a new barricade.

and then the barricades got on fire. But you can't jump to conclusions. You don't know why they're on fire."

When the reporter said, "Now the police are throwing grenades into apartments," the announcer said, "Oh, that must be accidental; they can't be doing it on purpose." So the reporter said, "But they are doing it on purpose, because those people were siding with the students. Sure they're doing it on purpose." And the announcer said, "It can't be true." That was during the night. On the next day the radio no longer spoke of chlorine gas or anything else of that sort.

People often asked about those who had their cars destroyed during the demonstrations. They must have been bitterly opposed to the demonstrators. This in fact isn't true. Those people lived in the area where the fights took place, and they could see the fights from their apartments. They could see how the police behaved, how they beat people who were already wounded, even going into infirmaries to get the identity papers of those who were hurt.

Those people who actually saw the fights and really sympathized with the students often helped them by taking them into their apartments. The police sometimes went to the apartments to arrest them. Some apartments were damaged by the police. If the cars of these people were destroyed during the fights, they felt that this wasn't so important after all, when thousands of young people were badly wounded.

There was no plan, no preparation, no one who'd decided: We will do this and that, this and that way. Of course there were lots where houses were being built, or things like that, and people used everything they could find. But they didn't arrive with a huge car entirely filled up with things with which to build the barricades. Everything on the spot was taken and used to make them. A tree here—a small tree—and everything we could take from construction sites. And cobblestones. When there were no cobblestones, people made long lines so the cobblestones could get to streets which had no stones.

At the beginning of that night, just in front of the Luxembourg Station, people were fighting with each other because some of them didn't want to build barricades. They said, "We're just going to wait for the police here; we'll just stand, and that's all." And the others said, "You can't just do that; we must defend ourselves, we must have cobblestones, or something." Because nobody had anything at all. But this was on one spot. Very few people, really, didn't want to build those barricades. At this particular place a few people didn't want to.

Nothing was really prepared, coordinated, organized. Nobody was the head of anything. People got organized on the spot. They didn't need somebody giving orders. Nobody was giving orders, or maybe everybody was giving orders. But there was no mess. It was the first time I realized that anarchism was not simply a mess, but that it could really work. Someone would say, "we need people here," and someone would go there. Some people came and said things here and there, but what they said had to be what the others were waiting for. Somebody could say things for a while, and someone else could come. And it did work, that's what's wonderful. There was never an "I don't want to receive orders from you" or anything of that sort.

The barricade building lasted from 9 at night until 2 o'clock in the morning. And it was really something quite out of the

common, being inside the barricades. It was estimated there were about fifteen thousand people inside the sixty barricades.

People threw things from the buildings: cigarettes, or things to eat and drink; and among the students well, you had a cigarette and you gave it to somebody. It was just complete freedom. That's funny to say. But inside those sixty barricades, surrounded by the police, there was a feeling of complete freedom. An atmosphere which was completely different, something I had never experienced before. All those people working. It was something entirely new. Whether you knew people or not didn't matter at all. Anyone who merely came to have a look could feel this atmosphere, could see people working without chiefs, without orders, without spending time electing anybody. There was no time to elect anybody. And there was no problem about that. No one in the group tried to take the head of everything. And no one came with a plan, saying, "There must be a barricade here. Ten people come here to build a barricade." There was nothing of that sort. If anyone thought, "Okay, let's build a barricade here," everybody was in it.

The only things people had—and they only had them if they'd experienced this before—were some spectacles for the gas. They had experienced teargas and things like that. It was rather picturesque: everyone trying to defend himself from the gases, wearing funny things on their heads, scarves on their noses. It wasn't a matter of anyone being prepared. You went to the building sites and found some helmets the workers had left there. You took them and put them on. But there was no "urban guerrilla" prepared ahead of time and which had experience.

The police attacked at two in the morning. THEY received orders. So they attacked, and it took them three and a half hours to get rid of all those barricades. But even at that moment the point was not to stay there for days and days. It was just to stay there a while and show them. It took the cops quite a while, and some barricades were even re-taken by the students.

What the students used were just the cobblestones, which they threw, and anything else they could find to throw; and standing it as long as they could. Only very few people had other things, but really few, like five or ten, had other things, like slingshots. But that was all. That was the main weapon, THE weapon. And these were really useful. You can't throw stones very far by hand. And the cops threw those gases so far that you couldn't reach them by hand. That was about all. A few anarchists had Molotov cocktails. But there were only about six Molotov cocktails for 15,000 people. And that's only because the anarchists had always had these theories, and all those books about this and that. But these were not really people trained for urban guerrilla war or anything of that sort. And they didn't really use them properly, I guess, because I didn't hear about anything much happening.

The cops had launchers with which they could send teargas grenades—and many of them at the same time. They began to throw chlorine gases. And here there was something funny. On the radio you could hear the reporter, who was on the spot at the demonstration, saying, "Now they're sending chlorine gases, and I can't stand it any more." And the announcer in the radio station saying, "Oh, you don't know whether it's chlorine gas or not." And the reporter said, "But I can smell it." So the announcer said, "But you can't say it, I'm sorry. You can only say that this kind of gas is different from the kind you've smelled before." Which was obviously so funny. The reporters who were on the spot couldn't help telling what was really going on. But the one who was in the studio was trying to quiet things down, because he knew there'd be trouble afterwards.

Another time the reporter said, "The police are setting the barricades on fire," and the announcer said, "How's that? It can't be possible." So the reporter said, "Oh, yes, they throw grenades, and the barricades get on fire." Then the announcer said, "All you can say is that you saw them throw grenades,