

Response to J. Rancière “The Myth of the Artisan”

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Jacques Rancière's stimulating essay "The Myth of the Artisan" [ILWCH, Fall 1983, pp. 1-16] raises some fundamental objections to the view that the French labor movement "developed as the expression of a working-class culture and was based on the actions and attitudes of its most highly skilled workers." (1) Such a view holds that it was professional capacity and pride in work that created labor militancy in the 1840s. This militancy declined or ended when new masses with low skills or institutions like Taylorism became features of the labor movement. Rancière's position is that such a view is politically motivated. It is held by those sectors of the labor movement that want "to fend off new and competing militant forces. . . ." (1) Rancière focuses on the workers of 1848 to develop his critique but also ranges into the twentieth century as well. Some of his comments on the latter period, especially on the role of Alphonse Merrheim in the above interpretation of French labor history, are questionable. It is to these comments that I will limit my observations.

According to Rancière, Merrheim sought to explain the pre-World War I crisis in revolutionary syndicalism by an appeal to this myth that the most militant leaders of the CGT were the highly professional and self-educated workers. The militancy of the labor movement experienced a profound transformation, however, as the owners introduced Taylorism into their plants and as new generations of workers began to lose their skills and their pride in work. After the war, according to Rancière, Merrheim imposed "his very questionable sociological explanation" to account for "the failure of unionist-revolutionary 'pacifism,' the acquiescence of the working masses in contributing to wartime industry, and their sympathy for the Bolshevik revolution." (12) In interpreting the labor movement in this manner, Merrheim, Rancière believes, is a direct heir to an earlier generation in the French labor movement which explained its own declining influence by developing the myth of a highly professional worker being swamped by unskilled masses.

While Rancière raises some excellent points — he is on the mark about the problematic nature of the relationship between labor spokesmen and the masses — his view of Merrheim is somewhat facile and therefore slightly misleading. Merr-

heim did compare the militancy and commitment of the CGT's leadership to the inertia of the rank-and-file. He did explain the crisis in the pre-war CGT by contrasting the underdeveloped state of consciousness and dedication of the masses to the militancy of the leaders, as well as a result of the decline in labor skills brought on by Taylorism. What is central to Merrheim's career, however, was that he held such elitist views very early; that they were not merely a response to some competing faction in the CGT; and that they were not always completely cut off from real developments. It was mostly Merrheim's position as an active labor leader, first as a secretary of a metalworkers' local in Roubaix and after 1904 as co-secretary of the Federation of Metalworkers, that shaped his attitude. His negative estimation of the militancy of the masses was influenced by the difficulties he had had organizing workers in the Nord and in leading a few local strikes there. As early as 1902, for instance, he expressed some disappointment with the preparedness of rank-and-file workers and suggested a program of education to compensate for the inadequacies of the labor movement.¹ Complicating the picture — and this does give some credence to Rancière's point — was that Merrheim was in competition with Guesdist socialists in the Nord. But what looms even larger in Merrheim's formation are the strikes he led once a co-secretary of the Federation of Metalworkers. These, especially the 1905 strikes in the Longwy basin and the 1906 strike of Hennebont, convinced Merrheim of the necessity of a long preparatory period for workers before their militancy and revolutionary consciousness could match that of their leaders. In the Longwy basin Merrheim struggled to get metalworkers and miners to cooperate with each other and with the many foreign workers there against the steel barons. What he encountered, however, was the deep-seated hostility the native French workers had for foreign labor.² During the Hennebont strike, Merrheim confronted his own limitations in the face of the technical expertise of the owners.³ In the course of these two strikes, also, Merrheim discovered the existence and the power of the powerful employers' trusts and cartels in the steel industry. More than any other single factor, the steel trusts, whether the "Comptoir de Longwy" or the "Comité des forges," assured Merrheim that the masses would have to prepare themselves thoroughly before confronting — in partial strikes or the final revolution — the employers with any chance for success. Merrheim's interpretation of the labor movement follows closely this experience in the world of labor.

But there is another factor which accounts for the manner in which Merrheim interpreted the labor movement. Merrheim's activities and perceptions as a labor leader undermined his own revolutionary militancy. Throughout his life he remained in the revolutionary wing of the CGT but his practice was reformist.

This leads me to a point in Rancière's article that is very valid and useful, namely his warning that the voices of the representatives of the working class cannot always be taken to capture the feelings and attitudes of the collectivity. (8-9) This caveat, with which I completely agree, must be applied with some care to Merrheim, however. Throughout his leadership role in the CGT, Merrheim remained close to rank-and-file workers, their activities and concerns. His explanation of the labor

movement is the result of a life in the daily labor arena. This is not meant to deny that after the war Merrheim's thesis was also used to fight against a new and/or opposing faction in the CGT; it was. Nor do I mean to suggest that Merrheim's views are always an accurate reading of the temper of the labor movement. In fact, I have already written that during the July 1919 metalworkers' strikes Merrheim lost touch with the revolutionary aspirations of a portion of his own workers.⁴ Rather I mean to say only that his views are the product of a much more complex set of forces than suggested in Rancière's article.

NOTES

1. Merrheim, *Le Cuivre*, No. 97, September 1902, p. 2.
2. I develop this point at length in my forthcoming book, currently in manuscript form, on the life of Merrheim. An excellent discussion of the Longwy strikes is Serge Bonnet and Roger Humbert, *La ligne rouge des hautes fourneaux* (Paris, 1981); see especially pp. 198–213.
3. Nicholas Papayanis, "Alphonse Merrheim and the Strike of Hennebont: The struggle for the eight-hour day in France," *International Review of Social History*, vol. XVI (1971). Part 2, pp. 159–183.
4. Papayanis, "Masses révolutionnaires et directions réformistes: les tensions au corps des grèves des métallurgistes français en 1919," *Le Mouvement Social*, October–December 1975, pp. 51–73.