

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

Working-class History in France: 1978

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*Le Mouvement Social*¹

The year 1978 evokes, first of all, some anniversaries in the history of French workers: the unsuccessful strike of 1938 after the Munich Pact, in the midst of the workers' defeat, of which G. Bourdé has attempted the first history, and the great miners' strikes of 1948, to which the *Confédération Général du Travail* has devoted both a film and in December a colloquium conducted by R. Trempé, among others. The history of the workers in the two terrible years 1947-1948, part of the transition from the Resistance through the "battle of production" to the great movements of 1948, which was all of one historical piece, is now beginning to become clearer. French historiography is trying at last to escape from the mysterious ailment which formerly prevented it from passing the barrier of the Second World War.

The witnesses of these years are often still active. Oral history interrogates them more and more often, and both the sociologists of the University of Nantes and the historians of Lille, Lyon and elsewhere are refining the questions which must be posed in order that, not content with furnishing information to those who would reconstruct events, this technique may also contribute to revealing the social fabric, forms of sociability, and working-class culture in all their density. That development was evident in the colloquium, which took place in October, 1977 at the *Ecomusée* in Creusot.

Sources, Institutions, and New Instruments of Work

Oral history archives provide a new material, which must be decoded and interpreted, like all others. Along the trail of this search for the workers' identity, several other new sources have also emerged. In 1978 industrial archeology, a concept which appeared in Great Britain at the end of the 1950s, succeeded in convening its first national meeting in France. On July 11 and 12,

1978, at the invitation of the mining companies of the Nord-Pas de Calais region, historians and technicians, representatives of the ministries of culture and industry and of both private and nationalised firms, and some archivists assembled. The group in Lewarde, where the first center of miners' history is in operation, revealed the need felt by this region, where the old foundations of the industry are crumbling, not to lose their memory. This meeting was the occasion of an initial inventory of the places where efforts to preserve and to study the spatial and technical organization of industry are being undertaken. One can be confident that the *Association d'histoire matérielle de la civilisation industrielle*, of which S. Chassagne is secretary, will shed its light from this point on over the old charcoal forges of the West, as well as the urban neighborhoods and the factories that promoters are now destroying.

Nevertheless, the more classical workers' archives have not lost their importance. Those of the *Bureau de Recherches, d'Analyses et d'Etudes Confédérales* (BRAEC-CFDT) and those of the sectional unions from the years after the Liberation continue to be assembled at the University of Paris-I, while the *Comité d'histoire de la Sécurité sociale* is making progress in the establishment of a bibliography of the sources of that immense institution, and is studying ways to preserve a significant percentage of individual dossiers. One rejoices to see such a journal as the *Gazette des Archives* summon its subscribers to participate in the collection of the "contemporary archives of the workers' movement." But one also awaited uneasily the new law on public archives, the text of which appeared in the official Journal on January 5th, 1979. The desires of researchers for a liberalization of policies still do not seem near realization. To be sure, the "normal" delay in availability was put back from 50 to 30 years, but article 7 defined a series of exceptions: for individual medical dossiers, 150 years; for personal dossiers, 120 years; for judicial matters and documents containing individual information, 100 years from the time of the act; and for those touching national security or defense, 60 years. Some exceptions are possible, but, all that must await administrative decrees.

The stimulation provided by seminars of the Third Cycle in the history of the working-class world, or in related disciplines, did not begin in 1978. But this year has to its credit one act of birth and one transformation. The birth is that of the *Institut d'histoire du temps présent*, the direction of which was bestowed upon F. Bédarida by the *Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique*. The transformation is indicative of development, rather than of a change in fundamental orientation: the *Centre d'histoire du syndicalisme* has become the *Centre de recherche d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et du syndicalisme*. It has a new office, at 9 rue Mahler, 75004 Paris. Jacques Girault has become director, in place of Jean Maïtron, who is devoting his studious retirement to the completion of the *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français*, as well as to the dictionaries of foreign movements. The first of two volumes devoted to the militants of the Japanese movement is about to appear. The Center proposes to publish a bulletin each

year, and two issues have already appeared. *Le Mouvement social* continues to be prepared independently in its offices.

Finally, it is necessary to note a particularly fortunate initiative undertaken by the library of the *Maison des sciences de l'homme*. Under the title, *Histoire ouvrière, Guide des principales bibliothèques parisiennes*, the latter has prepared a booklet which permits one at last to compensate in part for the extreme dispersal of workers' archives in Paris. Collecting institutions are listed there, together with the diversity and accessibility of their holdings, and their hours of business. This guide has been needed for a long time.

The year 1978 has doubtless been less fruitful in the publication of great works than in the collection of new sources. It is, however, necessary to note that after a decade in which the ideologies of the extreme Left have found a vast response and given rise to numerous scholarly publications of uneven quality, the Trotskyist current has established its vitality. The thesis of J. Pluet, *La presse trotskyste en France de 1926 à 1968* constitutes a veritable bibliographic compendium, which one would wish that the effort would be extended beyond the boundaries of France. The same year saw the young *Institut Leon Trotsky* begin the publication of the collection *Ouvres de Trotsky* with three volumes covering the period March, 1933 to April, 1934. The group in charge of the project, under the direction of P. Broué, has announced its intention to publish a first series of texts covering some seven years in 20 volumes. It will include articles and brochures, letters, notes and circulars, resolutions, short hand notes of discussions, and interviews. This critical edition evidently cannot claim to be exhaustive: in a few years the "closed section" of the Trotsky archives at Harvard will be opened. The present publication is intended to prepare the way for this future development.

Old (already) and New Subjects of Research

The organizational forms of the French workers' movement have furnished material for some original works this year. Research efforts have converged on the unions and the Communist Party. Particularly noteworthy are the efforts underway to encompass different forms of unionism. That of the miners is the subject of C. Cherrier's thesis on Michel Rondet and of J. Michel's research on the International Miners' Federation. The unionism of the men and women in printing is being studied by the group of M. Rebérioux and M.N. Thibault. More novel is the desire to investigate the independent unions. In a volume whose title is as ambiguous as its subject, *La droite révolutionnaire en France (1885-1914)*, Z. Sternhell has examined the constituency of the "Yellow" union movement at the beginning of this century. The great thesis of M.G. Dezès on this capital theme is expected in 1979 or 1980. It is as much a work of political science ("*politologie*") as of history.

On the subject of the Communists, J.P. Brunet defended his thesis, "Une banlieue ouvrière: Saint Denis, de 1890 à 1939," in July, 1978. The history of municipal government in this red suburb constitutes the heart of this

work, and it is dominated by the strange personality of J. Doriot. Also largely devoted to the industrial suburbs of Paris are the studies collected by J. Girault and published under the title *Sur l'implantation du Parti communiste français dans l'entre-deux guerres*. There are other pressing subjects: the rooting of French communism in localities, the establishment of its unions in factories, the strength and characteristics of its dependence on the Communist International between the wars, and the validity of a cultural history of communism. The *Institut Maurice Thorez* has launched an inquiry into the different ways of approaching the history of the Communist movement, resuming a debate which was opened two years ago by the review *Politique Aujourd'hui*.

Finally, it is necessary to stress the importance of the publication of Y. Lequin's great book, *Les ouvriers de la région lyonnaise (1848-1914)*. By analyzing the formation of the working class in a regional framework, on which it depended strongly, as well as the weight of craft organization on a working class which "did not fully emerge from it," and the causes of the resurgence of a "separatist" collective consciousness on the eve of the Great War, this thesis introduces new parameters to our knowledge of the social history of the workers. Meanwhile, the scrutiny of Taylorism initiated by the works of A. Moutet and P. Fridenson is evolving into a cluster of analyses of the factory as a "moral gymnasium," as is evident from several articles in the volume of *Recherches* devoted to the "Soldat du travail."

But the year 1978 has also seen the emergence of research topics to which historians of the working class had formerly devoted very little study. I restrict myself to two examples. Several theses of the Third Cycle have been defended or soon will be, which focus on the specific features of women's work in the nineteenth century. A. Martin-Fugier has completed her research on female domesticity around 1900 at the moment of the appearance of M.H. Zylberberg-Hocquard's book *Femme et syndicalisme en France avant 1914*. This diversity was manifested in issue Number 105 of *Le Mouvement Social*, "Travaux de femmes dans la France du XIXe siècle," presented by M. Perrot, as well as in the colloquium which was held at Vincennes in December on "Les femmes et la classe ouvrière." In the same sense one welcomes the publication in French of the study which C. Sowerwine, a former student of Harvey Goldberg's, has devoted to France: *Les femmes et le socialisme*.

Working-class history in France is trying at last to escape its own Euro-centrism. Evidence is provided by the abundance of the contributions brought to volume four of the *Histoire général du socialisme*, the great study which has been directed by J. Droz from 1945 to the present. Has the crisis of socialism of the last thirty years not been inseparable from its emergence as a world-wide phenomenon? The new, and still insufficient, efforts turn on the relations between the workers' movements of the countries of the "center" and those of the "periphery." This illumination, which one discovers in the thesis of C. Liauzu on the "Naissance du salariat et du mouvement ouvrier en Tunisie," also imparts its meaning to the latest *Cahier du Mouvement social*,

edited by R. Gallissot, "Mouvement ouvrier, communisme et nationalisme dans le monde arabe."

The "turning back toward history," which has been evident for several years at the same time as the tide of structuralism and formalism has ebbed, has been accompanied in the study of working-class history by a more marked orientation toward social and cultural history. This trend is confirmed by the publication, anticipated in the first third of 1979, of volume four of *L'Histoire économique et sociale de la France (1880-1914)* under the direction of E. Labrousse and J. Bouvier. Agreement has been reached on the necessity of moving the history of the working class out of its isolation, even if at the end of 1978 differences on the means to reach that goal (happily!) persist.

NOTES

1. Translated by David Montgomery