

# The making of the French working class

### Writing the social history of the French working-class

Labour historiography has undergone two major paradigm shifts since the 1960s. In the first, historians located the origins of the 'working class' in the resistance of artisans to threats to their skills, job autonomy, communities and lifestyle posed by the advent of the factory system. Labour movements – reformist or revolutionary – were viewed as key agents in the creation of a more just egalitarian society. Workplace and community solidarities, the cooperative ethos and job pride were all celebrated. Artisans were portrayed, even in defeat, evolving from craft to class consciousness and transmitting to subsequent proletarian labour movements a heritage of pride in working-class identity, combativeness and stubborn refusal to submit to the inexorable logic of the laws of the market. After 1980 de-industrialisation of heartlands of organised labour undermined trade-union power. The global triumphs of the free-market Right provoked a crisis of welfare states, of social democracy and – in France – of the Communist Party. As confidence in the 'forward march of labour' faded, a second paradigm shift occurred within the historical profession. The 'new social history' had sought to recover the experiences of workers whose identity was assumed to be rooted in the workplace. Influenced by post-modernism and cultural anthropology, historians now claimed that workers had multiple, shifting identities, of which class position was not necessarily the most significant. Instead of workplace solidarities, endless ethnic, religious, sectional, generational, gender and regional divisions were now emphasised. Images of the worker as male craftsman or coalminer were, it was claimed, constructed against numerous 'others' – women, unskilled, immigrants. As the working class of the 1980s disappeared before our eyes, so its past – the 'history of the working class' – was being deconstructed. Perhaps it had never existed except as a discursive construct of radical intellectuals or aspiring labour leaders?

How was the *French* working-class distinctive? One paradox appeared central to analysis of French labour in the 'long nineteenth century' (1789–1914). French workers exhibited precocious militancy and political consciousness. Yet the labour *movement* appeared numerically weak and ill-organised. In 1914 there were one million union members, whereas Germany and Britain both claimed four million. The French Socialist party (SFIO) had under one-tenth of the German SPD's one million members. Several explanations have

been suggested. The first emphasises the structures of the labour force. Because craft products maintained niches in domestic and foreign markets, artisans constituted a high proportion of the labour force. Struggles to defend crafts in the face of industrial changes radicalised many artisans. Their movement exhibited distinctive style and priorities. It was concerned with skills. Its projects, whether cooperative or syndicalist, emphasised direct action and worker control rather than nationalisation. It mistrusted bureaucratic trade unions and centralised political parties (Berlanstein 1992).

However, a crucial watershed occurred with the rise of ‘new’ industries after 1870. Transmission of the values and experiences of the artisanal movement to a proletariat of rural migrants, women and immigrants proved difficult. The latter two groups lacked the vote. Company paternalism and scientific management strengthened employers’ control and inhibited the development of unions (Noiriel 1990). An alternative approach emphasised the ‘primacy of politics’. Involvement in the Revolution raised French workers’ levels of consciousness. But the political lessons remained ambiguous. Was worker emancipation to be achieved via alliance with the ‘progressive’ Republican bourgeoisie, or through further popular insurrection? Workers alternated between hopes of a ‘social’ Republic, which would finally fulfil the promises of 1789, and anger and frustration when, as in 1830, 1848 and 1871, (sections of) the liberal bourgeoisie appeared to betray them. Ambiguous perceptions of the Third Republic explain oscillation between reformist and revolutionary sentiment in workers’ discourse. It was *both* ‘theirs’, an instrument of capitalist social control, and yet *simultaneously* ‘ours’ – a regime with the *potential* to emancipate labour. Workers who denounced the use of troops against strikers might rally to defend the Republic against the far Right (Judt 1986). A final explanation emphasises the role of *local, informal* protest networks among ‘unorganised’ workers. Levels of unionisation in Nord textile mills were generally low. Yet there was a factory culture of ruses and symbolic protests – everyday forms of resistance which mocked managerial authority. The ‘pragmatic of direct action’ is typified by the stokers of the Paris Gas Company. Migrants without craft traditions, they developed a strategy of wildcat strikes at opportune moments to win concessions. When a union was formed in the 1890s, after pressure on management to normalise industrial relations from the Radical Paris municipal council, stokers mistrusted it as a ploy designed to tame their militancy – claiming to prefer the ‘healthy’ French model of confrontation to the British model of large but moderate unions. Many French workers who were not members of unions participated in strikes (Berlanstein 1992; Reddy 1984).

## The making of the working class

### The structures of the labour force (1800–70)

A genuine ‘industrial proletariat’ of factory workers, miners and forge-workers did emerge in a few regions. But it co-existed with a sizeable artisanate and rural proto-industrial workers. The industrial workforce rose from 2 to 4.5 million between 1800 and 1876. Textiles was the largest employer, followed

by 'traditional' construction and wood sectors. Artisans, 30 per cent of the workforce in 1860, dominated 'quality' export sectors – silks, porcelains, furniture, fashions and jewellery. Women made up over 30 per cent of the labour force, children under 16, 10 per cent. Child factory labour horrified social observers. But it has been argued that children had always worked, that working alongside kin in a mill was better than labouring in a cramped, filthy artisan workshop – in short that this was not a 'dark age' of unprecedented exploitation. Yet things probably got worse before they began to improve. Infant and child mortality, particularly from TB, was very high in textiles. Many conscripts from mill towns proved unfit for military service. Children were injured cleaning machinery and deformed by repetitive tasks. Factory jobs did not give opportunities to run errands in the fresh air which had made earlier types of child labour tolerable. Millowners, claiming that competitiveness depended on cheap child labour, evaded hours limitations imposed by the 1841 Child Labour Act. After 1860 technological changes made children less essential in textile mills, while paternalist or 'progressive' employers argued for regulation of child labour because French industry required a healthy, literate workforce. By 1870 children comprised only 7 per cent of the work-force.

Migration into industrial centres was steady rather than rapid. Many moved initially to a nearby town, then later along paths established by relatives or fellow villagers to a city or industrial region. Urbanisation was quite slow. By 1848, when 50 per cent of Britains lived in towns, only 25 per cent were urban dwellers. Only 4 of the 25 largest towns were industrial. Alsace, the Nord and the Stephenois were miniature versions of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Heavy industry was located in isolated, single-industry, company towns such as Decazeville. Rural industry proved resilient. It required less fixed capital investment. Wood and water power provided alternatives to scarce coal. Peasant-workers could be paid low wages because they produced some food, and could be laid-off in a slump without provoking dangerous unrest. Hopefully they were sheltered from the corruptions of city life. Many survived by 'pluri-activity' – using earnings from domestic weaving or clog- or glove-making to supplement those from agriculture or carting. Looms dominated villages around Rheims or Mulhouse and cotton outwork the Pays de Caux (Normandy). Charcoal forges flourished in Champagne and Périgord into the 1850s, as did watchmaking near Montbéliard or glove-making around Grenoble. Life in a proto-industrial village or an artisan quartier offered a degree of autonomy absent from a mill town. One could work irregular hours, rest on 'Saint Monday'. Pluri-activity allowed flexibility. During an economic slump not all one's eggs were in one basket. Reluctance to submit to the discipline of the factory, known in popular parlance as *bagne* (prison), combined with falling birth-rates to create recruitment difficulties for heavy industry. Proto-industrial workers developed 'informal' strategies of resistance not available to proletarianised urban workers. Fougères shoeworkers fell back on agricultural resources when in dispute with merchant capitalists. Paternalist strategies were designed to break such habits of independence by luring workers into the 'security' of reliance on company housing and pensions (Noiriel 1990; Berlanstein 1992).

Real wages stagnated until 1850 and rose only gradually thereafter. Food prices rose sharply after bad harvests in 1816–17, 1826–31 and 1845–47. Many conscripts from industrial regions were rejected because of diet deficiency diseases. Rising food prices reduced purchasing power and triggered industrial slumps and unemployment. Welfare relief from *Bureaux de Bienfaisance* was patchy, and many were reliant on private charity or the benevolence of notables or paternalist employers. The working day remained long – above fifteen hours in some sectors. Only a few ‘progressive’ employers, such as Alsace’s Protestant mill-owners, accepted that shorter hours could reduce accidents and increase productivity. Disparities in wealth and income distribution widened in industrial areas. Under 10 per cent of the inhabitants of Lille controlled over 90 per cent of inherited wealth. Upward social mobility remained negligible, although some building craftsmen did become construction contractors.

### **‘Before the making . . .’: workers and protest c.1780–1830**

The term ‘working class’ – *classe ouvrière* – emerged only in 1830. But the roots of working-class identity may be discerned in the corporate artisanal world and in popular mobilisations of the Revolution. Marxists portrayed eighteenth-century crowd protests, particularly grain riots, as resistance to an emerging free-market economy and argued that the popular movement was a key actor in the radicalisation of the Revolution. Parisian crowds stormed the Bastille, installed the Jacobins and forced them to introduce price controls. Rudé (1973) identified activists as craftsmen – skilled, rooted in their *quartiers*, fiercely egalitarian. Possibly this rather idealised narrative underplayed the role of the unskilled, ‘floating’ population – navvies, river dockers, porters. Revisionist historiography, reviving themes of nineteenth-century reactionaries such as Taine, reasserted the centrality of violence to the Revolution, allegedly stemming from a brutal urban popular culture. The apparent delight of Parisian crowds in mutilating the corpses of the Bastille’s defenders has been correlated with the taste for cruelty revealed in artisan autobiographies. Such ‘primitives’, it is implied, are best studied by social anthropologists trained to observe strange tribes! Yet the *sans culotte* movement was a precursor of the artisan-based labour movement of the 1840s. Its rhetoric linked the social condition of the ‘little man’ with a radical political stance. It advocated an egalitarian Republic, direct democracy and direct action. Its perceived enemies were aristocrats and the ‘gros’ – big merchants, speculators, middlemen and financiers. It advocated taxes on the rich and price controls. It drew on Republican discourses about the ‘independent citizen’ and an idealised discourse of the workshop contrasting the integrity of productive craftsmen – masters *and* journeymen – with the vices of parasitic elites. This was not yet the class discourse of an embryonic proletariat. Some *sans culottes* were small employers whose emphasis on independence made them suspicious of servants and day-labourers. Jacobin concessions to their demands were largely tactical, since popular support was needed to ‘save the Revolution’. Eventually Robespierre clamped down on the popular movement and imposed wage as well as price controls. However, a myth of the Jacobins was later nurtured by Buonarrotti and Blanqui which, by 1848,

transformed them into embryonic social democrats. After 1794 the popular movement itself disintegrated, its activists hounded and arrested, their workshops ruined. Yet memories of the Year II lingered on in popular cafés and Parisian *faubourgs*.

The 'radical artisan', defending his independence against industrial capitalism, has become the culture hero of early labour movements. Yet myths of a golden age of the craft workshop may bear little relationship to the realities of the world of work. Soboul assumed that *sans culotte* political ideology emerged from master/journeyman solidarities and shared pride in craft labour. Yet stable workshops with amicable master/journeyman relations were already rare. Rural proto-industry was undercutting guild producers. Many Faubourg St Antoine workers made cheap furniture outside guild controls. Division of labour was emerging in tailoring. Most journeymen stayed only briefly in a given workshop. Masters wanted strengthened guild controls to discipline insubordinate journeymen, who welcomed Turgot's 1770s attempt to abolish guilds as a measure against hierarchy within the trades – unaware that the logic of a free market would produce a world in which craft skills, apprenticeship and quality production would all be in jeopardy (Truant 1994).

Journeymen's *compagnonnages* were strong in central and southern France, particularly among single workers in construction trades. Older, sedentary workers tended to join *confréries*. Since *compagnonnages* found lodgings and jobs for 'tramping' journeymen and organised boycotts of 'bad' employers, one might view them as embryonic trade unions. However, their division into three *devoirs* – each with a foundation myth claiming origins in Solomon's Temple! – suggests that they accentuated rivalries within the world of work. *Devoirs* had initiation rituals involving blindfolds and oaths. *Compagnons* had sobriquets, often of a warlike nature, and carried staves, adorned with coloured ribbons, used in brawls (*rixes*) with members of rival *devoirs* or different trades. *Compagnons* participated in regular drinking rituals. This was a culture prizing virility and violence. Rather than being 'traditional' organisations, *compagnonnages* were a response to a world of labour in transition. Corporate structures were disintegrating, the distinctiveness of individual skills increasingly blurred. Membership of a *devoir* allowed journeymen to construct a symbolic 'pecking order', to assert in ritual forms their differences from other, almost identical, workers in order to claim job monopolies in specific locations. Hence the survival of semi-clandestine *compagnonnages* after 1800 could be viewed as an *obstacle* to solidarity which a nascent 'labour movement' needed to overcome (Truant 1994).

Between the 1790s and 1830, workers participated in strikes, Luddism, food riots and inter-*compagnonnage rixes*. But prefects, armed with the Le Chapelier Law (1791) banning workers' associations, rarely viewed labour unrest as a major threat. It lacked coherent ideology or leadership. Labour policy during the Restoration was ambiguous. Pressure from business lobbies ensured that the Ministry of Commerce remained faithful to free-market ideologies introduced by the Revolution. However, ministers made neo-corporatist gestures to woo artisans, lending an ear to masters who wanted guilds restored to guarantee the quality of French craft production and restore order to the workshops. Policy towards *compagnonnages* proved ambivalent. Their clandestine

existence and brawls were generally tolerated, but prefects intervened if they organised boycotts of employers. Less ritualistic and bellicose were mutual aid societies, whose Parisian membership quadrupled to 30,000 during the 1820s. These insisted on sobriety and ‘dignity’, disapproved of brawling and, unlike *confréries*, were largely secular. Societies recruited from a single trade sometimes played a role in strikes, as in the Paris furniture trade in 1820–21 (Sibalis 1989).

This was a world in transition. Corporate structures were recalled with nostalgia by some craftsmen and paternalist officials. Free-market ideology was increasingly dominant, yet often resented. Authorities wavered between tolerance and repression of vestiges of workers’ corporate organisations. Workers’ oscillated between discourses of neo-corporatism, ‘moral economy’ and Revolutionary rights. Introduction of machinery provoked Luddite outbursts – if fewer than in Britain. There were a hundred major incidents, fifteen involving serious violence. Many occurred in 1816–19 and 1830–31. Woollen towns such as Vienne were favoured locations. Employers admitted that machines would free them from the ‘tyranny’ of labour by undermining skilled workers’ control of production processes. Threatened wool-croppers or handloomers appealed to the King, describing themselves as loyal family men. Such deferential rhetoric was often combined with threats against employers. In southern mill-town Lodève there were undercurrents of Republicanism. The Hérault prefect voiced the authorities’ ambivalence. Describing cropping machines as an ‘inevitable evil’, he promised charity to redundant workers but threatened to prosecute the ‘factious’. Nord prefect Villeneuve-Bargemont lamented that free-market policies both increased national wealth and denied workers bread (Perrot 1978).

The year 1830 was a watershed. A new consciousness was generated by political experiences rather than by any transformation of the structures of the labour force. In the 1820s bourgeois liberals sought popular allies for their struggle against the Bourbons, persuading printers that censorship posed a threat to their jobs. This ‘alliance of “blouse” and frock-coat’ rapidly disintegrated once victorious Orleanists failed to offer political or social concessions. But during the political upheavals of 1829–31 city workers came into contact with ‘advanced’ elements of the middle class – St Simonian students and radical Republicans. Workers appropriated from St Simonian discourse the contrast between productive industrial and parasitic rentier classes, giving it a populist twist by identifying workers as the truly productive class. Soon the working class was described as the source of the nation’s wealth, its mission one of self-emancipation. Lyon silkweavers who sent funds to aid striking St. Etienne miners addressed them as ‘fellow workers’. Workers were no longer ‘the mob’ or the ‘rabble’ (*canaille*) – nor *gens de métier* linked to members of the same craft. The invention of the working class allowed workers in different cities and trades to claim that they shared a common identity and similar grievances and interests.

The July insurrection was dominated by artisans, notably from the building trades. However, popular insurgents, lacking a coherent ideology or programme, were easily seduced by ‘fine liberal phrases’. When an autonomous workerist consciousness eventually surfaced, the window of political

opportunity was already closing. By 1831 artisans were demanding the franchise, association rights, checks on the introduction of machinery and job-creation programmes. To the Orleanist elites 'liberty' meant something different – the franchise for men of property, freedom to introduce new machinery and work practices. As the new regime clamped down on popular militancy it became clear that participation in the Revolution had transformed many workers' mentality. Thousands of artisans joined the Republican *Société des Droits de L'Homme* (SDH). A. Colin's *Le Cri du Peuple* (1831) articulated the sense of 'betrayal' by bourgeois who had posed as friends but now revealed themselves as a new 'financial aristocracy'. Workers, the 'useful' class, should put aside craft divisions and stand together. Colin articulated a metanarrative in which the revolution was completed with a 'happy ending' in which workers secured the fruits of their labour. Workers would struggle against bourgeois oppressors whose pious law-and-order rhetoric was shamelessly hypocritical, since they themselves had come to power via insurrection! Scornful of bourgeois depiction of the 'criminal', 'dangerous' mob, Colin's discourse portrayed workers as imbued with the dignity of labour, 'proletarians' and proud of it (Judt 1986; Faure and Rancière 1976).

### **The radical artisan?**

The decades after 1830 marked the apogee of artisan radicalism. Handloom-weavers faced competition from factory-based machine production. Tailors and shoemakers were threatened by a division of labour which enabled merchants to employ female labour to produce ready-made goods for an expanding petty bourgeois market. Craftsmen were forced to work longer hours for lower rates. Merchant capitalists were increasingly dominant, providing orders and raw materials, marketing finished items, supplying credit for weaving masters to purchase Jacquard looms, and dominating industrial disputes tribunals (*Conseils des Prud'hommes*). Young workers' chances of an apprenticeship were receding, as were journeymen's prospects of establishing their own workshop. Industrialisation also multiplied opportunities for skilled metal workers and engineers, while urban renewal projects provided employment for building craftsmen in a construction sector little affected by technological changes. However, even 'threatened' artisans possessed a range of resources which could be mobilised. Their skills remained essential in the production of fancy silks, fashions, decorated porcelains or furniture. Many adapted flexibly to innovations such as Jacquard looms or metal printing presses. Ownership of workshops and tools gave a degree of independence. Artisan quarters such as Faubourg St Antoine, where 72 per cent of Paris furniture-makers lived, provided neighbourhood solidarities and allies among small shopkeepers and café-owners in whose establishments artisans spent work breaks. Semi-clandestine journeymen's *compagnonnages* survived from the ancien régime. Most artisans were literate, and artisan-run newspapers proliferated. Martin Nadaud ran classes for fellow Limousin migrant building workers, teaching both basic literacy and 'love of the Republic'. Many militants were autodidacts who, like locksmith Gilland, graduated from cheap *romans-feuilletons* to Rousseau and Socrates! Activists read aloud in cafés and workshops from Cabet's pioneering socialist *Le Populaire*, whose circulation figure of 5000 thus

disguised a much wider audience. Literate artisans were respected by fellow workers who used them as scribes and interpreters of official documents.

Some moved from narrow craft consciousness towards an inclusive class awareness, recognising that artisans in different trades faced similar problems and that mobilising the unskilled was essential since it was among this reserve army of labour that capitalists recruited to undercut craft workers. Artisan radicalism took a variety of forms. Parisian insurrections from 1789 to 1848, and beyond, were dominated by artisans. After 1830 producer and consumer cooperatives and mutual aid societies emerged, some acting as fronts for strike organisation, as with Parisian tailors in 1840. As many as 90 per cent of strikes in 1830–48 were artisanal. Strike leaders such as shoemaker Efrahem had contacts with the Republican SDH. Use of troops to arrest pickets exacerbated workers' sense of injustice. The role of lawyers such as Cabet as defence counsels for arrested strikers strengthened ties between artisan militants and bourgeois radicals. Denied access to electoral politics and freedom of association or assembly, the embryonic labour movement was driven to employ a range of less orthodox outlets. Some militants flirted with Blanquist secret societies which dreamed of a revolutionary coup. Others found opportunities to express egalitarian sentiments in popular song-groups (Prothero 1997; Sewell 1980; Moss 1976; Johnson 1974; Rudé 1973).

Artisanal cities were more militant than factory towns. The 'Rome of socialism' was Lyon. Praising its 'enlightened fanaticism', Proudhon lamented that he would 'never find a second city like it'. After suppression of worker insurrections there in 1831 and 1834, a worker-run press and mutualist and cooperative projects emerged. In 1844 there were strikes against targeted employers. Weavers were the key figures in a city which was the capital of the European silk industry; 40,000 of the city's 190,000 population worked in the industry, 400 merchants provided orders and raw materials for several thousand master weavers (*canuts*) who were assisted by 25,000 journeymen and auxiliary workers. International competition pushed merchants to cut costs by moving 'plain' weaving to peasant-workers in the hinterland. By 1847, 47 per cent of looms were outside the city. Silk preparation and spinning was done by peasant girls in convent workshops, supervised by nuns. Government rejection of demands for the restoration of fixed wage rate levels (*tarifs*) had provoked the 1831 revolt. Radical culture in Lyon was distinctive. Master *canuts*, the key cadres, were small employers yet were obliged to carry the *livret*, the workers' pass-book introduced by the Napoleonic Code. They *identified themselves* as workers. Joseph Benoît, a master who was a socialist deputy in 1849, entitled his autobiography *Confessions d'un Prolétaire*. A united front with journeymen was possible because they faced a common threat from the merchants. Journeymen lodged with masters in the Croix-Rousse weaving district. They both participated in flourishing consumer cooperatives, the purpose of which was to maintain the viability of small workshops by reducing food expenditure. Their newspaper, *Echo de la Fabrique*, portrayed weavers as sober craftsmen whose 'artistry' provided France with quality exports (Bezucha 1974; Stewart-McDougall 1984).

Tailors were hit by the rise of the ready-made clothing sector (*confection*). While 74 per cent of workers in Parisian bespoke tailoring in 1848 were

workshop-based male craftsmen, 60 per cent of *confection* employees were seamstresses working from home. Tailors, shoemakers and handloom weavers provided the activists in Cabet's Icarian socialist movement (Johnson 1974). Although artisans had a range of strategies and idioms available, the dominant discourse was that of 'associationist' socialism. 'Associations', lamented Thiers, 'are the malady of the age' (Vincent 1984). Producer cooperation offered the prospect of introducing new technology under the control of workers themselves. Associationists accepted private ownership of workshops by working masters but denounced a free-market system which eulogised ruthless competition, treated labour as a 'commodity', undermined skills, reduced wages and generated overproduction crises. It demanded *tarifs*, controls on new machinery and hours reductions to redistribute employment more equitably. It developed through interaction between artisan activists and ideologists who articulated ideas circulating in the workshops, made explicit strategic choices available and coined slogans such as 'social workshops', 'organisation of work', and 'right to work' which popularised the movement's message. Louis Blanc urged alliance with bourgeois radicals to build a democratic Republic which would supply orders and credit facilities to large producer cooperatives in each sector. Buchez gave lower priority to politics and the state. He attracted support from the ex-artisan journalists who ran *L'Atelier* – who equated associationist values with a Christian fraternity neglected by a hierarchical Church. More pluralistic than Blanc, they envisaged a multiplicity of small cooperatives. They helped publicise strike petitions and articulate opposition to private job agencies and employer domination of *Prud'hommes*. Their insistence that to win respect of, workers must appear sober and industrious, was shared by P.-J. Proudhon. Trained as a printer, Proudhon was a prickly maverick who delighted in paradoxes. Although virulently anti-clerical, his views on women were traditionalist – even misogynistic. Despite coining the phrase 'property is theft', he supported small artisan and peasant property, articulating the concerns of a stratum of (master) artisans such as Lyon *canuts* desperate to defend their work-cultures and avoid the factory. Suspicious of Blanc's state cooperatives and of Republican politics, he favoured apolitical mutualism and a worker-run People's Bank. He viewed skilled labour as the prerequisite for workers' dignity and morality, but feared that workers, corrupted by capitalism, lacked the *virtu* to construct a better society (Berenson 1984; Fitzpatrick 1985).

Urging scepticism about linking 'professional situation, militant practice and ideological statements', Rancière (1989) claimed that the 'radical artisan' was a *construct* of two groups – intellectuals and autodidact former craftsmen such as *L'Atelier* journalists now remote from workshop realities. They *invented* the figure of the proud craftsman in order to refute bourgeois slanders about 'lazy', 'immoral', drunken workers. This myth was misleading. Their image of the austere artisan risked confirming conservative assertions that the mass of ordinary workers were hedonistic and feckless. Militant trades such as shoemaking or tailoring were increasingly 'vile' – their workers 'sweated', deskilled, demoralised. Radical tailors, viewing the workshop as a 'hell without poetry', dreamed less of reforming than of escaping from it. Few wished to spend their lives sewing *petit point*! Militants yearned to travel,

write poetry. Worker poets were advised by intellectuals to write ‘authentic’ verse about their trades, but they wanted to write Romantic poetry about love! The memoirs of decorative painter P. Deruneau tell of visits to museums and art galleries and of drowning sorrows in taverns, but are silent on workplace experiences. Agricol Perdiguier found his furniture job fatiguing and stultifying and dreamed of hills and fresh air. Artisans’ aspirations were not confined to the worlds of work. They wanted to be citizens, to be treated with dignity and to have wider cultural opportunities (Ranci re 1989; McWilliam 2000).

Rather than seeking the seeds of radicalism in artisanal culture, some emphasise French workers’ unique *political* relationship with a neo-Jacobin bourgeoisie. Both London and New York had tens of thousands of artisanal workers. If French workers aspired to be equal Republican citizens it was their *political* experiences of Parisian insurrections which provided the explanation. But the path from craft to class awareness was not smooth. Rather than viewing artisans as an embryonic working class, one might categorise them as ‘reactionary radicals’ – their militancy nurtured by a hatred of industrial capitalism and a desire to *avoid* becoming industrial proletarians. Such passions gave their mobilisations real ferocity, but were of limited relevance to workers in mills and mines or to the mass of casual and female labour. Artisans who valued ‘manly independence’ worried about the reactionary consequences of enfranchising ‘dependent’ servants, unskilled workers and women (Judt 1986; Calhoun 1983; Moss 1993).

There were tensions within the artisan world. Master/journeyman solidarity could be strained even in the Lyon silk industry. Many master-weavers were mature men – cautious, sober, eager to refute bourgeois slanders about ‘feckless’, ‘immoral’ workers. They were involved in mutualist and cooperative projects and in the workers’ press, and aspired to enter electoral politics. Their journeymen, single and more volatile, enjoyed the hedonistic culture of caf s, song groups and Carnival, and were keen on direct action and violent confrontation. Beno t saw the 1848 revolution as premature, because most journeymen, even in Lyon, lacked the maturity and education to sustain a viable popular Republic. Tensions erupted where cost-cutting pressures obliged masters to reduce wages, as in Paris tailoring. Many industrial court cases involved disputes between masters and journeymen. Similar tensions in the construction industry are revealed by the complex Parisian career of Martin Nadaud. Though a radical Republican, active in strikes, Nadaud was a skilled mason with aspirations to become a building contractor. He sometimes acted as a *t cheron* – a subcontractor who organised workgangs. Yet in 1848 building workers demanded the abolition of this hated subcontracting system. The workplace was often a site of conflict and divisions. Many artisans were doubtful that producer cooperatives could really emancipate them from the wage system. For some they were simply a refuge in periods when, as after 1834, repression closed off other outlets for labour politics. Others resorted to them as pragmatic responses to unemployment, or as a form of collective subcontracting. Associationism also offered a convenient discourse for bourgeois Republicans keen to woo worker allies. Cooperatives could appear an anodyne alternative to more militant forms of

popular mobilisation – strikes or insurrections (Prothero 1997; Stewart-McDougall 1984). There were other divisions within the artisanal world. If many artisans were anti-clerical, there were enclaves of popular Catholicism in towns like Nîmes and Marseille. Mutual aid society regulations excluded the unrespectable and the alcoholic, and often women. The radical artisan was quintessentially male. Tailors blamed ‘sweating’ on the influx of seamstresses into their trade and advocated the return of women to the home. One response of Lyon silkworkers to competition from female workers employed in the convent workshops was to burn them down! Many family workshops only survived by ‘sweating’ wives and daughters.

Yet one cannot dismiss the radical artisan as a myth. The artisan movement had its divisions, flaws and myopias, partly defining itself against unskilled and female ‘others’. Yet France *did* possess Europe’s most radical popular culture. Factory workers were more militant in towns like Rheims with a sizeable artisan presence. The qualities of the ‘ideal type’ artisan – pride in skills, a desire for autonomy in the workplace and for respect as a citizen, and willingness to take direct action – were prerequisites for the development of a radical public sphere distinct from that of the liberal bourgeoisie. The ‘location’ of this was often outside the workplace. Cafés were centres of occupational and neighbourhood solidarities, sites for discussion, newspaper reading rooms, job agencies, strike headquarters. They housed song-clubs (*goguettes*) which featured the radical songs of Pierre Dupont and which were, socialist jewellery-engraver Vinçard claimed, a ‘powerful school of patriotic education’. Paris artisans were theatregoers, delighting in political innuendo, hissing upper-class and clerical villains. There was no unbridgeable gulf between the ‘serious’ culture of artisanal self-education and politics and a wider, hedonistic culture of cafés, *bals* and popular sociability. Nadaud won a reputation among fellow masons for his work skills, for running evening classes, and for being handy with his fists! Workers who read cheap popular novels – *romans-feuilletons* – could read into them a critique of a society where poverty and exploitation led inexorably to crime. *Goguettes*, which rejoiced in names such as ‘Sons of the Devil’, mixed the Rabelaisian with the political (Prothero 1997).

Rancière’s scepticism is exaggerated. Canuts were fiercely protective of their reputation for quality silks. Furniture-makers took pride in their ‘artistry’. Perdiguier claimed that a cabinet-maker shared Michaelangelo’s concern to combine mathematics and beauty. Sadly, Vinçard observed, artisans, like artists, were obliged to prostitute their talents to the crass commercialism of market society. Rather than accepting the factory system and then fighting for lower hours, artisans emphasised that one’s integrity depended on producing only goods which satisfied professional standards. Concern with the aesthetics of labour, and to express symbolic rejection of market values, led some to spend time completing their ‘masterpiece’ (*chef d’oeuvre*). Possibly artisans’ passion for labour was a morbid pathology which unwittingly made them complicit with capitalism. Perhaps it was a defiant assertion of identity. Many clearly viewed pride in ‘quality’, threats to their trades and dreams of an egalitarian Republic as interconnected issues. A letter from Lyon to Parisian tailors expressed alarm at threats to the ‘artistry of the craft . . . , that

superior elegance which brings honour to French industry. You are . . . aware of the catastrophe besetting our industry. It was in Paris that those soulless speculators – who see nothing in life but money, who push us towards concentration of commerce and who reject all sentiments of humanity – first saw the light of day’. Such capitalists represented a total denial of the motto ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ which adorned public buildings (Auslander 1993; McWilliam 2000; Liebmann 1980).

### **Beyond the artisanate**

Militancy was low among proletarians in large-scale industry. Comprising 30 per cent of the labour force, they were involved in under 10 per cent of strikes, and rarely formed mutual aid societies or political groups. But there were variations within and between sectors and regions. The image of textile mill-towns was established by bourgeois ‘experts’ whose reports permuted a stock litany of phrases, combining ‘miserabilist’ tropes about the horrors of factory and slum life with a pervasive moralism which blamed workers’ conditions on their own ‘immorality’. Long hours in unhealthy mills exposed workers to industrial accidents and TB. Female factory labour weakened family ties. Child labour led to low school attendance. Alcoholism and prostitution were rife. Fatalism was more prevalent than revolt, as wills bowed to the trinity of ‘factory regulations, boss and machine’. Low literacy limited the influence of radical propaganda. Recent migrants were disorientated, lacking community or corporate solidarities. With the exception of those involving male engineers or textile printers, strikes were brief and unorganised. Unskilled machine-minders were easily replaced if they did strike. The requirement to carry the *livret* facilitated blacklisting of activists.

Historians’ reliance on such stereotypes has been questioned. Millworkers with experience of ‘protoindustrial’ textile work may have been closer to artisans than usually assumed. Perceiving themselves as ‘paying’ mill-owners for raw materials, heat and light and ‘selling’ them the finished cloth or yarn, they behaved more as independent producers than as waged proletarians. Measuring their militancy via strike levels is problematic. Some disputes did reveal a degree of sophistication. When 8000 Rouen workers withdrew their labour in August 1830 they contrasted ‘freedom’ proclaimed by the Orleanist regime with the draconian discipline in the mills. During the Lille spinners’ strike in 1839 against fraudulent measurement of their yarn, they were supported by a solidarity fund from neighbouring mills. The leaders were jailed, but the issue of fraud was revived by a Republican Union of Spinners in 1848. Employers congratulated themselves on the relative ‘calm’ of mill towns in the post-1845 depression. Yet a report by liberal economist Blanqui, commissioned by Rouen employers, suggested that beneath workers’ ‘docility’ lay resentment at speed-ups, rising accident rates and falling wages. In Midi towns woollen mills were established in the 1770s, spinning and carding mechanised in the 1800s. Third-generation millworkers developed solidarities. Some disputes in Lodève involved resistance to mechanised power looms, but even wage strikes showed signs of planning – with strikers targeting mills with full order books, then trying to extend wage concessions to neighbouring mills. The town became a ‘red’ bastion in 1848 (Reddy 1984; Johnson 1995).

During the July Monarchy annual coal production quintupled to five million tons. Deeper mines with heavy capital investment developed. Yet many miners remained quasi-peasants. Decazeville managers saw this as a mixed blessing. Such workers were immune from radical urban ideologies. But their disappearance at harvests and *fêtes* constituted an 'annual tribute that we pay to the farm'. Paternalist schemes – company housing, free medical provision – were used to construct a reliable, loyal labour force and reduce labour turnover. Anzin offered coal-sorting employment to miners' wives and daughters. Yet even paternalist companies were not immune to labour disputes. In 1833 troops were used to break an Anzin strike against tough labour discipline imposed in new, deeper pits. Protest was more organised in the Loire coalfield in 1844, where the monopolistic *Compagnie des Mines de la Loire* (CML) – employing 70 per cent of the region's 5000 miners – was blamed for escalating accident rates caused by increased work-pace. Miners' demands to control their own mutual aid society won local community sympathy. Strike leaders received heavy jail sentences because the authorities were alarmed by the political influence of local radical silk-weavers and glass-workers on the miners' anti-monopoly discourse (Reid 1985; Hanagan 1989).

### Towards 1848

In the 1840s, government rejection of electoral reform encouraged a tactical alliance between Republicans, disaffected strata of the petty bourgeoisie and workers. If some workers remained suspicious of Republicans, others welcomed their provision of defence lawyers for arrested strikers. Nadaud felt flattered when congratulated by a Republican student for reading a radical paper in a *cabinet de lecture*. In Toulouse, once a bastion of popular Catholic-Royalism, Republicans played upon workers' growing anti-clericalism, adopted associationist rhetoric and tapped resentments at neglect of the region by Parisian economic elites. In Toulon, Republicans' 'democratic patronage' was crucial for the emerging labour movement. The insular conservatism of native Provençal workers was eroded by the influx into the naval dockyards of northern metal- and wood-workers. Defeat of the 1845 dockyard strike failed to disrupt close relations between worker militants and progressive bourgeois strata – Republican lawyers, St. Simonian naval engineers – who advocated an alliance of the 'productive' classes of the town. In Nantes, Republican doctor Guépin won workers' gratitude through medical work in the slums (Aminzade 1993; Agulhon 1970).

After 1845, France experienced a combination of a 'new' overproduction and 'traditional' – Labrousseau – crises. Poor harvests triggered rising grain prices, a consequent fall in consumer goods' sales and rising unemployment. Mortality rates rose sharply, as did petty theft and vagabondage. Crowds attacked grain convoys, forcing traders to sell grain at a 'just price'. Calls for vengeance on 'hoarders' and 'speculators' mingled with cries of 'down with the bourgeoisie!'. Protesters included textile and mine workers, rail navvies, quarrymen and proto-industrial workers. With 25 per cent of the Nord population dependent on poor relief, the crisis highlighted the inadequacy of a welfare system in which a patchy network of underfunded *Bureaux de Bienfaisance* had to be supplemented by Catholic charities, subsidy of grain

purchases by paternalist employers and improvised governmental provision of food coupons. Much protest was inchoate and 'apolitical'. There were attacks on Belgian immigrants in the Nord, and Luddism. But workers condemned charity as 'demeaning' and insisted on their 'right' to welfare – evidence, some argued, of the influence of pernicious socialist ideologies. With National Guard units reluctant to intervene, the army was used. Shootings in Lille and Mulhouse further weakened the regime's already shaky legitimacy.

## Workers and the Second Republic (1848–51)

The Second Republic was a defining moment in the 'making' of the working class. Insurgents who overthrew Orleanism in February 1848, remembering the 'betrayal' of 1830, demanded a Republic with male suffrage, the right to work and an 11-hour day. National Workshops were established for the jobless – 60 per cent of the Parisian workforce. A 'workers' parliament' – the Luxemburg Commission – was established to debate labour problems. Unions were legalised. Cooperatives and mutual aid societies mushroomed. Workers joined political clubs which organised the April 1848 election campaign. Workers entered the Limoges National Guard. Election in 1848 proved disappointing. But in 1849 workers were prominent in a broad-left *Démocrate-Socialiste* coalition which secured 36 per cent of the vote in the May elections. Its programme of rail and mine nationalisation, state support for cooperatives, progressive income tax and free secular education, made it Europe's first mass socialist party. Its deputies included silkweaver Benoît and stonemason Nadaud. But conservative notables shrewdly manipulated peasant fears of the 'red peril'. In April 1848 radicals won barely 100 of 800 parliamentary seats.

Faced with a conservative government and continued unemployment, workers vented their frustrations in direct action. Troops suppressed riots in Rouen and Limoges, where radical urban voters had been 'swamped' by conservative ballots from the surrounding countryside. Parisian artisans grumbled at demeaning navvying jobs in the National Workshops, but their closure provoked a June insurrection, suppressed by troops, National Guards and paramilitary *Gardes Mobiles*, which left 1500 dead and 11,000 arrested. Historians have provided nuanced analysis of the forces on either side of the barricades, but contemporaries as diverse as Marx and Tocqueville saw this as a class war. Workers were now on the defensive. Clubs were banned, cooperatives harassed, cafés subjected to curfews. In the December 1851 coup, Lyon workers awoke to find cannon trained on the Croix-Rousse. But the city had existed under a state of siege since mid-1849. Workers grew cynical as hopes faded. Some had the edge of their discontent smoothed by falling food prices and improving job prospects, although recovery remained fragile until the coup reassured worried investors.

French workers had mobilised on an unprecedented scale. Thousands who attended Paris clubs had their consciousness raised by a crash course in political education (Amann 1975). However, defeat was not just due to coercive state power or *notables'* manipulation of rural voters. Fault lines of gender, religion, ethnicity, age and skill in the embryonic working class had been

exposed. Anti-Belgian xenophobia disfigured popular protests in the Nord. Catholic workers in the Gard retained legitimist loyalties. Male tailors demanded exclusion of 'docile' seamstresses from the clothing industry. Most activists were skilled, male workers in artisanal towns. Sustained militancy was rare among factory workers, miners or metallurgy workers who often proved ideologically naïve, vulnerable to seduction by Bonapartist populism or company paternalism. Activists disagreed over strategy. Should one ally with bourgeois radicals who headed the *Dem-Soc* electoral coalition, aim for an autonomous workers' party or put faith in Proudhonist mutualism – or in insurrection? Nevertheless, labour did pose a challenge to bourgeois hegemony. Marx came to argue that immature workers had allowed themselves to acquiesce to bourgeois leadership, seduced by utopian chimeras of salvation of petty production through cooperatives and cheap credit. Further industrialisation was the prerequisite for successful revolution. Some portray 1848 as a watershed between 'archaic' modes of protest – tax and food riots, Luddism – and 'modern' electoral or union mobilisation. Hence the Second Republic constituted an 'apprenticeship' in political democracy. Others question Marx's assumptions of the primacy of the industrial proletariat, emphasising that the real revolutionaries were not factory workers whose jobs and identity were dependent on industrial capitalism, but artisans – 'reactionary radicals' who were fundamentally threatened by it (Tilly 1972; Calhoun 1983).

### Patterns of mobilisation

Applicants for compensation for injuries sustained in the February rising were provincial-born craftsmen. Their profile resembles that of the 1830 insurgents, but their average age – thirty-five – was higher. They constituted a 'revolutionary generational cohort', with memories of earlier insurrections, in which 14 per cent of them had participated. But 11,000 June Days insurgents offer a broader base for analysis. Unskilled and 'lumpen' elements constituted under 3 per cent; 3000 were metal and building craftsmen – 4 per cent of the workforce in these trades. Most worked in small firms, though some engineers came from the La Chapelle locomotive works; 2230 were furniture makers and tailors. Print and luxury trades were less heavily represented, as were small masters. Of petty bourgeois insurgents, 191 (9 per cent) were winesellers. Cafés remained central to the sociability of popular quarters. Many insurgents were arrested after tip-offs from landlords with whom they were in rent disputes. Conversely some arrested insurgents received character references from employers! (Tilly and Lees 1983). Analysis of the *Gardes Mobiles* who helped suppress the rising questions straightforward correlations between artisans and militancy. Rejecting Marx's claim that these were drawn from 'lumpen' elements – that the bourgeoisie recruited the 'dangerous classes' to restore order! – Traugott (1985) claims that they belonged to the very trades which supplied the bulk of insurgents. 'Organisational experience' supplied the link between class position and class identity. *Gardes* were recruited, isolated from Parisian politics and supplied with guns, uniforms, training and indoctrination. One could also explain the *gardes'* conduct in terms of their youth. Their average age was around twenty. Possibly government recruited them precisely because they had weaker family or workplace loyalties and

were more malleable. Many had been laid off or had apprenticeships curtailed in the economic slump. Few were yet socialised into the cultures of their crafts. Some nursed resentments at bullying meted out to workshop newcomers by established artisans (Traugott 1985).

Debates among the 669 Luxembourg delegates illuminate artisans' grievances. Sewell (1980) detected in these a transition from craft corporatism to class consciousness and an associationist vision of emancipation of workers from the wage system. Judt is more sceptical, arguing that they still mobilised under craft banners. By entering candidates from each trade they split the workers' vote in April 1848. Many concerns were pragmatic – enforcement of hours limitations and of a minimum wage in each sector. They denounced competition from prison labour and subcontracting, and advocated public labour exchanges. But cooperative production was central to their vision of a 'federative trade socialism' in which state credit and orders would allow cooperatives to eliminate middlemen and to share out work. Cooperation was not merely a pragmatic response to unemployment nor simply a 'retreat' by labour after the setbacks of 1848. Throughout the spring, workers from varied ideological backgrounds debated an associationism which would cover most trades. The June Days weakened hopes of state support, though *L'Atelier* collaborated with Cavaignac's government which offered subsidies for mixed employer/worker cooperatives. Others sought to reverse the electoral disasters of 1848, arguing that cooperatives needed the backing of a social Republic. Some shared Proudhon's disillusionment with politics and urged workers to focus on mutualist projects. During 1848–49, 50,000 Parisian workers from 120 trades participated in 300 cooperative ventures. But with even apolitical mutualism viewed as 'subversive', police harassed and prosecuted dozens of associations. Others collapsed because of internal frictions or financial problems. The large Clichy tailors' cooperative ran into difficulties because of shortage of capital and disputes over labour discipline and distribution of dividends (Sewell 1980; Judt 1986; Moss 1976).

Solidarities between silk masters and journeymen were central to Lyon labour politics. Both felt threatened by big merchants, and residential solidarities of the Croix-Rousse underpinned their strength. As many as 74 per cent of weaver households had co-resident members in the silk trade. By contrast artisans in other sectors were dispersed throughout the city, with only 28 per cent of co-residents from their trades. In 1848, Lyon had 150 clubs with 8000 members. Their disciplined electoral tactics led to success for worker candidates. Cooperative and mutualist ventures multiplied in the aftermath of the June Days – many 'fronts' for political clubs. But political violence was always close to the surface. In 1848 a workers' paramilitary, *Les Voraces*, patrolled the city and occupied the fortifications. In June 1849 a rash assault on the town hall by 15,000 workers led to 25 deaths and 800 arrests, providing an excuse to introduce a state of siege and dismiss radical councillors. This lapse reflected generational and cultural tensions within the silk-weaving community. Older masters favoured careful planning, electoral strategies, mutualism and self-education. Younger journeymen, despairing of establishing their own workshops, were volatile and sympathetic to direct action. Though labour was now on the defensive, the prefect reported

a defiant popular mood. 'To be a socialist here . . . is a sort of profession of faith – in conformity with which one regulates relationships from the workshop to the secret society to the barricade. Strong class and party discipline reigns due to 20 years of conflict' (Stewart-McDougall 1984; Liebmann 1980).

Patterns of mobilisation in Marseille reflected the fragmentation of its working population. Unskilled immigrants participated in riots, rarely in organised politics. Those in 'closed' trades such as stevedores had secure niches in the port and passed on jobs to their sons. Native-born Provençal speakers, suspicious of 'outsiders', had their own *confrèries* and a tradition of Catholic-Royalism. Only 30 per cent in 'open' trades such as shoemaking or tailoring were local-born. They were receptive to 'outside' ideologies and their religious practice was lower. Comprising 28 per cent of the labour force, they made up 47 per cent of club or cooperative activists or those arrested for political militancy. However, mobilisation during the Second Republic did produce discernible shifts in attitudes. Dissemination of discourses about the 'working class' led to a questioning of identities. Stevedores in the National Guard proved reluctant to fire on fellow workers. By 1851, 5 per cent of militants under police surveillance were dockworkers (Sewell 1988).

Ideological militancy among proletarian workers before 1848 was rare, but the circumstances of the Second Republic facilitated the contagious spread of popular protest. Textile mill-towns witnessed increased militancy as the fatalism with which workers had responded to the 1846 slump had shattered. Rouen workers denounced 'demeaning' charity and blamed 'arrogant' employers for mechanisation which led to overproduction and unemployment. There were Luddite outbursts, attacks on jails to release prisoners and post-election riots in April 1848. Denunciation of industrial *seigneurs* mingled with calls for a social Republic. In 1849, socialists won 32 per cent of the vote. However, Rouen had few artisans to act as intermediaries between the *Dem-Soc* leadership and the rank-and-file. Sporadic violence by mill-workers pushed the city's middle class towards the Right. Cooperative/associationist discourse had little appeal to a proletarianised labour force. Republicans utilised classic tropes about immiserated workers existing on subsistence wages and dwelling in foul slums. This discourse was not fully congruent with actual grievances and aspirations of cotton operatives who still perceived themselves as quasi-independent producers 'selling' their product to the mill-owner, and resented their lack of influence over hiring and fraudulent measurement of yarn and cloth which they produced. Alongside unorganised protests – food riots, Luddism – in the Nord, there were signs of a politicised unrest. Embryonic unions emerged, particularly among skilled mill maintenance engineers, textile printers and wool-combers. Strikers attempted to coordinate actions in Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. Consumer cooperatives multiplied. However, workers proved vulnerable to the seductive populism of Louis Napoleon, political clubs were rare and Left-wing voting modest. Imprisonment of a handful of militants after 1849 was sufficient to break resistance to imposition of new piecework payments systems (Reddy 1984; Aminzade 1993).

Labour's prospects in Alsace did not appear promising. Protestant textile employers were tough paternalists practising divide and rule strategies. Alongside the 'usual' divisions of skill and gender, labour was fragmented along

ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, between French and German speakers, natives and Swiss immigrants, Protestants and Catholics. Yet, aided by votes from radicalised peasants and petty bourgeois, the Left dominated the 1848–49 elections. Alsace had rallied to the French Revolution and had a developed sense of French Republican identity. It sheltered German radical exiles and was acutely aware of the proximity of reactionary forces across the frontier. Alsatian textiles specialised in upmarket products and employed a high percentage of skilled workers – textile printers, machine-makers – who, together with tavern-keepers and teachers, supplied the socialist cadres. They took advantage of the weakening hold of paternalist projects, which employers found prohibitively costly during the slump, to assert control over mutual aid societies. Radical secret societies mushroomed in 1850–51. Alsatian electors voted ‘no’ in the post-coup plebiscite (Harvey 2001).

In April 1848, Decazeville’s manager warned workers that revolutionary upheaval threatened their jobs, ran militants out of town and told Republican authorities ‘I am the master here, more so than the Provisional Government in Paris’. Similar management tactics in other company towns did not always prevent trouble. A radical engineer was elected in Le Creusot in 1849. But Schneider soon exacted revenge, sacking militants and calling in troops to break strikes. Anzin followed a similar trajectory of radical electoral victory followed by punitive sackings. The most sustained coalfield militancy occurred in the Loire, where a coalition of radical lawyers and ribbon-weavers helped mobilise support for miners’ struggles against the oppressive CML coal monopoly. Miners demanded control of their own mutual aid society, electing safety delegates and independent doctors, and eventual nationalisation (Reid 1985; Hanagan 1989).

### **The politics of democratic socialism**

After the June Days, workers had the options of retreating into apolitical mutualism, developing secret societies or seeking to build a workerist party. However, the significant development was their involvement in the *Dem-Soc* movement. Led by neo-Jacobin lawyers and journalists, this sought to channel ‘archaic’ and anarchic local protest into electoral channels, to achieve a social Republic via the ballot box. Marx criticised its naïve faith in cross-class alliances, its ‘parliamentary cretinism’, its ‘utopian’ illusions about rescuing doomed artisanal and peasant petty production. Others are less dismissive of a movement which, in the face of bureaucratic repression and entrenched notable power, made impressive electoral gains and mobilised a broad populist coalition. Fears of *Dem-Soc* election victory in 1852 led conservatives to support the coup. Its appeal was increased by imaginative propaganda which used songs and *Almanachs* as well as newspapers, distributed by migrant workers and *colporteurs*. The movement suffered from internal social and ideological tensions. Some suspected that bourgeois leaders’ rhetorical support for associationism masked a desire to divert workers from industrial militancy. Nîmes artisans were uneasy at the role of Protestant businessmen in local leadership. Faced with police harassment, rumours of Right-wing coups and daily clashes with Catholic-Royalists they grew impatient with electoralist strategies and flirted with secret societies. In a region with a history of bloody

sectarianism, activists' invocations of the 1793 Terror when one played *boules* with the heads of the royalist 'whites' sat uneasily alongside the leadership's fraternalist associationist rhetoric (Berenson 1984; Huard 1982).

Yet France was unique in possessing a radical middle-class stratum open to the egalitarianism of 1793, willing to restrict free markets, endorse workers' rights and embrace socialist discourse. *Dem-Soc* success was greatest where there was collaboration with cadres of literate artisans. Such alliances, impossible to construct in northern mill-towns, flourished in cities like Toulouse where barely 10 per cent of workers were in factories. Artisans and Republican bourgeois shared a distrust of 'northern' capital and a fear of Catholic-Royalism. The key to variations in local labour politics and class consciousness lay not *simply* in labour force structures or in workshop experiences but in the types of worker/bourgeois political alliances which were constructed. Radical Republicanism was not an ideology *imposed upon* the rank-and-file by manipulative bourgeois leaders. Two-thirds of urban Republican activists in 1849–51 were workers (Aminzade 1993).

The years 1849–51 witnessed the protracted 'agony of the Republic'. Police repression provoked resentment and resistance, but could also disrupt *Dem-Soc* organisational networks as newspaper editors were prosecuted, cafés placed under curfew, jury trials suspended, cooperatives hounded, radical councillors dismissed and activists prosecuted. In Limoges the porcelain cooperative faced police harassment, workers were ousted from the National Guard and the garrison was supplemented by a bourgeois militia to patrol workers' quarters. But repression alone cannot explain Labour's defeat. Some workers felt that socialist agitation threatened the business confidence required for economic recovery and employment. The absence of a secret ballot and paternalist benevolence posed obstacles to the Left in company towns. Portrayal of socialists as atheists, men of blood eager to return France to the Terror, influenced conformist and Catholic workers. Finally Bonapartist propaganda, which used songs, lithographs and *Almanachs* to portray Louis Napoleon as the workers' friend, a ruler not tied to the economic elites, appealed to less sophisticated workers in regions such as the Pas-de-Calais (Merriman 1985; Ménager 1988).

## Bonapartism and French labour (1851–71)

### Bonapartism – between authoritarianism and populism

The Second Empire provided political stability which encouraged industrial expansion. This accelerated changes in the structures of the working class. Completion of the rail network threatened the livelihoods of river boatmen but quadrupled the number of railway workers – to 138,000 – and stimulated metallurgical and coal sectors. The Pas-de-Calais coalfield was opened up. Around St. Etienne heavy engineering, steel and coal ousted ribbons and hardware as the dominant sectors. The balance in textiles shifted from rural industry and southern mill towns like Lodève towards the north and north-east. Wool-weaving was mechanised in Roubaix and Rheims. Rouen cotton-mills fell from 233 to 185, but their average size rose. Coke-fuelled iron-forges

undercut charcoal forges. The balance of the labour force changed only gradually. Paris flourished as *the* European artisan centre, its craft industries adapting flexibly to changing consumer tastes and technological advances. Urban renewal projects benefitted small and medium building contractors. By 1870 France employed 121,000 miners and quarrymen, and 49,000 workers in heavy metallurgy, but 825,000 in textiles – many in small workshops or rural proto-industry. However, the labour movement was influenced as much by state policies as by structural changes. A regime adept at populist gestures began by repressing the Left – and retained authoritarian tendencies. Activists arrested in the coup were jailed or exiled, urban constituencies gerrymandered and municipal autonomy in major cities ended. Unlike in Britain, where mid-Victorian prosperity and liberalism fostered a reformist labour movement, police surveillance of activists and the ban on unions perpetuated a sense of alienation. Workers' viewed the state as the repressive arm of the economic elites. Restrictions on political activities limited workers' contacts with Republicans and pushed some craft workers towards Proudhonist mutualism. This sought to ignore (unpleasant) realities of state power to focus on mutual aid societies, whose membership trebled to 800,000, and producer cooperatives. These now functioned more as petty capitalist enterprises than as ventures aspiring to emancipate workers from the wage system.

Workers' relations with Bonapartism passed through three phases. Until 1857 prefects warned that absence of overt militancy signified fear of repression not support for the regime. Limoges workers boycotted elections. In Lyon thousands stayed off work on the anniversary of the Second Republic. After 1857 attitudes 'improved'. Economic expansion multiplied job opportunities and the regime's Italian policy attracted support. Thereafter prefects' reports became gloomier. The fading of the rail and urban reconstruction booms fuelled industrial unrest and the re-birth of radical politics. By 1869, the opposition vote reached three million (42 per cent) – five times higher than in 1857 – and industrial militancy reached unprecedented levels. However, if Bonapartism 'lost' the urban vote, it had enjoyed support among sections of the working class. Limousin migrant peasant-masons were seduced by the Paris building boom, to the despair of exiled radical Nadaud, now reduced to teaching French in a Wimbledon private college! Mulhouse Catholic workers voted Bonapartist as a gesture against liberal Protestant employers. The populist nationalism of a frontier region explains working-class Bonapartism in eastern France. Bonapartism's idiosyncratic blend of authoritarianism and populism had genuine appeal. Workers were assured that Bonapartism guaranteed political stability and full employment. Napoleon III was the 'people's Emperor' – sympathetic to workers' grievances, not beholden to the elites. He toured industrial regions. During the 1857–58 crisis of the Lyon *fabrique* the court increased orders for silk dresses. Public works projects provided employment. In 1854 the emperor responded to Loire miners' petitions by breaking up the CML coal conglomerate. State subsidies were available for mutual aid societies which adopted an apolitical stance, and for housing projects such as Paris's *Cité Napoléon*. As the regime alienated Catholic and business support by its Italian and free-trade policies, it stepped up propaganda to workers. Strikes were legalised (1864). Article 1781

of the Penal Code, which accepted employers' word in court, was abolished. Such populist strategies enjoyed only modest success. In the last resort the regime could never refuse Schneider's request to send troops to break a strike at Le Creusot. Concessions, as conservative Bonapartists had warned, produced not a grateful working class but encouraged further demands. By 1869–70 the regime drifted back into alliance with Orleanist business and Catholic elites, and cracked down on strikes and workers' organisations (Kulstein 1969; Ménager 1988).

### The provincial proletariat

Pierrard (1965) claims that 'fatalism' was the overriding response of Lille mill-workers to appalling working and housing conditions. With typhoid and cholera frequent visitors, and infant and child mortality stubbornly high, life expectancy was twenty-four. Families spent some two-thirds of their income on food. Enforcement of child labour regulations remained lax. Low school-attendance kept literacy below 40 per cent. Observers lamented the fragility of family life, with 20 per cent illegitimacy rates, domestic violence and alcoholism. The rare organised strikes were by skilled male textile-printers. Possibly such analysis draws too heavily on the 'miserabilist' discourse of social commentators recycling the rhetoric of Villermé's 1830s reports which attributed workers' plight to their immorality. The café was a place of warmth and sociability, not (just) of dissipation. It housed both mutual aid societies and a vibrant song-culture which voiced forms of oblique, indirect 'resistance' – albeit in a world where open protest remained dangerous. Songs exhibited stoicism and self-deprecating humour. Lille was a 'dirty old town', but it was home. Workers were unimpressed by grandiose Bonapartist urban renewal projects. Customs such as 'St. Monday' were cherished. Strike statistics were inadequate indicators of industrial protest. In 1856 skilled *batteurs* faced arrest when they organised slow-downs to resist new machinery. They resorted to symbolic protests – mimes and pranks within the mills drawing on well-known phrases and jokes borrowed from street puppet theatre. And by 1867–70, 30 per cent of all French strikes were in the textile sector. Troops were sent to Roubaix to suppress protests against a new work system obliging weavers to operate two looms. In 1869 Republicans captured 80 per cent of the Lille vote. But employers proved adept at directing workers' anger against government free-trade policies, portrayed as a threat to jobs (Reddy 1984; Pierrard 1965). The fate of the Midi town of Lodève, a radical bastion in 1848, is instructive. Government orders for army uniforms, upon which its woollen industry depended, were transferred to regions with more 'docile' labour forces. This blow was compounded by the refusal of rail companies – dominated by financiers close to the regime – to construct rail links direct from Lower Languedoc to Paris via the Massif Central. By reducing a once-thriving textile region to an industrial backwater, capitalism illustrated its capacity – all too evident in our age of globalisation – to play 'hopscotch', to undermine pockets of worker resistance by shifting investment and production (Johnson 1995).

The strike in Zola's *Germinal* (1884) is based on two incidents in 1869 when troops shot striking miners in La Ricamarie and Aubin. Republicans claimed

that Bonapartism's populist mask was slipping as it resorted to repression to contain workers' protest. Yet miners were scarcely in the vanguard of labour militancy. The dominant discourse *about* miners portrayed them as oscillating between volatility, stoicism and docility. They were portrayed as coarse, often drunken. Annual per-capita beer consumption at Denain was calculated at 330 litres! Underground work was viewed as brutalising, the youth of mining villages as ill-educated and immodest. Yet miners were also seen as quasi-rustics whose narrow horizons protected them from urban vices and radical ideology. The perils of pit work made them more God-fearing than urban artisans, though they were hedonistic 'festive' christians whose religiosity was heavily tinged with superstitious fear of underground ghosts! Coalfields exhibited diverse characteristics. The Pas-de-Calais had many isolated mining villages. The established Loire coalfield was more closely integrated with industrial towns. Full-time Loire miners worked 14-hour shifts, whereas isolated pit-towns like Carmaux employed 'peasant-miners' who worked eight-hour shifts before tending their farms. Paternalist firms like Anzin provided company housing and encouraged high fertility to create a 'hereditary' work-force. Girls were offered jobs as pithead coal-sorters. Grand'Combes (Gard) recruited from the surrounding Catholic peasantry and used nuns to run schools and charities and help with labour discipline. Even striking miners exhibited little ideological awareness. At Carmaux they blamed individual managers rather than the company for imposing stricter timekeeping, and chanted '*Vive l'Empereur!*'. Solidarities of Aubin miners were essentially those of Aveyron rural parishes from which they were recruited. Their grievances focused on fines for poor-quality coal and the lack of company housing provided at nearby Decazeville. Aubin strikers were, Reid (1988) observes, the type of 'archaic' Catholic protesters with whom labour history remains ill-at-ease. They, too, viewed their quarrels as with an individual manager rather than with the coal company – let alone capitalism or the Bonapartist state! Only at Ricamarie, where troops shot into a crowd seeking to free arrested strikers, were there signs of politicisation. Conflict was triggered by attempts to wrest control over mutual aid funds from management – a sensitive issue in a coalfield where there were few jobs for women and where accidents among male breadwinners were increasing. Hopes of support from the prefect proved unfounded. Strike leader Rondet – a sacked activist who ran a café – subsequently became a union leader. Loire miners had links to ribbon-weavers and skilled metalworkers in a region with an active Republican tradition (Reid 1988; Hanagan 1989; Trempé 1974).

### **Provincial cities**

Provincial cities offered an environment better suited to labour politics than mill towns or pit villages. By 1870–71 Marseille had a branch of the First International and staged a brief uprising in support of revolutionary Paris. The city's population grew by 60 per cent to 312,000. Industrialisation and the influx of migrants altered the balance of the labour force and the nature of popular politics. Engineering, chemicals, soap, oil-pressing, tobacco and food-processing expanded. Literate, skilled migrants – northerners and Cévenol Protestants – were drawn to the city by prospects of upward

mobility in the service sector. Italians became unskilled labourers. The expansion of the port and the resilience of artisanal sectors suggest that popular radicalism cannot be ascribed to impoverishment. Migrants exposed the city to wider cultural and ideological currents. They were less devoted to local religious *fêtes*. Mass attendance fell, delays between birth and baptism lengthened. French replaced Provençal as the lingua franca. Reconstruction of the docks threatened stevedores' work-culture – for direct hiring replaced gang-subcontracting, mechanical cranes were introduced and enclosed warehouses curtailed traditional 'perks' of pilfering from cargoes. Protest petitions to Napoleon III went unanswered. Resentment at domination by outside capital intertwined with hostility to centralisation to fuel demands for municipal autonomy in the political mobilisations of 1869–71. Yet the working class remained inchoate. Relations between Provençals, French migrants and Italian immigrants remained tense. Xenophobic discourse labelled the latter a volatile, criminal underclass. In new industries French workers did skilled and supervisory jobs, Italians dirty, unskilled tasks. Italian women worked in the sweated clothing sector and sugar factories, better-paid posts in the state tobacco works went to stevedores' daughters (Sewell 1985).

Lyon was kept under tight surveillance. There were 800 arrests during the 1851 coup. Lyon workers were egalitarian socialists just as eighteenth-century bourgeois had been *philosophes*, claimed the *Procureur Général*. After 1860, strike militancy revived and a branch of the International was established. However, the social basis of Lyon radicalism was in transition as industrial changes altered the balance of the workforce. Developments within the silk *fabrique* strained relations between masters and journeymen. By 1870, 70 per cent of plain weaving was done in the rural hinterland. Lyon became an entrepôt and a centre for upmarket fancy weaving and design. These were hit by declining American markets, fashion tastes which favoured mixed silk/cotton fabrics and pebrine disease which destroyed local raw silk supplies. The *fabrique* resorted to resilient Asiatic silks, which proved more suitable for power-looms. Forced to improvise survival strategies, masters intensified exploitation of family labour, employed female auxiliary workers and cut journeymen's wages. Relationships within the workshops deteriorated, and disputes between masters and journeymen now dominated the *Prud'hommes*. Masters feared that militancy would jeopardise the industry, and blamed journeymen's 'insubordination' for the *fabrique's* 'moral crisis'. Producer co-operatives were now essentially petty-capitalist enterprises which distributed dividends. Consumer cooperatives were used to reduce food costs in order to hold down journeymen's wages. Journeyman Norbert Truquin saw masters as a labour aristocracy who no longer wore workers' blouses and who now favoured moderate Republicanism or Proudhonist mutualism – an analysis confirmed by the later chapters of Benôit's autobiography where this master-weaver and former socialist firebrand denounced 1860s strikers as 'agitators' with 'evil passions'. Journeymen, often reduced to casual jobs on building sites, now identified with the wider working class of engineering and chemical workers in suburbs of Oullins and La Guillotière. By 1870 only one of nineteen *Association Internationale des Travailleurs* (AIT) leaders came from

the Croix-Rousse. Younger activists abandoned mutualism. Some favoured Bakuninist insurrectionism, and participated in an abortive rising in September 1870. Others sought to construct a workers' party with links to the (underground) trade unions, while collaborating with Republicans against Bonapartism. The strike wave of 1867–70 encompassed silk journeymen, a few plain masters, female *ovalistes* and workers from heavy industry. Barely 10 per cent of participants in the brief Lyon Commune of May 1871 were silkworkers (Sheridan 1986; Lequin 1977).

### Workers and Republicans

By 1869, Bonapartism's hold on industrial France was waning. Workers were voting for opposition candidates and an unprecedented strike wave involved broad strata of the labour force. Wider implications of this mobilisation remained unclear. Would it be channelled by moderate Republicanism? Was a re-emergence of the democratic-socialist coalition of 1849 possible? Or would an autonomous workers' party emerge? Paris and Lyon militants were hostile to the Bonapartist state and large capitalism, and wary of cooption by bourgeois Republicans who 'betrayed' them in 1848. Elsewhere Republicans dominated opposition politics, either in the absence of strong labour traditions or because industrial changes had marginalised artisans who had been the cadres of earlier radicalism. Lawyers and businessmen constructed electoral coalitions which wooed workers by tapping grievances against free trade, domination of local economies by Parisian finance, excessive centralisation and clerical education. In eastern France or the Gard, workers signed Republican petitions for secular education. Republicans rejected the violence and 'utopianism' of 1848. They included 'progressive' industrialists who defined themselves against older Orleanist and Bonapartist elites – big merchants or large landowners – who favoured state repression, clerical education and authoritarian paternalism to impose social control. The only basis for a viable socio-political order was a democratic regime led by productive strata of the bourgeoisie – offering opportunities to aspiring *nouvelles couches* and association rights for workers. Such strategies succeeded in Rheims where handloomers, the militants of 1848, had been undercut by weaving mechanisation. Republicanism was led by mill-owner Holden – 'autocratic by instinct (but) democratic by ambition' – who denounced Bonapartist mercantile dynasties and offered workers the prospect of free schooling. Although a few militants joined the International, most acquiesced to such 'democratic patronage'. A similar pattern of class relations prevailed around St. Etienne. Here ribbonweavers, once in the vanguard of labour politics, were threatened by new looms, operable by less experienced workers, which produced patterns automatically from perforated cards while a single bar moved multiple shuttles. If the outward form of industry – small workshop production – changed little, weavers' control was eroded. The balance of the regional economy was moving towards heavy industry. In big armaments plants and steel mills at St. Chamond workers were subordinate to authoritarian/paternalist Bonapartist employers. But medium-sized engineering employers such as Dorian criticised such styles of labour control, and the 'brutality' of a regime which shot miners at nearby La Ricamarie. Dorian dominated

elections in 1869, insisting that *his* Republic stood not for disorder but for 'liberty, progress, security'. Radical weavers protested that 'progressive' employers were making St. Etienne their 'fief', for they were 'no different from the conservative bourgeoisie, since they live at the expense of the working class'. Despite a brief uprising in sympathy with Paris, the scope for independent labour politics had narrowed (Gordon 1985; Elwitt 1975).

Class structures and relations established fields of possibilities for progressive politics, but political alliances were required to realise these. In Toulouse, neo-Jacobin lawyers reassembled a coalition similar to that of 1849. Emphasising neglect of the regional economy by 'northern' Bonapartist elites, they appealed to shoemakers, furniture craftsmen and tailors who still dominated the labour force, though clothing masters had declined by 30 per cent since 1850, and flirted with associationist socialist rhetoric. Republicans were less influential in 'red' Limoges, where the working class was led by shoemakers and porcelain workers who lived alongside and mobilised the unskilled in their industry. In 1869 the prefect claimed that workers shared 'Parisian' ideas. Whereas it was often the municipalist strand of the Paris Commune that attracted provincial support, in Limoges it was its socialism. Local militants joined the International. In 1871 workers attempted to control the National Guard and prevent troop trains setting out for the capital (Merriman 1985). In 1870–71 most provincial industrial towns sought a third way between revolutionary Paris and reactionary Versailles. They desired a Republic which offered social and educational reforms and a degree of regional and municipal autonomy. Most provincial 'communes' of 1871 were ephemeral, relatively bloodless and thinly supported. Usually the uneasy alliance between bourgeois Republicans and workers held firm and accurately reflected local realities. The particular character of each movement was largely determined by the evolution of the structures of the local labour-force and by patterns of bourgeois-worker relations (Aminzade 1993).

### **Parisian workers between Haussmann and the Commune**

Some view the Commune as the accidental outcome of the unique circumstances of the siege of Paris in the winter of 1870–71. Others locate its roots in grievances already fuelling unrest in Bonapartism's declining years. Marx is often portrayed as labelling the Commune an attempted socialist revolution and the first working-class government – a glorious harbinger of the future. Yet Marx constructed a heroic myth of workers 'storming the heavens' in order to salvage something from a bloody defeat. At the time he warned that a bid for power would be suicidal, and he subsequently intimated that the Commune had been merely the rising of a city under exceptional wartime circumstances. Ironically it was the contemporary Right which portrayed it as a proletarian rising masterminded by the International – a class interpretation contested by modern liberal/conservative empiricists. The Commune is now viewed more as 'dusk' than 'dawn' – less herald of an age of proletarian revolution than last gasp of artisanal radicalism or Parisian insurrectionism – or as part of a wider municipalist revolt supported by sections of the middle class, against Bonapartist centralisation (Tombs 1999).

Hausmann's project was to accelerate the circulation of capital by construction of rail stations, goods yards, markets and boulevards, and relocation of heavy industry to the periphery. New sewers and water systems improved hygiene in the wake of cholera epidemics. Real estate speculators grew rich as central Paris was transformed into a space for bourgeois apartments and leisure culture. To render governable a hitherto ungovernable city, Faubourg St Antoine was surrounded by wide boulevards along which to move troops from newly constructed barracks. Construction projects, and the economic activities which they stimulated, were meant to generate jobs to defuse social tensions which had fuelled the upheavals of 1848. At its peak the construction boom provided employment for 20 per cent of Parisian workers. Migrant masons appeared reconciled to the regime by unprecedented prosperity, which also benefitted trades such as upmarket tailoring, bronze-working and *articles de Paris*. However, if *some* artisans survived in central Paris many were among the 350,000 displaced by Hausmann. Their sense of alienation ensured that a strategy designed to control and integrate workers ultimately nurtured popular resistance. Artisan delegates to the 1867 *Exposition* talked of 'Napoléonville' – a Paris of luxury and leisure – surrounded by *faubourgs* of squalor and deprivation. Demolition of inner city housing, and an influx of migrants which swelled the population by 65 per cent to two million, created a housing crisis and rising rents. Conflicts between tenants and landlords became endemic. Lacking access to transport and amenities, *faubourg*-dwellers resented the imposition of the *octroi* (consumption tax) to pay for Hausmann's projects. *Geographical* segregation influenced the 'social imagination'. Conflicts acquired *spatial* as well as class dimensions. However, if *faubourgs* did present a depressing blend of slum housing, railway sidings, gasworks, warehouses and refuse dumps, their residents developed a certain sense of community identity based both on a sense of exclusion from central Paris and on aspirations for improved amenities and municipal autonomy. Solidarities built a round *quartier*, street and café emerged as displaced artisans, and recent migrants and petty bourgeois intermingled. Around 75 per cent of working-class grooms and brides had small employers or shopkeepers as marriage witnesses. Radicalisation of such *quartiers* was rooted in such popular networks, not just in those of the workplace (Gould 1995; Shapiro 1985; Gaillard 1977). Where anxieties once focused on workers in inner city basements or attics, now it was to the heights of Belleville that bourgeois eyes were turned. Its population rose 67 per cent in 1851–56 alone. Its indices of crime, illegitimacy and mortality were rising; 85 per cent of inhabitants died leaving 0.8 per cent of inherited wealth. By 1869 it was identified with a re-emerging popular radicalism involving both skilled metal- and wood-workers and migrants drawn to the city by employment prospects but victims of the economic slump and rising rents and prices (Jacquemet 1984).

Despite relative prosperity for building trades and upmarket Parisian crafts, problems deepened in other artisanal trades. Sewing and leather-cutting machines allowed clothing and shoemaking entrepreneurs to use unqualified female operatives. Many apprentices lacked written contracts and failed to complete their training. Observers linked this to juvenile delinquency and

advocated funding of formal, broad-based training programmes. Porcelain and hatting industries were leaving Paris in the quest for cheaper provincial labour. Other trades survived by accepting long hours and lower wages. Furniture makers increasingly produced shoddy goods unworthy of their 'artistry'. Free trade and railways created wider, 'faceless' markets. Haussmann's bright new world of bourgeois consumption was one of competitive pressures on declining trades, subdivided labour processes and sweated outwork. Yet artisan resistance was not yet broken. Denis Poulot, a 'progressive' engineering employer, dreamed of improving productivity within a moderate Republic and an industrial relations system where workers cooperated in the introduction of new machinery and payments' systems. His journeymen (*sublimes*) obstructed such projects. They were undeferential, moved regularly between small workshops (*bôîtes*) and resisted piece-work bonus systems. Sadly their skills were still needed, and their indiscipline was a role model for fellow workers. Politically aware, they attended the mass meetings which became a feature of Parisian public life after 1868. Held in the dance-halls and theatres of Belleville which they frequented, these attracted crowds of thousands. Alarmed at the tone of debates, police arrested some speakers. Blanquists and Internationalists denounced Bonapartism as the guard dog of capitalism – using troops to break strikes and the law to dispense class justice. The state apparatus was 'parasitic', existing on the back of workers' labour. Many repudiated Proudhon's criticisms of strikes and, in line with the strategy of the International, urged coordinated industrial and political strategies (Cottureau 1980; Dalotel *et al.* 1980; Auslander 1993; Berlanstein 1980).

This discourse, together with opposition election gains and the International-coordinated strike wave, prompted Dalotel *et al.* (1980) to argue that the Commune was 'born under the Empire'. The scale of worker disaffection *already* threatened Bonapartist hegemony. Such claims require qualification. Though Varlin insisted that 90 per cent of activists now accepted 'communist' ideas, successful opposition candidates in 1869 were mainly bourgeois Republicans whose emphasis on anti-clericalism, secular education, abolition of the standing army and municipal decentralisation enjoyed popular support. Labour was fragmented between Proudhonists, Blanquists and Varlin's wing of the International – itself disrupted by arrests in 1869–70. Much Parisian violence was ritualised street brawling, posing no serious threat. Nevertheless, Paris clearly did alarm the regime. Unrest was fuelled by the ending of the construction boom, alienation of those displaced by Haussmannism and the anger of threatened artisans. Social tensions were exacerbated by popular awareness of the city's history. Proud of their revolutionary heritage, Parisians were angered by the lack of municipal self-government. Uniquely Paris was a centre of government, an intellectual and academic capital and Europe's largest centre of artisanal production. The population of this 'laboratory of ideas' had a clear awareness of how political debates and ideological conflict could escalate into direct political action, access to a revolutionary repertoire of demonstrations and barricades and a sense that regimes could be overturned (Tombs 1999).

Clearly the Commune *was* a response to wartime experiences. After military defeats in the east had triggered the overthrow of Bonapartism in September

1870, Paris was subjected to a prolonged siege which caused food shortages, disease and high casualties. The male population was mobilised into the National Guard. The Armistice of January 1871, followed by national elections in February, dealt a double blow to Parisians' Republican patriotism. Surrender of Alsace-Lorraine appeared to render the city's heroic resistance futile. Royalist electoral victories raised the spectre of the new Republic's overthrow by reactionary rustic hordes. Hitherto support for the Left in Paris had remained modest. Blanquist coups attempted in October 1870 and January 1871 ended in fiasco. Only five socialists were elected in February. However, the reluctance of Republicans to support popular resistance to army seizure of National Guard cannons in Montmartre on 18 March allowed the Left to seize the initiative, proclaim a 'Commune' – a name evoking the patriotic resistance of 1792 – and win 80 per cent of votes in the ensuing elections. The Commune held out against military assault for nearly two months, making abortive efforts to solicit support from provincial sister movements. Although its leadership was preoccupied with defence, a range of imaginative social and cultural projects were debated and attempted at a local level.

Rather than interpreting this episode as the outcome of pre-existing class hostilities and community tensions, some argue that it is explicable in terms of short-term, 'contingent' experiences linked to the siege. The war stimulated the city's Republican patriotism and allowed the population to be armed. The key to the Commune perhaps lies in the experiences of 300,000 National Guardsmen. Service in the Guard provided 1.50 francs per day, food and a sense of camaraderie which many were reluctant to give up. The solidarities of guard battalions stemmed from recruitment from within *quartiers*. Officers tended to be white-collar strata or shopkeepers, NCOs craftsmen. Many guards fought doggedly for the Commune because of a sense of loyalty to neighbours, or for fear of being branded a 'shirker'. Most Communards were working-class. But the *language* which they used to identify themselves was not (merely) that of class. As *Republicans* they insisted that only a Republic represented France's general will, even if ignorant rustics voted for a monarchy. They were *patriots*, heirs of citizens of 1792 who resisted Prussian invasion and elite treachery. They constituted 'the *people*' – a category which encompassed strata of the middle class. And they were *Parisians*, heirs to the city's proud heritage asserting their right to municipal self-government. In their 19 April appeal to provincial cities for support they included such 'sisters of liberty' in this call for municipal rights. These discursive self-definitions were asserted against specific 'others' – Royalists and Bonapartists, police and bureaucrats, clergy, stupid reactionary peasants, the 'Prussians of Versailles'. 'Parasitic' financiers were reviled, as were landlords. The Commune froze rents and has been described, half seriously, as history's largest rent strike. There was relatively little denunciation of industrialists, indeed some Communards called for the marriage of productive industrial bourgeois to the people! The Commune's socio-economic programme was ad hoc and populist, not socialist. It left the Bank of France untouched and worked with big engineering firms like Cail willing to continue production for the defence effort. Much of its energy went into anti-clerical gestures and school secularisation (Gould 1995; Tombs 1999).

Yet to define the Commune *simply* as populist, 'Parisian', municipalist, patriotic and Republican is insufficient. Marx emphasised that half of its 80-man executive were workers. For thousands of workers in clubs and vigilance committees the short weeks of the Commune represented a springtime of hope. It was at *local* level that initiatives for wider social transformation were debated. Many insisted that workers must emancipate themselves, destroy and replace – not merely take over – the state apparatus. Certainly the International's role was subsequently exaggerated. Initially it appeared ideologically fragmented and marginalised. But 34 of the Commune executive were members and they headed key education, food and police commissions. Varlin was a leader aware of the need to combine political and industrial strategies. Sectarian divisions between Proudhonists, Blanquists and neo-Jacobins produced less feuding than might have been expected. Mâlon, who attended meetings of these diverse groups, claimed to have learned tolerance by finding men of 'good faith' in all of them. Even if Communards did not choose to identify themselves only as 'workers', most activists were artisans. In 1869–70 the International had militants in all trades with active *chambres syndicales*. The typical Communard was a skilled worker in his thirties, married, a migrant to the city but not a recent one. Among insurgents killed, arrested or tried, 15 per cent were from the liberal professions or petty bourgeoisie, a further 15 per cent unskilled. Printers and woodworkers provided the cadres, the building and metal trades a disproportionate share of fighters. Shoemakers and tailors were less prominent than in 1848, skilled workers from large engineering plants more involved.

One could interpret the Commune as a last chance to fulfil the cooperative dreams of 1848. Some activists dismissed cooperation as 'archaic' and anodyne – capable of delivering only a form of petty capitalism. The economic viability of cooperatives during the siege was always problematic. A successful ironfounders' cooperative with 250 workers was a pragmatic enterprise which employed a former patron as manager, set wages below the norm and traded with large private suppliers – who vouched for the members' reliability at their post-Commune trial! Yet many artisans still viewed cooperatives as offering a chance to maintain skills and dignity and to introduce new machinery under workers' control. A recent claim that the Commune represented a 'paradise of associations' is, perhaps, hyperbolic. But abandoned factories were taken over, some 2000 tailors worked for six cooperatives supplying National Guard uniforms, and encouragement was given to women's cooperatives (Johnson 1996; Tombs 1999).

The Right *behaved as if* the Commune was a workers' revolution and a real threat to bourgeois hegemony. It was they who contributed most to the subsequent myth, even if their depiction of Communards as drunken brutes from the 'criminal and dangerous classes', led by ambitious *déclassés*, was scarcely hagiographic. In 1848 repression targeted the leadership of the popular movement. Now it was all insurgents. 'If I had my way', said one police chief, 'everyone who stayed in Paris would be punished.' 'The horrible sight of corpses', Thiers insisted, was a 'useful lesson' to keep workers' in their place. Thousands of prisoners were shot in the streets in a display of naked class vengeance for once lacking in any legal or patriotic fig-leaf. Worse than a crime,

these massacres were a strategic error. They transformed Communards into martyrs, bestowing on the Commune a heroic grandeur in defeat. Pilgrimages to the *Mur des Fédérés* in the Père Lachaise cemetery, followed by clashes with the police, became an annual labour ritual. Many of the 4000 per year arrested in Paris cafés in the 1880s for disturbing the peace were metal and building workers who mixed denunciation of police brutality with threats to revenge the Communards. Songs such as *L'Internationale* or *Le Temps des Cerises* kept the Commune's memory alive in workers' song groups (Haine 1996).

The Commune complicated subsequent efforts to integrate labour. Syndicalists and Marxists evoked the repression to illustrate the brutality of the capitalist state. Certainly some ex-Communards metamorphosed into radical Republicans, moderate reformist socialists or, indeed, into quasi-fascist Boulangists! Yet repression of the Commune, by exorcising the 'threat' of Parisian revolution, served as the Republic's great 'foundation massacre', reassuring provincial France that a Republic could defend law-and-order. With one hundred thousand Parisian militants dead, exiled or jailed, the Commune marked the swansong of the age of artisan revolt and urban insurrections, less the dawn of a new era of working-class politics than the twilight of older traditions of popular mobilisation.

## Workers and the bourgeois republic (1871–1914)

### The re-making of the working class? Changing structures of the labour force

Complex changes occurred in the composition of the working class in the decades after 1871. There was a good deal of stability. In 1896, 36 per cent of non-agricultural workers were still employed in units of five or less. During the subsequent economic boom the number of self-employed working on their own rose from 223,000 to 356,000. Textiles, a heterogeneous sector employing 40 per cent of workers, remained the largest industry. Construction, a 'traditional' industry with 13.6 per cent of the workforce, was the third largest. But exposure to wider competition due to the railway revolution led to a decline in such rural industries as Troyes bonnet-making, Normandy textiles and Lyonnais gloves. After stagnation in the 1880s the workforce in coal, steel, chemicals, heavy engineering and automobiles expanded rapidly. So, too, did employment in the tertiary and service sector and in transport. Of greatest significance for the labour movement was the decline – at first relative – of the craft sector. Lyon silk-weavers had adapted to the advent of Jacquard looms and electric power, to Asiatic silks and mixed or artificial fibres. Paris had remained a centre of diverse quality production. But by 1900 only 5 per cent of Parisian workers were apprentices, as against 18 per cent in 1860. Few had written contracts. Two-thirds failed to complete their training. There remained 4000 'quality' furniture craftsmen in the Faubourg St Antoine, but the 20,000 reduced to performing 'subdivided' tasks – making chair legs or table tops – lamented the decline of 'artistry' and urged their sons to quit the trade for the tertiary sector. *Métiers d'art* employed 29 per cent of Belleville workers in 1871, 14 per cent by 1891. By

1902, 56 per cent of building craftsmen's sons followed their fathers into the trade, compared with 77 per cent in 1869.

The new world of work was typified by Lorraine, now a major iron and steel region. By 1900, 86 per cent of miners worked in firms employing over 500. The rail workforce doubled between the 1870s and 1914. The automobile industry, Europe's largest, employed 33,000 in 50 firms. Chemicals, rubber and aluminium all expanded, often located in 'new' areas. Hydroelectric projects developed in Alpine valleys. As the city centre was bourgeoisified and artisanal Croix-Rousse stagnated, dynamic industries of the Lyon conurbation were those of Oullins or outer *banlieues* such as Vénissieux. During the Depression the industrial labour force hovered below the five million reached in the 1860s. It rose to seven million by 1910, not without recruitment difficulties in certain sectors. Some seasonal migrants settled into permanent urban employment. Peasant-workers, as at Carmaux, became full-time miners. But birth rates fell, and peasants or artisans were reluctant to enter heavy industry. Annual labour turnover at Anzin reached 33 per cent in 1900. Literate Protestants from Cévenol villages sought white-collar jobs in Nîmes. Catholic migrants were more likely to become blue-collar rail workers, yet once in the city their birth rate fell and their children, in turn, sought tertiary-sector employment. By 1914 there were a million immigrant workers, and women comprised over 35 per cent of the labour force. Retaining their role in textiles, clothing and tobacco, women were increasingly visible in hatting, printing and even engineering, which employed 43,000 by 1910. Belgians had long worked in Nord textiles. Now Italians were found not merely in the South-East but in Lorraine and, alongside Poles, in northern pits. In the Marais in Paris, hatters and tailors were Jewish refugees from Tsarist pogroms. Immigrants performed heavy jobs which French workers shunned, their presence allowing natives to occupy skilled, supervisory and clerical posts. But they were the target of xenophobia, some of it from unionised French workers who viewed them as undercutting established wage levels or as blacklegs.

Restructuring of the labour force had implications for working-class identity and consciousness and for the labour movement. Noiriel (1990) discerns a 'brutal rupture' as craft communities, bedrock of earlier popular protest, crumbled before coherent 'proletarian' identities or solidarities had been forged. Processes of 'class formation' should be viewed not as unilinear, but as marked by endemic discontinuities as old trades and communities dissolve, new identities emerge and 'class consciousness' has to be re-made. Artisans lamented that their skills were now redundant, their know-how was no longer being transmitted to the young who failed to appreciate the significance of past struggles and solidarities. Some spoke of a 'crisis' of worker culture as the young drifted into delinquency or were seduced by the lure of an emerging commercialised mass culture (Noiriel 1990; Lequin 1977; Berlanstein 1984).

Such rhetoric was too pessimistic. The strike wave of 1869–70 had hinted at emerging militancy in large industry. Some artisans found niches as skilled factory workers and were able to transmit their experience, organise the semi-skilled and sustain memories of past heroic struggles. In popular *quartiers* populist hostility to the *gros* was voiced by a *petit peuple* comprising a blend

of small employers, shopkeepers, 'self-employed' artisans and journeymen. New industrial workers developed workplace and community solidarities – now clearly those of class not craft. In artisan quarters of Lyon, marriage had been within the same trade. Now workers' children found partners from the wider working class. Moreover, production became concentrated into a limited number of industrial regions. Over 50 per cent of output was now in fourteen departments. Nevertheless, the labour movement, its cadres decimated by repression of the Commune, struggled to secure footholds in a changing industrial landscape. The 'rounded' skilled Parisian metal-workers of the small *boîtes* – Poulot's *sublimes* – were giving way to narrower 'specialist' workers (*ouvriers spécialisés*) such as millers or turners. In Britain the engineering craft union (ASE) was strong enough to offer protection from such technological threats. In France, where unions remained illegal until 1884, there was little organised resistance to these processes. Heavy engineering was located in outer banlieues, miles from city artisan quarters. Many semi-skilled workers were migrants. Bretons who came, with their priests, to Paris's north-western outskirts to the rubber and cable industries were impervious to Parisian radical culture, voting, if at all, for employers' candidates. Glass-blowers' skills were rendered redundant by new Siemens gas-ovens. Resistance strikes in the 1880s were unsuccessful, though Carmaux glassworkers established a cooperative at Albi which survived until 1920. Chambon-Feugerolles file-cutters carved out a niche in production processes and mobilised unskilled workers to elect socialist deputies to speak for them in parliament. But elsewhere in the St. Etienne region, heavy engineering and steel relied increasingly on semi-skilled labour as crafts such as puddling were undermined by new technologies. St. Chamond militants lamented that workers 'bowed their heads in shameful apathy', voted for management candidates and raised wage issues only in humble petitions which disclaimed any intention of strike action! (Hanagan 1980; Scott 1974; Berlanstein 1984; Lequin 1977).

Although socialists appealed to the 'working class', one might argue that France had several 'working classes'. Processes which eroded artisans' skills and status simultaneously created semi-skilled posts promising higher wages and stable employment to casual labourers. The 'ideal type' class-conscious worker was male, skilled, a union activist, anti-clerical and a believer in a social Republic. Yet in 1914 over 80 per cent of workers were outside the trade unions. Many were female or immigrant. Some aspired to becoming small employers, put faith in the bourgeois Republic, or were loyal – or deferential – to paternalist employers. Some were Catholics – offended by the labour movement's anti-clericalism – or populist nationalists, vulnerable to the xenophobic anti-Marxist and anti-immigrant rhetoric of 'yellow' company unions. The co-existence of so many types of worker offers one explanation for the weaknesses of 'organised labour'. However, the decline of earlier patterns of popular mobilisation also owed something to rising living standards and to the policies of Republican elites and of employers.

### **The rise in workers' living standards?**

Did rising living standards erode working-class radicalism? Unemployment was high from the late-1870s until 1896. Prolonged agricultural depression

increased 'vagrancy' and accelerated migration to the cities. But agricultural imports reduced food prices and diets became more varied. The *vie chère* riots which swept industrial France in 1911 were a protest at the price of former luxuries like butter and meat. Calculation of average wages remains difficult. Many industries had seasonal lay-offs. Workers were involved in pluri-activity. There was a variety of payment systems and complex subcontracting practices. Le Play's data on 'family budgets' must be treated with caution. Nominal wages were highest in Paris, but housing there was expensive. Nevertheless, estimated average wage rises of 25 per cent in Lyon and 33 per cent in St. Etienne in the period 1881–1911 were probably not untypical. Family life was altered by the decline of child labour due to compulsory schooling, Child Labour Acts (1874, 1892) and technological change in textile mills. In the clothing sector, where child labour was still 'useful', employers and parents colluded to evade regulation. Factory inspectors were too few to police small-scale industry. Wary of offending Republican employers they imposed nominal fines. The shift from temporary to permanent migration helped to stabilise family life, and children's health improved. Between 1869 and 1900 the percentage of Belleville conscripts unfit for military service fell from 30 per cent to 10 per cent. The average workday fell steadily, from 14 hours to 11 hours in the Lyonnais. A shorter working week and rising real incomes generated an embryonic 'leisure culture'. Although fashion historians emphasise French workers' loyalty to class-specific dress – the blouse and cap – falling clothes' prices allowed younger workers to dress up for the weekend.

Workers began to show interest in sports – as participants and spectators. Nord employers strengthened company loyalties by subsidising works' football teams. Midi landowners aped their Andalucian counterparts by financing commercial bullfighting for vineyard labourers. Bicycle and tyre manufacturers sponsored cycle races in urban velodromes and the Easter Paris–Roubaix race became a feature of popular culture in the Nord. Sportshops emerged specialising in cycling gear and fishing tackle (Rougerie 1964; Noiriol 1990; Cross 1983; Lequin 1977). Dance and music-halls multiplied, the latter less dominated by jingoistic and conservative songs than their London counterparts. Reduction of wine taxes encouraged the spread of the ubiquitous café. Its critics, including sober labour leaders, accused it of corrupting popular culture by encouraging male workers to neglect family responsibilities and consume excessive amounts of alcohol. However, some cafés welcomed workers' family groups and acted not merely as the focus of quartier sociability and solidarity but also as unofficial job-centres, strike headquarters and centres of political debate (Haine 1996). Some welcomed greater family stability and cultural and leisure opportunities, but others claimed that commercialised leisure was a sop to offset loss of workplace skills and job control. Decline of apprenticeships accentuated generational divisions within the working class. The visibility of gangs of working-class youths allowed the mass press to play on the fears of settled, middle-aged workers. Anodyne music-hall songs were replacing political ballads once favoured by workers' singing groups. Literacy simply exposed workers to the seductions of cheap *romans-feuilletons* and social-imperialist newspapers such as *Le Petit Journal*.

Any optimism must be qualified by the persistence of glaring social inequalities. 'We *must not* fool ourselves', insisted Dr E. Rey in 1900, 'the poor are becoming impatient with a Republic which has *not* (relieved) their sad situation. It would be *dangerous* to continue to deny them legitimate satisfaction.' Family budgets were squeezed when children were young or as ageing workers' earning powers were reduced. Periodic lay-offs or short-time working made survival dependent on charity, 'tick' from local grocers or pawnshops – whose custom rose 66 per cent in Lyon during the 1880s. Workers felt it futile to adopt bourgeois virtues of thrift and planning. Miners died prematurely of bronchial diseases or injuries. Millworkers were vulnerable to TB. Housing remained cramped, dirty and damp, and urban rents high; 33 per cent of court cases in Belleville involved rent arrears and evictions. Polluted water and poor sewage were endemic in workers' quarters. By 1900 a socialist vote in eastern Paris was a vote against chemical companies whose pollution of water supplies went unchecked by complacent Republican authorities. *Faubourgs* like Belleville suffered multiple deprivations. Between 1860 and 1900 the percentage of the population dying propertyless rose from 79 per cent to 88 per cent; 85 per cent were buried in pauper graves. Statistics on social immobility must be handled with care, since workers who 'succeeded' were not classified as 'workers' at death. Yet 63 per cent of conscripts in the 1900s belonged to the same social class as their father, and 14 per cent had 'fallen'. In Lille in the 1900s, as in 1850, 90 per cent of the population died leaving under 10 per cent of wealth. In Lyon, income disparities widened (Berlanstein 1984; Shapiro 1985; Jacquemet 1984; Stone 1985).

### Workers and the Republic

Workers' relationship with the Republic was complex. Some, particularly Catholics, deferentially accepted their place in a hierarchical social order. Others' visceral hatred of the bourgeois social order led them to favour workerist direct action. But many welcomed the Republic as fulfilment of a long-held dream – although hoping that it would metamorphose into a social Republic. Republicans introduced laic schooling for workers' children and legalised unions (1884). There were attempts to integrate a hitherto alienated working class into electoral politics and normalised industrial relations. Hopefully concessions would nurture a reformist labour movement on the British model. Yet by 1914 there were Marxist and syndicalist strands in organised labour, and strike levels were higher than in 1880. Did inadequate social reform and use of troops against strikers perpetuate worker alienation? Or did the relatively pro-labour stance of Republican politicians and bureaucrats, reliant on working-class voters against the Right, permit the (radical) labour movement greater 'space' than that allowed to its counterpart in the US, where repression of labour was more systematic? (Friedman 1998).

Working-class electors, who contributed to decisive Republican electoral victories in 1876–77, hoped that prefects would side with them against authoritarian employers. Yet the Republic's 'honeymoon' with labour risked being brief. Depression threw thousands out of work and exacerbated social

relations, and the return of exiled Communards stimulated a socialist revival. Republicans realised that steps were needed to retain workers' electoral support. Thus, Elwitt claimed, attempts were made to weld 'disparate and otherwise antagonistic forces of the . . . bourgeoisie' into a flexible ruling bloc aware that the 'best defence against socialism (was) social reform'. Republican politicians, bureaucrats, academics, businessmen and Catholic paternalists from Royalist or Bonapartist backgrounds participated. Fearing labour unrest this coalition overcame ideological differences to establish parapolitical groups to frame social policies. Republicans toned down their anti-clericalism, conservatives hid their distaste for the Republic. 'Normalised' industrial relations were a priority. Strike militancy was spreading – both defensive strikes against wage cuts caused by the Depression and revolts against authoritarian employers. Use of troops risked eroding the fund of goodwill which the Republic enjoyed among workers. In 1884 unions were belatedly legalised in the hope of encouraging pragmatic labour leaders and marginalising revolutionary hotheads. Militants viewed with suspicion provisions in the Act banning 'political' debate and requiring membership lists to be deposited with the police! Perhaps the Act was part of a 'technology of power' through which aliberal regime was adjusting the mechanisms of social control – an analysis applicable also to municipal funding of *Bourses du Travail* as headquarters for local labour organisations and labour exchanges. If a *Bourse du Travail* flirted with revolutionary politics, municipal subsidies could be withdrawn. Conciliation and arbitration procedures involving JPs were introduced (1900) and Commerce Minister Millerand suggested 'tripartite' machinery to facilitate negotiations between employers, bureaucrats and union officials to head-off industrial conflicts (1900). Compulsory arbitration and strike ballots were envisaged. Industrial accident compensation (1898), an obligatory weekly rest day (1906), hours limitations for miners and railmen and workers' pensions (1910) were measures designed to conciliate labour. Parapolitical groups encouraged workers' savings banks, profit-sharing to give workers a 'stake' in capitalism, and mutual aid societies which by 1900 boasted two million members.

The *Musée Social* provided a forum for such ideas. It brought together social Catholics, technocratic managers and Radical Solidarists who sought a 'third way' between socialism and free-market capitalism, arguing that workers' marketplace inferiority made them unable to negotiate as equals or enjoy the independence necessary for citizenship. Society was an organic whole, not a collection of atomised individuals. 'Social diseases' had to be treated by 'experts' – doctors, sociologists, criminologists – consulted by the state. Through enlightened self-interest, the bourgeoisie should support reforms to strengthen capitalism by defusing working-class unrest. The quest for a viable bourgeois order, Elwitt (1986) claims, forged consensus among disparate ideological groups. Faced with falling profits, import penetration, rising unemployment and labour unrest, elites negotiated a 'second founding of the Republic' uniting industrialists and landowners around strategies of tariff protectionism and social imperialism. Royalist textile-magnate Motte rallied to a 'moderate' Republic which played down its anti-clericalism. As strike levels trebled between 1889 and 1893, and Nord textile workers turned

to the Marxist *Parti Ouvrier Français* (POF) in the aftermath of the massacre of strikers at Fourmies (1891), Méline ‘sold’ tariff protection to workers as the guarantee of job preservation – trumpeting the ‘solidarity of employer and worker’ in the battle for ‘*travail national*’. Normandy employers gathered workers’ signatures on protectionist petitions. The Marseille colonial exhibition, organised by shipping magnate Charles-Roux, linked the port’s prosperity with colonial trade, forcing socialists to tone down anti-imperialist rhetoric lest it appear to threaten employment (Elwitt 1986; Lebovics 1988; Schneider 1982; Schöttler 1985).

Such strategies had limited success. Socialist voting and strike militancy increased. Elwitt’s (1986) analysis conflates solidarist statist reform with paternalistic strategies designed to minimise state intervention and underestimates the strength of laissez-faire ideologies. As the Boulangist and Dreyfus crises suggest, it overestimates elite consensus. Not all conservatives accepted the Republic, nor did all employers accept the need for social reform or union recognition. Housing reform was never effectively addressed. Population growth in Paris drove up rents and pushed workers into shanty towns in *banlieues* lacking transport and basic amenities. Exploitative landlords remained bogeymen in popular culture. Anarchists organised tenants’ groups and arranged ‘moonlight flits’ for those seeking to change apartment without paying rent arrears! Reformers dreamed of housing projects which would transform workers into conservative homeowners. But reluctance to commit taxpayers money or to allow municipalities financial freedoms to build council housing meant that the 1894 Housing Act was an anodyne measure – merely offering private builders tax concessions to construct cheap housing. Endless debate generated ‘a voluminous literature but minimal advancement’, since most reformers remained wedded to market solutions (Shapiro 1985).

Adult male unemployed faced harsh treatment. *Bureaux de Bienfaisance* resources were withheld from able-bodied unemployed – viewed less as victims of the Depression than as ‘professional indigents’, morally responsible for their fate. ‘Vagabonds’ – whose numbers swelled to 400,000 – were demonised. In 1890, 51,000 were arrested and 20,000 convicted. Unemployment was treated as a penal, and punitive ‘workfare’ scheme, based on ‘scientific’ American programmes, spread to 110 towns. Cities imposed residence qualifications for welfare claimants eliminating migrants and immigrants; 67,000 were pruned from Paris welfare rolls in the 1890s. Lyon abandoned welfare schemes hitherto operated to retain skilled weavers in the city during periodic slumps. By 1903 it had no adult males on relief! Private charities concentrated on mothers, children and the elderly, and imposed religious eligibility criteria. Reluctant to appear ‘soft’, radicals allowed debate to be dominated by hardliners who denounced welfare claimants as parasitic members of a degenerate, alcoholic sub-class. *Le Petit Journal* and Right-wing populists seized on the ‘scientific’ rhetoric of ‘experts’ who classified the jobless as ‘social garbage’ and advocated deportation of ‘recidivist’ beggars to penal colonies. In 1902, 10,000 such transportations occurred. *Office du Travail* reports on the structural roots of unemployment failed to influence policy-making. The lack of a national system of labour exchanges meant that the jobless were forced to rely on exploitative private agencies (Smith 1999, 2000).

### Management, paternalism, industrial discipline – and the state

Strategies for ‘incorporating’ workers required employer co-operation. Waldeck-Rousseau introduced socialist Millerand to his 1899 cabinet and blamed intransigent employers for provoking strikes. He secured support from an employers’ group, the *Comité Mascaraud*, founded by a Paris jewellery employer who was president of the Seine Industrial Tribunal. It included provincial industrialists who saw themselves as a productive class with roots in the people – heirs of that ‘hard-working petty bourgeoisie, keen on reform, which made ‘89’. They sought a *modus vivendi* with labour and welcomed Millerand’s tripartism. Some advocated a high productivity/high wage economy and job-creating public works projects. They urged fellow employers to accept the new Ministry of Labour (1906), the weekly rest-day and old-age pensions. The ‘contradictions’ of their position became clearer after 1906 when they supported Clemenceau’s tough stance against syndicalist strikes. Their support for progressive income tax was premised on absence of ‘inquisitorial’ prying into company accounts! (Moss 1993). If France was unique in possessing some committed Republican businessmen, most industrialists were suspicious of state intrusion into industrial relations. ‘I accept the intervention of *no one* outside the factory in contacts I have with my workers’, Schneider insisted. The mining and metallurgy employers’ association (UIMM) was founded to resist Millerand’s reforms. Employers boycotted conciliation and arbitration machinery and refused to participate in collective bargaining. Only 1 per cent of strikes between 1899 and 1914 were settled by direct negotiations with unions. Factory inspectors’ attempts to enforce industrial regulations were obstructed. Faced with the guaranteed weekly rest-day – introduced to head-off syndicalist demands for the Eight-Hour Day – big business mobilised small employers to secure a range of exemptions. Service-sector strikes against employers who flouted this Act prompted one Radical to enquire ‘what shall we say to workers when every time a law punishes them it is respected – and when (one) benefits them, there is always someone to wreck it?’ (Stone 1985).

Company paternalism produced workforces which oscillated between docility and sporadic protest. Zola described Anzin as a ‘new type of Bastille’ where miners, under incessant surveillance, lacked civil liberties. Large firms portrayed the patron as benevolent father figure – an image difficult to sustain if they became *Sociétés Anonymes* with boards of directors and technocratic managers. To create the ‘tireless little worker’ involved treating workers as children. Le Creusot installed a statue of workers, caps in hand, gazing up in admiration at their patron. The company ran the *mairie* and provided schools, stores, housing, allotments and a hospital. Schneider dreamed of a town with deserted streets, and no cafés where workers might hold subversive discussions. Such projects originated in efforts to build a stable labour force where peasants were reluctant to enter heavy industry. Anzin, aspiring to become a ‘family of 15,000 souls’, praised miners’ wives as breeders and spiritual directors of the next generation, and awarded prizes to fathers whose sons entered the pit. Houses were open to surveillance, with fines for lack of cleanliness. Religious congregations ran schools and welfare agencies and compiled dossiers on the workforce. ‘What we lack *at present*’, lamented

Grand' Combes manager, 'is *complete* surveillance of workers' behaviour.' The ballot box was rarely secret.

But workers were not rendered deferential by the mere existence of paternalistic discourses. The 1880s saw violent strikes at Decazeville, at Montceau – where a church and pithead were dynamited – and at Anzin. Around 2500 strikers sacked in 1899 by Schneider left Le Creusot by train waving red flags. Many workers were grateful for company welfare, accepting the Faustian bargain of trading independence for relative security. Yet there were numerous contradictions. Companies which praised allotments for preserving workers' healthy ties with the soil forced peasant-miners to abandon smallholdings in order to create full-time workers with better time-discipline! With the priority given to creating a self-perpetuating 'race' of loyal employees, the steep fall in birth rates in company towns could be read as a form of resistance. Paternalism sought to cocoon infantilised workers, but only functioned effectively where workers lacked alternative job options or were remote from wider democratic currents (Reid 1985b; Noiriél 1984).

The labour movement remained feeble in Lorraine iron-mining and steel-manufacturing. Unions found difficulties in coping with technological change, a massive influx of immigrants and ruthless paternalism. The steel industry had relied on skilled men who passed on know-how to younger workers. However, the Bessemer process undercut puddlers' skills and production processes became controlled by supervisory staff. Employers developed a full range of paternalist tactics, supplying housing for long-time workers, financing *fêtes patronales*, spying on polling booths and cutting off water from cafés which offered meeting places for union organisers! By 1900, 70 per cent of iron miners were Italian. As one manager said, 'I prefer Italians rather than migrants from central France where strikes are endemic'. They lacked the vote and were not covered by the 1898 accident compensation legislation. Strikers risked deportation. Employers implemented a divide-and-rule strategy, an industrial apartheid. Images of knife-wielding Italian bachelors were invoked to arouse the xenophobia of 'decent', family-loving native workers who held skilled and supervisory jobs and enjoyed housing and welfare provision. Employer hegemony was challenged by strikes after 1900. An alliance formed between Italians – resentful of fines and company stores – and French skilled workers hostile to speed-ups and technological changes. Organisers came from the Italian socialist party and the *Fédération des Métaux* to address mass rallies. The employers' *patrie* was defined as 'that which makes the biggest profits'. But unity proved fragile. Xenophobia was never far beneath the surface. The *patronat* subsidised Biétry's anti-immigrant 'yellow' union, which recruited 'French' strikebreakers disgusted by 'violent' Italians and 'unpatriotic' Marxist agitators. Militants were sacked and the *Comité des Forges* drew up blacklists. Residential segregation widened the gulf between French and immigrant workers. Technological changes and rationalisation of space in the steel mills further eroded skilled workers' autonomy. With trade-union membership pitifully low, resistance was reduced to daily ruses and subversive café songs (Noiriél 1984).

Faced with the Depression and foreign competition, employers sought to cut costs by eroding the collective work practices of skilled workers. Taylorism

– ‘scientific management’ – was more an imported American ideology than a widespread practice, but it attracted technocrats and industrialists such as Renault who combined concern for industrial efficiency with authoritarian political views. It offered a vision of a future where skilled workers’ autonomy could be curbed, though full-scale Taylorisation would be expensive and shift power from patrons towards engineers. The ad hoc, piecemeal elements of scientific management that *were* introduced provoked as much shopfloor protest as they quelled. Parisian engineering firms witnessed a ‘revolt against work’ – wildcat strikes against speed-ups, domineering foremen, piecework schemes and the introduction of machines such as ‘universal millers’. Such disputes flared up sporadically until 1914, with time-and-motion study projects particularly resented in car firms such as Berliet. In the 1880s, 12 per cent of strikes had involved job-control issues – by 1910–14, 25 per cent. However, in the face of tough employers’ associations, willing to use lock-outs and blacklists and to replace skilled workers with semi-skilled machine operators, strike success-rates fell (Berlanstein 1984; Humphrey 1986).

In the 1880s the Republican state responded positively when workers sought protection from prefects against intransigent employers – Bonapartists or Royalists – whose authoritarianism was perceived as provoking protests. Yet having created the space for the reviving labour movement, Republicans allowed the army to shoot strikers. Such ‘proletarian massacres’, critics argued, revealed the iron fist of a bourgeois regime. Fourmies (1891) boosted workers’ support for the Marxist POF. Villeneuve-St-Georges (1908) confirmed the image of prime minister Clemenceau as France’s ‘top cop’. Police personnel and strategies changed little in the transition from Bonapartist to Republican regimes. Informers infiltrated labour organisations. Agents provocateurs instigated ‘outrages’ which ‘justified’ police clampdowns. Clemenceau flooded the coalfields with troops to smash a strike called to protest at 1100 deaths in the 1906 Courrières pit disaster. The 1910 rail strike emphasised the deteriorating relations between the regime and its sometime working-class supporters. Hitherto rail unions had been grateful to governments for interceding to secure shorter hours. However, the autocratic railway companies responded to cuts in the working week by imposing speed-ups, tighter schedules and fines on the drivers. The drivers’ union, evolving from craft particularism towards wider class solidarity, applied to join the syndicalist Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). Portraying the strike as a threat to national security, Briand’s government threatened to conscript strikers and court martial any who did not resume work; 3300 were sacked. Although the strike crumbled, many railmen shared the verdict of one spokesman that the rail companies’ authoritarianism ‘should not exist in a Republic’ – and that the ‘Opportuno-Radical’ regime was no better than a monarchy (Stein 1979).

Around 40 per cent of the really violent strikes of the Third Republic occurred in just three years – 1904, 1906 and 1911. Was this evidence that workers were losing patience with the inadequacy of Republican reforms and that the bourgeois Republic was revealing its true colours by backing the *patronat*? The reality is more nuanced. In the US there *really was* an alliance between government and ruthless union-busting employers which forced the American Federation of Labor to adopt a cautious stance. By contrast the

French Republic appears relatively progressive. It still faced real threats from the far Right, with which sections of big business had links, and held intransigent employers responsible for labour discontent. To win elections and preserve the Republic it still needed working-class votes. Even Clemenceau made no real effort to outlaw the syndicalist CGT. Possibly syndicalism was permitted to survive because Republicans treated it with some leniency (Friedman 1998).

### **Socialism, syndicalism and French labour 1880–1914**

The labour movement took years to recover from the tragedy of the Commune. Municipal election gains preceded a breakthrough in 1893, when socialists won 750,000 votes (8 per cent) and 50 parliamentary seats. Progress was then retarded by internecine ideological splits until, in 1905, a united Socialist Party (SFIO) was formed which captured 100 seats and 1.4 million votes by 1914. Perhaps the depth of labour's ideological and organisational divisions should not be exaggerated. Many activists proved capable of holding both reformist *and* revolutionary views, emphasising one or the other depending on circumstances. Rival groups often collaborated within local *Bourses du Travail*. Nevertheless, the existence of several socialist groupings reflected real ideological and strategic differences. 'Possibilists' envisaged progress via reforms in alliance with the progressive Republican middle class and hoped to achieve meaningful local reforms through control of municipalities. At times anarchists, and even Marxists, shared such hopes. Marxism gained ground through the POF from the 1880s. Less influential – and less ideologically sophisticated – than in Germany, it was much stronger than in Britain. Though Marxism was denounced as an alien 'German-Jewish' implant, its insights were close to those of the historic French Left – unsurprisingly since Marx's emphasis on the working class's political capacity derived from his French experiences. The POF did well in Nord mill towns whose factory workers approximated to a Marxian proletariat. Its enthusiasm for scientific management failed to endear it to craftsmen. Outside the POF, Vaillant urged a blending of Marxist insights with France's Republican and anti-clerical traditions to appeal beyond a minority working class to peasants and petty bourgeois, and to coordinate party strategies with workers' shopfloor grievances. Similar concerns made groups such as Allemane's Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Révolutionnaire (POSR) sympathetic to syndicalism. Anarchists' influence was greater than its estimated 5000 activists might suggest. A police clampdown of 1893 curtailed their campaign of 'propaganda of the deed' – although not before Ravachol, who killed a judge, had become the 'hero' of a popular song performed in the bars of the Paris *faubourgs*. Anarchist groups were active in anti-landlord tenants' groups and moved into trade-union activity in the mid-1890s in order to strengthen syndicalist resistance to party control.

Prospects for socialist unity ebbed and flowed. Electoral successes in 1893 gave even Marxists illusions about the ballot box. An agreed minimum programme was constructed. Control of over 100 urban councils raised the profile of municipal socialism and worthy programmes of crèches, school meals and health clinic provision were introduced. Projects for council housing or

'gas and water socialism' foundered on the hostility of prefects and court judgements ruling it illegal to spend local taxes on such schemes. The scope for municipal projects proved narrower than that permitted to Chamberlain's contemporary Tory council in Birmingham! The inability of elected councillors to reform public amenities contributed to the souring of workers' attitudes towards the Republic. In the 1890s elections were lost because of sectarian feuding. After 1898 socialists were divided by the Dreyfus Affair. Some argued for defence of the Republic against the threat from the Right, others dismissed it as a capitalist regime like any other. Such splits proved damaging. In Bourges (Cher) the socialist candidate won 38 per cent of the vote in 1898, two rival socialists only 18 per cent between them in 1902. The vote was divided along occupational lines. The reformist attracted support from postal workers and arsenal workers reliant on state orders for their jobs, the 'revolutionary' from porcelain workers and lumbermen. The SFIO was a broad church seeking to hold together a disparate collection of reformists, Marxists, quasi-syndicalists and anti-militarists. By 1914 it attracted 1.4 million votes. Since many of these were from teachers, petty bourgeois and peasants, clearly many industrial workers voted for Republicans or even the Catholic or populist Nationalist Right.

The labour movement suffered from unresolved demarcation disputes between political and industrial 'wings'. Radical political mobilisations long preceded legalisation of unions in 1884. The POF sought to control the emerging union movement, but by the 1890s unions had asserted their autonomy. The CGT, established in 1895, was soon dominated by syndicalists who insisted that the overthrow of capitalism required industrial rather than political/electoral strategies. In 1902 the CGT united with the Fédération des Bourses du Travail (FBT). Bourses du Travail coordinated local labour activities, bringing together workers – skilled and unskilled – from different sectors. The CGT emphasised autonomy of local unions, but urged craft unions to amalgamate into industrial federations. After a slow start, union expansion gathered pace. There were 139,000 members in 1890, nearly a million by 1914. Only half affiliated to the CGT, which was shunned by some reformists. French unionism appeared numerically and organisationally weak alongside British or German counterparts, each boasting four million members and impressive bureaucracies. Workers joined during strikes, often to quit once these finished. Dues paying was erratic. New industries and some regions had minimal union presence. Yet labour militancy, measured by strike levels, was often higher than in neighbouring countries.

### **Varieties of labour experiences**

Within the confines of the present study one can, at most, illustrate diverse labour strategies which evolved in specific industries and regions. Labour movements derive their distinctive characteristics from the nature of the labour force, the policies – liberal or authoritarian – of state and employers, and the availability of ideologies. But the French working class was so heterogeneous that strategies which appealed to some strata made little sense to others. And whereas one can categorise Tsarism as authoritarian, both the Republic and the *patronat* were Janus-faced – sometimes liberal, sometimes

repressive. And France, Europe's most politicised society, had a veritable superfluity of ideologies on offer. Unsurprisingly no single style of labour politics was dominant.

### ***Marxism in the Nord***

One-third of the electors, and half the members, of the Marxist POF lived in the Nord, a department little touched by artisanal radicalism and rarely prominent in earlier labour militancy. However, textile strikes took off after 1880 and the Fourmies massacre (1891) proved the catalyst for socialist gains. POF activists, many sacked former mill-workers who ran cafés, dominated the textile union whose membership largely comprised unskilled, female and Belgian immigrant workers. The party's relationship with women workers deteriorated in the 1890s as electoral ambitions led to a concentration on concerns of male voters. Gains in national and local elections led, briefly, to dreams of achieving socialism via the ballot box. Control of municipal councils permitted the party to offer crèches and school meals for working-class families. In 1898 the POF's electoral momentum was lost as local industrialists exploited socialist divisions. Many workers were confused by the POF's sectarian insistence that the bourgeois Republic was not worth defending against the anti-Dreyfusard Right. Mill-owner Motte defeated Guesde by posing as a moderate Republican, wooing small retailers alarmed at high local taxes which municipal socialism implied, and by threats from socialist consumer cooperatives. He emphasised the role of employers in providing jobs and charity, and labelled the Marxist POF a 'foreign' party concerned more with immigrant Belgian workers than with native French. Although these electoral losses were eventually reversed, POF electoral support levelled off at one-third of the Nord vote. It was a revolutionary party which, like the German SPD, had no revolutionary strategy. It failed to use Marxist analysis to develop strategies appropriate to France's 'peculiarities' – the durability of artisanal and peasant strata and the historic importance of Republicanism. It ran a network of consumer cooperatives, but its lack of enthusiasm for industrial militancy made it insensitive to millworkers' shopfloor grievances and ensured that it made little headway among the region's miners and metalworkers (Stuart 1992; Gordon 1996; Willard 1965; Hilden 1986).

The song culture of Roubaix provides insights into workers' mentalities. In woollen mills where skill levels were already modest, Northropp mules finally eroded the relative job autonomy hitherto enjoyed by weavers. Hence songs reflect little joy in work or pride in skills – for machines do everything, the factory is a *bagne* (prison), workers *bagnards* (convicts). What makes life tolerable is the café where one meets friends, plays billiards. Songs by socialist activists reflect hostility to Catholic charity and disillusionment with a Republic which reneged on its promises to improve workers' lives. But textile workers read less and were less ideologically aware than city artisans. Their insular patois culture expressed localised solidarities. Even a trip to nearby Lille was a rarity. A 'frontier' patriotism made Guesdists wary of espousing anti-militarism, and an undercurrent of anti-Belgian xenophobia was expressed in resentment at immigrants' role as strikebreakers and cheap labour. Songs were male and misogynistic. Women workers were too docile towards

employers, frivolous gossips who wasted family resources on dresses and made married life an endless sequence of petty disputes. The culture revealed by these songs has humour, vitality and warmth, but is introverted, fatalistic, and tinged with ethnic and sexual tensions. There are few aspirations to proletarian cultural autonomy. It was a culture the fragility of which would be revealed by exposure to Republican patriotism or to the lure of commercialised mass media (Marty 1982).

### **Miners and reformism**

Concentration of miners in particular constituencies gave them a precocious capacity to elect their own deputies, while the role of state mining engineers in supervising the pits led miners to look to the state to regulate safety. Miners' long-term goal was nationalisation. In the interim, introduction of mine-safety delegates (1890) or the Eight-Hour Day (1905) were evidence that parliamentary reformism delivered results. During the 1880s – when Zola wrote *Germinal* – an unprecedented strike wave transformed the image of miners from culturally isolated quasi-rustics into archetypal proletarians. This militancy was provoked by management attempts to turn peasant-miners into full-time workers in order to improve labour discipline, timekeeping and productivity. Deprived of supplementary agricultural resources, miners became increasingly sensitive to wage issues and pit conditions. But strikes were also triggered by hopes that Republican prefects would support miners against authoritarian employers. The Nord/Pas-de-Calais coalfield emerged as the heartland of miner reformism. Employing 100,000 miners, it produced 75 per cent of French coal. The key figure was Basly, the 'Tsar of Lens'. His strategy was to use the union as an electoral machine to deliver deputies whose function was to lobby parliament. An admirer of the pragmatic unionism of the British and Ruhr coalfields, he lobbied alongside employers for tariffs to protect French coal, urged wage restraint to win government approval and kept his union aloof from the syndicalist CGT. In the Arras Convention (1891) he secured collective bargaining rights for northern miners. Critics in other coalfields resented his indifference to national bargaining. Within the Pas-de-Calais, union officials – café-owners whose role appeared to be to maximise sales of alcohol – became resented as out of touch with pit-face grievances such as hated piecework wage systems. A quasi-syndicalist breakaway union emerged in the 1900s, briefly securing 20 per cent support (Michel 1974).

In the Loire, the second-largest coalfield, Rondet, was a miniature Basly. Isolated mining towns of the Centre and the South often had difficult seams and low productivity. Their management were often intransigent. In the Gard the influx of miners from outside the region eroded the introversion of local Catholic miners, paving the way for violent May Day strikes in the 1890s – virtual guerrilla wars with the sabotage of pits and militants taking refuge in the hills! Strikes were defeated and the union broken. When labour organisation revived it was more cautious and worked, in conjunction with radical *vignerons*, for the election of socialist deputies. Jaurès, the SFIO leader, was deputy for the Carmaux mining constituency. Here miners got support in the 1880s from anti-clerical Republicans against the Catholic-Royalist

coalowner, before turning to socialism under the influence of local glass-workers. The path of Carmaux labour was scarcely smooth. Jaurès lost his seat, briefly, in 1898, and a company union gained ground. Local miners' leaders were repelled by Basly's 'repugnant egoism', favoured national bargaining and flirted with revolutionary rhetoric when the local prefect sided with management. Yet they shared Jaurès' faith in the Republic as a progressive regime which offered the framework for necessary reforms (Trempe 1974).

### ***Syndicalism and labour protest: the rebels behind the cause***

Revolutionary syndicalism was the ideology that best expressed the mood of militant workers. Syndicalists' attempts to challenge capitalism via industrial mobilisation rather than electoral politics made them heirs of traditions of popular direct action – and precursors of hauliers, fishermen and railworkers who still blockade Channel ports! Repression of the Commune suggested that urban insurrection was no longer viable in Western Europe. But disillusionment with the bourgeois Republic nurtured mistrust of politicians – an *ouvriériste* sense that workers' autonomous actions were the only means for changing society. Syndicalists argued that workers could unite around shared experiences of exploitation at work. Concessions won by struggles strengthened consciousness and solidarities more than did passive receipt of reforms 'from above'. Syndicalism's emphasis on job control reflected the aspirations of surviving artisans and skilled workers. Dreams of producer cooperation appeared utopian after the Second Industrial Revolution. But syndicalists' 'socialism' was not that of bureaucratic nationalised industries but of federations of independent producers. Syndicalism's decline coincided with the rationalisation of industry during the First World War which swamped remaining skilled workers with *ouvriers spécialisés* who did not share their aspirations to shop-floor control. However, one should beware of linking its trajectory too closely to technological changes. By 1900 syndicalist leader Griffuelhes, a skilled leather-worker, was encouraging craft unions to amalgamate into industrial federations capable of defending workers in an era of large-scale industry and employers' associations. The syndicalist CGT proved more successful than the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at recruiting members in large metallurgical and chemical plants (Friedman 1998; Vandervort 1996).

At least 40 per cent of syndicalist militants were at some stage socialist party members. Socialists worked alongside syndicalists in *Bourses du Travail*, socialist municipalities aided syndicalist strikers and shielded pickets from police harassment. Socialist orators addressed strike rallies. Levels of unionisation in large industrial plants correlate with local socialist voting. Nevertheless, syndicalism was ideologically and organisationally distinctive. Pelloutier envisaged *Bourses du Travail* as centres of an alternative workerist culture, with libraries, training courses and facilities for workers from different trades to exchange ideas. Pouget was editor of the anarchist *Père Peinard*, built around the figure of an irascible cobbler forever ridiculing capitalists and hypocritical Republican politicians. Written in Parisian *argot*, the paper tapped into the popular sub-cultures of the capital and was adept at channelling populist grievances. Exiled in the mid-1890s for alleged encouragement

of terrorism, Pouget returned to lend his talents to syndicalism. However, it was strike-leaders Griffuelhes or Yvetot who were the quintessential syndicalists. The former was impatient with intellectual justifications for syndicalism offered by retired engineer Sorel in his *Reflections on Violence*, insisting that he read Alexandre Dumas! By 1902 syndicalists controlled both the CGT and the *Bourses*, allowing them to launch a campaign of strikes whose immediate goal was to raise workers' consciousness, but whose ultimate aim was the revolutionary general strike (Julliard 1971; Mitchell 1987).

Even in its brief heyday in the 1900s, when annual strike rates topped a thousand, syndicalism's critics denied that it was representative of workers, dismissing it as a 'general staff without an army' (C. Bouglé). German and American union leaders warned that revolutionary rhetoric alienated ordinary workers, pragmatists interested in achievable wage gains, not class warriors. This judgement was reiterated by Stearns, who dubbed syndicalism a 'cause without rebels' backed by a minority of that minority – perhaps 15 per cent – of workers who were unionised. Larger, better-funded unions – mining, rail, print and textiles – were led by reformists who avoided rash strikes. These kept aloof from the CGT, whose domination by syndicalists was the result of manipulation of a number of small unions. Syndicalists' revolutionary rhetoric was bluster born of impotent frustration. Eulogy of militant 'active minorities' reflected their tenuous hold on the rank-and-file. When they did persuade labour's poor bloody infantry to go over the top, the results were a series of demoralising defeats. Syndicalist unions charged low dues, were unable to collect these regularly and lacked the funds to sustain strikes. Reformist printers charged union-dues five times higher than syndicalist unions (Stearns 1971).

Stearns (1971) exaggerates his case. His claim that most strikes were wage-orientated ignores the rise in job-control and hours disputes. He ignores the quasi-messianic mood of the 1906 strike wave and the range of workers attracted to syndicalist-led mobilisations, which included breakaway minorities from reformist mining and rail unions. Perrot's (1987) magisterial study of strikes provides the essential prelude to an understanding of the syndicalist years. During the 1880s Depression, newly legalised unions were weak, strikes often ill-organised, 'defensive' reactions against wage cuts. Yet by 1890 annual strike levels of 300 were double the average of the previous two decades. Skilled workers' strikes remained better organised and more successful, but two-thirds of strikers were now unskilled or semi-skilled. In the absence of unions, their disputes were coordinated from local *Bourses*. Barely 4 per cent of strikes involved serious violence, but some foremen and managers were armed. Strikers' often threatening rhetoric was redolent more of 1789 than of Marxism! Employers were parasitic *seigneurs* exploiting industrial serfs. Strikes were 'happenings' – lived experiences which stayed in the memory of those involved, 'days of hope' eroding workers' sense of fatalism and isolation. Rituals of street demonstrations with red flags and singing of the *Internationale* developed. Labour leaders addressing mass rallies were evangelical preachers spreading a message of the historic 'mission' of the working class to build a New Jerusalem, and evoking a future revolutionary *Grand Soir*. May Day strikes planned by labour organisers after 1890 for the international

Eight-Hour Day campaign escalated out of control as Nord rioters attacked mill-owners' homes and Gard miners attempted to dynamite pitheads (Perrot 1987; Tilly and Shorter 1981).

Unions organised 30 per cent of strikes in 1890, 75 per cent by 1906. Union growth between 1884 and 1913 was concentrated in five years of major strike outbreaks. Strikers flooded into unions during disputes. Many drifted away once conflict ended, but membership stabilised at a higher level. *Bourses du Travail* widened support for strikers. Their broader role was to nurture an autonomous workerist culture. They demanded shorter hours to give workers chances for self-education and family life. It was hours strikes which were most stubbornly resisted by employers. *Bourses* campaigned against alcoholism, arguing that drinking wrecked families, diverted workers from the class struggle and lined the pockets of brewers and distillers. They spread birth-control propaganda, urging a *grève des ventres* which, by reducing birth rates, would deprive capitalists of a reserve army of labour and militarists of cannon fodder for Imperialist wars. But activists agreed with Griffuelhes that strikes were 'worth more than the content of libraries' – teaching the values of solidarity, 'exposing' the repressive nature of the state. The only gains worth making were won through struggle, not 'conceded' by reform from above (Mitchell 1987; Julliard 1971).

Syndicalism benefitted from the post-1896 economic upturn which strengthened labour's bargaining position. Strike failures fell from 46 per cent to 33 per cent between 1895 and 1904. But syndicalism also relied on the 'space' permitted to it by a Republic which it professed to despise. Republicans relied on workers' votes and mistrusted reactionary elements of big business which wished to crush unions. The strike wave of 1899–1900 was triggered by hopes raised by Millerand's cabinet appointment. 'Successful' syndicalist-led strikes often saw intervention by bureaucrats who pressured employers into concessions; 50 per cent of state mediation resulted from workers' requests, only 3 per cent from those of employers. At the apogee of syndicalist influence, annual strike levels regularly exceeded a thousand. In 1906, 68,000 troops were mobilised in Paris and CGT leaders arrested to break the May Day general strike which, like one-third of strikes since 1904, demanded shorter hours. Syndicalist-led unions were more successful at running strikes than reformist rivals, recruiting a range of workers including many in large-scale industry. Catholic Mazamet wool workers and Besançon watchmakers established unions during syndicalist-led strikes. One unlikely bastion of syndicalism was the Parisian food-workers' union (*Fédération de l'Alimentation*) which mobilised an eclectic mixture of chefs and pastry cooks, journeymen bakers, hotel and café workers, grocery assistants and female sugar workers in strikes against exploitative job-agencies and for implementation of the weekly rest-day. The surprise here is less the union's decline after 1907 than the scale of its activity among such workers in the previous years.

By contrast, construction workers, whose *Fédération du Bâtiment* (FB) was strongly syndicalist, had a tradition of militancy. They clashed with big construction firms which ignored established pay-scales and safety regulations on Paris *Exposition* or Metro construction sites. Carpenters and joiners, resentful of the introduction of power saws and concrete and steel girders,

were prominent in strikes, but navvies and bricklayers were also recruited into an industrial union. There were 47 major strikes in Paris in 1906–08. One on the Metro lasted eleven months. These demanded the Eight-Hour Day, fixed pay-scales and safety regulations. Violence between pickets and ‘yellows’ – and hired gunmen – was frequent. The climax of FB militancy came in 1908 when four demonstrators were killed and 67 wounded as cavalry charged a demonstration at Villeneuve-St-George called to protest at police shootings into the strike headquarters at a nearby quarry dispute. With the state supporting the employers, the FB faced crisis. Leaders were arrested for anti-militarist propaganda. Latent tensions between craftsmen and navvies and between native and immigrant workers exploded.

The trajectory of the *Fédération des Métaux* (FM) illustrates syndicalism’s weaknesses. In 1905–06 union leader Merrheim acted as roving strike organiser, pointing to the use of troops against strikers as evidence of the Republic’s true nature. But strike defeats prompted him to rethink his strategy. By 1914 the FM had 25,000 members, 3 per cent of the workforce – a paltry level of unionisation compared with that of its British counterpart the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). Events in 1912 epitomised the union’s dilemmas. Confronted with craftworkers’ protests against time-and-motion studies, Renault locked out his workers, went to the Riviera, then returned to sack 400 activists and replace them with semi-skilled workers. In 1914 the FM had 50 members in Renault’s 4000 workforce – and none among the 2000 at Berliet’s Lyon car plant! The FM’s future lay in organising new semi-skilled strata. But union activists were craftsmen contemptuous of such neophytes for lacking skills and professional pride. Despite sharing such sentiments, Merrheim argued for a new approach which found favour with Jouhaux, the new pragmatic CGT leader. Faced with government collusion with employers’ associations, one had to jettison outmoded strategies of militancy and provocative anti-militarism and construct industrial federations with large, dues-paying memberships. ‘We are *for* active minorities’, Jouhaux insisted, ‘but these grow weary if their efforts are futile.’ One had to reject craftsmen’s quixotic efforts to resist industrial rationalisation and demand that workers reap the benefits – shorter hours, greater leisure, higher wages – of productivity gains achieved via scientific management and technological innovation. This became the strategy of the ‘new realists’ of the CGT during and after the war. Syndicalist discourse had always identified the worker as producer rather than as citizen. The new policy exposed an Achilles heel in this discourse, for union leaders risked seduction by the productivist rhetoric of neo-St. Simonian, ‘progressive’ businessmen and technocrats offering the beguiling vision of an ‘American’ high wage/high productivity utopia (Tucker 1996).

## **Conclusion: integrating the workers?**

Despite anti-militarist demonstrations in the run-up to the war, workers rallied to the *Union Sacrée* of August 1914, albeit more with a resigned sense of duty than real enthusiasm. Contingency plans to arrest thousands of militants were not implemented. This did not necessarily signify workers’ integration into

the bourgeois social order. The Communards were revolutionaries *and* patriots. Among the most fervent of patriots in 1914–18 were neo-Blanquist workers in Belleville who viewed defence of France – or perhaps of Paris – as defence of the world’s revolutionary epicentre! Socialist leader Jaurès, assassinated by a nationalist fanatic on the eve of the war, insisted on the compatibility of internationalism and Jacobin patriotism. Comparative studies of levels of integration of European labour place French workers in an intermediate position, more reconciled to their society than those in southern or eastern Europe, rather less than those in Britain or Scandinavia. Eugen Weber’s trinity of railways/barracks/schools gave peripheral regions a sense of national identity largely absent in parts of Italy or Russia. Despite syndicalists’ critique of French capitalism’s lack of dynamism vis-à-vis the US, workers enjoyed material fruits of capitalist Imperialism denied to workers in parts of Europe where per capita productivity was two-thirds lower. Unlike Italy in 1896 or Russia in 1904–05, France had suffered no very recent military or colonial humiliation. Many jobs depended on trade with the Empire. Some socialist discourse even portrayed colonialism as part of France’s progressive civilising mission! The army was far from universally popular. Workers detested reactionary, upper-class Catholic officers and resented army strike-breaking. Yet syndicalism’s *Sou du Soldat* campaign to keep young conscripts in touch with the labour movement had limited success. The laic school taught pupils to do their military duty, and conscripts’ experiences of military service were less brutalising and alienating than elsewhere in Europe. Working-class autobiographer G. Navel portrayed his father, a Lorraine steelworker, as nostalgic for the barracks – remembered as a period of escape from the constraints of family and steel mill, of camaraderie, drinking and brothel escapades. *Romans feuilletons* portrayed life in the colonial army, particularly the Legion, as exotic and heroic. Military service strengthened many young workers’ sense of the ‘foreigner’ as ‘alien other’.

Except in areas of maternity and childcare, the French welfare system lagged behind that in Germany. The proportion of workers covered by accident, insurance or pension provision was between two-thirds and three-quarters lower than in the Reich. Nevertheless, the growth of welfare provision after 1890 contributed to a sense of national identity. *French*, not immigrant, workers became eligible to be mine-safety delegates or receive free medical care. Immigrants were now excluded from municipal and civil service employment. Crucially French workers were citizens of a democratic Republic. Male German workers had the vote, but within a semi-authoritarian Reich, where parliament’s powers were limited and local franchises biased in favour of property owners. Britain had a ‘liberal’ parliamentary system and union rights, but excluded 30 per cent of male workers from the franchise. In southern and eastern Europe the franchise was much more restricted.

A study of Roanne, a south-eastern textile town, emphasises the importance of workers’ incorporation into municipal sociability. Workers showed signs of class consciousness. They voted socialist after 1896 and joined consumer cooperatives which supported frequent textile strikes – despite modest unionisation levels. However, they also joined non-class voluntary associations – music societies, sports clubs, former pupils and ex-conscript groups – where

they rubbed shoulders with bourgeois and petty bourgeois. These were active in municipal festivals and concerts. In 1914 such workers had a sense that they were defending a democratic Republic which did not exclude them. In 1915 a Gard miner, none too keen on the war, insisted that 'if Germany had a Republic, even one as bastardised, uncaring and crass as ours, there would never have been a war!'. This was clearly an endorsement, of sorts, of the French system. Yet the industrial unrest of 1917–20, culminating in the foundation of the Communist Party, was not just a product of the war. France had revolutionary strands – Marxist and syndicalist – in its labour movement much stronger than those in Britain. These were a legacy of its post-1789 political heritage and of unresolved social and industrial tensions (Van der Linden 1988; Milner 1990; Howorth 1985; Turner 1999).

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