

## REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

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### A Century of Organized Labor in France: A Union Movement for the Twenty-first Century?

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In November and December 1995, widespread strikes paralyzed France, threatening to bring down the Juppé government and demonstrating the continuing influence of organized labor in French politics. Although apparently successful, the strikes should not obscure the underlying reality that French trade unionism—indeed, trade unionism the world over—is in crisis. Several weeks later, on February 9 and 10, 1996, a conference was held in commemoration of the centennial of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the French Communist Labor Confederation, founded in 1895. “A Century of Organized Labor in France” was organized in cooperation with the CGT by the Institute on Western Europe at Columbia University and the Center for European Studies and the Institute of French Studies at New York University.

The participation of political scientists, sociologists, historians, economists, and trade-union officials from both sides of the Atlantic generated compelling panels and lively, insightful debate on the critical challenges facing the French (and international) labor movement today: technological change, market globalization, ideologies ill-adapted to the post-Cold War era, structural unemployment, the increase in part-time work and jobs with little employment security, public perceptions of union ineffectiveness, attempts to roll back French workers’ hard-won *acquis sociaux* (a wide range of rights and entitlements), and the underrepresentation of certain groups within the unions.

The conference also examined traditional features—usually perceived as weaknesses—of the French labor movement, many of which Roland Cayrol (Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris) addressed in his discussion of recent public opinion polls on the image of unions in France. While Cayrol found general respect in France for the historical achievements of trade unionism, as well as a continuing perception of unions as necessary social actors, his data identified wide-ranging criticisms of the French labor movement. Unions, unable to attempt new solutions and propose projects, do not understand and have not adapted to the new

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situation; they are more concerned with defending their own interests than those of workers as a whole (a real problem given that less than ten percent of French workers are currently members). The union movement lacks unity, a failure deemed all the more critical in periods of crisis when workers turn to their organizations for defense and relief. There is a growing gap between union leadership and its base, resulting in the impression that unions are increasingly “recuperating” spontaneous worker protest initiatives they were unable to foresee and organize. The overreliance by unions on strikes and mass demonstrations simply underscores their difficulty in developing new, more efficient ways to participate in the dialogue between employees, employers, and the state. Unions are too closely tied to political parties, a perception very often shared by union members themselves. There is also a widespread (and accurate) perception that union membership comes primarily from the public sector, with the damaging corollary that private sector employees do not believe their interests are as well served by unions as those of French *fonctionnaires*. Unions would do well to address this perception given the present trend in France (as elsewhere) toward the “downsizing” of the state and privatization.

Anthony Daley (Georgetown University) questioned the extent to which the historical relationship between trade unions and political parties still applies. He argued that over the past fifteen years there has been a gradual loosening of the bonds between unions and political parties in France (and in northern Europe, in general). As French political parties have moved to the center, seeking wider electoral support and advocating liberal policies, unions have responded by appealing directly to the state through mobilization and lobbying. Daley attributed the erosion of union membership (from twenty percent of all salaried workers in 1975 to less than ten percent today) in part to political disagreements among members which have fueled de-unionization. He concludes, nevertheless, in a positive vein: French trade unions have recently been rethinking strategies and adapting to their new situation by emphasizing collective bargaining, developing and strengthening local unions, experimenting with the reduction of working time to confront unemployment, concentrating on membership rather than ideology, and replacing their ineffective and outdated culture of permanent conflict with a culture of permanent negotiation.

As French unions seek to reverse the precipitous decline in their membership that has occurred over the past two decades, they would do well to woo social groups which have traditionally remained on the margins of the labor movement in France. Martin Schain (New York University) compared the successful incorporation of European immigrant workers into French unions in the interwar period and the inability (unwillingness?) of today's unions to do the same for non-European—principally North African—immigrants. The interwar process of integration was facilitated by a vast network of “ethnic” organizations which allowed for the collective unionization of immigrant workers. Unions today, wary of Islam, are reluc-

tant to turn to equivalent institutions as a means of collective integration. The fact that many immigrants are employed in declining smokestack sectors further discourages unions from making an effort to unionize them. Leah Haus (New York University) noted, however, that today's immigrants are increasingly employed in the nonexportable service sector and that unions would consequently be well advised to unionize them, if only to prevent them from undercutting native workers. Curiously absent from this discussion of immigration was the explosive issue of racism in late-twentieth-century France. As the Communist party has declined, many of its former working-class constituents have shifted their support to Jean-Marie Le Pen's racist, anti-immigrant Front National. As a result, there is likely to be significant overlap between the Front National's new electorate and union membership. This might explain why trade union leaders are reluctant to incorporate the very targets of their constituents' xenophobia.

Laura Frader (Northeastern University, Harvard Center for European Studies) attributed the historical underrepresentation of women in French unions in part to the fact that women's specific demands have been inadequately addressed by male-dominated unions which feared female competition in the job market, defined labor and skill in masculine terms, and were reluctant to include in their programs issues which, they believed, belonged to the "private" sphere (such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment, family allowances, and social security). Furthermore, the labor movement's relationship with political parties has often resulted in a "class against class" strategy to which women's specific interests have been subordinated. Frader noted that in the past quarter century these historical tendencies have begun to be reversed as female activists increasingly occupy leadership positions, especially in sectors with significant numbers of women. As women represent a disproportionate number of the growing and still un-unionized part-time sector, French trade unions seeking to increase membership would be wise to make women's concerns a priority.

Guy Groux (Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris) addressed the challenges and opportunities posed to the French Labor movement by technicians, engineers, and managers who have rejected the traditional union protest culture which implicitly accepted the subordinate position of workers under capitalism. Instead, members of these professions claim the right to participate in economic decision making and the management of their firms, based on their technical and managerial expertise. As their number continues to grow relative to that of blue-collar workers, they may well shape the vision and strategies of the French labor movement and help it adjust to the new economic situation.

What, then, are the prospects for the CGT and the French trade union movement as they enter the next century? What new strategies must they adopt to become effective players in the global, post-Cold War marketplace? George Ross (Brandeis University, Harvard Center for European Studies) argued that the CGT must go beyond its mostly empty

internationalism of recent years and its characterization of European integration as a capitalist plot. A necessary first step would be membership in ETUC (the European Union's trade union organization), which would allow the CGT to help shape the process of European integration in ways that would raise the labor and living standards of European workers. The CGT could then build on its newfound European activism to address trade unionism on a global scale, for example, by promoting human rights and helping workers in the developing world to organize. Jean-Pierre Page (National Executive Committee, CGT) rejected the inevitability of a liberal (in the European sense), Maastricht Treaty-driven European integration. Page advocated a concrete, flexible, unifying, independent, and international approach to confront the increasingly global job market and counter the weight of multinational corporations. His suggestions included new international labor legislation to penalize companies relocating to developing countries with lower labor costs; increased collaboration of union movements at the regional and interregional levels (made possible by the end of the Cold War) to maximize their influence; organizing the growing numbers of unemployed and part-time workers; replacing anachronistic and divisive ideologies by an acceptance of diversity within the international labor movement; and activism on behalf of universal issues such as human rights, peace, disarmament, and the environment. His remarks served as a fitting conclusion to a conference rich in historical perspectives and trenchant in its analyses of the challenges facing the French and international labor movements.

## South Asian Labor: Linkages Global and Local

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This workshop, organized by Prabhu Mohapatra and Marcel van der Linden, took place in Amsterdam in the last week of October 1995 under the joint sponsorship of the International Institute of Asian Studies and the International Institute of Social History. Twenty-two scholars from India, Europe, and the United States presented papers on a wide range of themes: labor in precolonial India, the legal regime of imperialism, the formation of class and community, South Asian labor overseas, and theoretical approaches to labor history. What impressed this participant was the high level of research and reflection that had gone into each contribution.

The history of the colonial experience in Asia has been the subject of