

**Renouncing the Left:
Working-class conservatism in France,
1930-1939**

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Abstract

Histories of the working class in France have largely ignored the existence of working-class conservatism. This is particularly true of histories of the interwar period. Yet, there were an array of Catholic and right-wing groups during these years that endeavoured to bring workers within their orbit. Moreover, many workers judged that their interests were better served by these groups. This thesis explores the participation of workers in Catholic and right-wing groups during the 1930s. What did these groups claim to offer workers within the wider context of their ideological goals? In which ways did conservative workers understand and express their interests, and why did they identify the supposed 'enemies of the left' as the best means of defending them? What was the daily experience of conservative workers like, and how did this experience contribute to the formation of 'non-left' political identities?

These questions are addressed in a study of the largest Catholic and right-wing groups in France during the 1930s. This thesis argues that, during a period of left-wing ascendancy, these groups made the recruitment of workers a top priority. To this end, they harnessed particular elements of mass political culture and adapted them to their own ideological ends. However, the ideology of these groups did not simply reflect the interests of the workers that supported them. This thesis argues that the interests of conservative workers were a rational and complex product of their own experience. They were formed by a large range of materials, from preconceived attitudes to issues such gender and race, to the everyday experience of bullying and intimidation on the factory floor. This thesis shows that workers could conceive of their interests in a number of different ways, and chose from a range of different groups to try and further them.

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Abbreviations

ACJF	Association catholique da la jeunesse française
AD	Alliance démocratique
ADN	Archives départementales du Nord
ADR	Archives départementales du Rhône
AF	Action française
AN	Archives nationales
ANMT	Archives nationales du monde du travail
AP	Archives de Paris
APPP	Archives de la préfecture de police
CFTC	Confédération française des travailleurs catholiques
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CGTU	Confédération générale du travail unitaire
FGSPF	Fédération gymnastique et sportive des patronages de France
FFCF	Fils et filles des Croix de feu
JP	Jeunesses patriotes
JOC	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne
FR	Fédération républicaine
PCF	Parti communiste français
PDP	Parti démocrate populaire
PSF	Parti social français
PPF	Parti populaire français
SFIO	Section française de l'internationale ouvrière
SPES	Société de préparation et d'éducation sportive
SPF	Syndicats professionnels français
UF de Paris	Union fédérale de la region parisienne
URL	Union républicaine lorraine
URP	Union république populaire
VP	Volontaires nationaux

Introduction

Historians have characterised the late 1930s as the moment when the French working class ‘entered’ national political life.¹ In May 1936, an alliance of left wing parties, bolstered by the support of trade unions and extra-parliamentary groups, won a remarkable electoral victory against the forces of the right. The Popular Front, as this alliance was called, lasted in government for barely two years. It had to contend with a faltering economy at home and the growing threat of war abroad. Yet it was the social achievements of the Popular Front government that have led historians to use this expression. The Matignon agreements, hastily signed on 7 June following an unprecedented strike wave, introduced sweeping social reforms designed to bring social justice to the nation’s working poor. This ‘entrance’ of which historians speak was also cultural. The introduction of paid holidays and the forty hour week gave workers the opportunity to leave the city and explore the countryside and the coasts, many for the first time. Media outlets, from cinema to the popular press, worked in tandem with the Popular Front to give the working class greater cultural visibility. For many workers, this idea of ‘entering’ national life was not only symbolic, but an accurate reflection of their experience.

The idea of ‘belonging’ to national political life presupposes that, prior to the election of the Popular Front, the French working class were ‘outside’ it. Many French workers certainly endured a difficult time during the interwar period. During the Great War, workers rallied to the *Union sacrée*, but the alliance did not endure in peacetime. A railway workers’ strike in 1919 and 1920 was brutally crushed by the government, effectively putting

¹ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, XIXe - XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), pp. 153-189.

an end to labour action for over a decade. Membership of the largest trade union, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), plummeted from 1.3 million in 1920 to 400,000 in 1921.² 40% of strikes between 1925 and 1935 ended in defeat.³ The First World War profoundly shook the foundations of French working life. Vast swathes of north and north-east France, areas of great industrial importance, lay in ruin. The death and destruction on the front line deprived the labour market of 3.3 million active workers.⁴ During the war, the labour deficit was filled by female workers, but increasingly women were squeezed out in favour of returning troops and immigrants.⁵ Through the prism of the conflict, old values and traditions were questioned and overturned. The Russian Revolution rekindled the hopes of the revolutionary left. In December 1920, the Parti communiste français (PCF) was founded out of a schism with the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (SFIO).

In spite of these problems, the French economy boomed during the 1920s. Industrial production increased faster in France than anywhere else in Europe. Heavy industry was extensively modernised and coal, iron, and steel production soared. Around Paris, new rationalised production methods were introduced to automobile and electrical goods industries. Giant production facilities such as the Renault plant in Boulogne-Billancourt and the Citroën factory at the Quai Javel became recognised symbols of France's industrial might. Accompanying this prosperity was the growth of the *banlieue*: large suburban housing developments such as Boulogne-Billancourt and Saint-Denis that housed an expanding workforce. Peasant workers, formerly employed on a seasonal basis, migrated permanently to these areas. Immigrants, followed suit; by 1930, France's immigrant population numbered

² Noiriel, *Les ouvriers*, p. 155-157.

³ Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 105.

⁴ Noiriel, *Les ouvriers*, p. 125.

⁵ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender division in the French and British metalworking industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 127-132.

2.7 million, making France host to the second largest immigrant population in world, behind only the United States.⁶ In 1931, over half of the French population lived in urban areas for the first time in the country's history.

Consensus holds that these economic and social developments compounded the sense of exclusion within the working class. Workers gained little from the booming economy; wages largely stagnated, while the government's failure to adequately resolve the post-war housing crisis meant that many continued to live in deplorable conditions. New production line factories were run with militant discipline and created a pool of young, unskilled workers with little chance of upwards mobility. The *banlieue* was a new, overwhelmingly proletarian urban space that created a sense of exclusion from the rest of the city, a process sometimes known as 'ghettoisation'. New communities, often composed of first- and second-generation immigrants, grew up in the *banlieue* and cultivated their own political, social, and cultural practices. The young Communist party was the main beneficiary of this. Swathes of new suburban areas became known as 'red belts' because of their close identification with the Communist party. The PCF saw the *banlieue* as a *tabula rasa*, an area ripe for the development a new counterculture that bound worker to class and class to party. This counterculture, or 'society within a society', is taken as further proof of the distance between the French working class and greater society during the interwar years.⁷

This narrative still frames the way in which these years are understood and interpreted. Its power is not limited to academia. This narrative is built into the mythology surrounding the Popular Front, an 'event' which remains one of the landmark events in modern French history.⁸ The 'inclusion/exclusion' dichotomy certainly boasts numerous

⁶ Noiriel, *Immigration, Antisémitisme et Racisme En France* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2009), p. 361.

⁷ This interpretation was presented by Annie Kriegel during the 1960s and remains influential today. See Annie Kriegel, *Les Communistes Français : Essai d'ethnographie politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967).

⁸ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 289-296.

merits as a description of certain political, social, and cultural developments. Yet historical narratives, particularly those that serve political ends, have the tendency to obscure and conceal phenomena that do not fit the narrative's logic. In this case, scholarship on the French working class during the interwar period have routinely excluded the fact that many workers, in some way or other, felt a sense of inclusion in French society as a whole. Workers 'belonged' to society in a number of broad but important ways. Nationality remained an important glue that bound French men and women of all classes. Parties on the left had difficulty grappling with this reality; the PCF, for example, struggled to attract an audience outside of the *banlieue* until it began to embrace certain aspects of patriotism and national symbology in the mid-1930s. The interwar years were also a crucial period for the expansion of mass culture on a national scale. The fruits of this culture were far more popular among workers than the proletarian alternatives offered up by the left, although the two were not mutually exclusive. Generalist newspapers such as *Paris-Soir* and *Le Petit Parisien* had far larger circulations than the Communist and Socialist press put together.⁹ While directors such as Jean Vigo endeavoured to bring poetic realism to the masses, workers flocked in greater numbers to see the new hit movies of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.¹⁰ The popularity of spectator sports also rocketed. Newspapers dedicated increasing column inches to sporting events, and sportsmen such as boxer Georges Carpentier and cyclist André Leducq became national stars. *L'Auto*, a newspaper dedicated exclusively to sport, was compulsory reading for male workers. The hegemony of this mass culture, to use the Gramscian term, was a significant obstacle for the counter-hegemonic projects of the Communist and Socialist

⁹ In 1939 *Paris-Soir* had a circulation of around 1.7 million. *Le Petit Parisien* had one of over one million. By comparison, the main organ of the Communist party, *L'Humanité*, had around 300,000 readers; *Le Populaire*, the official Socialist newspaper, around 150,000. See Claude Bellanger et al, *Histoire Générale de La Presse Française, Tome 3 : De 1871 à 1940* (Paris: PUF, 1972).

¹⁰ Philippe Bernad and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914-1938*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chapter 26.

parties and acted as an important binding agent between the workers and wider French society.

The challenge facing the left was also political. There were an array of parties, leagues, and non-political groups that stood for a completely different set of values and attitudes to the left. Moreover, these groups were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of bringing workers into their orbit. However, the consensus narrative has tended to airbrush out these groups. The Popular Front era is portrayed in neat class terms: workers and the left were pitched against the old alliance of business and peasant interests, represented by the right.

In reality, the right was complex, composed of numerous groups and associations. Each of these groups, moreover, represented a range of different interests. On the centre-right were two political parties, the Alliance démocratique (AD) and the Fédération républicaine (FR). Formed in 1901 and 1903 respectively, the AD and the FR belonged to the 'Orleanist' tradition of liberal conservatism dating back to the early nineteenth century. Their programs were broadly similar, defending economic liberalism and limited social reform against the statist and collectivist policies of the far-left. They were split over the separation of church and state. Together, the AD and the FR were a bulwark of the parliamentary system. They frequently polled well in elections during the interwar period and their politicians featured in numerous governments.

The AD and the FR came to represent a system that was increasingly seen as incompetent and corrupt. Parliamentary scandals, the onset of the global financial crisis and the instability of successive coalition governments animated a number of far-right protest movements. The oldest of these, the Action française (AF), was monarchist, anti-democratic and strongly nationalist. The ideas of its principle ideologist, Charles Maurras, were enormously influential on the right, while its youth organisation, the Camelots du roi, were a militant presence on the streets. During the Cartel des Gauches government of 1924 to 1926,

a number of new far-right leagues were established. Initially the largest was Pierre Tattinger's Jeunesses patriotes (JP), which took the form of a paramilitary organisation and fought street battles with the left. Shortly after this, the Croix de feu was founded, the largest and most important of the interwar leagues. Initially a veterans' organisation, the Croix de feu opened its doors to non-veterans in 1930 and quickly rose to become the largest political group in France. When the left was reelected to power in 1932, the extreme-right redoubled its attacks on the Republic. On 6 February 1934, following a particularly bitter political scandal, the Croix de feu, the AF, the JP, and several other smaller leagues and veterans' associations launched a street demonstration outside the Palais Bourbon. The demonstration caused the incumbent left-wing government to resign and kindled fears on the left that a fascist coup was imminent. On 19 June 1936 the Popular Front government dissolved the leagues. The Croix de feu became the Parti social français (PSF) and founded a right-wing trade union, the Syndicats professionnels français (SPF). The ex-Communist Jacques Doriot, meanwhile, founded the Parti populaire français (PPF), the second largest far-right party during the late 1930s.

The alternatives open to workers were not limited to moderate- and far-right movements, however. An array of Catholic groups were also established in the interwar period that sought to fulfil the church's moral obligation to the working poor. The papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891, directed French Catholics towards non-political action and led to the creation of a number of important social Catholic organisations. The Association catholique de la jeunesse française (ACJF), founded in 1886, was the driving force behind the Action catholique movement. In the interwar period, the ACJF spawned numerous other worker organisations. The most important was the Jeunesse ouvrière catholique (JOC), a Catholic youth movement that ventured to curb the rising trend of secularism and materialism among French youths. Important too was the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC), a trade union of confessional bent. Established in

1919, the CFTC overcame an auspicious start to become the largest non-affiliated (that is, non-CGT) trade union in the country. The Catholic right had a complex relationship with political formations on the left and the right. Some Catholics were sympathetic to the right because of its campaign against the separation of church and state; others were sympathetic of the left's dedication to social justice. In general, groups like the JOC and CFTC took pains to separate themselves from politics.

Historiography

Plainly there were an abundance of political and extra-political movements available to workers that did not belong to the left. While a great deal of scholarly work has been dedicated to these movements, we still have a relatively poor understanding of who supported them. The quality of our empirical data, most importantly membership records, is inconsistent. The best we can do is studiously piece together the data found in the numerous monographs on working-class and right-wing history for the period. The largest gap in our understanding still lies with the parliamentary right: the FR and the AD. William Irvine's top-down history of the FR in the 1930s has yet to be improved upon, while a bibliography of works on the AD can be compiled in several lines.¹¹ Granted, Irvine's claim that the AD and FR felt 'least at ease' with the working class is almost certainly correct, but it does not follow that the parliamentary right ignored the working class, nor that a minority of workers would vote for them in elections. In his study of the right in Lyon, Kevin Passmore has shown that the FR began to adopt more socially-orientated policies during the 1930s and was

¹¹ William D. Irvine, *French Conservatism in Crisis: Republican Federation of France in the 1930's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). On the AD, see François Audigier, 'L'Alliance démocratique de 1933 à 1937 ou l'anachronisme en politique', *Vingtième Siècle* 47 (1995), pp. 147–157; Donald G. Wileman, 'P-E Flandin and the Alliance Démocratique, 1929-1939', *French History* 4 (1990), pp. 139-173; Rosemonde Sanson, *L'Alliance Républicaine Démocratique : Une Formation de Centre, 1901-1920* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003).

surprisingly successful in the legislative elections of 1936 in proletarian areas.¹² Under Pierre-Etienne Flandin, the AD also showed a growing concern with the demands of mass politics and created groups for young workers and working mothers in order to make inroads into the masses.¹³

Our understanding of the relationship between the AF and the masses is slightly better. Thanks to the work of Eugen Weber, we know that the AF made a brief but concerted effort to attract workers in the mid-1920s, chiefly under the initiative of the former anarcho-syndicalist Georges Valois.¹⁴ However, it was during the 1930s that a number of right-wing movements developed a genuine proletarian base. The bulk of historical work on the interwar leagues and parties is concentrated on this decade and it is no surprise that our understanding of working-class participation is superior. Recent research on the Croix de feu/PSF suggests that working-class support grew steadily during the 1930s and, in some areas, may have rivalled the participation of the league's strongest demographic, the lower middle class. Sean Kennedy has put together all of the existing data on working-class membership to the Croix de feu/PSF.¹⁵ While working-class membership varies greatly from place to place, it is clear that in some major industrial centres, such as the Nord, the Croix de feu/PSF attracted a substantial following of workers. Jean-Paul Thomas estimates that thirty-three percent of the PSF's followers in the Nord were workers, a figure which equates to around 19,000 to 20,000 workers. Remarkably, this raises the possibility that the PSF had a larger

¹² Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 274-275 and 'Catholicism and Nationalism: the Fédération Républicaine, 1927-39' in Chadwick, Kay (ed.), *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 47-69.

¹³ Wileman, 'P-E Flandin and the Alliance Démocratique', pp. 157-172.

¹⁴ Eugen Weber, *Action française: Royalism and reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 205-218.

¹⁵ Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de feu and the Parti social français, 1927-1945* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), pp. 192-193, 196.

proletarian following than the Communist party in the region.¹⁶ The SPF, an independent trade union founded by the PSF, also attracted around 500,000 members at its peak.¹⁷

Of all the interwar far-right movements, the PPF has received the most scholarly attention with regards to its working-class following. Born of a schism in the Communist party, the PPF was led by a large number of ex-Communists who had long careers in proletarian politics, including its enigmatic *chef*, Jacques Doriot. The PPF believed that its empathy with the working class gave it a significant advantage over the rest of the right. It regularly bragged of its mass following in the pages of its daily newspaper, *L'Emancipation nationale*. Historians' attempts to scrutinise the PPF's claims have been inconclusive. Jean-Paul Brunet believes that a working-class following of around fifty-seven percent during its pomp is justifiable; Robert Soucy is more sceptical.¹⁸ A number of micro-studies suggest that, like the *Croix de feu*/PSF, working-class participation in the PPF was very much dependent on local context. Ralph Schor's study of the Var reveals that workers dominated the local PPF section; Paul Jankowski's study of Marseille reaches the opposite conclusion.¹⁹ It seems probable that a large fraction of the PPF's support was composed of workers and that the issue is over the *degre* to which this was the case.

Our best empirical work on interwar movements concerns the Catholic right. These groups kept well-maintained membership records and, unlike the far-right movements, did not find it necessary to inflate their statistics in the press in an act of political bravado. For this reason, we can be fairly confident that the CFTC had around 167,000 members in 1935,

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Thomas, 'Le Parti social français dans le Nord (1936-1945)', *Revue du Nord* 370 (2007), pp. 341–360.

¹⁷ Philippe Machefer, 'Les Syndicats Professionnels Français (1936-1939)', *Le Mouvement social* 119 (1982), p. 91.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Brunet, *Jacques Doriot : Du communisme au fascisme* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 1986), pp. 228-230; Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave*, p. 237.

¹⁹ Ralph Schor, 'Le Parti Populaire Français dans les Alpes-Maritimes (1936-1939)', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 33/34 (1986), pp. 99–121; Paul Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration: Simon Sabiani and Politics in Marseille, 1919-1944* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 55-68.

and that this number almost quadrupled during the Popular Front period, reaching around 750,000 members in 1938.²⁰ The JOC also flourished during the 1930s, with some 200,000 members in 1936.²¹ The celebration to mark the JOC's tenth anniversary saw 80,000 young workers descend to the streets.

We can deduce from existing scholarship that a considerable fraction of the French working class lent their support to right-wing and Catholic groups during the interwar period. Yet few historians of interwar France have acknowledged this fact, nor considered the implications that it has for our understanding of the period. The subject is a notable historiographical blind spot when compared to other periods. Since the publication of Zeev Sternhell's *La droite révolutionnaire* (1978), it has become well established that working-class support was critical to the success of nationalist movements during the *fin-de-siècle* period.²² The Jaune movement, a short-lived federation of anti-Marxist trade unions that operated during the first decade of the twentieth century, has piqued particular interest amongst scholars.²³ Recently, the enthusiasm with which many blue-collar workers have embraced the *Front national* has renewed the debate and prompted some to cast an eye back for previous *rencontres* between workers and the right.²⁴ Yet for most, working-class conservatism is an anomaly, 'the consequence of a socio-economic and political situation that prevailed at a

²⁰ Michel Launay, *La C.F.T.C. Origines et développement, 1919-1940* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1986), p. 322.

²¹ Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilising Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 2-13.

²² Zeev Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire 1885-1914 : Les origines françaises du fascisme*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

²³ Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire*, chapters 6 and 7 and *Neither left nor right: Fascist ideology in France*, trans. by David Maisel (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 47-51; George Mosse, 'The French Right and the Working Classes: Les Jaunes', *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (1972), pp. 185-208; Edward J. Arnold, 'Counter-revolutionary Themes and the Working Class in France of the Belle Époque: The Case of the Syndicats Jaunes, 1899-1912', *French History* 13 (1999), pp. 99-133.

²⁴ Gabriel Goodliffe, *The Resurgence of the Radical Right in France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

given moment in a particular society.²⁵ Interwar France, by this token, was none of these things.

The same reasoning is evident in the small number of works that do acknowledge the participation of workers in right-wing movements during the interwar period. These works tend to explain working-class conservatism as a momentary aberration from the normal development of the labour movement, caused by exceptional political circumstances rather than an expression of certain attitudes and mentalities. For example, Philippe Machefer argues that the rapid growth of the SPF was a consequence of the reunification between the CGT and the Confédération générale du travail unitaire (CGTU), a Communist trade union.²⁶ Workers joined the SPF in protest against the CGT's new direction, but only temporarily. A similar type of explanation has been used to justify the popularity of the PPF among workers. Workers were attracted to the PPF because it was able to sustain the myth that it was a revolutionary proletarian party with bonafide roots in the labour movement. Only when the party's reactionary policies came to the fore did workers abandon the PPF en masse.²⁷

Historians of other European nations have developed sophisticated ways of explaining the participation of workers in far-right movements. It is not difficult to appreciate why this is the case. The question of why workers participated in, or at the very least failed to resist, the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy is fundamental to our understanding of totalitarianism and its relationship to the masses. Of course, France did not fall under a totalitarian regime during the interwar period. The relationship between the far-right and wider society was fundamentally different. Nevertheless, the explanations that these historians have developed can be of great value to how we think about the attitudes of

²⁵ Sternhell, *Neither left nor right*, p. 48.

²⁶ Machefer, 'Les Syndicats Professionnels Français', pp. 91–112.

²⁷ Soucy, *The Second Wave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Chapter 5; Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 55-68.

everyday workers and their relationship with political and extra-political groups. Historians of Nazi Germany, for example, have cast aside the view that the working class was simply 'pacified' by the Nazi regime through the practices of coercion and terror.²⁸ Instead, they have explored the more troubling idea that many workers identified with the regime, found satisfaction in its economic and social policies, and internalised some of its most extreme ideas. Underlying this has been a thorough reevaluation of the attitudes of workers and their relationship to political organisations. For Alf Lüdkte, the doyen of *Alltagsgeschichte* or the history of the everyday, the strength of bonds between German workers prior to the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933 has been very much exaggerated. His theory of *Eigen-Sinn* follows that workers were competitive and deliberately protected the space between themselves and fellow workers. Workers therefore approached political choices in a more pragmatic and curious manner than historians have acknowledged.²⁹ Moreover, Lüdkte argues that the notion of 'quality work' (*deutsche Qualitätsarbeit*) was fundamental to the German worker's world view. This notion, which celebrated the superiority of the male German worker and his craft, chimed well with Nazi ideas concerning race, gender, individualism, and hard work. The Nazi regime offered ample opportunity for workers to display their professionalism and attention to detail, even as concentration camp guards and soldiers on the eastern front.³⁰

²⁸ See Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 2nd edn (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), Chapter 7; Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), Chapter 7, Mary Nolan, 'Rationalization, Racism, and Resistenz: Recent Studies of Work and the Working Class in Nazi Germany', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 48 (1995), pp. 131–151, Timothy W. Mason, 'The Containment of the Working Class in Nazi Germany', in *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 231–273.

²⁹ Alf Lüdkte, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse-Verlag, 1993).

³⁰ Lüdkte, 'The Appeal of Exterminating "Others": German Workers and the Limits of Resistance', *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992), pp. 46–67; 'Everyday Life and German Fascism', *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000), pp. 74–92.

Works on the subject are not isolated to the fascist countries. Historians of Great Britain have long grappled with the problem of popular conservatism.³¹ The Conservative party has a long history of attracting workers and the term ‘working-class Tory’ is now etched into the British political lexicon. Like their German colleagues, historians of Britain have rejected narrow political explanations for the phenomenon and instead examined the wider social and cultural attitudes of everyday workers. Jon Lawrence, for example, has shown that the idea of the ‘free working man’ with his proclivity for ‘manly’ pursuits such as drinking, football and racing, was widespread among the British working class and was perceived to be under threat from Liberal party and its quest for moral reform.³² The Conservatives were able to profit from this by pledging to protect the simple pleasures of the working man and created a network of working men’s clubs across the country. Thus, in a very different context, Lawrence is able to demonstrate the relative autonomy of working-class attitudes in Britain, and shed light on some of the ways in which the Conservative party tried, and succeeded, to represent them.

Why, then, has working-class conservatism remained a blind spot in the historiography of interwar France? I suggested earlier that the dominance of the Popular Front narrative has been the main culprit. A second dominant narrative, common in histories of the right, also contributes to this paucity of scholarship. This narrative explains the rise of right-wing groups in the interwar period as a consequence of the rise of a new class of *petits indépendents* and white-collar workers that felt excluded from existing political formations.³³ The struggle between left and right is therefore expressible in neat class terms. Again, the pervasiveness of this narrative has the effect of obscuring the participation of workers in

³¹ For an up-to-date historiography on the subject, see Matthew Roberts, ‘Popular Conservatism in Britain, 1832-1914’, *Parliamentary History* 26 (2007), pp. 387–410.

³² Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jon Lawrence, ‘Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914’, *The English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 629–652.

³³ The most recent example of this view is Goodliffe, *The Resurgence of the Radical Right*, pp. 138-195.

right-wing movements. In reality, interwar right-wing groups were heterogeneous. They sought to represent men and women from a broad range of social and occupational backgrounds. To present oneself as a genuine mass party, it was essential to recruit from France's six-million strong workforce. The recruitment of workers also had tactical merits. It weakened the parties of the left and blunted the possibility of a Communist insurgency. The 'conquest' of working-class areas made excellent propaganda material. It is therefore erroneous and misleading to generalise the support of right-wing movements from its largest support base. In doing so, we only learn but a fraction of the movement's history.

Two recent works have suggested that the tide is slowly changing. Xavier Vigna's volume on the French working class during the twentieth century contains the welcome acknowledgement that many workers were attracted to the 'siren calls' of the right, and he includes the PPF, SPF and social Catholic movements as part of his analysis of the interwar period.³⁴ These movements are also present in Yves Lequin's contribution to François Sirinelli's *Histoire des droites en France*.³⁵ Lequin synthesises the history of conservative workers from Napoleon III to the present day. He teases out some of the continuities that links the interwar years with the *fin de siècle* and post-war periods. For example, he suggests that the right was able to profit from the gradual growth of a consumer culture in France and the increasing value applied to social mobility and the acquisition of property. He also identifies important continuities in worker's attitudes to patriotism and immigration. However, Lequin concludes with the dilemma that hangs over the study of working-class conservatism : 'The conservative worker is, by nature, silent. History only listens to the noise emitted from the extremes.'³⁶

³⁴ Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), pp. 138-140.

³⁵ Yves Lequin, 'La classe ouvrière' in Jean-François Sirinelli, *Histoire des droites en France : Tome 3, Sensibilités* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), pp. 473-507.

³⁶ Yves Lequin, 'La classe ouvrière', p. 507.

The aim of this thesis is to get conservative workers to break their silence. It offers a new study of the relationship between workers and the organisations of the right in the 1930s. This thesis argues that during a period of left-wing ascendancy and growing labour activism, the right made the recruitment of workers a top priority. It examines the strategies used by the right to attract workers, and analyses how these strategies were framed within the wider ideological and spiritual goals of a movement. It shows the ways in which the right tried to win the hearts and minds of workers on the factory floor, appropriating the use of factory cells and trade unions for their own ideological ends. It also shows the ways in which the right harnessed elements of mass political culture and consumerism to mobilise workers, from sporting programs to social work.

However, in this thesis I maintain that the ideology of these groups did not simply reflect the interests of the workers that supported them. I argue that the interests of conservative workers were made up of a complex range of materials related to the specific experience, or experiences, of working-class life. In this thesis I show that social, professional, cultural, and religious factors could all inform a worker's decision to identify with the right. Tensions over immigration and the break down of traditional gender roles were important mobilisers for working-class conservatism. Patriotism, too, remained an appealing aspect of right-wing discourse that spoke of bonds of nation rather than class. Workers did not passively internalise the doctrine of the right. Catholic and right-wing groups were judged to be the best vehicle for one or many of these interests at a given moment in time.

I also situate the history of working-class conservatism within the wider context of the struggle between left and right during the interwar period. Membership of right-wing or Catholic groups often carried significant risk. Conservative workers could find themselves bullied in the workplace, confronted in local bars and cafés, or subjected to the notorious *conduite de grenoble* during strikes. This lived experience was an important way in which

conservative movements developed and political identities hardened. Conservative workers often felt like an embattled minority, so right-wing groups provided a sense of shelter and comradeship. Political identities were not formed based solely on a sober judgement of subjective interests, therefore, but they were also a product of the relationship of power between working-class groups. The CGT and the Communist party enjoyed a hegemony over lesser organisations in many workplaces, so belonging to an alternative was a subversive act. The use of terms like 'traitor' or 'heretic' bear this out. This study therefore eschews the traditional interpretation of the interwar period as a class war by showing how the conflict played out *within* a social class, and the ramifications this had for the construction of conservative identities.

This thesis contributes to our understanding of the French labour history in a number of ways. Firstly, this thesis shows that working-class conservatism was a significant counter-veiling force to the ascendancy of the left during the 1930s. It allows us to build a more nuanced and textured picture of the French working class during these hugely significant years. It also illuminates the ways in which the struggle between left and right was played out in a working-class arena. Secondly, this thesis offers a new interpretation of the ways in which we consider workers' interests. Rather than 'reading off' workers' interests from socio-economic data or the doctrine of the movement they supported, this study examines how interests were understood and articulated by workers themselves. It shows that workers recognised that they had a range of political and extra political options available to them, and they weighed up these options rationally. Thirdly, this thesis shows that working-class conservatism was not a temporary aberration from the natural development of the labour movement, nor a product of short term crises. I argue that working-class conservatism is something that has always been present in modern French history. Working-class conservatism manifested itself in different ways in different contexts, but there is a common thread connecting the themes that concerned workers. Working-class conservatism

in the 1930s was a link in a chain that runs from *fin-de-siècle* nationalism to the Front national in the present day.

This thesis is organised into a prologue and four chapters. In the prologue I place this thesis within the wider context of the relationship between workers and the right under the Third Republic. Chapter one explores the relationship between the working-class conservatism and the Catholic faith during the 1930s. Situating this relationship within the wider historical context of the association between the working class and the church, this chapter argues that Catholic organisations were able to mobilise conservative workers from a range of industries and regions. While faith was an important aspect of these groups' appeal, it was also able to mobilise workers around the issues of gender and family. I illustrate the ways in which this relationship developed in a number of specific regional contexts. Chapter two examines working-class participation in the Croix de feu/PSF. The Croix de feu/PSF went to great lengths to try and integrate workers into its nationalist project. This chapter shows that the Croix/PSF enjoyed a considerable degree of success. The movement's thoroughgoing use of social programs may have incentivised participation in the movement, but they also communicated a set of values and a vision for France that chimed with many workers. Chapter three is dedicated to Croix-de-feu/PSF's flagship working-class strategy, the SPF. I argue that SPF grew to become an important trade union that was able to compete with its rivals, the CGT and the CFTC. The SPF was able to harness the specific challenges presented by trade unionism in order to transmit the values of its parent party. It was also best placed to profit from the growing anticommunist sentiment in factories around France under the Popular Front. In chapter four, I turn my attention to the PPF. This chapter argues that there was at least some substance to the PPF's claims that it was a genuine workers' party. The chapter sheds light on the party's distinctive combination of gritty proletarian politics and high-minded nationalist ideals. I argue that while some workers may have been attracted to

the violent, confrontational methods that the PPF employed, it was the content of its doctrine that most drew conservative workers within its orbit.

Who were the French working class?

The category of class is a notoriously thorny subject. There is no consensus among scholars as to how we define the working class. Broadly speaking, the subject may be approached in two ways. Firstly, the working class can be defined objectively. For example, Marx defined the working class as those individuals who sell their labour power in exchange for wages. This broad definition would include not only manual labourers or blue-collar workers, but also middle managers, foremen, engineers, technicians, office workers, and numerous other vocations that provide no other source of income outside of wage labour. Scholars have since adjusted and refined the way we define the working class using objective measures. For example, we might define the working class as those whose income falls into a certain bracket.

A second approach is to treat the concept of class subjectively. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), E. P. Thompson considered how English workers came to identify *themselves* as belonging to a group with shared interests and experiences. To be 'working class', in this sense, was a matter of self identification.³⁷ Using the subjective approach, it is extremely difficult to pin down a singular definition of the working class. People understood what the working class was in very different ways. In this sense, one might even be better served referring to the working class in the plural.

In this thesis I refer to the 'working class' in both an objective and subjective sense. In the first sense, I try to use the generally accepted standards that contemporaries used to define the working class. This allows us to understand the types of people that movements

³⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New Ed. (London, Penguin, 1991).

were trying to attract when they referred to 'ouvriers' and 'la classe ouvrière'. Almost universally, this excluded working men and women that belong to the *cadre* class - a layer of professions that was sandwiched between manual labourers and the ownership of the firm.³⁸ This also excluded white-collar workers, who were termed *employés* rather than *ouvriers* and were viewed to have a distinct set of interests. For this reason, I do not focus on these categories in this thesis. I use the term 'working class' in a subjective sense, however, to analyse the ways in which workers perceived their own identity and their sense of class loyalty. I argue that an important issue that distinguished working-class conservatives from other workers was the way in which they perceived their social condition. Some conservative workers rejected the idea of belonging to a class, while others believed that conservatism did not undermine their class loyalties. For many conservative workers, moreover, other loyalties took precedence over class, such as loyalty to the nation, or loyalty to the church. This thesis therefore problematises the way in which class identities were formed and articulated in interwar France.

Sources

Research for this thesis is based on a variety of sources. I have consulted the official national publications of the main political and extra-political movements at length, namely *Le Flambeau* and *Le Petit Journal* for the Croix de feu/PSF, *L'Émancipation nationale* and *La Liberté* for the PPF, *SPF* for the SPF, and *Syndicalisme* for the CFTC. These newspapers have been used for information regarding these movements' working-class policies and the underlying ideas and assumptions that inspired them. I have also used them to assess the impact of these policies. This is not without risk. Official newspapers pose a number of

³⁸ See Luc Boltanski, *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

problems for the researcher. They tend to show working-class strategies in an extremely favourable light. They also exaggerate the impact of party policies in order to impress the reader. I have tried to use statistics from these newspapers judiciously and qualify them by cross-referencing with other sources.

In addition to national newspapers, I have consulted a large number of regional, local, and even factory-specific periodicals that were published by these movements. These were published with varying degrees of frequency and differ greatly in quality. The Catholic press published a number of high-quality regional newspapers. I researched several of these in order to get the Catholic view on important strikes, as well as for information on regional social initiatives. For the PSF, I consulted all sixteen editions of its working-class monthly, *L'Ouvrier libre*. I also consulted seventeen local newspapers for the PPF and eighteen for the SPF. Unfortunately, the Bibliothèque nationale de France does not have every edition of these periodicals in its holdings, so their chronology is patchy. Moreover, the frequency with which these periodicals appeared tended to wax and wane with the popularity and economic fortunes of a movement in a given area. Nonetheless, they offer a rare insight into the functioning of these movements at a local level. Finally, I also used the CGT's official periodical, *Le Peuple*.

I consulted police sources from the Archives nationales and Archives de la Prefecture de Police, both in Paris. The F7 series at the Archives nationales contains a number of detailed case reports on strikes, each composed of daily reports from local police commissioners. This series also holds reports on political meetings and violent incidents. I also consulted the BB18 series concerning criminal cases that had been referred to the courts. The Archives de la Prefecture de Police contains surveillance reports on the activity of the Croix de feu/PSF, PPF and SPF in the BA series. I used these various reports to analyse the participation of workers in the political activities of the far-right. I also used them to examine the experience of conservative workers during periods of labour unrest. Although certainly

useful, one must be cautious about the reliability of police documents. Members of the police were not without bias, and they often wrote what their superiors expected to hear. Also, some police reports simply regurgitated statistics and nuggets of information from the press. As long as one bears these limitations in mind, police reports can afford the researcher an important glimpse into activity of conservative workers.

In chapter four, I provide a statistical analysis of the SPF's Paris section, the Union fédérale de la région parisienne. These statistics were taken from prefecture records held at the Archives de la Prefecture de Police and Archives de Paris, which holds prefecture records for the former Seine department. Trade unions were required by law to deposit their statutes and membership records to the local prefecture. Unfortunately, these records are incomplete, leaving me with a sample size of 676. Moreover, they only tell us about the state of a trade union when it was first founded. Even with these limitations, these records are the best we have to date for the size and composition of the SPF. The Archives de Paris also contains a number of the SPF's internal papers in the W series.

In order to explore the provincial aspect of working-class conservatism, I used holdings at the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille, the Archives du Monde du Travail in Roubaix, and the Archives départementales du Rhône in Lyon. At the departmental archives, I primarily consulted local police reports belonging to the M series for information relating to political activity and labour unrest. At the Archives départementales du Nord, I also consulted the 68J series on the Tourcoing section of the Croix de feu/PSF. These papers afford an interesting regional perspective on the efforts that the movement took to mobilise workers in proletarian areas. At the Archives du Monde du Travail I consulted the 1996 series on the local textile industry. This series includes the personal papers of the local textile magnate Désiré Lay.

Finally, I used the private archives of Louis Marin (AP 317) and Colonel François de la Rocque (AP 451) to research the FR and the Croix de feu/PSF respectively.

Prologue

Workers and the right under the Third Republic

Engagement between workers and the right was not unique to the interwar years. The programs that right-wing groups devised during this period, and the ideas that underpinned them, belong to a long heritage. During the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, a number of tendencies within the right called for a greater consideration of the working poor. From as early as the restoration period, royalists loyal to the Bourbon succession denounced the corrosive effects of *laissez-faire* capitalism on the bonds that formerly held elites and the masses together. During the Canut revolts in Lyon in 1831 and 1834, royalists pamphleted the striking workers, asserting their solidarity with them and scolding the new liberal order.³⁹ Following the revolution of 1848, Napoleon III went to great lengths to bring workers over to the new regime. The Emperor embarked on tours of working-class areas and awarded the *légion d'honneur* to the most talented. Official journals addressed social questions and attacked the greed of the old aristocracy. In some areas the strategy appeared to pay off: voting patterns in textile and mining towns suggest that the Emperor was overwhelmingly supported.⁴⁰ Many workers expressed nostalgia for the glory of Napoleon III's uncle, while others celebrated the abolishment of strangling monopolies.

The '*question ouvrière*' became increasingly critical under the Third Republic. Between 1880 and 1900, the French working class underwent a fundamental transformation. Prior to 1880, most workers still lived in rural areas and retained the traditional social and

³⁹ Lequin, 'La Classe ouvrière', pp. 476-478.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 478-479, 487-489.

cultural practices associated with the peasant lifestyle. *Travail à domicile* remained the most common mode of production and those that did work in factories often worked on a seasonal basis and returned to the village during the harvest. This way of life began to break down in 1880 as men and women migrated permanently to urban areas to fulfil the labour demands of emerging industries. Urbanisation led to the construction of new working-class identities and a self-conscious 'proletariat'. In 1884 the Law of Associations legalised trade unionism and labour activism boomed. Bitter strikes, such as those at Fourmies in 1891 and Carmaux in 1892-95, garnered national attention. A long and bitter economic depression, which lasted from 1873 to the mid-1890s, sharpened criticism against the political and economic status quo. Socialist parties of various stripes grew in size and confidence and in 1905 united to form the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière (SFIO).

Faced with an infant Republican regime, unprecedented labour unrest, and an organised workers movement, certain forces on the right sought to counter this trend by drawing workers into their orbit. Monarchists and Bonapartists continued to campaign in working-class areas, albeit with limited returns.⁴¹ The main thrust came from the wellspring of nationalism. During the late 1880s, General Boulanger, a popular ex-war minister under Clemenceau, launched a movement that promised constitutional reform, revenge for the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, and the restoration of the monarchy. The startling success of the movement among workers frightened conservatives and socialists alike. Bolstered by the support of financiers, journalists, and other political groups, most notably the Ligue des patriotes, the Boulangists were able to launch a barrage of leaflets, articles, photographs, popular histories, and songs into working-class areas.⁴² Working-class support was generated in the faubourgs of Paris and Saint-Denis, among workers in the Nord mining basin, in the

⁴¹ Roger Magraw, 'Appropriating the Symbols of the *Patrie*? Jacobin Nationalism and Its Rivals in the French Third Republic', in Angel Smith and Stefan Berger (eds.), *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 107.

⁴² Patrick H. Hutton, 'Popular Boulangism and the Advent of Mass Politics in France, 1886-90', *Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (1976), p. 86.

textile factories of Roubaix-Tourcoing, and the metalworkers of Fourmies.⁴³ In 1888, the Boulangist candidates comfortably beat their Socialist opponents in Paris during legislative elections, an outcome German socialist August Babel blamed on 'le profond patriotisme de l'ouvrier français'.⁴⁴ Yet *revanchisme* was only part of the Boulangist's appeal. The Boulangists campaigned on the exploitation of the working poor by ruthless capitalists and the negative effects of industrialisation.⁴⁵ Attacks on foreign workers were a staple of Boulangist newspapers and they won the anti-immigration vote in the proletarian border towns of the Nord and Lorraine.⁴⁶

These themes were often framed and articulated using the language of antisemitism. Antisemitism at the turn of the century was used as a popular catch-all by the nationalist right - as well as many on the left - to explain the problems that most dissatisfied workers: poverty, exploitation, immigration, and military failure. The Ligue des patriotes was the most organised and popular of the antisemitic leagues. Buoyed by their alliance with the Boulangists, the league was prominent in the working-class quarters of Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles, and also claimed strong followings in the proletarian districts of Meurthe-et-Moselle, Aveyron, and la Nièvre.⁴⁷ Journalists and writers, most notably Rochefort, Édouard Drumont, and Ernst Granger, popularised and normalised antisemitism through columns in both the nationalist and socialist press. The outbreak of the Dreyfus affair in 1894, when a Jewish officer was wrongly convicted for handing military secrets to the Germans, only fanned the flames.

⁴³ Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire*, pp. 77-79.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ These themes won the Boulangists support from the left, most notably in the guise of the Blanquists, a socialist faction. Blanquist support doubtless gave the Boulangists an extra boost in working-class districts.

⁴⁶ Passmore, *The Right in France*, p. 69; Magraw, 'Appropriating the Symbols of the *Patrie*?', p. 109; David Gordon, *Liberalism and Social Reform* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 41-42.

⁴⁷ Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire*, p. 107.

It was during the Dreyfus affair that the Action française (AF) was formed. The AF quickly took over the mantle as the most important of the far-right leagues between 1900 and 1914. Like the Boulangists and the antisemitic leagues that preceded it, the AF charged itself with the task of overcoming the problems of industrialisation and drawing the working class into the nation. The AF argued, in a similar fashion to the *legitimists* before them, that liberal capitalism and republican democracy had destroyed the traditional social obligations such as poor relief and Catholic charity that tied the masses to elites. It openly engaged with autonomous worker organisations in order to forge an alliance against their common enemies - bourgeois politicians, greedy capitalists, foreign immigrants, the Jews. The AF pledged its support to striking workers, such as the Hennebont steel workers' strike of 1903 and the Paris electricians' strike of 1907.⁴⁸ The crucial figure bridging the AF and the labour movement was Georges Valois. A former revolutionary-sindicalist, Valois engineered close links with dissident syndicalist groups such as *Terre libre* and *L'Accord social*. He also founded several ephemeral bodies that experimented in bridging nationalism and syndicalism, most importantly the Cercle Proudhon and the Confédération de l'Intelligence et de la Production Française.⁴⁹ While working-class support for the AF and its satellite organisations was probably meagre, the ideas and programs that the AF experimented with before the First World War would carry over to the interwar leagues.

The success of the *syndicats jaunes* among workers was more tangible. The Jaunes were a federation of counter-revolutionary trade unions founded in 1901 by Paul Lenoir. Lenoir and his successor, Pierre Biétry, enjoyed close ties with Drumont, Rochefort, and Déroulède, and were even briefly supported by the AF. Lenoir and Biétry sought to build a counter-revolutionary trade union to rival the CGT, based upon the nationalist and antisemitic ideas that had developed during the previous two decades. The Jaunes grew

⁴⁸ Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire*.

⁴⁹ Weber, *Action Française*, pp. 205-207.

rapidly; by 1906, they had over 100,000 members spread across 204 individual unions and twenty regional federations.⁵⁰ The largest concentrations of members were found in the regions of Paris, Pas-de-Calais, and Longwy, but their coverage was truly national.⁵¹ During a period of acute labour unrest, the Jaunes were the only non-revolutionary trade unions of note, and this moderation no doubt contributed to their appeal to many workers.⁵² Yet this is to under appreciate the ideology of the movement. Its themes and leitmotifs were familiar. Rather than attacking bosses, the *jaunes* made straw men out of faceless capitalists, freemasons, foreigners, and Jews. Striking based on political pretexts was strictly forbidden, although the union did cooperate with the 'red' unions when their demands were purely material. It is significant that the Jaunes positioned themselves as an anti-Marxist movement, which marks a break from the more pragmatic stance of the *fin-de-siècle* nationalists. This would remain fundamental to the ideology of the far-right in the interwar years. The Jaune movement slowly fizzled out after 1909 as the CGT, newly remodelled at the congress of Amiens in 1906, began to assert its dominance over the working class.

It is impossible to draw a neat distinction between the nationalist/moderate right and the Catholic right during during the *fin-de-siècle* period. Ordinary Catholics as well as Catholic elites played an important role in Boulangism and the Action française. Catholic bosses were also crucial clients of the AD and the FR. The distinction was further broken down by the *ralliement*, a movement animated by Pope Leon XIII to get French Catholics to accept the Third Republic and its democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the church did make

⁵⁰ 781,000 workers were unionised around this time, meaning around one in eight unionised workers belong to a *syndicat jaune*. See Edward J. Arnold, 'Counter-revolutionary Themes and the Working Class in France of the Belle Époque: The Case of the Syndicats Jaunes, 1899-1912', *French History*, 13 (1999), p. 107, George L. Mosse, 'The French Right and the Working Classes: Les Jaunes', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7 (1972), pp. 201-202.

⁵¹ Arnold, 'Counter-revolutionary Themes', pp. 109-110.

⁵² During the 1900s, the French trade union movement did not have a moderate, reformist wing comparable to those in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States.

independent efforts to address the *question ouvrière*. These efforts would leave a lasting impression on the strategies of right-wing groups of every stripe, and certainly attracted more workers than those of moderate and nationalist movements (although the possibility for joint membership is an important caveat). The social problems caused by rapid industrial growth and urbanisation elicited a strong response from the papacy. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII published the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, a document that set the tone for the church's policy towards the working class for the next half a century. *Rerum Novarum* expressed the need for states and ordinary Catholics to alleviate the suffering of the working poor. While *Rerum Novarum* accepted the 'natural' law of private property and denounced socialism, the document supported the right of trade unions and criticised unrestrained capitalism. It called for states and bosses to enact extensive social reforms such as fair wages, more leisure time, and improved workplace conditions. These principles were restated forty years later in Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.

Catholic social action developed in a number of directions. Catholic Conservatives within parliament, most notably Count Albert de Mun and Count François-René de La Tour du Pin, sought to ally social action with an elitist conception of social organisation. De Mun and La Tour du Pin formed the Oeuvre des Cercles Catholiques d'Ouvriers in 1871, an association of small working-men's clubs where workers could rest, eat, read, and receive religious instruction, all under the guidance of their social betters. In 1878 they enjoyed 45,000 participants.⁵³ The *Rerum Novarum* meanwhile reinforced paternalistic forms of work organisation that were favoured by many Catholic employers. In opposition to the elitism of such modes of social action, the Christian Democracy movement experimented with strategies that handed greater autonomy to workers. The movement gave birth to a number of small democratic parties such as Léon Harmel's Démocratie chrétienne and Abbé Garnier's

⁵³ R.E.M. Irving, *Christian Democracy in France* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 32.

Union nationale. *Abbés-démocrates* such as Jules Lemire sought to end the dominance of traditional elites by bringing social action directly to the worker.⁵⁴

Two movements belonging to the Christian democratic fold would prove particularly important in shaping Catholic social action in the interwar years. The Association catholique de la jeunesse française (ACJF) was founded in 1886. Initially a conduit for middle-class charity, the ACJF gradually recruited more workers and organised them into independent sections. These sections held a similar function to De Mun's Cercles but, in appealing directly to a new generation of young workers, they were vastly more successful. In 1903 the ACJF was composed of 210 sections and 12,000 members; by the eve of the First World War, it had swelled to 140,000 members organised into over 3,000 sections.⁵⁵ The ACJF also founded a network of independent trade unions, cooperatives, gardens, housing associations, credit unions, and libraries. More radical than the ACJF was Le Sillon, a movement founded in 1894 by Marc Sangnier. Le Sillon was composed primarily of study groups or *instituts populaires* which sought to inculcate the values of democracy and christianity into workers. In 1904 it had 20,000 members, more than the ACJF. Le Sillon took the experiment with democracy further than other Catholic movements. It openly disapproved of hierarchy and by the mid-1900s began to engage with the socialist critique of capitalism. It was abruptly dissolved following a Papal condemnation in 1910. The Sillon movement provided an intriguing glimpse into the potential political power of mixing theology with democratic ideals, but also demonstrated the limits to which the Vatican was willing to tolerate this fusion. This dynamic was again played out in the interwar years.

The First World War had an important effect on the relationship between the right and the working class. Jean-Jacques Becker argues that war was a crucial moment in the

⁵⁴ Pierre Pierrard, *L'Eglise et Les Ouvriers En France : 1840-1940* (Paris: Hachette, 1984), pp. 367-369.

⁵⁵ Pierrard, *L'Eglise et Les Ouvriers*, p. 384.

integration of workers to the republican-conservative consensus, although the long term effects of this are open to question.⁵⁶ What can be stated with confidence is that the war kindled working-class patriotism. Political groups from the AF to the SFIO joined the Union Sacrée under the conservative president Raymond Poincaré. Despite the overtly pacifist stance of the labour movement, millions of male workers were conscripted to the armed forces with little fuss. The labour unrest that had struck the previous two decades was quickly terminated, and between August 1914 and late 1915 membership to the CGT declined by 80%.⁵⁷ The experience of the frontline would provide the right with a powerful new avatar for its vision of society - the veterans' mystique. The camaraderie of the trenches was contrasted with the self-interest and decadence of politicians and war profiteers. Wartime discourses synthesised patriotism with scientific and religious elements - the French cause was a battle for Catholic civilisation against an inferior race.⁵⁸ Moreover, the success of the state managed economy during wartime poured fuel on the corporatist ambitions of right-wing groups. Finally, the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the emergence of the Parti communiste français hardened the anti-marxism that had developed on the right before the war.

Following the war, the AF broke away from revolutionary syndicalism. Valois, the AF's driving force in labour affairs, split with the league and formed the Faisceau in 1925. The Faisceau combined Valois' pre-war interest in labour activism and corporatist organisation with a new militaristic aspect. It appealed to the veterans' mystique, wore military-style uniforms and used paramilitary formations known as *légions* to take part in street fighting. The Faisceau made a concerted effort to win worker support. It backed striking textile workers in the Nord despite risking a blatant conflict of interest with one of the league's

⁵⁶ Jean-Jacques Becker and Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La France, la nation et la guerre: 1850-1920* (Paris: PUF, 1995), p. 334.

⁵⁷ Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class: Volume 2, 1871-1939* (London: Blackwell, 1992), p. 140.

⁵⁸ Millington, *From Victory to Vichy*, pp. 13-15.

main backers, the textile magnate Eugène Mathon. Activists toured factories and bought workers drinks and cigars.⁵⁹ While it appeared to have some success among transportation and railway workers, few of the Faisceau's 20,000 members were proletarian.⁶⁰ The Jeunesses Patriotes (JP), a league founded by Pierre Taittinger in 1924, fared slightly better. The JP long outlived the Faisceau, which was dissolved in 1929, and in 1934 had around 90,000 members.⁶¹ While many ideological and discursive aspects of the two leagues were similar, the socioeconomic policy of the JP was more conservative, and its hatred of communism less equivocal. Taittinger believed that the worker longed for 'amelioration, not revolution' and therefore promoted policies that encouraged social mobility and the acquisition of private property. It also espoused the benefits of upper-class paternalism, praising new 'worker-cities' that appeared to appease the needs of workers through the provision of housing, churches, cinemas, and bars.⁶² The JP sold this conservative package to workers using the 'common language' of the people. Speeches and articles incorporated working-class slang in order to separate the JP from the more floral style of the political elite.⁶³ This form of 'popular' conservative discourse harked back to Boulangism and would be found again in the discourses of the Croix de feu and the PPF.

The rupture caused by the First World War was less evident in the strategies of social Catholics. While the clergy saw the war as a symptom of the gap that remained between the church and the working class, it endeavoured to build upon the solid foundation it had created before the war, in particular the ACJF. Social policy remained the order of the day. However, the papal condemnation of Le Sillon placed limits upon the use of

⁵⁹ Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave 1924-1933* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 123.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p. 112, 122.

⁶¹ Soucy, 'Centrist Fascism: The Jeunesses Patriotes', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16 (1981), p. 349.

⁶² *ibid*, p. 357.

⁶³ *ibid*, p. 358.

overtly egalitarian ideas. Thus social Catholic movements during the 1920s followed a broadly similar course, in which the primary task was to educate a Catholic elite within the working class to assume the responsibility of spreading the faith. The ACJF led the way by absorbing the French section of the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (JOC) in 1926. The JOC was founded two years earlier by Abbé Joseph Cardijn in Belgium. Seeking to break from the bourgeois charity that still drove much social Catholicism, the JOC was '*pour et par les ouvriers et les ouvrières*'. Its range of services was vast, from apprenticeships and work placement schemes to marriage and life counselling. Female workers were organised into a separate section, the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine (JOCF), and provided with their own courses in 'feminine' duties such as house management and child rearing. Despite inauspicious beginnings, the JOC took off in the early 1930s and became the principal rival of the Communist youth organisations, the Jeunesse communiste (JC).⁶⁴

The arrival of the JOC in France spearheaded a raft of other social initiatives that increased the church's presence in working-class districts. Church-sponsored programs known as *patros* multiplied exponentially. Most were not explicitly Catholic in orientation but relied heavily on the participation of priests and Catholic laymen. Such was the case of the Fédération gymnastique et sportive des patronages de France (FGSPF), which counted 300,000 members in 1924, and the Union nationale des colonies de vacances.⁶⁵ *Secrétariats sociaux*, local organisations geared towards social initiatives and run by priests, also multiplied and were integral to social Catholicism in Lille and Lyon. Finally, local parishes were extremely active in the scouting movement. In 1929, 25,000 children aged between 8 and 17 were members of the Scouts de France, mainly in the Paris basin and the industrial north. 'L'idéal scout', according to one activist, 'habitué le future ouvrier et le future chef au dévouement, il met en eux le germe de l'idéal social dont la France a besoin pour une élite

⁶⁴ Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 104-106.

⁶⁵ Pierrard, *L'Eglise et les Ouvriers*, pp. 518-520.

destinée à montrer au pays que le progrès n'est pas dans la lutte des classes mais dans le dévouement de tous à un devoir commun.⁶⁶ Scouting thus engendered ideals that were shared by the more conservative wing of the clergy.

The most important addition to the gamut of social Catholic movements during the 1920s was the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC). The CFTC marked a significant step forward from the church's experimentation in trade unionism before the war. Founded in 1919, the CFTC started out during a period of profound crisis for the labour movement. In 1920, a massive railway workers' strike was ruthlessly defeated by the government; numerous arrests were made and 20,000 *cheminots* were fired in the fallout. As a result, CGT membership fell from 1,232,000 to 540,000 between January 1920 and January 1921.⁶⁷ Stepping into this breach, the CFTC won 125,000 members in its first two years, originating principally from Paris, Lyon, Alsace, and the Nord.⁶⁸ Membership to the CFTC was initially open only to Catholic workers. Each prospective member had to be sponsored by two existing members in order to vouch for their faith. However, the purpose of the union was not restricted to the creation of a worker-elite capable of spreading the faith. The CFTC aimed to put into practice the ideas of social justice propagated in the *Rerum Novarum*. It called for fair wages, safer working conditions, and restricted working hours, and occasionally entered into strikes in order to achieve these aims, although such methods were always held as a last resort. It also campaigned for the use of state arbitration in labour disputes. These goals, it hoped, would raise the earning potential of male workers, remove the burden on women to work, and thus strengthen the family unit. More leisure time, meanwhile, would allow more time for prayer and reflection.

⁶⁶ Philippe Laneyrie, *Les Scouts de France : L'évolution du Mouvement des origines aux années 80* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), pp. 90-91.

⁶⁷ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du Front Populaire 1934-1939* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964).

⁶⁸ Launay, *La C.F.T.C.*, p. 64.

Nationally, the growth of the CFTC during the 1920s was sluggish. The union struggled from the general disenchantment in trade unionism that held back the CGT and the CGTU. The one exception was in the Nord. By 1929 the regional union for the Nord had 30,000 members, an independent Bourse du travail, a network of cooperatives and credit unions, and an influential newspaper, *Le Nord Social*. Moreover, the union formed close links with the Bishop of Lille, Achille Liénart, and the local *secrétariat social*. Emboldened by the support of the local Catholic hierarchy, the CFTC campaigned vigorously against the local textile consortium and in 1929 even organised a relief fund for striking Communists. This pragmatism with regards to labour activism would persevere into the 1930s on a much larger scale.

Chapter One

Working-class conservatism and the Catholic church

Catholicism is considered to have enjoyed something of a renaissance in interwar France.⁶⁹ The Catholic hierarchy finally came to terms with the ruptures that consumed a previous generation of Catholic leaders, from the foundation of the secular Third Republic in 1871 to the separation of church and state in 1905. Under the guidance of Pope Pius XI, the church turned its attention away from political matters and towards socially-minded goals. In France, clergymen created a dense network of lay and parish organisations that helped rescue the church from irrelevancy in public life. Clerical leaders of national standing such as the Archbishop of Paris, Jean Verdier, and the Bishop of Lille, Achille Liénart, embodied the new spirit of the church by supporting workers during bitter social conflicts in the late 1920s and 1930s. A group of young Catholic thinkers, led by Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*, reevaluated the relationship between spirituality, socialism, and liberal capitalism. Historians often refer to the period as the second *ralliement*, or second attempt to reconcile the church with the republican state.⁷⁰

However, the second *ralliement* only went so far. Many Catholics refused to conform to the new direction of the church and remained embroiled in old quarrels. The application of secular schooling to the repatriated territories of Alsace and Lorraine in 1926 raised considerable outrage. The old alliance between the Catholic church and the nationalist right resurfaced in new forms. The rank-and-file of the Fédération républicaine and Action française remained predominantly Catholic, despite the condemnation of the latter in 1926,

⁶⁹ This position is summarised best in Philip Nord, 'Catholic Culture in Interwar France', *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 21, 3 (2003), pp. 1-20.

⁷⁰ Harry W. Paul, *The Second Ralliement: The Rapprochement between Church and State in France in the 20th Century* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967).

while Catholics also flocked to the Croix de feu.⁷¹ Catholics of a nationalist persuasion became bogged down in public arguments with the social Catholic movement, deeply damaging church unity.⁷² It came as little surprise, therefore, when many French bishops and lay organisations pledged their support to Pétain's National Revolution in 1940 and actively supported the Vichy regime until the Allies turned the tide of the war in 1943.⁷³

If the second *ralliement* failed to completely cut the ties that bound the French church to the forces of reaction, the policy nevertheless left a deep impression on the lives of many workers during the interwar period. Catholic organisations had attempted to make an impact within the working class since the early 19th century, yet the moderate success of these groups was eclipsed by those founded in the 1920s. Fear of the 'dechristianisation' of French society, and the perceived links between dechristianisation and industrialisation, stimulated church leaders to focus their attention on working-class communities.⁷⁴ Further impetus for this decision was provided by the growth of the French Communist party, founded in 1920, which gradually colonised large blue-collar areas, including the important *banlieue* surrounding Paris.

In 1919 the first national Christian trade union was founded, the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC). The CFTC aimed to apply the social doctrines of the church to labour policy and break the CGT's monopoly over blue-collar workers. From modest beginnings, the CFTC rose to become France's second largest trade union - during the Popular Front, it boasted 750,000 members.⁷⁵ While the CFTC was formed to defend the

⁷¹ Irvine, *French Conservatism in Crisis*, p. 44, Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy*, p. 88.

⁷² René Rémond discusses some of these quarrels in Rémond, *Les catholiques dans la France des années trente* (Paris: Cana, 1979).

⁷³ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, 3rd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 148-153.

⁷⁴ The gaelicisation 'dechristianisation' will be used throughout this chapter to describe the process whereby groups of people stop practicing the Catholic faith, or lose their faith entirely.

⁷⁵ Launay, *La CFTC*, p. 302.

interests of the poor and alleviate their suffering, the young union condemned class struggle and promoted instead the use of worker-employer negotiations and, where necessary, state arbitration to resolve industrial conflicts. However, while strikes were strongly discouraged, especially as a covert tool for political action, they were not ruled out altogether. The CFTC acknowledged that the intransigence of powerful employers' associations might render more forceful action a necessity. Strikes could bring employers to the negotiating table or force the government to intervene. Indeed, such practices became increasingly regular as the Depression finally bit during the early 1930s.

The Church paid particular attention to young workers, judged most vulnerable to the temptations of atheistic socialism. In 1925 Abbé Guérin, a curate from the Parisian suburb of Clichy, founded the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (JOC). The *Jocist* movement, which soon grew to include rural and student interests, had around 200,000 members in 1938, making it the largest youth movement in France.⁷⁶ In 1935 the JOC spawned the Ligue ouvrière chrétienne (LOC), aimed at young working families. The Church's interest in the working class also extended to the very young; parish associations were elemental to the growth of the scouting and girl guides' movement, which by 1939 had 72,000 young members, or 2% of all children aged between eight and seventeen in France.⁷⁷ Finally, the interwar period marked the growth of the Fédération gymnastique et sportive des patronages de France (FGSPF), a Catholic sporting federation that allowed workers and other groups to participate in individual and team sports. Taken together, this network of lay and parish organisations comfortably rivalled their rivals on the Communist left.

Historians of France have long acknowledged the importance of Catholic groups to interwar labour history. We have excellent top-down histories of the main organisational

⁷⁶ Aline Coutrot, 'Youth Movements in France in the 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1970), p. 25.

⁷⁷ Laneyrie, *Les Scouts de France*, pp. 86-89.

players.⁷⁸ Historians of the CFTC have generally placed the trade union within the context of the shifting relationship between employers, workers, and the state.⁷⁹ More recent histories have placed Catholic groups within the broader context of post-war state reform, particularly in relation to the Mouvement républicain populaire (MRP), an important Christian democratic party under the Fourth Republic.⁸⁰ Some scholars have examined these groups from other vantage points, such as the history of youth movements, the religious life of immigrant workers, and the participation of women in French political life.⁸¹ Surprisingly few, however, have considered why interwar Catholic groups succeeded in winning over workers. Christine Bard and Susan Whitney have used the testimonies of Catholic militants in order to illustrate why they were drawn to the CFTC and the JOC respectively.⁸² However, these pieces are used anecdotally and are not considered within the wider political, social, and cultural context of interwar labour history. Moreover, Bard and Whitney focus on the testimonies of

⁷⁸ Corinne Bonafoux-Verrax, *À la droite de Dieu: La fédération nationale catholique 1924-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), Laneyrie, *Les Scouts de France*, Launay, *La C.F.T.C.*, Françoise Richou, *La Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (JOC). Genèse d'une jeunesse militante*, (Paris: Harmattan, 1997).

⁷⁹ John Bulaitis, "'Le Syndicat Libre Dans La Profession Organisée': Rural Social Catholicism During the Popular Front, 1936-38', *Modern & Contemporary France* 21 (2013), pp. 493–515, Launay, *La C.F.T.C.*, Launay, 'Le Syndicalisme chrétien dans un grand conflit du travail: Les syndicats libres du Nord affiliés à la C.F.T.C. et la grève du textile de la région de Roubaix-Tourcoing-Halluin en 1931', *Le Mouvement social* 73 (1970), pp. 39-78, Pierre Trimouille, 'Les syndicats chrétiens dans la métallurgie française de 1935 à 1939', *Le Mouvement social* 62 (1968), pp. 27-48.

⁸⁰ Jean-Claude Delbreil, *Centrisme et démocratie chrétienne en France: Le PDP des origines au MRP* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1990), Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 25-87.

⁸¹ For the participation of women in Catholic groups, see Christine Bard, 'L'apôtre sociale et l'ange du foyer : les femmes et la CFTC à travers Le Nord Social', *Le Mouvement social* 165, pp. 7-21 (1993), Joceline Chabot, 'Les syndicats féminins chrétiens et la formation militante de 1913 à 1936 : 'propagandistes idéales' et 'héroïne identitaire'', *Le Mouvement social* 165 (1993), pp. 23-43 and Chabot, "'De l'angélus de l'aube à l'angélus du soir": être militante à temps plein dans les syndicats féminins chrétiens en France durant l'entre-deux-guerres', *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 36, 72 (2003), pp. 407-423. For the participation of immigrants in Catholic groups, see Bruno Béthouart, 'La naissance du syndicalisme chrétien dans le Pas-de-Calais (1913-1939)', *Le Mouvement social* 174 (1996), pp. 75-95 and Ralph Schor, 'Le facteur religieux et l'intégration des étrangers en France, 1919-1939', *Vingtième siècle* 7 (1985), pp. 103-16. Finally, for the relationship between Catholic youth groups and the wider context of interwar youth movements, see Coutrot, 'Youth movements', Richou, 'Apprendre à combattre : L'engagement dans la Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne (1927-1987)', *Le Mouvement social* 168 (1994), pp. 51–73, and Whitney, *Mobilising Youth*.

⁸² Bard, *Paroles de militants : Témoignages de syndicalistes C.F.T.C./C.F.D.T. du Nord-Pas-de-Calais 1925-1985* (Lille: Association 1884-1984, 1990), Whitney, *Mobilising Youth*.

Catholic militants rather than the thousands of ordinary workers that made up the vast majority of the rank-and-file.

The relationship between religion, workers, and intermediate bodies such as the CFTC and the JOC, is elemental to our understanding of the political attitudes of workers during the 1930s, and forms the subject of this chapter. It aims to understand how religion informed the political identity of Christian workers, and more specifically how religious faith intersected with wider political, social, professional, and cultural considerations. While this chapter eschews the institutional approach that has informed most histories of working-class Catholicism, these institutions are indispensable to our understanding of how Catholic identities were formed and represented. The present chapter therefore analyses how ordinary workers understood Catholic organisations such as the CFTC and JOC and sought to harness them in order to further their interests. It achieves this by looking closely at important incidents that involved the CFTC and the JOC, such as strikes, festivals, and parades, in order to analyse the behaviour of its members. It also examines the network of social clubs and societies that tried to draw workers away from secular competitors. It is necessary to frame this analysis within the context of wider political developments, in particular the growth of the left. This chapter argues that the identity of Catholic workers was shaped and reinforced by everyday contact of the left, particularly the Communist party and the CGT.

Before we may proceed, it is necessary to address three important issues: two contextual and one conceptual. Firstly, it is necessary to situate the Catholic workers' movement of the 1930s within the wider context of the church's efforts to win over the working class since the 19th century. This subject is covered in the first section of this chapter. Secondly, we must address the historical problem of 'dechristianisation'. Historians of France have used this term to describe the steady decline of the Catholic faith in France. However, there is considerable disagreement over the extent to which France became

'dechristianised', and much of this controversy stems from the type of indicators we use to measure this trend. The second section of this chapter therefore tries to bring some clarity to the issue and provide a geographical overview as to where the Catholic faith remained strong during the period in question. Lastly, it is necessary to consider the relationship between Catholicism and conservatism. Catholicism has often been considered synonymous with political conservatism, yet the precise relationship between these vague and far-reaching terms is complicated and largely dependant on historical context. In the third section of this chapter, I consider the ways in which Catholicism and conservatism intersect, thus drawing Catholicism into the overarching theme of this thesis.

The primary research in this chapter is presented in the form of two principal case studies in the second half of this chapter. The first of these case studies concerns the intersection between politics and religion in the Nord. The Nord had been a bastion of working-class Catholicism since the rapid expansion of industry in the region during the mid-to late-nineteenth century. The growth of Catholic worker groups such as the CFTC and the JOC during the interwar years far outstripped the growth of these groups nationally, reflecting the religious zeal of many northern workers. The Nord was also a hotbed of labour activism. During the 1930s, northern industry was hit by a number of lengthy and bitter strikes. Religious groups found themselves at the heart of the struggle. In this section I examine how the crossovers and contradictions between politics and religion were played out during this period of conflict.

The second of these case studies concerns the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. This region was also a hotbed for working-class Catholicism during the 1930s, although for very different reasons to the Nord. In Alsace and Lorraine, religion was closely bound to region's strong regional identity. In matters of language and culture, Alsace and Lorraine was distinct from metropolitan France at large. The region was also a major economic centre, rivalling the Nord in terms of industrial concentration and urbanisation.

Religion overlapped with labour politics, regional autonomy, nationalism, and culture politics. This case study examines the relationship between politics and religion in an altogether different context to the Nord, and shows how religion was integral to a form of labour politics that resisted the advances of the French left.

The Catholic church and the 'question ouvrière' since the 19th century

The complex relationship between the Catholic church and the working class during the 1930s was the consequence of a long contingent history. It is impossible to isolate a single line that French Catholics took in response to the emergence of a working class since the early 19th century. As René Rémond reminds us, Catholic opinion splintered into a number of factions, and the effects of such irreconcilable divisions were still evident in the interwar period.⁸³ Nevertheless, it must be stated that the influence of these factions was far from equal. The Papacy remained the absolute authority in matters of social doctrine, a fact which severely compromised the reach of 'unorthodox' interpretations of the Church's social responsibilities. The potential for independent action was further curtailed by the reconciliation of church and state during the first half of the century. The Concordat of 1801 restored many of the ties between the Catholic Church and the French state that had been severed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790. The position of the church as a bastion of the conservative order was further strengthened by the fear of social disorder enlivened by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.⁸⁴ The impact of independent Catholic thinkers in matters concerning the working class was therefore limited until the publication of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.

⁸³ Rémond, 'Eglise et monde ouvrier en France', *Le Mouvement social* 57 (1966), pp. 3–14.

⁸⁴ Carl Strikwerda, 'Catholic Working-Class Movements in Western Europe', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 34 (1988), p. 77.

Prior to this point, the Catholic hierarchy showed a remarkable lack of interest in the plight of the growing industrial classes. Church doctrine remained rooted in the Tridentine tradition, which was contemptuous of issues concerning the material world and extremely pessimistic about Man's potential for improvement.⁸⁵ In the mid-nineteenth century, a revival of interest in scholasticism reaffirmed the reactionary outlook of the senior clergy. The highly centralised and hierarchical structure of the post-Napoleonic Church meant that lower clergy were forced to meekly follow the orders of their bishops. Moreover, very few priests were drawn from urban lower classes.⁸⁶ As a consequence of these developments, the Catholic Church was ignorant to the social problems caused by industrialisation and mass urban immigration. The Church was also contemptuous of socialism and autonomous labour organisations. In 1864 Pope Pius IX issued the Syllabus of Errors, which attacked numerous facets of 'modernity', from liberalism to communism. In many quarters, not the least the working class, the Church was seen as a bastion of the old aristocratic order and a hindrance to material progress.

Reacting to the obstinacy of the Church hierarchy, several independent Catholic thinkers strove to engage with difficult social questions and attempt to lift workers out of poverty and deprivation. The most influential of these early thinkers was Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais. A hardline *ultramontagne* under the Restoration, Lamennais emerged from the revolution of 1830 with radically different views concerning the Catholic church and its relationship with civic society. In his newspaper *L'Avenir*, he unceasingly championed the causes of universal suffrage, equal access to education, freedom of thought, assembly, and the press. Through such reforms, Lamennais believed that workers could take control of their own destiny and break from the morally corrupt old order.⁸⁷ While Lamennais' brand of

⁸⁵ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 199-207.

⁸⁶ Strikwerda, 'Catholic Working-Class Movements', p. 78.

⁸⁷ Irving, *Christian Democracy*, p. 28.

liberal Catholicism failed to translate into a bona fide worker movement, his ideas resonated in the Christian Democracy movement that emerged during the late 19th century.

Lamennais and his followers were condemned by Rome and regularly harassed by the state, turning Catholic liberalism into a clandestine movement. During the 1850s, the Catholic conservative Maurice Maignen founded a more moderate branch of social Catholicism that received the acquiescence of the Vatican. In 1855 Maignon created the *Congrégation des Frères de Saint Vincent de Paul*, an apostolate dedicated to the education and evangelisation of the working poor, superseded several years later by the *Cercle des jeunes ouvriers*, a network of social clubs where Catholic activists could fraternise with workers and address their material and moral grievances. Unlike Lamennais' ambition for sweeping social and political reforms, Maignen's vision for social Catholicism rested on the more traditional idea of Catholic instruction and moral guidance. Maignen was motivated in part by a fear of social insurrection and blamed the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 on the decline of Christian faith within the working class. Following another bloody insurrection, the Paris Commune of 1870, Maignen joined forces with two prominent Catholic thinkers, Albert de Mun and Count René de la Tour du Pin, to found the *Œuvre des cercles catholiques d'ouvriers*. The *Œuvre des cercles* expanded the number of Catholic workingmen's clubs markedly. By 1878 there were 375 clubs across France containing 45,000 members, some of which survived into the 1930s.⁸⁸

During the 1880s and 1890s, the religious and political climate in France became more favourable to independent Catholic thought. Following the defeat of the Moral Order government in 1877, the Third Republic became dominated by secular republicans who aimed to fulfil the separation of church and state. While the vast majority of Catholics were wholeheartedly opposed to the separation, Catholic thinkers were forced to consider the future of Catholic activism without privileged access to state support. The Church also had to

⁸⁸ Irving, *Christian Democracy*, p. 32.

come to terms with the belligerent labour movement and the rise of socialism, which now dominated working-class affairs. The extent of the problems facing the Church was well understood by Pope Leo XIII, who succeeded Pius IX in 1878. In 1891 Leo issued the *Rerum Novarum*, which laid out the church's position on a broad range of social questions. While rejecting the legitimacy of socialism, the document called for governments and employers to address workers' rights, promoting fair wages, reduced working hours, and safer working conditions. The document also affirmed the right for workers to form trade unions, which had been legal in France since 1884. *Rerum Novarum* was followed in 1892 by another encyclical, *Au milieu des sollicitudes*, which encouraged French Catholics to accept the Third Republic.

The policies of Leo XIII had a transformative effect on Catholic attitudes towards the working class. Firstly, *Rerum Novarum* legitimised the efforts of social Catholics to prioritise the needs of the working class and inspired many Catholics to join their cause. Social Catholic groups, which hitherto had been limited to the efforts of the Œuvre des cercles, multiplied. The largest and most influential of these was the Association catholique de la jeunesse française (ACJF). Founded by de Mun, the ACJF provided Catholic instruction and assistance to young workers and draw them away from the socialist left. In two decades the ACJF grew at a remarkable pace, claiming 3,000 groups and 140,000 members on the eve of the First World War.⁸⁹ Secondly, Catholics began to experiment with trade unionism. Christian unions took the form of *syndicats mixtes*, which grouped together workers, middle managers and bosses within the same institution in the name of class collaboration. Nonetheless, some bosses were threatened by the new unions and petitioned vehemently against their existence, notably the Association catholique des patrons du Nord, a powerful northern textile consortium. Thirdly, Catholics were forced to reconsider the relationship between religious interests and republican democracy. Those in favour of conciliation, known as

⁸⁹ Pierrard, *L'Eglise et Les Ouvriers*, p. 384.

ralliés, sought to harness democracy in order to further the cause of social justice for workers in Parliament. In 1901 de Mun and the prominent Catholic liberal Jacques Piou founded Action libérale populaire, France's first Catholic centre party.

Despite the renewed impetus given to the social Catholic movement in the 1890s, French Catholics remained deeply divided over social questions. Conservative Catholics, marginalised since the fall of the Moral Order government, fought tooth and nail against the separation of church and state and rejected the legitimacy of the *ralliement*. For these Catholics, the extension of sweeping rights to workers threatened the basis of social order.⁹⁰ Other Catholics felt that De Mun's brand of social Catholicism did not go far enough. The Christian Democracy movement criticised the ACJF for its elitism and cautious moderation. Like Lamennais before them, Christian Democrats aimed to equip workers with the tools for their own emancipation from poverty and indignity. Much of the drive behind the Christian Democracy movement came from the lower reaches of the church. Self-styled *abbés démocrates* such as Jules-Auguste Lemire, Théodore Garnier and Paul Naudet championed the cause of the working class against local bosses within their own parishes. The most active of these early Christian Democracy groups, Le Sillon, was founded on study groups where workers could discuss increasingly radical ideas through the prism of Catholic spirituality. Le Sillon boasted 20,000 members in 1904, but the political leanings of its leader, Marc Sangnier, were considered too close to socialism and it was condemned by the Vatican in 1910.⁹¹

French Catholicism emerged from the First World War as divided as ever. Nonetheless, during the interwar period, Catholic groups from across the political spectrum began to harness new advances in mass political culture in order to expand the grass roots of their support, particularly within the working class. The conservative right continued to

⁹⁰ Passmore, *The Right in France*, pp. 90-95.

⁹¹ Irving, *Christian democracy*, p. 44.

pursue its quarrels with laïc republicans over the separation of church and state. In 1924, the Fédération nationale catholique (FNC) was founded by a distinguished general, Édouard de Castelnau, following the application of secular education laws to the repatriated territories of Alsace and Lorraine. The FNC was a mass pressure group, espousing a faith-based nationalism that generated considerable popular support. In 1926 the organisation claimed 1,832,000 members, including some workers in the Nord and Aveyron departments.⁹² However, the FNC steered clear of social questions and treated social Catholic groups with contempt.⁹³

The spirit of pre-war social Catholicism continued under the name Action catholique, an umbrella term grouping together numerous social Catholic groups, led by the ACJF. Action catholique embodied the socially-orientated goals of the new Pope, Pius XI. Pius wanted the Catholic church to return to the spirit of the *Rerum Novarum*, issuing a new encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, in 1931 to mark the fortieth anniversary of Leo XIII's landmark document. Pius also distanced the church from the nationalist wing of French Catholicism: Action française was condemned by the Vatican in 1926, while the FNC was frequently chastised for its thinly-disguised associations with the far right.⁹⁴

With the unequivocal support of the Vatican, Action catholique groups flourished. Leading the vanguard was the Jeunesse ouvrière catholique (JOC), founded in 1925. Challenging the elitist model of bourgeois assistance pursued by the prewar Catholic youth movement, the JOC encouraged young workers to become self reliant and think for themselves, a position encapsulated by the slogan 'Entre eux, Par eux, Pour eux'. Activists were also urged to participate the Christian trade union movement. In 1919, France's

⁹² James McMillan, 'Catholicism in Britain and France since 1789', in Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett (eds.), *The Right in France: From Revolution to Le Pen* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), p. 155, Bonafoux-Verrax, *À la droite de Dieu*, pp. 29-30, 54, 65.

⁹³ See, for example, the quarrel between the FNC and the ACJF over Briandist foreign policy. Rémond, *Les catholiques*, pp. 39-71.

⁹⁴ McMillan, 'Catholicism in Britain and France', pp. 161-162.

disparate Christian unions united to form the Confédération française des travailleurs catholique (CFTC). From modest beginnings, the CFTC rose to become a genuine national alternative to the CGT and the CGTU. The Vatican reaffirmed its commitment to social goals by backing the new union during a number of strikes, most notable the bitter textile strike of 1928-29 in the northern town of Halluin. Finally, the Action libérale populaire became the Parti démocrate populaire (PDP). Although the PDP was a marginal presence in electoral politics, earning twenty-one deputies at its peak in 1926, its influence was felt more keenly in regional affairs, particularly in the Catholic strongholds of Brittany and Alsace.⁹⁵

A number of small Catholic movements continued to operate to the left of Action catholique during the interwar period, but their influence among workers was negligible. Catholic non-conformist thinkers were drawn to the philosophy of personalism, popularised by Emmanuel Mounier in the journal *Esprit*. Among other things, personalism sought to resolve the contradictions between Catholic spirituality and Socialist materialism. Its influence was evident in Marc Sangnier's Ligue de la jeune république and the Jeunesse chrétienne socialiste, both of which joined the Popular Front movement during the mid-1930s. These groups reacted most favourably to the 'outstretched hand' of the Communist leader, Maurice Thorez, as he attempted to put aside age-old quarrels between socialists and Catholics in the name of national unity.⁹⁶ While the ideas propagated by the Catholic non-conformists deeply troubled the church hierarchy, these groups remained on the fringe of the social Catholic movement and were eclipsed by those groups sanctioned by the Vatican.

During the 1930s, then, the Vatican endorsed a moderate, socially-active policy that sought to marginalise the belligerent nationalism of the Catholic right and the radical

⁹⁵ Anderson, *Conservative Politics*, pp. 213-215.

⁹⁶ James Steel, "'La Main Tendue', the French Communist Party and the Catholic Church, 1935-37", in *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Martin S. Alexander and Helen Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 93-103.

egalitarianism of the Catholic left. The success of this policy among workers is evident in the steady growth of Action catholique groups, which suggests that, at least to some degree, the French church was able to disassociate itself from the conservative and nationalist right. However, as we have discussed, Catholicism remained integral to the political identity of the right, and many Catholics, including senior members of the clergy, continued to pledge their support to nationalist parties and leagues. Radical Catholics also remained a small but influential presence to the left of Action catholique. The participation of the latter in the Popular Front movement undermined, to a certain degree, Action catholique, which remained aloof and pragmatic.

To what extent, then, did the Church succeed in reversing the perceived 'dechristianisation' of the French working class during the interwar period? What do contemporaries and historians mean when they refer to dechristianisation? And to what extent did this perceived trend conform to reality?

The growth of industrial society and the limits of dechristianisation

One of the main problems that stimulated French Catholics to participate in social action was the perceived decline of the Christian faith among urban workers. The decline of faith was considered to be inversely related to the growth of industrialisation. Contemporary thinkers advanced numerous theories to explain this causal relationship. Catholic reformers in the late 19th century believed that industrial labour kills the soul.⁹⁷ It was later suggested that the very nature of mechanised labour fundamentally altered man's perception of his place within the universal order. While peasants relied on elements that were out of their

⁹⁷ Yves-Marie Hilaire, 'Les Ouvriers de la région du Nord devant l'Eglise Catholique (XIXe et XXe siècles)', *Le Mouvement social*, 57 (1966), p. 190.

control, such as clement weather, to enjoy a productive harvest, workers understood and controlled the labour process without needing the blessings of a higher power.⁹⁸

However, the notion that industrialisation leads to the continuous and irreversible decline of faith has been taken for granted by contemporaries and historians alike. As Gérard Cholvy argues, historians have been guilty of a number of fallacies. Firstly, have tended to caricature working-class attitudes to religion from the model of the Parisian metalworker, a hardline Communist with complete disdain for spirituality.⁹⁹ In reality, the French working class was extremely heterogeneous. Those workers who may be described as ‘uncompromising atheists’ were almost certainly in the minority. Secondly, theology was not as fundamental to the politics of the socialist left in France as it was in other countries. Historians have bought into the teleological narrative of the labour movement, which predicts the decline and eventual disappearance of religion, rather than exploring the hard facts.¹⁰⁰

It was only in the 1930s, in fact, that academics began to rigorously gather data in order to measure the decline of faith in France. Leading the way was the sociologist Gabriel Le Bras and his journal, the *Revue d’histoire de l’Eglise de France*, dedicated to the study of religious sociology. Le Bras and his disciples painstakingly mined data from local parish records concerning the participation of workers in Sunday mass, Easter mass, child baptisms, church weddings and funerals, the celebration of Saint’s days, and numerous other religious practices. As the quality of data improved, it became clear that the causal relationship between industrialisation and religious practice was more complicated than contemporaries believed. Certain regions with a high concentration of industry, such as the Nord and the eastern territories of Alsace and Lorraine, proved to be more resistant to dechristianisation.

⁹⁸ Gibson, *A Social History*, p. 218.

⁹⁹ Yves-Marie Hilaire and Gérard Cholvy, *Histoire Religieuse de La France Contemporaine, Tome III: 1930-1988* (Toulouse: Bibliothèque histoire Privat, 1988), pp. 173-175.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

In addition to this, there existed islets of working-class Catholicism in regions where the political tradition was overwhelmingly secular and republican, such as the industrial town of Saint-Chamond in the Loire department. New studies proved that rates of religious practice depended on a number of historical contingencies. The impact of industrialisation upon religious practice varied from place to place. Some working-class communities were able to sustain an active Catholic faith and resist the pressures of secularism and atheism.

The most exhaustive historical study of religious practice in France to date has been undertaken by Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire.¹⁰¹ Cholvy and Hilaire's work relies upon the methods pioneered by Le Bras; as such, they do not take into account recent developments in the field of religious sociology, such as the study of subjective expressions of faith.¹⁰² Nevertheless, their findings still provide us with the most comprehensive picture of the state of popular Catholicism during the 1930s. The authors distinguish between three levels of religious practice, and categorise sections of French territory accordingly.¹⁰³

The first are classed as 'zones pratiquantes'.¹⁰⁴ In these areas, regular church attendance remained high across social and gender divides. Catholicism was strongly tied to regional identity and the church remained a highly visible part of social and cultural life. A disproportionate number of clergymen also originated from these regions. Belonging to this category during the 1930s was the Armorican massif, composed principally of Brittany and parts of lower Normandy, the region of the south-west sandwiched between Bordeaux and the Pyrenees mountains, including the French Basque, and the repatriated territories of

¹⁰¹ Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire religieuse, Tome III*.

¹⁰² Studies of subjective faith suggest that the boundaries between secularism and religion are extremely blurred. See Colin Roberts, 'Secularisation and the (re)formation of French Catholic identity', in *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. by Kay Chadwick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 244–59.

¹⁰³ Yves-Marie Hilaire, 'La sociologie religieuse du catholicisme français au vingtième siècle', in Chadwick (ed.), *Catholicism, Politics and Society*, pp. 244–59.

¹⁰⁴ Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire religieuse, Tome III*, pp. 176-178, 184-185, 197-198.

Alsace and Lorraine in the north east. Brittany and Alsace-Lorraine were important breeding grounds for early social Catholic initiatives such as credit unions, mutual societies, and mixed trade unions. In Alsace, religious identities were bound up with class identities. After the reunification, the German-speaking working class remained deeply attached to the Catholic church, while the Francophone bourgeoisie, who favoured closer integration with French state, were drawn to Protestantism.¹⁰⁵ Workers in the growing urban centres of Brittany, however, displayed a growing disinterest in church service during the interwar period, in stark contrast to the region as a whole.¹⁰⁶

Regions with lower rates of religious participation are classed as 'zones à traditions chrétiennes'.¹⁰⁷ Considered part of this category is the broad expanse of territory extending from the Mediterranean coastline northwards to the regions of Centre and Burgundy, encompassing the important Lyonnais industrial basin. The region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais is also belongs to this category; the region forms part of a belt of territory extending into Belgian Flanders and Western Germany that has historically remained actively Catholic despite becoming highly industrialised.¹⁰⁸ In these regions, participation in 'core' Catholic rituals such as Sunday mass remained reasonably high (between 15-45%) but other rituals have declined or become obsolete. Hilaire and Cholvy also note that while female participation in church activity remains fairly constant, there is a marked decline in male church attendance.¹⁰⁹ Active religious participation was in slow decline, therefore, but Catholic practices were still important to social life.

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Huston Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine: Fascisms in Interwar Alsace* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ David Bensoussan, *Combats Pour Une Bretagne Catholique et Rurale: Les Droites Bretonnes Dans L'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), pp. 489-491.

¹⁰⁷ Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire religieuse, Tome III*, pp. 178-184, 193-197, 199-208.

¹⁰⁸ Hilaire, 'Les Ouvriers de la région du Nord', pp. 181-201, Strikwerda, 'Catholic Working-Class Movements', pp. 70-85.

¹⁰⁹ Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire religieuse, Tome III*, pp. 178-184, 193-197, 199-208.

Finally, Hilaire and Cholvy single out those regions that may be genuinely classified as 'déchristianisées' - that is, where religious practice has become virtually obsolete.¹¹⁰ In these areas, attendance to Sunday mass did not rise above 15% during the 1930s and civil ceremonies become increasingly favoured over religious services. The most important dechristianised zone was the Paris basin, where church attendance fell well below 10%. The Catholic church had failed to keep up with the sheer pace of urban migration during the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. As the population of the region boomed, the clergy failed to construct new churches to meet the demands of the migrant population. Moreover, only one new parish was created in Paris before 1914.¹¹¹ Unsurprisingly, Paris and its surrounding suburbs became the primary destination for Christian missions during the interwar period; the JOC opened its first centre in the northwestern suburb of Clichy in 1925. Fresh impetus was also provided by Jean Verdier, the socially conscious Archbishop of Paris in 1929, who was elected in 1929 and served until the outbreak of the war. Religious practice was also chronically weak in the nearby regions of Berry, Limousin, and Champagne.

Evidently, while religious practice continued to decline in France during the 1930s, this process was by no means uniform. Alsace and Lorraine, now reintegrated into French territory, was a bastion of working-class Catholicism, while religious practice remained high in Brittany and the south-west. While regular religious practice was in decline in other areas of the country, particularly among adult males, Christian rituals remained an important part of the social and cultural life of much of the country. In this sense, Paris, along with several other central regions, was something of an exception. Regular religious practice had practically bottomed out by the 1930s, and the church had proven inept at stemming the tide. Nonetheless, the French capital remained the organisational centre of the social

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, pp. 188-197.

¹¹¹ Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914*, p. 218.

Catholic movement, and the banlieue of the city was made the primary target of Christian missionaries.

Religion and conservatism

Religion is often considered to be one of the defining characteristics of conservatism. In his classic study of generic conservatism, Russell Kirk defines religion and spirituality as one of the six canons of conservatism; conservatives not only believe in a divinity and the teachings of the bible, but they also view religion as the basis of justice and fundamental to social cohesion.¹¹² Historians of France have singled out religion as one of the principal sources of division that separated right from left since the Enlightenment.¹¹³ Yet for the purposes of this study, the simplistic equation of conservatism with religion (and, conversely, socialism with secularism/atheism) does not suffice. The relationship between religion and politics was extremely complex. French Catholics during the interwar period understood their political and social obligations differently, leading to the creation of a plethora of Catholic movements with differing, and often conflicting, goals. By commonly-held standards, only a large fraction of French Catholics belonged to the 'classically' conservative right; the FNC, for example, which nurtured close links with the FR and the AF. Some even joined the Croix de feu, whose idealised vision of French society was founded on Catholic precepts.¹¹⁴ Other Catholic groups, such as the PDP and the CFTC, might be considered to have occupied the political centre, in a similar manner to the Deutsche Zentrumspartei in Germany. Fringe movements like Jeune république even openly pledged

¹¹² Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), pp. 7-8.

¹¹³ For the most up-to-date study of French conservatism and its links with religion, see Passmore, *The Right in France*.

¹¹⁴ Jean-Louis Clément, 'L'épiscopat, les démocrates-chrétiens et les Croix-de-feu, 1930-1936', *Revue historique*, 603 (1997), pp. 103-13.

their allegiance to the political left. The gamut of Catholic groups during the interwar years reflected the sheer variety of political opinions among ordinary French Catholics. Simply coupling together religion and conservatism is therefore misleading and ultimately erroneous.

One way to move beyond this is to consider the implicit conservatism of Catholic doctrine and the commonalities it shares with the goals of the right. The moral authority of the bible and the Papacy certainly placed constraints on independent thought. Catholics from the centre to the far-right therefore shared common ground over certain important issues. For example, Catholic organisations all actively supported the view that the patriarchal family must act as the foundation of social organisation. They also believed in the preservation of traditional gender roles and were generally opposed to the use of female labour. With the exception of fringe socialist groups, few Catholics questioned the moral legitimacy of social hierarchies or property rights. Peaceful cooperation was advocated between employers and workers and class conflict was strongly discouraged. Yet the case for Catholicism's implicit conservatism can be taken too far. French Catholics tested the interpretative boundaries of official church doctrine according to their own political biases. There was also ample scope for disagreement. Catholics remained spilt over the relative importance of 'social' and 'civic' duties. The church could offer less guidance over areas of political policy such as foreign affairs, an issue which proved to be particularly divisive.¹¹⁵

Most importantly, ordinary Catholics understood their faith in highly subjective ways. Religion certainly informed a worker's view on political, social and cultural issues, but it did not *determine* this view. Nor did it guarantee that a worker would support a confessional party or join a Christian trade union.¹¹⁶ Instead, we must understand the link between Catholicism and conservatism within the realm of lived experience. Religious activity was

¹¹⁵ Rémond, *Les catholiques*, pp. 39-71.

¹¹⁶ The CGT claimed to represent more Catholics than the CFTC. See Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire Religieuse, III*, pp. 173-175.

often *perceived* to be conservative in relation to the norms and values that governed working-class life in France. This process was driven by left-wing parties, trade unions, and press organs, who set out to discredit the ideology of their Christian opponents.¹¹⁷ Catholic conservatism was not simply a product of Christian doctrine, therefore, but was also an *identity* that became hardened by daily contact with supporters of the left. Recent studies suggest that Catholic workers were on the whole more radical than activists running Catholic worker organisations such as the CFTC, and part of the activist's role involved managing the expectations of their grass roots support. However, within the specific context of the working-class community, the perception that Catholic workers were compromising working-class solidarity and throwing their lot in with their bosses held sway. The idea of Catholic conservatism as a socially-constructed term will form the basis of this chapter.

Catholic workers, immigration and the Depression: The Nord-Pas-de-Calais

The region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais was a bastion of working-class Catholicism in 1930s France. The region was one of country's most heavily industrialised regions, with thriving industries in textiles, metallurgy and mining. The area belonged to a belt of territory, encompassing Belgian Flanders and the west bank of Rhine, which also remained devoutly Catholic, in spite of rapid industrialisation during the 19th century. The vitality of the Catholic faith in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais was nourished by the arrival of immigrant workers from Eastern Europe. Large Polish communities developed in the mining towns of Pas-de-Calais, such as Noeux, Marles and Courrières. Following the signing of a Franco-Polish convention in 1919, Polish workers were permitted to organise their own parish societies with native

¹¹⁷ This point is made by Laurent Kestel in Kestel, *La Conversion Politique : Doriot, Le PPF et La Question Du Fascisme Français* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d'agir, 2012), pp. 139-162. It does not necessarily follow that workers internalised the left's definition of other organisations, but examples show that many of workers shared their hostility.

priests, religious schools, choirs, and fraternities.¹¹⁸ As a borderland, the region also played host to a transient community of Catholic Belgian workers, most of whom worked in the textile towns belonging to the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing conurbation.

It is no coincidence that the Nord-Pas-de-Calais became a hot bed for the social Catholic movement during the early twentieth century. In 1919, the region already boasted several regional divisions of the influential Christian employees' union, the *Syndicat libre des employés*. Following the foundation of the CFTC, Catholic trade unionism boomed among blue-collar workers too. The Nord gave birth to the powerful Christian miners union, the *Syndicat libre des mineurs*, and the largest and most active section of the CFTC's metallurgical union, the *Fédération de la métallurgie*.¹¹⁹ The CFTC also successfully unionised northern textile workers, who were split into gender-specific unions on account of the large female labour force. Northern union leaders such as Jules Catoire and Charlemagne Broutin became national figureheads for Christian trade unionism.

This case study focuses on the first of these strikes. While labour relations were often volatile in the French textile industry, the Roubaix-Tourcoing-Halluin strike of 1931 was exceptionally bitter and divisive. The strike lasted two months and resulted in 120,000 workers downing their tools. The French textile industry had been one of the first to be hit by the global depression. By 1931, sixty percent of Nord textiles were sold to foreign markets, rendering the industry highly sensitive to any slumps in global demand.¹²⁰ As production fell, various cost-cutting measures were employed, at first through the removal of overtime and the use of partial unemployment, and then, as the crisis deepened, through a general wage cut. Cut backs could be justified by the fact that the cost of living in the Nord had fallen

¹¹⁸ Béthouart, 'La naissance du syndicalisme chrétien', p. 78.

¹¹⁹ Launay, *La CFTC*, p. 303.

¹²⁰ Launay, 'Le Syndicalisme chrétien dans un grand conflit du travail: Les syndicats libres du Nord affiliés à la C.F.T.C. et la grève du textile de la région de Roubaix-Tourcoing-Halluin en 1931', *Le Mouvement social* 73 (1970), p. 41.

slightly over the past year. The powerful textile consortium, led by Désiré Ley, reasoned that workers would have to sacrifice their material gains in order to share in the burden of the slump.

The strike was initiated by the CGT and the CGTU. Soon after, the CFTC and a cluster of small independent unions joined the movement. Negotiations between union officials and the Consortium dragged for eight long weeks. The catalyst for the eventual agreement, reached on 6 July, was the arbitration of Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Pierre Laval, who acted after pressure from the CFTC. Subsequently, historians have treated the strike as a victory for the Christian union and a demonstration of the value of conciliation over abrasive class conflict.¹²¹ Yet, for the workers embroiled in the conflict, it was an event fraught with hunger and violence. The magnitude of the conflict, its long duration, and the large volume of press and police sources dedicated to it, all allow the historian to make a closer reading of the conflict and tease out some of the divisions that separated workers in the region. It becomes clear that conflicting attitudes to race, gender, and religion threatened to break class loyalties and resulted in workers rejecting the politics of the left. The left was therefore just one of many strategies that workers could choose to represent their interests.

The first source of division for French workers during the Roubaix-Tourcoing-Halluin strike was the matter of nation. The gap of material well-being between Belgian and French workers had always been a source of tension. 30,000 of the 90,000 workers employed by the Consortium were Belgian in origin, but Belgian workers were subject to Belgian law and were represented by their own trade unions.¹²² Belgian commuters benefited from the cheaper cost of living across the border and could draw from a national emergency fund in times of crisis.¹²³ The material incentive for Belgian workers to strike was therefore significantly less

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Gérard Funffrock, *Les grèves ouvrières dans le Nord (1919-1935)* (Roubaix: Edires, 1998), pp. 141-142.

¹²³ AN F7 13920, 'Commissaire spécial de Lille à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale', 20 May 1931.

than for French workers, and the Belgian trade unions duly signed a unilateral contract with Consortium to apply wage cuts to Belgian workers. The news of this agreement hit the French press on 22 May.

The news aggravated the relationship between French and Belgian workers and the conflict quickly took on a nationalistic dimension. Violent altercations between French and Belgian workers occurred almost immediately and the Franco-Belgian frontier effectively became the front-line of the conflict. As Belgian workers began to trickle through border control, workers launched stones, bricks and bottles at the cortege of vans.¹²⁴ Violence also took the form of looting. Vans transporting balls of linen across the border were raided and their contents spilled out onto the street. Incidents between Belgian and French workers were not limited to this zone, however. On 31 May, a Belgian worker was thrown into the water as he rode past a group of French strikers across in Wattrelos, four kilometres from the border.¹²⁵ The class dimensions of the conflict were therefore transformed into a conflict over nationality. Anxieties over the outcome of the conflict meant that class concerns became projected onto the image of the Belgian worker. The two became intimately connected. In a letter to Désiré Ley, one striker threatened that the Belgian issue could lead to 'more strikes, civil war, and even revolution.'¹²⁶

The conflict between Belgian and French workers led to a crisis of representation in the left-wing press. Attempting to uphold the common front between Belgian and French workers against the Consortium, the Communist and Socialist press elected to downplay the significance of national differences. For *L'Humanité*, the conflict between French and Belgium workers was the consequence of several 'agents of treason' acting 'in the name of the most

¹²⁴ AN F7 13920, 'Commissaire spécial de Lille à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale', 24 May, 31 May 1931, *L'Echo de Paris*, 13 June 1931.

¹²⁵ AN F7 13920, 'Commissaire spécial de Lille à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale', 28 May 1931, *La Croix*, 31 May 1931.

¹²⁶ ANMT 1996 110/480, 'Letter from 'Rose Bleu' to M. Desire Ley', 19 April 1931.

vile chauvinism.¹²⁷ Yet this line ran counter to the reality of the conflict, and the Communists' desperate pleas of unity are symptomatic of the divide that national differences caused. The right sought to profit from the crisis. The right-wing press drew upon national anxieties and emphasised the 'foreignness' of Communist doctrine. Communist agents, normally of Polish, Hungarian or Romanian origin, were admonished for purposefully prolonging the conflict and disrupting any chance of a peaceful outcome. After a bitter night of conflict between strikers and *gardes mobiles* on 12 June, *L'Écho de Paris* blamed the violence on 'undesirable foreigners' that inhabited Roubaix without correct paperwork.¹²⁸ One, in particular, was singled out for comment, 'a grotesque giant' who saw off ten guards before 'his skull became acquainted with the pavement.'¹²⁹ For some workers, the right better reflected the social realities of the conflict than the abstract concerns of class on the left.

The Roubaix-Tourcoing-Halluin strike of 1931 also exposed conflicting attitudes over gender among the working class. The Nord textile industries was one of the first in France to employ female workers *en masse*. The light, dextrous work of spinning was seen by industrialists as the kind of low-skilled job that women were capable of performing and represented a logical extension of their domestic duties.¹³⁰ Yet for others, the employment of women was a contentious issue. The CGT and the CGTU were open to female membership in the interwar years but their late-night congregations of male workers in the smoke-filled backrooms of café-bars were alien and unwelcoming to female members. The CFTC was far more proactive in their recruitment of female workers. It organised female-only sections in the Nord and permitted a significant degree of autonomy, even permitting female

¹²⁷ *L'Humanité*, 7 June 1931.

¹²⁸ *L'Écho de Paris*, 15 June 1931.

¹²⁹ *L'Écho de Paris*, 13 June 1931.

¹³⁰ Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*.

representatives to participate in collective bargaining. Sensitive and spiritual, women were perceived to be the ideal conduit for the clerical principles of the CFTC. This in no doubt confirmed the prejudices of many politically-minded men that female emancipation would only strengthen the forces of the right.

Clearly the three dominant unions in the Nord took positions on the women question that were oppositional but also contradictory. The CGT claimed that the spoils of reformist syndicalism would meet the needs of female workers as well as male, while the CGTU maintained that true universal equality was impossible without gender equality. However, neither of the unions on the left offered female militants any latitude to achieve these goals through their own efforts. By comparison, the CFTC made no effort to disguise the fact that it considered the interests of male and female labour as fundamentally different. Female labour was an unfortunate consequence of free-market capitalism, but given that this system was not going to disappear, the role of the CFTC was to ensure that women remained committed to their duty as good mothers, good wives and good Christians. To this end, women were given an autonomous, if subordinate role in the union's activities. Some, such as Madeleine Tribolati, were even able to use their experiences in the CFTC as a platform to successful careers in the upper reaches of the post-war Christian syndicalist movement.¹³¹

The strikers of Roubaix-Tourcoing made no distinction between male and female workers in their demands. Even when talks entered their consolatory phase via the intervention of Laval, concessions were negotiated on a universal basis. Accordingly, male and female workers of every syndicalist creed downed tools together and formed what was, at face value at least, a united front against the consortium. Men and women were described demonstrating together along the Rue de Lille and fraternising on the door steps of their houses. Indeed, this image of sexual differences being buried in the name of class solidarity

¹³¹ Chabot, 'Les syndicats féminins', p. 31

was shared by every union because it broadly served the purpose of the strike. However, certain incidents suggest that this image of solidarity cannot be taken for granted. These incidents do not address the woman question explicitly, but are illustrative of the types of gendered assumptions that impregnated political discourses amongst the working class. They also demonstrate how popular discourses could broadly relate to the aims of the political organisations of the left and the right, but also belong to the language and symbolism of the workers and thus display a degree of popular agency.

The first concerns the degenerating effects that participation in labour conflicts has on female workers. There is a great emphasis in the conservative and Catholic press on the role that women played in the most animated aspects of the strike. Such women are described losing their Catholic morality and decency as they give in to the barbarous instincts of the striking hordes. Dressed in the shabby overalls and using the salacious language of their male co-workers, these women are also losing their femininity along with their faith. One such woman is described in *La Croix* launching a foul-mouthed tirade at the central police commissioner, M. Lenfant, whilst carrying a new-born baby in her arms.¹³² The incident serves to underscore three of the key degenerative effects that the right believed were caused by female participation in labour struggles: the rejection of authority, the neglect of parental responsibility, and the corrupting effect it had on common standards of feminine decency.

The right believed that these effects were an inevitable outcome of the growing participation of women in the male-dominated world of the factory floor. Nonetheless, the Communists are viewed as key agents in this process. For the right, communism was guilty of taking the idea of sexual equality to its logical extreme, recruiting female workers into the culture of violence and immorality that it harboured. Right-wing publications frequently emphasised the links between communism and female militancy. On 11 July, *L'Écho de Paris*

¹³² *La Croix*, 7 June 1931.

reported that two Communist militants, Madeleine Desloover and Zoe Dimanche, were arrested for attacking another female worker after she expressed an interest in returning to work. The young victim stated that Communists were preventing her from exercising her right to work.¹³³ The incident aptly demonstrates that Communism was viewed as the vital agent in the corruption of working women. It also has other interesting implications. First, it suggests that some female workers were repelled by communism due to the interests of their own political economy, and actively resisted the bullying of its militants. Second, it also illustrates the fact that female politics was not a reflection of the inherently reactionary nature of women but rather a reasoned awareness of their political rights and their illegal violation by communism.

This widespread fear of the degenerating influence of Communism on the working woman was sometimes supplemented with a more mocking discourse in which the traditional roles of men and women were employed as a device to denigrate the male militants. On one such occasion, towards the end of July, *La Croix* recalls a meeting between twenty communists to discuss the future of the strike action: 'In imposing numbers, the wives [of the Communists] went to the meeting room and demanded with vehemence that their husbands return home...which they did immediately. As for the main speaker, he wasn't able to slip away so easily: several of the more robust women had taken their most sturdy brooms along with them and threatened to attack him.'¹³⁴ The piece confirms the observation made earlier that the hard politics of communism was the preserve of its male members, while female members were confined to individual and spontaneous acts. It is also telling that this feminine encroachment on a typically masculine scene is taken by the right to be a sign of the 'softness' of its militants. The use of brooms, representing the merging of political and domestic spheres, completes the evocative image.

¹³³ *L'Écho de Paris*, 11 July 1931.

¹³⁴ *La Croix*, 25 July 1931.

Catholicism, regional identity and language: Alsace-Lorraine

The socio-economic profile of Alsace and Lorraine was similar in some ways to that of the Nord. The eastern territories, only repatriated after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, had the highest concentration of industry outside of Paris. Like the Nord, Alsace and Lorraine contained a dynamic textile industry and an advanced, highly-mechanised metallurgical sector. The rich natural resources within the region also led to the growth of a prosperous mining sector. The region was an important borderland. The eastern border of Alsace is shared by Germany and a small stretch of Switzerland, while the northern border of Lorraine touches Germany as well as Belgium and Luxembourg. As such, Alsace played host to a large population of immigrant workers, with Germans and Poles in the majority, followed by Italians, Hungarians, and Czechs. Immigrants were vital to the growth of mining and textile industries during the 19th and early 20th century, although their presence began to decline as Depression set in around the early 1930s.¹³⁵ Moreover, Catholicism had deep historical roots in the region. The Church nurtured strong ties with the lower classes, and connection between faith and class identity, not to mention regional identity, was arguably more intimate in Alsace and Lorraine than anywhere else in France. Around three quarters of the population were practicing Catholics, the majority of whom were workers.¹³⁶

In spite of these similarities, working-class conservatism took on a markedly different character in Alsace and Lorraine to the Nord and other regions with a strong Catholic tradition. There were a number of historical contingencies unique to the region that determined this. Firstly, religion was more socially differentiated in Alsace and Lorraine than elsewhere in the country. The Catholic church did not enjoy the same ties with the political

¹³⁵ For example, Noiriél estimates that 75% of immigrants in the mining industry were sent home during the early 1930s. Noiriél, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme*, p. 366.

¹³⁶ Hilaire and Cholvy, *Histoire Religieuse, Tome III*, pp. 184-185.

and industrial elite as it did in the country at large; local elites most often belonged to the Protestant faith and were represented by their own church, the *Église protestante réformée d'Alsace et de Lorraine*. The vitality of the Catholic faith therefore came from the lower classes. The Catholic church also came to fill a more important political role in Alsace and Lorraine than in the country at large. Following the annexation of the provinces by Germany in 1870, the clergy filled the considerable political vacuum left by the emigration of old French elites. Resisting the onset of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, the *Deutsche Zentrumspartei* became the largest party in the regional *landtag*. The reunification of the lost territories in 1919 led to new political formations, but they remained regional and closely tied to the Church. In Lorraine, the *Union républicaine lorraine* (ULP) took over from the *Zentrumspartei* as the region's main political power, completely dominating the working-class vote. The UPL's sister party, the *Union populaire républicaine* (UPR), enjoyed similar dominance in Alsace. The sheer strength of the Catholic right meant that the left struggled to get any foothold among the regions' workers. Unionism, too, stayed chronically weak.

The third factor which nourished working-class conservatism in Alsace and Lorraine was the strength of regional identity. For centuries, Alsace and the northern half of Lorraine, now the Moselle department, had developed a highly particularist regional culture that was more Germanic in character than French. The vast majority of citizens used German as their first language and spoke one of a patchwork of German dialects, the most dominant being Alsatian in Alsace and Platt in Moselle. The persistent tug-of-war between France and Germany, which saw these regions change nationalities on numerous occasions, only hardened regional sentiment and stimulated the growth of autonomist movements. Regionalism intersected with class and religious issues. Regional elites were generally more in favour of integration with the French state. Elites filled up the ranks of the regional bureaucracy and took on French as their main language. Workers and peasants, meanwhile, tended to resent the encroachment of the French state into Alsace and Lorraine and

protested against the centralising tendencies of the Republic. This was evident in the outpouring of indignation against the Herriot laws of 1924, which extended secular education to the repatriated territories. In Strasbourg 50,000 Alsatians protested against the laws and twenty-one Alsatian deputies signed a letter demanding that the statutes be removed.¹³⁷ Regionalism was therefore a highly charged issue that added an additional dimension to the political discussion. The stance of the national and regional parties was complex. Radicals and Socialists favoured increased centralisation, while the UPR and the UPL were less committal, aware as they were of the autonomist sympathies of the rank and file. Autonomism split the Communist party in two. A number of radical leagues were formed in the 1920s and 30s with competing loyalties, ranging from French nationalism (AF, PSF) to pro-German separatism (Kommunistische Partei Deutschland, Baurenbund).

How, then, did this complex interaction between religion and regionalism impact the ordinary life of workers during the 1930s? How did these factors influence attitudes to other important issues, including race and gender? And how did Catholic workers react to the steady encroachment of the left, in particular the French Communist party, into the world of work? Despite the considerable scholarly interest in Alsace and Lorraine, few historians have considered these questions. Samuel Goodfellow's important study of the right in Alsace considers the participation of workers in far-right leagues, which he concludes to be minimal, but skirts over the most important right-wing party, the UPR.¹³⁸ In a recent article on the Moselle, Louisa Zanoun argues that 'linguistic and cultural [barriers] prevented the penetration of the concepts of class homogeneity and consciousness; two concepts necessary for the development of the Communist doctrine.'¹³⁹ While Zanoun's premise is highly speculative - resting on the assumption that class homogeneity and consciousness are

¹³⁷ Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, p. 24.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Louisa Zanoun, 'Language, Regional Identity and the Failure of the Left in the Moselle Département, 1871-1936', *European History Quarterly* 41 (2011), p. 247.

Communist concepts rather than sociological forces - the author also fails to describe the nature of the Mosellan working class in the first place, leaving one to infer that it was individualist and lacking in class consciousness. David Allen Harvey has shown that Alsatian workers internalised the moralising lessons of Catholic and industrial leaders concerning gender roles, but analyses gender identity in isolation from other important issues.¹⁴⁰

This section shows how religion, regionalism, gender, and race all interacted in the construction of working-class conservatism in Alsace and Lorraine. It achieves this by looking at another important moment of labour unrest, when tensions over such issues came into the foreground. On 1 August 1933, in the Alsatian capital of Strasbourg, a massive general strike was ordered by the CGT and the CGTU in response to the intransigence of local construction firms, who refused to cave in to the wage demands of local construction workers. A large proportion of Strasbourg's carpenters, masons, and manual labourers had been on strike since 18 June. By 6 July, 1,831 of the city's 3,830 construction workers had downed tools.¹⁴¹ Bosses, represented by the Syndicat des entrepreneurs du bâtiment et des travaux publics d'Alsace-Lorraine, refused to budge on the blanket hourly pay rise of fifty centimes put forward by the unions.¹⁴²

The day of August 1, which coincided with a 'journée internationale de lutte' in Alsace, was chosen as the perfect opportunity to expand the strike. At 9am, 15,000 workers gathered at the Place de la Bourse to express their solidarity with the striking workers.¹⁴³ The following four days were marked by considerable unrest between strikers and local police. The most violent exchanges took place around the Place du Corbeau on 3 and 4 August, near

¹⁴⁰ David Allen Harvey, 'Mothers and Breadwinners: Gender and Working Class Identity in Alsace, 1821-1936', *Left History* 7, 2 (2000), pp. 7-27.

¹⁴¹ AN F7 13857, 'Rapport du préfet du département du Bas-Rhin à M. le Ministre de l'intérieur', 6 July 1933.

¹⁴² AN F7 13857 'Note confidentielle du commissaire spécial de la gare de Strasbourg au directeur de la Sûreté générale.' 24 June 1933.

¹⁴³ *Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg*, 2 August 1933.

by to the Strasbourg's labour exchange. A regional illustrated newspaper, *Dernières nouvelles illustrées*, published an exposé on the violence containing graphic pictures of workers fighting with gendarmes.¹⁴⁴ The city's electricity and gas workers, metal workers, and, crucially, railway workers at the Bischheim firm, all joined the strike, expanding the number of those on strike to around 10,000. The strike also gradually spread to the rest of Alsace and the Moselle. Construction workers were reported to be on strike in Mulhouse, Colmar, and Thann in the Haut-Rhin department.¹⁴⁵ By the end of August, agitation had spread to the Mosellan capital of Metz.¹⁴⁶

The Christian unions cautiously offered their support to the strikers. Christian unions in Alsace and Lorraine held a degree of autonomy from the CFTC due to the unique development that social Catholicism had taken in the region. The regional federation, the Fédération des Syndicats Indépendants (FSI), was not integrated to the CFTC, although it maintained close ties with the national body.¹⁴⁷ The Alsatian deputy Henri Meck acted as an important go between. Meck was a veteran of the CFTC's mining federation and began his political career as a member of the URP before running on a PDP ticket. Meck became the leading voice for both Christian unionism and Alsatian politics within parliament, and was therefore best placed to address labour issues in the region. Indeed, Meck was the first to telegram the minister of labour, François Albert, to request that the government intervene in favour of the strikers.¹⁴⁸ On 2 August, a representative for the FSI, M. Klock, joined the strike committee alongside the CGT and CGTU.

¹⁴⁴ *Dernières nouvelles illustrées*, 10 August 1933.

¹⁴⁵ AN F7 13857, 'Rapport sur la greve à Mulhouse et environs', 8 August 1933, 'Le Commissaire de Police à M. le Sous-Préfet de Thann', 17 August 1933, 'Note sur la greve à Colmar', 24 August 1933.

¹⁴⁶ AN F7 13857, 'A/S de l'agitation dans la corporation des ouvriers du bâtiment de Metz', 31 August 1933.

¹⁴⁷ Launay, *La CFTC*, p. 304.

¹⁴⁸ AN F7 13857, 'Note du directeur du Travail au 4^e bureau du ministère du Travail', 2 August 1933.

The intervention of Meck, alongside the Communist Mayor of Strasbourg, Georges Weill, drew the government into the conflict. On 9 August, the Président du Conseil, Edouard Daladier, received the general secretary of the CGT, Léon Jouhaux, to discuss the urgent situation.¹⁴⁹ The following day negotiations were opened by Albert in Strasbourg, with Klock elected to represent the FSI. In the cities under strike, tensions remained high. Rumours began to circulate that Communist agents were being sent from Paris in order to provoke further agitation. Conservative daily *Le Matin* reported:

‘Il est manifeste que les agitateurs communistes ont entraîné les syndicats chrétiens vers une situation sans issue. Les violentes bagarres de ce matin ont montré que les meneurs sont décidés à recourir aux pires moyens. C’est miraculé que, devant la soudaineté de l’attaque, la force publique ait put résister...Beaucoup d’étrangers ont quitté précipitamment la ville. Par contre, on voit des Allemands se promener dans Strasbourg avec le sourire.’¹⁵⁰

However, the Communists were dealt a blow in 10 August when it was announced that railway employees were to return to work. *L’Humanité* denounced the ‘treason’ of the railway workers’ union which tore apart the *grève de solidarité*.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, negotiations between bosses and the unions bore little fruit. The construction workers’ strike endured for another three weeks. It was only on 29 August, at a meeting of six hundred workers at the Salle de la République, that the finally unions agreed to end the strike.¹⁵² In a statement, the strike committee expressed that:

¹⁴⁹ *Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg*, 9 August 1933.

¹⁵⁰ *Le Matin*, 4 August 1933.

¹⁵¹ *L’Humanité*, 11 August 1933.

¹⁵² *Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg*, 30 August 1933.

‘Les entrepreneurs, favorisés par ces circonstances et spécialement par le manque d’énergie dont ont fait preuve les autorités gouvernementales et départementales, n’ont remporté qu’une victoire à la Pyrrhus.

Malgré toutes les déceptions, le prolétariat du bâtiment reprendra le travail, la tête haute, conscient d’avoir mené un combat qui occupera toujours une place d’honneur dans les annales de l’action syndicale de la ville de Strasbourg.

Avec le même ensemble que dans cette dernière lutte, les ouvriers du bâtiment, tout d’abord renforceront leurs rangs, développeront leurs organisations pour formuler avec force nouvelle et faire triompher leurs justes revendications, les ouvriers du bâtiment ont préféré reprendre le travail que d’accepter les honteuses propositions des entrepreneurs.’¹⁵³

Similar statements were released by local committees in Colmar and Metz in the days that followed.¹⁵⁴

The outcome of the strike was regrettable for the FSI, who supported the workers from an early stage and played an important role in negotiations. The outcome was also a blow to the principle of state arbitration that Christian trade unionism advocated. The intransigence of the construction firms ultimately proved decisive. Yet the solidarity of the striking workers and the working population at large was undermined by the fractious relationship between Catholic and Communist workers at the base. During the ten bitter weeks of the strike, Catholic workers came to express their resentment at the conduct of the CGTU. Their criticisms epitomised some of the anxieties of the local working population concerning the relationship between Alsace-Lorraine and greater France, and the intrusion of secularism into a overwhelmingly Catholic society. The daily experience of the strike,

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ AN F7 13857, ‘A/S de l’agitation dans la corporation des ouvriers du bâtiment de Metz’, 31 August 1933, ‘Rapport du direction de la sureté générale à la commissaire spécial de Colmar’, 31 August 1933.

with its violent incidents and intimidation of non-striking workers, only exasperated these divisions.

Catholic workers initially gave their support to the construction workers' strike because it remained on a strictly professional plane. Their confidence quickly began to waver. The violent events that marked the nights of 3 and 4 August were particularly important for this shift. On 3 August, strikers launched bricks, stones, and paving slabs at the police. The violence got worse during the evening. Five officers were badly wounded. One was stabbed in the back with a knife, while another was wrestled to the floor and kicked repeatedly in the head.¹⁵⁵ Rumours began to spread that Communist agitators were being sent from Paris to provoke the violence against authorities. Police informed the minister of the interior that 'certains indices semblent indiquer que les manifestants sont renforcés par des éléments suspects, venus de l'extérieur.'¹⁵⁶ The following day another report stated that 'la grève se poursuit et on a l'impression que la CGT est débordée et que la direction des opérations est de plus en plus entre les mains des communistes qui cherchent par tous les moyens à étendre le mouvement'.¹⁵⁷

Police managed to take control of the violence that hit central Strasbourg by 5 August. However, anticommunist sentiments continued to grow among workers in Alsace and Lorraine as Communist patrols were sent out to non-striking construction yards. In Thann, the local police commissaire reported that 'extrémistes notoriaires' were driving vans of Communists into local construction yards and forcing workers to abandon work immediately.¹⁵⁸ In the Haut-Rhin department, a patrol of thirty Communist workers parked

¹⁵⁵ AN F7 13935, 'Rapport du Contrôleur General Mallet sur les incidents survenus à Strasbourg dans la nuit du 3 au 4 Août 1933', 5 August 1933.

¹⁵⁶ AN F7 13935 'Communication téléphonique du contrôleur général de Strasbourg au Cabinet du ministre de l'Intérieur, Paris', 3 August 1933.

¹⁵⁷ AN F7 13935, 'Préfet du Bas-Rhin au direction de la Sûreté générale' 5 August 1933.

¹⁵⁸ AN F7 13935, 'Le Commissaire de Police à M. le Sous-Préfet de Thann', 17 August 1933.

several vans across the important commuter road connecting Mulhouse and Cernay. Non-striking workers, commuting to Cernay for work, were stopped by the patrol. Those workers that were able to break the blockage were stoned by the Communists.¹⁵⁹ Nine workers were wounded. At a meeting of the Syndicat unitaire de bâtiment on 9 August, the CFTC were booed by the 130 Communist workers present for attempting to steer the strike away from violence and towards peaceful means of conciliation. At a meeting of the strike committee on 10 August, Klock was censored by the Communists for raising his voice against Communist violence.¹⁶⁰ However, the CFTC's position appeared to reflect the mood of the population. According to a police source on 30 August, 'ce sont les syndicats chrétiens qui... auront réussi à la faveur de la grève à augmenter le plus sensiblement leur influence parmi les ouvriers de Strasbourg.'¹⁶¹

Anticommunism was closely linked to anti-German sentiments, which were rife among workers in the region. The memory of the privations caused by the German military occupation of 1914-18 was still fresh in the minds to many Alsations who had lived during these years. The rise of the Nazi party across the border only intensified suspicion and fear. Rumours quickly spread that Nazi agitators had infiltrated the movement. *Le Quotidien* reported that 'au cours des bagarres cinq hitlériens, porteurs de matraques, ont été arrêtés. On apprend qu'au cours des bagarres d'hier soir (3/4 August) une soixantaine d'arrestations ont été opérées. Parmi les personnes arrêtées se trouvaient cinq Allemands qui tous, étaient munis des insignes hitlériens et porteurs de revolvers, de matraques, de gourdins ou d'autres armes prohibées.'¹⁶² The Nazis was rumoured to be in league with the French Communists. 'Une remarque s'impose tout de suite, comment ce manifeste a-t-il pu

¹⁵⁹ AN F7 13935, 'Note sur la greve à Colmar', 24 August 1933.

¹⁶⁰ AN F7 13935, 'Le commissaire divisionnaire au préfet du Bas-rhin', 10 August 1933.

¹⁶¹ AN F7 13957, 'Untitled police report', 30 August 1933.

¹⁶² *Le Quotidien*, 5 August 1933.

être approuvé par le parti communiste allemand ?' reported the *Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg* on 12 August. 'Celui-ci n'existe plus. Hitler l'a écrasé et la plupart de ses membres sont passés aux formations nationales-socialistes.'¹⁶³ While cooperation between German Nazis and French Communists was inconceivable, the fact that such rumours that spread among the workers in Alsace and Lorraine is a testament to the depth of hostility for both organisations.

We can also see how anticommunism intersected with regional identity through the question of language. Although the Communists campaigned for regional autonomism, local workers saw the Communists as another example of French politicians interfering in regional affairs. Communist agents were criticised for being unable to speak the language of the local people, German. Amid the violence episodes of 3 August, Parisian Communists made several attempts at speaking the regional tongue, before resorting back to French. Police on the scene claimed that this drew ire and indignation from the gathering crowds.¹⁶⁴ Workers took advantage of the fact that Communist agitators could be distinguished from the striking masses because of their poor command of German. At another strike meeting on 28 August, several workers rose up in protest against a French-speaking delegate from the CGTU. A local delegate had to come to the defence of his Parisian colleague in German in order to quell the discontent.¹⁶⁵ Resentment was also expressed at the funds that were being sent to Communist strikers from Paris, which were significantly higher to those available to Christian workers.

Sentiment against French communists and immigrants workers did not die down after the strike. They remained an important source of division in the region. We can

¹⁶³ *Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg*, 12 August 1933.

¹⁶⁴ AN F7 13935, 'Rapport du Contrôleur General Mallet sur les incidents survenus à Strasbourg dans la nuit du 3 au 4 Août 1933', 5 August 1933.

¹⁶⁵ AN F7 13857, 'Le préfet du Haut-Rhin au Ministre de l'Intérieur', 28 August 1933.

see how these tensions reappeared during another notable moment of labour agitation, this time in the small textile town of Senones, in southern Lorraine. Inhabitants of Senones were particularly sensitive to the prospect of war. On 24 September 1938 the government ordered a partial mobilisation of troops in the region in response to Germany's annexation of Austria. Since then, French workers in the region had lived in deep suspicion of the foreign workers required to operate the textile mills. These xenophobic sentiments rose to the surface during the last week of September as reservists began to depart the town's train station. Italian and Polish workers were alleged to have congregated around the station and launched 'salacious gestures' at the reporting troops and their families. According to police testimonies, Italian workers passed a bottle of champagne around and gave a rousing rendition of *La Bandiera rossa*, a Communist song.¹⁶⁶ In the days that followed, French workers sought their revenge on the factory floor. On 3 October, a French worker cornered a young Pole and warned, fist raised to his face, that 'je ne veux pas d'étrangers ici, tu peux rester jusqu'à midi, mais demain, je te casserai la gueule'¹⁶⁷

On 10 October 1938, four hundred workers from several textile factories in southern Lorraine went on strike. At the Bousac factory in the small town of Senones, workers listed their grievances in a letter to the Minister of Labour, Charles Pomaret:

'Lorsque ces jours derniers, un grand nombre des nôtres sont partis appelés par la mobilisation partielle, les étrangers (italiens et polonais) travaillaient à la même usine que nous, nous ont regardé partir avec un sourire ironique et des propos dans le genre de celui-ci... avec l'occasion de prendre les bonnes places à l'usine'...etc.'

¹⁶⁶ AN F7 14778, 'Rapport du commissaire de police mobile, M. Vinot', 10 October 1938.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

'Dès notre retour dans nos foyers et à notre travail, nous nous sommes opposés à la rentrée à l'usine, de tous ces étrangers. Il y a, en effet, dans le pays, de nombreux chômeurs français qui ne demanderaient pas mieux que de trouver un emploi.'

'Or, aujourd'hui même, les usines ayant ouvert leurs portes à ces indésirables, nous avons protesté et il nous a été répondu, par la Direction, qu'elle ne faisait aucune différence entre les ouvriers français et étrangers. Nous avons aussitôt abandonné le travail, nous promettant de le reprendre dès que les ouvriers étrangers auraient été renvoyés.'

'Vous comprendrez, M. le Ministre, qu'après avoir abandonné nos foyers pour aller combattre les Italiens et des Polonais, alliés de l'Allemagne, il nous soit dur de voir ces gens venir manger notre pain et par dessus le marché, se moquer de nous.'

'Nous sollicitants donc, de votre haute bienveillance, M. le Ministre, une intervention à notre faveur, ordonnant le renvoi des usines, de tous les étrangers, nos amis de la France.'

'Nous portons en outre, à votre connaissance, que la Direction a menacé de renvoi, tout ouvrier qui interdisait l'entrée de l'usine à un de ces étrangers.'¹⁶⁸

News of the incidents spread to the nearby villages of Moussey, La Petite-Raon, and Moyenmoutier. On 8 October, representatives of the local textile factories met and agreed to strike. The CGT sent delegates to the factories to mediate the conflict, but they were met with hostility. One delegate was threatened and pushed to the floor by a worker.¹⁶⁹ Delegates from the CFTC fared better. It was agreed that the factories would be reopened on 20 October and a full inquiry would be launched. The resulting enquiry found some immigrants guilty of provocative acts, but ruled that the incident was blown up by the depth of xenophobic sentiment within the local populace.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*

¹⁷⁰ *ibid*

The textile strike of Senones is one of the most brazen examples of French working-class xenophobia during the period. We can see clearly how prejudice against Italian and Polish immigrants mobilised considerable political activism - in this case, a formal letter of complaint to the senior reaches of government, and a strike that endured for twelve days. All of this was amplified over the deterioration of international affairs. Numerous incidents were reported to the police. On 10 October, a French worker at the nearby Abbaye factory present a Polish worker with the door, shouting 'fiche ton camp, et fais que je ne te voies plus ici'.¹⁷¹ In another nearby factory, there was a confrontation between French and Italian workers. Pauline Longo, an Italian immigrant, asked her foremen to repair one of her looms. The foreman replied 'dis à Mussolini qu'il le fasse.' Taken aback, she replied 'il vaudrait mieux que Mussolini soit là, pour te corriger.' A French worker by a nearby loom then reportedly said 'vas t'en voir, Mussolini, salope que tu es.'¹⁷² International politics also marked a similar incident that took place after the strike. An Italian worker, reportedly reading the Italian fascist daily 'La Voix des Italiens', remarked to his colleagues that 'je n'ai pas fait la guerre de 1914, ce n'est pas pur en faire une aujourd'hui, d'autant plus que la France n'est pas ma patrie, je n'ai pas á défendre la France.' The Italian was abruptly rounded upon by overhearing French workers.¹⁷³ Xenophobic tensions were ramped up by the international crisis and opened up an enormous breach within sections of the working class.

French women, stated the local police commissioner, were worked up into 'a state of psychosis' by the behaviour of immigrant workers. Their inner patriotism had

¹⁷¹ AN F7 14778, 'Rapport du commissaire de police mobile, M. Vinot', 12 October 1938.

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ AN F7 14778, 'Henri Gérard au Juge d'Instruction', 22 October 1938.

been unleashed by the sight of their departing husbands and the mocking gestures of the onlooking immigrants. Rumours circulated that the foreign workers were planning to have their way with the wives of the *mobilisés* - to show the French women 'a real man.'¹⁷⁴ In this way, the strike at Senones also shows how popular attitudes to gender were articulated. Native and foreign workers wore their masculinity as a badge of honour and linked it with their national heritage. Masculinity was demonstrable by their success with women - foreign workers mocked that their superior masculinity would win over even married women. French workers no doubt hit back with competing claims. We can also see the dichotomy between the rational, composed male and the emotional, instinctive female on display. While men remained in control of the conflict, female workers were driven to psychosis by their emotional impulses. Male patriotism manifested itself through considered conduct while female patriotism came to the surface and overtook their behaviour.

Conclusion

The relationship between Catholicism and working-class conservatism in 1930s France was not simply a question of faith. While the value system of the Catholic church was an important point of reference for Catholic workers, it did not necessarily mean they rejected the left. In this chapter, I have argued that religious identity and conservative became closely tied together through of daily experience of working-class life. Catholic groups became a vital refuge for workers that rejected left wing movements and resented the conduct of left-wing groups, particularly Communists. Prior to the Popular Front, Catholic groups had a virtual monopoly over working-class conservatives. Religion also intersected with racial and gender identity. The experience of workers in the Nord and Alsace-Lorraine shows that Catholic groups were able to profit from popular resentment

¹⁷⁴ AN F7 14778, 'Rapport du commissaire de police mobile, M. Vinot', 10 October 1938.

against immigrant workers and the defence of traditional gender roles and family values. During moments of labour unrest, this relationship was brought to the surface. During the Popular Front, the decaying international situation only crystallised the opposition between Catholic and left-wing workers. However, Catholic groups now had several competitors for the hearts and minds of conservative workers: Colonel La Rocque's Croix de feu/Parti social français and Jacques Doriot's Parti populaire français.

Chapter Two

Social d'abord! : Workers and the Croix de feu/PSF



The Croix de feu was formed in 1927 as an organisation for ex-servicemen who had been awarded the Croix de guerre during the First World War. By the mid-1930s, it had become the largest right-wing league in France and the most potent critic of the embattled republican government. Following the dissolution of the leagues by the Popular Front government on 19 June 1936, the Croix de feu was transformed into a legitimate political party, the Parti social français (PSF). The PSF trod a more cautious and conservative path to the belligerent Croix de feu, but its membership continued to grow at a remarkable pace. By 1938, the PSF had two million members, making it the largest political party in France by some distance.

The Croix de feu inserted itself into the veterans' movement as an elite and hierarchical alternative to France's largest veterans' organisations, the Union fédérale (UF) and the Union nationale des combattants (UNC). Its purview did not extend far beyond military matters during its early years, campaigning for better pensions and air defence spending. The movement's membership figures reflect these modest ambitions at this stage, numbering around 18,000 in early 1931.¹⁷⁵ The majority of these members were drawn from the middle classes: financiers, shopkeepers, artisans, white-collar employees, and members of the *cadre* class.¹⁷⁶ Only 6.9% of its members were manual workers, a not-insignificant

¹⁷⁵ Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix De Feu and the Parti Social Francais, 1927-1945* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p. 37.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

amount, but a figure that would steadily increase during the 1930s.¹⁷⁷ Militarism was integral to the Croix de feu's aesthetic and structure. Street demonstrations took on the appearance of military parades with every participant donning a *brassard* marked with the Croix de feu's insignia, a skull upon a flaming cross. Paramilitary units, known as *dispos*, were recruited from 1929 to provide security for Croix de feu meetings and intimidate their Communist rivals on the streets.

In 1931 Colonel François de La Rocque assumed leadership of the Croix de feu. La Rocque, a distinguished and popular wartime officer, had a transformative effect on the league. La Rocque wished to remodel the veterans' group into a genuine mass party and create a fundamental program for national renewal based on the values of 'l'esprit Croix de feu'. While the political ambitions of the Croix de feu were ambiguous, its attempts to create a mass following were sincere and thoroughgoing. After all, the Croix de feu was above the petty and self-serving machinations of the democratic process. It would unite with the people directly through social policies, a position encapsulated by the slogan 'social d'abord !' Shortly after becoming leader, La Rocque founded a youth organisation, Les Fils et Filles de Croix de Feu (LFFCF), and set up colonies de vacances (summer camps) for children. A sophisticated network of social centres, sports clubs, student groups, and aeronautical societies were founded under Croix de feu patronage.

Membership, which was growing steadily between 1931 and 1934, took a substantial leap following the league's involvement in the February 6 riots. The event acted as a catalyst for the polarisation of French politics and the gave birth to the Popular Front movement. Within a month the Croix de feu more than doubled in size with over 100,000 members nationwide.¹⁷⁸ Emboldened by this growth, La Rocque redoubled his efforts to expand the Croix de feu's popular base. A female section, the Section féminine d'action

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Nobécourt, *Le Colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946, Ou Les Pièges Du Nationalisme Chrétien*, (Paris: Fayard, 1996), pp. 144-145.

¹⁷⁸ Kennedy, *Reconciling France*, p. 37.

sociale, was inaugurated in March 1934. The Section féminine took on responsibility for the Croix de feu's social work, marking out the distinction between the masculine sphere of politics and the female sphere of social action. In November 1935 the Mouvement social français des Croix de Feu (MSF) was established as an umbrella group for the league's numerous ancillary organisations.

The Croix de feu was dissolved by decree of the newly incumbent Popular Front government in the summer of 1936. La Rocque responded by forming the PSF, a legitimate political party. Politically, the formation of the PSF marked an important transition for La Rocque's movement. While the Croix de feu was primarily an anti-republican protest movement with vague aspirations towards seizing power, the PSF was a legal party with an expressed commitment to the republic and parliamentary procedures. Six recently-elected deputies joined the new party and a parliamentary group was founded in order to extend the party's influence within the Palais Bourbon. Yet in the realm of social policy, the PSF largely continued to expand the programs it had set up during the previous six years. In June 1936 the first Syndicats professionnels français (SPF) were founded, putting into action La Rocque's long-held ambition for 'la profession organisée'.¹⁷⁹ The remainder of the PSF's social programs were consolidated under the aegis of the Travail et Loisirs group. It also entered the realms of health policy with the Association Médico-Sociale Jeanne d'Arc, and sport with the Société de préparation et d'éducation sportive (SPES). The impact of this rich associational life upon the membership of the PSF was noteworthy. Contemporary sources estimate the PSF's support base to have been anything between 700,000 and 2 million; Jean-Paul Thomas arrives at the most judicious figure of 1.2 million, making it the largest party to have existed under the Third Republic.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ The SPF is the subject of chapter four.

¹⁸⁰ Jean-Paul Thomas, 'Les Effectifs du Parti Social Français', *Vingtième Siècle*, 62 (1999), pp. 61–83.

Until recently, scholarship on the Croix de feu/PSF has focused ostensibly on whether the movement was fascist. René Rémond's contention that the Croix de feu/PSF was not fascist, first made in *Les Droites en France de 1915 à nos jours* (1954), lit the torch paper for almost four decades of scholarly discussion, centred on the subject of taxonomy. The debate, while necessary, found little in the way of consensus. In his critique of categorisation, Michel Dobry argued that the questions of whether the Croix de feu was fascist 'does not constitute the sole, or even the principal, research question.'¹⁸¹ A new generation of historians has endeavoured to examine the Croix de feu from other vantage points. Perhaps the most significant thread uniting these 'post-fascism' works concerns the relationship between the Croix de feu/PSF and wider French society. The movement was remarkable in its size and scope, yet we know very little about why ordinary Frenchmen and women flocked to the PSF in such numbers. Its membership figures eclipsed those of their opponents on the left. Perhaps its failure to make a significant political impact, a consequence of the deteriorating situation abroad and the collapse of the Third Republic, has led many to underestimate the PSF's strength. Recent monographs by Albert Kéchichian and Sean Kennedy go some way to remedy this by studying the numerous social programs of the Croix de feu/PSF and, in the latter's case, assessing their impact.¹⁸² Laura Lee Downs, Kevin Passmore, and Caroline Campbell have all surveyed the movement's pioneering use of social work.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Michel Dobry, 'Thèse immunitaire face aux fascismes' in Dobry, ed., *Mythe de l'allergie française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003), p. 64.

¹⁸² Kennedy, *Reconciling France*, Albert Kéchichian, *Les Croix-de-Feu à L'âge Des Fascismes : Travail, Famille, Patrie* (Seysell: Champ Vallon, 2006).

¹⁸³ Passmore, "'Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism": Women's Social Action in the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français', *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1999), pp. 816-845, Caroline Campbell, 'Building a Movement, Dismantling the Republic: Women, Gender, and Political Extremism in the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français, 1927-1940', *French Historical Studies* 35 (2012), pp. 691-726, Downs, '« Nous Plantions Les Trois Couleurs ». Action Sociale Féminine et Recomposition Des Politiques de La Droite Française: Le Mouvement Croix-de-Feu et Le Parti Social Français, 1934-1947', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 58 (2011), pp. 118-63.

This 'social turn' in the historiography of the Croix de feu/PSF has placed the relationship between the league and the working class into greater focus. Even so, participants in the fascism debate did not ignore the question of sociology entirely. In a rare moment of consensus, the combatants agreed that the Croix de feu/PSF was in essence a middle-class movement with a tiny fringe of working class-support. For supporters of the immunity thesis, this proves that the Croix de feu/PSF was *not* fascist because it lacked, according to their criterion, a genuine mass base. Opponents of this view counter that this middle-class 'essence' did not detract from the movement's radicalism. Recent work has qualified this view by demonstrating that the Croix de feu took the recruitment of workers seriously. Kéchichian has provided the best top-down account of the Croix de feu's working-class programs, although his interpretation is compromised by his view that the movement was traditionalist rather than fascist.¹⁸⁴ Through Downs, we are enlightened to the particular importance attached to social work in the goal of drawing workers into 'la réconciliation française'.¹⁸⁵ However, this author concludes that Croix de feu/PSF social programs failed in their goal of winning over workers. The success of these programs is only evident when viewed from other vantage points, such as expanding middle-class membership through the use of Catholic-inspired volunteerism, providing professional opportunities for women, or even anticipating post-war Gaullism.

Jean-Paul Thomas has presented the most important challenge to this orthodoxy. His detailed analysis of PSF membership data suggests that support for the Croix de feu/PSF actually became increasingly heterogeneous as it grew in size.¹⁸⁶ The PSF's posturing as an '*interclassiste*' mass movement was not all rhetorical bluster, says Thomas, but had some

¹⁸⁴ Kéchichian, *Les Croix-de-Feu*, pp. 278-287.

¹⁸⁵ Downs, 'Nous Plantions', pp. 118-63.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas, 'Les Effectifs Du Parti Social Français', Thomas, 'Le Parti Social Français (1936-1945): Une Expérience de Parti de Masses et La Préparation D'une Relève', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 109 (2002), pp. 109-20, Thomas, 'Le Parti Social Français dans le Nord (1936-1945)', *Revue du Nord*, 370 (2007), pp. 341-60.

grounding in reality. His analysis of PSF membership cards shows up sizeable working-class followings in the Parisian suburbs, Normandy, and most strikingly, in the northern industrial basin. Thomas estimates that 19,000-20,000 members in the Nord were working class in origin. This means that the PSF's working-class following was larger there than that of the Communist party.¹⁸⁷ Thomas concludes that:

'le PSF pénétrait le monde ouvrier de l'extérieur des structures tendant à l'organiser en classe. Plus prosaïquement, il s'y heurtait à une force de rejet y compris physique que pouvaient mobiliser ses adversaires. Sa capacité à s'y surplus des problèmes conceptuels excédant notre objet. Elle n'a en tout cas jamais exclu l'existence d'autres visions de soi dans les milieux ouvriers : réelles chances de promotion; de catholiques; d'anciens combattants - dont des Nord-Africains, bien représentés au PSF - ; plus marginalement la réaction contre un embrigadement de la part de déçus de l'extrême gauche.'¹⁸⁸

Thomas's hypothesis advances the argument beyond the portrayal of the Croix de feu/PSF's working-class followers as young, unemployed street thugs, and instead presents such followers as an important demographic with complex motivations for joining the movement. Thomas's work is therefore an important starting point for this chapter.

Taking this historian's empirical findings seriously, the present chapter examines the multifaceted appeal of the Croix de feu/PSF to workers and fleshes out some of the speculations made in Thomas's piece. It begins with a descriptive narrative of the evolution of the Croix de feu/PSF's programs aimed at workers, linking these programs to the wider political context and the aims of the movement. It then uses documentary evidence to assess how workers received these programs, and therefore advance the recent work of Passmore, Downs et al. The source base of this chapter is far broader than that consulted by Thomas

¹⁸⁷ Thomas, 'Le Parti Social Français dans le Nord', p. 347.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

and Kéchichian. Thomas used a small batch of local studies in departmental archives to estimate national membership trends, while Kéchichian largely focused his efforts on the archives of François de la Rocque held within the Archives nationales and the Centre d'histoire Sciences Po. In this chapter, I combine work from the La Rocque holdings and several departmental archives with police sources, court proceedings, party literature, and a range of newspaper sources. This range of source material allows me to get closer to the workers themselves and the reasons why they were drawn to the Croix de feu/PSF.

It is important at this stage to briefly remark upon the distinction between the Croix de feu and the PSF. When referring to the movement as a whole, the proper noun 'Croix de feu/PSF' will be used for the sake of brevity. However, when exploring the movement's policies and their impact, separate nouns will be used. This is because the creation of the PSF marked an important rupture in the history of the movement. In terms of political policy, for example, the movement now had grapple with electoral politics, that crass and immoral world so detested by the Croix de feu. I would also suggest that the 'legalism' of the PSF had an important impact upon the way it was perceived, not least by the working class.

Finally, a nod back to the debate over French fascism. One of the underlying planks of René Rémond's argument was that interwar French society was immune to fascism because of the strength of its Republican tradition. The 'immunity thesis', as it became to be known, has been attacked from numerous angles. In the most recent of these broadsides, Chris Millington makes the point that interwar political culture was in fact exceedingly complex and cannot be reduced to a singular republican current.¹⁸⁹ This chapter supports Millington's contention. It argues that the growing popularity of the Croix de feu/PSF within the working class is evidence of a fractured political culture which left ample room open to authoritarianism, anti-republicanism and extreme nationalism. The fractions within working

¹⁸⁹ Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in inter-war France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 9-12.

class therefore mirrored those that divided other social classes. The reasons why this anti-republicanism failed to gather enough energy to overthrow the government, however, is a question for another historian.

Vers la pénétration ouvrière

As an infant veterans association with a small following and little political ambition, the Croix de feu showed little concern for the plight of the working class during its early years. Between 1927 and 1931, the movement was entirely dedicated to veterans' activities. *Le Flambeau*, the Croix de feu's national organ, began publication in November 1929 and its limited content reflected the movement's aims. These formative years, however, were important for the construction and articulation of the *mystique Croix de feu*, an ideological motif upon which the Croix de feu based its future social programs. This mystique in reality differed little from other discourses on war veterans' that flourished on the right during the 1920s. It pertained to the unique values and morals of those who had served during the First World War. The war veteran, so it went, embodied the values of duty, honour, selflessness, bravery, discipline, and patriotism. Unlike the rest of society, they had experienced the spirit of fraternity and brotherhood in the trenches and put aside petty differences of origin, education, and profession. For this reason the Croix de feu largely jettisoned class-based language in favour of terms such as '*esprit*' and '*mystique*' to express the quasi-spiritual bonds that these men shared.

The Croix de feu gradually began to engage with wider political and social issues during the early 1930s. The impetus for change came from La Rocque. La Rocque was a career officer who had served two tours of duty under Maréchal Lyautey in Morocco and fought on the Western Front with distinction during the war. Upon taking charge of the movement in 1930, La Rocque endeavoured to swell the ranks of the Croix de feu by opening

it up to non-veterans. Yet La Rocque also harboured grander ambitions. A hardened patriot and practising Catholic, La Rocque longed to transmit the Croix de feu mystique and its composite values to wider society. He had read the works of La Tour du Pin as a young man and was deeply impressed by the impact of the Catholic Action movement.¹⁹⁰ It is also probable that La Rocque was influenced by the works of his mentor, Lyautey, whose doctrine of social pacification exerted a huge influence over right-wing reformers between the wars. Under La Rocque, the function of the Croix de feu mystique shifted. What was initially a means of valorising the Croix de feu's clientele and draw attention to their interests became increasingly a cutting political and social critique. The values that the war veterans encapsulated stood in stark contrast to the perceived egotism, corruption, and decadence of the political class. La Rocque thus saw the Croix de feu mystique as a remedy for the ills that pervaded French society.

La Rocque's view of the working class was tempered by this political and social vision. The working masses, he claimed, were guilty of the same selfish pursuit of short-term material interests that motivated the bourgeoisie and the ruling classes. The promise of material fulfilment caused workers to flock to the socialist left and neglect their duty to their families, their profession, and their *patrie*. The nuances of socialist ideology, however, were lost on the everyday worker:

'Il existe dans la classe ouvrière des éléments qui, ayant un idéal politique, fondent leur action professionnelle toujours active, sur leur appartenance à un parti. Par contre, la grande masse des ouvriers, quoique sensible à l'action politique, surtout dans les périodes difficiles où y trouve un moyen de concrétiser protestations ou révoltes, s'attachera plus volontiers, dans la vie courante, à la réalisation d'un programme strictement professionnel'.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Kennedy, *Reconciling France*, p. 27.

¹⁹¹ AN 451AP 87, 'Note sur l'action syndicale', Undated (probably 1934/5).

While La Rocque judged this rampant materialism regrettable, he was nonetheless pragmatic on the subject. He reasoned that the lack of ideological conviction among the majority of workers was evidence that most proletarian men and women did not have a genuine appetite for class struggle. However, the Croix de feu would have to approach the subject in a cautious manner:

‘Tout ce que, de l'extérieur, tente une propagande pour amener la classe ouvrière à abandonner l'idée de lutte de classes, est, à notre avis, voué, à cause de la reconnaissance forcée de ses revendications légitimes, davantage à accroître cette lutte qu'à l'atténuer, par ce qu'elle renforce dans la classe ouvrière l'idée de solidarité de ses intérêts bien ou mal défendus. C'est seulement de l'intérieur, en donnant à cette solidarité son véritable aliment qui est celui de l'entraide, de la défense professionnelle, de la défense réelle et efficace des individualités qui refusent de se laisser entraîner uniquement par le courant matérialiste, qu'on peut agir, d'abord sur les meilleurs éléments et ensuite sur la masse déçue par l'inefficacité finale des méthodes de revendications continues, sans réorganisation générale.’¹⁹²

The Croix de feu reasoned that decades of Socialist propaganda had rendered the working class impervious to other forms of politics. The movement would have to take a more gentle approach, combining the defence of ‘strictly professional’ material interests with social projects that brought the Croix de feu spirit directly to the masses. La Rocque indeed reserved praise for the social programs being practiced on the left, such as placement services, sports facilities, and colonies de vacances for working-class children.¹⁹³ In the ‘best

¹⁹² *ibid.*

¹⁹³ *ibid.*

elements' of the working class, those that did not follow the 'materialist current', the Croix de feu also saw potential for future leaders, a kind of working-class elite.¹⁹⁴

The engagement of the Croix de feu with the working class was slow and came in stages. Until 1931 *Le Flambeau* was still overwhelmingly preoccupied with military affairs, although it had broadened its perspective to encompass other elements of foreign policy. Small vignettes that touched upon social affairs were few and far between and usually consigned to the back pages. From October 1931 *Le Flambeau* began to feature a page dedicated to social and economic matters. These articles, however, were dry and studious in tone and rarely mentioned the working class. The cartoon in figure 1, published in May 1931, is perhaps indicative of the Croix de feu's position at this stage. The scrawny, dishevelled worker is overshadowed by the burley, well-dressed war veteran belonging to the Croix de feu. The contrast in dress, posture and wit encapsulates the gap between the classes and played to the sensibilities of their bourgeois clientele.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

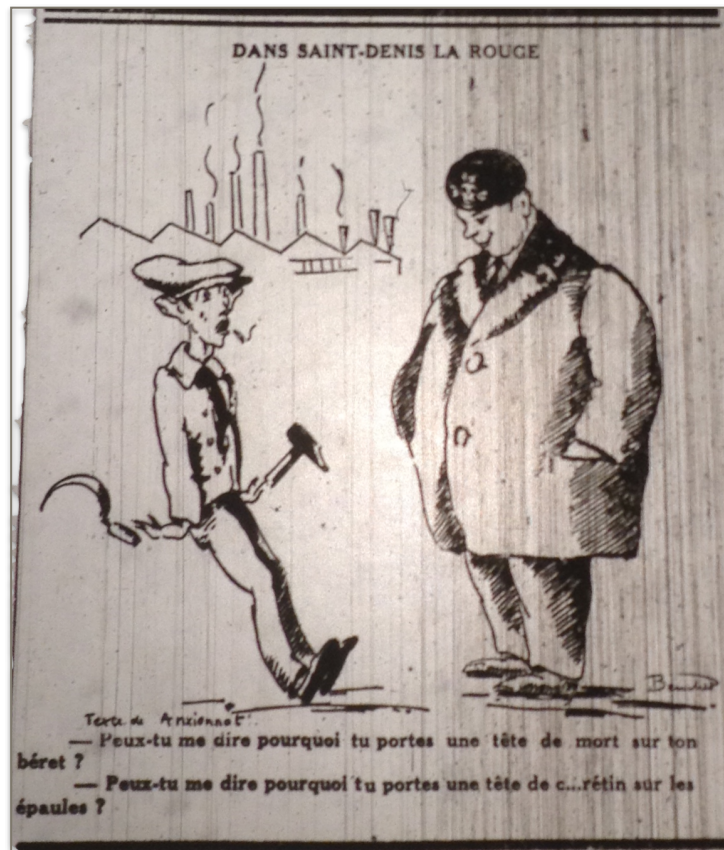


Figure 1 - Cartoon of worker is confronted by a member of the Croix de feu. *Le Flambeau*, 1 May 1931.

Nevertheless, the Croix de feu did begin to make small strategic inroads into working-class life. In November 1931 a work placement office, the Service d'entraide et de placement des Croix de feu, was opened in the 17th arrondissement of Paris. The office was founded, according to the league's press, to accommodate the employment needs of everybody, from factory workers to bank employees.¹⁹⁵ However, in practice the service appears to have been used almost exclusively by workers. Local sections were instructed to set-up work placement offices in their own districts, and their importance to the wider goals of the movement were spelt out: 'Le Comité Directeur CF et Comité Directeur VN doit s'occuper plus particulièrement du bureau de placement, d'assurer le développement de

¹⁹⁵ *Le Flambeau*, 11 November 1931.

cette oeuvre qui, à notre avis, est essentielle pour rendre notre programme effective, en particulier dans les milieux ouvriers'.¹⁹⁶

While on face value the work placement office offered a straightforward service to unemployed workers, in reality it undertook a complex set of functions. Firstly, every worker that used the service was obligated to submit a detailed profile and, initially, become a member of the Croix de feu. The office then tracked the progress of each worker during his tenure and was notified immediately if the worker was fired on the grounds of his political views.¹⁹⁷ Secondly, the work placement office held files on local enterprises and firms. These files contained information on the strength of Communist and anarchist cells and the use of foreign labour. Concerning this latter point, officials were encouraged to lobby local bosses to ensure that French workers replaced foreigners. 'Ceci', said an internal memo, 'serait d'un effet certain sur le moral de nos effectifs ouvriers'.¹⁹⁸ Thirdly, the work placement office was earmarked as a recruiting ground for future leadership talent. Officials were urged to select workers that were 'intellectually prepared' to lead Croix de feu sections within local industries.¹⁹⁹

While the Croix de feu claimed that its placement service was independent and impartial to the nature of the businesses that it worked with, in reality it nurtured close links with bosses that were favourable to the movement. Internal records show that Croix de feu placement services received substantial funds from industry. These funds were estimated to have covered almost of all of the 30-40,000 francs required annually to run each office.²⁰⁰ It is therefore likely that bosses used these work placement offices as a reliable source of

¹⁹⁶ AN 451AP 87, 'Note sur le bureau de placement', Undated.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ AN 451AP 87, 'Note pour M. Ottavi', Undated.

labour, an arrangement that was mutually beneficial for the Croix de feu. It is unclear to what degree workers were aware of this arrangement, or whether they willingly complied with it, but it was certainly well known to the left-wing press.²⁰¹

The Croix de feu work placement office was the first step towards a policy that targeted those workers worst affected by the economic crisis. In 1935 the Croix de feu opened a network of soup kitchens, known as 'soupes populaires', across the country. The kitchens gave free hot meals to struggling workers. Often attached to these makeshift kitchens were clothing charities, or 'vestiaires', that supplied workers with second-hand garments and shoes. The popularity of these initiatives is unquestionable. The first soup kitchens were opened in Paris in January 1935, and by March similar kitchens had opened in Lille, Bordeaux, Reims, Nancy, Rouen, and Strasbourg. Within three months, the Croix de feu had already given out 170,000 hot meals and 52,000 pieces of clothing. By the end of the year, the movement was distributing 5,495 meals a day.²⁰² In Paris the Croix de feu used its new social centres or leased out temporary properties to run the kitchens, while in other cities, such as Lille and Bordeaux, the movement relied on the more novel 'cuisine roulante', a mobile kitchen on wheels, to distribute bouillon and beer to hungry workers outside the factory.²⁰³

It is unclear whether the Croix de feu made it obligatory to carry a card for the movement in order to use these facilities. Given the sheer number of workers that the movement catered for, it seems improbable. However, the Croix de feu did seek to profit from the success of their charitable endeavours by pushing workers towards membership. In

²⁰¹ *Le Populaire* ran a series of articles in early 1936 challenging the impartiality of the Croix de feu's work placement schemes vis-à-vis the patronat. Internal evidence supports the newspaper's claims. See *Le Populaire*, 10, 11 and 16 March 1936.

²⁰² *Le Flambeau*, 23 March 1935, Albert Kéchichian, *Les Croix-de-Feu*, p. 287.

²⁰³ ADN 68J 22, 'Article from unknown publication, 'La soupe populaire des 'Croix de feu'', undated, Sylvain Trussardi, 'Faisceau, Croix de Feu, PSF : Trois Mouvements Girondins, Du Milieu des Années 1930 à La Fin Des Années 1930', *Parlement(s)* 3 (2005), p. 60.

Villejuif a poster advertising the local soup kitchen warned that the service was becoming oversubscribed and Croix de feu members would be given priority.²⁰⁴ These charitable initiatives were also an opportunity to put into practice some of the principles that drove the movement's social policy and sell them to workers. The Croix de feu expected that workers and party officials would coalesce within the walls of the dining hall. The movement's particular brand of dispassionate social assistance would create bonds between men and a spirit of fraternity would flourish, a microcosm of the peaceful class relations that the party intended to enact on a national scale:

‘Qu’un grand nombre de misères viennent à nous et s’installent à ces foyers fraternels ainsi offerts, il n’y a rien là, d’étonnant ; la souffrance pousse instinctivement les êtres vers l’assistance sincère, cordiale, simple. Mais que, pendant des mois, l’organisation se maintienne, s’élargisse, que les collaborations jamais ne se laissent et ne se heurtent, là est l’un des aspects du miracle Croix de feu.’²⁰⁵

The ‘sincerity’ and ‘cordiality’ of its charity, the Croix de feu believed, appealed to the natural honesty and pride of the male worker. The movement regularly published pictures of packed dining areas seated with rows upon rows of workers in cloth caps while social workers dutifully worked the aisles. Figure 2 shows the exterior of a Parisian soup kitchen, where a group of workers queue up whilst fraternising with more well-to-do members of the party, several of whom are wearing a military-style beret. Scenes such as this are typical of the cross-class interaction that the Croix de feu promoted through its charity work.

²⁰⁴ AN AP451 87, ‘Poster advertising Soupe populaire du Croix de feu in Villejuif’, dated 1935.

²⁰⁵ *Le Flambeau*, 23 March 1935.



Figure 2 - Photograph of workers and Croix de feu members outside of a soup kitchen.

Le Flambeau, 30 March 1935.

The soup kitchen was also one of the first Croix de feu social programs to rely upon the participation of women. Female social workers, referred to as ‘dames’ in party texts, were given responsibility of preparing and serving food, while male activists tended to cohort with workers and keep guard for Communist intruders.²⁰⁶ This division of labour was indicative of the Croix de feu’s stance on gender. Between the movement’s inception and the outbreak of the 6 February riots, the hyper-masculine veterans’ movement rarely included women in its activities, although they did play roles in the nascent FFCF and colonies de vacances. However, in March 1934 the Croix de feu opened its ranks to women through the foundation of the *Séction féminine des Croix de feu*, followed in November by *Action sociale des Croix de feu*, an auxiliary organisation dedicated to female social work. Hereafter women were handed the critical role of tending to the working class, essentially forming the front line in social centres, soup kitchens, and colonies across the country. By June 1936 there were 283

²⁰⁶ 451 AP 88, ‘Les Croix de feu de Rouen et de Normandie’, undated (probably 1935).

female sections in metropolitan France, 96 of which were in the Paris region.²⁰⁷ Although the party hierarchy was suspicious of the role of women in political movements, women were considered 'naturally' preconditioned for social work and therefore handed a fair degree of autonomy, with organisational responsibilities passed to a close ally of La Rocque, Antoinette de Préval.²⁰⁸ Female activists, according to the movement, could muster the sensitivity, diligence, and self-sacrifice necessary to aid society's most down-and-out and remove them from the anomie of modern life:

'La nature n'a pas fait l'homme pour vivre dans une société close et limitée: l'ouvrier des villes vit donc dans des conditions anti-naturelles. Comme tout être humain, il a cependant besoin de ne pas se sentir seul, besoin de savoir où trouver de l'aide, de la protection. Il sait très bien reconnaître celles qui mettent leur coeur dans leur travail, qui donnent infiniment plus qu'elles ne doivent, mais l'idée qu'elles ne sont pas uniquement des dames de charité lui permet de conserver le sentiment qu'il est aidé, conseillé, pas assisté, ce qui, pour lui, et juste titre, est entièrement différent et concilie sa dignité de citoyen et les exigences de la nature humaine. Besoins pour la femme d'utiliser pleinement ses aptitudes.'²⁰⁹

As this passage shows, women were assumed to be more attuned to a 'natural' mode of existence than men. Through the agency of women, the Croix de feu hoped that workers could re-establish the powerful bonds of codependence that once united the classes and elevate them from the 'anti-natural' conditions of modern industrial society. The movement also argued that female social assistance would provide a spiritual corrective for the rampant

²⁰⁷ Campbell, 'Building a movement', p. 712.

²⁰⁸ Passmore, "Planting the tricolour", pp. 823-824.

²⁰⁹ *Le Flambeau*, 23 May 1936.

materialism within the working class, which was causing 'selfish' proletarian men and women to ignore their duties as patriots and parents.²¹⁰

Soup kitchens and placement centres were the Croix de feu's first forays into what would become a sophisticated network of social services. From 1935 the Croix de feu founded a number of permanent social centres to function as nuclei for local social initiatives. The largest of these, such as the Centre Gynemer in Billancourt, employed over thirty social workers and administrators. The Croix de feu, and later the PSF, founded five major social centres in the 'red belt' of Paris and many others in working-class districts across the country. These were located in Saint-Ouen (Centre Kléber), Viry-Châtillon (Centre Mermoz), Colombes (Centre Jeanne d'Arc), Gif-sur-Yvette (Centre Lyautey) and Billancourt (Centre Gynemer). In keeping with the Croix de feu's policy of 'action de présence', the Croix de feu rented large, capacious buildings in the heart of working-class areas to house the social centres; the Centre Kléber was located inside an disused factory close to a residential area with seven floors and a large garden.²¹¹

The breadth of social services provided by the Croix de feu is striking, and emblematic of the importance that the movement attached to working-class recruitment. . While Croix de feu soup kitchens and work placement centres targeted young male workers that had been victims of the Great Depression, the Croix de feu/PSF social centres took the working-class family as its object. The Croix de feu regarded the patriarchal family as the societal model for France and the basic unit upon which social stability was founded.²¹² The movement blamed the breakdown of the working-class family on the steady infiltration of a secular and materialist culture that undermined gender and generational hierarchies. Great stock was therefore placed in the use of social assistance to tackle this problem and draw

²¹⁰ Passmore, 'Planting the Tricolor' p. 827.

²¹¹ APPP BA 1902, 'Untitled note on the Croix de Feu renting a disused factory in Saint Ouen', 28 December 1935.

²¹² Kennedy, *Reconciling France against Democracy*, p. 96.

working-class families into the Croix de feu fold. De Préval advised that social workers use a light touch, or 'pénétrer dans les familles sans les effaroucher'.²¹³ Local activists were discouraged from pushing local workers into using the social centres, preferring that they visit at their own accord.

Each social centre offered its own range of services. Prior to founding a centre, local activists were encouraged to survey prospective working-class districts in order to identify which services were in high demand.²¹⁴ Several principal types of service may be discerned. A number of social centres provided free medical services to working families without sufficient resources. A Centre Médical dedicated to such practices was opened in early 1935 in the 17th arrondissement of Paris, but the service soon became available in other centres. The program was coordinated by the Association Médico-sociale Jeanne d'Arc (AMSJA), an auxiliary of Action sociale. Through the AMSJA, some social centres were able to organise health clinics, visiting nurse programs, insurance aid for the incapacitated, and even founded a convalescent home in Pau.²¹⁵ A more common form of social work came in the guise of family counselling and advice bureaus. Female social workers, known as *directrices*, were trained by the Croix de feu in accordance with government regulations and lent assistance to working men and women. Some sections were even able to provide home visits for troubled families.

The most important element of the Croix de feu's social work was directed at working-class children. 'L'enfant', claimed Prével in a 1938 speech, 'est le seul chemin menant au Cœur de l'ouvrier français'.²¹⁶ While the Croix de feu had experimented with youth work between 1930 and 1933, it was only in 1934 that the program became

²¹³ AN 451AP 87, 'Rapport sur l'activité du centre de Saint-Ouen (Oct-1935-Juin 1936)', undated (mid-1936).

²¹⁴ AN 451AP 87, 'Oeuvres sociales non Croix de feu', undated (probably 1935).

²¹⁵ Campbell, 'Building a movement', p. 719.

²¹⁶ Quoted in Downs, 'Nous plantons les trois couleurs', p. 118.

instrumental to the movement's wider goals. Political movements of various stripes took great interest in active, play-based pedagogy during the interwar years. Catholic Action groups, republican schoolteachers, and the Communist/Socialist parties all founded their own network of *colonies* with programs that reflected their distinct ideological goals.²¹⁷ Uniting these movements, nevertheless, was an overarching concern with the health and education of the nation's children, and the plight of working-class children was regarded as particularly critical. 'Quelle satisfaction', said *Le Flambeau* in 1931, 'de voir ces mines de petits Parisiens pâlottes, maigriottes, s'emplir peu à peu, se doser au bon air ; ces muscles s'affirmer par le jeu de plaine campagne et les promenades en montagne, ces enfants se développer dans une ambiance de fraternité semblable à la camaraderie de front de leurs pères'.²¹⁸

The Croix de feu placed such hope in their youth work for three reasons. Firstly, the Croix de feu aimed to inculcate working-class children with the core values of the movement: *travail, famille, patrie*. While complex political lessons were certainly not the order of the day, the Croix de feu hoped that these values could be gently transmitted through practical activities and an appreciation of France's cultural heritage and natural splendour. Symbolic events such as twice-daily salutation of the tricolour and campfire renditions of nationalist songs taught children to love their country, while afternoon workshops in woodworking and domestic duties (for boys and girls respectively) prepared them for their future vocations as workers and mothers. Young boys and girls, it was hoped, would slowly develop an allegiance to the Croix de feu as they graduated through the age groups until they were eligible for full membership. A second, more immediate outcome of this strategy, so reasoned the Croix de feu, was that entire working-class families would be drawn to the movement by the provision of cheap, high-quality child services. Along with the *colonies*, the Croix de feu wheeled out

²¹⁷ See Downs, *Histoire Des Colonies de Vacances* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 2009).

²¹⁸ *Le Flambeau*, 1 September 1931.

several other initiatives aimed at children. Social centres were equipped with a crèche and a play garden for local children and some even provided after-school care. Every year, local sections would throw a Christmas party, or *arbre de Noël*, where gifts would be distributed by activists. These initiatives not only incentivised membership to the Croix de feu for working families, but also fostered a sense of community and codependence. Thirdly, youth work was a potential propaganda coup for the movement. The Croix de feu hoped that its reorientation towards 'soft politics' would counter the image of thuggish violence that had been propagated, with some foundation, by the left wing press since the early 1930s. In addition to this, the Croix de feu could boast of 'penetrating' Communist municipalities and beating the party at their own game.

June 1936 and the social turn

The events of February 6 1934 gave the Croix de feu national exposure, a fact that the movement readily exploited with its social programs and belligerent street demonstrations. The movement grew very quickly as a result. On the eve of legislative elections in 1936, the Croix de feu had some 500,000 members, perhaps many more.²¹⁹ However, the growth of the Popular Front movement presented the Croix de feu with considerable challenges with regards to its working-class policy. Firstly, the social reforms advocated by the Croix de feu were very similar to those that the Popular Front campaigned on and eventually enacted in the Matignon Accords. As Kéchichian points out, La Rocque had consciously played 'le jeu du Front Populaire', supporting demands for a national minimum wage, a reduced working week, paid annual holiday and state arbitration in labour conflicts.²²⁰ The Matignon Accords therefore threatened to take much of the wind out of the

²¹⁹ Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy*, p. 88.

²²⁰ Kéchichian, *Les Croix-de-Feu*, p. 287.

Croix de feu's sails. Secondly, the radicalisation of the political scene after February 6 meant that the Croix de feu was subject to strenuous attacks by the Popular Front. The Croix de feu was singled out, correctly, as the greatest fascist threat on home soil. Speaking to the seventh congress of Communist international in August 1935, the leader of the PCF, Maurice Thorez, rallied the antifascist coalition against the Croix de feu:

'Il serait bien dangereux de se laisser aller à l'illusion que le fascisme est déjà vaincu. Tandis que le peuple de Paris proclamait sa volonté de ne pas laisser passer le fascisme, à la même heure, le colonel comte de la Rocque passait en revue ses troupes de guerre civile...Il regroupe ses forces et se prépare à de prochains assauts. Le danger croît toujours. Les causes profondes qui font naître le fascisme, qui lui permettent de se développer et de se renforcer, n'ont pas disparu. L'aggravation continue de la crise générale du capitalisme, la persistance de la crise économique rendent toujours plus misérables les conditions d'existence des travailleurs. Pour prévenir et contenir la révolte des masses laborieuses et pour préparer la guerre, en assurant ses arrières, la bourgeoisie, à l'échelle internationale, a besoin du fascisme.'²²¹

Countless pamphlets, newspaper articles and posters were distributed to factory workers in an attempt to nullify the Croix de feu's influence and weed out class traitors. This not only strengthened the vigilance of left-wing activists against the Croix de feu at a local level, but also created a powerful discourse which rendered sympathetic feelings to the movement as heretical and treasonous, a move which doubtless altered the way in which the movement was perceived by workers.

Thirdly, in light of growing labour unrest, the Croix de feu had to clarify its position on labour militancy and strike action. The massive strike wave of 1936 aroused deep concerns in bosses and middle management, two vital pillars of support for the movement.

²²¹ Maurice Thorez, 'Discours au 7e congrès de l'Internationale communiste: Les succès du front unique antifasciste, 3 août 1935', *Oeuvres de Maurice Thorez*, Volume 2, Tome 9 (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1952).

The spontaneity and disorderliness of the strikers also went against two of the Croix de feu's self-identified principles: order and discipline. Yet attacking the working class for the strike movement risked undoing the progress that the Croix de feu had made among workers during the previous two years. La Rocque was therefore keen to avoid flagrant partisanship during the conflict. According to police sources, La Rocque informed section leaders that 'les Croix de feu ne doivent pas être les valets du patronat'.²²² Bosses were apportioned a share of the blame for the growing labour unrest due to their unbridled materialism and abrogation of social responsibility. Said *Le Flambeau*, 'dans la mesure où il en est temps encore, les patrons ont le choix : ou bien l'attitude négative et la responsabilité des ruines morales et matérielles pour avoir traité d'utopie toute action généreuse et simplement humaine - ou bien l'effort sincère et constructif'.²²³ Meanwhile, section leaders were ordered to record the grievances of strikers and relay them to the Bureau d'Études Syndicales, a body hastily set-up by La Rocque during the heat of the conflict to address labour issues. Workers were reminded, somewhat in vain, that the Croix de feu had long supported social reforms of the kind advocated by many striking groups.

The Croix de feu attempted to absolve the grand majority of workers from blame by making the Communist party accountable for the severity of the unrest. The strikes, they claimed, were initially animated by the honest pursuit of professional interests, but gradually the movement was infiltrated by foreign Communist agents who sought to turn it into a bonafide revolution:

'La tyrannie [des grévistes] s'est exercée parmi des ouvriers dispersés, terrorisés; une poignée de meneurs venus d'on ne sait où ne rencontrent même pas, pour vérifier leur mandat, le contrôle d'organisations ouvrières officielles, qualifiées. Le mouvement Croix de feu en a

²²² APPP BA 1902, 'Untitled report on a meeting between La Rocque and section leaders in Paris', 5 June 1936.

²²³ *Le Flambeau*, 6 June 1936.

appelé aux travailleurs conscients...de grouper des hommes de bonne volonté, entraînant sous leur saine influence les éléments affranchis de l'obedience étrangère.'²²⁴

The Croix de feu's position was not merely rhetorical. Evidence suggests that the movement took the threat of Communist insurgency very seriously. *Dispos* were mobilised in order to prevent further factory occupations and guard vital gas, electricity and water plants. Section leaders were placed in a state of alert and urged to protect working-class families that belonged to the Croix de feu.²²⁵ If anything, the experience of the 1936 strikes calcified the Croix de feu's anticommunist prejudices, which in turn had important bearing on the direction of factory-floor policy undertaken by the PSF.

La Rocque felt that the Croix de feu could profit from the polarising nature of the strike movement by siphoning off more moderate workers into his movement. According to a police source, the Colonel ordered all local sections to prioritise the recruitment of workers as the strikes began to subside.²²⁶ On 6 June he founded the Syndicats professionnels français (SPF), an 'independent' trade union which promised to depoliticise the labour movement and stand up for the worker's 'true' professional interests.²²⁷ The effects appear to have been immediate; a police report from 15 June states that 'on a constaté depuis le début des grèves une augmentation très notable du chiffre journalier des adhésions'.²²⁸ Yet while the the Croix de feu offered solace to those frightened by the experience of the strikes, others were disillusioned by the movement's cautious response. Some veteran militants were unhappy by the lack of decisive action against the striking hordes; the fabled H-hour

²²⁴ Le Flambeau, 13 June 1936.

²²⁵ APPP BA 1902, 'Untitled report on a meeting between La Rocque and section leaders in Paris', 5 June 1936, APPP BA 1952, 'Note on PSF activity at the Renault factories', 14 September 1936, Annie Lacroix-Riz, *Le Choix de La Défaite: Les Élités Françaises Dans Les Années 1930*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), pp. 1813-1817.

²²⁶ APPP BA 1902, 'Les Croix de feu et la grève', 6 June 1936.

²²⁷ See chapter 4.

²²⁸ APPP BA 1902, 'A.S. des Croix de feu', 15 June 1936.

had arrived, they claimed, but the movement had failed to act.²²⁹ One group of disaffected workers derided the SPF, 'qui ne riment à rien', and pledged instead to join the CGT, 'où ils auraient pu faire du beau travail, en noyant celle-ci'.²³⁰ The strike wave of 1936 was therefore something of a watershed moment for the Croix de feu, marking the beginning of a more moderate line that would alienate the movement's most radical fringe but entice many more to participate.

The Croix de feu became the Parti Social Français after the former was dissolved by decree of the Popular Front government on 12 July 1936. The transformation was not merely cosmetic, however. With the PSF, La Rocque hoped to build a genuine mass party from the groundwork prepared by the Croix de feu. To this end, La Rocque endeavoured to soften the image of the movement in order to broaden its appeal. In place of street agitation and vague threats against the republican order, the PSF sought to increase its political capital through electoral victories. Under Edmond Barrachin, the head of the PSF's political bureau, local sections were restructured to correspond with electoral constituencies, putting an end to the military-style organisation of the Croix de feu. The Dispos were reorganised as the Équipes volantes de propagande (EVP) so as to distance the PSF from accusations of paramilitarism. The new party also bought *Le Petit Journal*, a popular national daily.

Electioneering was an important new addition to the PSF's tactical resources. Primarily, the party aimed to seduce the middle classes and draw voters away from the other parties of the centre and centre-right, namely the AD, FR and the Radical party. Barrachin hoped that the PSF's more centrist stance, coupled with the party's belated acceptance of the democratic process, would appeal to moderate conservatives that were disillusioned with the status quo.²³¹ Yet while the middle classes were undoubtedly the PSF's principal

²²⁹ *ibid*

²³⁰ APPP BA 1902, 'Note of the reaction of Croix de Feu members to the SPF', 4 July 1936. This tactic was undertaken by the Parti populaire français around the same time.

²³¹ Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy*, p. 147.

target, the party also campaigned in working-class districts. This presented formidable difficulties. Buoyed by the electoral success of the Popular Front, the left redoubled the efforts of local vigilance committees to combat the encroachment of far-right groups. In the most combative areas, the PSF made motorised sorties into the centre of working-class neighbourhoods to distribute propaganda but were quickly rounded upon.²³² In a Communist district of Tourcoing, three EVP were encircled by the local, twenty-strong Jeune garde communiste and chased out of town on bicycles.²³³ PSF posters rarely went untouched for more than several hours. The head of a firm hired by the party to put up posters in the banlieue of Paris complained that his workers were constantly harassed and sometimes had to reaffix posters up to six times a day.²³⁴

In spite of this hostility, the PSF chose to run candidates in several working-class constituencies for the cantonal elections of October 1937. While it is unlikely that the party took its chances seriously, the decision presented a number of propaganda opportunities. The PSF claimed that the move was an expression of the party's commitment to the entire nation, comparing this to the reactionary partisanship of other forces on the right. The move was also a demonstration of the bravery, discipline and virility of the party's activists:

'Le Parti Social Français place avant tout l'intérêt du pays. Il réservait son effort pour des circonscriptions plus difficiles. Bien loin de pratiquer la désunion, comme certains l'en accusent perfidement, il donne chaque fois qu'il est nécessaire l'exemple de la discipline...Le PSF est désigné par le corps électoral dans les circonscriptions les plus difficiles de la 'banlieue rouge' comme le mieux qualifié pour défendre le drapeau tricolore.'²³⁵

²³² ADR 4M 269, 'Rapport du Capitaine Picot sur des réunions de partis où des désordres étaient à craindre', 2 February 1937, Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism*, pp. 261-266.

²³³ ADN 68J 113, 'Letter from the Président du Comité de Coordination de Tourcoing', 10 October 1937.

²³⁴ AN 451AP 103, 'Letter from Avenir Publicité (service affichage) to M. Hecht', 21 September 1936.

²³⁵ AN 451AP 103, 'Tract: Comment le Parti Social Français pratique l'union devant le marxisme', 20 March 1938.

The PSF even proudly published the results of losing candidates as testimony to its boldness. In the cantons of Pantin and Aubervilliers, both in the Paris banlieue, PSF candidates finished third behind Communist and Socialist contenders, a respectable outcome which the party milked in the press.²³⁶ Unfortunately, however, local election results tell us little about working-class support nationally. The PSF formed a relatively disciplined electoral alliance with the rest of the right and accordingly only ran candidates in certain constituencies.²³⁷ Nonetheless, it may be said that the modicum of success that the PSF enjoyed in working-class areas demonstrates that the party made *some* political impact, despite the odds stacked against it.

A far greater impact was made via the expansion of the Croix de feu's social programs. The realm of social policy remained the PSF's strongest asset and primary point of access into the working class. Several months after the PSF was founded, La Rocque created Travail et loisirs, an umbrella association grouping together the constellation of social centres and auxiliary groups that had been created by the Croix de feu. Several new social centres were founded; the Centre Social Français, Foyer Driant and Centre Perronnet all added to the rich associational life that the party enjoyed in the Paris region, while new centres such as the Foyer Jean Mermoz in Tourcoing brought social services to the provinces. Unlike its previous incarnation, the MSF, Travail et loisirs was aimed specifically at the working class. Working-class children, for example, were funnelled off to the larger Travail et Loisir *colonies* while the better off remained in those sponsored by the party.²³⁸ Travail et loisirs therefore represented the consolidation of the PSF's working-class programs.

²³⁶ *ibid.*

²³⁷ Thomas, 'Le Parti social français dans le Nord', p. 351.

²³⁸ Downs, "'Each and Every One of You Must Become a Chef': Toward a Social Politics of Working-Class Childhood on the Extreme Right in 1930s France', *Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009), p. 25.

As the name suggests, the new association also sought to move into the realm of organised leisure. While the Croix de feu had organised sporadic activities for working men such as social clubs and gardening associations, Travail et Loisirs was the movement's first attempt at the systematic organisation of working-class leisure. The decision reflected a wider political concern with the use of workers' leisure time, which, since the signing of the Matignon agreement, was now protected by law.²³⁹ While the PSF was broadly in favour of granting workers more time off, party officials felt that the Popular Front wasn't doing enough to ensure that leisure time was used constructively. The party feared that workers would become 'lazy and soft' by whiling away the hours at the cafe or the cabaret.²⁴⁰

The Société de préparation et d'éducation sportive (SPES) was founded in parallel with Travail et Loisirs in order to address the specific problem of physical education. The physical health of French youths had been a matter of grave concern within political and military circles since the catastrophic outcome of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. While the right was the most vocal critic of the health of young Frenchmen, emanating principally from the powerful military lobby, the left also displayed a growing concern with the issue as the labour movement took pace.²⁴¹ The issue was exasperated by the growing demographic deficit and the enormous loss of male life during the First World War. Both sides blamed the physical depravity of French manhood on the effects of mass urban migration and squalid working conditions. The crisis was also one of morality. For the right, modern urban culture promoted idleness and pleasure seeking over the higher virtues of duty and honour. By virtue of their leisure pursuits, men were becoming weak and feminine. While the left was more restrained in its critique of urban culture, it too drew a distinction between the

²³⁹ Gary Cross, 'Vacations for All: The Leisure Question in the Era of the Popular Front', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, 4 (1989), pp. 599-621.

²⁴⁰ Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 178.

²⁴¹ Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

'healthy' and 'unhealthy' leisure pursuits and promoted its own brand of physical education to the working class.

Organised physical education grew exponentially during the interwar period. The left led the way with two major organisations, the Fédération sportive du travail (FST), a Communist association, and the Union des sociétés sportives et gymnastiques du travail (USSGT), sponsored by the SFIO. The two combined in December 1934 to create the Fédération sportive et gymnastique du travail (FSGT), a body that would receive quasi-official status under the Popular Front. The right was altogether slower to organise, although the right-wing press never tired extolling the virtues of exercise and discipline. The SPES was the first serious challenge to the left on the battleground of physical education. It was also another concerted effort to tap into the left's working-class following. Through the endeavours of the left and the growing popularity of team sports such as football and rugby, working-class participation in sport had grown steadily during the interwar period. Sport was therefore an increasingly effective method of organising workers outside of the workplace. It also provided ample scope to inculcate some of the values for which a movement stood, such as teamwork, bravery, discipline, and sacrifice.

The Croix de feu was conscious of the value of sport to winning over working-class families from an early stage. In May 1935 the movement began to sponsor swimming lessons for working-class children. In Paris, cheap bus routes were put in place to allow poor children from the banlieue to travel to pools within the périphérique.²⁴² Those children that successfully passed the course were awarded the 'brevet élémentaire de natation Croix de feu'. Between October 1937 and May 1938 alone, the Croix de feu put on 32,200 lessons and awarded 556 brevets.²⁴³ Swimming, the movement claimed, had several long-term benefits. 'La Natation est le premier de tous les sports de par son utilité et son importance. Le

²⁴² AP 451 151, 'Note sur le but et le programme des SPES', 15 June 1938.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

Mouvement Croix de feu a tout de suite compris l'importance capitale que représente pour le Pays, un sport qui, non seulement briguer la première place par utilité au point de vue defense, mais aussi par ses heureux résultats au point de vue physique.²⁴⁴ While the movement is still mainly concerned with preparing future soldiers, there is also recognition of the wider benefits that good health has for daily life, a theme that the SPES would take further.

Under the stewardship of Jean de Mierry, the SPES established four local sections in Paris and a further fourteen provincial sections, attracting some 600,000 members by 1939.²⁴⁵ As usual, the PSF social centre were the fulcrum of the local SPES. A number were equipped with modern training facilities, including locker rooms and showers, and were purposefully located close to playing fields. The SPES ran an impressive range of sports and physical activities, from team sports such as football, rugby and basketball to individual pursuits including athletics, gymnastics, boxing, weightlifting, and swimming. By 1937 there were ten football teams and twenty-six basketball teams sponsored by the SPES in Paris alone.²⁴⁶ The SPES held an annual swimming gala at the Stade nautique des Tourelles in order to show off the athletic prowess of its finest members.²⁴⁷ While the organisational achievements of the SPES did not amount to those achieved by the left, aided now by the state, it was nonetheless made a far greater impression in this domain than any other right-wing movement during the period.

The PSF viewed sport as an instrumental part of its working-class program. Due to the growing demand for physical recreation, the party judged that it could draw workers

²⁴⁴ AP 451 151, 'Rapport pour le Service Propagande', 27 March 1936.

²⁴⁵ Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy*, p. 216.

²⁴⁶ Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body*, p.181.

²⁴⁷ AP 451 152, 'Brochure: Grande fête de Natation', 3 July 1938.

away from the left by providing a superior level of service and facilities. Writing to the head of social services, De Préval, Maire speculated that:

‘Jusqu’à maintenant, tous les groupements travaillistes, syndicalistes ou autres de même origine qui ont voulu s’occuper de questions sportives ont abouti à des *échecs complets*...La raison majeure en est le *manque de préparation des cadres*, tant au point de vue physique que moral. Il faut, je le crois, avant tout, placer l’ouvrier dans les conditions d’hygiène qui l’incitent à faire un effort plus que nécessaire. Les locaux qui seront proposés doivent être clairs, spacieux, rigoureusement propres et ne pas affectés à l’Education Physique sans que les installations de douches nécessaires soient complètes. En effet, cette question d’hygiène élémentaire, assez négligée dans les milieux ouvriers trouvent une excuse dans le manque d’installations dans la plupart des immeubles.

D’autre part, les cadres qui auront à s’occuper de ces éléments devront être en possession des moyens d’hygiène générale, tant corporels qu’alimentaires, qui leur permettront de guider et d’orienter des éléments souvent insuffisamment avertis, et dont les erreurs sont préjudiciables à leur santé.’²⁴⁸

This policy is evidently similar in spirit to the municipal projects undertaken by Doriot as mayor of Saint Denis. The party reasoned that top-of-the-range sports facilities were an attractive incentive for young sports fanatics, while a clean, hygienic environment would provide welcome respite from the trials of daily life. It drew influence from the Centre du Martouret, a large, modern camp in the Drôme department that provided physical education and team bonding programs for workers in Parisian heavy industry.²⁴⁹ To ensure that working men would attend its centres, the SPES worked in conjunction with Propagande ouvrière et

²⁴⁸ AP 451 153/bis, ‘Letter from M. Maire to Mlle. De Préval’, 26 May 1938.

²⁴⁹ AP 451 151, ‘Rapport sur le Centre du Martouret’, undated.

commerciale. In May 1938, the two bodies agreed to begin sending POC factory groups to SPES centres in order to participate in ‘manly’ pursuits such as football, basketball, boxing, and weightlifting.²⁵⁰ The party also offered cheap rates for unemployed workers. According to one internal report, the Parisian branch of the SPES was able to attract 1,463 unemployed to its centres in one week alone.²⁵¹

The purpose of the SPES went beyond bread and circuses, however. Through the medium of sport, the PSF hoped to communicate the inherent values of physical education to specificities of working-class life. This meant tailoring the dominant values of the movement at large to an overwhelmingly young, male, working-class audience. Firstly, the SPES aimed to show how the ‘joy’ and ‘fraternity’ of team sports might also be experienced from factory work: ‘Dans la conception courante, jeu s’oppose la plupart du temps à travail. Jeu égale joie, travail égale ennui. Jeu égale liberté, travail égale contrainte : conception que nous renions de toutes nos forces parce qu’éducateur. Le jeu est le complément naturel du travail, nécessaire à l’équilibre de toute action éducative.’²⁵² By breaking down the participant’s distinction between labour and play, workers would live happy, fulfilling and productive working lives. Secondly, sport provides correction and guidance for a generation weaned on decadent and corrupting urban culture: ‘Dans les générations que l’après guerre de 1918 a vu monter nous y avons contemplé : la veulerie, l’étourderie, l’inattention malade, l’indécision, la soif du plaisir, nous voulons après celle-ci faire monter une jeunesse robuste, équilibrée, loyale, énergique.’²⁵³ ‘[Grâce à] la pratique des sports, [elle] développe chez [les jeunes] l’esprit d’équipe, l’esprit de camaraderie, l’esprit d’altruisme. Et c’est ainsi

²⁵⁰ AP 451 153/bis, ‘Letter from M. Faust to Mlle. De Préval’, 25 May 1938.

²⁵¹ AP 451 154, ‘Rapport des activités EO des SPES de Paris’, undated.

²⁵² AP 451 151, ‘Cours des moniteurs’, undated.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

qu'ils deviennent bon ouvriers, bons pères de famille, et bons soldats.²⁵⁴ Sport is therefore also an exercise in social education and cultural readjustment. Thirdly, sport was viewed as a method for preparing working-class youths for their prescribed gender roles. While men were encouraged to participate in pursuits that developed strength, courage, teamwork, and stamina, female members were ascribed an altogether different physical program:

‘La femme est naturellement gracieuse, elle a l’instinct de l’élégance mais l’épanouissement de sa beauté ne peut être complet si elle reste étrangère à tout exercice corporel. La gracilité et la faiblesse ne sont pas nécessairement les attributs de la femme. L’éducation physique bien compromise ne lui enlève pas, comme on le croit souvent, ni la beauté ni la grâce, mais met au contraire ces qualités en valeur.

Le perfectionnement réel de chacun est en soi, il est le résultat d’un effort persévérant et l’éducation physique de la jeune fille et de la femme est d’un grand intérêt pour la race, car les qualités physiques maternelles se transmettent à l’enfant. En élevant la valeur morphologique et fonctionnelle de la femme c’est la race tout entière qu’on améliore avec elle.²⁵⁵

For female members, physical education must be undertaken to develop athletic characteristics without compromising the woman’s ‘natural’ elegance, beauty and grace. To this end, female members took part in classes that developed flexibility, balance, and posture – principally gymnastics. The development of these attributes would help the woman complete her daily domestic tasks and raise her children. Sport was therefore a means of promoting the separation of male and female spheres within working-class families, one of the primary goals of the SPES’s parent party. As this passage shows, the group also

²⁵⁴ AP 451 151, ‘Brochure: SPES buts de l’éducation’, undated.

²⁵⁵ AP 451 153/bis, ‘Education physique féminine: technique et programme’, undated.

subscribed to the view that such characteristics can be passed on genetically, lending additional merit to female physical education.

Conclusion

In the late 1930s, the PSF had grown to become the largest political movement in French history. Around two million French men and women were card-carrying members of the party in 1938; many more were probably sympathetic to the movement or participated in its activities. Presented with this simple truth, it is surprising to learn that most historians have written off the movement's claims to represent every class as unfounded posturing. It is equally surprising to learn that labour historians have regarded the PSF as irrelevant to the history of the French working class. As we established in the introduction to this thesis, historians of Germany, Italy and Great Britain, not to mention many other countries, have long left behind the simplistic pairing of working class and left-wing movements. By that token, the PSF was simply too large to register no impact with the working class. In this chapter, I have argued that we are neglecting an important part of the history of *both* the working class and the PSF if we neglect to study the two in unison. This chapter lends weight to Jean-Paul Thomas' recent claim that, in terms of membership, the working class was crucial to the numerical superiority the PSF enjoyed over other movements. This was in no small measure down to the fact that the PSF prioritised the recruitment of workers over other social groups in many constancies, such as the greater Paris conurbation, the Nord, the Lyonnais basin and southern cities such as Bordeaux and Nice. While the recruitment of workers certainly provided considerable propaganda opportunities, putting on display the 'bravery' of the PSF to 'invade' and 'conquer' areas controlled by Communists, this was not the movement's principal objective. Its principal objective was to add genuine numerical strength to the movement by recruiting from the most populous social group in the nation

and, by extension, weaken the hand of their avowed enemies on the left. To this end, the PSF could justify its *raison d'être* - unite the French and rid the nation of toxic foreign doctrines.

The PSF used a number of different strategies in order to bring workers within its orbit. As the Croix de feu, the movement began to pioneer the politisation of social work, a strategy formally limited to the left. This became a cornerstone of PSF working-class policy during the second half of the 1930s. The PSF strove to engage every aspect of working life, from job centres and apprenticeship schemes to sporting facilities and child care. While these schemes lent considerable material incentives to joining the PSF, workers themselves did not divorce these social programs from the ideology that underpinned them. The PSF's message had plenty to offer the conservative worker. It offered a dynamic and powerful alternative to the parties of the left and the dying centre, grounded on the ideals of national strength, economic revival, professional pride, and the protection of the family. The most important arm of this strategy was an organisation we have not yet studied - the *Syndicats professionnels français*, the PSF's quasi-official trade union. The SPF form the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter Three

The Syndicats professionnels français

The Confédération des syndicats professionnels français (hereafter SPF) was a trade union founded by the Parti social français in September 1936 to compete with the recently unified Confédération générale du travail and the ascendent Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens. As we established in the previous chapter, Colonel La Rocque saw the conquest of the working class as one of the primary challenges facing his party. The PSF created a thoroughgoing social program that sought to bypass the democratic process by creating a quasi-spiritual union between the party and the French people. The SPF operated on a somewhat different terrain, however. Officially, the SPF were handed complete freedom from the PSF. The SPF was expected to fight for the same issues as other trade unions: protect workers' rights, fight for better pay and better working conditions, participate in collective bargaining, and protect the integrity of the trade. The PSF used trade unionism as another receptacle for its ideology - one that would cater directly for the working class. The SPF's principles reflected those of its parent party. It promoted class collaboration and discouraged strike activity. It supported the *profession organisée* and was partially organised along professional lines in order to imitate the structure of a corporatist economy. It also pledged to protect the working family and lessen the work load of mothers and wives so they could focus on their domestic duties.

The appearance of the SPF on the trade union scene might be considered significant in several ways. Firstly, before the foundation of the SPF, French trade unionism was a two horse race - and an uneven one at that. The CGT, which was reunified in 1935, boasted nearly

four million members in December 1936 and continued to dominate labour affairs.²⁵⁶ The CFTC, meanwhile, enjoyed membership of around 750,000 in January 1937.²⁵⁷ The two unions both benefited from the resurgence of interest in trade unions after the strike wave of 1936. The arrival of the SPF changed this dynamic. It offered a 'third way' for workers to choose, an alternative to the moderate and confessional CFTC and the reformist and left-leaning CGT (with its significant Communist support). It is highly probable that conservative workers joined the CGT or the CFTC during the early- to mid- 1930s out of sense of obligation, fear, or for lack of a viable alternative. The SPF filled this vacant space to the right of the CFTC. Secondly, the SPF was significant because it was the first French trade union of any substance to originate from a far-right party. As we established in chapter one, the closest historical example to the SPF was the Jaune trade union movement, which existed briefly in the 1900s. However, while the Jaunes had close ties with the far-right, the movement had no real obligations to a parent political party. The SPF, however, was a genuine exercise of far-right politics in the arena of trade unionism. It benefited from the PSF's considerable financial reserves and pre-existing network of associations. However, unlike the Deutsche Arbeitsfront or the Fascist trade unions in Italy, which were subordinate to the state, the SPF had to operate in an open market and could not rely on coercion or terror to bring workers into its orbit. The worker had greater (but not absolute) freedom to join a trade union of his or her choice. This makes the SPF a particularly interesting case study of working-class conservatism in the late 1930s.

Historians have paid little attention to the SPF, however. Only several works on the French right mention the SPF in any detail. The trade union has also received short shrift in works of interwar labour history. Only one article, written by Philippe Machefer for *Le*

²⁵⁶ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du Front Populaire 1934-1939* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964), p. 37.

²⁵⁷ Launay, *La CFTC*, p. 322.

Mouvement social in 1982, has been entirely dedicated to the SPF.²⁵⁸ Machefer's article provides a good overview of the structure of the SPF, its popularity in certain regions and professions, and its relationship with other trade unions. According to Machefer, the SPF did remarkably well in a short space of time, attracting blue-collar workers, cadres, and white-collar workers across a range of industries in numerous urban areas.²⁵⁹ Machefer places an emphasis on the collaborationist side of the union's doctrine, underlining its attempts to create dialogue between workers and cadres and promote the idea of social accession between these two categories.²⁶⁰ However, Machefer does not stray beyond the organisational and doctrinal aspects of the SPF. Moreover, his findings are compromised by the fact that he only uses one type of source, the SPF's national newspaper.

Samuel Kalman uses a larger range of sources in his study of the SPF (which forms part of a study of the Croix de feu/PSF). Kalman analyses the SPF within the wider context of the PSF's ideological goals. He argues that the SPF was an example of the tension between modernism and traditionalism that characterised La Rocque's ideological outlook.²⁶¹ The SPF simultaneously celebrated the achievements of modern industry and yearned for the time when owners and workers toiled side-by-side. Kalman's work is useful for clarifying some of the finer points of the SPF's doctrine. However, we get no closer to understanding what the SPF was like as a real trade union that represented workers, as opposed to a system of ideas.

A couple of works of regional history offer us a glimpse into the relationship between workers and the SPF at grass roots level. Pierre Guillen has analysed the steady growth of the SPF in the Isère. Guillen finds that the SPF profited from a crisis in the

²⁵⁸ Philippe Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français (1936-1939)', *Le mouvement social* 119, (1982), pp. 91-112.

²⁵⁹ *ibid*, pp. 98-104.

²⁶⁰ *ibid*, pp. 104-108.

²⁶¹ Samuel Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France: The Faisceau and the Croix de feu* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 83-110.

Grenoblois construction industry, which was once dominated by the CGT.²⁶² This resulted in a series of armed standoffs between SPF and CGT workers. Mathias Bernard has demonstrated how pitched battles between the SPF and the CGT became part of daily life in the Auvergne. Tensions reached fever pitch in September 1936 when the prefecture of Clermont-Ferrand was occupied by right-wing metal workers.²⁶³ Robert Mencherini and Antoine Olivesi both highlight the startling growth of the SPF in the Marseille region, where dockers turned to the union to protest against the employment of North African immigrants.²⁶⁴ Kevin Passmore shows that the SPF were able to mobilise long-standing working-class conservatives in the Rhône valley by tapping into existing Catholic networks.²⁶⁵ Other studies of note include David Bensoussan on the growth of the SPF in Brittany, and Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie V. Schweitzer on the SPF in the Renault factories of Boulogne-Billancourt.²⁶⁶

These local studies shed light on a number of different issues. They show that anticommunism, directed mainly at the CGT, was an important mobiliser. They show that the resulting conflict between SPF and CGT/Communist workers was fractious, and often violent. They also show that the SPF's position on race and religion had an important bearing on why certain workers chose to join the union. We can see that these issues had deep historical roots that were unique to particular regions. We also learn that the SPF was successful at recruiting from a number of different industries, in diverse geographical locations. However,

²⁶² Pierre Guillen, 'La situation sociale en province: L'Isère' in René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (eds.), *Edouard Daladier, Chef du gouvernement : Avril 1938 - Septembre 1939* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977), pp. 156-168.

²⁶³ Mathias Bernard, 'L'Auvergne, entre Varenne et Laval', in Gilles Morin and Gilles Richard (eds.), *Les deux France du Front Populaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 302-303.

²⁶⁴ Robert Mencherini, 'Le Front populaire dans les Bouches-du-Rhône : la droite en réaction' in Morin and Richard (eds.), *Les deux France*, pp. 281-289, Antoine Olivesi, 'La situation sociale en province : Marseille et le Sud-Est' in Rémond and Bourdin (eds.), *Edouard Daladier*, pp. 169-180.

²⁶⁵ Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 284-285.

²⁶⁶ Bensoussan, *Combats Pour Une Bretagne Catholique*, pp. 507-512, Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie V. Schweitzer, *Le Communisme à L'usine : Vie Ouvrière et Mouvement Ouvrier Chez Renault 1920-1939* (Roubaix: Eclaires, 1984), pp. 225-230, 248-249.

these local studies only offer us snapshots of what the SPF was like at grassroots level, and do not come together to form a well-rounded picture of the trade union in action.

These studies do, however, give us signposts for further research. We may also make some provisional assumptions. Firstly, the SPF did not only take root in the great urban metropolises of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille, but also in smaller provincial and rural towns. John Bulaitis has recently added substance to this claim by showing that the SPF made considerable headway among rural workers in the Aisne and Oise departments.²⁶⁷ Secondly, the SPF were successful in recruiting from a broad range of industries and professions. The SPF did not only mobilise cadres and white-collar workers, as some historians have stressed, but also blue-collar workers in industries such as metallurgy, construction, and docking. This suggests that the SPF was able to appeal to a broad range of interests. Thirdly, only a complex arrangement of factors can explain blue-collar support for the SPF. Professional and socioeconomic interests intersected with xenophobia, religious identity, gender anxieties, and other concerns. Fourthly, the SPF must be understood within the conflict of left and right at grassroots level. This conflict was part of the daily experience of the working class during the 1930s. Workers understood that they belonged to a wider conflict, and this led to frequent altercations, many of which were violent. The experience of joint struggle crystallised the identity of SPF workers and strengthened its appeal to other workers alienated by the left.

This chapter aims to substantiate and nuance these claims. It analyses the SPF within the context of the key issues that mobilised conservative workers in the late 1930s, covering politics, socioeconomic issues, racial tensions, anxieties over gender identity, and other themes. It shows that these issues varied from place to place, underlining the heterogeneous appeal of the SPF. Using police records, this chapter also sheds light on the grassroots conflict that the SPF took on against the left. It shows the ways in which this

²⁶⁷ John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 120-125.

conflict was fought, from violent altercations in the factories and the streets, to lively exchanges in the press. It argues that this conflict was another terrain upon which the battle between left and right was fought. This conflict was both an expression of the conservatism of SPF workers, and a means by which such identities were constructed.

This chapter uses a broader range of sources than previous works on the SPF. Machefer's article was based on the union's principal newspaper, *SPF*, while Kalman widened his source base to include regional and corporate periodicals. I have consulted every edition of the SPF's national, regional and corporate press available from the Bibliothèque nationale de France and La Rocque's personal archives. As well as this, I have made a statistical analysis of prefecture records relating to the SPF held at the Archives de Paris, a resource previously untapped by scholars. I have also consulted police and court records of the SPF and a number of national periodicals. As such, the present chapter is the most comprehensive analysis of the SPF to date.

To begin, it is necessary to clarify several points relating to the general history of the SPF. We still know relatively little about this trade union. We can not be sure precisely how many workers joined the SPF, where they did so, and how many men and women were proportionally represented. We don't know the nature of the relationship between the SPF and PSF, and to what extent Colonel La Rocque and his entourage retained command over the union. We also know very little about the tactics the SPF used to attract workers, or the conflicts in which the SPF became embroiled. Based on new archival research, this chapter begins with a detailed study of the SPF's history, its membership, its tactics, and its relationship with the PSF. It argues that the SPF should be regarded as an important trade union, both numerically and on account of its activity. The left certainly took the threat of the SPF seriously and launched a prolonged press campaign to undermine its influence. La Rocque also struggled to reign in the SPF as its standing grew. However, the outbreak of the

second world war stopped the SPF in its tracks, and conservative workers dispersed into new organisations that were founded by the Vichy regime.

Origins and development

The SPF was founded during the fallout of the enormous strike wave that engulfed France in the summer of 1936. As we established in the previous chapter, Colonel La Rocque had already begun exploring the idea of trade unionism in 1934. Moreover, the Croix de feu had already developed an economic program for France that incorporated elements of corporatism, state planning, and class collaboration. The strike wave of 1936 rendered trade unionism a matter of urgent concern. On 6 June La Rocque announced the creation of a bureau d'études dedicated to the creation of a new trade union to challenge the hegemony of the reunified CGT.²⁶⁸ The future head of the SPF, Roger Vitrac, was charged with putting together the statutes for the new union. Vitrac was a close ally of La Rocque; he sat on the PSF's Comité financier and wrote regular columns for *Le Flambeau* and *Le Petit Journal* on economics and labour affairs.²⁶⁹ The first trade unions were rolled out in Paris merely days later. The sheer speed with which the first SPF were founded aroused suspicion in the left-wing press. Socialist daily *Le Populaire* speculated that the first SPF were founded by firms and employers that held sympathies for the Croix de feu.²⁷⁰ They were probably correct. The SPF at Citroën, which had a large Croix de feu section, deposited its statutes to the police prefecture two days after the bureau d'études started work.²⁷¹ The Samaritaine department

²⁶⁸ *Le Flambeau*, 6 June 1936.

²⁶⁹ Kalman, *The Extreme Right*, p. 97-98.

²⁷⁰ *Le Populaire*, 11 July 1937.

²⁷¹ AP W1070 47, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers et employés des établissements André Citroën', 8 June 1936.

store also founded one of the first SPF and immediately became a target for Communist attacks.²⁷²

By mid-July, the SPF claimed to have formed 2,000 unions in the Paris region.²⁷³ While this figure was probably exaggerated, the SPF was large enough at this stage to require a central body, the Union fédérale de la région parisienne (UF de Paris). The first president of the new federation was a bank manager, Marcel Gambart. Louis Tourainne and Gaston Dujardin, engineer and office manager respectively, were the first vice-presidents of the UF de Paris, and proved to be active leaders throughout the SPF's existence. The UF de Paris grew to cover union activity in the Seine, Seine-et-Oise, Oise, and Seine-et-Marne departments. After a brief stay at 11 rue Caumartin, the UF de Paris ran its operations from a four-storey building at 66 rue de la Boétie in Paris's well-to-do 8th arrondissement. This address would remain the nerve-centre of the SPF until its dissolution in 1940. While the upper floors were reserved for operations and propaganda services, the ground floor provided day-to-day services for its members and was furnished with an information centre, a legal-aid centre and a work placement service for the unemployed.²⁷⁴ By the end of the year, the UF de Paris oversaw thirty four industry-specific unions.²⁷⁵

Workplace elections indicate that the SPF enjoyed early success in the Parisian metallurgical and automobile industries. At Citroën and Matford, thirteen delegates were elected in October 1936, while eight were elected at Maison Brotin and U. C. P. M. I., both

²⁷² *Le Matin*, 19 June 1936.

²⁷³ *SPF*, 15 July 1936.

²⁷⁴ APPP BA 2045, 'A.S. de l'Union fédérale de la region Parisienne des Syndicats Professionnels Français', 1 December 1936.

²⁷⁵ Hôtellerie, Pharmacie, Automobile, Industries electriques, Assurance (x2), Nouveauté (x2), Taxi, Alimentation, Aéronautique, Banques et crédits (x2), Bâtiment, Production cinématographique, Coiffure, Confection et habillement, Cuirs et peaux, Comptabilité et contentieux, Halles, Imprimeries et livre, Industries chimiques, Horticoles, Infermiers, Maraichers et agricoles, Métallurgie, Orfèvrerie, Papeterie, Parfumerie, Textile, Transports, Voyageurs de commerce. APPP BA 2045, 'A.S. de l'Union fédérale de la region Parisienne des Syndicats Professionnels Français', 1 December 1936; Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français' p. 93.

metallurgical factories.²⁷⁶ The SPF also made early headway in the Parisian chemical industry. SPF delegates won an absolute majority at the Oxhydrique française factory in November, while the first meeting of the SPF des Industries Chimiques at the Salle Gaveau in the same month reportedly attracted over a thousand workers.²⁷⁷ Yet the early months of the SPF were also beset by problems. Many unions, hastily put-together during the summer of 1936, were dissolved with equal haste during the autumn as workers lost interest. Others, such as the SPF at the electrical lighting company Forlum, had to dissolve due to financial difficulties.²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the rate of growth of the new union raised considerable concern inside the Popular Front government. The minister of the interior, Roger Salengro, was panicked by the participation of the SPF in an industrial conflict in Clermont Ferrand. 'Il semble qu'on se trouve en présence d'une manœuvre dont la gravité ne saurait vous échapper', Salengro informed his prefecture. 'Ferait-elle réellement partie d'un plan concerté, et serait-elle susceptible d'être renouvelée dans d'autres départements ?'²⁷⁹

Salengro's fears proved to be well-founded. The SPF slowly expanded across France during the remaining months of 1936 and violent incidents followed closely in tow. Days after Salengro's memorandum, the SPF were responsible for breaking a metalworkers strike in the Provence region. Communists retaliated by looting the SPF's regional headquarters in Marseille.²⁸⁰ The SPF cemented its progress in the provinces by creating seventeen regional federations modelled on the UF de Paris.²⁸¹ In addition to this, fifteen *fédérations nationales* were formed to coordinate activity along corporatist lines, bringing the SPF in line with the

²⁷⁶ *Le Matin*, 30 October 1936.

²⁷⁷ *Le Matin*, 5 November 1936; *L'Informateur*, December 1936.

²⁷⁸ AP W1070 47. 'Syndicat professionnel français de la société française Force et Lumière Electrique Forlum : Bilan de dissolution', 3 August 1936.

²⁷⁹ APPP BA 1952, 'Note du Ministre de l'Intérieur aux préfets', 8 September 1936.

²⁸⁰ *Le Figaro*, 15 September 1936.

²⁸¹ Paris, Lille, Rouen, Brest, Nantes, Bordeaux, Dijon, Toulouse, Montpellier, Marseille, Lyon, Strasbourg, Châteauroux, Mulhouse, Nancy, Reims and Clermont-Ferrand.

corporatist ambitions of its parent party.²⁸² Finally, on 19 January 1937, Vitrac formally announced the formation of the Confédération des Syndicats Professionnels Français, an umbrella organisation for all of the regional and corporate federations.

As a national body, the SPF continued to grow in size and confidence. In February 1937 the SPF des services publics was founded, an influential union that would later play an important role during the public sector strikes at the end of the year. 'L'influence de la CGT dans les usines est-elle en décroissance ?' asked *Le Figaro* in May after the SPF posted more impressive election results at Peugeot, while Christian daily *La Croix* added 'ce mouvement marque-t-il une évolution dans la masse française ?'²⁸³ A police document states that between February and June the SPF won 722 delegates seats available and signed 322 collective contracts, making particular penetration in the food manufacturing industry and department stores. Recruitment, meanwhile, had picked up to 'une rythme assez élevé', reaching perhaps 600,000 members.²⁸⁴ The industrial basin of Paris continued to be the primary motor of growth for the SPF. Growth in the provinces proved to be more stubborn. In the Nord, a police commissioner tried to explain this sluggish growth to his prefect:

'Pour le Nord, les dirigeants des SPF font preuve d'une certaine activité. Ils disposent de tous les moyens d'action susceptibles de favoriser leur développement (locaux, publicité)...Cependant leurs efforts n'ont pas été jusque là couronnés de succès. Ils se heurtent à l'antipathie des ouvriers pour qui l'origine de cette organisation reste suspecte. Dans le monde du travail on soupçonne les chefs de ce nouveau syndicalisme de collusion avec le patronat. Aussi, malgré les concours qu'ils ont trouvé et trouvent encore auprès des chefs

²⁸² Agriculture, Automobile, Banque et Crédit, Cuir et Peaux, Hôtellerie, Imprimerie et Livre, Mines et Carrières, Nouveauté, Papeterie, Services publics, Spectacle, Textile, Transports, Chemin de fer and Industries électriques.

²⁸³ *Le Figaro*, 20 April 1937; *La Croix*, 20 May 1937.

²⁸⁴ APPP BA 2045, 'S. A. de la Confédération des Syndicats Professionnels Français', 3 December 1937.

d'industrie, ils groupent à peine 10,000 membres dans notre département dont 6,000 environ pour l'arrondissement de Lille.²⁸⁵

10,000 members still represented solid results from several months work. Other regional federations had greater difficulty in forming unions and attracting members. The SPF du Centre-Sud, based in Clermont-Ferrand, was candid in its monthly publication regarding the lack of orators, cadres and money that the union could rally, and believed that the CFTC was syphoning off much of the SPF's potential support.²⁸⁶

The SPF attempted to wield its new clout by lobbying the Popular Front government and crying foul over the abuses of the CGT. In February 1937 it joined Jean Fernand-Laurent, a conservative deputy, in protesting the monopoly of the CGT over construction contracts for the Exposition internationale.²⁸⁷ A month later, the SPF amplified its protests in the wake of the bloody encounter between the PSF and antifascist protesters in Clichy on 16 March. In an open letter to the président du conseil, Léon Blum, it stated that 'nous nous élevons énergiquement, non seulement contre ces entraves répétées à la liberté du travail, mais estimons qu'il ne peut être toléré de voir des travailleurs français indépendante contraints de cesser leur travail sous la menace de délégués cégétistes pour la plupart étrangers.'²⁸⁸ The opposition between the 'travailleur français indépendant' and 'cégétiste étranger' would remain a dominant theme in SPF discourse until its dissolution.

The SPF held its first congress on 23-25 July 1937 at the Salle des Ingénieurs-Civils in Paris. During his speech, Vitrac echoed some of the themes that consumed the right during the Popular Front period: 'Ce congrès...se situe au moment même où notre pays a besoin de tous des fils de toutes forces saines de la nation. La force SPF est prête. Nous aurons à

²⁸⁵ ADN M595 106, 'Commissaire Divisionnaire de Police Spéciale, Lille au Préfet du Nord', 13 July 1937.

²⁸⁶ *Bulletin d'information des syndicats professionnels français de la région Centre-Sud*, June 1937.

²⁸⁷ *Le Temps*, 25 February 1937.

²⁸⁸ *Le Petit Parisien*, 20 March 1937.

l'appliquer dans un bref avenir pour la sauvegarde des intérêts supérieurs de notre pays.²⁸⁹

The idea of a greater national interest, of sacrifice, and of 'clean' and 'dirty' elements of the national body, were common on the right and the SPF saw itself as part of this lineage. The general secretary, Maurice Jourdan, drew upon these themes again on the last day of the congress, underlining the quasi-spiritual purpose of the union. 'Il faut substituer...au monde actuel un monde plus humain, où l'argent sera au service de la production, la production au service de l'homme, et l'homme au service d'un idéal qui le dépasse dans la vie.'²⁹⁰

Come 1938, the SPF was a visible force with membership comparable to that of the CFTC.²⁹¹ Its formidable size and strength meant that other trade unions, politicians, and the government could no longer ignore the new upstart. In February an SPF delegation was received several times by the minister of labour, Ludovic-Oscar Frossard, in order to end a food manufacturing strike in the Paris region (a move which also reflected the importance of the SPF in this industry).²⁹² The SPF also received the ear of the minister of the interior, Albert Saurrat, and the minister of public works, Anatole de Monzie, over collective contract renewals in the entertainment and public sectors.²⁹³ The SPF was also a vocal opponent of the huge metalworkers strike that hit Paris during March and April of that year, allying on this occasion with the CFTC. The SPF worked with the hôtel de ville to extend the municipal aid available to non-striking workers, and used militants in its strongest factories, notably SIMCA and Matford, in order to encourage defections and weaken the grip of the Communists.²⁹⁴

However, the perpetual growth of the SPF and its visible national presence masked a number of internal divisions that would precipitate the union's decline. In an internal memo

²⁸⁹ *Le Matin*, 25 July 1937.

²⁹⁰ *Le Matin*, 26 July 1937.

²⁹¹ Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français', p. 94.

²⁹² *Le Petit Parisien*, 19 February 1938; Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français' p. 98.

²⁹³ *Le Matin*, 14 August 1938; *Le Figaro*, 30 August 1938.

²⁹⁴ *La Croix*, 8 April 1938; *SPF*, April 1938.

to Vitrac, probably dating around September 1937, the head of legal services, Marrié, gave a damning assessment of the internal functioning of the UF de Paris:

‘Nous recevons assez de monde chaque jour et assez de membres de bureaux syndicats pour connaître l'état de l'UF [de Paris] par recoupement. Il semble qu'elle présente l'état d'un véritable panier à crabes. Les animosités existantes sont très fortes et nombreuses. Oppositions Node-Langlois-Davy contre Fournier, Fournier contre Caussade, Camberabero-Salke contre Fournier etc...Des gens comme Caussade et Nodé, Langlois nous semblent sujets à caution.

Nous pensons que certains syndicats parisiens sont prêts à la dissidence parce qu'ils sont dégoûtés de la pagaie actuelle qui règne’.²⁹⁵

Corruption, he claims, is also rife:

‘Nous signalons que la CSPF paie 6 à 8,000 qui ont été volés à un patron par un délégué SPF du Taxi. Un ancien secrétaire de l'Aéronautique, Herluison a volé 4,500 - il y a environ 6 mois. Nous avons une sommation d'huissier à ce sujet mais on nous a interdit de porter plainte. Pour quels motifs ? L'honnêteté est-elle devenu un vice ? N'aurions-nous pas une meilleure position en faisant condamner nos adhérents qui sont des crapules ? Leur exemple encourage les autres.’²⁹⁶

Marie's report corroborates with an exposé on the SPF by Jean-Maurice Hermann in *Le Populaire* and Raymond Millet in *Le Temps* in April.²⁹⁷ By this point, the ‘dissidence’

²⁹⁵ AN 451AP 140, ‘Rapport sur la marche et l'organisation actuelle de la CSPF’, Undated.

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *Le Populaire*, 25 April 1938; 28 April 1938.

anticipated by Marie had become a reality. Condemning the 'Vitrac-La Roque-Gignoux' clan, the SPF des voyageurs de commerce left the confederation and formed the dissident Union Fédérale des Syndicats Professionnels Indépendants. It was soon joined by SPFs from the insurance and chemical industries.²⁹⁸ The influential Tourainne resigned as president of the UF de Paris.²⁹⁹



Figure 3 - Cartoon of worker turning away from a basket of SPF insignia in disgust.

Le Populaire, 8 May 1938

In spite of corruption, defection, and widespread malaise, the SPF tried to keep face and battle on. It dismissed Hermann's interest in the schism as 'un mauvais roman-feuilleton' and pledged to prove its strength with renewed vigour.³⁰⁰ On 9-11 September, the SPF held its second congress in Marseille. Vitrac affirmed that the SPF has become 'la concurrante la

²⁹⁸ *Le Populaire*, 28 April 1938.

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *SPF*, May 1938.

plus dangereuse pour la CGT', citing that during the previous year, the SPF has won 5,067 delegate seats, carried by over 500,000 votes.³⁰¹ There were also now 1,070 *syndicats de branche* across the nation, an 105% increase from the year before.³⁰² The SPF also began to adjust its rhetoric in light of the worsening situation abroad. As the Sudeten crisis hung over Europe, the SPF condemned a Parisian construction strike as 'un crime contre le pays'.³⁰³ The SPF de Normandie, meanwhile, declared that 'toute agitation...aurait pour effet de diviser les travailleurs et de compromettre la défense nationale de transformer les usines en terrains d'une lutte idéologique fratricide et d'offrir la France aux tentations de l'étranger.'³⁰⁴

The looming threat of Nazi Germany allowed the SPF to present class collaboration as a matter of national security. The general strike of 30 November 1938 against the Reynaud decree laws gave the SPF the ideal opportunity to illustrate this point. It seems, however, that the confederation was unable to capitalise on the strike. The SPF claimed that it had 1,350,000 members in January 1939, yet it fared very poorly in prud'homme and delegate elections during the turn of the year.³⁰⁵ Machefer argues that the decline of the SPF in 1939 was a result of the decline of its parent party, who had become cut-off from any possible alliance with Daladier and the Radicals.³⁰⁶ Yet internal divisions seem to have again plagued the union. In February the SPF held an emergency congress in order to address its organisational weaknesses. A motion was passed to decentralise the SPF, handing greater power to departmental unions.³⁰⁷ The emergency motion may have been passed to remove

³⁰¹ *Bulletin d'information des syndicats professionnels français de la région Centre-Sud*, October 1938.

³⁰² *ibid.*

³⁰³ *Le Matin*, 20 September 1938.

³⁰⁴ *Le Matin*, 25 November 1938.

³⁰⁵ ADN 68J 167, 'Activité générale des SPF en France', 30 January 1939. *La Croix*, 19 January 1939; *L'Humanité*, 30 December 1939.

³⁰⁶ Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français' p. 112.

³⁰⁷ ADN M595 106, 'Commissaire divisionnaire au Préfet du Nord', 30 January 1939; *Le Matin*, 19 February 1939.

power from the moribund central bureau. The *secrétaire adjoint*, Roumanès, reportedly expressed at the congress that:

‘La CSPF est une jolie fille...bien faite...constituée par d’horribles vieillards séniles...et par de falots personnages. Il lui plaît de flirter...mais c’est pour s’assurer son pouvoir. Elle reste fière...parce qu’elle s’est donnée tout entière à un gars qui est beau...le pays.’³⁰⁸

The reorganisation of the SPF did stimulate growth in some areas, with new departmental unions filling vacuums in Haut-Rhin and the Midi.³⁰⁹ Certain factory unions, such as that at SIMCA, continued to function well and win majorities in delegate elections.³¹⁰ Yet the wider picture was one of decline. The important SPF de l’hôtellerie, along with regional SPFs based in Lille and Troyes, left the confederation months after the congress.³¹¹ The SPF’s most powerful federation, the UF de Paris, dissolved on 12 July ‘pour des raisons d’ordre intérieur’, and was replaced by the far weaker Union départementale de la Seine.³¹²

Ultimately, the outbreak of the war and the arrival of the Vichy regime would seal the SPF’s fate. The SPF was dissolved alongside the CGT and CFTC in November 1940 by ordinance of the Vichy government. The SPF de la Seine did continue to operate in a reduced capacity, and it appears to have formed links with Madame Huntziger, the head of ‘Secours national’ under Vichy.³¹³ Infrequent meetings and professional courses were also permitted if authorised by the prefecture. Roger Vitrac, meanwhile, was elected to the Conseil national and had some influence in labour affairs, possibly oiled by the SPF’s admiration for René

³⁰⁸ *Le Populaire*, 20 February 1939.

³⁰⁹ Machefer, ‘Les syndicats professionnels français’ pp. 109-110.

³¹⁰ *L’Humanité*, 27 June 1939.

³¹¹ *Le Populaire*, 11 March 1939; 17 April 1939.

³¹² APPP BA 2045, ‘A.S. des “Syndicats Professionnels Français”’, 20 January 1940.

³¹³ APPP BA 2045, ‘Untitled report’, 19 March 1941.

Berlin and the *syndicats* wing of the CGT prior to the war. Regardless, the Vichy government ensured that the SPF was a spent force.

Case study: L'union fédérale de la région parisienne

While it is impossible to create a detailed national picture of the SPF in this chapter, we can gain a better understanding of the organisation of the SPF, its membership across different industries, and the gender balance of its followers, through a case study of the SPF's biggest regional federation, the UF de Paris. Machefer has already looked into the UF de Paris in his article. He highlights the strength of the union in the chemical, food, insurance, and taxi industries, along with a sizeable following among department store employees. The SPF also penetrated some of the automobile manufacturers of the region, including the jewel in the crown, Renault, where the SPF became 'une lézarde dans la forteresse'.³¹⁴ We are able to expand on this picture considerably. The law of 1884 on associations ruled that trade unions must declare themselves to the local prefecture and deposit a copy of their statutes and a list of their founding members. The Archives de Paris holds a large number of these documents in the W1070 series. The Archives de la préfecture de la police also holds a large number of these documents in the BA 2045 carton, many of which are not replicated in the W1070 series. Taken together, these documents give us an incomplete but nonetheless more thorough picture of the UF de Paris in its organisational aspect. We gain an insight into precisely which organisations had SPFs, the date of their formation and dissolution, the complexion of their executive committee, and occasionally more detailed information on membership and significant meetings.

³¹⁴ Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français' pp. 98-99.

SPFs affiliated to the Union fédérale de la région parisienne, by industry	Number
Aéronautique	6
Agriculture	7
Alimentation	35
Ameublement et décoration	17
Assurance	33
Automobile	36
Banque et crédit	16
Bâtiment	32
Blanchisserie et teinturerie	2
Chemin de fer	1
Cinéma (production et distribution)	7
Coiffure	3
Comptabilité et contentieux	1
Concierges	2
Confection et habillement	9
Cuirs et peaux	6
Exportation / Importation	8
Gardiens, Surveillants et Propriétés d'immeubles	1
Ouvriers et employés des Halles	8
Hôtellerie et restauration	14
Imprimeries	14
Industries chimiques	45
Industries dentaires	3
Industries électriques	39
Infirmiers	2
Lutherie	2

SPFs affiliated to the Union fédérale de la région parisienne, by industry	Number
Métallurgie	55
Mines	3
Nouveauté	30
Optique de la lunetterie et des instruments de la précision	3
Orfèverie, bijouterie, joaillrie et métaux précieux	4
Papeterie	6
Parfumerie	12
Pharmacie	33
Services publics	5
Spectacle	5
Taxi	12
Textile	26
Tourisme	4
Transports	9
Voyageurs de commerce	1
Voyageurs, représentants et placeirs	1
<i>Unspecified</i>	64
TOTAL	622

Table 1 - Sample of Syndicats professionnels français in the Paris region, 1936-1939.³¹⁵

Table 1 shows a break down of SPFs that were affiliated to the UF de Paris by industry. It must be noted that these SPFs represent only a fraction of the SPFs that were formed between 1936 and 1939. This is also not a controlled sample; the historian is at the

³¹⁵ This data extracted from documents titled 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français...' in AP W1070 46-55 'Syndicats professionnels' and APPP BA 2045 'Syndicats professionnels français'.

mercy of the prefecture records that made it into the archives. Some of these SPFs were substantial unions that lasted for two to three years, while others folded quickly due to a lack of interest.

With these qualifications in mind, we may make some careful analysis. Firstly, the sheer breadth of industries that the SPF came to represent is striking. In traditional blue-collar industries such as textile and chemical works, SPFs were numerous and often sprung-up in sizeable establishments. The SPF des ouvriers et employés des établissements de Laines et Tricots BZF boasted 105 members, eighty of which were female.³¹⁶ The A. Godde-Bedin and Fabriques de Laire factories also recruited fifty and forty-nine members respectively.³¹⁷ Large SPF in the chemical industry included the 235-strong SPF des ouvriers, employés et techniciens des établissements Rhône-Phoulenc, based in Vitry-sur-Seine, and the SPF des ouvriers et employés de la Stearinerie Dubois, which recruited ninety workers from its factory in Boulogne-Billancourt.³¹⁸ In the metallurgical industry, we can account for the formation of at least fifty-five SPFs. However, it must be taken into consideration that part of this industry was subdivided into other specialised categories in order to cater for the interests of specialised industries, such as automobile and aeronautical production. The SPF at Sauter-Harlé initially recruited seventy-five men and, as we will later discover, was extremely active during its existence.³¹⁹ To this we may add important SPFs at Citroën, Matford, Ferodo, Goodrich, Mestre et Blageté, and Camions Bernard, to name but a few.

³¹⁶ AP W1070 50, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers et employés des établissements de Laines et Tricots BZF', 17 October 1936.

³¹⁷ AP W1070 47, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers et employés des établissements de A. Godde-Bedin and Fabriques de Laire', 6 January 1937.

³¹⁸ AP W1070 48, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers, employés et techniciens des établissements Rhône-Phoulenc', 7 January 1937, AP W1070 49, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français ouvriers et employés de la Stearinerie Dubois', 19 November 1936.

³¹⁹ AP W1070 47, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers et employés des établissements Sauter-Harlé', 22 August 1936.

Unfortunately, data from the prefecture does not exist for the SPF at Renault, but police records do exist of their meetings.

Machefer is right to underscore the importance of the SPF in food production. The food production factories of the Paris basin boasted some of the largest SPF on record, such as those at Pernod (462 members), Gondolo (125) and the Abattoirs de la Villette (219), the latter of which already had an infamous association with the right as shock troops for the Marquis de Morès, half a decade before. Machefer is correct on the same score concerning department store workers. The SPF des ouvriers et employés de la Nouveauté de la Région parisienne began life with 4,000 members.³²⁰ Its newspaper, the *Bulletin des Syndicats professionnels français des ouvriers et employés de la Nouveauté*, was the first industry-specific publication to appear, and its success led to the publication of store-specific publications at La Samaritaine and the Galeries Lafayette. The SPF at Printemps, Galeries Lafayette, Samaritaine, Réunis Turenne, Uniprix, Prixunic Vauginard and Belle Jardinière all began with between fifty and 150 workers and remained active right up to the outbreak of the war.

Likewise, the SPF made substantial gains in the insurance and banking industries, supporting the claim that the SPF had much to offer better off, white-collar employees. Union members in the insurance industry could subscribe to *Le mois syndical français*, while those in the banking industry were provided with the monthly *Banque et crédit*. Of all the white-collar industries, the insurance sector stands out as a particular bastion for the SPF. Many were founded in the 9th arrondissement where a high concentration of insurance companies existed - Le Nord, Gresham Life, and La Concorde all had over fifty employees. White-collar workers were also catered for by the *Syndicat professionnel français des employés de Comptabilité, Contentieux, Cabinets d'affaires et branches connexes*. While data

³²⁰ APPP B2045, 'Conformation du dépôt des statuts et de la liste des membres de Syndicat professionnel français des ouvriers et employés de la Nouveauté', 23 July 1936.

concerning this sector is missing, it was important enough to be granted its own monthly publication, *Le Trait d'union*.

While Machafer is correct to highlight the importance of the SPF in the food, chemical, and white-collar industries, this picture is incomplete. As *table 1* demonstrates, SPF sprung up in a broad range of industries in the Paris region, and therefore appealed to a broad range of interest groups. In fact, there does not appear to have been many industries in the Paris region within which the SPF didn't have some representation, although this view would require further examination. The growth of the SPF in electrical manufacturing is particularly striking. The Syndicat professionnel français des employés des Industries Electriques, based at 56 rue Jacob, was one of the largest SPFs sampled (representing thirty-nine unions). Among these was a large SPF at the Thomson-Houston telephone company (105 members), Ouest-Lumière (sixty), Société Industrielle des Téléphones (seventy), Ariane (fifty-six) and Geoffroy-Delore (fifty). Likewise, the construction, furnishing and decoration industries were all well served by the SPF, with large unions created at L. Raulet (fifty-three members) and Les Clous au Soleil (sixty). The pharmaceutical industry, again considered something of a bastion by the SPF, had the newspaper *Pharmacie*, a monthly publication, and a large presence at firms such as the Institut Pasteur (150 members) and the Établissements Rodin (eighty). Also worthy of comment here is the perfume industry, which was founded with 800 members in July 1936, the hotel and restaurant industry, which could count among its ranks the 170-strong union at Grand Hôtel, and the printing industry, whose biggest union on record was founded at the journal *Illustration* and boasted 109 members. This prefectoral data also allows us to remark upon on the gender composition of the SPF. Data on male and female membership is available for 301 of the SPFs on record - approximately one half. These figures were submitted when an SPF was founded, and therefore are only representative of the SPF at a given moment in time. Moreover, the partialness of this data, within a sample already of limited size, means any broad conclusions

that may be drawn are of limited historical value. Nonetheless, these figures will be of some use when we come to discuss the issue of gender later in this chapter.

Industry	SPFs with data on gender composition	Male membership	Female membership	Ratio (men:women)
Aéronautique	3	51	13	3.92
Alimentation	12	769	383	2.01
Agriculture	1	100	100	100
Ameublement et décoration	8	123	55	2.24
Assurance	30	701	316	2.22
Automobile	18	776	178	4.36
Banque et crédit	9	167	156	1.07
Bâtiment	14	246	68	3.62
Blanchisserie et teinturerie *	1	100	350	0.29
Cinéma	4	58	31	1.87
Coiffure	2	12	20	0.6
Confection et habillement	5	56	80	0.7
Cuirs et peaux	3	50	28	1.79
Exportation / importation	3	69	17	4.06
Ouvriers et employés des Halles	3	44	10	4.4
Hôtellerie et restauration	7	279	71	3.93
Imprimeries et livre	5	278	70	3.97
Industries chimiques	8	361	161	2.24
Industries dentaires	1	15	6	2.5
Industries électriques	27	688	242	2.84

Industry	SPFs with data on gender composition	Male membership	Female membership	Ratio (men:women)
Lutherie	1	80	0	80
Métallurgie	26	535	159	3.64
Mines	1	10	5	2
Nouveauté	11	392	231	1.7
Orfèverie, bijouterie, joaillrie et métaux précieux	2	56	34	1.65
Papeterie	2	53	29	1.83
Parfumerie	4	72	77	0.94
Pharmacie	12	129	230	0.56
Services publics	1	17	14	1.21
Spectacle	2	14	10	1.4
Taxi	1	35	0	35
Textile	17	232	252	0.92
Transports *	1	100	0	100
<i>Unidentified</i>	56	1,059	642	1.65
TOTAL	301	7,707	4,038	1.91

Table 2 - Gender composition of a sample of Syndicats professionnels français in the Paris region, 1936-1939.³²¹

³²¹ AP W1070 46-55 'Syndicats professionnels' and APPP BA 2045 'Syndicats professionnels français'.

Of the 301 SPF sampled, 7,707 workers were male and 4,038 female, which calculates to a ratio of 1.91 men for every woman. In certain industries, the gender balance of the SPF reflects the dominance of a particular gender for a given task. This is the case in the bleaching and dying industries where female workers belonging to the SPF outnumbered male workers by 3.5 to 1. The same observation may be applied to the hairdressing, perfume and luxury goods industries, and may also account for the slightly larger number of female members in the Parisian textile sector. However, it can not be taken for granted that the gendered division of labour in Parisian industry would necessarily be directly reflected in the gendered composition of the SPF. The question of *why* female workers adhered to the SPF is still left begging. Some additional remarks may also be made with regards to the significant presence of women in male-dominated industries such as automobile production and metallurgy. Despite being numerically dominated by around 3-4 to 1, the adherence of these women and their relationship with male members raise some compelling questions. The domination of women in the pharmaceutical industry is also a curious anomaly. These will be addressed later in this chapter.

An independent trade union of a front for the PSF?

To fully understand the nature of the SPF and its underlying ideology, we must understand the dynamics of its relationship with the PSF. The SPF denied any link with La Rocque's party and claimed to be above the corrupting influence of politics. The SPF frequently denounced the political motivations of left-wing labour unrest and promised to guide the union down a purely professional path. It claimed to be the true heir of revolutionary syndicalism as it was originally conceived at the Charter of Amiens - principles, it noted, that the CGT and the CFTC no longer adhered to. Article one of the union's statutes, signed by every SPF, was underscored in black ink: *'Aucune question ne pourra y être discutée*

*qui soit étrangère à la profession.*³²² A sign overhanging the union's headquarters on rue de la Boétie, meanwhile, strictly forbid the wearing of any party insignia.³²³

If the SPF was unequivocal in regards to its distaste for party politics, in reality it enjoyed a far more complex relationship with the PSF. The party was unquestionably responsible for the foundation of the union, as La Rocque's article in *Le Flambeau*, cited earlier, demonstrates.³²⁴ Moreover, the speed in which the new unions were able to become established suggested that pre-existing networks ran by the Croix de feu were used to facilitate the process. *Le Populaire* alleged that the founding member of the SPF at Fondeur Fils, a hardware store, was also a director in the Croix de feu, while the three SPF executives at the Palais de la Nouveauté were Croix de feu paramilitaries, or VNs.³²⁵ Police sources substantiate *Le Populaire's* claims. Prefecture reports show that Dujardin, Étienne Laporte, and three other members of the executive committee of the UF de Paris were also card carriers for the PSF.³²⁶ Meanwhile René-Gilbert Piercy, the head of placement services at the union's headquarters, had worked as a secretary at *Le Flambeau* and led the Saint-Cloud section of the VN.³²⁷

The SPF also appropriated some of the symbols used by the Croix de feu. The cult of Jean Mermoz, a heroic aviator who became honorary president of the Croix de feu/PSF until his death in December 1936, was also of crucial importance to symbology of the SPF. Mermoz was the founding president of the SPF de l'aéronautique, the *SPF de branche* for the aeronautical industry. Mermoz's portrait also hung over the stage of the SPF's first congress

³²² AP W1070 48, 'Statuts des Syndicats professionnels français des Ouvriers et Employés des Établissements André Citroën', 8 June 1936.

³²³ *Le Temps*, 3 August 1937.

³²⁴ *Le Flambeau*, 6 June 1936.

³²⁵ *Le Populaire*, 17 June 1936.

³²⁶ APPP BA 2045, 'A.S. de "L'Union Fédérale Parisienne des Syndicats Professionnels Français', 29 August 1936.

³²⁷ APPP BA 2045, 'Rapport sur les SPF', 4 January 1937.

in Paris. The first seance of the congress was opened by Rammonès with a toast to the great pilot, 'adhérent SPF de la première heure, symbole des qualités et des vertus de notre race, héros magnifique, gloire française, qui aurait dû être le chef respecté, écouté, aimé de la CSPF.'³²⁸ Mermoz personified the virtues of Frenchness, leadership, and *patrie*, that the SPF purported to stand for, a symbol of continuity with the Croix de feu.

While La Rocque was largely preoccupied with the running of the PSF during the Popular Front years, the leader retained an interest in the SPF and continued to have a hand in its affairs. The head of the pharmaceutical branch of the SPF, René Rossion, felt moved to contact La Rocque in order to express his discontent with the state of the union:

Président d'une branche SPF, je suis peiné de voir nombre de mes collègues brûler actuellement ce qu'ils avaient adoré naguère et suis navré de constater que malgré mes prévisions les évènements me donnent raison; c'est à dire, manque de chefs, de cohésions, de directives, en un mot, absence totale de notre ancien esprit.

Sachant, mon Colonel, que cette lettre vous sera remise en mains propres, je me permets cette assimilation.³²⁹

Writing late into 1937, Rossion clearly still saw La Rocque as the guiding light of the SPF. In addition to this, the references he makes to 'chefs' and 'notre ancien esprit' displays the old language of the Croix de feu, with its preoccupation with strong leadership and the spirit of brotherhood. Clearly many saw the SPF as a continuation of the Croix de feu mission. The ambiguous relationship between the SPF and the PSF was also on display when La Rocque spoke at workplace meetings. On 10 April 1937 La Rocque gave a speech for the PSF in front of 600 PSF supporters at a Renault factory, many of whom also belonged to the

³²⁸ *Le Matin*, 24 July 1937.

³²⁹ AN 451AP 140, 'Lettre de M. Rossion à Colonel La Rocque', 30 September 1937.

local SPF. La Rocque warned workers to stay on guard against the 'salopards de la CGT' and condemned the CGT for becoming 'une force politique'.³³⁰ Yet events such as these only juxtaposed the messages of the PSF and SPF. Many workers probably struggled to separate the two. Many workers were card-carriers for both organisations. Membership to the PSF was not a prerequisite to joining the SPF, but it certainly eased the process. The PSF provided a strong organisational structure and substantial material reserves, but it was reluctant to lend its help to forces outside of the party. The SPF was permitted to use some of the job placement offices licensed to the PSF and probably used earlier by the Croix de feu in the mid-1930s.³³¹ In the Nord the PSF was responsible for getting the SPF up and running, and local police reports suggest that only PSF members were permitted to use the job placement service in Lille.³³² PSF workers in nearby Tourcoing meanwhile were also encouraged to attend the regional SPF congress in order to present a more impressive front to newcomers.³³³

Yet the SPF and the PSF did not function in perfect symbiosis. The SPF did in fact retain a degree of independence from its parent party, and this could often result in a conflict of interests. As we have already discussed in the previous chapter, the PSF pursued its own strategies to attract workers, and these could sometimes undermine the work of the SPF. The PSF organised its own groupements d'usine in order to combat Communist cells (later renamed cellules d'entreprises in 1938) and published its own factory-based journal, *L'Ouvrier libre*. These groups were later placed under the command of the POC. PSF social services, meanwhile, under the umbrella to the Travail et Loisirs movement, superseded anything available from the SPF. Millet in *Le Temps* suggests that these policies were deliberately

³³⁰ APPP BA 1952, 'Réunion d'information organisée par le PSF des Usines Renault', 10 April 1937.

³³¹ AP BA 2045, 'Note pour Monsieur le Directeur du Cabinet', 28 June 1937.

³³² ADN M 595 106, 'Commissaire Divisionnaire de Police Spéciale Lille au Préfet du Nord', 13 July 1937.

³³³ ADN 68J 167, 'Note du secrétaire du PSF Tourcoing au Président de la Section', 3 April 1937.

engineered to replace the ailing SPF on the factory floor - an argument that may ring true given the union's decline in 1939.³³⁴

Programs and propaganda

The strategies used by the SPF to attract workers varied by location and industry. They also varied according to the amount of financial resources available and the popular enthusiasm of the local working population. A national bimonthly newspaper, *SPF*, began publication on 15 July 1937, the same day as *Le Petit Journal* published its first edition as an organ for the PSF. *SPF* ran for forty editions with the last being published on 1 April 1939.³³⁵ Newspapers were also created to represent regional, departmental, and professional SPFs. Their location, and frequency with which they were published, tended to reflect the popularity of the SPF in a given region and industry. For example, *Le Syndicaliste national*, representing the Union départementale du Haut-Rhin in Alsace, began operating in August 1936 and published continually until the outbreak of the war. *Le Syndicaliste national* was published in German and French in order to appeal to the primarily German-speaking working class in the region, and was able to make inroads into the local construction and paper-making industries.³³⁶ Similarly, the SPF newspaper for the automobile industry, *L'Automobile*, ran for twenty-three editions until June 1939. Others, such as *L'Oise syndicale*, were published erratically, with empty spaces in the advertising columns pointing to financial problems.³³⁷

³³⁴ *Le Temps*, 3 August 1937.

³³⁵ Unfortunately, only a selection of these are available from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Disparate editions can also be located in the Archives Privés François de la Rocque at the Archives Nationales.

³³⁶ Anne-Laure Troalen, *Le Parti Social Français en Alsace, 1936-1939*, (Mémoire de master, Université Marc Bloch de Strasbourg, 2008), pp. 48-51.

³³⁷ *L'Oise syndicale*, December 1937.

The purpose of these newspapers was to communicate the ideology of the SPF in a way that engaged workers and addressed the issues that mattered to them most. Articles ranged from studious investigations of big topics, such as class collaboration and labour legislation, to on the ground coverage of everyday union activity. Trade journals were tailored to address the interests of a wide range of trades and occupational capacities. This often meant that the message of the SPF was contradictory, but it displays the necessary flexibility of the union in order to attract workers from a broad range of industries. The August 1938 edition of *SPF*, for example, ran an article criticising the individual pursuit of money, claiming that this went against the central values of the *SPF*.³³⁸ Yet in *Banque et Crédit*, a monthly aimed at white-collar bank employees, the SPF defended the pursuit of material wealth as instinctive and natural, following a campaign against the Schneider company by the CGT:

'On sait que c'est là un slogan aimé de la CGT. Mais pourquoi donc a-t-elle des instincts de propriétaire, et pourquoi donc elle, qui n'est déjà pas si pauvre, cherche-t-elle encore à s'enrichir ?

'Quand la CGT s'adresse à vous, employés de banque qui faites partie de la bourgeoisie, vous savez ce qu'est pour la CGT cette bourgeoisie... n'ajoutons pas un mot.'³³⁹

Along with newspapers, printed propaganda in the form of brochures and posters were the most common forms of communication by the SPF. Propaganda services were ran out of the SPF's headquarters and printed at the *Le Petit Journal*. One document handed out to local militants in the Nord gives an interesting insight into the goal of SPF propaganda. 'Notre propagande ne devra pas, comme tant d'autres, se borner à prêcher des convertis recrutés en vue de la seule prospérité syndicale, mais bien, de détacher les masses d'une idéologie

³³⁸ *SPF*, 1 August 1938.

³³⁹ *Banque et Crédit*, Édition spéciale (undated, probably 1938).

réprochée maintenant par les 3/4 de ceux qui vivent de leur travail.’³⁴⁰ SPF pamphlets were commonly distributed by SPF militants on the shop floor and during organised propaganda meetings, but they were also available for mail order via the *SPF* journal. Militant training courses were ran fortnightly by the head of the SPF des transports, Benoit.³⁴¹ The Union fédérale du Nord, for example, organised 154 propaganda meetings between November 1936 and March 1937 and oversaw the distribution of 325,000 pamphlets.³⁴² Nonetheless, Vitrac felt that the SPF could do more, pledging to intensify its efforts at a meeting of the Conseil national.³⁴³ The efforts of the CGT to combat SPF propaganda may have gone some way in blunting its effectiveness. At the Lille branch of Monoprix, CGT members tore down posters affixed in the changing rooms by a SPF delegate, M. Debrugge. Later in the day, a cashier at the same store, Jeanne Leroy, was scolded by the CGT for distributing SPF tracts and they organised a strike in protest the following day, calling for her removal.³⁴⁴

Beyond the printed word, the SPF’s showed off its knowledge about the world of labour through an array of professional services. The job placement centre was a crucial recruitment arm for the union. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the job placement centre was the first attempt by the Croix de feu to recruit from France’s growing pool of unemployed workers. The SPF not only replicated this idea but often tapped into the existing network of PSF placement centres across France. The service often led a precarious existence; monitored and regulated by the prefecture, they could be closed down with little warning. The closure of an SPF placement service for food manufacturing workers in Charenton prompted 2,000 workers to demonstrate in January 1938.³⁴⁵ Certain placement

³⁴⁰ ADN 68J 167, ‘BES 7 Documentation Propagande’, Undated.

³⁴¹ ADN 68J 167, ‘Note sur les cours des militants’, 7 October 1937.

³⁴² ADN M595 106, ‘Le commissaire divisionnaire au Préfet du Nord’, 12 April 1937.

³⁴³ *Le Matin*, 13 March 1938.

³⁴⁴ ADN M595 106, ‘Commissaire divisionnaire au Préfet du Nord’, 20 May 1937.

³⁴⁵ *Le Matin*, 26 January 1938.

bureaus even appear to have embedded themselves into the wider community. Three workers from Tourcoing were referred to an SPF placement centre by a local clergyman, Abbé Courteurs.³⁴⁶ The SPF also founded *centres de reclassement professionnel*, which endeavoured to retrain workers and equip them to compete in a changing job market. Twenty such centres were set-up in the Paris region and fourteen in the provinces.³⁴⁷ In addition to reeducation, these centres ran programs to help workers overcome occupational hazards. The centre at Boulogne-Billancourt for example trained Renault workers on correct ventilation procedures in order to prevent the inhalation of toxic paint fumes.³⁴⁸

Finally, the SPF nurtured a strong social network for its members, based on social centres, sporting clubs, and trips away from grinding urban living. SPF members at Renault were given a dedicated social centre at 5 rue Castéja, a short walk from the factory gates. Here, SPF workers could fraternise, eat a hot meal, and play the occasional game of boules, away from the hubbub of the factory.³⁴⁹ The regional SPF du Sud-Est, based in Lyon, sponsored regular trips abroad, including a memorable trip to Geneva where SPF workers were confronted by beleaguered Communists traveling in the opposite direction after having been denied access into Switzerland.³⁵⁰ Dedicated SPF sporting centres, such as that at 10 rue Bourg-Labbé in Paris, were set-up across France.³⁵¹ Following the lead of the PSF, the SPF also organised colonies de vacances for the children of workers during the summer. While evidently on a lower scale to those of its parent party, they appear to have taken off in the Paris region.³⁵²

³⁴⁶ ADN 68J 167, 'Demandes d'emploi, various', undated.

³⁴⁷ *L'Automobile*, June 1939.

³⁴⁸ *SPF*, 1 March 1938.

³⁴⁹ *ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *La Liberté syndicale du Sud-Est*, July 1937.

³⁵¹ *L'Essor*, August/September 1938.

³⁵² *L'Oise syndicale*, December 1938.

The conflict between the SPF and the left

The left remained consistently hostile to the SPF for the entirety of the union's existence. For the left, united in a brittle alliance against the perceived forces of fascism, the SPF was yet another manifestation of the fascist virus in France. The left cloaked this view in language common to antifascist discourse during the Popular Front period. For both the Socialists and the Communists, the SPF was a new tactical ploy by the 'armée des trusts' to manipulate workers and quell their revolutionary potential.³⁵³ The Rassemblement populaire campaigned on the view that big business trusts were in league with banks, employer unions and right-wing groups in order to control and manipulate the economic interests of the nation, a rhetorical theme that continued under the Popular Front government. For example *L'Humanité* claimed that the SPF was solicitous in a conspiracy by the 'trust blanc' to rig milk prices, rendering the commodity unaffordable for the average worker.³⁵⁴

The left believed that the SPF was colluding with the PSF, factory bosses, and the largest employer union of the period, the Confédération générale du patronat français (CGPF). We have already discussed how bosses with links to the Croix de feu were responsible for the creation of SPF in many occasions. For the left, however, the conspiracy went further than this. Socialist intellectual Jules Moch framed the creation of the SPF within a wider campaign by the CGPF to attract workers by exploiting the use of cadres.³⁵⁵ Under its new head, Claude-Joseph Gignoux the CGPF had been reenergised into a potent employer organisation during a time when bosses endeavoured to negate the most unsavoury effects

³⁵³ *Le Populaire*, 16 June 1936.

³⁵⁴ *L'Humanité*, 23 February 1938.

³⁵⁵ *Le Populaire*, 1 October 1937.

of the Matignon agreement.³⁵⁶ After Gignoux implicated the Marxist left in the bombing of the CGPF's headquarters, *Le Populaire* replied:

'Le silence de la CGPF, maintenant que les vrais coupables sont connus, contraste trop étrangement avec sa combativité agressive lorsqu'ils étaient encore dans l'ombre. M. Gignoux veut imposer les "syndicats professionnels français" comme agents d'apaisement social. Son seul patronage suffit à classer ces "syndicats". Mais il y a pire ! C'est à eux qu'appartiennent les assassins !'³⁵⁷

There is little evidence to suggest that the CGPF were directly responsible for creating individual SPFs. The CGPF appeared to display a more active interest in the Union corporative des travailleurs et producteurs de France, a union that followed a similar collaborationist agenda to the SPF but remained untainted by any association with political groups. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that the SPF was viewed as a palatable alternative to the CGT and that its growth was met by a degree of acquiescence by the CGPF. Gignoux rose in protest, for example, when Blum forbid the SPF from taking part in discussions for a *statut moderne du travail*.³⁵⁸

The left also sought to undermine the SPF through special exposés in its printed press. Jean-Maurice Hermann played a crucial role in uncovering the corrupt practices and internal disorder of the union. The Communist press also took part in the mud-raking. In an investigation into M. Vaillant, an executive member of the UF de Paris, *L'Humanité* discovered that he had once been an employee at Printemps but was sacked due to stealing from his employer. The journal took great pleasure in the irony surrounding Vaillant's new

³⁵⁶ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-38* (1990, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 267-268.

³⁵⁷ *Le Populaire*, 13 January 1938. The bombing was discovered to be the work of La Cagoule, a terrorist organisation with links to the far-right and the army.

³⁵⁸ Guillen, 'La situation sociale en province: L'Isère' in Rémond and Bourdin (eds.), *Edouard Daladier*, p. 158.

role as a defender of property rights.³⁵⁹ The press war between the SPF and the left could get extremely poisonous. The SPF at Fouga, an aeronautical firm based in the Hérault, took issue with the constant haranguing from *Voix de l'Usine*, a Communist journal:

'On trouve, en effet, de tout dans l'excrément communiste, depuis des cours de politique rouge et de syndicalisme périmé jusqu'à des rébus, des leçons d'histoire et de zoologie.

Ainsi, nous apprenons d'abord que les singes du Plateau [editor of *Voix de l'Usine*] sont des oiseaux, d'où nous déduisons que Monsieur Lynx [a journalist] est un âne...Quant aux rébus, nous les trouvons à chaque phrase de ce canard bien rédigé...auquel personne ne comprend rien.'³⁶⁰

Despite the partisan nature of this tempestuous press war, one can sense the fear that was building in reaction to the SPF's growth. For example, *L'Humanité* grudgingly acknowledged that the SPF had become the most powerful union for department store workers, and it feared that the SPF were slowly filling a vacuum in the automobile industry following a crackdown on left-wing cells by bosses.³⁶¹

Workers and the SPF: Race, gender and nationalism

We have established in this chapter that the SPF should be regarded as an important trade union that made a genuine impact during the Popular Front years. At its peak, the SPF might attracted at least 500,000 members, rivalling the membership figures of the CFTC, which had existed for almost two decades. SPFs were founded across a range of industries,

³⁵⁹ *L'Humanité*, 25 March 1937.

³⁶⁰ *Syndicats professionnels français Fouga*, April 1939.

³⁶¹ *L'Humanité*, 8 January 1939; 27 January 1939.

from manufacturing giants such as Citroën and Michelin to small white-collar concerns. It increasingly took part in labour disputes and collective contract discussions. It was also successful at mobilising women as well as men.

Why were so many workers attracted to the SPF? Given the size of the SPF and the breadth of its membership, there is no easy answer to this question. As we have discussed, the SPF understood that workers had an array of motivations for joining a trade union, and they attempted to cater for as many different types of worker as possible. Although this sometimes meant that the SPF's message contained contradictions, in general the ideology that the SPF promulgated in its newspapers and propaganda remained consistent. Nevertheless, we cannot simply assume that the ideology of the SPF reflected the views and attitudes of its members. Workers reacted differently to the propaganda they were given; some will have criticised parts of it and commended other parts. Others will have just thrown it away. Moreover, there was much more to the *experience* of belonging to the SPF than simply reading the union's printed materials or listening to the speeches of its leaders. There was also a world of strikes and strike breaking, of street altercations with the left, of popular festivals and celebrations. We can get a better understanding of the motivations of workers who joined the SPF if we look at how events such as these became an occasion for workers to articulate their thoughts and attitudes. A close analysis of these types of events allows us to balance out what we know about the SPF through its official documentation with the ways in which workers perceived the issues of the day.

As we have established, the SPF grew at a striking pace following its hasty assembly in June. Historians have attributed this to the fact that many bosses were members of the Croix de feu and were keen to organise SPFs in their firms in order to combat the influence of the CGT and the Communist party. However, this does not explain why workers were also quick to join the ranks of the SPF. As it happens, many workers were mobilised for the same reason that La Rocque founded the SPF in the first place: to express their discontent at the strikes

and to ensure that a similar strike wave did not break out again. However, their reasons for resenting the strikes were different from those of La Rocque. For workers, discontent sprang from the everyday experience of the strikes. Firstly, strikes could have a serious effect on a worker's material well being. During a strike workers would often have to get by on meagre hand outs from the municipal government or from the CGT's *caisse de secours*. As strikes went on, these funds could quickly dry up. In the case of a general strike or a *grève de solidarité*, life could come to a complete stand still. Local shopkeepers would close for business and essential public works such as electricity and gas become cut off. Even if these workers were initially enthusiastic for the strike and supported its ulterior goals, enthusiasm could quickly turn to disillusionment as poverty, hunger and boredom set in. Secondly, strikes could be perceived as a violation of one's freedom to work. 'L'entrave à la liberté du travail' was a common criticism of striking on the right. Many workers too understood strikes in this manner. Workers that did not necessarily join the strike movement might nonetheless find that they cannot enter the workplace. They might find access to the workplace barred by a group of strike activists. The owner might choose to close down the workplace entirely while undergoing talks. Against their own volition, these workers were subjected to the same privations as the participants of the strike. Thirdly, non-strikers could be the victims of aggression, intimidation, verbal abuse, and exclusion from the rest of the working community. Non-strikers were targeted in a number of ways. It wasn't uncommon for non-strikers to find the windows to their houses smashed, the doors covered in tar, and insulting graffiti written over the walls. Non-strikers that continued to work were branded as 'traitors' and '*jaunes*'. Groups of strikers might subject workers to the '*conduite de grenoble*', whereby strikers would follow non-strikers from the workplace to their homes whilst booing and hissing them, insulting them, and sometimes physically assaulting them.

The SPF provided a refuge for workers that experienced this kind of behaviour during the summer of 1936. A good example of this was the SPF at the giant Michelin tyre factory in

Clermont-Ferrand. Michelin was comfortably the largest employer in the Auvergnat capital during the interwar period. In 1936, it hired 19,000 employees across its labyrinth of factories and offices.³⁶² The leader of the firm, Pierre Michelin, was well-known supporter of paternalism and was suspected of holding sympathies for the far-right.³⁶³ The strikes of 1936 were long and bitter. Led by the powerful Union locale des syndicats ouvriers, affiliated to the CGT, the strikers promised to fight 'to the bitter end'.³⁶⁴ While the majority of workers celebrated the favourable outcome of the strike and revelled in the festive atmosphere, there was a palpable undercurrent of discontent. The SPF des employés et ouvriers des établissements Michelin was founded in July 1936, one of the first in the Puy-de-Dôme region.³⁶⁵ The PPF also had an important presence at Michelin and published its own newspaper for Michelin workers, *L'Echo du caoutchouc*.³⁶⁶

Trouble began to brew again at Michelin in September when a young worker was suspended for eight days for insulting a foreman.³⁶⁷ The CGT appealed to Pierre Michelin for clemency but the appeal was dismissed. In retaliation, the Union locale called a strike on 8 September. On the 9 September, two thousand workers, many of whom belonged to the SPF and the local Christian union, turned up to work at the Carmes factory at 8am only to find that the gates were locked and the factory was occupied by the CGT. Access to other factories was also denied to workers that did not carry a membership card to the CGT.³⁶⁸ The disgruntled crowd decided to head to the local prefecture in order to protest against the

³⁶² André Gueslin, *Michelin, les hommes du pneu. Les ouvriers Michelin à Clermont-Ferrand de 1889 à 1940* (Paris: Atelier, 1993), p. 304.

³⁶³ Prost, 'Les Grèves de Mai-juin 1936 Revisitées', *Le Mouvement social* 200 (2002), p. 51.

³⁶⁴ Danielle Tartakowsky, *Les manifestations de rue en France, 1918-1968* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997), p. 406.

³⁶⁵ Machefer, 'Les syndicats professionnels français', p. 103.

³⁶⁶ Kestel, *La conversion politique*, p. 193.

³⁶⁷ *Le Moniteur du Centre*, 8 September 1936.

³⁶⁸ *Le Moniteur du Centre*, 9 September 1936.

strike. The local prefect, M. Trouillot, was absent, so the crowd broke into the building and staged their own occupation of their own. At 9.30am the local police commissioner arrived at the scene, accompanied by Michelin. The pair entered the building but failed to get the occupiers to evacuate. Meanwhile, crowds of strikers began to gather in the gardens in front of the prefecture. Trouillot eventually arrived at the scene at 1.15pm. The minister of the interior, Roger Salengro, was urgently contacted and a request was made to use Gardes mobiles to clear the building. Salengro eventually agreed to the request around 3pm and three squadrons were sent to the prefecture. However the Gardes struggled to get past the throng of strikers that had completely taken over the surrounding area. By 6pm, thousands of workers had taken over the Place de Jaude, which flanked the prefecture building. At 7.15pm the occupiers were finally forced to leave via rue Georges Clemenceau, away from the baying workers. Some managed to get to the occupiers and blows were exchanged.

The SPF claimed that the occupation of the prefecture was spontaneous and they had no hand in the matter. Nonetheless, they extolled the significance of the event:

‘On a fait courir en ville divers bruits fantastiques et d’ailleurs contradictoires, en ce qui concerne l’occupation de la Prefecture. Aucune organisation politique ni syndicale n’a donné de consigne à ce sujet. C’est un mouvement spontané qui a porté à la Préfecture deux mille salariés des Usines Michelin, révoltés de se voir privés de leur droit au travail et décidés, à exiger des pouvoirs publics le maintien de cette liberté essentielle.’³⁶⁹

It is almost certainly true that the occupation of the prefecture was not preplanned. While the non-strikers were probably aware of the CGT’s decision to launch a strike, they had expected to go to work that morning like any other day. This impromptu act was therefore a sign of the competence that SPF workers in Clermont Ferrand had for striking after events

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*

earlier that year. It is also interesting that the non-strikers chose to use the methods favoured by the CGT - the *occupation de presence* - against the local government. The strikers felt that the authorities were not doing enough to protect citizens' right to work. This was doubtless linked to the fact that the Popular Front was now in power. Workers suspected that politically motivated strikes were now tolerated by the new government. This was a view echoed by the right-wing press. The editorial for *Le Journal des Débats* read:

'L'occupation des usines Michelin persiste. Les ouvriers non cégétistes continuent à être dans l'impossibilité de travailler parce que les cégétistes le leur interdisent. Le government annonce une énergie inflexible quand il s'agira d'empêcher l'occupation des édifices publics, il reste muet et inerte en ce qui touche l'occupation des propriétés privées. Voici le bilan, voici la situation telle que la résumerait un constat d'huissier.'³⁷⁰

Le Journal des Débats captured the hypocrisy that the SPF workers felt. Events like this hardened the opposition of SPF workers against the Popular Front government. It also drew them closer to the right.

The occupation of the Puy-de-Dôme prefecture was also noteworthy because of the use of nationalist symbols. Nationalism was an integral part of the SPF's ideology, tied closely to the ideology of the PSF. The SPF presented itself as a genuinely French trade union, the true heir to the French tradition of independent syndicalism. The CGT, on the other hand, was based on foreign doctrines, controlled by Moscow, and run by immigrant agitators with no interest in the the health of the French nation. SPF unionists were patriots; the Communists were traitors. Evidently, this nationalist element of the SPF doctrine was appealing to members of the SPF at Michelin. As the CGT began to gather outside the prefecture in the early afternoon, the SPF took a French tricolour and draped

³⁷⁰ *Le Journal des Débats*, 9 September 1936.

it out of a window.³⁷¹ Moments later, a white banner was put on display with the words 'pour la liberté' written across it. This drew whistles and shouts of 'au poteau' from the workers gathered outside. Later that afternoon, a chorus of the Internationale rang out across the Place de Jaude. The SPF countered with cries of 'vive l'armée!' from the windows of the prefecture.³⁷² Shortly before the SPF were evacuated, they broke into a version of *Le Marseillaise*.

These exchanges are typical of the politicised use of symbols that became commonplace during the Popular Front.³⁷³ Symbols were not only important for ideological signification and group solidarity. They were also another way of provoking one's political opponents. This is particularly true when it came to the tricolour and the Marseillaise, the two great symbols of the French nation. Although the left tried to appropriate these symbols during the mid- to late 1930s in order to express its commitment to France, these symbols were still provocative when used by the right as an expression of nationalism.³⁷⁴ The occupiers of the prefecture clearly had these intentions in mind. The tricolour and the Marseillaise symbolised loyalty to the nation rather than loyalty to class struggle. The cries of 'vive l'armée' were also a shot at the left's antimilitarist stance. The association of the left with pacifism, duplicity, and cowardice was a recurrent theme in French nationalism since the 19th century. This gained extra currency during the late 1930s due to the rising threat of the totalitarian states on

³⁷¹ *L'Avenir du Plateau Central*, 9 September 1936.

³⁷² *Le Moniteur du Centre*, 8 September 1936.

³⁷³ Philippe Burrin, 'Poings levés et bras tendus. la contagion des symboles au temps du front populaire' *Vingtième siècle* 11, 11 (1986), pp. 5-20.

³⁷⁴ Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-39* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 145-150.

France's borders.³⁷⁵ The occupiers of the prefecture were willing, therefore, to adopt the symbology of nationalism to further their own ends.

The SPF's nationalism was closely tied to the issue of race. As we established earlier, the SPF did not adopt an official stance on the subject of immigration until 1938. Before this date, the union posited that while it was 'preferable' for firms to hire French workers over foreigners, it was up to employers to decide what was best for the health of the company. Moreover, it actively encouraged immigrants to join the union. At the annual congress for the SPF des industries chimiques in Paris, for example, 150 of the 500 delegates present were North African.³⁷⁶ This stance began to change around 1938, however, when racial tensions were on the rise in France. The SPF called for greater protection of French workers and began to publish sensationalist accounts of the subversive activity of immigrants in the national and regional press.

Regardless of the official stance of the SPF, however, evidence suggests that the union was a beacon for workers seeking to vent their frustration at liberal immigration policies and the growing presence of foreign labour within French industry. The SPF was implicated in the murder of an Algerian Muslim, Tahar Acherchour, during a strike-breaking manoeuvre in the Paris suburb of Clichy on 23 November 1936. Following an eighteen-day strike in a local soap and candle manufactory, the director's son, Paul Cusinberche, employed a team of local SPF members, armed them with iron bars and revolvers, and set upon the occupying strikers. Cusinberche was a former treasurer for the eighteenth section of the Croix de feu with close ties to the new union.³⁷⁷ Acherchour was shot in the stomach and died the following day from his injuries; seven other Algerian

³⁷⁵ Brian Jenkins, *Nationalism in France: Class and Nation since 1789* (Savage, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1990), chapter 9.

³⁷⁶ BA 2045, 'Rapport sur l'assemblée générale de la Confédération des syndicats professionnels des industries chimiques', 21 December 1937.

³⁷⁷ Ralph Schor, *L'opinion française et les étrangers en France, 1919-1939* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985), pp. 639-640.

workers were wounded from the attack.³⁷⁸ A subsequent police report disclosed that several of the attackers belonged to the SPF and that the vehicles that drove men to the Cusinberche factory were supplied by the SPF.³⁷⁹

Trade unions on both the left and the right fostered a highly masculine culture during the 1930s. Women were kept on the margins of union activism - only 8% of members to the CGT in 1936 were female.³⁸⁰ During the strike wave of that year, women were perceived to be the passive and unwilling victims of a male-led movement. According to contemporary accounts, their role was limited to bringing food to the men, knitting, cleaning, and generally containing their domestic duties in the occupied factories.³⁸¹ This gendered reading of unionism is compatible with the SPF's stance on gender roles. The SPF argued that the rising use of female labour was regrettable. It proposed measures that would ensure women return to the home and focus on raising a family and becoming the 'chef' of the home, leaving the role of breadwinner to men:

'Un certain matérialisme dont Karl Marx fut le prophète parle des droits de la femme et précise entre autres, si droit au travail sous prétexte d'indépendance. Loin de nous la pensée de refaire de la femme moderne l'esclavage jadis, l'inutile de naguère, mais il nous semble naturel de penser qu'il y a pour les femmes mieux et plus à faire que de devenir des concurrentes de l'homme. Il n'est que de voir les enfants qui grandissent sans les soins maternels. Ils sont rudes et forts; durs au mal, querelleurs, mais il leur manque cette fraîcheur du coeur, ces élans frais et joyeux qui s'expriment si biens dans un seul mot : maman. Bien sûr, leur père, leur tuteur, les aime bien, mais ils sont gauches, empruntés, et l'enfant s'en rend compte. L'indépendance pour l'ouvrier c'est la joie de ne devoir sa

³⁷⁸ *Le Populaire*, 25 November 1936.

³⁷⁹ APPP BA 2045, 'Rapport sur l'Union fédérale Paris SPF', 4 January 1937.

³⁸⁰ Siân Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 119.

³⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 121.

subsistance qu'à son métier, qu'il aime dans les conditions de dignité et de justice compatibles avec le temps où nous vivons.³⁸²

Evidently, the SPF believed that men and women were naturally predisposed to different roles. Just as women were missing the natural strength, endurance, and guile for the world of work, so men lacked the spirit and tenderness required to raise children. The SPF praised large working-class families. In 1937, a worker belonging to the SPF in Agen won the Prix Cognacq-Jay, to the value of 20,000F, for raising a family of thirteen. The SPF praised this 'modest but courageous worker' whose reward sets an example for other working families to follow.³⁸³

The SPF's masculine culture and traditionalist approach to gender politics does not appear to have deterred women. In fact, proportionately the SPF had a far larger amount of female members than the CGT. The SPF claimed that around 30% of his adherents were women.³⁸⁴ Women were dominant in the industries of fashion, confectionery, perfume, fabrics, laundry, health services, and performing arts, and well represented in the food and textile sectors.³⁸⁵ The SPF's claims are backed up by the figures for the UF de Paris, which puts female membership at around one-third. The SPF's position on gender was therefore compromised by the fact that had a high representation of female workers. Moreover, females were active in local SPF unions. According to prefecture records, many women were founding members of SPFs and sat on the

³⁸² *L'Automobile*, April 1939.

³⁸³ ADN 69J 22, 'Rapport sur le prix Cognacq-Jay', 29 November 1937, *Le Petit Journal*, 29 November 1937.

³⁸⁴ *SPF*, 1 October 1937.

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*

executive committee.³⁸⁶ Women were a notable presence at SPF meetings. At a meeting of the Union fédérale du Nord, a quarter of the 400 delegates were female.³⁸⁷

The SPF had to channel female activism in a way that didn't compromise or contradict its overarching ideological goals. It achieved this by drawing a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' activism. Women were encouraged to participate in trade unionism in a way that utilised their maternal instincts and generous spirit. Women were used to staff the SPF's social centres, providing hot meals and entertainment for the *gars* at the end of a long shift.³⁸⁸ Women in the SPF were also encouraged to educate themselves about labour affairs so long as domestic duties were made a priority.³⁸⁹ Like in PSF, the SPF demonstrated a clear preference for unmarried women. In the Nord, married women need the permission of their husbands to join the SPF.³⁹⁰ However, the women strongly discouraged from taking part in street politics. The SPF used the example of female Communist activist to illustrate the defeminising effect that street activism had on women, and the emasculating effect it had on Communist men:

Connaissez-vous Marie Louise? Non... Tant pis pour vous, mais c'est dommage. Moi je la connais, c'est-à-dire que nous ne sommes pas en relations très suivies, mais je l'ai vue au travail et je vous assure que pour du boulot, c'est du boulot. C'était le jour où les grévistes de la maison Gillet arrêtaient tout le trafic place Tolozon. Ils étaient là 200 environ, plutôt calmes comme s'ils étaient désignés de corvée. Mais Marie-Louise était là. Grande, l'air décidé et énergétique, le corsage rouge comme son drapeau, aidée de son fidèle lieutenant la Tigresse, je vous assure qu'elle les menait, ces hommes ; et il fallait qu'ils

³⁸⁶ AP W1070 47-55.

³⁸⁷ ADN M595 106, 'Le commissaire central au préfet du Nord', 12 April 1937.

³⁸⁸ *SPF*, 1 March 1938.

³⁸⁹ *SPF*, 15 December 1937.

³⁹⁰ ADN 68J 167, 'Directives générales à donner aux bureaux d'études syndicales pour la formation des Syndicats Professionnels', undated.

travaillent....pour empêcher les autres de travailler. Grâce à Marie-Louise, pas un camion ne s'arrêtait une porte de la place. Et Marie-Louise parlementait, discutait, organisait des rondes, des patrouilles, elle était partout et rien ne lui échappait.

Marie-Louise est très amiable pour nous. Elle nous a rendu visite le 14 juin. Comme certains ouvriers de la Teinture prétendait faire leur autres affaires eux-même, ils s'étaient donné rendez-vous à nos locaux 12, rue Mulet pour organiser un Syndicat Professionnel. Mais Marie-Louise veillait, on ne la roule pas. elle est venue à la tête de ses troupes bloquer nos deux allées. Personne ne passerait et le Syndicat ne serait pas formé. Pauvre naïve va ! Il y a encore en France un petit peu de liberté et comme nous aimons bien que chacun fasse son travail soi-même, même la police, la rue fut vite dégagée par police-se-cours alertée.

Et le Syndicat Professionnel français de la Teinture fut formé, tandis que Marie-Louise ne connaissait que son devoir continuait sa faction devant notre porte au grand établissement des passants intrigués.

Si je faisais partie de troupes de Marie-Louise, je ne serais pas très fier. C'est assez empoisonnant d'être obligé chez soi de faire les quatre volontés de son gouvernement, pour qu'une fois qu'on est sorti on puisse faire le grand garçon sans aller plier l'Esche sous le knout moscovite (brandi par une femme). On est des hommes quoi... on n'a pas besoin d'un jupon pour nous mener, nous sommes capables de défendre nous-mêmes et nos intérêts et ceux des femmes ; leur place est à la maison où elles on aie assez de travail à faire notre soupe et nettoyer le derrière de nos gosses.³⁹¹

This passage shows, in rather disparaging terms, the ways in which the SPF tried to discourage women from joining men on the streets. Female activists were coarse and crude, sacrificing their femininity in order to join in with the striking hordes. Moreover, in

³⁹¹ *La Liberté Syndicale du Sud-Est*, 1 July 1937

allowing themselves to be commanded by women, Communist men undermined their masculinity and appeared weak and effeminate. This message therefore appealed to both men and women - a stern warning against inverting the natural order.

Conclusion

The SPF was one of the most important manifestations of working-class conservatism in the interwar period. Despite only existing for three years, the SPF was able to rally conservative workers across a range of industries and in a large number of regions. By 1938, the SPF could genuinely be regarded as the 'third force' in French trade unionism, with membership figures that rivalled that of the CFTC. This chapter has argued that it is misguided to view the SPF simply as a tool of the *patronat* or a small clique of ex-Croix de feu extremists. While La Rocque founded the SPF and ex-Croix de feu members took on important positions as union leaders, the vast majority of the SPF's rank and file joined the union by their own volition. There were several aspects to the SPF's ideology that appealed to conservative workers. It claimed to belong to the authentic 'French' tradition of trade unionism that had been betrayed by the CGT. Its stance against unnecessary, politically-motivated striking spoke to workers that were exhausted by ceaseless labour unrest and the intimidation of Communists and the CGT. Whereas the Popular Front was perceived to have gone soft on immigration, the SPF stood up for French workers and used provocative language with increasingly regularity against foreigners as the decade drew to a close. The SPF also stood up for family and traditional gender roles, attracting the support of a considerable amount of women. Moreover, we must not neglect to mention that the SPF appears to have taken its role as a trade union seriously. It had notable success in delegate elections and participated in collective contract talks; from 1938, SPF leaders were invited to the ministry of labour with growing

frequency. The example of the SPF shows that workers could be mobilised to a trade union that supported a radically different set of values to the left, despite the considerable risks involved. It was therefore one of the most fully realised examples of working-class conservatism during the 1930s.

Chapter Four

Un parti ouvrier? : Workers and the Parti populaire français



The Parti populaire français (PPF) represented a new force on the French right when it formed in June 1936. Unlike the PSF, which inherited the structure and ideas of the Croix de feu and took them in a more moderate direction, the PPF was built from a range of different materials. Its leader, Jacques Doriot, was an ex-Communist and mayor of the proletarian Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis. Doriot was forced out of the Communist party in 1934 for promoting closer collaboration with the Socialist party, a view considered heretical by the International at the time. His inner circle was composed primarily of ex-Communists, but also boasted a number of industry leaders that lent both their political and financial clout. A number of *ex-liguers* and *modérés* were also among Doriot's ranks. Several notable French intellectuals, among them the novelists Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Bertrand de Jouvenel, rounded off the party elite, wielding their pens regularly for the party's daily organ, *L'Emancipation nationale*.

While the PPF never got close to the membership enjoyed by the PSF, the party probably had around 100,000 members at its peak in January 1938.³⁹² The party's doctrine reflected many of the themes that preoccupied the French right during the interwar period. It called for extensive constitutional reform (the *État populaire français*), corporative economics, and a form of integral nationalism that would bind every social class to the nation and defuse class conflict. This final point was reflected in a strong commitment to the lower middle class and the peasantry, two groups that had been 'cast aside' by the Popular

³⁹² This figure is far smaller than party statistics claim, but is generally considered accurate. See Jean-Paul Brunet, *Jacques Doriot : Du communisme au fascisme* (Paris: Balland, 1986), pp. 228-230.

Front government. The PPF made sworn enemies out of Communist party, for which it reserved an almost obsessive hostility, and 'social conservatism', which for the party was manifest in the 'egotism' of *patronat* and the ruling elite.

Historical writing on the PPF has generally focused on the transition of Doriot from communism to fascism. The social base of the movement has been a secondary concern. There is little consensus among historians as to where the working class fits into this history of the PPF. Work on the subject tends to take one of two positions. The first affirms that the PPF was a 'true' proletarian party with a strong working-class following throughout its existence. Doriot inherited a core of loyal workers in Saint-Denis and built on this by appropriating Communist tactics and modes of representation in order to lure workers away from the left. According to this view, the party's *interclassist* aspirations were slow to bear fruit, and although some workers did flee the party in late 1937 and 1938, they remained in the majority. This interpretation originates from Dieter Wolf's 1963 biography of Doriot. Using internal party documents and figures obtained from the PPF press, Wolf contends that 50-65% of PPF members were workers in late 1936, and this percentage only decreased slightly over the next two years.³⁹³ He adds that Doriot prioritised factory-based initiatives and downplays the importance of other tactics.³⁹⁴ Subsequently, Jean-Paul Brunet has been the leading proponent of this view.³⁹⁵

On the other side of the coin are those historians who argue that the PPF hugely exaggerated its proletarian following and drew the majority of its support from 'traditionally' right-wing social groups. These historians dismiss the party's working-class strategy as a failure and it quickly fell by the wayside as the PPF turned its attention to petit bourgeois and business interests. Robert Soucy, the main advocate of this view, argues that blue-collar

³⁹³ Dieter Wolf, *Doriot : Du communisme à la collaboration* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), pp. 216-224.

³⁹⁴ Wolf, *Doriot*, pp. 202-205.

³⁹⁵ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*.

workers 'overwhelmingly rejected' the PPF, and after a brief flirtation with the party in late 1936, he argues that most workers quickly rejoined the ranks of the Communist party.³⁹⁶ Paul Jankowski concurs, branding the PPF's *ouvrieriste* self image as 'sheer fantasy'.³⁹⁷ In his study of Simon Sabiani, an ex-Communist turned nationalist leader in Marseille, Jankowski argues that workers cut off their support for Sabiani after he threw in his lot with the PPF. The party instead gained a thoroughly middle-class following. The bourgeoisie joined because it believed in the ideas of the party, while those workers that did cling on did so out of the possibility of municipal jobs, a hangover from the 'clientelism' that Sabiani had practiced as mayor of a town famous for gangsterism.

This conflict stems from a disagreement over two issues. The first is the debate over the number of workers that joined or participated in the PPF. According those who downplay the proletarian side of the party, there is little or no historical value in the statistics upon which our estimates are founded. They say that the best conclusion we can draw from this data is that working-class participation steadily declined between 1936 and 1940.³⁹⁸ Proponents of this view therefore claim that working-class membership peaked around the final months of 1936. Those who take the opposite position agree that the number of working-class members of the party was constantly fluctuating, but add that the party never lost its core of blue-collar supporters.³⁹⁹ They offer the additional caveat that working-class support began to rise proportionally again in 1939 as Doriot refocused on social programs, although total membership decreased.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave 1933-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 237.

³⁹⁷ Paul Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration: Simon Sabiani and Politics in Marseille, 1919-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 55-68.

³⁹⁸ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 237.

³⁹⁹ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, pp. 299-300.

⁴⁰⁰ *ibid.*

The second cause for disagreement is the self-representation of the party. Partisans of the Wolf/Brunet thesis argue that the PPF purposefully presented itself as a party 'of the workers' and must therefore be taken seriously as a genuine 'proletarian' party. They point to the fact that Doriot continued to cultivate his image as a working-class hero and framed the PPF as a continuation of his work as a revolutionary and labour leader.⁴⁰¹ They believe that this was reflected in both the tone of party propaganda and in the strategies that the party adopted. Paul Schue has recently lent his support to his view by showing how the PPF's proletarian image was cultivated in its coverage of the Spanish civil war.⁴⁰² The second school counters that the party's proletarian image was merely a snakeskin, quickly shed after the party's auspicious start in 1936. After this period, *interclassisme* was the order of the day for the PPF. The working class became marginalised in party rhetoric and the content of its programs.⁴⁰³ Yet the same historians acknowledge that the PPF engineered its statistics in order to exaggerate its proletarian following, which is in itself a mode of representation. There is therefore a contradiction between these two propositions.

Beneath this quarrel, however, historians from both sides have made similar assumptions about the reasons why workers may (or may not) have supported the PPF. Jacques Kergoat, who shares Brunet's interpretation, argues that workers were attracted to the PPF because of the use of direct, and frequently violent, action, while the middle classes shied away from such means.⁴⁰⁴ Soucy and Jankowski, who support the opposite view, argue nevertheless that the bourgeoisie joined the PPF out of 'ideological and economic conviction' while those workers that clung on did so for 'the bread of city jobs and the circuses of

⁴⁰¹ Brunet, 'Un fascisme français : le Parti populaire français de Doriot (1936-1939)', *Revue française de science politique* 33, 2 (1983), pp. 266-269.

⁴⁰² Paul Schue, 'The Prodigal Sons of Communism: Parti Populaire Français Narratives of Communist Recruitment for the Spanish Civil War and the Everyday Functioning of Party Ideology', *French Historical Studies*, 24 (2001), pp. 91-117.

⁴⁰³ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 237.

⁴⁰⁴ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 1986), pp. 178-179.

political meetings'.⁴⁰⁵ Historians have therefore created a dichotomy between the irrational, unthinking proletariat and the rational middle-class agent, unwittingly reflecting the political thought of many contemporaries of the period. The history of interwar fascism in Germany and Italy clearly shows, however, that men and women from across the socio-economic spectrum can be drawn to mass movements that legitimise violent practices, and do so for complex reasons. As Laurent Kestel points out, the similarities between communism and fascism do not mean ex-Communists are more predisposed to becoming fascist - the majority of defectors in the late 1930s joined the Socialist party or other far-left groups.⁴⁰⁶

The purpose of this chapter is to show that the appeal of the PPF went beyond the mere allure of political violence and short-term material gain. While violence certainly had an important tactical role to play in both PPF discourse and everyday street campaigns against the party's political enemies, the same was true of the Communist party. The crucial difference between the Communist party and the PPF was the evolution of their respective ideologies. While some workers may have continued to follow Doriot out of a blind sense of loyalty, the majority of the workers joined the party because of the appeal of its political message. This chapter argues that the PPF was able to successfully mobilise working-class support by espousing a form of exclusionary nationalism that chimed with the rising xenophobia inside certain blue-collar towns and industries. The hyper-masculinity of the party's discourse also appealed to a certain vision of gendered responsibility, although female members still belonged to the party.

It is important to begin this chapter by tackling the two issues that have caused the historiographical rift described above - the numerical participation of workers in the PPF, and the representation of the PPF as a 'parti ouvrier'. It argues that working-class participation was significant relative to other organisations of the French right. Unfortunately, however, a

⁴⁰⁵ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, pp. 240-241, Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration*, pp. 64-65, 68.

⁴⁰⁶ Laurent Kestel, *La conversion politique : Doriot, le PPF et la question du fascisme français* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2012), pp. 7-8.

quantitative investigation is beyond the scope of this thesis due to the detailed regional research required. In terms of the party's self-representation, this chapter argues that the PPF continued to present itself as a proletarian party despite drifting to the right. However, its *conception* of the working class underwent considerable modification during this drift. To show how this impacted the party's working-class strategy, this chapter will examine the tactics used by the PPF to attract working class support and the changes they underwent during the period.

Working-class participation in the PPF

The quality of statistical data on working-class participation in the PPF is patchy at best. Our current data has been almost entirely extracted from party documents and therefore has questionable objective value. Nonetheless, it is important to make the best of this data so we can make a rough estimation of how many workers joined the PPF, and to identify where its strongholds were.

Dieter Wolf has undertaken the most important statistical research in this area. Subsequent studies have continued to rely upon his findings. Wolf used data collected by the party at their annual congresses to calculate the participation of workers in relation to other social groups. At the first PPF congress, on 9-11 November 1936, a survey completed by delegates determined that 57% of party members were from a working-class background.⁴⁰⁷ He adds that this number may even be an underestimate, given that shortly after *L'Emancipation nationale* put the number at 67%, or two in every three members. Jean-Paul Brunet and Robert Soucy also employ data from party congresses, but reach different conclusions. Both historians quote the same document from the first national congress

⁴⁰⁷ Wolf, *Doriot*, pp. 177-184.

which lists 49% of party members as workers (8% below Wolf's figure).⁴⁰⁸ However the pair give starkly different figures for second party congress on 11-13 March 1938. Brunet argues that working-class participation had fallen to 37%, a 12% drop, while Soucy claims that working-class membership had more than halved (20%).⁴⁰⁹

There is greater consensus over the geographical implantation of the party. Brunet identifies these strongholds as the north and east suburbs of Paris, including Doriot's own constituency of Saint-Denis, Marseille, the Var and Alps-Maritime departments, the industrial basin of Lyon, and Algeria.⁴¹⁰ Brunet also identifies smaller followings in Clermont-Ferrand, Reims and Rouen. Wolf helps to clarify this picture by mapping the location of PPF sections and distinguishing between 'virtual' and 'active' sections. By this measure, the Paris region leads the way with 112 sections (40 active), followed closely by the south-west (87 sections, 31 active) and the Rhône (70 sections, 22 active). Besides these bastions of PPF support, Wolf also identifies a considerable amount of party activity in the Auvergne (29 sections, 10 active), Alsace-Lorraine (49 sections, 17 active) and the Nord (51 sections, 15 active).⁴¹¹

While the PPF evidently drew most of its support from urban areas, it is difficult to make a precise sociological profile of the party based on the current state of research. There are only a handful of local studies that touch on the subject. On Marseille, Paul Jankowski, Robert Mencherini and Antoine Olivesi all argue that the PPF successfully rallied the middle classes to become the leading party of the right during the late-1930s, to the detriment of its initial proletarian following.⁴¹² Thus of its 15,000 followers in the Bouches-du-Rhône,

⁴⁰⁸ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, pp. 231-232, Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 237.

⁴⁰⁹ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, p. 230.

⁴¹¹ Wolf, *Doriot*, pp. 219-221.

⁴¹² Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration*, pp. 55-68, Robert Mencherini, 'Le Front populaire dans les Bouches-du-Rhône : la droite en réaction' in G. Morin and G. Richard (eds.), *Les deux France du Front Populaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 281-28, Antoine Olivesi, 'La situation sociale en province : Marseille et le Sud-Est' in R. Rémond and J. Bourdin (eds.), *Edouard Daladier, Chef du gouvernement: Avril 1938 - Septembre 1939* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977), pp. 169-180.

perhaps only 2-3,000 ex-*Sabianist* workers continued to support the party after 1936 (by contrast, Doriot himself claimed that 78% of members in the region were workers in 1938).⁴¹³ In his study of the PPF in the nearby Var region, Ralph Schor presents a different picture. Schor demonstrates that the party successfully built up its working-class support to around 47% of total membership in September 1937, a number that grew by several points in 1938.⁴¹⁴ He argues that strategies to woo workers away from the left were far more successful than those aimed at the middle class, who by-and-large remained loyal to the traditional right.

In his regional study of Lyon, Kevin Passmore takes a more nuanced position. While Passmore acknowledges that the PPF primarily sought to profit from the crisis of conservatism among the Lyonnais middle class, he discovers that the party's largest socio-economic group was the working class (28%), which was comfortably higher than working-class membership in the FR and the PSF.⁴¹⁵ The PPF made footholds in working-class suburbs of Villeurbanne, Vénissieux and Bron, mobilising an embattled minority of conservative workers. In recognising that the PPF's strategies were heterogeneous, offering different things to different social groups, Passmore's work marks a departure from other historians on the subject. He shows, for example, that the PPF constructed a discourse drawing upon gender- and class-based ideas in order to address the interests of local workers.⁴¹⁶

The contention over the participation of workers in the PPF is largely a matter of interpretation. One can note, for example, that Passmore describes the participation of Lyonnais workers in the PPF (28%) as 'significant' while Soucy brands a similar figure (20%) as

⁴¹³ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, p. 231.

⁴¹⁴ Ralph Schor, 'Le Parti populaire français dans les Alpes-Maritimes (1936-1939)', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 33/34, (1986/1987), pp. 105-115.

⁴¹⁵ Passmore, 'Class, gender and populism: the Parti Populaire Français in Lyon, 1936-1940' in N. Atkin and F. Tallett (eds.), *The Right in France, 1789-1997* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), p. 191.

⁴¹⁶ *ibid.*

'derisory'.⁴¹⁷ These figures must therefore be considered in the wider context of other right-wing movements. By this measure, the PPF compares very favourably. Even if we scale down the party's own figures, as Soucy does, we are still left with a proportionate amount of workers that was far higher than the Croix de feu/PSF and smaller right-wing leagues, not to mention the FR and the AD. Moreover, if we are to accept the findings of regional studies such as that of Schor, there is good reason to believe that party estimates may have been closer to the truth, at least in some areas, than historians have suggested. We must also factor in the risks involved in supporting the PPF. Workers could find themselves open to intimidation, beatings, and even social exclusion. The sheer hegemony of the left over the political affairs of the working class adds greater significance to the fact that a minority of workers chose to join the PPF, an avowed enemy of the left. Working-class participation in the PPF was therefore a highly significant phenomenon that requires explanation.

The PPF: Un parti ouvrier?

While the working-class membership of the PPF may have been proportionally larger than the rest of the far-right, this does not validate Brunet's claim that the PPF was a genuine proletarian party. To further interrogate this claim, we must examine the use of workers, the working class, and other images associated with these categories, within the political discourse and self-presentation of the PPF. Brunet argues that the PPF deliberately continued to cultivate a proletarian image for the party well into the late-1930s.⁴¹⁸ Nationalism was used to update rather than supplant this image. Soucy is less convinced. He argues that the PPF turned its back on class-based politics early on in order to broaden its

⁴¹⁷ *ibid*, Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 237.

⁴¹⁸ Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, p. 299-230.

appeal and pursue a conservative social and economic program.⁴¹⁹ Recently, Jessica Wardhaugh has nuanced Brunet's position by examining the PPF's use of language.⁴²⁰ Wardhaugh argues that while the PPF did begin to use more inclusive terms such as '*le peuple*' rather than '*les ouvriers*', such terms were still loaded with implicit references to the working masses. The party juxtaposed images of workers with captions referencing *le peuple* or *le pays* in order to suggest the bond between workers and the nation, as well as to avoid the provocative language of class politics.

It is problematic, however, that these scholars have taken the discourse of the PPF to be static and unchanging. It is also problematic that these scholars overlook the fact that political discourse is not homogenous, but aims to speak to different groups in different ways, even at the risk of creating contradictions. In reality, the PPF sought to appeal to a number of different interest groups: this was both the source of its nationalism and the great idea that purportedly distinguished the PPF from its political rivals. Nonetheless, there is some merit to Brunet's claim in that the PPF played up its proletarian roots, in particular those of its leader, Doriot. The working class was a central theme in the party's use of imagery and symbols. This section will show that the PPF did initially seek to present itself as a genuine proletarian party. It will contend, however, that this image was slowly allowed to slide as the party's *conception* of the working class changed and became more in line with that of other right-wing groups. In analysing these two issues in tandem, we can see with greater clarity how language and ideas changed during the PPF's infamous 'drift to the right'.

Wardhaugh is correct to emphasise the importance of Doriot's background, and the background of some of his closet allies, to the initial self-conception of the PPF. Doriot had a long history as a leading member of the Communist party. During the 1920s, he was the influential leader of the *Jeunesse communiste*, and tales of his bravery and activism became

⁴¹⁹ Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 237.

⁴²⁰ Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-39* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 134-136.

the stuff of Communist (and later PPF) folklore. It was as a Communist that Doriot became the mayor of Saint-Denis, a Parisian suburb overwhelmingly inhabited by workers. During his communist days Doriot's popularity in Saint-Denis was unwavering. However, his popularity with those within the ranks of the PCF was anything but, and his persistent criticism of the party's 'class against class' tactics cumulated in his formal expulsion from the party on 17 June 1934. An outcast on the revolutionary left, Doriot turned inwards to his constituency of Saint-Denis, where he formed the *Rayon majoritaire*, a quasi-political party uniting ex-Communists, and the *Comité de vigilance antifasciste*, an umbrella group for left-wing dissidents in the Paris region.

Doriot's Bureau politique was occupied by a number of other ex-Communists and veterans of the trade union movement. The career of Henri Barbé closely mirrored that of Doriot. An ex-metalworker, Barbé rose through the ranks of the Communist party to become a contender for the party leadership until he was frozen out by Moscow during the Barbé-Célor affair of 1931. Barbé joined Doriot's administration in Saint-Denis as a councillor and collaborated with him closely in the *Rayon majoritaire*. The ex-secretary for the Seine section of the Communist party, Marcel Marshall, also formed close links with Doriot in Saint-Denis and later took over as mayor on a PPF ticket. Two *ex-cégétistes* became labour experts for the PPF. Alexandre Abremski was a prominent CGT activist during the 1920s and was later charged with formulating the PPF's policies on labour issues. Jules Teulade meanwhile was the leader of the CGTU *Fédération du bâtiment* and wrote on labour matters for *L'Emancipation nationale* and *La Liberté*. Finally, the most high profile of Doriot's regional leaders, Simon Sabiani, had enjoyed a substantial working-class following in the region of Provence, first as a Communist and later as the mayor of Marseille and the leader of the dissident *Parti d'Action Socialiste*.

The ex-Communists dominated the early direction of the PPF. This helps to explain why the party sought to present itself as a proletarian party from the outset. One must not,

however, underestimate the contribution of other leaders who had little to no prior experience in the labour movement. As we have already seen with the example of the Croix de feu/PSF, leaders did not require strong left-wing credentials in order to understand the importance of working-class engagement. In fact, it was often the sense of frustration at the ineptitude of the moderate right to mobilise workers that stimulated conservatives to join the far-right leagues. This was also true of the moderates and intellectuals that joined the PPF. The writers Robert Brasillach, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and Ramon Fernandez all postulated that a only a party that was young, dynamic, proletarian and - crucially - non-Communist could steer France away from the brink of the abyss. In placing their hopes in the PPF, the intellectuals bought into the idea that the PPF was a genuine workers' party and committed their energy to propagating this image through print.

During the first months of its existence, PPF ideologues insisted that the new party was the rightful heir to the revolutionary left, free from the dictatorship of Moscow and the Third International. Working-class imagery and discourse featured consistently in party's press and propaganda. The PPF were at pains to stress the proletarian quality of the party's symbology. The PPF anthem, for example, was allegedly penned by two manual workers, Henri André and Henri Fontaine.⁴²¹ The party enthusiastically approved the celebration of labour festivals. Figure 5, a poster celebrating the Fête du travail (May 1), shows the PPF emblem perched on top of a blacksmith's anvil in front of a silhouette of factories belching smoke from their chimneys. The poster represents the sense of continuity that the PPF sought to cultivate between itself and the labour movement. However, the PPF tried to sustain this connection without relying on divisive, class-based language. The party began to incorporate inclusive terms such as *le peuple* and *la masse* into its political lexicon from as

⁴²¹ *L'Emancipation des travailleurs de Saint-Denis*, 7 November 1936.

early as the Rayon majoritaire years.⁴²² As the PPF, these terms were used interchangeably



with *les ouvriers* and *les travailleurs*, without any sense of conflicting signification.

Figure 4 - PPF poster commemorating the Fête du Travail.

Underpinning this proletarian image were a set of assumptions about the nature of the working class that also bore the stamp of the far-left, albeit with some important qualifications. Doriot and his party saw in the working masses the same revolutionary potential as the Communists. This revolutionary potential singled the working class out as the 'active' element of French society, untainted by the 'passive' effects of bourgeois culture and morality. The PPF also placed great faith in the value of 'spontaneous' action as distinct from action motivated by the salacious words of Communist demagogues. The Bureau

⁴²² Gilbert D. Allardyce, 'The Political Transition of Jacques Doriot', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, 1 (1966), p. 70.

politique was there to channel this spontaneous action towards common goals - a genuine proletarian elite.⁴²³ The PPF's early conception of the working class therefore did not directly associate spontaneous action with the irrational behaviour of crowds, as the PSF did, but rather paired irrationality with the actions of those workers 'duped' into believing the lies of Moscow. According to the PPF, the working class's potential for autonomous rational action was evidenced in the strikes of June 1936.

However, as the political and social program of the party began to develop in late-1937 and 1938, it is evident that the party no longer placed its trust in the spontaneous action of the working class. Instead, it cast them as an irrational mass that needed the structure of a rigid social order and the moral guidance of authority. Robert Loustau, one of the party's principal ideologues, argued that workers should remain distinct from the 'creative element' of the division of labour.⁴²⁴ Thus rather than encouraging workers to achieve 'joy through work' by becoming reacquainted with artisanal processes and skills, the PPF now argued that the position of the manual worker was inevitable and irreversible. Loustau continues that this position was predetermined by genetically inherited characteristics:

'Qu'on le veuille ou non, les hommes naissent à la vie dans les conditions d'inégalité biologique qu'aucune forme d'éducation ou d'organisation sociale ne saurait effacer ; ils naissent inégaux en force physique, en santé comme en beauté ; ils naissent inégaux en dons intellectuels ; ils naissent inégaux en force et en valeurs morales.'⁴²⁵

⁴²³ Jacques Doriot, *La France ne sera pas un pays d'esclaves*, (Paris, 1938), p. 128.

⁴²⁴ Robert Loustau, *Notre doctrine devant le problème social* (Paris: Bureau de la section des techniciens du PPF, 1937), p. 3.

⁴²⁵ *ibid*, p. 10.

This placed the PPF in line with a common trope in right-wing thought that borrows from human biology and social darwinism to justify the superiority of elites and the necessity of social order.⁴²⁶

A number of explanations have been put forward as to why the PPF underwent this ideological transformation. This debate is largely irrelevant to the subject of this thesis. What is important is to understand how this transformation affected the tactics employed by the party to attract workers and the ideological message that such tactics contained. This is the subject of the next section.

Ideology in practice

The political strategies used by the PPF to win the support of workers mirrored the changing ways in which the party viewed the working class and its inherent behaviour. They also display the ways in which Doriot and his Bureau politique sought to satisfy the various interest groups both within the party and within his grass roots support. While these strategies were clearly influenced by the orthodox practices of the Communist party, they also featured important modifications that were drawn up by the party intelligentsia, who valued moral education over the pursuit of material ends. The strategies of the PPF were also distinct from those of the PSF in that the party deliberately avoided any engagement with trade unionism until 1939. However, the PPF did share the PSF's preoccupation with extra-political activities; primarily sport, but also the provision of social services and colonies de vacances. In this regard, the PPF was another example in the coming together of politics and consumerism that was common across the political spectrum in the 1930s.

The distinguished history of Doriot and his entourage as senior Communist activists gave the PPF a tactical edge and invaluable experience when it came to the world of working-

⁴²⁶ Passmore, 'The Gendered Genealogy of Political Religions Theory', *Gender & History* 20, 3 (2008), pp. 648-658.

class politics. This view was shared by his comrades on the far-right. According to a police document dating from September 1936, Doriot met with Colonel de la Rocque and Henri Dorgères, the leader of the *Comités de défense paysanne*, or 'greenshirts' as they were known colloquially, to discuss the carving up of responsibilities necessary to combat the newly-elected Popular Front government.⁴²⁷ It was agreed that the PPF would concentrate on the working class while Dorgères would concentrate on the peasantry, with La Rocque acting as an intermediary. The report would appear to corroborate with the fact that the PSF avoided explicit factory floor initiatives until early 1938. By this point, the PPF and the PSF had fallen out over the implementation of the *Front de la Liberté*, an initiative championed by Doriot to formalise cooperation on the far-right.⁴²⁸ La Rocque's refusal to join the Front poisoned the relationship between the two leaders and turned the two parties into rivals.

This apparent free hand in working-class affairs led to a slew of initiatives focused on harnessing the active energy of workers at a grassroots level. Doriot personally travelled to working-class areas in order to rally support. The hostility of Communist workers was already evident. One impromptu meeting at a tannery factory near Montpellier drew 400 workers; Doriot and Sabiani were later shot at by local Communists whilst dining in the nearby *Hôtel de Palais*.⁴²⁹ Despite the leader's incessant travelling, the first local sections and factory cells appear to have been organised through the initiative of PPF activists. These local sections were soon organised into a three-pronged framework. The most general of these three was the *section locale*, which coordinated activity in a given geographical district: the twenty Paris sections, for example, matched the capital's twenty *arrondissements*. The *section d'entreprise* and *section professionnelle*, meanwhile, were specific to the workplace and were

⁴²⁷ APPP BA 1945, 'Untitled police report', 16 September 1936.

⁴²⁸ William D. Irvine, 'French Conservatives and the "New Right" during the 1930s', *French Historical Studies* 8, pp. 534-562.

⁴²⁹ *L'Express du Midi*, 26 October 1936, AN F7 14817, 'Incidents graves à Sunel à l'issue d'un meeting politique qui s'est tenu à Montferrier à l'occasion de la venue de M. Doirot et M. Sabiani', 26 October 1936.

designed to coordinate the activity of workers and cadres respectively. These sections were led by Abremski until his death in 1938. During these early months, Abremski toured the country giving speeches to workers and setting up sections, such as at the Marolles factory in La Ferté-Millon (Aisne).⁴³⁰ At the PPF's first congress, Abremski claimed that thirty *sections d'entreprise* had been set-up in Paris, fifty-four in Marseille, fourteen in Bordeaux and seven in Lyon, reflecting those urban areas that would become the PPF's primary source of support.⁴³¹

The *sections d'entreprise* were intended to become the frontline in the struggle against Communism and the primary source of recruitment for the PPF; in Abremski's words, these sections would 'arracher au sein des entreprises les travailleurs à l'emprise de Moscou.'⁴³² While the Communist factory cell provided a blueprint for these sections, it is also apparent that the PPF were inspired by existing anticommunist groups that began to flower across France in the 1930s. In late 1936 Doriot was in correspondence with Edouard Soulebeau, the secretary general of the Groupement national des français mobilisés (GNFM). Soulebeau claimed that the GNFM had organised a number of Groupes d'autodéfense in factories across France in order to mobilise workers in the event of a Communist putsch.⁴³³ Soulebeau claimed to have recruited 5,000 workers. Contained within his correspondence to Doriot were detailed instructions on how to nullify the activity of Communist cells, including strike breaking, provoking violent behaviour in order to stir the authorities, and educating workers on the danger of Communist ideology.⁴³⁴ The group, he continued, must be made of

⁴³⁰ *L'Emancipation des travailleurs de Saint-Denis*, 17 October 1936.

⁴³¹ APPP BA 1945, 'Congrès national du Parti populaire français. Troisième journée. Séance de l'après-midi', 11 November 1936.

⁴³² Wolf, *Doriot*, p. 180, APPP BA 1945, 'Congrès national du Parti populaire français. Troisième journée. Séance de l'après-midi', 11 November 1936.

⁴³³ APPP BA 1945, 'Lettres par Edouard Soulebeau au PPF', 19 November 1936, 11 December 1936.

⁴³⁴ APPP BA 1945, 'Note sur les dispositions à prendre en vue d'une reoccupation généralisée des usines', 19 November 1936.

'hommes sûrs et résolus' that have displayed 'la confiance et la virilité' in the past. Soulebeau's formula doubtless struck a chord with Doriot's desire to mobilise the most active and brave elements of the masses. The veiled threat of violence is also evident.

The defensive quality of the *sections d'entreprise* was consecrated in the party's statutes. The *Règlement d'organisation, d'administration et de comptabilité*, published in 1938, states that these sections would 'mener à l'intérieur des entreprises la lutte contre la cellule communiste en amenant d'abord à la section d'entreprise du PPF les sympathisants et les tièdes et en s'attaquant ensuite aux troupes communistes elles-mêmes.'⁴³⁵ The statutes continue that the *section d'entreprise* 'doit défendre....les intérêts et les justes prérogatives des salariés vis-à-vis de l'employeur mais sans inutile démagogie.'⁴³⁶ These sections therefore also attempted to fulfil a role normally reserved by trade unions in helping to settle the material grievances that workers may have held with their employers, insofar as they were compatible with the national interest. For example, the PPF *section d'entreprise* sometimes ran candidates in delegate elections against those of the CGT, the CFTC, and the SPF. On occasion these candidates were successful, in the Sautter-Harlé factory in Paris, for example, and the Peugeot factory in Sochaux.⁴³⁷ However, the PPF's trust in worker activism had limits - strikes were considered breeding grounds for Communist agitation and outside of the national interest. The PPF's growing fear of the working masses as irrational actors may also have fed this view.

The growing distrust that the PPF placed in autonomous worker action was also evident in the increasing importance that the PPF placed in the cadre class. As we have established with regards to the PSF and, to a lesser extent, the parliamentary right, great stock was placed in the 'social role' of the cadre due to its position between capital and

⁴³⁵ Emile Masson, *PPF, règlement d'organisation, d'administration et de comptabilité* (Paris, 1938), p. 38.

⁴³⁶ *ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *L'Emancipation nationale*, 14 November 1936.

labour. However, while the SPF largely encouraged the fraternisation of workers and cadres *within* the same union, the PPF chose to organise cadres separately. This policy reflected the conservative line, discussed earlier with regards to Loustau, according to which manual workers should be separated from the creative process. This also drew upon corporatist ideas that gained increasing currency in the party from 1937. Doriot expressed this line to a group of cadres at the Palais de la Mutualité in May of that year:

‘Le problème de la maîtrise se manifeste par des mouvements indépendants de techniciens. Ceci prouve que la maîtrise a un rôle à jouer, en dehors des ouvriers et du capital. Ce rôle ira en grandissant dans l’avenir. C’est aux techniciens qu’est dévoué la belle action de réconcilier le Travail avec le Capital, pour une utile collaboration.’⁴³⁸

Consequently, the PPF organised *sections professionnelles* separately from the *sections d’entreprise* and handed them different responsibilities. The *sections professionnelles* initially collaborated more closely with worker sections in order to curb the activity of Communist militants. However, as the PPF extended the remit of the *section d’entreprise* to include more constructive projects, the *section professionnelle* took on a greater supervisory role and its responsibility as the ‘collaborator’ between labour and capital was given substance. As Kestel has shown, these sections were encouraged to form close relationships with favourable bosses, even to secure jobs for unemployed PPF adherents, and to keep close tabs on labour militancy in the factory.⁴³⁹ The competence and leadership that cadres displayed in their professional lives was therefore expected to be reflected in their conduct as a member of a PPF section.

⁴³⁸ *Le Journal*, ‘M. Doriot parle aux ingénieurs et agents de maîtrise’, 7 May 1937.

⁴³⁹ Kestel, *De la conversion en politique. Genèse et institutionnalisation du Parti populaire français, 1936-1940*, (Thèse du doctorat, Paris I, 2006), pp. 368-369.

Unsurprisingly, there is little reliable data on how many worker sections were created before the war. The party did give statistics at their party conferences but these were wildly inflated. In November 1936, the party claimed to have 110 *sections d'entreprise* and a further 90 in the process of being formed. At the party's second congress in 1938, the party claimed that this number had risen to 1,000 *sections d'entreprise*, of which 300 were in the Paris region. Even accounting for exaggeration and the existence of defunct sections, however, the number of worker sections appears to have been significant. Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schwetzer, for example, suggest the *section d'entreprise* at Renault had over a thousand members at its peak, rivalling the size of the Socialist section.⁴⁴⁰ Brunet finds thirty *sections d'entreprise* in Saint-Denis alone and observes that 'la grande majorité des usines importantes en semblent dotées.'⁴⁴¹ Wolf meanwhile estimates that the PPF published around 800 unique *journaux d'entreprise* for these sections.⁴⁴² The *sections professionnelles*, appear to have had a harder time taking root. A police report from Lyon states that *sections professionnelles* within the textile and chemical industries had only recruited 'des effectifs réduits et ne paraît pas susceptible de se développer beaucoup.'⁴⁴³

The *sections d'entreprise* were handed such a privileged role on the front line because the PPF tried to distance itself from the trade union movement. The party claimed that complete disengagement with the trade union movement was the only way to separate political and professional questions. The *sections d'entreprise*, a non-syndical organisation, was free to discuss political questions without violating this rule - unlike the SPF, for example. The PPF claimed to act in the true spirit of the Charter of Amiens, a 1906 covenant that

⁴⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie V. Schweitzer, *Le Communisme à l'usine : Vie Ouvrière et Mouvement Ouvrier Chez Renault 1920-1939* (Roubaix: Edires, 1984), pp. 230-233.

⁴⁴¹ Brunet, *Saint-Denis, la ville rouge: Socialisme et communisme en banlieue ouvrière, 1890-1939* (Paris: Hachette, 1980), pp. 405-406.

⁴⁴² Wolf, *Doriot*, pp. 197-200.

⁴⁴³ ADR 4M 236, 'Rapport sur l'état d'esprit de la population', 24 March 1937.

guaranteed the autonomy of the CGT from political parties. Speaking to *Le Temps* journalist Raymond Millet in 1937, Doriot remarked:

‘Nous leur laissons le droit absolu d'agir et de voter dans les syndicats cégétistes comme bon leur semble. En leur ménageant cette indépendance totale, nous avons voulu manifester le respect que nous portons à l'autonomie des organisations syndicales. C'est un bon exemple à donner pour que le CGT, après les remous de ces derniers temps et les menaces persistantes, retrouve, en toute liberté à l'égard des partis politiques, la tradition du syndicalisme pur.’⁴⁴⁴

The PPF peddled the view, now common on the right, that the CGT had become overrun by Communists and was now nakedly pursuing the policies of Moscow rather than the interests of the French working class. However, the PPF was more optimistic than other right-wing forces that the CGT could be purged of left-wing extremists and put it back on course. The PPF press frequently ran articles praising the ‘Syndicats’ wing of the CGT, led by René Belin, which was openly critical of the influence of Communists within the union.⁴⁴⁵ Doriot reasoned, with some justification, that dissident unions will only draw conservative workers away from the CGT and weaken the interior forces of resistance.⁴⁴⁶ He also recognised the power of the left-wing press to label dissident unions as ‘jaunes’ and therefore render them unpalatable to everyday workers.⁴⁴⁷ The CFTC however was largely spared from criticism.⁴⁴⁸ *L'Emancipation nationale* remarked that, ‘dans tous les cas, les efforts des militants de la CFTC sont admirables et ils sont soutenus par une doctrine infiniment belle’.⁴⁴⁹ Workers in

⁴⁴⁴ Raymond Millet, *Doriot et ses compagnions* (Paris: Pion, 1937), p. 88.

⁴⁴⁵ *L'Emancipation des travailleurs de Saint-Denis*, 17 October 1936, *Fraternellement*, 1 April 1938.

⁴⁴⁶ Millet, *Doriot*, p. 87, *L'Emancipation nationale*, 25 November 1938.

⁴⁴⁷ Wolf, *Doriot*, p. 223.

⁴⁴⁸ *L'Emancipation nationale*, 4 July 1937.

⁴⁴⁹ *L'appelou émancipé mais français PPF, Organe de la section de Firminy*, 1938.

the Loire department were encouraged to vote for CFTC candidates in delegate elections. A similar admiration was reserved for the JOC, in particular its power to mobilise young workers *en masse*. The great meeting of 50,000 *jocistes* in September 1936, for example, showed off 'un esprit nouveau qui n'est pas pour déplaire au PPF'.⁴⁵⁰

It was doubtless this admiration of other interwar youth groups that motivated the PPF to create its own, the Union populaire de la jeunesse française (UPJF). While not a uniquely working-class organisation, the UPJF made labour one of its central themes and its members were probably in the majority young workers. The UPJF was founded in March 1936 and became comfortably the largest of the PPF's extra-political organisations. By 1938 the UPJF may have had as many as 30,000 members, with sections in Bordeaux, Marseilles, Toulouse, Beziers, Metz and Nancy.⁴⁵¹ Like other interwar youth groups on the left and the right, the PPF acknowledged the centrality of labour and work to young people's lives and celebrated the value of labour in a way that complimented the parent values of the party. The PPF placed particular importance in the UPJF because it paired the 'active' values of youth and work. The word was included in the group's slogan - '*action, éducation, distraction*'.⁴⁵² The UPJF sought to create productive, disciplined young workers who could resist the temptations of 'individualistic' popular culture. The group organised its own cultural activities (or *distractions*) in order to inculcate these qualities in its members. As was common in political circles during the period, the colonies de vacance were an important cog in this strategy. The PPF opened a permanent summer camp in open countryside near La Ferté-Millon, in the Aisne department.⁴⁵³ Young urban dwellers were to attend the camp in order to get a healthy dose of fresh-air therapy and allow body and soul to detoxify from the

⁴⁵⁰ *L'Emancipation des travailleurs de Saint-Denis*, 28 November 1936.

⁴⁵¹ Brunet, *Doriot*, p. 228, Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body*, p. 195.

⁴⁵² *Le Cri Populaire de la Banlieue*, 15 March 1938.

⁴⁵³ *L'Emancipation nationale*, 31 July 1937.

effects of city life. 45 minutes of physical culture and athletics every morning also developed the virility of young males.⁴⁵⁴

In summer 1937 the PPF created an organisation dedicated to physical culture and sport, the Union des Jeunes Sportives Françaises (UJSF). The UJSF aimed to increase the amount of sporting opportunities available to workers and improve the health and virility of urban youths. The UJSF claimed to have twenty-two sections in Paris, overseeing team sports such as football, basketball, rugby and water-polo, as well as swimming, athletics, cycling and weight-lifting.⁴⁵⁵ Like the PSF, the PPF considered a healthy body to be fundamental to active citizenry. Physical activity was compulsory for female members too, but their roles in society were to remain separate:

‘Sa tâche d’être la fidèle compagne de l’homme, son rôle qui consiste à donner des enfants au pays, réclament pour elles une sérieuse préparation. Elles doivent acquérir une santé robuste, une forte formation morale qu’elles pourront puiser dans le sport et la distraction convenablement pratiqués.’⁴⁵⁶

According to Lyonnais party newspaper *La Brèche*, physical culture must prepare working women for the demanding task of raising children, while men must develop their bodies to cope with the physical stress of manual labour.⁴⁵⁷ The UPJF and UJSF collaborated closely with PPF *sections d’entreprise* in order to offer professional help to young male workers and encourage them to participate in party-sponsored sport. Local UPJF sections organised skills

⁴⁵⁴ *L’Émancipation nationale*, 23 April 1937.

⁴⁵⁵ Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body*, pp. 195-196.

⁴⁵⁶ *Le Libérateur de Sud-Ouest*, 14 October 1937.

⁴⁵⁷ *La Brèche*, March 1938.

workshops and courses in workplace safety. UPIF members were also often responsible for organising *sections d'entreprise* in their factories.⁴⁵⁸

The PPF's fascination with sport and physical culture did not stop with the UJSF. The party also tapped into the enormous interest in spectator sport in order to broaden its appeal to workers. The party's largest newspapers, *La Liberté* and *L'Emancipation nationale*, led back pages dedicated to major sporting events. The leader of the UJSF, Jacques Cartonnet, was himself a celebrated swimming champion and a sports columnist for *La Liberté*.⁴⁵⁹ Sports reporting was yet another opportunity to promote the value of physical culture and show off the physical perfection of France's sporting heroes. However, the PPF regretted the commercialisation of sport in popular magazines such as *L'Auto*. The party endeavoured to illustrate the higher values that may be gleaned from sporting excellence and communicate these lessons to workers.

Until 1939, the *section d'entreprise* and the UPIF/UJSF remained the principal means by which the PPF expanded its working-class support. In 1938, however, the PPF experienced a series of politically-damaging events that appear to have caused many workers to abandon the party. Most historians have blamed this crisis on the party's response to the deteriorating situation abroad, in particular Doriot's tacit endorsement of appeasement after the Munich agreement. Indeed, this was the reason that many party officials gave in their resignation letters. During the months following Munich, Jouvenel, Pucheu, Fabre-Luce and Barbé all resigned from the Bureau politique, while others, such as Drieu La Rochelle, retired from party activities. However, this spat was largely kept private and it is unlikely that this accounts for the wider malaise that the party experienced during the year.

For a more thoughtful account of the crisis and its effect on working-class membership, we must turn to Kestel. Kestel extends the crisis back to early 1938, when it appears that

⁴⁵⁸ Schor, 'Le PPF dans les Alpes-Maritimes' p. 108.

⁴⁵⁹ Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body*, p. 195.

some of the PPF's crucial financial backers began to cut off their funds to the party.⁴⁶⁰ The crisis hit the party's extensive publishing network first; some newspapers began to publish more irregularly, while others were cancelled altogether. In addition to this, a rift began to open up between the ex-Communists and bourgeois intellectuals. Intellectuals found it harder to adapt to the gritty world of working-class politics than they anticipated. Kestel observes the alienation felt by the intellectuals and businessmen in attempting to adapt to the habitus of the ex-Communists - a world of coarse language, smoky bistros and unrefined food. The feeling was mutual. Jouvenel was permitted to run for election in Corrèze, but local workers displayed little appetite for a candidate with bourgeois mannerisms. A local militant requested that Doriot replace him with a worker.⁴⁶¹

The flawed relationship between workers and intellectuals was best typified by the Cercles populaires français (CPF). The CPF were an attempt to strengthen the backbone of working-class supporters that had been floundering since the start of 1938. The strategy was the brainchild of Ramon Fernandez, a prominent literary critic who, like numerous other interwar intellectuals, abandoned the far-left during the mid-1930s. Fernandez subscribed to the idea, common to right-wing thought since the turn of the century, that a pact between the 'active' elements of French society - namely intellectuals, students, and the working class - could cure France from the ills of republican democracy and bourgeois decadence. The CPF were to be a crucible where workers and intellectuals could meet, fraternise and exchange ideas. Said Fernandez, 'ces cercles...dont je suis le fondateur, ne sont nullement des cercles d'intellectuels, ni des cercles ouvriers. Ils sont créés dans un but de fraternité et de compréhension, notre désir étant de voir les intellectuels et les manuels collaborer ensemble et mieux se connaître'.⁴⁶² They also represented the PPF's first foray into the field of cultural

⁴⁶⁰ Kestel, *La conversion politique*, pp. 191-202.

⁴⁶¹ Kestel, *La conversion politique*, p. 223.

⁴⁶² APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles Populaires Français, section du XIème arrondissement', 24 March 1939.

politics. The CPF were earmarked to rival the Maison de la culture, a Communist organisation later appropriated by the Popular Front government that promoted working-class participation in the arts.⁴⁶³ By 1938 the Maison de la culture had 80,000 participants.⁴⁶⁴ Each CPF began with a series of lectures that covered history, literature and the arts. Their purpose was to transmit a lucid set of values to workers through a nationalist reading of French culture, designed to enliven the worker's innate patriotism.

The CPF was minuscule by comparison to most other political cultural movements. The first meeting held in Marseille on 9 June 1938 and, according to party sources, attracted 2,600 workers.⁴⁶⁵ They were not held with any regularity until November. Between then and the outbreak of the war, a total of thirty meetings took place. Twelve were held in the Paris region and eighteen in provincial cities, principally concentrated around the PPF strongholds of Lyon, Marseille, Nice and Bordeaux.⁴⁶⁶ Police records shed light on the extent to which party figures on attendance were inflated. A meeting in the 6th arrondissement of Paris in November 1938 drew 400 attendees; another meeting in February of the following year, this time in the 9th arrondissement, drew only 150.⁴⁶⁷ The CPF perhaps reached its nadir in March when Fernandez spoke on the merits of technocratic corporatism to a crowd of thirty-five.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶³ Fernandez was a founding member of the Maison de la culture, a fact that further illuminates how certain modes of political practice were easily transmitted from left to right.

⁴⁶⁴ Serge Wolikow, *Le Front Populaire en France* (Paris: Complexe, 1996), p. 199.

⁴⁶⁵ William Kidd, 'Ramon Fernandez and the Cercles populaires français: Workers and Intellectuals in Doriot's PPF', in *French Writers and Politics*, ed. by William Craw and William Kidd (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1987), p. 93.

⁴⁶⁶ Kidd, 'Ramon Fernandez', pp. 92-97.

⁴⁶⁷ APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles populaires français, section du VIème arrondissement', 25 November 1938, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles populaires français, section du IXème arrondissement', 10 February 1939.

⁴⁶⁸ APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles populaires français, section du IXème arrondissement', 24 March 1939.

The CPF clearly fell far short of the expectations that party intellectuals pinned to it. This in itself tells us something about the divide between workers and intellectuals, although other factors may also have contributed to its failure, such as poor organisation. Nevertheless, the CPF was an important stage in the development of PPF tactics because it is an example of the renewed emphasis that the PPF placed on worker recruitment. This commitment was made clear by the organisation of a Congrès national ouvrier, held in Doriot's former fiefdom of Saint-Denis on 8-9 January 1939. The congress assembled 1,500 worker-delegates chosen from *sections d'entreprise* across the country. At the congress, Doriot expressed his intention to end the party's disengagement from trade unionism and use such means to reinvigorate his party. 'Le bruit court que notre parti est fini. Jamais le PPF n'a été si sûr de lui, si vigoureux, si puissant, si actif...l'heure du rassemblement syndical a sonné.'⁴⁶⁹ Victor Barthélemy, who was present at the conference, summed up its significance:

'Cette conférence marqua un nouveau tournant dans l'histoire du PPF. Une sorte de retour aux sources. De l'ensemble des travaux, et du discours de Doriot, il apparut clairement que le parti n'avait pas oublié ses origines ouvrières, et qu'il comptait tenir sa place dans le mouvement qui, après les échecs que la CGT venait de subir au cours de l'automne, tendait vers une nouvelle forme de syndicalisme.'⁴⁷⁰

The moment was considered opportune by Doriot and his party after witnessing the failure of the general strike of 30 November 1938. The catastrophe caused workers to abandon the CGT en masse and the PPF stood to profit from their disillusionment. Writing on the subject shortly after the strike, Doriot remarked that 'ce qui l'a rendu plus important, plus urgent,

⁴⁶⁹ *Le Jour*, 'Le congrès national ouvrier du PPF', 30 January 1939.

⁴⁷⁰ Victor Barthélemy, *Du communisme au fascisme: L'histoire d'un engagement politique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978), p. 148.

c'est d'une part la chute massive des effectifs de la CGT ; d'autre part le développement des syndicats indépendants'.⁴⁷¹ Doriot reasoned that a failure to act now would only strengthen the SPF and render the PPF irrelevant to workers. The spontaneous organisation of anti-Communist committees in the factories during the strike, which often included PPF workers, gave Doriot further reason to act. 'Spontanément, des membres du parti ont su trouver dans les mouvements de grève la technique qui convenait pour regrouper des efforts épars contre les communistes : le comité indépendant.'⁴⁷² These committees, he adds, are the 'préfiguration de l'unité corporative française et de la politique que nous préconisons, les petites chapelles n'y trouvent peut-être plus leur compte. Mais la classe ouvrière y trouve sa liberté d'action, et c'est le but essentiel que nous poursuivons.'⁴⁷³

The PPF's rapprochement with trade unionism allowed the party to realise its corporatist ambitions more fully. The party displayed a greater concern, for example, with state-controlled immigration, which drew upon an increasingly racist and antisemitic discourse.⁴⁷⁴ This would be a recurrent theme, as we shall see shortly, in worker propaganda at the time. The worsening crisis abroad also allowed the PPF to link state-managed production and urgent national interest. However, the crisis also meant that Doriot was unable to fulfil his aim of creating a trade union until after the outbreak of war and the installation of the Vichy regime. Local trade unions did surface. Sabiani, for example, established the Confédération française du travail unitaire in March 1939, with 2,000 followers.⁴⁷⁵ Doriot, however, had to wait until the summer of 1940 to found the Fédération

⁴⁷¹ Jacques Doriot, *Refaire la France* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1938), p. 114.

⁴⁷² Doriot, *Refaire la France*, p. 115.

⁴⁷³ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ Kestel, 'The Emergence of Anti-Semitism within the Parti populaire français: Party Intellectuals, Peripheral Leaders and National Figures', *French History* 19, 3 (2005), pp. 378-384.

⁴⁷⁵ Mencherini, 'Le Front populaire dans les Bouches-du-Rhône' pp. 285-286.

nationale des groupements corporatifs français on 23 June 1940, which later resurfaced as the Front du travail français in 1943.⁴⁷⁶

Why did workers join the PPF?

On 24 January 1938, two factory workers from Montataire in the Oise department, Gaston Lamarre and Auguste Fernandé, were overheard arguing in a local bar. The argument started when Lamarre, a Communist sympathiser and trade union delegate at the local Marioni factory, overheard Fernandé expressing his support of the PPF to a friend. The argument came to blows and spilled out into the street. After some scuffling, Fernandé brought out a knife and stabbed Lamarre twice in the head - an act of self-defence, he claimed. Lamarre died two days later of his injuries.⁴⁷⁷

The bloody nature of this dispute is illustrative of the conviction with which political opinions were felt amongst many workers during the interwar period. Fights between Communists and *Doriotistes* were common, even if they did not usually prove fatal. Yet historians have simplified the reasons why workers may have joined the PPF. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, historians have generally given two explanations for this phenomena. The first is that workers were attracted to the party because it kept many of the facets of Communism, from grassroots organisation to revolutionary rhetoric, but gradually modified them through the lens of exclusionary nationalism.⁴⁷⁸ The second explanation argues that Doriot used clientelism to buy off workers. It claims that party leaders such as Doriot, Sabiani, and Le Can were able to secure the support of workers by offering them generous concessions in exchange for their loyalty, such as jobs and extravagant public works

⁴⁷⁶ APPP BA 1946, 'Recapulation du Parti populaire français', June 1941, Brunet, *Jacques Doriot*, p. 383.

⁴⁷⁷ AN BB18 3123, 'Procureur général près la Cour d'Appel d'Amiens au Garde des Sceaux', 6 May 1938

⁴⁷⁸ Brunet, *Saint-Denis*, pp. 399-418.

projects.⁴⁷⁹ This interpretation supposedly explains why many workers followed their leaders across the divide in the summer of 1936. While these factors do have some explanatory value, they fall some way short of the full picture. They suggest, somewhat patronisingly, that the support of workers could simply be bought, brushing aside political or ideological motivations. In fact, supporting right-wing parties such as the PPF could bring significant risk to a worker's life due to the hegemony of the left over the social and cultural life – as the incident in Montataire shows. The decision to carry a PPF card, to attend a PPF meeting, or to distribute a PPF pamphlet, was not taken lightly. This analysis of their motives must not be made lightly either.

It is immediately clear that many workers shared the same anticommunist sentiments that motivated people from other classes to join the PPF. For workers, anticommunism took a particular form that reflected social and professional realities. The dominance of the Communist party and the CGT over working-class affairs gave conservative workers the impression of belonging to an embattled minority. Repeated verbal and physical attacks only reinforced this idea. The PPF, which campaigned more vehemently on anticommunism than any other party on the right, was well placed to attract workers of this disposition. The *section d'entreprise* in particular provided a useful nebulous for anticommunist workers to organise. Many sections were born out of the experience of June 1936 and the subsequent threat of sit-down strikes and tactical sabotage. A *section d'entreprise* at the Compagnie Lilloise des Moteurs in Lille was set up in response to the June strikes in order to defend the garages against future Communist occupation. The section, which had 160 members by May 1937, included SPF and CFTC card carriers as members.⁴⁸⁰ The section paid particular attention to the shop floor equipment, setting up surveillance committees in order to prevent sabotage in the event of a strike. Members, according to police sources, 'ne sont pas

⁴⁷⁹ Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration*, p. 68, Soucy, *The Second Wave*, p. 239.

⁴⁸⁰ ADN M154 290, 'Commissaire divisionnaire au Préfet du Nord', 10 May 1937.

hostiles à l'action syndicale cégétistes en général, mais ils sont nettement résolus à contrecarrer celle de la cellule communiste de cette usine et à faire échec, par tous les moyens, à tout mouvement de grève qu'elle déclancherait.⁴⁸¹

The conviction that communism was antithetical to authentic, 'French' labour action was common and linked anticommunism to nationalism. This created disillusionment with the CGT and stimulated workers to pursue alternative means of representation. This was further aggravated by the perception that the CGT was too close to the Popular Front government. The government was accused of handing exclusive recruitment contracts to the CGT, excluding non-unionised workers and those belonging to alternative organisations. The PPF was one of the main beneficiaries of this disillusionment, particularly during acute periods of labour agitation. The example of the Lyonnais construction industry is illustrative of this point. During 1937, rumours circulated that non-CGT workers were being banned from accessing construction sites. The following year, a series of strikes broke out across the industry, most of which took place between August and October. The strike hardened the anticommunist sentiments of many construction workers and caused them to mobilise. Workers at the Borie construction firm formed a *section d'entreprise* in retaliation to a Communist-led strike of 150 workers.⁴⁸² At another site, a stonemason was murdered shortly after leaving the CGT and joining the PPF. According to police records, 'la victime...avait manifestée publiquement sa réprobation de la grève, et avait elle-même repris son travail bien qu'elle fit partie de la corporation du bâtiment.'⁴⁸³ Posters distributed by the sections argued that 'il ne peut y avoir d'ouvriers heureux dans une patrie diminuée' and 'seul le travail permettra de rendre sa force à la patrie'.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁸² ADR 4M 236, 'Rapport sur l'état d'esprit de la population', 28 June 1938.

⁴⁸³ AN BB18 3121, 'Le Procureur Général près la Cour d'Appel de Lyon, à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux', 12 October 1938.

⁴⁸⁴ ADR 10M 240, PPF poster entitled 'Grève générale du bâtiment', undated.

The PPF's staunch anticommunism was tightly bound to its views on foreign policy. Some PPF workers were engaged with the situation abroad and sympathised with the party's stance. Foreign policy was the most common topic on the front pages of national and local newspapers. The Communist party's persistent campaigning for aid and volunteers for Spain on the factory floor, sometimes resulting in strike action, doubtless exasperated the situation. In Lille, a telegram from the PPF read: 'La section Lilloise du PPF au nom des ouvriers de ses sections d'entreprises proteste contre la menace d'intervention en Espagne et déclare que seul un gouvernement d'union nationale de salut public antimarxiste peut assurer au peuple de France le pain la paix la liberté.'⁴⁸⁵ PPF workers in Lyon hung a large banner from a bridge at the CGT rally to protest against the belligerence of the Communist party over the Czech crisis.⁴⁸⁶ The PPF even sent ex-Communists who had abandoned the party after their experiences in Spain into *sections d'entreprise* in order to stir up local workers. Seven veterans were sent to factories in Valenciennes alone.⁴⁸⁷ Nonetheless, not all workers followed the party line. In the Nord a worker was arrested in June 1939 for distributing Nazi tracts and was found carrying a PPF membership card in her coat pocket.⁴⁸⁸

Although national issues took precedence in the PPF press, these texts also displayed a concern for local affairs that reflected the desire of workers for competent municipal government as well as sound foreign policy. Regional and local newspapers regularly harangued local governments under socialist and communist control for their mismanagement and incompetence. In Boulogne-Billancourt, Alfred Costes, the local Communist deputy and municipal councillor, was taken to task for the rise in street violence and failure of public works projects under his watch.⁴⁸⁹ In the 18th arrondissement of Paris a

⁴⁸⁵ ADN M154 290, 'Télégramme à M. Léon Blum Président du Conseil et des ministres, Paris', Undated.

⁴⁸⁶ ADR 4M 236 'Rapport mensuel sur l'état d'esprit de la population', 27 May 1938.

⁴⁸⁷ ADN M154 291, 'Commissaire Divisionnaire au Préfet du Nord', 24 July 1937.

⁴⁸⁸ ADN M154 292, 'Rapport, Sous-préfet de Douai', 24 June 1939.

⁴⁸⁹ *En avant Boulogne !, Bulletin de la section PPF de Boulogne-Billancourt*, 14 November 1937.

complaint was issued against the town hall for making unemployed workers queue in the wind and rain for their benefits whilst the employed were bussed to factories from the Place Jules Joffrin.⁴⁹⁰ In Lyon, the PPF criticised the state of the roads which, they claimed, caused workers to fall from their bicycles on their daily commute.⁴⁹¹ This kind of local politics allowed the PPF to address issues that touched the daily lives of workers whilst simultaneously landing further blows on the Communist party. They also represented an opportunity to vaunt the success of Doriot's municipal projects in Saint-Denis, although this strategy would doubtless have lost currency after he was ejected from his seat as mayor in June 1937.

Besides questions of policy, the PPF was also able to mobilise conservative workers by exploiting mounting xenophobic and antisemitic tensions. We have already seen how latent xenophobia could inform the political choices of workers during the early 1930s, as the examples of the social Catholic movement and the Croix de feu show. Xenophobia reached a far higher pitch during the mid- to late-1930s. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the rising concern over France's national security stoked fears over the country's large immigrant population. High profile acts of terrorism, such as the murder of Louis Bartheau and King Alexander I of Yugoslavia in Marseille by a Bulgarian immigrant in October 1934, were blamed on France's *laissez-faire* approach to immigration.⁴⁹² Secondly, as the economic slump showed no signs of ending, French workers became increasingly resentful of immigrants, who they blamed for unemployment. Attacks on immigrant workers rose and the phrase 'la France aux français' became increasingly visible in political discourse.⁴⁹³ Thirdly, the humanitarian immigration policies of the Popular Front government were met

⁴⁹⁰ *La Montagne du 18ème. Organe mensuel du Parti populaire français du 18e arrondissement*, 15 December 1936.

⁴⁹¹ *Bron libre et français. Organe mensuel du Parti populaire français, section de Bron*, 1 May 1938.

⁴⁹² Noiriél, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme*, p. 395.

⁴⁹³ *ibid.* pp. 396-397.

with consternation and anger by the right. Policies such as the Blum-Violette bill, which pledged to extend full French citizenship to Algerians who fulfilled certain criteria, were fiercely criticised in the press. Violently racist and antisemitic diatribes were aimed at leading Popular Front politicians, even within parliament.⁴⁹⁴ The political debate surrounding immigration reached fever pitch between the years of 1936 and 1938, and was only partially defused by the anti-immigration policies of Edouard Daladier.

Historians have noted the apparent reticence of the PPF to questions of race before 1940. Kestel has shown, however, that the PPF's attempts to mobilise support in Algeria among *pieds-noirs* and fight the Blum-Violette bill had the effect of radicalising the party's stance to immigrants and Jews.⁴⁹⁵ One might add that pressure from the PPF's working-class rank and file also contributed to the drift towards explicitly racial discourse. Workers certainly saw membership to the PPF as means of addressing racial issues from an early stage. PPF groups were responsible for some of the xenophobic protests and acts of violence that broke out in France during the late 1930s. Party leaders appear to have struggled to cope with this grassroots activism. In 1937 dockworkers belonging to the PPF in Marseille went on strike over the rise of North African immigrants in the industry. The Section d'entreprise du PPF des Ports et Docks de Paris launched its own strike to show their solidarity. The PPF were forced to distribute a pamphlet to discourage other workers to join the movement.⁴⁹⁶ PPF workers in the Nord mocked the hubris of immigrant Polish workers who dreamt of bigger and better things: "Pour certains étrangers au profil significatif, travailler la terre est humiliant, une place d'inspecteur c'est autre chose!"⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid.* pp. 423-431.

⁴⁹⁵ Kestel, 'The Emergence of Anti-Semitism', pp 364-384.

⁴⁹⁶ BNF, 4-Lb57-16554 Parti populaire français : Tracts politiques, 'Poster entitled 'Pas d'agitation à tout prix'', undated.

⁴⁹⁷ BNF, 4-Lb57-16554 Parti populaire français : Tracts politiques, Poster entitled 'PPF Federation du Nord', undated.

Racism and antisemitism gradually became more explicit in propaganda aimed at workers. At a CPF meeting in early 1939, a worker was employed to give a speech entitled 'Témoignage d'un ouvrier'. The worker called on Frenchmen to 'chasser les étrangers et surtout les juifs qui doivent être considérés come tels'.⁴⁹⁸ The party press called on bosses to only consider Frenchmen for new positions. 'Tant qu'il y a du travail pour les français, pas d'embauche pour les étrangers', read a newspaper for the *section d'entreprise* at the Lumière factory in Lyon.⁴⁹⁹

Gender politics did not generate the same degree of political heat as race during the late 1930s. Nonetheless, the hyper masculinity of the PPF was an important part of the party's appeal. As we have established, the PPF viewed gender roles in a way that was common to the right during the late 1930s. It discouraged women from entering the world of work and championed the pronatalist cause. Men meanwhile were to remain the breadwinner of the family and the active militants in the ranks of the party. Nonetheless, the PPF adopted novel means to distinguish itself from other political parties and improve its appeal to working men. The party contrasted the solemnity and sanctimoniousness of Communist militants with the good-natured, no-nonsense attitude of male PPF workers.

⁴⁹⁸ APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles Populaires Français, section du XIème arrondissement', 10 February 1939.

⁴⁹⁹ *L'Effort populaire français, Organe de la section d'entreprise Lumière, Lyon, July 1939.*

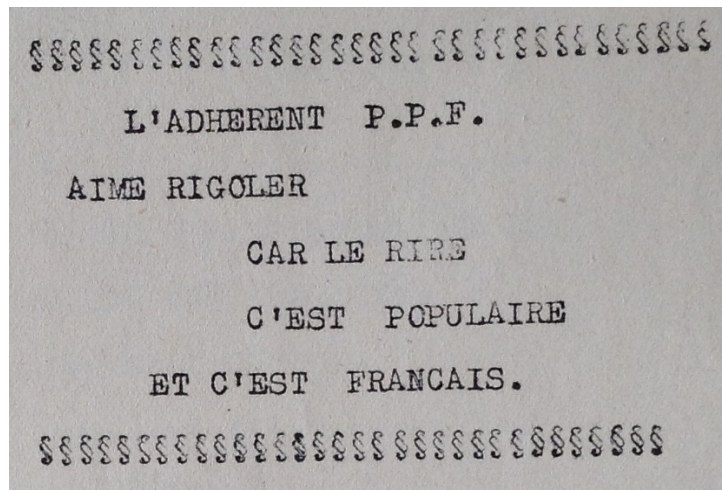


Figure 5 - Slogan on the superior humour of PPF workers. *La Liberation ouvrière*, Undated.

This emphasis on humour cut across categories of class, gender and race. The PPF used humour to show that it was in touch with the everyday French worker and comfortable with his 'true' nature, something that the Communists with its foreign doctrine and alien culture could never achieve. Figure 5, a short propaganda piece that featured regularly in workplace propaganda, juxtaposes humour, party and Frenchness. At a local picnic for local militants in Boulogne-Billancourt, workers were said to have displayed 'the sense of humour that is the reserve of French workers' when torrential rain broke out over the gathering.⁵⁰⁰ *La Brèche* reports of the 'sourire moqueur' painted across the faces of local Lyonnais militants, filled with 'le dédain et l'ironie', when confronted with foreign Communist strikers in the locality.⁵⁰¹ The PPF man, with his common sense and *joie de vivre*, was a true Frenchman at heart and a bulwark against Communism.

The success of this discourse contrasts well with the PPF's failed attempts to use moral education to win over workers. This clash between worker and bourgeois culture reinforces Kestel's argument on the crisis of 'habitus' that foreshadowed the decline of the party in

⁵⁰⁰ *En avant Boulogne !*, 24 July 1937.

⁵⁰¹ *La Brèche*, April 1938.

1938. It also underlines the fact that workers were more receptive when the party adapted to the worker's world view rather than imposing its own. The failure of the CPF is most illustrative of this. While the *sections d'entreprise* and the UJSP were tailored to complement working-class culture, a culture which many party leaders knew well, the CPF lectures, with their high-brow themes and moralising tone, found little traction among workers and attendances declined rapidly. The poet and *académicien*, André Bellessort, spoke on the value of French poetry and the *chanson populaire*, but denounced 'les odieux refrains du café-concert'.⁵⁰² Another *académicien*, the famed writer Abel Bonnard, lectured on the comparisons between Blum and the eristic rhetorical style of Voltaire and Rousseau at the Salle de l'Horticulture in November 1938, to 400 workers.⁵⁰³ The next meeting, held in the same venue a month later, drew just a quarter of the audience. While it is probable that a minority of workers enjoyed these lectures and even engaged with their political implications, the majority doubtless found the experience alienating, if not patronising, and found far more empathy in other party practices, or, more likely, other parties.

Conclusion

The importance of the PPF in the history of working-class conservatism is greater than its small size might suggest. The reasons for this are threefold. Firstly, the PPF made the most concerted effort among the parties of the right to win the support of workers and it was the only party to parade itself as an overtly proletarian party. Secondly, the Communist roots of the PPF gave the party unrivalled expertise in working-class politics, which resulted in a coherent set of political practices, despite the party refusing to engage with trade unionism. This accounts for why, among all the organisations on the right, the PPF attracted the highest

⁵⁰² APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles Populaires Français, section du VIIème arrondissement', 29 March 1939.

⁵⁰³ APPP BA 1946, 'Rapport sur une conférence des Cercles Populaires Français', 25 November 1938.

percentage of workers by some distance. Thirdly, the nature of PPF political practice, particularly at a local level, allows us to see some of the reasons why workers may have become attracted to the right. Some factors are clearly held in common with other organisations on the right: the provision of rival groups on the factory floor to organise and harbour anticommunist workers, for example, or the increasing use of extra-political activities like social services and sports clubs. Others were unique to the PPF and highlight the party's unique appeal amid a spectrum of other options. The party was capable of appealing to the conservative views of certain workers with regards to race and gender while divesting them of religious significations. Yet the party also failed when it came to another of its flagship strategies: the much vaunted alliance of workers and intellectuals. The fate of this policy nonetheless sheds more light on the opinions of conservative workers and the limits to their loyalty. While the PPF would ultimately fall well short of its aspiration of becoming a genuine popular party that could challenge the ascendent left, its attempts still offer the historian a valuable insight into the relationship between party and *la base*, while its existence is a further indication of the extent of working-class conservatism during the Popular Front years.

Conclusion

The dramatic events that marked the close of the 1930s were in many ways favourable to the development of working-class conservatism. The general strike of 30 November 1938 was not met with the same enthusiasm as the strikes that raised the curtain on the Popular Front era.⁵⁰⁴ Many workers were pessimistic about its potential outcome. The festive atmosphere of two years ago was no longer present; workers took to the strike with tired forbearance. Some reacted in outright disgust. After the defeat of the strike, membership to the CGT plummeted from 4 million to 1.5 million.⁵⁰⁵ As the international situation steadily deteriorated, French men and women of all backgrounds searched desperately for the right course of action to take. Answers were not readily forthcoming. The fear of war stoked xenophobic sentiments. The tone of the political discussion over foreigners took a notable shift to the right. Rumours that German and Italian agents were infiltrating the working class abounded. Attacks on immigrant workers rose. The *Kristallnacht* pogroms in Germany on November 9 1938 brought a wave of Jewish refugees into France, enlivening popular antisemitism.⁵⁰⁶ The Spanish civil war created its own refugee crisis in the south of France as republican combatants fled Franco's Spain.⁵⁰⁷

The international crisis aggravated anticommunist sentiment. The right redoubled their attacks on communists in the press. Anticommunism became increasingly prevalent in the political centre too. The Radical *président du conseil*, Edouard Daladier, blamed the

⁵⁰⁴ Jackson, *Popular Front*, pp. 104-106.

⁵⁰⁵ Prost, *La CGT*, p. 108.

⁵⁰⁶ Noiriél, *Immigration*, pp. 434-445.

⁵⁰⁷ *ibid*, p. 478.

communists for holding back arms production and sabotaging the war effort.⁵⁰⁸ Anticommunism reached its zenith when news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on 23 August 1939 broke. The political discussion over gender and family also took an increasingly conservative direction. Daladier introduced a robust natalist policy. The Family Code of 30 July 1939 introduced nationwide family allowances, in addition to harsh penalties for birth control and abortion.

With the Popular Front era decidedly over, and the left in disarray, the right sought to profit by reinforcing its working-class base. The circumstances appeared germinal. The core values of French conservatism - patriotism, tradition, '*la France aux français*' - were gaining currency. The SPF and the CFTC both condemned the general strike of 1938 and mobilised its factory sections to ensure that workers did not participate.⁵⁰⁹ The unions hoped that they could syphon off workers who abandoned the CGT. The strike also pressed the PPF to act. Doriot reorientated his party back to working-class programs and began plans to form his own trade union. The PSF, SPF, and PPF all heightened their rhetoric against immigrant workers and, in the latter case, Jews. Catholic groups commended Daladier for the Family Code. While right-wing movements took a complex range of positions with regards to the international crisis, they all called on workers to abandon class struggle and unite for France. Echoes of 1913-14 and the *union sacrée* could be heard.

And yet, the growth of working-class conservatism in the 1930s did not spark a resurgence of the right. The rapid decline of the left did not lead to a symmetrical spike on the right. In terms of membership, right-wing movements only gained marginally from the crisis. There are several reasons why this was the case. Firstly, the policies of Daladier satiated demands for tighter controls on immigration, anticommunist measures, a strong rearmament program, and family-orientated social policies. This took much of the initiative

⁵⁰⁸ J. Kim Munholland, 'The Daladier Government and the "Red Scare" of 1938-1940', *Proceedings for the Annual Meeting of the Western Society of French History*, X (1982).

⁵⁰⁹ Launay, *La CFTC*, p. 342.

away from movements like the PSF and the PPF, who had been pushing for such policies since 1936. Secondly, some of these groups suffered from internal crises that weakened their capacity to campaign on the ground. The SPF began to disintegrate as local union leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with the leadership. Many belonging to the PPF's executive committee abandoned the party after the Munich crisis. Catholic groups, meanwhile, remained true to their principles and distanced themselves from the highly-charged political atmosphere. Thirdly, and most importantly, the discontent that many workers felt for the left during the late 1930s resulted in a general apathy for politics and trade unionism. The majority of those who abandoned the left did not join another party or trade union. In this sense, working-class conservatism became disconnected from the world of organised political movements. In truth, political and social attitudes were probably extremely fluid during these years. Men and women from left to right had to come to terms with painful new truths as France moved from phoney war to rapid, inglorious defeat in the summer of 1940. Did the Vichy regime bring a sense of order and stability to workers' lives? Did the values that it stood for chime with conservative workers, just as they had during the interwar years? Or did workers keep their heads down and passively accept the new order, hoping for better days around the corner?

We currently know little about the history of the French working class under the Vichy regime. The wartime experience of workers is usually bracketed by the question of resistance and collaboration. However, we do know that only a small minority of workers participated in active resistance movements.⁵¹⁰ The vast majority of workers carried on life with a degree of normality. Nevertheless, certain factors make the study of working-class conservatism during the Vichy years particularly challenging. The authoritarian policies of the Vichy regime, the edicts of German occupying forces, and the suppression of the political opposition all muzzled the voices of workers. On 16 August 1940 Marshal Pétain signed a

⁵¹⁰ Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-44* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 296-300.

decree banning the CGT, the CTFC, and the SPF. They were replaced by compulsory state unions that dictated labour policy without regard for the voices of workers. Other political activities were kept tightly under wraps: the PSF was rendered a husk of its former self, while Doriot and the PPF became puppets for their Nazi occupiers. Catholics took a range of positions, from active collaboration with Pétain's National Revolution to active clandestine resistance.⁵¹¹ The rapid decomposition of interwar political movements makes it difficult to measure working-conservatism during the war years. How did conservative interests change? Was political life simply put on hold, an 'existential rupture in time' as de Beauvoir put it? What did workers make of the National Revolution and the German occupation? Why didn't more workers resist? We do not yet have answers to these questions. This would certainly make a fruitful area for future research.

The arguments made in this thesis would suggest that working-class conservatism remained an important element of working-class life during the Vichy years. During the 1930s, a range of political and extra-political movements were able to mobilise workers around a system of ideas that bore a close resemblance to Pétain's National Revolution. In this thesis, I have argued that historians have underestimated the extent to which workers participated in right-wing and Catholic movements. Historical consensus, which portrays interwar politics in rigid class terms, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. Interwar political movements were heterogeneous and spoke to numerous interest groups. Indeed, this was built into the very logic of nationalism and mass politics. This thesis has shown the most important far-right and Catholic movements of the 1930s were all able to mobilise workers in number. While the Croix de feu began life as a narrow veterans' association, it grew to become a party of national significance with a considerable working-class following. As the PSF, La Rocque's movement could back up its pretensions as a genuine mass party. The SPF

⁵¹¹ Atkin, 'Ralliés and résistants: Catholics in Vichy France, 1940-44' in Chadwick, *Catholicism, Politics and Society*, pp. 97-118.

was the most important product of this. In three short years, the SPF grew to become one of the largest trade union federations in France. Using syndicalist tactics, the SPF were able to rally workers on the factory floor to the values of its parent party. The PPF, too, grew a sizeable working-class following with its distinctly proletarian brand of integral nationalism. Finally, Catholic groups remained a bulwark of working-class conservatism during the 1930s. The CFTC and the JOC mobilised workers in unprecedented numbers. These facts alone show that the left could not take the allegiance of workers for granted. It operated on an open playing field and often stood to lose.

In this thesis I have shed light on the strategies that right-wing and Catholic movements used to attract workers. I have also shown the ways in which the ideology of the parent movement was transmitted through these strategies. During the 1930s, politics was fought on numerous levels. The far-right poured scorn on electoral democracy and tried to engineer a direct union between the party and the masses. Catholic groups shunned traditional politics too, but for different reasons. Under guidance of the Vatican, French Catholics aimed to alleviate the suffering of the working poor in the social rather than the political realm. Indeed, the sphere of social policy was closely contested during the 1930s. Catholics pioneered the use of trade unionism to mobilise conservative workers. This space was later infiltrated by the SPF during the Popular Front. Movements of all stripes politicised the use of physical education and sport. The PSF placed great stock in the use of social work. Social policies were aimed primarily at working-class youths. Far-right and Catholic movements pinned their hopes on young men and women to revitalise France and shake up the old order. Youth groups became important auxiliary organisations that mobilised thousands of workers. These movements were not above the gritty world of factory floor activism, however. The PPF and the PSF all formed factory cells. These cells were organised to fight communists and stop the outbreak of unnecessary strikes, but they also had a more

constructive function. These cells engendered camaraderie and sociability among conservative workers.

We cannot simply 'read-off' the attitudes of conservative workers from the content of a movement's ideology or doctrine, however. In this thesis I have argued that the interests of conservative workers were complex and cannot be reduced down to simple categories such as deference or material self-interest. Workers made their choices rationally and identified certain movements as the best vehicle for their interests. Moreover, workers viewed their interests in a range of different ways. Interests were only a partial reflection of a worker's socioeconomic condition. Other modes of experience and identity played an important role - in this thesis, I have argued that gender and race were the most important. I have also argued that conservative interests were formed autonomously, or *prior* to the intervention of a political movement. Far-right and Catholic movements had to adapt their discourse in order to appeal to conservative workers. Put another way, these movements did not simply mould workers according to their own machinations and desires. Working-class conservatism always existed. Despite the subjectivity of worker interests, we can identify common themes. Many conservative workers resented the role of immigrant workers in the French labour force and saw exclusionary nationalism as a way of returning French jobs to French workers. Some male workers feared that the growth of female labour blurred the distinction between the male's role as breadwinner and female's role as child raiser. Far-right movements advocated family-orientated policies and used highly-masculine rhetoric to 'speak' to workers of this persuasion. For Catholic groups, this was more closely linked to the question of faith. Anticommunism was prevalent among conservative workers. This was born of the experience of the factory floor. Hair-trigger strikes, intimidation, and bullying hardened sentiments against communists and CGT unionists. This too was couched in gendered and racialised language. Communists were viewed as effeminate and un-French. Far-right movements played on this dichotomy, and were rewarded for it.

Anticommunism leads into another of the central themes of this thesis. During the 1930s, working-class conservatism was an important component of the wider struggle between left and right. This thesis has shown that the struggle between left and right was not, as Marxist historians would have us believe, a class struggle. In social terms, the divide between left and right was vertical rather than horizontal, pitting members of the same social class against each other. Conservative workers were not fighting on behalf of the bourgeoisie or the *patronat*, but in defence of their own interests, as they perceived them. Many workers did not embrace the Popular Front. They felt that the Popular Front endorsed illegitimate strikes, was soft on immigration, and neglected the family unit. Moreover, supporting the right carried significant risks. The left was the hegemonic power in most working-class areas. Conservative workers might be branded as heretics or traitors. Catholic workers could be the victims of popular anticlericalism. Violence against conservative workers was commonplace. The willingness of many workers to take this risk is testament to the strength of their convictions. Doubtless many more workers sympathised with the right, but were put off joining a movement.

Historians have identified several, short-lived *rencontres* between workers and the right during modern French history. The 1930s might be considered as another of these *rencontres*, a momentary aberration from the norm. The circumstances were certainly 'exceptional', holding up in comparison to the 'exceptional' circumstances that saw workers flock to the *fin-de-siècle* nationalists or the Front national during the 1970s and 80s. Except, we can always find something that was 'exceptional' about a given era. If the term is used too often, it loses its meaning entirely. In this thesis, I have argued that we should not view working-class conservatism as a series of ruptures, but as a long, continuous history, one with its own ideological and symbolic heritage. The 1930s were a link in a chain that runs from the first emergence of the working class to the present day. We only need to glance at the program of Marine Le Pen's Front national today to see the lineage of the Croix de feu or

the PPF. Working-class conservatives have *always* existed in France. They are a silent minority. During some periods we hear their voices better than others. But they are a part of France and its history, as much as the left. This thesis is a small contribution to their history.

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