

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Law, Labour and Lunch in France at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Ventilation emerged as an efficient technique to reduce the health impact of dust and gas in workspaces around 1900. However, this technical solution to a major sanitary problem collided with the human factor. When, in 1894, French law imposed shop-floor clearance during lunch to facilitate aeration, workers resisted the injunction as a disturbance of their daily eating routine. Authorities relied on labour inspectors to find solutions to contentious situations. The 1901 union-led strike in the high-fashion district in Paris propelled the issue to national attention. Striking women demanded the strict enforcement of the aeration rule. The executive obliged, but the newfound zeal subsequently rekindled antagonism towards the regulation. Reversing their claim, women workers launched a community-based petitioning campaign to return to pre-strike tolerance. Rumours of another walk-out by seamstresses, triggered by the enforcement of the regulation in 1902, precipitated a governmental volte-face. Authorities apprehended the power of the street and the threat of public disorder. Government yielded to the women's influence. A more relaxed version of the decree – it did not automatically require the evacuation of workspaces – appeared on 29 November 1904. It had taken ten years, and a zigzagging trajectory, to overcome the unanticipated consequences of purposive legislative action. The new rules proved to be very solid: they remained in place until Covid-19 pushed the government to temporarily authorize eating at one's workplace to prevent the spread of the virus in canteens and restaurants.

Second thoughts emerged barely three months after the publication, on 10 March 1894, of the French executive decree on the mandatory aeration of workshops cleared of personnel during mealtimes. The Catholic weekly *Le Dimanche* pinpointed the rule's "somewhat embarrassing consequence, to wit: the removal of the workforce to the streets during lunch hour".¹ No one contested the government's rationale to protect the health of workers on the job from air corrupted by dust, volatile particles, fumes, and stench, an argument that also animated reform movements in the English-speaking world and which gave rise to clean-air legislation in the British

¹"Une conséquence fâcheuse de la loi sur l'hygiène des ateliers", *Le Dimanche* (Lille), 23 June 1894, p. 388.

Factory Act of 1895.² There was enough evidence proving the efficiency of a vigorous, window-to-window ventilation to remove airborne contaminants from indoor spaces while channelling fresh air into worksites.³ While the rule formed a partial solution to the toxicological risks workers encountered on the job across industries, it put an end to the long-established use of workspaces as eating places. It led to the spillover of lurching crowds into public places, where other dangers lurked: outdoors, these included the harassment of women, parks littered with leftovers, and flu due to chilly weather; indoors, restaurants threatened to foster alcoholism, to offer tainted food, and to lead to promiscuity with no assurance of a cleaner atmosphere. Of course, social and technical innovations come with the possibility of unforeseen upshots, so much so that sociologist Robert Merton outlined their causes in a classic article.⁴ It launched a large literature on how to predict – and prevent – hazards of most every kind, and initiated myriad studies relating decisions to drawbacks and perverse effects. This inquiry adds another dimension to examinations of unforeseen outcomes. It explains how a series of often cross-purpose mobilizations ended with the decree's Articles 8 (evacuation of worksites during meals) and 9 (compulsory aeration during mealtimes) rendered more flexible within a decade. The ending was far from predictable. No one had anticipated that workers, much less women workers – the supposed beneficiaries of the sanitary measure – would campaign for the re-authorization of eating on the shop floor. This article explores the reasons why, and the means by which, they contested legislation whose aim it was to protect working people.

Collective action – retrieved here through union, police, and ministerial archives as well as government publications and the national and local press – clinched a victory in the struggle over the aeration rule. The paper's first section details workers' low-key objections to the decree as it disrupted their daily lunch routine;⁵ it mentions particular manufacturing sectors with continuous production processes (sugar refining, papermaking) that urged government to relax the regulation to assure uninterrupted, complete fabrication cycles. Section 2 sheds light on the protracted union-led strike in the Parisian sewing trades (4 February to 11 March 1901) as the “transformative event”⁶ that quite surprisingly propelled the lunchtime issue from a circumscribed, discreet, and occasional presence to national prominence. The walk-out mobilized

²Janet Greenlees, *When the Air Became Important: A Social History of the New England and Lancashire Textile Industries* (New Brunswick, 2019); A. Spurgeon, “The Contribution of the Women's Factory Inspectorate (1893–1921) to Improvements in Women's Occupational Health and Safety (MA, University of Worcester, 2012), pp. 94–96.

³Henri Napias, *Manuel d'hygiène industrielle. comprenant la législation française et étrangère, et les prescriptions les plus habituelles des conseils d'hygiène et de salubrité relatives aux établissements insalubres, incommodes et dangereux* (Paris, 1882), pp. 228–239.

⁴Robert K. Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action”, *American Sociological Review*, 1:6 (1936), pp. 894–904.

⁵David Snow, Daniel Cress, Liam Downey, Andrew Jones, “Disrupting the ‘Quotidian’: Reconceptualizing the Relationship Between Breakdown and the Emergence of Collective Action”, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 3:1 (1998), pp. 1–22.

⁶Doug McAdam, Richard H. Sewell Jr., “It's About Time: Temporality in the Study of Social Movements and Revolutions”, in Ronald R. Aminzade *et al.* (eds), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (2001), pp. 100–112.

the seamstresses, and their union called for the rigorous implementation of Articles 8 and 9 to stop the fashion houses' ploy of serving lunch on the shop floor to their strike-breaking female staff (employers in Chicago applied the same strategy during the 1910 garment workers' strike).⁷ This is thus also a story about gender and empowerment as dressmakers – just like the female workers in fish conservation, cheese making in Roquefort or the textile industry – no longer stood “timid and without resolution” in the shadow of their male colleagues with whom, as historians have noted, they shared claims for higher wages, an end to piece work and shorter work days.⁸ Parisian seamstresses demonstrated their public clout and set a benchmark for future militancy.⁹ The third section shows how the scrupulous application of the lunchtime regulation rekindled the resentment among the personnel of the heavily female fashion and artificial-flower industries. Their informal networks circulated petitions that urged authorities to relax the legal requirement to evacuate shops for aeration during lunchtime. One female labour inspector commented in her yearly report for 1901 that “the enforcement of Article 8 sets off strong emotions among women shop workers. The kind of protection appears tyrannical to the women and girls who, living far from their workplace, have taken up the habit of bringing in their already prepared lunch”.¹⁰ Strict enforcement was the catalyst that rendered the objectionable intolerable.

Anxiety about women causing public disorder after the 1901 walk-out triggered the government's introduction of a slightly amended version of the 1894 decree that granted chief labour inspectors a degree of discretion in authorizing lunch on the shop floor. This is an interesting outcome. For one, authorities conflated two forms of women's mobilizations into a single threat to the ordinary, hum-drum run of things. These events were not only discrete, they also happened consecutively. Their motives diverged; in fact, the second episode (petitioning) was a reaction to the consequences of the first incident (strike). Historiography tends to identify such outpourings of collective verve separately, too. The first approach, which helps construe the seamstresses' strike in 1901, situates the rallying drive with women's unions that strove for the recognition to engage in collective bargaining.¹¹ The second line of

⁷N. Sue Weiler, “The Uprising in Chicago: The Men's Garment Workers Strike, 1910–1911”, in Joan M. Jensen, Sue Davidson (eds), *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike: Women Needleworkers in America* (Philadelphia, PA, [1984] 2018), p. 122.

⁸Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève. France 1871–1890* (Paris, 1974), p. 322; Louise A. Tilly, “Paths of Proletarianization: Organization of Production, Sexual Division of Labor, and Women's Collective Action”, *Signs*, 7:2 (1981), pp. 405–415; Laura L. Frader, “Femmes, genre et mouvement ouvrier en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Bilan et perspectives de recherche”, *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 3 (1996), pp. 224–229. See Fanny Gallot and Fabrice Virgili, “A Gender for Strikes?”, in *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe* [online], 2022. Available at: <https://ehne.fr/en/node/14186>; last accessed 14 December 2022.

⁹Judith G. Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 177–182; fashion workers would go on to play a seminal role in the genesis of the labour contract, see Claude Didry, “Les midinettes, avant-garde oubliée du prolétariat”, *L'Homme & la Société*, 3 (2013), pp. 63–86.

¹⁰Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application pendant l'année 1901 des lois réglementant le travail* (Paris, 1902), p. 27.

¹¹For French historiography that attributed women's increased activism to the formation of female and mixed sections in labour unions around 1900, see Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard, *Féminisme et syndicalisme en France* (Paris, 1978), p. 205; Patricia J. Hilden, “Women and the Labour Movement in France,

inquiry emphasizes the grassroots momentum in women's struggles and here sheds light on the petitioning women of Paris after the end of the work stoppage. Their claims grew out of a feminine rather than a feminist consciousness (to use Temma Kaplan's distinction), they couched their arguments in family terms around the defence of non-economic benefits of women's jobs, and the campaign built up from local, informal female networks that also existed elsewhere and sustained labour struggles as far apart as Barcelona, Shanghai, or Wheatland, California.¹² The lunch-break conflict of the early twentieth century most mattered to wage-earning women and, while issues of eating breaks for female workers came up here and there,¹³ it appears as a typically French issue. To look at the process of its resolution is to do justice to the historical dynamic as well as to pay attention to the different stakeholders – from working women and men, to union members, labour inspectors, factory owners, politicians and even journalists.

Lunchtime and Hygienic Regulation

Reformers and legislators had worked for ten years on protective legislation before adopting the first law on workplace security and hygiene in 1893. It was part of a legal battery that formed the foundation of the welfare state (women's and children's employment in 1892, work accidents in 1898, a partial passage to the ten-hour work day in 1900, retirement benefits for workers and peasants in 1910, minimum salary for women in domestic textile sweat shops in 1915).¹⁴ Preparatory drafts left no doubt about the motivation to ventilate the shop floor across industries during breaks. The idea was to “evacuate the micro particles and reduce the ‘animalization’ of the air”.¹⁵ This was not new. The national assembly's advisory committee on industrial hygiene

1869–1914”, *The Historical Journal*, 29:4 (1986), pp. 818–822; Coffin, *Politics of Women's Work*, p. 181; Patricia Tilburg, *Working Girls: Sex, Taste, and Reform in the Parisian Garment Trades, 1880–1919* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 156–160; for England, see Ursula De la Mare, “Necessity and Rage: the Factory Women's Strikes in Bermondsey, 1911”, *History Workshop Journal*, 66:1 (2008), pp. 69–75; for the United States, see the contributions in Jensen and Davidson (eds), *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike*, among which Sue Davidson, “Introduction”, pp. xi–xxii; Weiler, “The Uprising in Chicago”, pp. 118–119; and Ann Schofield, “The Uprising of the 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend”, pp. 169–171, 176.

¹²Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918”, *Signs*, 7:3 (1982), pp. 545–566; Steve Smith, “Class and Gender: Women's Strikes in St Petersburg, 1895–1917 and in Shanghai, 1895–1927”, *Social History*, 10:2 (1994), pp. 152–153; Vincent DiGirolamo, “The Women of Wheatland: Female Consciousness and the 1913 Wheatland Hop Strike”, *Labor History*, 34:2–3 (1993), pp. 236–255; Ileen A. DeVault, “‘Too Hard on the Women, Especially’: Striking Together for Women Workers' Issues”, *International Review of Social History*, 51:3 (2006), pp. 444, 454, 459–460. In France, only Perrot, *Ouvriers en grève*, pp. 312–407, mentioned this localistic attribute of women's strikes.

¹³DeVault, “‘Too Hard on the Women, Especially’”, p. 457; Jonathan Mood, “Employment, Politics and Working-Class Women in Northeast England, ca. 1790–1914” (Ph.D., University of Durham, 2006), pp. 152–153; Diane Shepherd, “Working-Class Women's Agency in the Labour Movement in East London, 1890–1914” (Ph.D., University of Hertfordshire, 2021), pp. 54–55.

¹⁴Philip Nord, “The Welfare State in France, 1870–1914”, *French Historical Studies*, 18:3 (Spring 1994), pp. 821–838; Donald Reid, “Putting Social Reform into Practice: Labor Inspectors in France, 1892–1914”, *Journal of Social History*, 20:1 (1986), pp. 67–87.

¹⁵Comité consultatif d'hygiène publique de France, *Rapports et projets de lois et règlements relatifs à la salubrité et sécurité du travail* (Paris, 1885), pp. 19–20.

mentioned precedents from England, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland to strengthen their case for similar, encompassing directives in France.¹⁶

By the late nineteenth century, hygienists had established the aetiology of many an industrial disease (phosphorous necrosis, saturnism, silicosis, etc.).¹⁷ Precautionary advice on occupational health was ubiquitous. Scientists insisted on a minimum volume of indoors space per worker and the necessary renewal of its air.¹⁸ The *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* urged to ventilate all confined work areas, and it advocated strict personal hygiene, including thorough handwashing before sitting down to a meal outside of workplaces where toxins (arsenic, lead, mercury, etc.) were handled.¹⁹ There were reports on the poisoning of house painters who had not washed their hands before eating their finger-food lunch in enclosed work sites.²⁰ Jobs where women's employment was exclusive, predominant or important – washing, laundry-, flower- and match-making, sewing but also metal polishing – received the same advice, that is: eating in separate rooms after changing work blouses or aprons and washing hands under running water.²¹

The architects of the 1894 decree devised a regulatory frame within which to formulate amendments and modifications in response to production constraints or changes in technology and shop-floor organization.²² Employers were quick to point out the difficulties in implementing Articles 8 and 9. Their complaints went to the Labour Office and its tutelary ministry. Manufactures where humidity was important to the treatment of textile fibres, such as spinning, noted the impossibility of keeping the relatively moist atmosphere constant during aeration, a difficulty that also spurned owners' opposition to ventilation in Massachusetts and Lancashire cotton mills.²³ Industries like sugar refining around Paris and in the North, and

¹⁶Comité consultatif d'hygiène publique, *Hygiène & sécurité des travailleurs dans les établissements industriels. Rapport et projet de règlement pour l'application de la loi du 12 juin 1893* (Paris, 1893), pp. 23–24.

¹⁷Anne-Sophie Bruno et al., “La santé au travail. Regards comparatistes sur l'historiographie récente”, in Anne-Sophie Bruno et al. (eds), *La santé au travail, entre savoirs et pouvoirs* (Rennes, 2011), pp. 13–40.

¹⁸A. Proust, “Professions. Maladies professionnelles”, in Sigismond François Jaccoud (ed.), *Nouveau dictionnaire de médecine et de chirurgie pratiques* (Paris, 1880), vol. 29, pp. 509–585, 565 (eating on the job); Jules Arnould, *Nouveaux éléments d'hygiène* (Paris, 1881), pp. 1124–1192, 1136 (eating on the job).

¹⁹“Arsenic”, in M.A. Dechambre (ed.), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (Paris, 1876), ser. 1, vol. 6, pp. 248–250; “Manufactures”, *ibid.*, ser. 2, vol. 4, p. 646. Entries on crafts in the 100 volumes provide a panorama of industrial hazards.

²⁰“Empoisonnement par imprudence”, *La Jeune République*, 7 April 1880, p. 2.

²¹E. Monin, “De quelques métiers exercés par les femmes”, *Le Génie civil*, 8 December 1888, pp. 92–93; “Fleurs”, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique* (Paris, 1878), ser. 4, vol. 2, pp. 399–405; Félix Brémond, *Précis d'hygiène industrielle, avec des notions de chimie et de mécanique, rédigé conformément au programme de la loi du 2 novembre 1892, à l'usage des inspecteurs et inspectrices du travail dans l'industrie* (Paris, 1893), pp. 88–89. For a comparison with Great Britain, see Barbara Harrison, *Not Only the Dangerous Trades: Women's Work and Health in Britain 1880–1914* (London, 1996).

²²André Lebon, ministre du Commerce, des Industries, des Postes et Télégraphes, au Syndicat professionnel de l'Union des Fabricants de Papiers en France, 24 April 1895, quoted in *Le Moniteur de la papeterie française*, 1 May 1895, p. 355.

²³Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1894* (Paris, 1895), pp. 213–214, 283, 319; Archives Nationales (henceforth AN), F/22/474, Comité des Arts et Manufactures, Rapports et Avis, Séance du 13 juin 1900, Réclamations de M. Duveillier-Wattine, filature de coton, Tourcoing. See Greenlees, *When the Air Became Important*, pp. 37–38.

papermaking located in the east (Doubs, Jura) of France, insisted on the practical limits to the enforcement of the eating-break rule. Their production processes were continuous, depended on a steady supply of heat, and required constant supervision. One industry representative exclaimed that obliging workers in sugar factories to leave their workstations to grab a bite to eat is “like asking firefighters to quit a fire because it’s lunchtime”. In 1901, a labour inspector from Brittany reported that “it is common practice among workers in around-the-clock processes to eat in the shop”.²⁴ Night work, it turned out, combined the problems. Machines needed running while opportunities to eat out in poorly lit neighbourhoods were few, if any. The labour inspector for north-eastern France remained matter-of-fact in noting that “workers in night crews eat while supervising the machines”.²⁵ Professional associations proposed amendments. They formulated organizational solutions. Shifts among alternating working teams offered one way to keep machinery running during meal breaks. Others counted on technological innovation in aeration, air-conditioning and exhaust ventilation to maintain the required atmosphere for production. Progress, however, seemed slow in coming, and pricey to boot.²⁶

Workers’ concerns owed little to technology and much to everyday subjects. Factory inspectors, whose task it was to implement labour laws, regularly reported on the special difficulty of enforcing “Art. 8 of the [10 March 1894] decree, which obliges workers to take their meals outside the workrooms. It should not raise any objection as hygienic considerations amply justify the measure. It instigates, however, some of the most important adversities.”²⁷ Historians have lined up a series of reasons to explain workers’ defiance of industrial hygiene: fear of losing autonomy on the job or of losing the job altogether, a certain attachment to routine, and ignorance although Janet Greenlees has found evidence that working women and men sized up “acceptable risks” in the workplace and responded to them within the constraints of

²⁴Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application 1894*, pp. 27, 130, 340; “L’application de la loi du 2 novembre 1892 et du décret du 10 mars 1894 dans les papeteries”, *Le Moniteur de la papeterie française*, 1 May 1895, pp. 354–355 (national federation of papermakers), pp. 336–338 (individual complaints); “Le Comité régional de l’Association des Industriels de France contre les accidents de travail”, *Journal de Saint-Quentin*, 15 March 1895, p. 2; AN, F/22/474, L’Inspecteur de la 7e Circonscription, 4e section à l’Inspecteur divisionnaire, Nantes, 21 December 1901.

²⁵Direction du Travail, *Bulletin de l’Inspection du Travail 1896* (Paris, 1896), p. 141; Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application 1896*, pp. 240–241; AN, F/22/474, L’Inspecteur divisionnaire, 5e Circonscription, à M. le Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes, 20 December 1901; L’Inspecteur divisionnaire de la 6e Circonscription à M. le Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes, Nancy, 17 January 1902; *ibid.*, Folder Article 8. Réclamations – Vœux, Chambre de Commerce de Corbeil, 11 November 1911.

²⁶Association des industries de France contre les accidents du travail, *Observations sur l’application du Décret du 10 mars 1894* (Paris, April 1895), pp. 12–15; *Rapports sur l’application 1894*, pp. 76, 130, 311; *Rapports sur l’application 1895*, pp. 106–107, 164; “Congrès pour l’examen des meilleures conditions d’hygiène et de production dans les manufactures textiles”, *Le Génie civil*, 17 June 1899, p. 116; Jules Rochard (ed.), *Encyclopédie d’hygiène et de médecine publique*, vol. 6: *Hygiène industrielle* (Paris, 1894), pp. 279–289, 311–329; Direction du Travail, *Bulletin de l’Inspection du Travail 1900* (Paris, 1900), p. 663.

²⁷“Rapport sur l’application de la loi du 12 juin 1893 par M.A. Millerand, ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes”, in Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1900 des lois réglementant le travail* (Paris, 1901), pp. clviii–clix; see “Le registre”, *Journal de la Ville de Saint-Quentin*, 20 March 1895, p. 1.

keeping their livelihood. A gendered spin points to the veneration of virility and physical force as a factor accounting for men's relative indifference to the dangers at work.²⁸ While the ascription begs the question of women's attitudes towards danger in the workplace, it also edges past issues connected with the daily routine of workday lunch and its relation to the prevention of adverse health effects on the job.

Workers' rejection of Articles 8 and 9 had roots in proximate motives of discontent. Cost and weather posed concrete limits to a modification of lunch practices. Habit (or preferences) and a certain form of self-respect (*amour propre*) – the capacity to decide for oneself – subsumed more intangible drives to resist. So much was obvious a year after the decree had gone into effect. The chief labour inspector of the Paris area lamented the poor welcome that the new legal frame had received from the labour force. He went on to write that

[T]hose whose residence is quite distant from the factory, and who bring in their lunch, declare that the decree forces them either to eat in the street or to go to a restaurant and spend money. The objection is even stronger when made on behalf of women and children. [...] Some industrialists, concerned with the well-being of their personnel, have built refectories. At one place after two days, the working women absolutely refused to use it for reasons of *amour propre*.²⁹

The injunction to ventilate workspaces to chase away harmful substances during breaks appeared like an unproblematic measure to protect workers' health. In theory, the recommendation seemed all the more feasible as eating facilities appeared numerous.³⁰ Choice, of course, is not merely a question of options. Opportunities come with a price tag. Physiologists calculated that a calorie eaten away from home was twice as expensive as its homemade equivalent.³¹ Sit-down meals in commercial eateries were expensive. And they weighed more heavily on working-class women. A full commercial lunch absorbed almost thirty per cent of their average

²⁸Vincent Viet, *Les voltigeurs de la République. L'inspection du travail en France jusqu'en 1914* (Paris, 1994), pp. 506–513; Stéphane Frioux, Patrick Fournier and Sophie Chauveau, *Hygiène et santé en Europe de la fin du 18e siècle aux lendemains de la Première Guerre mondiale* (Paris, 2011), p. 199; Caroline Moriceau, *Les douleurs de l'industrie. L'hygiénisme industriel en France, 1860–1914* (Paris, 2009), pp. 238–239. On workers and “acceptable risks”, see Greenlees, *When the Air Became Important*, pp. 11–12, 94; Janet Greenlees, “Workplace Health and Gender among Cotton Workers in America and Britain, c.1880s–1940s”, *International Review of Social History*, 61:3 (2016), pp. 475–480.

²⁹Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1894*, p. 27.

³⁰Martin Bruegel, “Workers' Lunch Away from Home in the Paris of the Belle Epoque: The French Model of Meals as Norm and Practice”, *French Historical Studies*, 38:2 (2015), pp. 253–280. For comparisons, see Peter Scholliers, “Eating Out”, in Martin Bruegel (ed.), *A Cultural History of Food in the Age of Empire* (London, 2016), pp. 108–114. Jakob Tanner, *Fabrikmahlzeit. Ernährungswissenschaft, Industriearbeit und Volksernährung in der Schweiz 1890–1950* (Zurich, 1999); Katherine L. Turner, *How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working-Class Meals at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley, CA, 2014); Thomas Bouchet et al. (eds), *La gamelle et l'outil. Manger au travail en France et en Europe de la fin du 18e siècle à nos jours* (Nancy, 2016).

³¹Marcel Labbé, “L'alimentation ouvrière”, *Journal des débats politiques*, 4 June 1910, p. 2; Albert Dejouany, “L'alimentation du personnel civil de la Cartoucherie militaire de Vincennes”, *Bulletin de la Société scientifique d'hygiène alimentaire*, 4:3 (1914), pp. 119–120.

daily wage. Men spent about twenty per cent of their daily pay on a proper meal.³² In other words, Articles 8 and 9 came with a cost. Their economic impact was one of the reasons for workers' dissatisfaction.

The persistence of lunchtime routines was patent. Workers stuck to taking lunch in their shops and factories as it was, according to Jacques, chief labour inspector of the eastern circumscription, "very hard to modify long-established habits".³³ Such inertia posed a problem to the Labour Office. The government made the resolute application of Article 8 a priority. The principle, however, suffered amends. The executive went so far as to afford a margin to the labour inspectors, urging them to see that the regulation "be applied as strictly as possible".³⁴ The expression became something of a mantra. Early on, the chief labour inspector of the north-eastern circumscription observed that "the many reclamations [concerning the decree of March 1894] have incited the labour inspectors to adopt a posture of great tolerance and to limit themselves to giving only such advice that would get them as close as possible to the spirit of the law". His colleague in the central circumscription noted in 1896 that "factory owners have taken our observations into account within the limits of what is possible".³⁵

The possible required time. The law and sanitary prescriptions were ideals to reach, the head of the south-eastern circumscription Blaise stated, and patience was the best way to get there. To force issues was counterproductive. He declared "tolerance is indispensable even though it needs to be transitory". In 1897, a district labour inspector urged his hierarchy to push for an easing of Articles 8 and 9. He said that "formal summons remain without results". Workers, he reported, continued to eat in their workspaces, a practice that corresponded to everybody's expectation. He suggested the adaptation of the law to specific industries, leaving no doubt on the law's justification with regard to manufactures where toxins entered the production process. Where possible, however, he advocated to grant workers the same latitude as before the decree of 1894 so as to avoid disaffection and conflict. The idea was widely shared. It combined, another labour inspector declared, "patience and resolve in the search for small steps forward".³⁶ The compass of moderate but steady progress

³²Martin Bruegel, "Le genre du déjeuner. Alimentation et travail dans le Paris de la Belle Époque", *Food & History*, 14:2–3 (2016), pp. 35–37.

³³Rapport de M. Jacques, inspecteur divisionnaire, 3e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1896*, pp. 64–65.

³⁴Rapport de M. Boyer, inspecteur divisionnaire, 2e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1894*, p. 57; "L'inspection des fabriques en 1901", *Bulletin de l'Office du Travail*, 10 (1903), p. 55.

³⁵Rapport de M. Chambord, inspecteur divisionnaire, 4e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1894*, p. 116; "Rapport de M. Boyer, inspecteur divisionnaire, 2e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1896*, p. 41.

³⁶Rapport de M. Blaise, inspecteur divisionnaire, 6e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1894*, pp. 219–221; AN, F/22/474, Dossier d'un premier projet de modification d'ensemble du décret du 10 mars 1894, L'Inspecteur divisionnaire de la 3e Circonscription à M. le Ministre, 16 November 1897; *ibid.*, L'Inspecteur divisionnaire de la 4e Circonscription à M. le Ministre, 20 November 1897; *ibid.*, L'Inspecteur divisionnaire de la 5e Circonscription à M. le Ministre du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 20 December 1901; "Rapport de M. Gouttes, inspecteur divisionnaire, 8e Circonscription, Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur application 1894*, p. 282; "Rapport de M. Chambard, inspecteur divisionnaire, 2e Circonscription", Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1896*,

could have continued to guide the Labour Office's approach to implementing the regulation. A strike triggered a change in the politics as usual.

The Spark: Striking Women

Legislative reform originated with the 1901 strike that saw women's tailors fight for better wages, an eight-hour day, and the abolition of piece work. The month-long walk out – it lasted from 4 February to 11 March – failed to achieve its goals. A united front of intransigent employers faced down the movement with a lock-out.³⁷ And yet, a convoluted subplot with its own unexpected consequences involving the seamstresses employed by high-fashion houses breathed new life into the lunch-break issue. To be sure, this “transformative conflict” to put Articles 8 and 9 upfront on the public agenda was unlike the mobilizations singled out in Sellers and Melling's programmatic review of clashes over workplace dangers. The law emerged as a surprise. Rather than highlighting its relevance to toxic outputs in production and to the harm they inflicted on workers' health in the long run, women workers wielded it as a tactical device to force the hand of their employers during the strike.³⁸

The tailors invited the seamstresses to join their movement on the eve of their strike.³⁹ It took more than a week and several other pleas to convince the female dressmakers. As in so many places, misogyny in labour unions likely explained women's initial misgivings.⁴⁰ They eventually joined the movement by February 11 “after overcoming the hesitations of the first hour”.⁴¹ They did so on the condition “that there be reciprocity, that the men support the ladies' demands”.⁴² Female strikers, who demanded the meticulous construction of the law as a weapon against abusive employers, received union backing. The seamstresses' union dated its earliest activities to 1892, counted 500 adherents on the eve of the 1901 strike, and relied

pp. 90–91; “Rapport de M. Le Roy, inspecteur divisionnaire, 9e Circonspection”, *ibid.*, pp. 240–241; “Rapport de M. Lagard, inspecteur divisionnaire, 10e Circonscription”, *ibid.*, p. 266; “L'inspection des fabriques en 1901”, p. 55.

³⁷“Les grèves”, *La Petite République*, 6 February 1901, p. 2; Office du Travail, *Statistique des grèves et des recours à la conciliation et à l'arbitrage survenus pendant l'année 1901* (Paris, 1902), pp. 72–76; “Grève des ouvriers-tailleurs pour dames. Lock-out patronal, février–mars 1901”, *L'ouvrier de l'habillement*, August 1905, p. 2.

³⁸Christopher Sellers, Joseph Melling, “Towards a Transnational History of Industrial Hazards: Charting the Circulation of Workplace Dangers, Debates and Expertise”, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 45:3 (2012), p. 419.

³⁹Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (henceforth APPP), BA 110, Rapport quotidien du Préfet de Police, 1901, Rapport du 25 January 1901.

⁴⁰Hilden, “Women and the Labour Movement”; Christine Bard, “Proletarians of the Proletariat: Women's Citizenship in France”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 48 (1995), p. 55; Tilburg, *Working Girls*, p. 176; Schofield, “The Uprising of the 20,000”, p. 170; Lois Rita Helmbold, Ann Schofield, “Women's Labor History, 1790–1945”, *Reviews in American History*, 17:4 (1989), pp. 507–510.

⁴¹“La grève des tailleurs”, *Le Socialiste*, 17 February 1901, p. 3.

⁴²APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Direction générale des recherches, 2e Brigade, 1er Bureau, Rapport, Réunion des ouvrières et ouvriers tailleurs pour dames, 31 January 1901.

on a core of sixty active members to sustain day-to-day militancy. This was part of the increase in women's union activism.⁴³ While men's support helped women to voice their claims in public, the invitation to join the strike was as much a gesture of inclusion as of interest.

Working-class solidarity was not a foregone conclusion. While the sewing trades offered many jobs to immigrants,⁴⁴ hard times tended to pit ethnic groups but also tailors and seamstresses against each other. There were about 800 tailors for women and about 20,000 high-fashion modistes and seamstresses working in Paris. While skills defined the occupational hierarchy in fashion houses, women needleworkers could grab opportunities and change job venues in response to the vicissitudes of the economy.⁴⁵ This gave rise to competition between women and men in the fashion industry. A police report noted that owners in the trade took advantage of the antagonism by relying on women as strike-breakers. The tailors' walkout had prompted counter-tactics, the informant wrote, "as many high-end fashion houses organize shops where women do the same work as the tailors".⁴⁶ Women's participation in public meetings at the union-led Labour Exchange overcame the opposition of the sexes at the high end of the textile industry's labour market.

The joint movement of the seamstresses and women's tailors was so sensational that it received regular mention in newspapers and police reports. In fact, just as in female strikes elsewhere, there was a joyous, almost carnivalesque aspect to the seamstresses' public movement.⁴⁷ Women often accounted for half of the attendance in public meetings. Their presence added, according to cultural critique Arsène Alexandre, "a festive element to the happenings even though the tragic problem [of misery] is never far off".⁴⁸ On 20 February, they were 600 in a 1200-strong meeting whose main resolution was a rebuttal of media accusations that peddled the mistaken affirmation of women's subordinate

⁴³"Congrès international de la condition et des droits des femmes", *La Fronde*, 6 September 1901, p. 3; Auguste Pawlowski, *Les syndicats féminins et les syndicats mixtes en France. Leur organisation, leur action professionnelle, économique et sociale, leur avenir* (Paris, 1912), pp. 14–17; Zylberberg-Hocquard, *Féminisme et syndicalisme en France*, p. 205; Hilden, "Women and the Labour Movement"; Coffin, *Politics of Women's Work*, p. 181; Tilburg, *Working Girls*, pp. 156–160.

⁴⁴Nancy L. Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque* (New York, 1986), p. 237.

⁴⁵See Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC, 1997), pp. 74–104; on membership numbers, see "L'actualité – Couturiers et couturiers", *La Justice*, 12 February 1901, p. 1; on job hopping, see Gaston Worth, *La couture et la confection des vêtements de femme* (Paris, 1895), pp. 73–74.

⁴⁶APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Renseignements complémentaires sur la grève des ouvriers tailleurs pour femmes, 22 March 1901. On the efficacy of hiring strike-breakers in the US, see Larry W. Isaac, Rachel G. McKane, and Anna W. Jacobs, "Pitting the Working Class against Itself: Solidarity, Strikebreaking, and Strike Outcomes in the Early US Labor Movement", *Social Science History*, 46:2 (2022), pp. 315–348.

⁴⁷Eleanor Gordon, "Women, Work and Collective Action: Dundee Jute Workers 1870–1906", *Journal of Social History*, 21:1 (1987), pp. 42–44; Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "Femmes, genre et syndicalisme pendant la Grande Guerre", in Evelyne Morin-Rotureau (ed.), *Combats de femmes 1914–1918* (Paris, 2004), pp. 98–111; Lois Scharf, "The Great Uprising in Cleveland: When Sisterhood Failed", in Jensen and Davidson (eds), *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike*, p. 150.

⁴⁸Arsène Alexandre, *Les reines de l'aiguille. Modistes et couturières* (Paris, 1902), p. 185.

role in the tailors' campaign.⁴⁹ But seamstresses inclined less towards a walk-out. While the strike of tailors for women mobilized 600 men throughout (seventy-five per cent of the professional group) and united fifty-five employers out of roughly 100 against them, women's walkouts were fewer, targeted specific fashion houses, and with one exception mobilized a smaller fraction – from one tenth to one third – of their staff.⁵⁰

The seamstresses were now in the news. They no longer lived by the norm of female quiescence and docility in the public sphere. And it showed. The weekend supplement of the *Petit Parisien* of 3 March 1901, which sold one million daily copies, carried a colour print of a meeting of tailors and seamstresses on its front page (see Figure 1). The commentary said that “the affluence was considerable”.⁵¹ The seamstresses' putative coquetry revealed itself as an element of respectability. *Le Socialiste* mocked the bourgeois papers “stupefied by the curious spectacle of well-dressed tailors and, above all, the seamstresses of cutting-edge fashion houses”. Their chic dresses distinguished them from miners or masons, the newspaper wrote, “they are nonetheless exploited like the others. Elegant and beautiful female citizens [*citoyennes*] speak up at the Labour Exchange, and their resolve transports the cause of the proletariat”.⁵² The left-leaning *Estafette* scoffed at the “journalistic or doctoral feminism that will never end abuses”, and saluted the seamstresses' movement as “the will to free themselves from intolerable despotism and limitless exploitation”.⁵³ The press eagerly reported on the strike, the dreaded police prefect Lépine took a particular interest in it, undercover agents spied on it, and the police occasionally – but just as elsewhere – used excessive force against it.⁵⁴ In short, there was a palpable sense of disorder that haunted the authorities in the face of women's mobilization. Its memory was to mark the future.

While seamstresses made very similar claims as their male counterparts (an eight-hour-day paid six francs and the abolition of piece work),⁵⁵ a specific plea concerning the organization of the working day set women's requests apart from men's goals in the strike. They wanted “the installation of refectories so that the seamstresses are not obliged to eat on the stairways or outdoors exposed to all winds”.⁵⁶ It is impossible to ascertain whether the demand was part of a wish list prepared on

⁴⁹ APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Direction générale des recherches, 2e Brigade, 1er Bureau, Rapport, Réunion des ouvrières et ouvriers tailleurs pour dames, 20 February 1901; APPP, BA 110, Rapports quotidien du Préfet de Police, 20 February 1901, mentions the newspapers *Le Matin* and *Le Français* as targets of the meeting's ire.

⁵⁰ APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Renseignements complémentaires sur la grève des ouvriers tailleurs pour femmes, 22 March 1901; APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Direction générale des recherches, 2e Brigade, 1er Bureau, Rapport, Réunion des ouvrières et ouvriers tailleurs pour dames, 12 February 1901.

⁵¹ “Nos gravures. À la Bourse du Travail”, *Le Petit Parisien. Supplément littéraire illustré*, 3 March 1901, p. 70.

⁵² “La grève des tailleurs”, *Le Socialiste*, 17 February 1901, p. 3.

⁵³ “L'Aiguille”, *L'Estafette*, 20 February 1901, p. 1.

⁵⁴ APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour dames, Dépêche télégraphique, 19 February 1901, 10 heures 15 matin. On police violence, see Weiler, “The Uprising in Chicago”, in Jensen and Davidson (eds), *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike*, p. 126.

⁵⁵ “Tailleurs pour dames”, *L'Aurore*, 11 February 1901, p. 3.

⁵⁶ “Couturières et tailleurs pour femmes”, *La Fronde*, 12 February 1901, p. 1; “Couturières et tailleurs pour femmes”, *ibid.*, 13 February 1901, p. 1; “Tailleurs pour dames”, *L'Aurore*, 13 February 1901, p. 3; “La Grève des Couturières”, *La Liberté*, 16 February 1901, p. 1.



Figure 1. Striking women. Fashionable dress emphasized the respectability of the seamstresses' claims for better wages, fewer hours, the abolition of piece work, and the right to convenient eating places. According to observers, women's participation in collective action added a joyous element to serious concerns. *Le Petit Parisien. Supplément littéraire illustré*, 3 March 1901.

the eve of the mobilization. At the International Congress on the Condition and Rights of Women in 1900, the feminist editor Marguerite Durand had floated the suggestion of putting an end to seamstresses' eating in improvised spaces while ventilating their workplaces, and the bourgeois advocacy group *Ligue sociale d'Acheteurs* urged consumers to patronize shops with lunching facilities for their workers.⁵⁷ The idea

⁵⁷“Congrès international de la Condition et des Droits des Femmes”, *La Fronde*, 6 September 1900, p. 3; Patricia Tilburg, “‘Sa coquetteurie tue sa faim’: Garment Workers, Lunch Reform and the Parisian *Midinette*”

of refectories was thus in the Parisian air, and the strike launched it on a surprising path.

To obstruct their workers' mobilization, the owners of various fashion houses, among which the prestigious Beer, Paquin, Redfern, and Worth, offered several hundred lunches to their non-striking employees. They aimed at avoiding any encounter between their staff and picketers at noon. Critical comments coming from union sources accused employers of sequestering their personnel to prevent them from joining the walkout.⁵⁸ The action incited socialist assemblyman Viviani to remind a 3500-strong meeting of the manoeuvre's illegality in light of Article 8 of the 10 March 1894 decree.⁵⁹ The assembly swiftly dispatched a delegation to Alexandre Millerand, minister of Commerce and Industry, to hasten the application of the law. Millerand, the first socialist in government, was a signal presence at the top of the state in that he communicated a constructive attitude towards workers' concerns; he kept an eye on the regulation of industrial poisons and backed the extension of the 1893 law on hygiene and security in the workplace to non-mechanical occupations like restaurant cooks or office clerks.⁶⁰ He sent labour inspectors to check the mealtime set-up. They found that "a number of employers have indeed served meals to their seamstresses, not in shops but in especially prepared rooms. The workshops have been ventilated, so that the inspectors found no violation of the extant regulation".⁶¹ The minister's delayed enforcement of a law "so important to a great number of women" astonished the strikers but they were, according to an article in Durand's daily *La Fronde*, satisfied to have set implementation in motion. Pressure proved the mother of invention, and it showed that practical solutions to respect the law were at hand.⁶²

The Pendulum Swings Back: The Grassroots Campaign

The strike of the tailors and seamstresses had unexpectedly given new salience to Articles 8 and 9. Labour inspectors seemed to take their cue from the newfound attention and ministerial mandate. While infractions of the March 1894 decree increased by twenty per cent between 1900 and 1901, penalties inflicted for the violation of the paragraphs prohibiting lunch at work rose by seventy per cent from 290

1896–1933", *French Historical Studies*, 38:2 (2015), p. 299; Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, *Consommateurs engagés à la Belle Époque. La ligue sociale d'acheteurs. 1900–1935* (Paris, 2012).

⁵⁸APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Direction générale des recherches, 2e Brigade, 1er Bureau, Rapport, 12 February 1901; "Tailleurs pour dames", *L'Aurore*, 13 February 1901, p. 3; "Couturières et tailleurs", *L'Aurore*, 14 February 1901, p. 2; "La grève des tailleurs pour dames", *L'Estafette*, 14 February 1901, p. 4; "La grève des tailleurs et des couturières", *Le Figaro*, 13 February 1901, p. 3; "Les repas à l'atelier", *La Presse*, 16 February 1901, p. 3; "Les Grèves. Couturières et tailleurs", *L'Univers*, 17 February 1901, p. 3.

⁵⁹"Couturières et tailleurs pour dames", *La Fronde*, 14 February 1901, p. 1; APPP, BA 110, Rapport quotidien du préfet de Police, 1901, 14 February 1901.

⁶⁰Lenard R. Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1870–1914* (Baltimore, MD, 1984), pp. 178–179; Judith Rainhorn, *Blanc de plomb. Histoire d'un poison légal* (Paris, 2019), pp. 223–224; Martin Bruegel, "The Martyrs of the Saucepan: Parisian Cooks, French Gastronomic Reputation, and Occupational Health around 1900", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 94 (2018), pp. 80–106.

⁶¹"Le repas à l'atelier", *La Presse*, 16 February 1901, p. 3; "La journée de la grève", *Le Matin*, 15 February 1901, p. 2; "Le décret de 1894", *La Lanterne*, 16 February 1901, p. 1.

⁶²"Couturières et tailleurs pour dames", *La Fronde*, 15 February 1901, p. 1.

instances to 501.⁶³ Whatever the situation was during the strike, the zeal to have the letter of the law respected irked certain categories of workers. Now the pendulum of activism swung back to a campaign in favour of a more tolerant enforcement.

The new context breathed fresh, vigorous life into old arguments. The vast majority of workers' claims to uphold the right of eating in the worksite expressed concrete concerns. Gender operated as a dividing mechanism in the attempt to reform Articles 8 and 9 (see Table 1).

Women and men hailed from different occupational backgrounds. Men's cases originated in industrial jobs (textiles, printing, ironworks) located in many regions. Conveniences like shelter from inclement weather and distance from work figured prominently in their contentions.⁶⁴ Women's demands came from the smaller but heavily female and often quite seasonal craft shops of the Parisian manufacturing sector (sewing, ornamental feathers, artificial flowers). Women relied on personal relationships to lobby for their cause. While their claims highlighted the impact of Article 8 on female health and finances, they also hinted at the moral implications of sending women into the streets and commercial eateries at lunch hour. Women workers understood, and agreed with, the health concerns conveyed in the rules about aeration; they often put forth the sufficient number of cubic feet per person in the shops. They said, however, that the directive added to their existing financial burden, noting that

We can bring in healthy food cooked in our families. It would be unjust to compel us to take our meals in holes-in-the-wall [*gargotes*] where there is less air than in our shop and where the food is adulterated and more expensive [than the lunch basket].⁶⁵

While men continued to campaign on a single-site based mode, coordination was obtained among women workers. The movement gathered momentum as more workshops joined in. Short distances and geographic concentration helped. Feather workers signed a petition. They explained the difficulty to make ends meet on their modest salaries, which kept restaurant lunches out of their reach (their employers had no rooms reserved exclusively for breaks).⁶⁶ Flower-makers insisted that homemade meals realized savings to benefit the entire household. They added, "we are mostly young women who do not care at all to lunch in restaurants where, very often, we confront the obsessions of people who absolutely lack manners and respect". The contention resonated with others who insisted on the familial

⁶³ APPP, BA 1394, Grève des tailleurs pour femmes 1901, Direction générale des recherches, 2e Brigade, 1er Bureau, Rapport, 19 February 1901; Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1900* (Paris, 1901), p. 532; *ibid.*, 1901 (Paris, 1902), p. 496.

⁶⁴ AN, F/22/474, Folder Imprimerie Plont Nourrit, Nanteuil-lès-Meaux, 29 November 1900; *ibid.*, folder iv, L'inspecteur divisionnaire à M. le Ministre, Toulouse, 4 January 1902.

⁶⁵ AN, F/22/474, Folder 4, Ouvrières de Vve A. Ettlinger & fils à M. le Ministre du Commerce, 7 November 1901.

⁶⁶ AN, F/22/479, Application des décrets, Employées et ouvrières de la Maison F. Péliissier à M. le Ministre du Commerce, 7 November 1901; AN, F/22/474, Un groupe d'ouvrières plumassières à M. le Ministre du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 10 February 1902; AN, F/22/474, Dossier Sannois, couturière, 29 November 1901.

Table 1 Gender and claims to relax lunch regulations, 1901–1904.

| Workforce | Largely female | Largely male |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| cause for claim | health, family economy | convenience |
| source of solidarity | community | occupation |
| industries | fashion and fashion accessories | papermaking, beet sugar, etc. |
| mobilization | industry-wide/district | single-unit/point of production |
| mechanization | minimal | important |
| scale of industrial sites | predominantly small | predominantly large |
| geography | Paris | urban and rural France |

ambiance in shops when compared to the motley and at times predatory clientele in restaurants.⁶⁷

The family motive mobilized beyond the workshop itself. Ferdinand Buisson, assemblyman from a working-class neighbourhood in Paris, received a letter from a father who detailed the conditions in which “his daughter and thousands of women workers [in the so-called Parisian industries] were compelled to take their meals in the open air”. In fact, a letter-writing campaign from his constituency prompted Buisson to invite the Minister of Commerce and Industry to study the feasibility of derogations to Article 8 in order to preserve everyday arrangements that, as historians Perrot and DeVault have argued, facilitated women’s gainful employment.⁶⁸ Surprisingly, the correspondents did not press for higher wages. It was left to the Labour Commission of the Seine department (which included Paris) to suggest a trade-off between the construction of refectories and a rise in women’s wages.⁶⁹

Notwithstanding Louise Tilly’s contention that petitioning women achieved little success,⁷⁰ their arguments in favour of a broader interpretation of lunchtime regulation resonated with authorities and the press. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Minister Trouillot explained that the “very large number of reclamations” with respect to the prohibition of eating in work spaces had convinced him of the relevance of adjustments.⁷¹ As it were, the

⁶⁷AN, F/22/474, Les ouvrières fleuristes de la Maison Gentil à M. le Ministre du Commerce, 27 January 1902; AN, F/22/474, Les ouvrières de la Maison Blouin à M. le Ministre du Commerce, 4 October 1901.

⁶⁸AN, F/22/479, Ferdinand Buisson, député, au Ministre du Commerce et de l’Industrie, 1 March 1904; Augustin Vuillemin to M. le député, 7 February 1904; Goedert to M. le député, n.d.; Chénéquart to M. le député, n.d.; Météré to M. le député, 5 February 1904; Adrien Brugalières à M. le député, n.d.; Renauld to M. le député, n.d. See Perrot, *Ouvriers en grève*, pp. 194; DeVault, “Too Hard on the Women, Especially”, pp. 444, 459–460. However, the perception of lesser food quality and faulty hygiene in working-class restaurants was erroneous, see Martin Bruegel, Sébastien Lecocq, “The First Systematic Survey of Restaurant Hygiene in Paris, 1908”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 51:1 (2020), pp. 97–120.

⁶⁹Commission départementale du Travail, *La question des veillées devant la commission départementale du travail du département de la Seine* (Paris, 1901), pp. 26–29 (22 February 1901).

⁷⁰Louise A. Tilly, “Women’s Collective Action and Feminism in France”, in Louise A. Tilly, Charles Tilly (eds), *Class Conflict and Collective Action* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1981), p. 214.

⁷¹AN, F/22/474, Georges Trouillot, Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes à Monsieur le Président du Conseil, 3 July 1902; on the inquiry’s take-off, AN, F/22/474, Alexandre Millerand, Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes, à M. l’Inspecteur divisionnaire, 18 December 1901.

artificial-flower makers' professional journal construed the presence of machinery as a condition for labour laws to apply. It accordingly announced that flower-makers, who were dexterous manual workers with little technical equipment, had the right to eat in their shops.⁷² Such claims drew on the continued reporting on working women's demands in the printed press. A year after the strike, the centre-right daily *L'Éclair* ran a long commentary on the "good intentions behind Article 8", only to find fault with "these labour laws that risk to harm precisely those interests the lawmakers pride themselves on defending". It enumerated the regulation's unanticipated consequences, and deemed Article 8 too severe, its dispositions "causing profound perturbations in women's proletarian life". It concluded with a call to withdraw the paragraph from the 1894 decree.⁷³

While the government mulled over a possible reform, frenzied if behind-the-scenes happenings uncover the tight spot from which authorities had to act. It pertained to labour trouble. The memory of the 1901 strike got revived when, on 11 September 1902, the renowned Maison Beer decided strictly to carry out Article 8.⁷⁴ The aeration of the workshop required the evacuation of all the personnel whose number exceeded 200 operatives in a five-storey building. The seamstresses, some of whom probably remembered their employer's strike-breaking resolve in early 1901 (Beer had offered lunch to seamstresses during the collective action), deemed the action unacceptable. They opposed the enforcement and insisted on the continued tolerance of the practice of eating in the workplace. The Police Prefect of Paris informed the Chief Labour Inspector in the evening that his men had observed an unusual effervescence in the garment district. Their observations pointed towards a movement involving the employees of several fashion houses in the neighbourhood, as a result of which "a thousand seamstresses will likely remain standing on the sidewalks in front of their employers at noon on Friday and the following days". The garment workers' militancy sent tremors through the police. The chief law-enforcement officer asked the Labour Office "to take measures to prevent this protest rally". In some sense, legal time got suspended. The government would not sanction Beer for letting his personnel lunch in the shop, especially since it planned to revise Articles 8 and 9. The short term was, however, much more important. The news of the improvised solution that allowed lunch in the shops spread through the high-fashion district, Laporte noted, "and the dreaded crowds did not form".⁷⁵ The stealthy manoeuvre had defused tensions. No women stationed on the pavement. Tolerance prevailed until the modified regulation was to go into effect in 1904.

⁷²*Bulletin mensuel de la Chambre syndicale des fabricants des fleurs artificielles*, 15 March 1902 quoted in Elisabeth Piquet, "Les fleurs du mal. Les maladies professionnelles des ouvriers en fleurs artificielles en France 1829–1919", *Mémoire de Mastère*, Université de Valenciennes, 2014, pp. 123–124; "Conseil d'État. Les accidents de travail et les ateliers de mode, de fleurs artificielles etc.", *La Fronde*, 8 March 1902, p. 2.

⁷³"Le déjeuner des ouvrières et l'article 8", *L'Éclair*, 21 February 1902, p. 1; "Trop d'hygiène", *Le Troyen hebdomadaire*, 18 May 1902, p. 1. See AN, F/22/474, L'Inspecteur divisionnaire de la 3e Circonscription au Ministère du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 22 February 1902.

⁷⁴All information comes from the detailed report in AN, F/22/474, Dossier Beer, Laporte, inspecteur divisionnaire, à M. le Ministre du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 22 September 1902.

⁷⁵AN, F/22/474, Dossier Beer, Laporte, inspecteur divisionnaire, à M. le Ministre du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 22 September 1902.

In the meantime, the minister instructed the Labour Office “to facilitate, by way of transitory arrangements, the application of the regulatory prescriptions in companies where their rigorous enforcement could have troubled the operations of the industry or the habits of the personnel”. While legislation was being rewritten, a “Note” from the Labour Office ordered inspectors to refrain from giving fines to shops without obvious health hazards.⁷⁶ The message got through. The rule of thumb to prevail in the period before revised regulations provided new legal bearings was to let people take lunch in their immediate working environment.⁷⁷

After the women’s strike the government put two standing advisory committees to work towards the revision of Articles 8 and 9 in 1902. Both went along with the pragmatic *modus operandi*. The Committee on Public Hygiene advised to relax the code.⁷⁸ The Committee on Arts and Manufactures corroborated the justification of reclamations, and advocated an easing of the rules that would give labour inspectors the authority of assessing hygienic conditions in shops and of okaying lunch at workstations.⁷⁹ The minister in charge of the file, Georges Trouillot, adopted precisely that language when explaining the reasons for updating the regulation in August 1904.⁸⁰ The new decree dated from 29 November 1904. Article 8 received the most important make-over (most other modifications helped streamline the regulation, none refined it). It maintained the principled ruling that prohibited eating in the workspace but authorized it, after investigation by the labour office, when three conditions were united: the absence of toxic substances in the workspace; a production process that did not emit noxious gases or generate dust; and satisfying sanitary conditions all around.⁸¹ Flexibility was built into these guidelines.

Conclusion

The revision of Articles 8 and 9 showcased the responsiveness of the republic’s political institutions to claim-making from the street. The process leading up to the loosening of the legal rules mandating the evacuation of worksites during lunch

⁷⁶“Rapport de M. le Ministre du Commerce sur l’application de la loi des 12 juin 1893–11 juillet 1903”, Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1904 des lois réglementant le travail* (Paris, 1905), pp. cxlviii–cxlix; AN, F/22/479, Direction du Travail, Note, 13 August 1902.

⁷⁷Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1903 des lois réglementant le travail* (Paris, 1904), p. 283; AN, F/22/474, L’Inspecteur divisionnaire de la Première Circonscription à Monsieur le Ministre du Commerce et de l’Industrie, 19 March 1904; Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1902*, 26; AN, F/22/479, L’Inspecteur départemental à l’Inspecteur divisionnaire, 20 February 1903; Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1903*, p. 19; Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l’application pendant l’année 1904 des lois réglementant le travail* (Paris, 1905), pp. cxxiv–cxxx, 231.

⁷⁸“Aération des Ateliers. Modifications aux Articles 5, 6, 8 et 9 du Décret du 10 mars 1894”, Direction de l’assistance et de l’hygiène publique, *Recueil des Actes Officiels et Documents intéressant l’hygiène publique. Travaux du Comité Consultatif d’Hygiène publique* (Melun, 1906), t. 34, pp. 590–591.

⁷⁹AN, F/22/474, Dossier du projet de modification de l’ensemble du décret du 10 mars 1894, Commission Consultatif des Arts et Manufactures, Rapport à Monsieur le Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, 12 April 1904, and Séance du 13 juillet 1904.

⁸⁰Georges Trouillot, Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes, “Rapport au Président de la République”, *Journal officiel de la République française* (25 August 1904), p. 5301.

⁸¹“Décret du 29 novembre 1904 relatif à l’hygiène et à la sécurité du travail des ouvriers et employés”, *Journal officiel de la République française* (1 December 1904), p. 7087.

for thorough aeration to renew the atmosphere allows historical analysis to use the law as a prism through which to shed light on the framing of a hygienic problem in the workplace and on its reception in the world of work. Workers' opposition arose because, to apply Merton's vocabulary, the legislators ignored the economic cost and practical strains that the well-intentioned directive on ventilation during lunch hour inflicted on them. Although there is evidence that workers appraised workplace hazards and accommodated risks when it came to air quality, the failure to anticipate the measure's burden heightens our perception of their overriding concern for expedients that simplified everyday life and diminishes the visibility of their anticipation of longer-term health benefits.⁸²

The legal obligation to evacuate and ventilate shops and factories during lunch eased but did not, by far, eliminate workplace hazards due to dust, smoke, and micro particles. Note that separate eating rooms for workers had their advocates elsewhere so as to diminish exposure to toxic substances.⁸³ But industrial canteens did not, initially, prove popular among workers in Europe because, as one labour inspector put it, they "smell of discipline, and it is for that precise reason that the worker does not like [them]".⁸⁴ This being said, it was only in France that the regulation – enacted through Articles 8 and 9 of the 10 March 1894 executive decree – became a countrywide bone of contention between workers and employers, so much so that it sent ripples through the national political arena for an entire decade before authorities came up with a pragmatic solution to calm industrial and labour relations. It quelled the agitation among the seamstresses and nudged employers towards the installation of refectories at least, canteens at best. While the law thus sustained the extension of eating facilities, it helped but did not entirely prevent conflicts. Even after 1904, disagreements between workers, employers and labour inspectors flared up and required arbitrages.⁸⁵

While the 1894 decree sent male and female workers grumbling because it upset everyday routines, the decade-long agitation offers a good vantage point on the question of gender and collective action. Women and men shared workplace issues of wages, hours of work and the abolition of piece work in the 1901 union-led strike, a drawn-out movement that confirms French historiography on the importance of workers' organizations to industrial activism. The seamstresses' mobilization showed that class solidarity could overcome labour-market rivalries between women and men in the fashion industry. Eating on the job, however, emerged as an item that mostly stirred the seamstresses' union. In the short run, organized female militancy turned the law into a weapon against employers who fed strike breakers on the shop floors of their fashion

⁸²Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences", pp. 900–902.

⁸³June B. Hannan, "The Employment of Working-Class Women in Leeds, 1880–1914" (Ph.D., University of Sheffield, 1984), p. 201; Greenlees, *When the Air Became Important*, p. 56; Vicky Long, "Cantines d'entreprise et discours hygiénistes dans l'industrie britannique de l'entre-deux-guerres", *Le Mouvement Social*, 247:2 (2014), pp. 65–67; Ulrike Thoms, "Physical Reproduction, Eating Culture and Communication at the Workplace: The Case of Industrial Canteens in Germany 1850–1950", *Food and History*, 7:2 (2009), pp. 127–131.

⁸⁴Direction du Travail, *Rapports sur l'application 1898*, p. 178. For workers' reluctance to use canteens, see Martin Bruegel, "Le repas à l'usine. Industrialisation, nutrition et alimentation populaire", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 51:3 (July–September 2004), pp. 183–198.

⁸⁵Scattered files in AN F/22/479.

houses. In the long run, the strict legal application ignited women's petitioning operation to temper the regulation on the sanitary use of mealtimes for the aeration of workspaces. The women's campaign had its roots in everyday concerns and connections. No union appeared to have contributed to its organization. This is an overlooked aspect of women's contribution to French politics and labour relations. The contrapuntal claim-making with respect to the settings in which to take the midday meal notwithstanding, authorities did not distinguish workplace and quotidian motives of women's mobilization. Their alarm over women's renewed manifestation in 1902 disclosed that fear of working women's taking again to the streets fuelled the revision of the clean-air article.

There is another point to ponder. In spite of changing contexts and demands, health concerns took second place before, during and after the strike. The reduction of daily hassles before 1901 and, afterwards, the need for jobs and salaries to make ends meet eclipsed the apprehensions of operatives when it came to the risks linked to a hazardous eating and working environment. During the walk-out, physical well-being receded behind the union's tactical calculations to denounce the illegal behaviour of owners when serving an indoor lunch to their non-striking personnel on the premises. Parisian employers, by the way, remained quite inconspicuous over the decade-long conflict. They wished to keep fashion and allied industries running with as little regulatory interference as possible.⁸⁶ While women workers tried to cope with daily constraints, the employers' pursuit of profit in the short run trumped any longer-term perspective of workers' health and well-being.

This is not to gainsay the sanitary progress introduced with Articles 8 and 9. After all, the regulation applied throughout the twentieth century during which legislators occasionally updated it and labour conflicts tested it through the early 1960s when the law mandated canteens for companies with a workforce of more than fifty people.⁸⁷ French workers and employees, two thirds of whom regularly take their sit-down workday lunch in a built environment in the company of colleagues away from the job, discovered the decree's very existence in February 2021 when the government temporarily suspended it as a means to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in restaurants and canteens. The provisional relaxation exposed not only the public's widespread unawareness of the law (which it respected quite unwittingly) and the lack of knowledge about its hygienic origins, it also demonstrated how much law and food culture actually converged and indeed reinforced each other over time.⁸⁸

⁸⁶AN, F/22/474, Comité consultatif des Arts et Métiers, Report of 6 November 1901 (rapporteur Mr Roy); AN, F/22/479, Inspection du Travail au Ministre du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 27 November 1902; Bruno *et al.*, "La santé au travail", p. 32.

⁸⁷"2000 midinettes en grève", *L'Humanité*, 21 May 1935, p. 2; see, among others, Dr L. Eldé, "Le saturnisme professionnel", *Le Droit ouvrier*, 15:6-7 (June-July 1938), p. 407; Claudine Kanapa, "Hygiène", *La Revue des travailleuses*, 7 (January 1953), pp. 34-35.

⁸⁸"Déjeuner devant son ordinateur redevient légal", *Le Monde*, 16 February 2021, p. 17; Martin Bruegel, "Covid-19, Workday Lunch and the French Labor Code", *Food and Foodways: Inquiries into the History and Culture of Human Nourishment*, 29:3 (2021), pp. 299-308.