

# REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

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## Society for French Historical Studies

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At the March 1985 meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, five papers focused on working-class issues, and the diverse topics they treated had several interrelated themes: division of labor along gender lines, gender-related rights, and community solidarity outside the workplace and formal institutions.

Scholarship on the French labor movement has long shown that women workers had little propensity to strike or unionize, and male workers actively tried to keep them out of their unions. In a session entitled "Women Workers, Collective Action and the Unions," chaired by Sanford Elwitt (University of Rochester), three papers offered a revised interpretation of women's participation in labor-related protest activity. They specifically brought attention to women's dual and overlapping roles in production and reproduction. In "Women's Collective Action and Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Aude, 1900-1914," Laura Levine Frader (Northeastern University) described in detail the proletarianization of both men's and women's labor in vineyards. The extension of agricultural capitalism combined with the phylloxera crisis to eliminate most small producers, and turn them into wage laborers. Several market crises at the turn of the century inspired the formation of unions as well as extensive protest activity.

At first men shunned women from their unions, preferring that women leave the labor force entirely because their lower wages and sometimes heavy labor threatened men's positions. But even though women neither joined nor formed unions, they participated in strikes and militantly protested the cost of living increases during several market crises between 1900 and 1914. Recognizing these contributions, men finally invited women to join the union. The women refused. What explains this exception to the stereotype of the docile fe-

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male worker? Why did they refuse to join the union, and how were they able to protest so effectively without organizational support?

Frader argued that women's multiple roles—wage earner outside the home, producer and marketer of domestic goods, and primary nurturer in the family—created a sense of community among women, shaped the demands they made of their employers, and influenced modes of protest. Their solidarity stemmed from gender-related work experiences. As vineyard labor in the late nineteenth century became increasingly divided, it divided along gender lines. Women performed the less skilled, though sometimes extremely heavy labor, at wages far below those of men. Work organization helped create their solidarity: women worked in teams that required a high level of cooperation and good will. This cooperation extended to home and community activities as well. They shared childcare, washed laundry, peeled vegetables, and bought and sold market goods together. Frader argued that through these activities and the interdependence they required, women developed a sense of solidarity that made formal institutions unnecessary when they decided to strike or protest.

Women's multiple responsibilities also gave them a sense of their own rights, and thus explain the demands they made of employers. Frader pointed to their seemingly inexplicable demand for a separate contract preserving the division of labor by sex as evidence that women felt they had rights different from those of men. Their complex responsibilities led them to accept a secondary position in the labor hierarchy because doing so would help the working-class family maintain some control over labor. Their forms of protest, moreover, often assumed distinctly feminine forms. In one case a large group of women and children lay down in the main road to prevent mounted police from entering their village, an action which exploited social conventions regarding the "weaker sex" and fulfilled their (female) rights and responsibilities to preserve peace and life.

Bonnie Gordon (University of Wisconsin) also argued that specifically female issues led to collective action among match workers between 1890 and 1898. Her paper, "Women in the Match Industry and their Unions in the 1890s," recounted how the use of white phosphorous supposedly resulted in two female-related diseases: necrosis (the rotting of teeth and jaws), and a general debilitation leading to miscarriages, stillbirths, and high infant mortality. Thanks to the activity of women in the Match Workers' Federation, white phosphorus was finally banned in 1898.

Gordon argued that these women succeeded in their efforts because, similar to the workers Frader describes, they exploited social conventions regarding their sex. Although necrosis did result from working with phosphorous, Gordon claimed reproductive difficulties did not. Census records and statistical annuals indicated that match workers had as many children as other French women, Gordon noted. Apparently aware of this fact, the women ex-

ploited official concern over the fall of the birth rate in France by keeping alive before the public an image of barren and disfigured match girls.

Gordon focused on the politics of industrial hygiene in the Third Republic rather than on the social backgrounds of the women who forged this battle. Nonetheless, there are some comparisons that may be made with Frader's study. Although 70 percent of the workers in the match industry were women, men assumed leadership in the union. But it was women, Gordon argued, who provided the enthusiasm and support that made the union succeed.

The issues here are, however, confused. Necrosis can only be construed as gender-related because it was predominantly women who worked with white phosphorous. Did the men in the union experience the same threat? Was reproductive debilitation really a false issue? Gordon produced no evidence indicating that women believed it was false, or that, believing it was false, they knowingly exploited it. Given the propaganda, it seems women would genuinely fear reproductive debilitation rather than manipulate it as an issue. In any case, just as with Frader's study, the crossed lines of production and reproduction forced women, this time with male leadership, into unionized protest activity.

Jane Bond-Howard (Lincoln University) traced the development of female labor union activity in the production of war materiel in her paper, "Women Workers in the Bourges Government Arsenal during the 1914-1918 War." During World War I women in France, as in other countries, were recruited in large numbers into previously male industries, especially metallurgy. Bond-Howard examined government arsenal workers in Bourges (Cher) who formed a *minoritaire*, or "minority," union that opposed the war. Typically, men initially opposed women's entry into the industry as well as into the union. But the war compounded familiar prejudices: not only did women undermine the pay and position of male workers, but by replacing them, women sent men to war. Yet at the same time, it was the war that changed men's views toward women's potential value to union activism. Leaders eventually invited them to join the union because they believed women naturally had a stronger commitment to pacifism, and would help bolster support for their peace demands.

Unfortunately limitations on sources, and especially the inaccessibility of personnel records in the *Etablissements Militaires*, prevented Bond-Howard from examining the relevant issues in as much depth as she wanted to. Although women did participate in union and strike activity, she could not explore issues of how solidarity developed among them. It was only after they entered the union at the men's invitation that they became bold in their demands for better work conditions. In other words, in this case it is not clear that collective action among women stemmed from specifically feminine issues. Interestingly enough, although union leaders believed women would be stronger supporters of pacifism, Bond-Howard concluded that demands for peace

did not draw them into the union and into strike activity any more readily than they did men.

These papers raised a number of important and fascinating issues crucial to understanding the nature of working class activism. Division of labor along gender lines clearly shaped women's interest in protest and strike activity. But inseparable from this fact is the way those lines crossed their responsibilities for childbearing and nurturance. As Frader insisted, their different responsibilities also gave them different rights, which in turn, shaped their demands and forms of protest. Moreover, lines of communication among women in the workplace and outside of it in some instances fostered a solidarity independent of and perhaps even irrelevant to unionization.

Two other papers, in a session entitled, "Friendship in French History," chaired by Cynthia Koepp (Cornell College), examined community solidarity and worker sociability outside the context of workplace or formal institutions such as unions. Tyler Stovall (University of California, Berkeley) questioned whether lack of community feeling was inherent to suburban life in industrial society. In his paper, "The Process of Community Formation in Suburban Paris, 1914–1939," Stovall described the development of working class sociability and its relationship to the success of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the suburb of Bobigny. At first glance it might seem that everything about Bobigny's growth would inhibit the development of neighborhood sentiment. High rents in Paris and inexpensive suburban lots drove workers out of the city, but within commuting distance of it. The population of Bobigny multiplied by more than ten times in a forty-year period. The large number of newcomers, the absence of specific ethnic groupings, and the nonexistence of landmarks which distinguished it from the rest of the urban area prevented community sentiment or local pride from developing in traditional ways. No sociability based on work could develop because Bobigny offered little employment; most inhabitants commuted to Paris.

Given these conditions it is surprising that any single political party would be able to take firm hold in this area. How did the PCF become so successful? The fact that the population was sociologically homogeneous—predominantly working class—helped foster sociability. Moreover, cafés—a virtual social institution of the French working class—spread throughout Bobigny; their number kept pace with the increase of residents. But most important, as Stovall demonstrated, the very nature of Bobigny's rapid growth forced its residents into a common struggle. Population growth far exceeded the extension of paved streets, sidewalks, utilities, sewers and other infrastructural amenities. In the effort to improve their living conditions, residents organized themselves into local interest committees and lot owners' associations. And herein the PCF found an arena for political organization on the grass-roots level. Stovall concluded that the PCF could not have taken hold if residents had not already had strong neighborhood sentiment based on the living conditions they suf-

ferred in common and on their mutual effort to improve them. Café life, committees, and associations reinforced the networks of sociability. The political activism which became centered on the PCF, in turn strengthened the residents' community identity. Thus worker solidarity in Bobigny developed outside the workplace and assumed untraditional patterns—but these patterns were closely connected with larger ones inherent to urban growth in an industrial society.

In his paper, “‘Café Friend’: Friendship and Fraternity in Parisian Working Class Cafés, 1860–1890,” W. Scott Haine (University of South Alabama) approached themes of working-class sociability from inside the café. Using primarily judicial sources, he attempted to define the meaning, or meanings, of “café friend.” Haine argued that the concept included aspects of both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, for it denoted at once casual relationships and intimate friendships. Cafés became more important to workers as their neighborhoods disintegrated, particularly with Haussman's rebuilding of Paris. Massive immigration disrupted old patterns of neighborhood sociability, and the constant increase in rents forced workers to move with increased frequency. The café offered both a place of anonymity and a source of social integration independent of neighborhood, work, and kin. But it was also a place where close friends met. Furthermore, as other French historians have shown, cafés provided a location for workers to organize political, union or strike activities outside individual homes or the workplace. The anonymous character of café life helped shelter these activities from police scrutiny, especially during repressive periods in French history.

In some respects Stovall's and Haine's treatments of working-class sociability seem contradictory: for Stovall, the café helped promote neighborhood feeling; for Haine, the café provided a substitute for the neighborhood. Obviously, the role that they played depended on their locality. Workers in Paris had needs different from the home-owning working class of Bobigny. But both Haine and Stovall demonstrated that as workers moved from colorful, urban neighborhoods to slums or to nondescript, poorly constructed suburbs, they developed new ways to form friendships. Those friendships sometimes provided a basis for political activism.

Whether it be community feeling among vineyard workers in the Aude, or friendships in cafés and neighborhoods, working class life outside formal institutions is particularly difficult to examine. Friendships produce little, if any, documentation. Stovall and Haine both used marriage certificates, which include information on the occupation and address of witnesses, to try to document such relationships. But these records cannot accurately portray friendship.

These problems are inherent to social history, and of course we need to confront them in order to solve them. The effort among French historians to do so became manifest at this conference in a seminar conducted by Susanna

Barrows (University of California, Berkeley) and Michael Burns (Mount Holyoke College) entitled "New Approaches to Popular Political Culture." Burns and Barrows raised the question of how we can retrieve a working-class or peasant past when political repression resulted in what they termed "collective amnesia." They stressed the need to reassess the methods by which we interpret standard sources of social history. The lively discussion of about twenty-five people produced some interesting suggestions: We need to look for new sources in which we might find symbols of social and political life: Early postcards portraying workers with their machines and the pride they took in them, and symbolic gestures and actions such as civil funerals that expressed anti-clericalism were among the examples mentioned.