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Title

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Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 9(0)

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Publication Date

1989

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A DIMMING OF PERSPECTIVE

The Paris Electrician's Strike of 1907

Elizabeth K. Collumb

ce serait du coup la révolution économique par des moyens beaucoup plus sûrs que les mauvais fusils et les mauvaises barricades de nos pères.

émile pataud,
quoted in *le matin*, march 12, 1907

oui, mai est-ce que le prolétariat y verra plus clair parce que le roi de portugal sera resté deux minutes sans lumière?

jean jaurès,
quoted in *le temps*, december 1, 1909

On March 8, 1907, at precisely five o'clock in the evening, the lights went out in Paris. As night quickly fell, the City of Light found itself plunged into almost-complete darkness, the district of Les Halles being the only area of Paris unaffected by the sudden and unexpected blackout. Theaters, the Opera and other "places of amusement" were shut down by the city authorities.¹ Café and restaurant employees rummaged in storerooms and cellars for candles, oil lamps, and other alternative means of illumination. Empty wine bottles were used as impromptu candleholders, and the outsides of many cafés were "lit up with innumerable Chinese lanterns, which gave them quite a picturesque appearance."² Parisians streamed in dense crowds onto the wide boulevards, curious to see how Paris looked in the dark. Phone lines were jammed as people called their families, friends, the local authorities, and the electric companies for information about the blackout.

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Although most Parisians initially believed "that an accident had occurred at their district's plant,"³ the news quickly spread that the power outage was due to a carefully organized electricians' strike, carried out with "chronometrical precision"⁴ by members of the electricians' union, under the supervision of its leaders, Émile Pouget and Émile Pataud. These radical leaders hoped that the strike, in addition to demonstrating the strength of the union, a guaranteeing that the demands of the strikers would be granted, would also serve as a bellows to fan the flame of revolutionary syndicalism. The strike kept Paris without electricity for over 48 hours, and was largely successful particularly by the standards of the day, in achieving the material demands of the workers. The electricians, despite Émile Pataud's and Émile Pouget's best efforts, did not prove to be the shock troops of the general strike and the syndical revolution. This is not to say, however, that the strike had no effects beyond the questions of the electricians' demands. In fact, the strike both illuminated and raised several important issues; the manner with which these issues were dealt had consequences that only increased in magnitude over the course of the years immediately preceding World War I. By investigating the progress of the strike itself, the negotiation process, and the larger issues associated with the strike, a wealth of information on French labor history can be amassed.

On the purely material end, the strike was not the result of any dissatisfaction with current contract provisions or working conditions. Rather, "it was directed against a state of affairs which had not yet come into existence and had for its origin, so to say, the future grievances"⁵ of the electricians. These future grievances had much to do with the concessionary system under which electrical power was supplied to the various arrondissements of Paris. Unlike gas workers, teachers, and postal workers, electricians were not, per se, municipal or state employees. Electrical workers, and the supply of electric power itself, were indirectly supervised by the government. Instead of directly employing workers and managing the utility itself, the Paris Municipal Council sold concessions to private companies for the supply of electric power to Paris. (The one exception to this rule was in the district of Les Halles, where electricity was supplied directly by the municipal government, employing municipal workers and using equipment and plans owned by the state. That was why Les Halles was the only district in which electrical power was not shut off.) While the Council could and did

set certain standards by which concessionaires had to operate, the concessionary companies acted, for the most part, like any private corporations seeking to maximize profits while minimizing costs.

The concessionary agreements in effect at the time of the strike were due to expire at the end of 1907. In July 1906, the Municipal Council began negotiations for new concessions. In seeking to assure the stability of both supply and price of electrical power, the Municipal Council recognized that the satisfaction of the workers, as well as price levels and subsidies for electric power itself were important factors in the negotiations. Thus, in addition to requesting that bidding companies agree to supply power at five centimes per hectowatt-hour, the Municipal Council asked the syndicate of electricians— that "exceptionally skillful organization"⁶ run by MM. Pataud and Pouget— what benefits they sought. Five major demands were drawn up by the union. These were as follows:

1. All workers currently employed would keep their jobs under the new concessionaires; all workers who had left their jobs to perform military service would be rehired.
2. Workers for the private companies would "be placed on the same footing as the men employed by the Municipal Council itself."⁷ This "municipalization" would guarantee the concessionary employees all benefits given to civil servants, a status commonly regarded as "l'Éden du prolétariat"⁸ (the Eden of the proletariat) as far as material benefits were concerned.
3. Pensions would be made retroactively-effective for up to 18 years' seniority, "for the benefit of the men who have been in the service of existing companies from the start."⁹ The pensions would be funded by deductions of 2% from the salaries of workers, and payments by the companies of up to 6% of wages paid to the employees, for a pension fund of seven million francs.
4. Arbitration and collective bargaining for future contracts would be recognized.

5. The length of the working day would be reduced from nine to eight hours.

The Municipal Council promptly "passed a vote in favor of the claims,"¹⁰ except for the demand of an eight-hour day. This question was tabled for later discussion and possible consideration in legislation to be passed by the Chamber of Deputies. The syndicate accepted the compromise on these points, as did the concessionaires.

This harmonious state did not last. By November of 1906, the bidding firms were in collusion. Acting as a cartel, they hoped to renege on the July agreements without sacrificing their chances of obtaining concessions and "to humble the Municipal Council."¹¹ Albert Sartiaux, "the omnipotent engineer"¹² and chief representative of the concessionaires' cartel, informed the Municipal Council that rising copper and coal prices made it impossible for them to guarantee the five centime charge for a hectowatt-hour. In addition, the capital's size and the growing demand for further electrification called for new plants and large amounts of capital investment. These high costs made a charge of eight centimes per hectowatt-hour imperative. A retroactive pension fund of 3.5 million francs, with the maximum corporate payment equal 4% of wages paid to workers, was all the cartel would support. In addition, the cartel refused even to consider the notion of collective bargaining. Sartiaux demanded of the council,

How could we accept, for example, an arbitration committee and collective bargaining before the law has regulated their practice? When these new principles are passed into law, it is well-understood that we will accept them but we do not have to take an initiative of this sort.¹³

The cartel remained intransigent in its insistence on these proposed conditions. "These claims seemed exorbitant to the Prefect of the Seine [J. de Selves] himself," who wrote in a November, 1906, Council memo that "it is of the utmost importance that the employees are not deprived of benefits which have been promised to them."¹⁴

Tensions began to mount, as the electricians feared for their job security and benefits, and the government worried about being able to work out an agreement for the supply of electricity. The electricians,

under the leadership of Émile Pataud, formed a secret strike committee, composed mostly of upper-echelon employees. This committee formulated and promulgated a strike plan which included the masses of lower-level employees. They then sat back and waited for what they considered to be the ripest possible moment to strike. At the beginning of March, "when the inquisitorial methods of the proposed income tax and the failure of the new law on the weekly day of rest . . . had produced widespread dissatisfaction,"¹⁵ the secret committee put their plan into action. Quickly and quietly, the workers were informed of the prepared strike plans. Tight organization and tighter lips kept the strike a secret; there was no buzz of rumor around Paris in the days immediately preceding the strike. In fact, the only warning sign of a strike came in a manifest "posted only a few hours before the strike declaration,"¹⁶ in which the electricians restated the July agreements and berated the concessionaires' bad faith in breaking the agreed-upon conditions.

The strike, therefore, came as "a disagreeable surprise"¹⁷ to everyone but the electricians themselves, who precisely at five o'clock on March 9, "extinguished the lights, and without committing a single act of sabotage, left the plants after having informed the administrators that they were going on strike."¹⁸ Pataud and Pouget exulted in the well-orchestrated implementation of their plan. To these well-known authors of such revolutionary syndicalist works as *Sabotage*, and *How We Will Make the Revolution*, the strike was more than a battle against the treacherous concessionaires; it was the opening salvo in the war against the capitalist bourgeois society of France, the preamble of the general strike, and a tool to increase proletarian consciousness. In an interview with a report for *Le Temps*, Pataud proclaimed loudly,

convinced of the uselessness of our sincere and loyal proceedings, in comparison with those of the future concessionary, which always conceals its intentions and takes back the next day what had been promised the day before. . . we have resolved to show our vigor and to prove that we are conscious of our power.¹⁹

Pataud and Pouget hoped that the strike would do more than satisfy the material aims of the electrical workers; they saw in it the potential to

prove that "the electric current produces not only light, it produces power as well,"²⁰ the power to begin the restructuring of society according to the aims of revolutionary syndicalism. The strike, by its devastating effects on capitalist bourgeois society, would be a far more effective weapon than the barricades and weapons of the Commune.

Pataud had done his preparation well; the electricians' strike was noteworthy both for its thoroughness and for the precision of its execution. The blackout was so complete, remarked one reporter, that "at midnight, Paris usually so lively and bright, wore the sorry expression of a third-rate boondock town."²¹ In addition to closing theaters, pool halls, gambling houses, the Opera, the courts, and many cafés and restaurants, the strike shut down the stock exchange and the Bourse du Travail. Many newspapers were unable to print a morning edition on March 9, although by evening, papers such as *Le Temps* rigged up portable generators and non-electric power for their presses. The print shop of the Confédération Generale du Travail itself, "which was not at the mercy of an inopportune strike"²² since it possessed its own generator, was not affected by the strike, and thus printed leaflets explaining the strike and the electricians' grievances, as well as serving as a meeting hall for 1,200 people rallying in support of the strike. These offices of the C.G.T. also served as an assembly hall for the electricians immediately after the strike was declared; the closure of the Labor Exchange forced this change of venue.

The strike, however did not pose the dangers for Paris that a blackout today would, as the city was not yet wholly dependent on electric power. After the initial confusion, most restaurants and cafes were able to stay open, using candles and gas for illumination. Department stores, which had their own generators, were largely unaffected by the power outage. Railway service was not interrupted, although several tunnels under construction were flooded in the absence of electricity to operate pumps and turbines. Though rumors of sabotage and trapped trains abounded, the tunnel flooding was the only substantial damage which occurred. However, "the disturbance had the greatest import on the services of the postal administration."²³ Telephone service remained uninterrupted, but telegraph and mail services were hampered for the two days of the strike. In districts such as the Latin Quarter, people made the best of the annoying and inconvenient situation, and adopted a festive attitude. Light-heartedly carrying candles jammed into potatoes,

...the students are there, overflowing with life and cheerfulness and the lack of electricity does not cause sadness and dismay in their ranks. They laugh, they sing in the pubs which are filled with people.²⁴

For most people, then the impact of the strike was measured by the price of an unusable theatre ticket and a boring evening spent at home, by the inconvenience of mail service delayed a day or two, by the lost wages caused by the closure of shops, restaurants, and theatres, or by the inconvenience, to those whose homes and business were electrified, of finding alternate means of illumination. The stealth and suddenness with which the electricians struck made the strike more of a surprise, and more of a coup, but also more of an annoyance, more of an inconvenience to the vast masses of Parisians. Without advance warning, agitation, threats, publicization of the breach of faith on the part of the concessionaires, or calls by the electricians for public support, Paris suddenly found itself in the dark, literally and figuratively: "Nobody in Paris suspected that there was a struggle going on between the workers and the future concessionaires. They had made their move from the shadows."²⁵ That the strike came as such a surprise only served to annoy people further. Thus, while the effectiveness and suddenness of Pataud's project convinced many of the power and organization of the electricians' syndicate, few supporters were won by these tactics. As a reporter for the *London Times* undoubtedly far more cognizant of the reasons for the strike at its outset than the average Parisian, noted: "Even were the grievances of the electrical workmen substantial and well-founded —and there may be something to be said for them— the punishment of a whole city, and that city Paris, for the purpose of obtaining justice . . . caused public opinion to rebel."²⁶ This press silence on the first day of the strike further fueled indignation while temporarily hampering dissemination of information about the underlying causes of the strike.

When the strikers' grievances *were* explained in the following days, many people, though agreeing that the strikers had valid cause to act, questioned the validity of the strike itself, on moral if not legal grounds. Many saw the willful imposition of such inconvenience and potential danger on the public by the relatively small Parisian electricians' union as selfish, narrow-minded, and injudicious. "The prefect attempts to make the

strikers realize that the strike was certainly not the most effective means of furthering their cause.²⁷ Not enough time and effort had been devoted to negotiating: the strike was not a last resort, but rather a slick and mean-hearted effort to ensure that the demands of the electricians would be granted without further discussion. Felix Roussel, a member of the Municipal Council, chastised the electricians, telling them that "for some (demands) the official guidelines would have guaranteed satisfaction and that for the rest, it would have been easier to talk before striking; a half hour's discussion would have cleared up any misunderstandings."²⁸ Legal proceedings could have been instituted to ensure that the concessionaires did not succeed in their collusion. "Actually," Clemenceau announced in the Chamber of Deputies on March 11, "the strike has been declared without cause. The workers claim, not for the past, but for the future, benefits which the prefect of the Seine, word for word, demanded for them in 1906 before the Municipal Council."²⁹ This "preventive" strike was not accepted in the same way that "reactive" strikes, which fought already-extant unsatisfactory conditions, were grudgingly accepted. "Last evening," *Le Figaro* complained, "a meeting took place at the Labor Exchange and the strike was decided on before any negotiations!"³⁰

The leaders of the strike did not garner much support with their claims that the electricians' strike was but the first step towards a syndicalist paradise encompassing all workers. "Yesterday's surprise is but the prelude to what will happen tomorrow,"³¹ thundered the leaders of the strike; the belief that the electricians were really only interested in augmenting their benefits without concern for any one else, however, persisted. This belief that "The selfishness of one union showed the depth of syndical egoism"³² of the electricians, found its evidence in statements by leaders of the strike and of the C.G.T.. According to Victor Griffuelhes, the secretary of the C.G.T. and a comrade of Pataud, the strike "is more than a lively demonstration of our strength; it is the irrefutable proof that when we want to, we will impose our will."³³

Most convincing of all, however, was the evidence that those most affected and inconvenienced by the strike were the working classes, and not the bourgeoisie or ruling elite. "The strikers," noted *Le Figaro*, "among many other wrongs they have inflicted, are responsible for having inconvenienced the lower classes most of all."³⁴ It was the members of the proletariat, toiling waiters, ticket takers, and clerks—"These are not the bourgeois, these people!"³⁵— who found themselves "hard hit, deprived of

their meager resources and, for some, of their daily bread."³⁶ The electricians cared only for their own interests; Pataud's rhetoric did not mean much to Paris. The electricians' actions contradicted the noble expressions of their solidarity with the working class. In the eyes of most of the Parisian public, Pataud et al. had selfishly sacrificed society's comfort to their demands: "But, who cares? As long as those electricians get the eight-hour day, collective bargaining, and pensions for their old age."³⁷ The press, in its accounts of the strike, tended to discount the ideological content of the strike while emphasizing the material demands of the strikers. "The grievance," stated the *Times*, "is the reduction by one-half of the pensions."³⁸ Pataud was usually depicted as a demagogic radical fanatic (not inaccurately, it may be added: he referred to himself as "King Pataud"); the press mocked his "dictatorial fantasies"⁴⁰ insisting that the main import of the strike was "to impose working conditions upon the future electric light supply company."⁴¹ Beyond resentment of the inconvenience it brought, the strike tended to be viewed as an effective, well-organized vehicle for the satisfaction of the strikers' material demands.

This narrow reading of the strike as a selfishly pragmatic enterprise was reflected in the debates of the Chamber of Deputies and the Paris Municipal Council, as well as in the negotiations undertaken by the Council, the concessionaires, and the strike committee itself. Certain issues were brought to light, however, and these were to find their import not in the resolution of the electricians' strike, which tended to gloss them over, but in the years immediately following 1907.

The strike negotiations were noteworthy for the pragmatic willingness of all sides to sit down and discuss concrete issues and figures. The public view of the strike as a gambit for solely material ends, and the turn of public opinion against the strikers for the inconveniences and hazards they had caused, even in the face of what many viewed as nonetheless legitimate grievances, led to the abandonment of revolutionary rhetoric in favor of rapid settlement of the strike. The government demanded that the strikers return to work, and that the concessionaires honor the original agreement; if the strike were not resolved forthwith, said government leaders such as Clemenceau, soldiers would take the factories from the companies and the jobs from the striking workers. Jaurès and other Socialist party deputies initially disputed "the legality of such a remedy, arguing that the strike [was]

lawful, and inquir[ed] in virtue of what right the Government would employ soldiers to take the place of the strikers."⁴² And, at 4:30 PM on March 10, the strike committee, led by Pataud, marched to the Ministry of the Interior, where they were received by Sarraut, the Under-Secretary of State, to protest against the threatened intervention. " 'If there are troops this evening,' declared Mr. Pataud, secretary of the strike committee, 'if there is a conflict, there will be bloodshed.'⁴³ While this issue was being discussed, the masses of electrical workers themselves, at approximately 5:00 PM, voted to go back to work, thus completely undermining Pataud's threats of reprisals, sabotage and a protracted strike leading to a general strike. It would seem

that what chiefly contributed to bring the strike to an end was the profound irritation against the workmen [of all classes of the community], together with the measures taken by the authorities to have their places filled. . . Public opinion has seldom been so unanimously and so vigorously expressed.⁴⁴

In negotiations with the companies, Pataud's well-organized trade union quickly "obtained satisfaction on the principal points of difference."⁴⁵ The government was eager to end the strike quickly, and despite suffering "the fear of appearing to cave in under outside pressure,"⁴⁶ strongly urged the concessionaires to concede many points. Members of the Municipal Council tried to smooth things over by urging the strikers to resume work while negotiations were proceeding, and this was indeed what happened. Arthur Rozier, a Socialist member of the Municipal Council and "untiring defender of municipal interests,"⁴⁷ reassured the strikers of the governments's intentions to work for their demands; he also apologized for the strikers to less sympathetic members of Council, saying rather disingenuously that the strike was merely a "workers' gesture" because, "to these workers, it didn't look as though the promises made to them last July were going to be honored."⁴⁸

The workers' demands were dealt with first; the concessionary firms tended to be initially intransigent, with Sartiaux stating simply that the strikers "asked much too much."⁴⁹ The cartel tried to blame the Municipal Council, informing Paris that "the Municipal Commission. . . only has to consider their claims and decide to what extent they should be honored.

. . . We have no choice but to accept . . . or to give up [the application for the concession].⁵⁰ The Municipal Council took up this gauntlet, promptly declaring that municipalization should be instituted, with privately-employed electricians to be "treated in the same manner as the personnel of the municipal plant of Les Halles."⁵¹ Roussel demanded a meeting with Sartiaux to discuss the pension questions. Finally, the Municipal Council restated flatly Article 14 of the July agreements and demanded that the concessionaires accept its conditions:

A guide was drawn up between the Prefect of the Seine and the operating firms to determine for the employees, who were also consulted...The personnel are to be granted the status of municipal personnel...The concessionaires are to recognize syndicates legally drawn up by the employees and enter with them into written or verbal negotiations whenever asked to do so.⁵²

The cartel's resolve disintegrated in the face of these statements, and it agreed that "the personnel of these districts will be granted status strictly equivalent to that of municipal employees."⁵³ The pension question was also worked out, with Sartiaux declaring, "For the pensions, we have made the largest sacrifices."⁵⁴ Although the cartel would not explicitly agree to a seven million franc pension fund, it did accept the 2%-6% payment scheme, and even offered a production incentive. If the output goal of 75 million hectowatt-hours was reached, the concessionaires agreed to reduce employee payments into the pension fund to 1%, and to raise employer contributions to 7% of wages paid. In addition, retroactive pensions were recognized. "The electrical workers' pension plan will thus be even better than that of the municipal workers."⁵⁵ No worker would be fired. Announced Sartiaux, "We will retain all present personnel, even though the new implements we intend to use in the plants allow for a reduction of man-power. This is yet another most important sacrifice."⁵⁶ Ex-personnel who had lost jobs due to military service were to be rehired, although the companies threatened that this would necessitate the firing of their replacements. The replacements' jobs had been already guaranteed, however, so as a compromise, it was agreed in the future "to hire only men who had completed their military service."⁵⁷ In short, the only point not conceded to the striking electricians was that of the eight-

hour day, which was tabled for discussion after the strikers returned to work.

The electricians' success in attaining these material goals seems, in retrospect at least partly due to the effective sacrifice of Pataud's avowedly revolutionary aims and the concomitant narrowing of the strike's aims and focus. Though Pataud raged loudly during the actual days of the strike itself that "the capitalists were heartless beings, incapable of any human sentiment,"⁵⁸ the workers, themselves materialistic and unwilling to challenge the status quo, gutted the anarcho-syndicalist character of the strike.

They were, for the most part, much more inclined towards calm negotiation, a willingness to compromise, and a desire to work with the government in achieving their goals. Pataud, who wanted to maintain the strike until the electricians' demands were granted unconditionally, intended to involve the C.G.T. and the Bourse du Travail in fomenting a general strike out of the unrest and inconvenience caused by the electricians' strike, and threatened sabotage and violence at the possibility of government intervention. The strikers' vote, after only 48 hours of darkness, to continue negotiations while returning to work, ignored Pataud's aspirations. Rozier "congratulated the strikers on their attitude."⁵⁹ The favor of the government's fairly solicitous attitude towards granting the demands of the strikers was returned by the strikers. They stripped the strike of its radical and more threatening dimensions by apologizing to the Paris Municipal Council and reassuring Council members that the strike was not a revolutionary fusillade, but merely a means "to draw attention to their case and to try to obtain the benefits they felt they deserved."⁶⁰ In the Chamber, Viviani, Clemenceau's Minister of Labor, spoke for the strikers' wisdom in "admitting the principle of law and leaving to the Government the choice of the moment" for deciding upon the eight-hour day question.⁶¹ The workers were apparently satisfied with their municipalization and the privileges gained therefrom. In the week following the strike, as negotiations continued, the electricians took special pains to reassure the public that they would not strike again, even in the face of protracted negotiations. On March 18, the union sent a letter to the Council denying the rumors of a fresh strike, and even the revolutionary Pataud, perhaps recognizing the public's and his own troops' attitudes, called the probability of another strike "this noise...without cause."⁶² There was barely a whisper of protest when, on

March 21, the Municipal Council defeated two separate motions; one to grant electrical workers an immediate eight-hour day, another to grant them the shorter day beginning in 1913. Both proposals, rejected by votes of 41 to 23, were declared

illegal, in face of the wording of the Millerand decrees, and also because the 1906 law on electricity granted the city

certain rights which were specifically enumerated, and limiting working hours was not among these rights.⁶⁴

Rozier then attempted to use the Millerand edicts to the electricians' advantage by drafting a resolution which would give the municipal electricians of Les Halles a better contract, thus forcing the concessionaires to follow suit. This too was voted down, 36-29. By a vote of 41-0, with many abstentions, "the effective municipalization" was recognized and reconfirmed by the Council.

On the concessionaires' side as well, the Municipal Council struggled to reach a rapid solution; negotiations on the price per hectowatt-hour were completed by the 17th of March. In voting on the 15th, the Council voted that the price per hectowatt-hour be seven centimes during a six-year transition period, with the price dropping to five centimes "during the specified twenty year period" of the concession.⁶⁴ However, protests were so insistent that on the 16th the Council passed, by a vote of 46-30, the "Dausset amendment," which extended the concession from 26 to 32 years and authorized government subsidies of up to 1.7 million francs per year so as to "keep the scheme in equilibrium."⁶⁵ Thus, all negotiations concerned with the strike were completed in short order.

The focus on and rapid resolution of differences on material benefits, however, while helpful in ending the strike and working out the specific grievances of the electricians, down-played at best and ignored at worst more profound and wide-reaching issues that were to cause frictions and crises in subsequent years. Some of these issues were sparked by the strike; others had been latently extant and were brought into very brief focus by it. All, though, were given short shrift.

One issue, already mentioned, was that of legitimacy. Did the

electricians have any right to strike? Though the legality of the electricians' strike was quickly affirmed by Jaurès and others in Parliamentary debates during the conflict, the actual legality was rather hazy. The electricians operated in a twilight zone and their status as workers employed by private firms who supplied a public good under the supervision of the government was unique. Were they, in the last analysis, private employees, who could strike legally, or public servants who were forbidden by law to strike? Most people felt that the electricians were bound, by ethical considerations, by the importance of the service they supplied, and by their privileged contractual status, not to go on strike. As Sarraut, the Under-Secretary of State proclaimed in the Chamber on March 10, 1907,

It was impossible for the public administrators to treat this suspension of work as an ordinary strike. If tomorrow the bakery workers decided to starve Paris, would it thus be necessary let Paris die of hunger, under the pretext of not wanting to infringe on their right to strike?⁶⁶

This clash between private interest and public good was asserted by an editorial in *Le Temps*, which stated, "However justified the claims of certain parties may be...there is something which overrides them; that is the entire nation, it is the public interest."⁶⁷ Vociferous opinions of this sort, however, decreased in number and volume once the electricians returned to work. Little was done to actually address the issue on a grass-roots or governmental level; private citizens chose to buy stores of candles and gas lamps in case of a future strike, rather than try to eliminate that threat.

The government attempted to address the issue, introducing the Chamber of Deputies on March 12, 1907, a legal project "while making sure that civil servants carried out their duties, insured their freedom of association and safeguarded them against arbitrary action."⁶⁸ Acknowledging the right of public servants to constitute associations for the protection of their material interests, the bill accorded legal rights, self-administration, the right of association, and access to public meeting places to these associations. The bill was not a liberalization of the 1884 Waldeck-Rousseau legislation; although

resolved to grant civil servants the rights that belong to all citizens, it retained the power to control these rights so as not to compromise the effective operation of public services.⁶⁹

It thus reaffirmed the 1884 resolutions forbidding strikes by civil servants and drawing up explicit sanctions against striking civil servants: *all* strikers were to be fired, and agitators were to be subjected to prison terms of six days to a year.

While discussing the status of civil servants employed directly by the government, the Chamber failed to resolve, or mention, the problematic status of the electricians. In any case, the union leaders, civil servants, and other workers (a group which included Pataud among its members) which the government had asked for support in the drafting of the project, not surprisingly chose instead to reject it. In 2,000 posters glued to the walls of Paris, organized labor informed the State

that their central committee at its March 22nd meeting, rejected entirely the proposal concerning the status of civil servants, and decided to continue the struggle for the complete fulfillment of the 1884 syndical law.⁷⁰

The government dropped the project, unratified; it thus failed to resolve the question of the electricians' relation to the state and their liability to strike, even as it intensified the antagonisms held by "bona fide" civil servants toward the state. The electricians' strike raised important questions about the "rights" of certain groups of employees to protect their interests by striking; the government's inability to either resolve or ameliorate these concerns redounded to its advantage, as the strikes of merchant sailors and postal employees, to name but two, showed in coming years.

This "parliamentary incoherence"⁷¹ in defining the status and responsibilities of strikers found its counterpart unwavering policy, a problem which the electricians' strike "brought to a head. . .in a somewhat disquieting form."⁷² A particularly telling example of this was shown by the trial of Pataud in the wake of the 1907 strike. Pataud was sued by a music hall performer who had lost his turn when the lights went out in

March. Despite having promised that no strikers would be prosecuted for having participated in the strike, the government, after much stalling, allowed the case to be heard in September of 1908. The real significance here was certainly not the eight francs in damages sought by the performer, but rather "the question whether the right to strike includes the right to injure third parties."⁷³ The magistrate initially ruled against Pataud; several months later, the judgment was overturned in Pataud's favor. This ruled out civil courts as a means of redress against strikers; it did little, however to resolve the question of dealing with strikers who supplied public services, to set guidelines for government intervention, or to show that the government was capable of formulating a definite labor policy.

The Clemenceau government, in general, found itself in a quandary. On the Right, conservatives argued that a hard line attitude towards labor disturbances was the only way to maintain "the principle of administrative authority upon which the French state is based."⁷⁴ The Left held that only socialist-leaning policies would assuage the growing pressures and needs faced by labor and, indeed by all of France. These policies, Jaurès and others warned were necessary for the Clemenceau government to maintain *its* administrative authority. Clemenceau himself favored a tough authoritarian policy, which contrasted with the more flexible and compromising attitude of his party. Thus "his initial program did call for several measures of social reform, but then remained stillborn. The period was marked, rather by the most sever labor unrest France had ever known, culminating in an attempted general strike in 1909."⁷⁵ Unable to reconcile the intrinsic conflict of a strong central government seeking to implement labor reforms which threatened that authority, "this method of government—or, to put it more accurately, lack of government"⁷⁶ attempted to "solve" the electricians' strike by a rapid resolution of material issues while failing to address deeper concerns adequately. This undoubtedly contributed to the growing unrest among organized labor syndicates and associations, as well as to the eventual downfall of the Clemenceau government itself.

The electrical workers' strike also illustrated the widening schism between the Socialist party and organized labor. While both groups ostensibly fought for the laboring classes, the Socialist party was a political organization, determined to use the machinery of government and popular support to achieve its goals. Organized labor, on the other hand, tended

to separate itself from the Socialist camp, tending to eschew politics in favor of direct action. Under the leadership of Griffuelhes, Pouget, and Yvetot, the C.G.T. had, since 1902, tended toward a more anarchic and "red" tinge of syndicalism, explicitly avowing direct action, sabotage, and the general strike, rather than political activity, as the means to achieve their ends. The "direct method. . . recommended the workingmen to 'hold aloof from the public authorities" and to reject politics in favor of direct action."⁷⁷ Tensions increased as the leadership of the C.G.T. refused to become trade-union Socialists; "in its Amiens Charter of 1906 the union asserted a rigorously antipolitical position. . . The trade union movement and the Socialist party thus functioned as jealous rivals for the workingman's support."⁷⁸ Jaurès, though supportive of the electricians and their right to strike, quickly disassociated his party from the anarcho-syndicalist camp of organized labor: "Mr. Clemenceau, you've lumped us together with certain supports of direct action, whose doctrines, you well know, are not our own."⁷⁹ In the same session of the Chamber, Bietry, a more dubious Socialist, separated his "yellow" party from the leadership of the unions:

We disagree...about the goal, which for them is abolition of that private property which has enslaved the workers. We on the other hand, demand property for the workers as a means of achieving liberty.

This conflict between Socialists and revolutionary syndicalists, who declared "You're talking politics and 'raison d'etat'...We are talking industry,"⁸¹ eventually came to a head during the attempted general strike of 1909, when the Socialists voted consistently in favor of measures to repress and penalize the strikers.

The debate on the merits of political versus direct action also split the C.G.T. itself into "red" and "yellow" factions; though the leadership of the confederation was almost exclusively revolutionary, the masses of workers were much more revisionist-minded, seeking to achieve material aims through political means. "Most workers went to the polls for Socialist candidates...The myth of the general strike was counterbalanced by the attractions of collective bargaining, parliamentary labor legislation, and wage-hour gains as immediate goals."⁸² As the electricians made clear

by voting to go back to work and choosing to negotiate with the government, they did not want their aims subordinated to the revolutionary agenda of Pataud and the other leaders. The electricians strike thus revealed a fundamental difference in the attitudes towards strikes held by the common workers and their leaders. To the majority workers, strikes and organized labor were an effective tool to back up, enforce, and promote legislation and government action in their favor; to the revolutionary syndicalist leaders, strikes were the means to "the destruction by force of the existing organization."⁸³ These different views divided the C.G.T. and its member unions in the years preceding the First World War, often to the detriment of both the C.G.T. as a corporate whole and its individual worker-members.

The 1907 strike showed the significance and extent of many labor problems and issues clearly for perhaps the first time; however, the revolutionary syndicalists continued in their espousal of antipolitical ideology, just as the government continued to flounder along without a consistent labor policy and the workers themselves searched for ways to improve their condition. Tensions illuminated by the strike were tossed, by virtue of the exceptionally rapid resolution of the strike which focused almost exclusively on the narrower material aspects of the dispute, into a dark, lightless closet. That the strike took place, and was resolved in the manner in which it was, indicated paradoxically, not that the system was working efficiently, but rather that serious problems existed and were to remain unresolved and magnified into the future. For this reason, the 1907 electrician's strike stands out as a rich source of information on the labor situation in France in the years preceding the First World War.

Tous les abus. . .recommencent à sevir. . .et
sont encore plus intolérables qu'ils
ne l'étaient jadis.

Le Figaro, March 11, 1907

NOTES

¹*Times* (London), 9 March 1907, p. 7.

²*Ibid.*, p. 1.

³*Le Temps* (Paris), 9 March 1907, p. 1.

⁴*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Times*, 9 March 1907, p. 7.

⁷*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

⁸*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2. Municipal workers, on the whole, enjoyed more generous pension plans, higher levels of job security, better working conditions and shorter working days than their comrades employed by privately-owned firms. Moreover, these advantages were safeguarded by law, leading many to regard the situation of civil servants as paradisiacal.

⁹*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Le Petit Parisien*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁵*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

¹⁶*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

¹⁷*Le Petit Parisien*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

¹⁸*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

¹⁹*Le Temps*, 9 March 1907, p. 2.

²⁰*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.* p. 2.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Le Figaro* (Paris), 9 March 1907, p. 1.

²⁶*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

²⁷*Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 2.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Georges Clemenceau, quoted in *Le Petit Temps* (supplement to *Le Temps*), 12 March 1907, p. 1.

³⁰*Le Figaro*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

³¹Victor Griffuelhes, quoted in *Le Matin*, 12 March 1907, p. 1.

³²*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

³³*Le Matin*, 12 March 1907, p. 1.

³⁴*Le Figaro*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

³⁵*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

³⁶*Le Figaro*, 10 March 1907, pp. 2-3.

³⁷*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

³⁸*Times*, 9 March 1907, p. 5.

³⁹*Le Temps*, 1 December 1909, p. 1.

⁴⁰*Le Figaro*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

⁴¹*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

⁴²*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

⁴³*Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 1.

⁴⁴*Times*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Minutes of Municipal Council Meeting, 10 March 1907, in *Le Petit Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 2.

⁴⁷Jean Jolly, *Dictionnaire des Parlementaires Français 1889-1940*, vol. 8 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 2,930.

⁴⁸*Le Temps*, 19 March 1907, p. 2.

⁴⁹Albert Sartiaux, quoted in *Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 1.

⁵²Article 14 of the July, 1906 "Cahier des Charges" drawn up by the Paris Municipal Council and the electric companies, cited in *Le Petit Parisien*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

⁵³*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵*Le Temps*, 19 March 1907, p. 2.

⁵⁶Albert Sartiaux, quoted in *Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2.

⁵⁷*Le Temps*, 10 March 1907, p. 2.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹*Le Figaro*, 10 March 1907, p. 1.

⁶⁰*Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 1.

⁶¹René Viviani, quoted in *Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 5.

⁶²Émile Pataud, quoted in *Le Temps*, 18 March 1907, p. 7.

⁶³*Le Petit Temps*, 22 March 1907, p. 2.

⁶⁴*Le Figaro*, 16 March 1907, p. 3.

⁶⁵*Le Écho* (Paris), 15 March 1907, p. 2.

⁶⁶Albert Sarraut, Under-Secretary of State and deputy from Aude, in the minutes of the Chamber of Deputies, 10 March 1907.

⁶⁷*Le Temps*, 11 March 1907, p. 1.

⁶⁸*Le Temps*, 13 March 1907, p. 1.

⁶⁹Reading of the content of the project in the Chamber of Deputies, 12 March 1907.

⁷⁰C.G.T. poster, cited in *L'Écho*, 31 March 1907, p. 1.

⁷¹*L'Écho*, 22 March 1907, p. 2.

⁷²*Times*, 2 April 1907, p. 3.

⁷³*Times*, 14 September 1908, p. 6.

⁷⁴*Times*, 8 April 1907, p. 5.

⁷⁵Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 4th edition (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 262.

⁷⁶*L'Écho*, 9 March 1907, p. 1.

⁷⁷Louis Levine, *The Labor Movement in France: A Study in Revolutionary Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), p. 165.

⁷⁸Wright, p. 283.

⁷⁹Jean Jaurès, leader of Socialist party and deputy from Tarn, quoted in minutes of Chamber of Deputies, 11 March 1907.

⁸⁰Pierre Biétry, deputy from Finistère, *ibid.*

⁸¹C.G.T. poster, cited in *L'Écho*, 31 March 1907, p. 1.

⁸²Wright, p. 283.

⁸³Sir Arthur Clay, *Syndicalism and Labour: Notes upon Some Aspects of Social and Industrial Questions of the Day* (London: J. Murray, 1912), p. 2.