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France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society

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Chapter 9

France after the War, 1919–28

In the aftermath of the war, people spoke of reconstructing France. They meant the France of before the war, the France for which they believed they had fought and suffered. But that France was gone. Which France, whose France, would be rebuilt? Hope and fear of change aroused struggle on two fronts: the relations between workers and employers – class struggle – and between women and men – gender struggle.

Class struggle

The Russian Revolution of November 1917 seemed to herald a new order. Both terrified conservatives and exhilarated activists thought revolution was 'near, inevitable, fatal, at the Four Corners of Europe'.[1] The Social Democrats took power in Germany and then put down the far left Spartacist Revolution in January 1919. Struggle continued: on 3 and 4 March, the government killed 1200 Communists. Socialists won the Austrian elections in February.

To coordinate and drive forward what appeared to be a European revolution, Communists founded the Third International or Comintern at a Moscow congress (2–6 March 1919). The Bolsheviks and many Western activists believed that the Second International parties had betrayed the workers' cause by supporting the war effort and that the new International would make them more revolutionary. On 21 March 1919, Hungarians proclaimed a Soviet republic. Socialists won the Estonian elections, held 5–7 April 1919. And on 16 April 1919, the 'Black Sea Mutiny' showed that French workers might revolt. Clemenceau had sent the French fleet to Odessa to support the continuing 'White' – counter-revolutionary – campaign. Refusing to act against the revolutionaries, the sailors mutinied. The

government used colonial troops to repress the insurrection but had to withdraw the fleet. André Marty, ringleader of the insurrection, became a hero and leader of the Communist Party.

New members were streaming into the CGT and, to a lesser extent, into the SFIO. The CGT tripled its membership, from 600 000 on the eve of the war to 1.8 million in 1920. The SFIO doubled its membership, from 90 000 to 180 000. A national Christian trade union organisation emerged, the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (French Confederation of Christian Workers – CFTC). It had its origins in unions founded with the cooperation of employers – 'yellow unions', as other unionists called them – but in the surge of militancy after the war, a number of these broke their links with employers and formed the CFTC, which had some 150 000 members at its founding congress in 1919.

Who were all these people joining unions? Many were new to politics and unionism, returned from the front with a determination to change things. All wanted action. They sensed that politics were open. The proletarian writer Georges Navel, 15 at the time, went with his brother to a union meeting. 'I learnt the meaning of the strikes of 1917, the mutinies ... and the struggle in Russia. The foremen and the boss lost their prestige.' Until then, Navel wrote, his 'peaked cap, smock, grey jacket, velour trousers – the worker's outfit during the week' was his identity. Now he believed 'that nothing prevented a man from being a man. Class ceased to appear a limit within which one was enclosed.'[2]

The government sought to head off workers' demands with laws permitting collective bargaining (25 March 1919) and granting the eight-hour day and six-day week (23 April 1919). There was irony in this, since Clemenceau had in 1906 so brutally repressed the first major May Day strike for the eight-hour day! The CGT nonetheless called a strike for May Day 1919, mainly to placate the rank and file, who sensed that, in Shorter and Tilly's words, the time was right 'to influence the political struggle' with mass action.[3] Some 500 000 demonstrated in Paris. Many were injured by the police: one was shot and killed, and another, a Socialist deputy, was wounded by a mounted policeman's sabre.

The revolutionary minority of the CGT sought to develop a general strike. Unrest continued during May, with 330 different strikes and more than 200 000 strikers, but the CGT leaders refused to call a general strike. They feared to set off a revolution which, they were sure, would be repressed in blood. By June, metalworkers, miners and transport workers were on strike. Resentment turned against the moderate union leadership, who were heckled and even bashed by their own followers. The CGT leadership was finally forced to concede a general strike against the Allied intervention in Russia and Hungary. Just before that strike, however, on 18 July, Clemenceau called in the CGT leadership and promised them

speedy demobilisation, partial amnesty, and steps to keep down the cost of living, in return for calling off the strike, which they did. The result was bitterness among the rank and file, who felt that they had been on the verge of victory.

Now Navel felt his sense of class again. Finding no room in third-class, he jumped into a first-class carriage, but discovered he once again had 'a sense of hierarchy': 'first-class ... intimidates me ... I am not at ease as a Bohemian would be, and very quickly I run my fingers through my hair to appear correct ... The *gentlemen* [English in original] ignored my arrival ... My presence offends the decor ... At the first stop, I rejoin my natural background, the third-class carriage.'[4]

The elections of 1919

These events contributed to the election of a conservative government in November 1919. So did the demands of women: the Chamber had passed a law for women's suffrage on 20 May 1919 by the astonishing margin of 329 for and only 95 against. Conservatives were terrified at the prospect of women's suffrage and the new, visible presence of women in public positions, on the streets and in cafés. The strikes and the growth of socialism added to their fears that the traditional order was threatened. Behind women's and workers' demands, they discerned the spectre of the Russian Revolution. Against that spectre, supporters of the existing order coalesced.

Between March and July 1919, the Chamber adopted a new voting system designed to favour centre and right coalitions. All parties to the right of the Radicals formed a coalition called the Bloc national. It included the nationalists (except for Action française), the centre parties of big business (Alliance démocratique and Fédération républicaine), and some Radicals. They fought the election, in Clemenceau's words, 'for or against Bolshevism', before an electorate which was much older than usual since so many young men had died.

The Socialists fought without their usual alliance with the Radicals, because their congress had rejected 'class collaboration'. Although they increased their vote from 1.38 to 1.7 million, they fell from 102 to 68 seats. The Radicals suffered too without the alliance, doing hardly better than the Socialists. The Bloc national triumphed, winning a majority of 319 out of 620 seats. It was the most conservative legislature since 1871. It came to be known as the 'Blue Horizon' Chamber because so many of the deputies were veterans wearing their sky-blue dress uniforms.