

The French Silk Workers Revolt of 1834

A short account of the Lyon silk workers strike of 1834

It is now 180 years since the silk workers revolt in Lyon in France in 1834. This and the preceding revolt there in 1831 were some of the first workers uprisings at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the development of the working class.

Lyon had become the silk weaving centre of France by the beginning of the 1830s. More than half the population was employed in the silk industry and silk workers were known as canuts. In 1831 the production of silk in Lyon was still organised in a pre-industrial way. 1,400 bankers and traders ruled the industry. Below them were 8,000 craftsmen who in their turn employed 30,000 apprentices who generally lived, ate and slept in the homes of the craftsmen. Women were also employed at a lower wage as were the apprentices and errand boys. As can be seen most of the production took place in craftsmen's homes with only one factory employing 600 workers.

Because of economic crisis in 1831 the demand for silk goods dropped drastically. Wages were cut so the canuts asked the departmental Prefect (Regional governor) to negotiate with the manufacturers for a fixed price. This was not appreciated by the manufacturers and 104 of them refused to implement it. This was met with mass anger among the silk workers. A semi-secret paramilitary organisation, The Rhone Volunteers, was formed by the workers.

On November 21st, several hundred workers toured the workshops in the Croix Rousse municipality. They made the few workers still working in their workshops to stop work, set up barricades and then marched to Lyon with a black flag of revolt at the head of their procession.

In Lyon they stormed the fortified police barracks at Bon Pasteur and armed themselves with weapons from the arsenal. There were then clashes between the workers and the military. The National Guard, a sort of state militia and in Lyon recruited in the main from the canuts refused to fire on the workers and changed sides.

After pitched fighting which left 100 dead among the forces of the State and 69 among the workers, with barricades being built everywhere in the streets and with many black flags flying, bearing the slogan Live Working or Die Fighting, Lyon fell into the hands of the insurgent workers. Both the mayor and the local military commander fled.

The leaders of the insurgents seemed unsure as to how to proceed, insisting that the struggle was still around the fixed rate for silk goods.

In Paris the revolt was met with consternation by central government. King Louis Philippe and the President of the Council of Ministers blamed the revolt on republican and socialist agitation. Twenty thousand troops were sent to Lyon. They entered Lyon without meeting any resistance. The fixed rate was abolished, the National Guard was disbanded, and a garrison was installed. In addition a fort was built to separate Croix Rousse from Lyon. The first revolt had failed, with the arrest of 90 workers.

Radical republican groups now began to agitate in Lyon establishing links with local silk workers organisations. Workers in Lyon had realised that Louis Philippe and his government were supporters of the silk bosses. The next 28 months saw a growth in class consciousness among the Lyon workers. The Le Chapelier Law of 1791 forbade the forming of unions so the Lyon workers organised secretly. They rose from 250 members at the end of 1831 to 2,400 members in 11 different bodies in 1833. In addition there was a society of ferrandiniers (manufacturers of silk and wool) with 400-420 members.

The government now threatened these unions. The silk workers newspaper L'Echo de La Fabrique, influenced by socialist ideas warned that the workers had had enough and would reply in kind. L'Echo encouraged workers to join these associations and to form links with other groups of workers. By the end of 1833 there were good economic conditions and a boom began in the Lyon silk industry. As a result the government felt that the chances of another revolt were slim.

The employers were now concerned that workers were earning too much. They tried to drive down wages. This unleashed a period of unrest. On 14th February sixty thousand female and male silk workers went on strike in Lyons. This was one of the first general strikes in an industry anywhere in the world. Ten days later there was a vote to return to work. In the aftermath 13 workers regarded as ringleaders were arrested.

The trial began on April 5th. This coincided with the Chamber of Peers meeting to pass a law leading to further repression against republican groups.

The following day up to 10,000 workers turned out for the funeral of a silk worker who had been active in one of the unions. On 8th April a general strike was called for in Lyon by the workers associations for the day that the trial had its next hearing. It was also decided that they would reply to any armed attacks by the police and military.

The State replied with a massive show of force with soldiers and artillery surrounding the main public buildings.

When a large crowd gathered soldiers fired at will on them, killing several people including children. In reply barricades went up all over Lyon. One military barracks was seized by the workers and became the HQ of the uprising. In the night of 9th-10th April one of the main republican groups decided on an insurrection for the following day.

Faced with the well organised workers Adolphe Thiers, the Minister of the Interior, withdrew all the troops from the centre of the city and had them encircle it. The workers now occupied the telegraph office and the nearby town of Villeurbanne. Black flags were raised in many of the workers districts. Meanwhile uprisings in towns near to Lyon, Saint Etienne and Vienne broke out. The military bombarded the workers stronghold of Croix Rousse. By April 14th the military had retaken Lyon, massacring many workers in the process.

The casualty figures give 131 military dead, with a minimum of 200 workers killed and 600 wounded. More than 500 were arrested and many sentenced to long prison terms or to deportation.

In the following years the silk bosses attempted to defuse revolt by locating their workshops in the countryside. This did not stop a further uprising in 1848 in Lyon. However, this was just one of many throughout Europe in that year of revolution so it was less remarked upon.

The Lyon revolts of the 1830s inspired further revolts throughout Europe over the following decades. It also inspired the great Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin when he wrote his The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution. As for Adolphe Thiers, he was to head a government that would crush the most important workers uprising of the 19th century, the Paris Commune of 1871, with much greater ferocity and bloodshed.

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