

**The Birth of the Weekend
and the Revolts against Work:
The Workers of the Paris Region
during the Popular Front (1936-38)**

Michael Seidman

The Popular Front period in France has often been described by both Left and Right as a *révolution manquée*, a missed opportunity for the working class to take control of the means of production. When workers occupied and staged sit-down strikes in the factories during May and June, 1936, commentators of various political persuasions believed that the workers were on the road to revolution. Yet despite an unprecedented one million workers occupying factories all over France, the bourgeoisie managed to retain its ownership of the means of production. Instead of making revolution during the governments of the Popular Front, the workers demanded—and received—paid vacations and the forty-hour week. In the midst of the greatest economic depression that capitalism has ever known, France gave birth to the weekend. In the face of high unemployment and the increasing threat of war, French workers fought for their forty-hour week with Saturday and Sunday off. Thus the Popular Front was not only an alliance of unions and left political parties to prevent fascism in France, but it was also the birthplace of mass tourism and leisure. The demand for a social revolution in which the workers take over and develop the means of production was superseded by numerous struggles against work. This article will examine the revolts against work, and it will explain in detail

Michael Seidman is finishing his doctoral dissertation for the University of Amsterdam.

I wish to express my gratitude to the following archivists: M. Delacarte of Aérospatiale, M. Labat of the Archives de France, and M. Dumont of the Régie Renault. In addition, I wish to thank Professor Arthur Mitzman of the University of Amsterdam for his encouragement and help.

how the Communist and Socialist parties and the massive federation, Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), which were, with the Radical Party, the main components of the Popular Front, reacted to the aspirations of the working class in Paris and its suburbs.

In order to understand the failure of the revolution and the struggles against industrial discipline, the relationship between the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production) and the working class must be examined. In France throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a strong bourgeoisie had steadily and consistently industrialized, and the development of the productive forces had, as in other western nations, ended the revolutionary possibilities of the working-class organizations. In contrast to this advanced social development, in Spain in 1936 anarchosyndicalist militants took control of the underdeveloped productive forces which had been literally abandoned by a weak bourgeoisie; however, in France, at the same time, the militants of the extreme Left—*anarchosyndicalists, Trotskyists, and dissident Communists*—who demanded Soviets, workers' councils, or some form of workers' control, were largely ignored. The overwhelming majority of workers in the industries which will be examined in this essay did not want to take over the means of production. In fact, many workers often wanted to avoid work and had little desire to labor for their employer, state, party, or union. This refusal of work manifested itself in a variety of actions, from hostility to industrial discipline to both legal and illegal tactics of evasion and even destruction of work space and of work time.

Yet if the dynamism of the French bourgeoisie had effectively ended the revolutionary option, the nature of the developed productive forces promoted struggles against work. The noise and space of the factories, the ugliness of the industrial suburbs, the anxious boredom of the daily commute, and the meaninglessness of many tasks encouraged workers to escape and flee from the means of production. Ongoing rationalization, the increasing "dequalification" of labor, and the consequent necessity of military-like discipline in the factories created resentments which expressed themselves in sabotage, violence, and revolts against work. Thus, instead of taking control and developing the productive forces, during the Popular Front the Paris workers waged a daily *guerrilla* against work and its attendant discipline. This *guerrilla* became the most important form of class struggle during the Popular Front and damaged

the Left's hopes of economic growth through increased production and consumption. The workers' struggles against labor discipline and for the weekend question certain generalizations by historians that French workers had "accepted" the industrial system and had "adapted" to the factory.

This article will attempt to explore the struggles of workers in certain key industries of the Paris region. Paris has been selected because of its enormous political and economic importance within France. Nor is the choice of the industrial branches totally arbitrary. Two of them—automobiles and aviation—formed the essential part of the advanced sectors which were the cutting edge of the working-class movement during the Popular Front, and the occupation waves of the spring of 1936 began precisely in these branches. The third branch, construction, has been included because its more traditional nature contrasted sharply with the industrial modernity of the other sectors. In addition, the World's Fair of 1937, a huge construction project employing tens of thousands of workers, was to be the showcase of the Popular Front. Other industries have been left unexplored because access to both public and private archives is still rather limited. Nevertheless, the workers of the industries examined here expressed many of the desires and actions of other Parisian workers during the Popular Front governments. To put their actions into proper perspective, French and particularly Parisian economic and social development must be briefly surveyed.

After the French defeat in World War II, many historians emphasized French industrial backwardness compared to Germany, England, and the USA. However, more recently, the focus of historiography has shifted, and historians have stressed the development of powerful automobile, aviation, and chemical industries in the twentieth century. A tendency toward concentration and elimination of small, relatively inefficient firms characterized industrial developments in the first third of the twentieth century.¹ Modern metalworking firms began to employ more workers than the older textile industries, which had been the base of the Industrial Revolution. In the 1920s these and other advanced industrial branches expanded rapidly, and the growth rate for French industry was the highest in Europe.² By 1936 French industry had reached a certain

¹ Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France entre deux guerres*, I (Paris, 1972), 232.

² François Caron and Jean Bouvier, "Guerre, Crise, Guerre," in *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, IV (Paris, 1979), 648.

balance between large and small firms, a kind of interdependent “dual economy” where small and medium-sized businesses coexisted with large enterprises and where the economy was composed of both rather backward and very advanced regions.³

Much, if not most, of the growth of the modern and highly concentrated industries occurred in the area which concerns this article, the Paris region. Paris was the France of economic development, of industrial dynamism. Even before World War I, the automobile, aviation, and chemical industries had expanded in Paris proper and especially in its suburbs, the *banlieue*, and between the wars the automobile industry became the most important of modern industries. The Renault establishments in Boulogne-Billancourt, employing over thirty thousand workers, were probably the largest in Europe, and other giants of the French automobile industry, such as Citroën, were also located inside their largest market. The aviation industry was even more concentrated around Paris than the automobile industry: one estimate claimed that in 1936, 65 per cent of the factories that manufactured aircraft bodies and 90 per cent of the plants producing airplane engines were in the Paris metropolitan area.⁴

These modern industries, particularly that of the automobile, not only changed the appearance of Paris but also altered the nature of factory work itself. The automobile industry, in France as in the USA, was a pioneer in the rationalization of work. Methods of rationalization and “scientific” work organization, such as Taylorism, widened the distance between work and play and the skilled and unskilled. In factories which used “scientific” work organization, workers could perfect their skills and techniques in several weeks instead of the two or three years previously required.⁵ At Renault this “dequalification” of labor proceeded rapidly, and on the eve of World War II in the large automobile factories around Paris, 60 per cent of the workers could learn their jobs in three days.⁶

³ See Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, “Le patronat français a-t-il été malthusien?” *Le Mouvement social*, No. 88 (July-September, 1974), pp. 46-48.

⁴ Pierre Cot, *Triumph of Treason* (Chicago and New York, 1944), p. 322. The major airfields were also located in the Paris region.

⁵ [Commandant] Hourst, *Le Problème de la main-d'oeuvre: La Taylorisation et son application aux conditions industrielles de l'après-guerre* (Paris, 1916), p. 46.

⁶ Georges Lefranc, *Histoire du travail et des travailleurs* (Paris, 1975), p. 335.

The assembly line appeared at Renault in approximately 1924 and led to the construction of a new kind of factory space:

Assembly-line work leads to the construction of buildings which have only outside walls. The interior is divided only by a very small number of partitions, in contrast to the compartments of the era of specialized and skilled workshops. The new spatial organization permits a large view of the whole of production.⁷

Presumably, the new space helped enable management to oversee and control its workers.

In addition to an altered type of spatial and work organization, a new kind of time was born in the modern automobile factory. Piecework, or rather production incentives, which were an intrinsic part of “scientific” work organization, became the established form of payment for most auto workers between the wars. Thus workers were forced to be conscious of the clock from the time they punched in until the siren ended the working day. Simone Weil, the intellectual who worked in several of the large metalworking firms around Paris, described factory life in the 1930s:

It's inhuman: parcelled-out labor—piecework—a purely bureaucratic organization of the relations among the various components of the enterprise and the different work operations. Attention, deprived of worthy objects, is, in return, compelled to concentrate every second on a petty problem, always the same, with some variants: do fifty pieces in five minutes instead of six, or something along these lines.⁸

There are two factors in this slavery: speed and orders. Speed: to “make it,” you must repeat motion after motion at a rhythm, which, being more rapid than thought, forbids freedom not only of reflection but even of dreaming. You must, when putting yourself in front of the machine, kill your soul for eight hours per day, your thoughts, feelings, everything.⁹

The unskilled and semi-skilled were subordinated to the operations and the pace of their machines. At best, workers could control their working speed, but even this form of autonomy was reduced by certain kinds of piecework. Important decisions were made by managers and technicians. Hierarchy was an essential part of a metallurgical worker's life. In the huge space of the noisy factory, a military-like discipline was needed to force the semi-skilled workers to perform their repetitive and boring jobs. Foremen and watch-

⁷ Alain Touraine, *L'évolution du travail ouvrier aux usines Renault* (Paris, 1955), p. 42.

⁸ Simone Weil, *La Condition ouvrière* (Paris, 1951), p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

men, with virtually absolute authority over their subjects, were hired to ensure that workers produced what and how they were ordered. Every aspect of their working lives was tightly controlled.¹⁰

The industrial organization of the aviation industry was somewhat different. Because of its complicated operations, the aviation industry's rationalization of work was often less advanced than that of the automobile industry. Thus workers were generally more skilled than their counterparts in the auto industry. However, rationalization became increasingly important both before and especially during the Popular Front. Assembly lines were introduced in certain operations, such as the production of wings and motors, and the size and space of aviation firms increased dramatically. The Lioré and Olivier factory in the Paris suburb of Argenteuil added a series of immense hangar-like halls which contained 32,960 m².¹¹

Not all of the industries which will be examined in this article were as rationalized or as concentrated as automobiles or even aviation. The construction industry was often a refuge for the craftsmen. Compared to the "territoire militarisé d'une usine," the independence of, for instance, plumbers or roofers was remarkable.¹² Construction was largely decentralized and family run. Whereas in 1931 in metallurgy 98.3 per cent of workers were employed in firms with over 100 workers, in construction and public works only 23.8 per cent of workers labored in concerns with over 100 workers.¹³ However, even within the traditional structure of the construction industry, the nature of work was changing between the wars. Considerable amounts of hard physical labor were reduced by the use of machinery like bulldozers, cranes, cement mixers, pumps, and jack hammers.¹⁴ Some skilled labor was eliminated through the employment of spray-painting machines and the beginning of mass production of locks and hardware. Large public works projects in the Paris region, namely, the extension of the subways and the World's Fair or Exposition of 1937, employed hundreds and even thousands of workers.

Before exploring the struggles of the construction, aviation,

¹⁰ *Humanité*, November 29, 1936.

¹¹ Edmond Petit, *La vie quotidienne dans l'aviation en France au début du XX^e siècle (1900-1935)* (Paris, 1977), p. 163-64.

¹² Arnold Brémond, *Une explication du monde ouvrier: Enquête d'un étudiant-ouvrier dans la banlieue parisienne* (Saint Etienne, 1927), p. 47.

¹³ Sauvy, *Histoire économique*, I, 232.

¹⁴ Adolphe Hodée, *Les travailleurs devant la rationalisation* (Paris, 1934), p. 17.

and auto workers, the demographic and economic situation of France in the 1930s must be briefly reviewed. France was hard hit by the carnage of World War I, and these losses, combined with a low birthrate, led to a labor shortage. Throughout the interwar period foreign labor was recruited to make up the manpower deficit. On the whole, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs found workers, whether French or foreign, but companies requiring skilled labor had a more difficult time. This shortage of qualified workers was to have a profound effect during the Popular Front governments. After 1931 slow demographic growth was compounded by the economic crisis, as France felt the effects of the worldwide depression. In industry and commerce, production dropped about 20 per cent during the 1930s.¹⁵ Although in 1936 France had an unemployment rate of only 4 per cent, unemployment was very significant in the Paris region, which contained 20 per cent of the French population but had over one half of the nation's jobless.

The declining French economy and the increasing international tensions promoted the formation of the Popular Front at the end of 1934. Its economic program called for a reduction of the working week without a pay decrease, a large public works program which would get the unemployed back to work, and the nationalization of defense industries, especially aviation. After the Popular Front's election victory in the spring of 1936 and before the new Blum government took office, France was confronted by the greatest wave of factory occupations or sit-down strikes that the nation had ever experienced. The workers employed occupation tactics to prevent "scabs" from entering the factories and because they had been assured by Blum himself that he would not use force against the working class. Workers sensed correctly that Blum did not want to be the French Noske,¹⁶ and they took advantage of the hiatus in state repression to occupy factories in the Paris *banlieue* and, later, throughout France. In addition, the tactics of occupation forced employers to settle more quickly than a walkout would have. In effect, property rights were violated, and the machinery and capital goods of the factory fell directly into the hands of the workers. Sabotage and destruction were a possibility.

¹⁵ Sauvy, *Histoire économique*, II, 112.

¹⁶ Gustav Noske (1868-1946) was the German Social-Democratic leader who re-established order in Germany by effectively suppressing the insurrection of early 1919 which attempted to extend the German Revolution. Blum made it clear that he would not follow the Noske precedent.

The occupations began in May 1936 in the aviation plants, most of which were in the Paris region. From aviation the movement spread to automobiles, and on May 28 the wave hit the great industrial giant, Renault. Workers' demands, although somewhat varied, usually included higher pay, an end to overtime, a forty-hour week, paid vacations, and official recognition of the federation, CGT. In addition, at Renault, "the workers were tired of the low salaries, of work speed-ups, of fines, and of the military discipline that was forced upon them."¹⁷ After an agreement was reached at Renault on May 29, the occupations began to recede in metalworking, but other industries, such as construction, soon were affected.

However, at the beginning of June a renewed wave struck the aviation and auto firms of the Paris region. When the Blum government took power on June 4, 1936, its main task was to calm the occupation movement which was spreading from Paris to the provinces. According to Blum, the initiative for negotiations between the employers, the union (CGT), and the government came from representatives of the major employers' organization, Confédération générale de la production française (CGPF). On June 7-8 the Matignon accords were reached. The employers' delegates recognized the workers' right to join a union without the threat of sanctions, and in turn, non-union personnel were guaranteed the right to work. The CGPF representatives agreed to the election of union delegates in the factories. Blum himself arbitrated the question of salaries, which he raised between 7 and 15 per cent. He also promised to introduce legislation, which was to be approved quickly by the legislature, guaranteeing paid vacations and, most importantly, the forty-hour week. The CGT justifiably viewed the agreement as a great victory for the union. Management considered it as the best settlement which it could obtain given that over one million workers were occupying factories throughout France. The employers hoped that collective bargaining and the institution of elected union delegates would stabilize the factories by providing mechanisms to determine wages, working conditions, and the presentation of grievances. The more "progressive" management even accepted paid vacations and pay increases, but almost all employers objected to the forty-hour week, which they believed would drastically raise costs and put them at an unfair disadvantage with foreign competitors.

Although many employers objected to the size of the wage

¹⁷ *Humanité*, May 29, 1936.

increases of the accords, the Popular Front and the Blum government believed that the augmentations were an essential element of the theory of *pouvoir d'achat*. The Left thought that the increased buying power of the workers would augment consumption and thereby stimulate the economy, which was the intention of the Popular Front's program. Higher demand would create economies of scale which would reduce costs per unit produced. Thus, higher-paid workers would be able to purchase lower-priced goods, and the economy would move out of the stagnation which had characterized it since the decade's beginning. However, there was one catch: production had to increase if the plan was to succeed. An augmentation of goods and services could only come from increased investment and hard work, and the latter was in particularly short supply in certain key industries in the Paris region during the Popular Front.

Despite the signing of the Matignon accords of June 8 and Blum's commitment to obtain legislative approval for the forty-hour week and paid vacations, the occupations continued. Although the CGT delegates signed the agreement, they could not end the occupations, and this failure indicated that the movement was spontaneous or, at least, not entirely under the control of the CGT. Many, if not most, historians have attributed the end of the May-June strikes to the influence of the speech which the leader of the French Communist party, Maurice Thorez, gave to CP militants on June 11, 1936: "We do not yet have behind us, with us, ready to go with us to the end, the people of the countryside. We are risking the estrangement of sections of the bourgeoisie and peasantry who are somewhat sympathetic. What then? . . . Then it is necessary to know how to end a strike once satisfaction has been obtained."¹⁸

Yet Thorez' influence even at Renault, where the CP claimed to have great strength,¹⁹ seems to have been limited. The same day upon which the Communist leader told the militants not to scare "the bourgeoisie and the peasants of France," workers at Renault purposely began to damage that factory.²⁰ Although little damage

¹⁸ Thorez quoted in Georges Lefranc, *Juin 36* (Paris, 1966), p. 172.

¹⁹ Bertrand Badié, "Les grèves du Front populaire aux usines Renault," *Le Mouvement social*, No. 81 (October-December, 1972), pp. 69-109.

²⁰ AN, 91AQ115. Sources from management, like those from labor, must be used with some degree of skepticism. Whenever possible, I have tried to find third-party confirmation of the events or incidents mentioned. For example, the correspondence of insurance companies—organizations which are hardly known for their gullibility—was employed to confirm the Renault management's claims of sabotage and destruction during strikes. Court

had occurred during the June 5 to June 11 occupation, a “mean spirit” appeared among the workers on June 11 under the pretext of the delay of the signing of the collective bargaining agreement.²¹ After June 11 there was a “new situation, characterized by the violence of the strikers.”²² Raw materials were “deliberately damaged and rendered unusable,” and Renault claimed 161,201 francs worth of damage, a considerable sum.²³ Workers used this destruction to wring concessions from the Renault management.

Most historians have stressed the calm, order, and respect of the workers for both people and property during the occupations. In many factories machines and materials were protected, and management was left untouched. The workers of the Paris region were not full-fledged Luddites. They did not wish to destroy the machines and factories upon which they depended for their livelihood, but at Renault during the occupations, violence frequently erupted. Administrative personnel who were “guarded as hostages” became involved in fights with other workers.²⁴ During the occupation windows were broken “either voluntarily or involuntarily.”²⁵ Thousands of francs worth of thefts occurred, including clocks, tools, and equipment of all sorts.²⁶ Workers intentionally damaged wood and cloth materials.²⁷ Assembly-line workers sometimes refused requests by their foremen to complete the work at hand. In one case the superintendent (*chef d’atelier*) demanded that workers grease unfinished doors which would rust if left untreated, but the men “categorically refused” to carry out the order. Management was later forced to spend 8,379 francs to eliminate the rust.²⁸

At Renault after the occupations, the revolts against work took many forms: lateness, absenteeism, disobedience, theft, production slowdowns, and violence against non-union workers and those who

cases, in which arguments from both sides were presented, have been consulted to evaluate the production problems at the World’s Fair of 1937. In the nationalized aviation companies, CGT participation in management’s debates heightened the usefulness of the minutes of the Administrative Councils. Police reports, although not yet officially available, were quite helpful in establishing the “political” character of certain strikes and strikers. Finally, articles from the press of working-class organizations sometimes confirmed, whether intentionally or not, employers’ assertions.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Le Petit Parisien*, May 29, 1936.

²⁵ AN, 91AQ115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

were producing too much. With the relaxation of the iron discipline that followed the electoral victory of the Popular Front, workers, particularly the newly elected union delegates, took advantage of the new atmosphere. They modified their schedules, coming in late and leaving early. Sometimes workers physically attacked their foremen, and delegates threatened to strike if the attacking worker was disciplined.²⁹ Delegates consistently ignored a clause in the contract which instituted a ten-hour per month maximum for the exercise of union functions, and many missed work whenever possible.³⁰ They left the factory to go to the union hall, in complete disregard of the contract.³¹ When management offered the delegates a card to permit them to circulate freely in the factory and thus to account for the time exercised in their functions, the delegates refused. They even requested that management fire those workers who refused to join the CGT, and non-CGT workers were beaten and injured.³²

Tensions between the delegates and foremen were particularly acute. A kind of “dual power” existed at Renault. Foremen who attempted to enforce work discipline often ran into the resistance of delegates who disobeyed their orders. When a delegate’s foreman reproached him for lateness, he replied that “he had had enough, that it had to blow up, and that the next time workers would not hang foremen and bosses in effigy but for real.”³³ Delegates struggled to control hiring and firing, and they demanded the dismissal of certain foremen and superintendents.³⁴ Occasionally, foremen were given an ultimatum to join the CGT within a certain amount of time.³⁵

Foremen and technicians protested vigorously against the decline of their authority. Those who belonged to the right-wing Syndicat professionnel declared: “Mass production can only exist when a rigorous discipline reigns. Now the agitated state which exists in our industry can only result in slipshod production and uncertain delivery.”³⁶ The Syndicat professionnel sent a letter to

²⁹ Archives Renault, “Incidents,” September 8, 1936. The Archives Renault are at Boulogne-Billancourt.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, “Note,” September 11, 1936.

³¹ *Ibid.*, “Rôle et compétence des délégués,” October 21, 1936.

³² *Ibid.*, “Les violations,” October 21, 1936.

³³ *Ibid.*, September 9, 1936.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, “Incidents,” September 8, 1936.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, “Les violations,” October 21, 1936.

³⁶ Syndicat professionnel quoted in Jacques Delperrié de Bayac, *Histoire du Front populaire* (Paris, 1972), p. 315.

Blum himself in the fall of 1936, which cited the “troubles reigning in all the metallurgical factories of Paris and its suburbs.”³⁷ It blamed the decline of management’s authority on “irresponsible agitators who are not qualified to substitute for the management.”³⁸

The “dual power” at Renault did bring a severe drop in productivity, and foremen who tried to increase production speed were disobeyed or threatened.³⁹ The management reported that production slowdowns were frequent throughout 1937 and 1938, and it was necessary to watch the workers very closely to obtain a decent output.⁴⁰ In some workshops, union delegates inspected the paychecks of workers to see if they were producing more than the *de facto* quota established by the delegates.⁴¹ One delegate even ordered that machines be turned off during mealtime.⁴² Piecework and incentives were largely ineffective in boosting output during this period of the Popular Front.

Not only management but also the CGT itself sometimes could not enforce work discipline on its members at Renault. On September 9, 1936 a sit-down strike occurred in *atelier* 195, “in spite of the intervention of the Secretary of the Fédération des métaux of Billancourt and of M. Timbault,” an important CGT leader.⁴³ Local CP and CGT newspapers would acknowledge, however infrequently, that workers were late without justification. On April 1, 1937 *L’Unité* (CGT) noted that in the ball-bearing workshop “we have all too often observed among our members an unusual number of absences on trivial or non-existent grounds. Besides, it is quite natural that everyone should respect the work schedule set up by the management and accepted by us. We implore you to obey our union’s discipline, for in no way should we lay ourselves open to our enemies.”⁴⁴ The local CP newspaper, *La Lutte Finale*, charged that “undisciplined comrades” were falling into a trap set by the management by not producing well.⁴⁵ Even the extreme right-wing Parti Populaire français joined the chorus. Its organ, *Le Défenseur*, approved the gains that the June strikes had produced at Renault: the

³⁷ Archives Renault (n.d.).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, “Incidents,” September 8, 1936.

⁴⁰ AN, 91AQ116.

⁴¹ AN, 91AQ65.

⁴² AN, 91AQ16.

⁴³ Archives Renault, “Les violations,” September 9, 1936.

⁴⁴ *Unité*, April 1, 1937.

⁴⁵ *La Lutte Finale* (n.d.).

end of turnstiles, a “little less arrogance from the wardens,” i.e., foremen, and the ability to enter the factory a bit late without losing one-half day’s pay. “In return,” the *Défenseur* remarked, “the comrades exaggerate. They arrive at 7:30 or at 8:00, thus disturbing the starting of the assembly lines. Moreover, certain workers stop work ten minutes before the siren.”⁴⁶

Occasionally, but rarely, delegates and CGT officials would respond to management’s requests and ask workers to increase their output. For example, at Renault in September 1937, new and unskilled dippers (*trempeurs*) were hired, and according to management, they worked poorly. In response, veteran dippers cut their production “brutally” and began to work like their newly employed colleagues.⁴⁷ Management reported that “at this moment the intervention of the delegates who told these workers that all sanctions would be permitted against them if they did not resume their normal production was very useful to support our [management’s] effort.”⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter, production returned to normal. Yet although intervention by delegates to augment production was occasionally successful, it had severe limits since it risked arousing “the anger of the workers against the delegates.”⁴⁹ As has been demonstrated, delegates generally hindered production, disturbed normal factory discipline, and even intimidated the minority of workers who wanted to produce. The earlier hopes that union representatives in the factories would be a stabilizing force were destroyed.

Despite its nationalization, mostly at the beginning of 1937, the aviation industry experienced, although somewhat less intensively, the same problems which characterized automobile production. The nationalized companies quickly instituted CGT representation on their Administrative Councils, and although the CGT was in a minority position, it did participate effectively in the management of the nationalized firms during 1937 and 1938. These enterprises retained their former owners and managers, men like Marcel Bloch and Henri Potez, to direct the day-to-day operations of the firms. The state substantially raised the salaries of its workers and guaranteed them better benefits and more job security. The government also embarked upon a program of rationalization of production. Its

⁴⁶ *Le Défenseur*, December 1936.

⁴⁷ AN, 91AQ65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ AN, 91AQ116.

goals were to specialize production, eliminate craftsman-like methods, and to promote assembly-line organization. The state encouraged specialized factories, which mass produced aircraft parts, and this “rational organization of work” produced excellent results and cut the time necessary for certain operations.⁵⁰ Engineers were employed to determine the ideal duration of certain tasks, and one job, for instance, was cut from 25,000 hours of work to 4,000.⁵¹ New machines were purchased in France or abroad to help speed up those areas of production which suffered from a lack of qualified personnel. New buildings were constructed, and more workers were hired. The state promoted concentration of previously dispersed branches while encouraging the establishment of new factories outside the Paris region, where salaries were high and agitation was fervent.

Despite CGT participation, gains in pay, and other benefits to the workers, problems quickly appeared. CGT delegates sometimes took advantage of their position to escape work.⁵² Even when the delegates attempted to aid production, their advice often went unheeded. For example, in September 1938, despite delegates’ promises that workers would work Saturday and Sunday, workers failed to appear for weekend duty.⁵³ In the aviation plants discipline became lax and authority was often defied. At Gnome et Rhône, a firm in which the government had partial control (*participation minoritaire*), a worker complained that the Jacomet arbitration agreement of the spring of 1938 reinforced work and discipline.⁵⁴ Before the arbitration, workers could move about freely in the factory and go to the toilet when they desired; however, after the Jacomet decision, thirty guards were posted, toilets and dressing rooms were closely watched, and the authority of the foremen was strengthened.⁵⁵ In aviation firms under more complete government control, senior administrators condemned “la vague de paresse” in France and recommended, in addition to overtime, “the strengthen-

⁵⁰ Société nationale de constructions aéronautiques du Nord (hereafter cited as SNCAN), January 25, 1939. The aviation archives are located at Aérospatiale, Paris.

⁵¹ Société nationale de constructions aéronautiques du Sud-Ouest (hereafter cited as SNCASO), April 26, 1938.

⁵² SNCAN, “Objet: Déplacements,” March 4, 1937.

⁵³ SNCASO, December 9, 1938.

⁵⁴ Pierre Couturet, “Un exemple bien typique: Gnome et Rhône,” *La Révolution prolétarienne*, July 25, 1938.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

ing of management's authority in the factories" in order to increase production.⁵⁶

Aviation workers resisted piecework and production incentives. At Gnome et Rhône workers agreed among themselves to limit their production, and when management wanted to quicken output, "unforeseeable incidents and machine stoppages showed the impossibility of increasing the pace."⁵⁷ Gnome et Rhône workers knew how many pieces per hour their neighbors had completed.⁵⁸ Metallurgical employers charged that, "piecework [in aviation] is practically abandoned. The Fédération des métaux (CGT) constrains workers not to go beyond a "ceiling" of fixed salaries."⁵⁹ While managers of the nationalized aviation firms granted increased salaries, high overtime pay, August vacations, improved health and safety conditions, professional re-education, special transportation to work, and even CGT participation in hiring, management nonetheless insisted upon tying pay levels to production through a system of piecework or incentives,⁶⁰ which, as has been demonstrated, were largely ineffective.

Aviation workers vigorously defended the weekend and the forty-hour week. This struggle slowed French aircraft production and weakened it in comparison with German, and even Italian, aviation, where workers labored between fifty and sixty hours per week. In 1938 the French government and employers pressured the workers to work overtime to close the gap; however, workers resisted these demands for several reasons of varying importance. The ideology of both the Communist and anti-Communist factions of the CGT clearly asserted that overtime was unnecessary and exploitative when unemployment existed. The discourse on unemployment regarded overtime as an attack upon the unemployed workers' right and need for a job. Nevertheless, the CGT discourse, which was shared, of course, by the rest of the Popular Front, did not take into account the nature of an advanced economy, particularly the character of the aviation industry. As has been noted, this industry depended upon a considerable percentage of skilled workers who, because of the French demographic situation and the insufficiency

⁵⁶ SNCAN, October 19, 1938.

⁵⁷ Couturet, "Un exemple typique."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Usine*, June 9, 1938.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, April 21, 1938; SNCAN, May 11, 1938.

of retraining programs, were in short supply. Thus the unemployed, most of whom were either old or unskilled, could not be easily employed in the many specialized jobs in the aviation industry.

The aviation and other workers not only resisted overtime and attacks on the forty-hour week because of solidarity with the jobless but more importantly because workers wanted to protect their weekend and the forty-hour week. In fact, "fascism" was identified by many French workers with a very intensive and long working week which greatly reduced "free" time. Workers often thought of fascism primarily in economic or industrial, rather than political, terms. Despite claims by many in the Popular Front that workers would be willing to sacrifice for national defense to compete with potential adversaries, the government found it difficult to extend the working week beyond forty hours. In March 1938 strikes erupted in various Parisian metallurgical firms, including aviation plants, over salary issues and the extension of the forty-hour week. In many workshops, work was halted "without concern for the consequences that the abandonment would have on production rhythms."⁶¹ After the March-April 1938 strikes, the privately owned Société des Avions Caudron reported 6,379 francs of damages.⁶²

Historians of various political persuasions have argued that during the strikes of the spring of 1938 the management of both the public and private aviation industry rejected the unions' offer to work forty-five hours per week.⁶³ However, the aviation employers' rejection of the forty-five hour week in the spring of 1938 was altogether exceptional and was caused by the high costs which the CGT demanded. The Jacomet arbitration later reduced the costs of overtime pay, and the forty-five hour week was accepted.⁶⁴ Thus, the aviation directors, both public and private, supported changes in the forty-hour week. Their attitude was similar to that of the vast majority of the French bourgeoisie, who felt that the forty-hour week was legislated laziness, which put France at a disadvantage in international competition or, at the very least, that the forty-hour week should be modified to suit the needs of each specific industry

⁶¹ AN, 91AQ115.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Georges Lefranc, *Histoire du Front populaire* (Paris, 1974), p. 274; Delperrié de Bayac, *Histoire du Front populaire*, p. 449; Sauvy, *Histoire économique*, II, 276.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth du Reau, "L'Aménagement de la loi instituant la semaine de quarante heures," in René Rémond and Janine Bourdin, eds., *Edouard Daladier: Chef du gouvernement* (Paris, 1977), pp. 131-36.

in order not to hinder production. Throughout the spring and summer of 1938 the aviation management pushed for longer working hours.⁶⁵

Again, in the summer and fall of 1938 aviation workers fought against overtime and battled to save the weekend. The forty-five hour week in aviation was divided into five days of nine hours each despite the desires of employers, who often preferred to partition the forty-five and even the forty-hour week into six days. They argued that productivity and the likelihood of overtime were often greater in a six-day week.⁶⁶ Even when legally required to do so, aviation workers sometimes refused to work on Saturdays and Sundays in order to “recuperate” holidays which had occurred during the week.⁶⁷ In October 1938 workers at both public and private aviation firms left their jobs at 5:00 P.M. instead of 6:00 P.M. to protest against overtime.⁶⁸ It should be mentioned that this agitation against overtime in October 1938 came after the Munich agreements between England, Germany, and France, which the CP actively opposed. Thus, the walkouts and work stoppages in October may indicate some CP influence among aviation workers. However, in light of the attempts by aviation and other workers to defend the forty-hour week and the weekend both before and after the Munich agreements, the Communist influence had only marginal importance, and workers—most of whom were not party-affiliated—fought to defend the gains of June 1936 regardless of party positions.

Aviation management was often unable to fire disobedient workers or to lay off unnecessary laborers because of the threat of retaliation by strikes. CGT participation in hiring new personnel in the nationalized aviation sector made the problem of featherbedding even more insoluble. By the beginning of 1938 many aviation firms had “a personnel larger than their needs; whereas, for social reasons, they were not able to lay off any worker. Output was affected and production fell to half of what it could be with regard to the true capacity of the factories.”⁶⁹ The readiness of aviation workers to defend their jobs and sources of income should not, of

⁶⁵ AN, 91AQ80.

⁶⁶ J.-C. Asselain, “Une Erreur de politique économique: La Loi de quarante heures de 1936,” *Revue économique*, XXV (July, 1974), pp. 688-90.

⁶⁷ *La Vie Ouvrière*, June 23, 1938.

⁶⁸ *Usine*, October 20, 1938; *La Journée industrielle*, October 20, 1938.

⁶⁹ AN, 91AQ80.

course, be confused with their eagerness to work, as the continuing problems with output and discipline have demonstrated.

The Parisian construction industry, especially the large projects like the extension of the *métro*, the building of a stadium, and the erection of the International Exposition of 1937, exhibited problems similar to those of the aviation and automobile industries. However, perhaps because of the smaller size of the construction firms, the struggles over the length of the working day, overtime, output, CGT control of hiring, and discipline were even more violent and intense than in other industries. The May-June strike movements in construction created a new social situation in which productivity and output dropped significantly on construction sites. High officials of the Exposition of 1937 noted that since the “events” of the spring of 1936, workers had engaged in slow-down strikes.⁷⁰ Workers took twice as long to complete certain jobs in 1937 as they had early in 1936.⁷¹ One firm complained that if output between February and May 1936 had been maintained, a job which actually required 264,700 hours to complete could have been terminated in only 78,710 hours.⁷² The management of the *métro* extension project of the Gare d’Austerlitz contrasted the increased productivity of 1934 to its decline during 1936.⁷³ At the stadium project in St. Cloud, bricklayers needed 256 hours to complete a chimney which should have taken only 123 hours.⁷⁴ Employers complained that workers took longer to dress, undress, eat, go to the toilet, and to take a break.

The rapid fall of productivity can be partially attributed to the climate of disobedience which reigned at the construction sites. Workers were able to defy the normal industrial chain of command without fear of reprisals. At the World’s Fair (*Exposition*), one review charged that “no one” could command, “not the bosses, not the government, not the unions.”⁷⁵ On many construction sites at the World’s Fair the employers’ authority had disappeared; however, the question of the union’s authority is more complex. Although

⁷⁰ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Commission permanente, October 2, 1936. (The archives concerning the *Exposition* are in the process of being classified, and therefore certain documents lack file numbers.)

⁷¹ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Contentieux, 34.

⁷³ AN, 89AQ2025.

⁷⁴ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 35.

⁷⁵ *Usine*, May 6, 1937.

workers often disobeyed or ignored high-ranking CGT leaders, the lower-ranking union delegates did exercise considerable power at the *Exposition* and other large construction projects, where they controlled both hiring and production speed.

Early in 1937 Leon Blum himself sent his right-hand man, Jules Moch, to reorganize the chaotic situation at the Fair, which was becoming an acute embarrassment to the CGT-supported government. In March 1937 Moch endorsed the already *de facto* control of the CGT on many sites. Evidently, the Socialist government believed that it would be more fruitful to work with the CGT, not against it, in the battle to finish the *Exposition* on schedule. The CP and the CGT were also anxious to have the Fair open on its May 1 scheduled date in order not to embarrass the Popular Front. In February 1937 R. Arrachard, the secretary-general of the Fédération du Bâtiment, declared that the *Exposition* “must be . . . and will be ready on the first of May.”⁷⁶ Early in 1937 both the Communist and anti-Communist factions within the CGT urged the workers to open the World’s Fair on schedule. Even the CP itself joined the chorus, and at the end of 1936 *Humanité* asserted that the *Exposition* must and would be finished on time.⁷⁷

Yet production lagged, and on February 11, 1937 the major leaders of the Popular Front gathered to address the assembled workers of the World’s Fair. Blum declared: “The *Exposition* will be the triumph of the working class, the Popular Front, and liberty. It will show that a democratic regime is superior to dictatorship. . . . The reputation of the Popular Front is at stake, and I tell you frankly that work on Saturday and Sunday is necessary.”⁷⁸ Léon Jouhaux, the leader of the CGT, also told the workers that sacrifices were needed.⁷⁹

Despite the pleas and exhortations of the leaders, the *Exposition* opened way behind schedule. The CGT refused to lengthen the forty-hour week. Thus, two or three shifts per day had to be organized. The output of these additional shifts declined significantly for several reasons. First, the shortage of skilled laborers led to the hiring of inexperienced workers for the second and third shifts. The CGT wholeheartedly endorsed this practice and even forbade em-

⁷⁶ *La Vie Ouvrière*, February 18, 1937 (Arrachard’s italics).

⁷⁷ *Humanité*, August 12, 1936.

⁷⁸ Blum quoted in Delperrié de Bayac, *Histoire du Front populaire*, p. 368.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

ployers to hire some of their most qualified personnel who did not belong to the Federation. Therefore, much of the work completed by the second or third shifts was poorly executed and often had to be redone. Secondly, the night shift had inherent difficulties with lighting, and its abnormal schedule was usually much less productive than that of the day shifts.⁸⁰

Although high-ranking CGT officials promised that work on Saturday and Sunday would be permitted within the framework of the forty-hour week, in practice, CGT delegates at the *Exposition* largely banned weekend work.⁸¹ Delegates and workers ignored pleas from both the CGT and *Humanité* that weekend work was necessary to open the Fair on time.⁸² The painters of the USA pavilion were denied permission to work Saturday and Sunday, and shortly afterward, an electric transformer was damaged, presumably to protect the right to a workfree weekend.⁸³ According to the official report of the *Exposition*, the union leaders were unable to “deliver” on their promises of weekend work.⁸⁴ In addition, workers refused to make up days lost to rain or to “recuperate” holidays which had occurred during the week.⁸⁵

CGT delegates often set production quotas and limited piecework. Many of the workers, who were hired through the CGT’s *Bourse du Travail*, had little interest in improving their output.⁸⁶ Delegates limited, for instance, the number of bricks which a bricklayer could lay, and it was quite difficult to fire these unsatisfactory workers. Although Arrachard, secretary-general of the Fédération du Bâtiment, claimed that he intervened frequently so that workers would produce normally, his interventions would seem to have been ineffective.⁸⁷ Some foreign nations attempted to employ non-French workers to complete their pavilions, but the CGT effectively opposed not only this practice but even the hiring of provincial French workers.⁸⁸

The struggles over the control of hiring, production rhythms, and weekend work produced a climate of violence at the *Exposition*

⁸⁰ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Commission permanente, June 11, 1937.

⁸¹ *Usine*, March 25, 1937.

⁸² *Humanité*, March 5, 1937 and March 13, 1937.

⁸³ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 38.

⁸⁴ Edmond Labbé, *Rapport général*, II (Paris, 1938), p. 67.

⁸⁵ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 35; *Usine*, April 22, 1937.

⁸⁶ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 34.

⁸⁷ *La Vie Ouvrière*, March 30, 1939.

⁸⁸ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 37.

and other construction sites. The tense atmosphere is easy to understand since the authority of the employers and their foremen was consistently undermined by workers and union delegates; moreover, many employers at the *Exposition* headed small firms and could not afford the cost overruns which higher salaries, low productivity, and CGT control of hiring entailed.⁸⁹ CGT members physically prevented non-union personnel from working, and sometimes police were called to protect the right to work of non-CGT workers.⁹⁰ Some workers even carried arms on the job.⁹¹ At the stadium construction site at St. Cloud, a worker knifed his foreman.⁹²

The CGT response to low output, violence, and the numerous struggles against work revealed a considerable gap between its productivist ideology and its largely non-productivist practice. According to the CGT and the Left, the bosses were to blame for delays or production problems in construction or in the other industries examined. The Communists, CGT, and even the Socialists charged innumerable times in their publications that “fascist” bosses were sabotaging production to damage the Popular Front and even to deliver the nation to Hitler and Mussolini. However, there is no evidence to support the charges that management was deliberately sabotaging French production. As for the “fascist” political tendencies of employers and their immediate subordinates, these ideological impulses grew during the Popular Front in response to the workers’ challenge to authority, their refusal to work diligently, and the government’s inability to re-establish order in the factories or on the construction sites. Thus, the Left’s accusation that the French bourgeoisie, perhaps the founder of modern nationalism, willingly sabotaged its own industries for the benefit of foreign powers seems unfounded.

The Left’s accusations and its ideology of sabotage and conspiracy by the bosses or the “200 families”⁹³ hid the structural problems of work in a modern industrial society. With few exceptions, the Left refused to admit that the workers profited from the new social situation created by the May-June strikes and the inauguration of

⁸⁹ Court cases concerning the responsibilities for cost overruns dragged on between the employers and the state even into the 1950s.

⁹⁰ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 38.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Commission tripartite, April 29, 1937.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Contentieux, 35.

⁹³ The “200 families” was a slogan of Radical origin used by the Left to denote the wealthiest families that supposedly controlled the French economy.

the lenient Popular Front governments. This new social situation encouraged the defiance of management and sometimes even the union. It was not the bosses, but the workers who refused weekend work, who were inexperienced in their jobs, who defied the authority of their superiors, and who were mainly responsible for production problems. The World's Fair of 1937 opened May 24 with much work still two and one-half months behind schedule, and the CGT finally inaugurated its own pavilion, La Maison du Travail, on July 1, 1937, two months late.⁹⁴

However, at the *Exposition*, the Renault factories, and aviation firms, the Left did put one part of its productivist ideology into practice: the employment of the unemployed. The payrolls of the *Exposition* increased from 5,000 in December 1936 to 24,800 workers at the end of April 1937.⁹⁵ Renault and the aviation firms in the Paris area added literally thousands of new workers. Yet despite these additions, the World's Fair opened behind schedule, productivity at Renault did not improve, and airplane production was sluggish. Nevertheless, the Left constantly asserted that the unemployed only wanted to work. More accurately, the unemployed had less desire to work than need of jobs, or more precisely, of steady incomes. At construction sites throughout the Paris region, workers deliberately slowed their pace as the projects approached completion in order to receive an income for a longer period of time. At one construction project, CGT delegates opposed the hiring of qualified workers from other construction sites so that their own workers could take turns sharing unemployment benefits.⁹⁶ The Left's discourse on unemployment masked the reality of a situation in which many workers, both employed and unemployed, often wanted a source of income more than they wanted to produce.

By the end of 1938 a new government, led by the Radical, Edouard Daladier, faced increasing internal and international pressure to augment production to overcome the stagnation of the French economy and to prepare for the coming war. Daladier appointed the conservative Paul Reynaud to the Finance Ministry. Throughout the Popular Front, Reynaud had opposed the forty-hour week and had fought to increase French production. As Minis-

⁹⁴ "A l'Exposition 1937 l'édifice grandiose élevé par la CGT à la gloire du travail a été inauguré," *Syndicats*, July 1, 1937.

⁹⁵ Labbé, *Rapport*, II, 66.

⁹⁶ AN, *Exposition* 1937, Contentieux, 35.

ter, Reynaud attacked the application of the forty-hour week and destroyed the weekend. He established a six-day working week, promoted piecework, and reduced pay for overtime.⁹⁷ Reynaud's attack on the weekend and other aspects of his program aroused great opposition among workers, particularly in the industries which have been examined. The CGT called for a general strike on November 30, 1938 to prevent enactment of the Radical government's new policies. The strike call was supported by the CP and the Socialists, and it ended the Popular Front by causing a break with the Radical party.

Wildcat strikes erupted against the new six-day week even before the planned date of November 30. The most important wildcat strike occurred at the Renault factories on November 24, and it was very violent. Although the CP and its followers claimed that Renault workers were not responsible for the violence or attributed it to "Trotskyites,"⁹⁸ the auto workers did engage in sabotage and physical aggression. Forty-two bludgeons or blackjacks and one dagger, which the workers had made in the factories, were found in the workshops occupied by the strikers.⁹⁹ Workers damaged new cars and trucks to construct barricades, broke windows, and destroyed a clock.¹⁰⁰ Many works in progress were ruined, and management claimed almost 200,000 francs in damages.¹⁰¹ Police had to evacuate the factories by force, and they were met by a barrage of a variety of automobile parts from carburetors to pistons.¹⁰² Forty-six policemen and at least twenty-two strikers were injured in the confrontations.¹⁰³

Approximately two hundred and eighty workers were arrested, mainly for failure to respect the right to work (*entraves à la liberté du travail*).¹⁰⁴ Of the available police reports on thirty-one workers, only five were "political" and members of the CP. Twenty-one were judged "non-political" by police inspectors, and five had no mention of political activity in the investigative reports.¹⁰⁵ Of the five CGT

⁹⁷ *Usine*, November 17, 1938.

⁹⁸ Badié, "Les grèves," 102; Robert Durand, *La lutte des travailleurs de chez Renault* (Paris, 1971), pp. 78-79.

⁹⁹ AN, 91AQ116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*; Cf. Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, "Le déclin de la grève violente en France de 1890 à 1935," *Le Mouvement social*, No. 76 (July-September, 1971), pp. 106-09.

¹⁰² AN, 91AQ116; AN, F² 2760.

¹⁰³ Guy Bourdè, *La défaite du Front populaire* (Paris, 1977), p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ AN, 91AQ116.

¹⁰⁵ AN, 91AQ117.

delegates, only one was a Communist militant, and another was known as sympathetic to the Party. The other three delegates were described as “non-political.” Only two workers out of thirty-one had a criminal record. These statistics are very significant because they contradict the claims by the Renault management and the Daladier government that the November 24 strike was “political,” i.e., a protest by CP militants against the government which had signed the Munich accords. The statistics, which reflect a low rate of CP membership among the presumably most militant workers, also refute recent assertions by historians that the Party controlled Renault during the Popular Front.¹⁰⁶ The police reports indicate that non-political workers were the essential force behind the November 24 strike to defend the weekend against Reynaud’s decrees. The lack of criminal records among the workers who committed violent acts against both people and property implied that violence in a huge, rationalized plant like Renault was not caused by criminals, or even CP militants, but by workers who revolted against industrial discipline.

The November 30 strike, which had been planned by the CGT, failed. The government acted with force and shrewdness to end the strikes in the most essential public services. Troops were stationed in the *métro*, train, and bus stations to assure circulation. Government workers were requisitioned and came to work.¹⁰⁷ The Daladier government foreshadowed contemporary practices by an astute use of the state-controlled radio which effectively intimidated strikers and potential strikers.¹⁰⁸ Despite the failure of the general strike, the industries examined in this article participated actively in the strikes against the Reynaud plan. In the *banlieue*, where the most important aviation and automobile firms were located, the percentage of strikers was relatively high. The most modern industries—chemicals, automobiles, electronics, and aviation—were the cutting edge of the November 1938 movement as they had been in May-June 1936. Many aviation workers ignored a government requisition order and shut down their factories. Strikers threatened non-striking personnel, and isolated instances of violence and sabotage were reported in suburban aviation firms.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Badié, “Les grèves,” pp. 69-109, *passim*.

¹⁰⁷ Bourdé, *La défaite*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁸ *Syndicats*, December 21, 1938; Andre-Jean Tudesq, “L’Utilisation gouvernementale de la radio,” pp. 256-63 in Rémond and Bourdin, eds., *Edouard Daladier: Chef du gouvernement*.

¹⁰⁹ SNCASO, December 9, 1938.

An effective repression followed the failure of the November 30 general strike. Workers who had caused production problems during the Popular Front were dismissed. Leftist historiography largely regards this post-November repression as an almost irrational act of vengeance by employers.¹¹⁰ It presents the dismissed workers as innocent, passive victims who only wanted to exercise their legal union rights. Yet considering the workers' fight against work and factory discipline, the employers' repression seems exceedingly "rational." At Renault, management dismissed those "troublemakers" (*meneurs*) who had limited production in their workshops. After these workers were fired, productivity jumped 10 to 25 per cent in many *ateliers*.¹¹¹ Despite a general reduction of personnel from 34,000 to 32,000, production did not decline.¹¹² Factory discipline was reinforced by the re-establishment of turnstiles and inspections to prevent thefts, which had increased since the spring of 1936.¹¹³ On December 26, 1938 the foremen and superintendents of Renault wrote to the Socialist daily, *Le Populaire*, protesting its article of December 23 which claimed that the demand for dismissals of the *meneurs* was the work of a "minority of discontents," and the foremen asserted that the firings were supported by almost all their colleagues.¹¹⁴

In nationalized aviation also, selective dismissals eliminated those workers who had hindered production. On December 9 the President of the SNCASO noted: "The re-employment will be total except for those persons having committed violations of the right to work, serious errors, or not having a normal output before the strike."¹¹⁵ In addition to selective dismissals, salaries were tied more closely to production by increasing the weight of monetary incentives.¹¹⁶ The post-strike policies of aviation management were at least partially effective since the monthly delivery of airplanes doubled within several months after the disturbances of November 1938.¹¹⁷ Once a climate of work discipline had been reestablished,

¹¹⁰ Bourdé, *La défaite*, pp. 223-228.

¹¹¹ AN, 91AQ16.

¹¹² Patrick Fridenson, *Histoire des usines Renault*, I (Paris, 1972), p. 271.

¹¹³ AN, 91AQ116.

¹¹⁴ AN, 91AQ16.

¹¹⁵ SNCASO, December 9, 1938.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ J. Truelle, "La production aéronautique militaire française jusqu'en juin 1940," *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, No. 73 (January, 1969), p. 104. The rapid increase in production should not, of course, be entirely attributed to the effects of the failed November

the great majority of the dismissed workers, whose skills were frequently needed, were quickly reintegrated into production.

This article has attempted to show why the Popular Front became the birthplace of the weekend, not of revolution. The Soviet or anarchosyndicalist alternative of workers' control and development of the means of production had little appeal for French workers. On the contrary, many of the workers of the Paris region wanted to avoid work space and work time. The nature of the advanced productive forces, which the French bourgeoisie continually developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, promoted struggles against industrial labor by workers who wanted to escape from the environments pictured in *A Nous la Liberté* and *Modern Times*. These revolts took forms of indifference, slowdowns, indiscipline, lateness, absenteeism, thefts, and even sabotage and outright violence. After the electoral victory of the Popular Front, Paris workers took advantage of the relaxation of state and police repression to occupy factories and, later, to greatly intensify their struggles against work. At the end of 1938, a strong government, which was willing to use the forces at its disposal, was needed to restore labor discipline and to increase production. Thus, political changes profoundly influenced both economic performance and social relations. In France in the first half of the twentieth century, before the age of advertising, whose intensive propaganda pushes consumption and therefore indirectly stimulates work and production, a strong state which was ready to employ its powers to guarantee social order may have been a prerequisite for labor discipline.

The examination of the Paris workers' struggles during the Popular Front questions the assertions by some historians that the twentieth-century French working class had "accepted the industrial system"¹¹⁸ and that it had adapted to the factory.¹¹⁹ The question of adaptation to the industrial system is, of course, extremely complex.

30 strike since aircraft production is dependent upon long-term planning and large capital investment.

¹¹⁸ Peter Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor: A Cause without Rebels* (Rutgers, N.J., 1971), p. 106. See also Peter Stearns, *Lives of Labor: Work in a Maturing Industrial Society* (New York, 1975). Cf. also Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France, 1830-1968* (London, 1974), p. 75: "The new proletarians [after World War I] were interested *solely in acquiring power at the national level*, and finally in 1936 they rushed into organizations and confederations that promised to do just that. *For these men the strike was becoming a symbolic act*" (my italics). This conclusion is at odds with our research.

¹¹⁹ Michelle Perrot, "L'espace maudit et l'homme-machine," *Architecture, mouvement, continuité*, No. 30 (May, 1973), p. 18: "L'usine de 36, acceptée, voire assumée, est, peut-être, la marque d'une adaptation en même temps qu'un signe de maturité du prolétariat moderne."

Obviously, the French working class had adapted to the industrial system to the extent that it did not destroy the factories during its occupations and that it accepted many of the goods and services produced by industrial society. However, sabotage and destruction of property did exist during and after the occupations. Violence was not infrequent at the end of 1936 and throughout 1937 and 1938. Although hundreds of thousands of workers joined the CGT, one sign of adaptation to the factory system, the union was often ignored or disobeyed by its rank and file. In short, adaptation had to be supplemented by coercion in order to make workers work. At the end of 1938 the employers and the state realized that adaptation was insufficient, and they employed force—police, military, firings, legal proceedings, and court trials—to make the workers labor harder and produce more. The weekend was destroyed, but only temporarily. Although it has now become a fixture of contemporary Western civilization and is portrayed in the cinema by Jean-Luc Godard as the factory was in the 1930s by René Clair and Chaplin, the weekend's painful birth and violent infancy were consequences of the workers' lack of adaptation to the factory system.

The Communists, Socialists, and the CGT attempted to control the struggles against work by organizing the weekend and paid vacations and by endorsing the forty-hour week. In addition, these parties and unions argued that the forty-hour week would help solve the "problem" of unemployment by putting the jobless to work. In the industries which have been examined, the forty-hour week forced employers to hire more workers, but this augmentation did not lead to the increased production which the Popular Front assumed would raise the purchasing power of the workers. In fact, employment of the unemployed led to higher costs which were passed on to consumers through inflation and higher taxes.

The Left tried to mask the problems of the forty-hour week with productivist ideology. It claimed that the unemployed only wanted to work and that the bosses were sabotaging production. It refused to admit that many of the unemployed and the employed too, for that matter, were more interested in securing a steady income than in projects designed to improve production. Even when, on rare occasions, union and left political leaders admitted the justice of the opposition's claims that the lack of skilled labor was harming output or that production had declined, the leaders' calls for more work and improved production were often disregarded by the base. In response, the Left refused to acknowledge the workers'

active resistance to work. Its press ignored the workers' violence toward their foremen and those colleagues who refused to slow down production, refused to participate in strikes or to join the union. The Left attempted to portray the workers as sober, hardworking, disciplined, and willing to sacrifice for the good of the *patrie* and, of course, production. Many historians of varying political beliefs and scholarly orientations have often continued this tradition and have therefore ignored essential aspects of working-class life and social realities.