
CAPITAL IMPLODES AND WORKERS EXPLODE IN FLANDERS, 1789-1914

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Flanders in 1789

In Lille, on 23 July 1789, the Marechaussee of Flanders interrogated Charles Louis Monique. Monique, a threadmaker and native of Tournai, lived in the lodging house kept by M. Paul. Asked what he had done on the night of 21-22 July, Monique replied that he had spent the night in his lodging house and " . . . around 4:30 A.M. he got up and left his room to go to work. Going through the rue des Malades . . . he saw a lot of tumult around the house of Mr. Martel. People were throwing all the furniture and goods out the window." Asked where he got the eleven gold louis, the other money, and the elegant walking stick he was carrying when arrested, he claimed to have found them all on the street, among M. Martel's effects. The police didn't believe his claims. They had him tried immediately, and hanged him the same day (A.M. Lille 14336, 18040).

According to the account of that tumultuous night authorized by the Magistracy (city council) of Lille on 8 August, anonymous letters had warned that there would be trouble on 22 July. On the 21st, two members of the Magistracy went to see the comte de Boistelle, provincial military commander; they proposed to form a civic militia. Boistelle rejected the plan, declaring "I'll make the troops obey. I take responsibility." But soon after, the "awful populace" began its attacks on houses of the rich, including that of grain merchant Martel (A.M. Lille 17470).

In addition to Martel's house, the raiders sacked three others. The owners of all three played prominent parts in control of the food supply; they were, in fact, all members of Lille's Subsistence Committee. Two of the victims, Madre des Oursins and de Druez, also belonged to the governing

Magistracy. The third was Lagache, the intendant's subdelegate. They did not receive the respect to which the old regime had accustomed them; while Lille's people sacked their houses, most of the royal troops failed to intervene. As in Paris, many soldiers had lost commitment to the regime.

For the work of destruction, members of the crowd borrowed hammers — faithfully returned after an hour or so — from a local locksmith. People broke into the arsenal to get torches. According to one witness, a participant replied to a military officer who asked him to stop sacking a house: "Sir, how can we leave these people alone, when they went so far as to say they would make us eat straw? It's our turn to make **them** eat straw!" (Martinage & Lorgnier n.d.: 9) The words had ominous overtones; that same day, a Parisian crowd displayed the severed head of King's Councilor Foulon, mouth stuffed with straw.

For Lille's burghers, the warning came clear and loud: They had to take charge, to restore order. The next day, the bourgeois of Lille formed a provisional committee and established their civic militia. The only people punished for the uprising of 21-22 July were Monique, who hanged, and another accused thief, who went to the galleys.

A notary from nearby Frelinghien who visited Lille on the 23d was amazed at how fast the city had changed: "Everyone is wearing the national cockade," he reported. "Even the troops are totally committed to the Third Estate. I had to wear the cockade myself, in order to avoid being insulted" (Thery 1923: 199). Red, white, and blue colors now stood for popular sovereignty. The Revolution had reached Lille.

Flanders' people had been performing revolutionary acts for months. From

the very beginning of 1789, rural people had been braving game wardens and hunting on posted land. In Lille, the representatives of craft guilds had protested against the merchant oligarchy as early as 14 January. "The long-desired moment has come," their spokesmen declared,

to free ourselves from the eternal oblivion in which the ambition of our Municipal Magistrates would like to keep us, to the detriment of our rights, our interests, and the common good . . . It is important and essential that representatives be elected by those represented, and that the representatives of each Order be members of that Order . . . But our Municipal Magistrates want to be US, want us to have a civic identity only through THEM, want to represent US, plot in silence against the most precious of our rights (D'Hollander 1970: 13).

No more virtual representation, they were saying; only direct representation will do.

That spring, the most frequent grievances concerned food supply. Cambrai saw its first food riot of the year on 13 March. Hondschoote, Hazebrouck, Valenciennes, Bergues, Dunkerque, Lille, and Douai followed close behind. Through April, struggles over food took place mainly in urban areas. On 6 May, the people of Cambrai seized grain from local merchants' storehouses and sold it below market. Almost immediately, others in the countryside began breaking into the grain stores of landlords, secular and ecclesiastical alike, and selling off what they found. In some cases (such as the abbey of Honnecourt), they burned the archives -- those stores of licenses to exploit the common people -- as well. Their fellows attacked landlords' game, refused to pay dues, started to use enclosed meadows, stopped paying taxes and tithes.

Taken together, these acts of resistance constituted an unparalleled challenge to authority. On 30 April, the authorities of Lille deplored "the shameful excesses that a number of ill-meaning individuals committed against both farmers and other outsiders who were providing for their subsistence by bringing grain to the city's market, as well as the bakers who took care to sell bread below its value during the winter, and are still doing so . . ." (A.M. Lille 412). On 12 May, the Parlement of Flanders issued an ineffectual edict forbidding people to break into private property; in it, the parliamentarians expressed shock that people had demanded grain "in the name of the king". About the same time, frightened municipalities began organizing local militias to protect themselves against brigands and countrymen who might strike against their dwindling, high-priced stores of food.

Around Lille, the annual leasing of the ecclesiastical tithe on field crops began early in July 1789; local groups demanded that the tithe-holders first allocate a portion of the tithe to the poor. Confronted with that unprecedented demand, the canons of Lille who were supervising the leasing said they had to consult the other members of the chapter. Their stall didn't work. On the morning of 21 July, 400 women entered Lille, went to the chapterhouse and repeated a call for the canons to give a third of their tithe to the poor. Although troops drove the women away, the women's appearance in the streets sharpened the confrontation between rich and poor. That night came the attacks on the houses of Lille's well-fed elite for which Charles Louis Monique died. On the following day, countrywomen returned and broke into the chapterhouse. The canons gave way, conceding a share of the tithe to the rural poor (Lefebvre 1959 [1924]: 378-379). The rural and urban revolutions intertwined.

Nor was Lille alone. Douai lived insurrection from 24 to 27 July, with the high point being the sacking of the city's tollgates. In Cambrai, "2,000 people, led by musical instruments and drums, used violence to open the jails and free everyone in them" (Martinage & Lorgnier n.d.: 15). On 2 August, Tournai's crowd echoed Lille's; they, too, attacked the homes of bourgeois.

Unlike Paris and the Ile de France, Flanders had stirred rather little during the struggles of Parlements and ministers in the 1770s and 1780s. Once the possibility arose that landlords and officials would lose their royal backing, however, the region's people entered the fight with a vengeance. They fought for food supplies, for access to commons, for reduction of the tithe, for the right to hunt, against feudal dues, against landlords' privileges. They mounted a sustained assault on the whole apparatus of a semi-capitalist agrarian regime. Nothing could stop them.

In the northern half of the region -- in Flanders, properly speaking -- popular action concentrated on the food supply. In those densely-settled areas, there were few important noble or ecclesiastical landlords, a number of substantial peasants, and a plethora of landless or land-poor workers. That northern region, criss-crossed with canals and largely Flemish-speaking, greatly resembled the Flemish and Dutch regions to the northeast. Whether in cash-crop agriculture, cottage industry, or peat-cutting, its population consisted mainly of proletarians. "Perhaps it is the overpopulation of the countryside," commented the observant English traveler Arthur Young, "to which we should attribute the fact that Flanders, with Europe's richest soil, can't feed its own cities, but must import great quantities of grain from Artois and Picardy, where large farms permit them to supply the neighboring province, whose farms are

more fragmented" (Young 1976: III, 1220). Flanders' rural proletarians, heavily involved in textile production, depended on the purchase of food for survival. Within Flanders, Dunkirk, Bergues, Hondshoote, Bailleul, Hazebrouck, Armentieres, Lille, and other commercial-industrial cities saw seizures of grain, price-fixing, and attacks on presumed hoarders and profiteers.

Frelinghien, a village of 2,000 people about 10 kilometers northwest of Lille, had its own semi-official version of a food riot. Jean-Baptiste Blanquart, royal notary there, was the visitor to Lille who had felt obliged to wear the national cockade on 23 July. Blanquart reported that on 31 July at 4:30 in the morning:

some women from the community came to ask me to speak to a royal captain, escorting a grain boat for the troops at Lille with 50 grenadiers under his command. Under duress, I went to the Dupire mill. There, with the boat fairly close, I asked to speak to the officer commanding the detachment. I said to him, "Captain, under duress, I have the honor to announce unhappily that the inhabitants of Frelinghien have no grain or bread. Since it is physically impossible to live without eating, and since necessity has no law, moved by their misery, I join with them in asking you to unload enough grain for the subsistence of the inhabitants. I'll guarantee that use of the grain, and will pay a reasonable price." The officer resisted, saying he had strong orders to unload nothing. As a result, I said, pointing toward the people, of whom at least 800 had gathered, "Well, sir, if that's how it is, let me say this: I can't hold back this multitude of inhabitants. I declare myself innocent of any bloodshed that may ensue." I added that there were probably twice as many more at Frelinghien that they couldn't

see. Moved by my reasoning, he had his troops ready their arms, and offered me flour (Thery 1923: 201).

After more maneuvering, Blanquart arranged to buy 130 sacks of grain. The next day, he went to see Lille's military commander, Boistelle, for authorization to distribute the grain. Boistelle shouted and fumed, but finally accepted the fait accompli. Around Lille and to the north, in a region swarming with landless laborers, food supply for poor people had a high priority.

Toward the south, in Hainaut, noble and church property became more significant, a few large farmers leasing large estates stood out from the mass of peasants, and the proportion of smallholders rose as well. There, peasants and agricultural workers attacked the landlords with ardor. But the attacks were not indiscriminate. In place after place, people subject to a general payment such as terrage or the tithe first demanded its remission, then forced those landlords who resisted to renounce their rights. About the same time, rural people began open and collective violations of recently-established prohibitions against hunting, gleaning, gathering, and pasturing on previously common land. They began to reverse the recent advances of agrarian capitalism.

In the cities and market towns of both south and north, food riots continued. Local people combined direct action against the symbols and realities of clerical or noble power with their attempts to secure an adequate food supply for the dependent poor. The great surge of action against powerholders began in mid-July 1789, and lasted until early in August. Then open conflict declined dramatically: a few minor struggles over food and common land, a last grain seizure in Lille on 23 December, but little else. The attacks and demands of July and early August, however, sufficed. Although troops intervened and people

went to jail, on the whole the authorities found themselves unable to suppress such massive action. As a result, some of the old regime had crumbled in Flanders well before the formal abolition of feudalism began on the night of 4 August 1789.

Revolution in the Nord

The territory I have been calling "Flanders", with such reckless inaccuracy, became the department of the Nord in 1790. The revolutionary Nord went through two experiences that set it off from other French departments: France's enemies invaded the Nord several times in 1792, 1793, and 1794, and the later French conquests in the Low Countries took away its position on the frontier.

In other respects, however, the Nord shared the national experience. The same sorts of conflicts that shook 1789 persisted into later years: Peasants kept on resisting collection of the tithe, poor people continued to glean in landlords' fields and to attack the landlords' own hired gleaners, while food riots went on more or less as before.

The urban version of the food riot could be just as devastating as under the old regime. On 3 pluviöse, Year IV (23 January 1796), the municipal officers of Lille wrote to the Minister of the Interior that:

yesterday afternoon we went through a violent crisis because, following your advice, we raised the price of bread slightly. Fifteen to twenty thousand rebels came to the Common House [Maison Commune = city hall] and the nearby squares and streets, and ordered the municipality to rescind within an hour the decision to raise the price of bread, or be massacred and see the city sacked. We did everything we could, short of force, to restore order. We have only a hundred infantryman, who behaved well. But what could they do

against that number of madmen? The mayor, surrounded by the furious horde, would have been massacred if we had resisted any longer. So we had to give in to avoid patricide (A.M. Lille 18008).

Such rebellions had a great deal in common with their old-regime predecessors. The main difference was that the authorities' responses to these popular actions now varied with the phase the Revolution had reached: As the disestablishment of the church proceeded, for example, officials soon stopped punishing resistance to the tithe.

In the Nord and elsewhere, the Revolution did bring some new forms of collective action. When church properties went on sale, many villagers banded together to exclude outsiders from the auctions. When priests had to decide whether to accept the revolutionary Civil Constitution of the Clergy, about 85 percent of the Nord's clergy refused the crucial oath. After that, most country people shunned the priests who took over from the non-juring clergy, and many villages protected their cures from revolutionary retribution. The introduction and subsequent devaluation of assignats, paper money nominally backed by the value of nationalized properties, excited movements of protest from peasants, merchants, and manufacturers who had to give up their goods for dubious currency. When the call for large-scale military conscription to defend the country arose in 1793 and later, resistance to the draft became widespread. Although the struggle against military service harked back to much earlier anti-conscription revolts, on the whole these actions had few precedents; they responded to the unprecedented demands that revolutionary governments made on ordinary people.

During the Revolution's early years, reform of the church — more exactly, replacement of the priests who refused to accept the revolutionary reforms —

drove the largest wedges into local communities. In Flines, near Douai, the "constitutional" priest who replaced the old cure faced a hostile community. 5 October 1791 was a local holiday in Flines. Mouton, the constitutional, reported that "a large number of peasants who called themselves aristocrats and supporters of the old clergy gathered in the square across the street from the church," went into nearby cafes, and shouted "Long live the clergy! Long live the aristocrats!" "After they had drunk for a while and sung a 112-verse song they had composed about the constitutional cure and the local democrats," Mouton continued,

they left the cafes in which they had gathered. They put white cockades in their hats, and lined up behind two soldiers . . . The two soldiers, on horseback with sabers drawn, led the group of peasants with white cockades, and others with branches to which they had attached white cloths. They paraded through the village in an insulting way, shouting "Long live the clergy! Long live the aristocrats! Hang the democrats! And they sang said song of 112 verses (Deschuytter 1959-1961 I: 52).

Mouton reported these counter-revolutionary doings to the district of Douai. The district eventually convicted four day-laborers for their involvement in the serenade-demonstration and in another display of hostility the following February. Elsewhere, people stoned their constitutionals or threw mud at them. In retaliation, patriotic National Guard units tried to stop the ministrations of "refractory" priests by interrupting funerals and breaking up church services.

Only in cities such as Lille and Cambrai did the forms of revolutionary enthusiasm — parades, festivals, ceremonies at Liberty Trees, public oath-taking, meetings of revolutionary committees — prevail. In the cities, the

revolutionary repertoire combined genuine innovations with clever adaptations. Political meetings and mass oath-takings had few pre-revolutionary counterparts; they broke with the entertainments, processions, and solemn assemblies of the old regime by obliterating the previous line between a few participants and a great many spectators. Yet the pageantry and gaiety of the festivals borrowed from the old routines of local holidays. Even the most specifically revolutionary actions, furthermore, often built on old-regime materials. In Lille, for example, young people of different neighborhoods adapted the standard routine of collection for the Maypole to new circumstances: they dunned local residents for money to erect Liberty Trees -- those revolutionary equivalents of the Maypole -- in their own sections of the city.

No doubt the awesome rituals of the Terror left the old regime farthest behind. But only Cambrai, where Terrorist Joseph Lebon presided, built the full apparatus of revolutionary justice: tribunal, guillotine, and public humiliation of the Revolution's enemies. Only Lille, Douai, Cambrai, and Bailleul created revolutionary armies, as the militias of the Terror called themselves. Indeed, conflicts of the early Revolution often pitted the reluctant peasants and proletarians of the hinterland against the National Guard, and then the revolutionary armies, of the cities, eager both to proselytize the countryside for the Revolution and to assure the urban food supply.

With these crucial exceptions, the conflicts of the Revolution generally borrowed forms that old-regime people knew well: seizures of grain, invasions of fields, and all the rest. The Revolution changed people's interests and collective-action repertoires much less than it changed their opportunities for action.

Revolutionary Reorganization

The Revolution wrought a remarkable series of administrative changes. Revolutionaries installed a single hierarchy of governmental units — commune, canton, arrondissement, department, national state — to replace a welter of overlapping and competing jurisdictions. That substitution introduced the most spectacular reorganization, but not the most fundamental. Two other changes reached even farther into daily life.

The **first** profound change was the direct incorporation of local communities into the structure of the national state. Under the old regime, despite the presence of royal officers and people holding royal commissions of various sorts in most cities, towns, and villages, the monarchy had ruled local communities incompletely and indirectly; it had relied heavily on priests, lords, and other notables who had strong ties to the crown. As a result, intendants, subdelegates, and other officials had to bargain incessantly with powerholders who rested not on national law but on local privilege. For that arrangement, the revolutionary regimes first substituted a series of extraordinary committees, assemblies, and militias, dominated by the nation's bourgeoisie. Then they squeezed out the committees, subordinated the militias, and coupled each assembly with an executive tightly responsible to the next higher level of authority. As Revolution moved toward Empire, the executives gained power relative to the assemblies. In the process, French people created the first large state in world history ever to rule directly right down to the individual village.

Revolutionary authorities reinforced their incorporation of local communities into the national state by a move old-regime authorities had often dreamed but never executed: They absorbed both the revenues and the debts of

municipalities into the national fiscal structure. In the inflationary years of the early Revolution those debts evaporated. But the monopolization of tax power ended centuries of struggle at a stroke. It continued, even tightened, the dependency of municipalities on the national state. But it ended the state's dependence on the particular abilities of municipalities to raise revenues, and abolished the privileges that had aligned the municipalities against royal efforts to raise taxes. The incorporation of communities was at once a political and fiscal tour de force.

Within that centralized framework, some actions taken by local and national authorities with no obvious intention of building the state likewise had the effect of incorporating local communities directly into the state. As never before, the state became the employer of last resort. When wartime price controls squeezed the artisans and retail merchants of Lille and other cities, they often sought employment as clerks, policemen, concierges in government offices. As the revolutionary government built up its military strength, new jobs opened up: "Lille, a frontier fortress, offered very wide opportunities for employment, thanks to teeming military offices and huge storehouses" (Cobb 1965: 154). In fact, with the growth of governmental administration in the Nord, the government became for some people the employer of **first** resort; revolutionary committees served, among other things, as placement offices for well-connected militants.

No doubt conscription had the largest effect of all. The military drafts of 1793 and thereafter involved not only every community but the majority of individual households directly in the government's fate. During the later Revolution and the Empire, the professionalization of government service and the

continued expansion of military organization continued the absorption of local life into the national state.

The **second** deep change followed from the first. France's cities finally gained something their rulers had long coveted: the power to coerce their hinterlands. As landlords, tithers, tax-collectors, and merchants, city people had long exploited country people. Nevertheless, the presence in the countryside of lords, priests, and municipalities holding chartered privileges had checked the ambitions of the cities. Old-regime urban officials, for example, had few means to force outsiders to deliver them food in times of shortage. As a result, they encouraged wealthy households and institutions to assure their own food supplies via tithes, rents, and direct production of crops both inside and outside the city walls.

Shortages of the early Revolution, however, brought the apparatus of committees, assemblies, administrations, and militias together in the requisition of grain and the control of its marketing throughout the hinterland. Rural people resisted and evaded those frightening controls as best they could. Yet the cities' combination of revolutionary zeal, authorized armed force, and backing from the state tipped the balance away from hapless countrymen. As city administrations lost their autonomy vis a vis the state, they gained power over their hinterlands.

Flanders Faces the Nineteenth Century

At the nineteenth century's very outset, the Nord's prefect Christophe Dieudonne signed a famous Statistique prepared mainly by his secretary-general, Sebastian Bottin. Looking back from 1801 through a dozen years of war and revolution, Dieudonne/Bottin saw a department that had lost about 13,000 people

from its 1789 total of 808,000. The cities had lost some 30,000 inhabitants, just over 10 percent of their total, while the countryside had actually gained. "It isn't hard to understand the reasons for that decline in the urban population," said the Statistique:

Emigration was heavier from the cities, and we know that many emigres died. The cities supplied many more men, proportionately, to the armies. The stagnation of trade, shops, and factories for ten years paralyzed thousands of workers, most of whom went elsewhere to find work" (Dieudonne 1804: 37).

The 795,000 people who remained distributed unevenly among the department's six districts. Table 7.1 sums up the division of land and people in 1801.

TABLE 7.1: DISTRIBUTION OF LAND AND PEOPLE IN THE NORD, 1801

PERCENT OF TOTAL LAND BY ARRONDISSEMENT

CATEGORY	Bergues	Haze- brouck	Lille	Cambrai	Avesnes	Douai	Dept. Total
woods	2.8	8.6	4.0	5.5	21.4	12.4	10.7
water	2.3	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.7
swamp	3.5	0.6	1.4	0.1	0.2	1.2	1.0
pasture	33.2	31.5	11.4	10.9	36.7	15.7	23.9
arable	48.6	52.0	73.1	78.4	35.0	62.0	56.3
gardens	2.0	0.9	3.4	1.1	0.7	1.9	1.6
roads	2.0	4.4	4.2	2.5	2.5	3.2	3.1
structures ₁	1.0	1.2	1.8	1.2	0.6	1.4	1.1
waste	<u>4.6</u>	<u>0.4</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>0.0</u>	<u>2.5</u>	<u>1.5</u>	<u>1.6</u>
total	100.0	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0
total hectares	73706	70818	90410	87361	149510	107884	579689
popula- tion	83685	101970	226519	112944	98288	171466	794872
persons/ km ²	113.5	144.0	250.5	129.3	65.7	158.9	137.1

SOURCE: Compiled from Dieudonne 1804, 32-35.

1. "houses, mills, and factories"

Dieudonne's data make the variation plain. They show the reclaimed land, still relatively marshy, of the northern district of Bergues, with its stockraising bringing meadows up to a third of the area. Around Hazebrouck we find less water and more woods, but about the same area in pasture. Lille shows the highest share of its land in houses, mills, and factories, as well as the most arable: Around its crowded cities and towns, more than three-quarters of its area lay in gardens and cultivated fields. The district of Cambrai resembled that of Lille, with even more land in gardens and arable. Avesnes, to the southeast, had much of its area in woods and pasture, and little in urban structures. Douai, although relatively wooded, had more than its share of arable. All districts but that of Avesnes were settled at densities twentieth-century people recognize as nearly urban; Lille, with over 250 persons per square kilometer, teemed with people.

One crucial use of the Nord's land occupied too little area to show up in such a comparison: the mere 44 hectares in mines and quarries. They concentrated in the southeastern section of the department, including the low-density district of Avesnes. The three coal mines of Fresnes, Vieux-Conde, and Anzin produced more than any other comparable cluster in France. At the Revolution, according to Dieudonne/Bottin, the Anzin mine was an "immense establishment" that had "reached a high degree of splendor" (Dieudonne 1804: I, 165). Some 4,000 workers, reported the

Statistique, then toiled in the mines.

Similarly, the land-use data hide the very widespread digging and burning of peat in the department's northern districts -- one more tie to the standard organization of the Dutch-speaking coastal regions to the northeast. Finally, charcoal-burning forges worked the iron drawn from mines in the heavily-wooded region around Avesnes.

These various fuels supported metal-working industries through much of the Nord. The central and northern sections operated an important vegetable-oil industry. Nevertheless, at the start of the nineteenth century textiles dominated the department's manufacturing. Dieudonne/Bottin took it as a matter of course that rural people spun and wove in the off-season. Cities such as Lille, Cambrai, and Douai not only controlled the trade in textiles, but also housed their own large shops. Wool manufacturing became more prominent toward the southeastern end of the Nord, cotton concentrated in the regions of Lille and Douai, and linen flourished through much of the department. As of 1804, all that textile activity made the Nord one of the world's great industrial areas. With textiles, oil-pressing, mining, metalworking, and other industries, country and city alike buzzed with trade.

Concentration and Implosion

The Nord entered the nineteenth century an industrial and commercial powerhouse, with city and country alike wired to national and international markets. It already contained provincial France's greatest concentration of industrial capital. Yet its industry and commerce belonged to recognizable eighteenth-century types. The Nord's people of 1804 produced mainly for markets, and often worked for wages. But most of them did their work in small producing units: shops, farms, households. In the country, a large number of wage-earners divided their time among seasonal labor on other people's farms, domestic manufacturing for local merchants, and gardening on the small plots they rented or owned. In the cities, merchants, master artisans, journeymen, and domestic workers all aimed their efforts toward the market. Except for mines, almost all productive organizations operated with few workers and modest capital. Merchants, rather than capitalist entrepreneurs, provided the regional economy's connective tissue.

The next century wrought great changes -- concentration of capital; movement of labor, production, and capital to cities; expansion of production based on machines and fossil fuels; shift of the prime locus of proletarians and proletarianization to urban areas. The Nord led the national implosion of capital, labor, and production itself into cities and factories. The Nord took on the

lineaments of urban, industrial capitalism.

The Nord's capitalists did more than move production to cities, increase the scale of production, expand horsepower, multiply machines, and introduce full-fledged factory production. They launched a century-long struggle to wrest control of production and of labor markets away from workers. Workers resisted where and when they could. They organized, sabotaged, went on strike, attacked strikebreakers and cheap laborers recruited from outside. The Nord became famous for the militancy of its workers.

Yet over the century capitalists, usually supported by local and national authorities in the name of "order" and "freedom to work", gained enormous ground. Proletarianization and subordination of labor began in the mines, but soon entered metalworking and textiles. By century's end, big capitalists, responding to signals from national and international markets, made the basic decisions concerning what to produce, how much, where, and with what labor; only the conditions under which workers would actually supply that labor remained open to bargaining.

Textiles continued to dominate the region's industry. Cotton started displacing wool and linen. Mining, metalworking, and steam-powered manufacturing increased in scope and scale. Small industrial cities such as Anzin grew large, and villages which had formerly hosted cottage industry grew into smoky factory towns.

Tourcoing and Roubaix provide the obvious examples.

In and around Lille itself, cotton production expanded, a garment industry organized in urban sweatshops arose, rural linen production for urban entrepreneurs and distant markets flourished, and the trade of an industrial region multiplied. Nearby Tourcoing specialized in wool-weaving, as adjacent Roubaix concentrated on cotton. Although the commercial crisis of 1827-1831 stimulated a move of Roubaix' manufacturers back toward wool, cotton remained king there throughout the nineteenth century. Throughout the century, Belgians from nearby regions of declining cottage industry poured across the border into Roubaix, Tourcoing, and other expanding factory towns. At the century's high point, in 1872, just over half of Roubaix's population was Belgian-born (Reardon 1981: 172).

Unlike the hinterlands of smaller industrial centers elsewhere in France, the countryside around Lille, Cambrai, and other accumulators of capital in the Nord did not deindustrialize, depopulate, and turn to market gardening for the urban market. Around the great centers of cotton and wool production, handloom weaving of higher-priced cloth survived the century. Elsewhere in the Nord, lace and batistes provided work for thousands of spinners and weavers. The miners of Anzin, Fourmies, and other places in the department's southeastern half dug wider and deeper. Industrial towns and villages proliferated, and even seasonal domestic production continued. Despite its glorious agricultural

history, the industrializing region came to depend more and more on imports of food from elsewhere.

Concentration and implosion marked the sphere of coercion just as it marked the sphere of capital. Post-revolutionary governments, for all their trappings of royalty, clung to the consolidated, centralized structure built during the Revolution and fortified during the Empire. A researcher sees it in the archives -- which are, after all, nothing but trimmed-down files of former governments. Before the Revolution, royal officials' correspondence shows them maneuvering to increase the central government's power, especially its fiscal power. It shows them bargaining with city authorities and regional institutions. It shows them intervening in the region's affairs with increasing power, but still as outsiders and after the fact. Intendants, subdelegates, and their fellows did acquire advance information about the doings of regional powerholders; indeed, most of them came from or joined existing networks of power. But they left the day-to-day surveillance and control of the general population to municipal authorities, regional courts, church officials, and local lords. As a result, little anticipatory intelligence about the likely actions of workers and regional powerholders flowed from Lille or Valenciennes to Versailles.

What a contrast with the post-revolutionary archives! Nineteenth-century representatives of the state had to take the region's capitalists into account. But their correspondence and

records show them operating the governmental apparatus down to the individual community, and pumping to Paris a continuous stream of information on fiscal administration, road construction, opportunities to promote manufacturing or trade, worker organization, and political action. The old regime's intendants might have deplored the lack of autonomy that characterized the prefects, their nineteenth-century successors. They would surely have envied the means of coercion and intelligence those prefects had at their call.

The twin concentrations of capital and coercion framed the nineteenth century's contention. The holders of capital began with a decided advantage. Their control of growing capital in a time of capital intensification helped them become masters of the sphere of production. But the Revolution and Empire had also given them great power in the sphere of coercion. Their access to the state helped them establish a public definition of workers' organization as a threat to public order, of strikes as "disorders" or "troubles" or at least "violations of the freedom to work".

Workers, furthermore, had carried over from the old regime a principle of organization and collective action that concentration made obsolete. In general, skilled workers in a trade organized at the level of a community, sought to make a common front against the employers of that community, and tried to control the entry of workers into their trade anywhere in the community. To control

workers in the trade, actual and potential, they deployed a variety of sanctions: sharing of rituals and secrets, pooling for mutual aid, withholding of information and support from nonconformists, ritual mockery and direct coercion for blacklegs, rate-breakers, strikebreakers, and other undesirables.

Workers likewise had a number of means for putting pressure on employers. The word "strike", which we now associate inevitably with firm-by-firm action, conveys badly their usual mode of action. The British word "turnout" fits better: the routine in which a group of aggrieved workers in a trade assembled to talk over their grievances, then went from shop to shop in that trade throughout the community, made a hullabaloo, called the workers inside to join them, continued their march through the streets until they had assembled as much of the trade as they could muster, moved off to a relatively secure public place (such as a field at the edge of town), debated their grievances, demands, and actions, then sent a delegation to bargain with representatives of the employers.

As employers built large plants employing many workers in different trades, and as the number of workers in a community began to number thousands, the old scale and type of organization no longer served workers well. In skilled crafts employing relatively small numbers and giving their members control of irreplaceable, crucial skills, adaptations of the old forms survived; with strikes and trade unions illegal, indeed,

nineteenth-century workers' politics long depended on secret, militant organizations built on craft models. But in the growing remainder of the labor force the old organization atrophied, or never formed at all. The growth of large firms and semi-skilled industrial labor eventually threatened the artisans on their own ground; through competition or through their direct employment by large capitalists, artisans and skilled workers faced proletarianization.

During the nineteenth century, as capital concentrated, and as the alliance of capital and state became more obvious, workers fashioned new forms of organization and action: the politically-active workers' association, the trade union, the public demonstration, the firm-by-firm strike. By the end of the nineteenth century, workers of the Nord had established themselves as socialists, as collectivists, as allies of political radicals. In 1893, Jules Guesde himself went to the Chambre of Deputies from a Roubaix constituency.

Workers' Politics

The Nord took a while to recover from the rigors of the Napoleonic Wars. The region bore the brunt of the Allied occupation in 1815, then slowly rebuilt its industrial strength. One of the costs of losing the war was to see Belgium once again become foreign territory. That cut off merchants along the frontier from an important area of domestic production. Merchants responded by encouraging migration across the frontier into the

newly-forming shops and factories. By 1819, one of the century's recurrent themes of conflict had come clearly into view: Cost-cutting employers recruited Belgian workers from nearby areas of declining cottage industry, as native French workers attempted to maintain control of the labor market -- and, to some small extent, of wages -- by keeping Belgians out.

In Roubaix, employers had been cutting wages on the ground that (despite protective tariffs) English competition was doing them in. At the same time, they had been recruiting Belgians who were willing to cross the border and work for low wages. On Bastille Day 1819, according to the royal prosecutor, "rather serious disturbances broke out in that populous and entirely industrial city . . .

Politics has nothing to do with the affair . . . it is a sort of coalition among French workers for the purpose of expelling from Roubaix and the surrounding area the Belgian workers who have settled there, and whose competition brings down a wage that the French would like to see rise. The 14th of this month, between eight and nine in the evening, when the workers were leaving their shops, a crowd of four or five hundred people gathered in Roubaix. The aim of that gathering was to attack and expel the foreign workers employed in the same shops. The local police stepped in, and order was restored (AN BB¹⁸ 993).

On the 15th, three gendarmes on horseback frightened off another

gathering, but a rock hit one Belgian; he was said to have shouted, while under the protection of the gendarmes, "You Frenchmen can't do anything to us. We're the bosses here now!" (AN BB¹⁸ 993). The gatherings continued for days.

The prosecutor's ruling out of "politics" meant that no organized group making claims on the national structure of power -- Republicans, supporters of Napoleon, or anyone else of that ilk -- had a hand in the events. In fact, Flemish-French hostility as such played only a small part in the local politics of Roubaix and other frontier towns. For the next two decades, workers' politics in the Nord concerned labor markets, wages, and working conditions. A moment of absorption into national politics arrived in 1830; during the July Days, as the news of insurrection arrived from Paris, workers streamed out of the factories of Lille, rushed through the streets breaking windows and shouting "Long live the Charter". When the cavalry tried to break up the crowds, people stoned them. When the infantry fraternized, the shout changed to "Down with the cavalry! Long live the line!" (Gazette des Tribunaux, 2-3 August 1830). In Douai, young people "of the working class" went through the streets forcing people to light up in celebration of the Revolution (AN F⁷ 6778).

Nevertheless, the struggle with employers continued to preoccupy the Nord's workers. The night of 10 August 1830, for example, workers in Roubaix gathered in large numbers and asked employers for a raise. "They broke the windows of the principal

factories," wrote the royal prosecutor, "and entered in force to ask for written agreement to the raise" (AN BB18 1186). Although the Parisian newspaper Moniteur blamed the action on "foreign workers", the chief division clearly followed class lines (Moniteur 18 August 1830).

In general, the Nord's workers relied on the local organization of their trades, and made little effort to form unions and other special-purpose associations, until the 1840s. More generally, associations did not begin to play major parts as vehicles of collective action -- working-class or bourgeois -- until well after the July Revolution. As of 1834, the prosecutor of the arrondissement of Lille provided an inventory of associations in the city. He enumerated 106 workers' mutual aid societies, providing sick benefits from pooled funds, and named for saints. The city's bourgeoisie -- "merchants, rich bourgeois, and National Guards" -- had twelve associations whose object was to drink and play cards. The only one with a worrisome political cast, he reported, was the salon des negociants, which consisted of confirmed Legitimists. The one republican drinking club, with 22 members, had recently dissolved. Finally, medical students had a society that "does not seem to involve politics" (AN BB³ 167). Only with the 1840s did an organized republican opposition start to show up in Lille's public life.

To the thinness of formal organization among workers corresponded a near-absence of strikes. Workers in textile towns

did occasionally use the informal structure of their trade either to keep others away from their jobs, to sanction workers who broke ranks, and to organize an occasional turnout. But on the whole, considering their wages and working conditions, the Nord's textile workers mounted very little collective opposition to the region's capitalists during the 1820s and 1830s.

For serious, long-term strikes during those decades, we must turn to the Nord's miners. Especially the miners who worked for the big Anzin company in its pits at Saint-Vaast-la-Haut and Anzin. Citing fierce Belgian competition, the company had begun cutting wages in the early 1820s. At the same time, they tightened surveillance and discipline in the mines. The economizing paid off; in 1833, the company's stockholders were receiving an 8 percent return on their investment (Guignet 1973: 351). The miners complained not only of the "four sous" in daily pay they had lost in 1823, but also of being treated with contempt by the Anzin Company's officials.

Periodically, the miners struck back. Shortly after the July Revolution, for example, they had risen briefly and unsuccessfully (Aguet 1954: 56). In May 1833, it was a different story. The so-called Four Sous Riot (emeute des quatre sous) made its mark in national labor history. When the Anzin Company's governors met in Anzin on 10 May, word spread among miners that the governors were finally going to give back the four sous they had taken away ten years earlier. Nothing happened. After the disappointing

meeting, a new story went the rounds: The company was actually considering another wage cut, and Charles Mathieu (pit supervisor at Saint-Vaast, whose brother Joseph was mine inspector and mayor of Anzin) had been cashiered for favoring a raise. The story gained credibility from the fact that, shortly after the governors' meeting, Charles Mathieu did leave the company to take a job elsewhere.

On the 17th, two or three hundred people -- men, women, and children -- gathered before the company offices in Saint-Vaast. They demanded their four sous, called for the firing of three overzealous supervisors, and sang songs whose refrain ran "Down with the Parisians, long live the Mathieux of Anzin" (Guignet 1973: 348). Some of the miners went to the lodgings of Monnier, one of the three unpopular supervisors, where they broke furniture and tore up clothing. After the company's general agent, Mark Jennings, met with members of the crowd, the mayor and the cure of Anzin persuaded the miners and their families to disband. In the meantime, however, company officials had called the police. On the evening of the 17th, detachments of gendarmes, cavalry, and infantry, plus 150 National Guards, converged on Anzin. During the following days, gendarmes made a few arrests and support for a work stoppage appeared in a number of nearby coal mines, but few direct confrontations between miners and troops occurred. As Philippe Guignet summarizes the events:

From 17 to 22 May, the miners unquestionably kept the lead;

the movement spread, the "forces of order", which were numerically inferior to the massed workers being unable or unwilling to stop the strikers. That is why the authorities decided to put a stop to the movement on the 22d by calling on regular army units. On the 27th, in a region placed under a state of siege, the miners decided to return to work (Guignet 1973: 348).

The national authorities who sent in massive force were probably remembering the 1831 silkworkers' strike in Lyon, which turned into a general insurrection; they were not going to let Anzin get out of hand.

As insurgents, the miners of Anzin were remarkably nonviolent during the Four Sous Riot. But as strikers, they looked remarkably like insurgents. As of 1833, in fact, the miners and their employers had no established routine -- by striking or otherwise -- for collective negotiation over employment, wages, and working conditions. Every work stoppage therefore took on a tinge of insurrection.

Mid-Century Mobilization

Paradoxically, the increased tempo of industrial conflict during the 1830s and 1840s normalized the strike, at least to some degree. Miners kept up their losing battle for wages and job control. Anzin itself produced another small strike in December 1833, and standup battles in 1837, 1846, and 1848; in these confrontations, miners typically tried to stop the pithead

machinery, and mine owners typically called in troops to protect their property. During the same period, the mines of Denain, Fresnes, Vieux-Conde, and Abscon joined the ranks of major strike producers; in most of their strikes, a walkout from one mine incited a work stoppage in at least one more.

With the later 1830s, textile workers of Lille's region began to organize strikes as never before. In the spinning mills of Lille, employers cut the piece rate in 1839. The senior workers of dozens of plants started meeting to plan their defense, first establishing a pool of money to aid the unemployed, then edging toward its transformation into a strike fund. The first full-fledged work stoppage came in August. After a quick settlement of that first dispute, which ended with city officials intervening to cancel the wage reduction, the "elders" of the trade started drafting a city-wide agreement. By mid-September, workers were responding to rising food prices by calling for wage increases. The Parisian Constitutionnel clipped this account of the events of 20 September from the Echo du Nord:

Groups of cotton spinners who had left their shops went to various spinning mills to persuade those who were still working to follow them. In some of these plants the rebels started disturbances by throwing stones at the windows. The National Guard eagerly took arms; a number of patrols organized at once spread out through the city, especially toward the threatened places. About nine o'clock that night

the groups, which had previously been separated, met together in the main square; one heard incoherent yells, or rather jeers, that the National Guard had the good sense to ignore. A police officer read the mayor's edict forbidding riotous assemblies. Immediately afterward, he gave the required three calls to disperse, and the National Guard started clearing the square. Heavy rain helped scatter the groups. The following day at five A.M. the National Guard was out; its mission was to assure the entry into shops of those workers who didn't want to follow their comrades in rebellion. There were still a few attempts at disorder and a few arrests (Le Constitutionnel, 23 September 1839).

Need I mention that the National Guard drew its troops especially from Lille's bourgeoisie? Although the spinners of Lille did not strike again on any scale until 1848, the series of conflicts in 1839 showed the substantial class division within the city as well as the capacity of its textile workers for collective action. In nearby Tourcoing, Roubaix, and Fourmies, similar strikes -- most often incited by employers' attempts to cut wages, and again typically ending with the authorities' use of armed force against the workers -- occurred repeatedly between 1839 and 1848.

During the same period, small signs began to appear of workers' identification of their cause with opposition politics at the national scale. In the Nord, those glimmers of political opposition often took on a republican tint, but sometimes came out

Bonapartist. In 1840, the prosecutor at the royal court of Douai began to report incidents in which people sang the semi-seditious Marseillaise in the streets or at the theater. In 1841, republicans of Lille and Valenciennes joined the resistance to the national census, seen widely as a governmental maneuver to extend its control and clear the way to tax increases.

In 1846, when workers of Roubaix gathered to protest curtailment of the Mardi Gras celebrations, they turned to attacking well-dressed young men as "sons of manufacturers", shouting "Down with the manufacturers!", and breaking the windows of bourgeois cafes, police stations, and homes of manufacturers. They sang the Marseillaise as they marched through the streets. When the radical bourgeois of Lille organized their part of the national campaign for political reform in 1847, a few workers actually joined them. With the news of the February Revolution in Paris, many of the activists in Lille's streets were workers. The theme song of those days was, of course, the Marseillaise.

Once a provisional republic took power in Paris, workers of the Nord underwent a remarkable mobilization. In Valenciennes, Tourcoing and, especially, Lille, workers' marches through the streets became commonplace. Almost immediately after the February Revolution, furthermore, began a new round of important strikes. During 1848, Anzin, Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing all had significant strike movements. Then, as Louis Napoleon's government tightened its control, moved to the right, and began

its deliberate dismantling of the radical republican movement in the country as a whole, the Nord's workers demobilized.

The experience of Lille shows that process of mobilization and demobilization clearly. When the news of revolution first reached Lille on 25 February, groups of workers entered the prefecture, seized rugs, wall hangings, and a bust of Louis Philippe from the prefect's dwelling, burned the household goods in the cities Grand'Place, paraded the bust through the streets like a severed head, and threw it in the canal. Groups of workers likewise burned the suburban railroad station at Fives and attacked the interim central station in Lille. Noisy gatherings in the streets continued for several days. The National Guard of Lille took on the task of containing them.

Two weeks later, Lille's workers were again marching. This time, however, they were protesting cuts in the workday (hence in total pay) agreed upon by the city's textile manufacturers, under pressure from the Nord's revolutionary commissioner Delescluze, as a way of getting unemployed workers back on the job. A group of workers sought to organize a city-wide turnout, but failed to bring out all those who had accepted the reduced scale. Strikers gathered outside the working shops, shouted their call, and tried to block the entries. Workers ("accompanied by women and children", according to Le Siecle, 20 March 1848), set up barricades and fought the National Guard in the streets. But their main business was with employers and strikebreakers. The

evening of 14 March, for example, about 400 men, women, and children had assembled in Lille's Grand'Place, and marched off singing the Marseillaise. They headed toward the city's spinning plants. According to Courtin, government commissioner at Lille, about 8 P.M.:

a large group of workers went through several streets of Lille to the house of M. Bonami Defresne, a spinning master. After making threats and shouting, they broke the entire front of the house with stones and staves. Windows, frames, and blinds were nearly destroyed, and large stones have been found inside the house. The disorder did not end until the police and National Guard approached; without them, the crowd would most likely have entered the dwelling . . . The workers are unemployed, and unfortunately blame that terrible state of affairs on the bad will of the masters. M. Defresnes is disliked because of the frequent difficulties he has had with the people he employs. The spinning mill, which is separate from his house, was left alone (AN BB³⁰ 360).

At the same time as some workers were in the streets, however, others were attending the Societe des Ouvriers, which collaborated with the Societe Republicaine des Amis du Peuple in the first phases of the revolution at Lille. Although employment, salaries, and working conditions remained the centers of workers' politics, they had once again connected directly with national politics.

Lille's conflicts continued through 1848, with workers

breaking into the premises of the republican Echo du Nord in response to its comments on workers' complaints (15 April), meeting to demand aid for the unemployed (10 May), vigorously protesting the exclusion of some workers from the workshops set up for the unemployed (22 May), demonstrating against employers who were introducing the system of two banks of bobbins per spinner (14 August), besieging the mayor to resist the substitution of piece rates for daily pay in the municipal workshops (24 August), and through it all striking repeatedly. As the struggles continued, however, the prefect sent troops to break strikes and dissolved the Societe republicaine des fileurs de coton de Lille, as the municipality finally dissolved the municipal workshops, as it became a crime to call for the "democratic and social republic". By the end of 1848, as in the rest of France, control of the government had slipped away from the coalition of workers and radical republicans that had formed in February.

The rightward drift continued. In Lille, an antirepublican association, Les Amis de l'Ordre, made its appearance. After a round of republican-worker demonstrations (including a Mardi Gras procession mocking the great figures of the new regime, including President Louis Napoleon) early in 1849, the city's left began to collapse. The pace of strike activity declined as well. The workers of Lille, after a year on the defensive, were demobilizing. As if to underline that demobilization, authorities forbade civic celebration of the revolution's anniversary at the

end of February, called for a Te Deum, and once again made the singing of the Marseillaise a crime.

Neither workers nor bourgeois republicans managed very effective resistance to Louis Napoleon's final seizure of power. Lille became the center of articulate republicanism. As a retrospective report to the Minister of Justice put it:

The newspaper Messenger du Nord put itself at the head of the movement, as its editor, M. Bianchi, began active oral propaganda. In Lille and the surrounding area even the most active vigilance could not prevent the formation of extremely dangerous secret societies. On the 20th of October they found at the door of the subprefecture of Avesnes an anonymous note saying "Citizen subprefect, you dissolved the National Guard . . . In 1852, you'll get yours. When the time comes, we'll burn your headquarters, and we'll know how to get rid of you" (AN BB¹⁸ 423).

The dream of an insurrection to bring the Democratic and Social Republic in 1852 had apparently not died in Avesnes. But the dreamers had again to dream it anonymously, in dark of night.

When Louis Napoleon preempted any such insurrection by his coup d'etat of 2 December, however, Lille, Douai, and Anzin gave the Nord's chief shows of resistance. In Lille, on the evening of 3 December, a "deplorable collision" set the police against 600 republican demonstrators, who shouted "Long live the Republic" and sang the Marseillaise, but eventually dispersed without trying to

take over the city (Le Constitutionnel, 7 December 1851). Douai had a similar confrontation of 200 shouters of "seditious slogans" with the police. In Anzin, 40 workers broke into the city hall, grabbed guns, and went from factory to factory in Anzin, Raismes, Beuvrages, and Vicoigne trying unsuccessfully to bring out the workers. At the approach of a cavalry detachment from Valenciennes, the would-be rebels turned tail (Le Moniteur, 10 December 1851). The newspaper reported that Anzin's raiders were not miners; of the eleven residents of Anzin formally charged with participation in resistance to the coup, one was a clerk for the Anzin Company, and the rest were artisans outside the mines: AN BB³⁰ 396). The great workers' mobilization of 1848 had definitively ended.

Changing Repertoires

The Nord's contention during the Second Republic combined forms of action that strongly recalled the eighteenth century with others that remain familiar today. Attacks on Belgian workers, for example, reached their nineteenth-century peak between 1848 and 1851. Around Denain, especially, manufacturing workers tried repeatedly to force the firing and expulsion of Belgians. But Denain was not alone: In May 1848, workers in Tourcoing and in Semain called for Belgians to leave town. Where the workforce in a trade was relatively small and compact, resident workers could still hope to control the local labor market. In time of contraction, that often meant calling for the expulsion of

"outsiders", even those who had been at work for a long time.

Similarly, textile workers continued to act via the community-wide turnout: trying to get the entire trade to stop work by marching from shop to shop and by blocking the entrances to unstruck shops. That tactic was becoming decreasingly effective in the towns of large shops and many workers, such as Roubaix. There, the one-firm strike was becoming common.

Struggles over food showed the combination of old and new forms most clearly. The word "food riot" gives a specious sense of continuity; it includes routines so different as blocking the shipment of grain, seizing stored grain for placement in the public domain, forced sale of grain or bread below the current market price, direct attacks on presumed profiteers, and demonstrations urging public officials to control prices, distribute food, or punish profiteers. All of these except forced sales occurred at one time or another in the Nord during the Second Republic.

Blockages occurred fairly often. In April 1848, for example, workers in Dunkerque stopped the departure of a shipload of grain from the port while people in Trelon, Anor, and Baives, on the Belgian border, blocked the shipment of grain out of France. In Anor, people also confiscated eight sacks of flour from a merchant and deposited them in the town hall, asking that the municipality distribute the flour free. In Fourmies:

they forced the mayor to go with the workers to raid a baker.

They took 170 sacks of flour from him. Those sacks likewise went to the town hall, but people were very angry because of the size of the stock. The women, especially, made a great racket, threatening to string up the baker on the Liberty Tree. In order to escape, that man and a co-owner of the flour said they were making a gift of the flour to the commune (AN BB³⁰ 360, report of deputy prosecutor of Avesnes, 29 April 1848).

When workers from Trelon went to Baives in order to stop shipments across the border, the municipality of Baives rang the tocsin and called out the National Guard. The Guard shot at the invaders, and severely wounded two of them. (An exaggerated report reaching Le Constitutionnel and Le Siecle in Paris had twelve of Trelon's workers dead in that encounter.)

In addition to these classic actions, people also organized in ways that broke with the eighteenth-century food riot. On 19 May 1848, for instance, "troublemakers" in Villers-Outreaux, near Cambrai, "assessed a contribution in bread and money on those landowners whom they singled out as giving nothing or too little to the poor"; a detachment of gendarmes and fifty cavalrymen soon put a stop to that popular organization of charity (Le Siecle 29 May 1848). The demand that wages be adjusted to match the price of food, or vice versa figured repeatedly in workers' demonstrations in the larger cities. Indeed, the price and supply of food remained crucial issues for the Nord's workers well into

the twentieth century. Men and women of the Nord, for example, took an active part in the nationwide demonstrations of 1911 against high food prices.

By that time, nevertheless, the old-fashioned blockage, seizure, and forced sale had almost faded from memory. On a national scale, the last important wave of food riots in that old style came in 1853-54. During that period, troops of beggars wandered through the Nord and harassed householders. In Cambrai, someone circulated an anonymous handbill threatening grain merchants. In Aymeries, near Avesnes, someone tried to burn a hayrick, leaving a pole stuck in the ground bearing a chunk of bread and a notice: BREAD AT FIFTEEN SOUS OR EVERY FARM WILL BE BURNED! (AN BB³⁰ 432). That was as close as the hungry Nord came to a food riot. Despite constant struggle over wages, prices, and living conditions, the Nord never again produced a significant cluster of blockages, seizures, or forced sales. From its place as the most frequent form of popular contention in 1789, in sixty years the food riot had dwindled to insignificance.

Meanwhile, the strike, the demonstration, the election rally, the public meeting had become the standard forms of popular involvement in open struggle. During 1848 and 1849, ordinary people -- especially workers -- of the Nord had helped combine these newer forms into their part of a national political movement. The repression of 1849 and thereafter checked that variety of popular involvement for twenty years, but did not stamp

it out entirely.

In the 1850s, the strike itself was still evolving: The turnout and related forms of community-wide action within a trade were declining, as the firm-by-firm strike came into its own. In Roubaix, for example, one sees a significant contrast between the 1840s, when weavers and spinners generally tried to turn out the entire trade against the masters for the purpose of striking a collective bargain, and the 1860s, when the workers of Motte, Toulemonde, Roussel, Delfosse, and other major firms struck separately and made their own settlements -- even though management and workers in each company constantly watched and aided their counterparts in the city's other firms. The only important exception was the Roubaix general strike of 1867, when workers from many firms joined in attacking both the homes and the shops of the capitalists who had sent out an appeal for work on two looms instead of one. Even that strike had begun as separate actions within three large firms. When the owners of the struck firms consulted with each other and with their fellow owners, that concert brought all the city's weavers together (ADN M 619). The concentration of capital and the increase in the labor market's scale had rendered the old forms of working-class collective action ineffective, and promoted the formation of workers' counter-organization at the scale of the firm.

By the 1860s, more generally, concentration and nationalization of both capital and coercion had wrought a great

transformation of popular contention. At the end of the Second Empire, the ordinary people of the Nord were engaged in meetings, demonstrations, electoral campaigns, associations, and trade unions in ways that look quite familiar to twentieth-century eyes. More was to come: continuous struggles between secularizing radicals and defenders of the Catholic Church against disestablishment; strikes at a scale and frequency not previously imagined, including the great Anzin conflict of 1884 fictionalized in Zola's Germinal; May Days marked by strikes and demonstrations, including the massacre of workers in Fourmies on 1 May 1891; the formation of a strong Marxist workers' party led by Jules Guesde; election campaigns such as the one in 1891 that made Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, deputy of Lille; fights between activists of competing parties; the 1911 protests over high food prices; in short, the full, familiar apparatus of twentieth-century contention.

In a sort of complaint, Robert Pierreuse once commented on workers' politics in Roubaix at the end of the nineteenth century:

Politics didn't interest [the worker] except to the extent that the doctrines and men that sought his vote helped or wanted to help solve the social problem caused by the existence of a rich bourgeoisie owning the means of production and a proletariat which considered itself oppressed, whose existence depended heavily on bosses who gave him work and paid low wages. Workers of Roubaix aimed

at only one goal: their own liberation. They only joined the electoral fray to reduce the influence of capital (Pierreuse 1969: 250).

One reading of this situation is that Roubaix' workers had a cramped, self-interested view of politics. Another is that they had become that long-sought commodity: perceptive, class-conscious analysts with their own, autonomous organization. In either case, their organization sufficed to bring an entirely socialist municipality to power in 1892, and to elect Jules Guesde deputy the following year.

The Nord as a whole had become headquarters and prize of France's chief Marxist party, the Parti Ouvrier Francais. With over 63 percent of its 1896 labor force in manufacturing, the Nord stood as a model of large-scale capitalist production. A century after 1789, a region of merchants, peasants, day-laborers, domestic producers, and workers in small shops had turned into a complex of mines, factories, and sooty cities. In the process, the people of the Nord had entirely transformed their means of collective action.

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