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FRANCE: A UNION WASTELAND

Dominique LABBE

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Summary

In France, since the 1920s, there has never been such a small proportion of workers who are members of a union: less than one in ten. Twenty years ago they were nearly three in ten. How can we explain this evident "désyndicalisation" (deunionisation) ? Three groups of factors can be highlighted. Firstly, the general situation of the French economy and society: the recession, unemployment and the political situation. Secondly, some factors are inherent to trade unions. During the last 25 years, the French "plant-level trade-unionism" has weakened, the networking of factories and offices by shop stewards has disappeared. Extreme fragmentation, divisions and politicization have led to a loss of credibility and to increasing unpopularity. Thirdly, organisational modifications have played a major part: the authoritarian regrouping of unions, the disappearance of representation by categories in the headquarters, the instability and disorganization have important repercussions on union membership.

Résumé

Il n'y a jamais eu aussi peu de syndiqués en France : moins de 10% contre près de 30% il y a vingt ans. Comment expliquer cette "désyndicalisation" ? Trois séries d'explications sont examinées. En premier lieu, les explications générales : la crise économique et le chômage, la situation politique. En second lieu, des explications propres au mouvement syndical : la disparition du "syndicalisme à la française" qui se caractérisait par la présence sur les lieux de travail de noyaux militants ; la division et la politisation du mouvement syndical. Troisièmement, certains facteurs organisationnels ont joué un grand rôle : regroupements autoritaires de syndicats, modification de la représentation catégorielle, instabilité des structures.

FRANCE: A UNION WASTELAND¹

This paper presents a summary of ten years of our group's research on the decline of French trade unions². But, before this analysis, I would like to remind that the situation of trade unions in France is very complex: one must bear in mind that there are three major confederations of unions. In decreasing order:

— CGT (General Confederation of Labour) is the oldest and, since 1945, it has been led by the communists;

— CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour). Before 1964, its name was CFTC (Confederation of French Christian Workers);

— FO ("Force ouvrière") which is difficult to translate; it comes from a schism in the CGT which took place in 1948;

In addition, there are also the FEN (Federation of the State Education System Employees) which comes also from the CGT (the FEN exploded in 1992) and numerous little organisations...

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section shows that nowadays the French labour movement is a wasteland as concerns the number of members. The second sections gives a brief presentation of some explanations for this decline. The third section underlines some unknown organisational reasons.

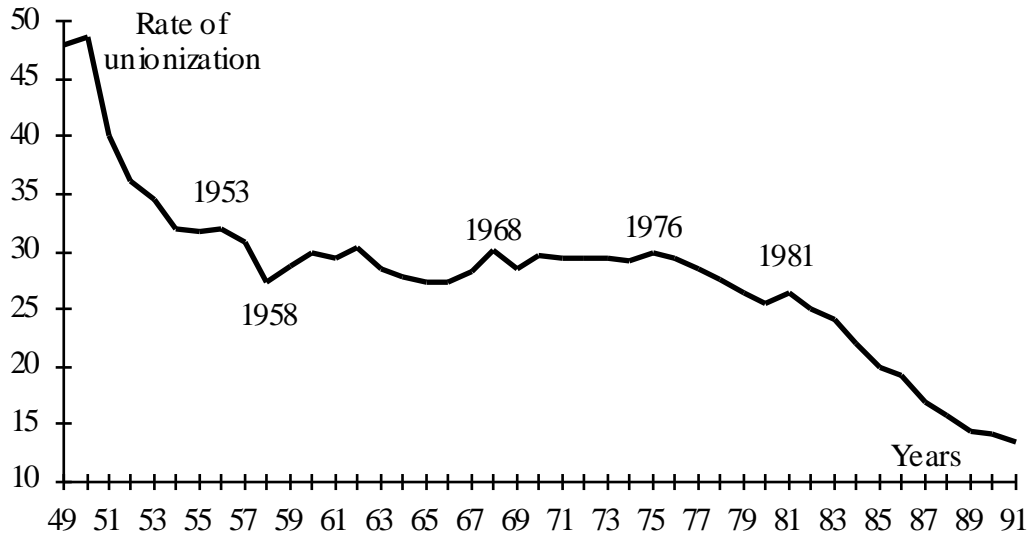
1. History of unionization in France since 1945

The first diagram shows that, since the second world war, the history of French trade unions can be divided into three periods (the Liberation and the fifties, the sixties and the early seventies and since 1976).

¹ The author is grateful to Edward Arnold for his helpful comments in the preparation and translation of this paper.

² This research group, created in 1985, is composed of : Dominique Andolfatto, Jean-Charles Basson, Antoine Bevort, Maurice Croisat, Jacques Derville, Gilles Nezosi, Jean-Yves Sabot. The main titles are given in our bibliography.

Figure 1. Approximative rate of unionization³ in France since 1949 (percentage of the total working population).



- First, the **Liberation and the fifties**

At the Liberation, the rate of unionism was very high: nearly one worker out of two was a member of a union. This proportion is slightly under the historic level of the "Front populaire" (1936-38). But, in a century of history of the French labour movement, the rate reached at the Liberation is out of the ordinary.

Between 1948 and 1958, this rate of unionism was halved: in 1958, only one worker out of four was a member of a union. We will examine later the explanations for this phenomenon, but one can already understand that political circumstances was largely determinant : the eviction of the French communist party from the government in 1947 ; the Cold War, the Kruchtchev report and the Hungarian uprising in 1956. But, when General de Gaulle took power in 1958, the French Labour movement was still alive.

- Second period: **during the sixties and the early seventies**

During all this period, the rate of unionization still remained at around thirty per cent. One can consider that this rate is good, because one must take into account some characteristics of the French economy: many small firms, few industries and a high level of workers mobility. You can also notice on the curve that the little peak of 1968 cannot be compared with the "rush" of 1936-37. The stability of the rate does not mean that any change occurred. On the contrary:

³ The rate of unionism is the number of union's members divided by the total workforce. For the figures, see : Bevort-Labbé and Labbé, 1994.

— in this period, the number of workers increased from thirteen to eighteen million. The active population changed, modern industries and services grew quickly and, consequently, the conditions for unionism became more favourable. So, the stability of the rate probably meant a relative decline in the real influence of unions;

— the CGT stabilised the number of its membership to around two million. But, because of the growth in the number of workers, this stabilisation meant a slow decline. This decline of the CGT principally benefited the CFDT — the CFDT had nearly one million members in 1976. For the same reasons, later in the seventies, the FO experienced a limited growth.

- Third period, **since 1976**

Since 1976, a continual and irreversible fall has affected all unions. Today, less than one worker out of ten belongs to a union. It is, surely, the lowest rate of unionization in all western industrialised countries (See Visser). This decline had affected every profession, all the regions in France, every gender and every class age bracket. For that reason, we can now consider that France is a "union wasteland" ("désert syndical").

The fall in unionization in France is a paradox.

On the one hand, left wing parties won the elections in 1981. The French labour movement was strongly linked to the new government and it hoped for a wave of unionization. On the contrary, the worst years for the unions were 1982, 1983 and 1984!

On the other hand, since 1968, several laws had been voted to give more protection and more power to the unions; they had also received many subsidies. However, they lost hundreds of thousands of members.

How can this paradox be explained?

2. Some explanations for the decline

French sociologists give some explanations (for example, see Caire):

— firstly, they argue about historical reasons. The researchers say that France never had strong unions; that the history of the Labour movement is characterised by a succession of cycles: short waves of unionization followed by long periods of low tides. So we have to wait for the next wave !

— secondly, they explain the union's decline by the general situation of the country : the economic recession, the individualism of workers, the employers refusal to accept unionism, and so on...

More precisely, some explanations focus on:

— the movement of employment into the service sector. During the past twenty years, the number of industrial workers has declined by 20%

in absolute terms (now three quarters of jobs are in the service sector). And the industrial workers — especially the "métallos" — were the nucleus of the two biggest unions (CGT and CFDT). With this shift, collective identities have changed in the labour force. New professions have grown in number: social and hospital workers, information processing, engineers, and so on. And these professions seem to be totally alien to the unions.

— within the firms, the organisation of production has also changed. Big plants and offices have been closed and their jobs have been sub-contracted... In private firms, social relations are less hierarchical and more individual. Workers do not need any more help from shop stewards to defend them against their hierarchy.

Of course, all these explanations are not wrong, but the same events took place in all industrial countries and the same collapse occurred nowhere else. So, it seems that these general explanations are not really valid in the French case or, at least, that they are incomplete. Of course, times are changing! But the problem is: why were the unions not able to adapt themselves to these changes in French society, in the workforce and in the firms? And, above all, as concerns deunionization, the first question is: why did so many members disappear?

To study the reasons why so many people have faded from the union horizon during the past twenty years, we asked this question to a sample of five hundred ex-members of the CFDT. This study took place in 1986-88 and led to various articles, studies and to a book (Labbé-Croisat). This research has showed that there are three major types of reasons for these disappearances:

— firstly, around one ex-member out five gave personal explanations: retirement, sickness, unemployment, professional mobility, moving house and so on;

— Secondly, the disappearance of the union and equivalent reasons: we met many people who explained that they never resigned but, quite simply, nobody asked them to pay union dues. As explained in our book, for many reasons, the shop stewards have disappeared from the workplace. So one can consider that it is not these members who resigned but the union which abandoned them;

— Thirdly, politics and divisions within the unions are the main explanations. In France, politicization seems to be as old as unionism. For example, in 1948, the communist leadership in the CGT led to a schism and to the foundation of the FO and the FEN. But, until the seventies, this politicization was limited, as far as it was possible, to the union headquarters. At grass-root level, one never talked about politics. For 20 years, this cautious attitude was forgotten. And, the activists sometimes seemed more interested by political debate than by

unionism... But their members did not appreciate this shift and many of them resigned! In the same way, divisions were not very visible. Sometimes, confederations acted together; for example, against colonial wars during the fifties ; also, between 1966 and 1978, the CGT and CFDT followed a common course of action and, in some plants, they presented only one list of candidates for the "professional elections". On other occasions, they worked separately but without open rivalries and without fighting like dogs over a bone. For nearly twenty years, these divisions have become public. For example, since the end of the seventies, two or three distinct marches have taken place for the first-of-May celebrations. Collective bargaining offers another illustration: before collective branch bargaining, there is no more "concertation" between the unions and, if one or two organizations come to an agreement with employers, the rest refuse to sign and denounce the others as "scabs".

As a conclusion on this point, we have seen that, usually, the explanation of the French union crisis is that the organizations have not been able to change. On the contrary, our central idea is that, during the past twenty years, major changes have occurred in French trade unionism. Let us summarize these changes in few words. In the fifties and sixties, the French Labour movement was characterized by two major points:

- numerous little cells grouped, in the workplace, around some activists. Shop stewards — eg "délégué du personnel" who are elected — formed the nucleus of these little groups. So, France was very near to a system of "establishment-based unionism". The legal protection of members was low. Individual defence of the workers and management of the "oeuvres sociales" were the main activities. At plant level, contracting was rare, and had no real importance...

- these cells were integrated into federations and confederations. But, these organizations were very weak, with no strategic capacity, few resources and no control over their grass-roots. In some branches, contracting was more important, but, the major rules on working conditions and on wages were decided by the government and parliament.

One must not idealize the "syndicalisme à la française". Many testimonies of ex-activists show how difficult it was to manage this kind of organization. Sometimes, it led to some situations of anarchy : wildcat strikes, factional fights, local agreements against national strategy and actions far beyond the control of unions officials. But, miraculously, it seems to have worked well for two decades and to have looked interesting enough for millions of people who joined these organizations.

This "syndicalisme à la française" has ceased to exist over the past twenty years (Croisat-Labbé, 1992). We have just seen the major causes of this disappearance. In addition to this, organizational factors have had an unknown, but large impact.

3. Organisational changes and their impact on unionization

How are French unions organized? Diagram II shows the internal organization of the CGT⁴. The CFDT and the FO have a very similar structure as A. Bevort and I have explained in our book. Three levels can be identified.

Firstly, the **workplace**. These grass-root cells are grouped around a little nucleus of activists and they are usually called "sections syndicales". Except in some big factories, they have few members: from ten to fifty, rarely more. They are very autonomous and real "union life" is to be found here.

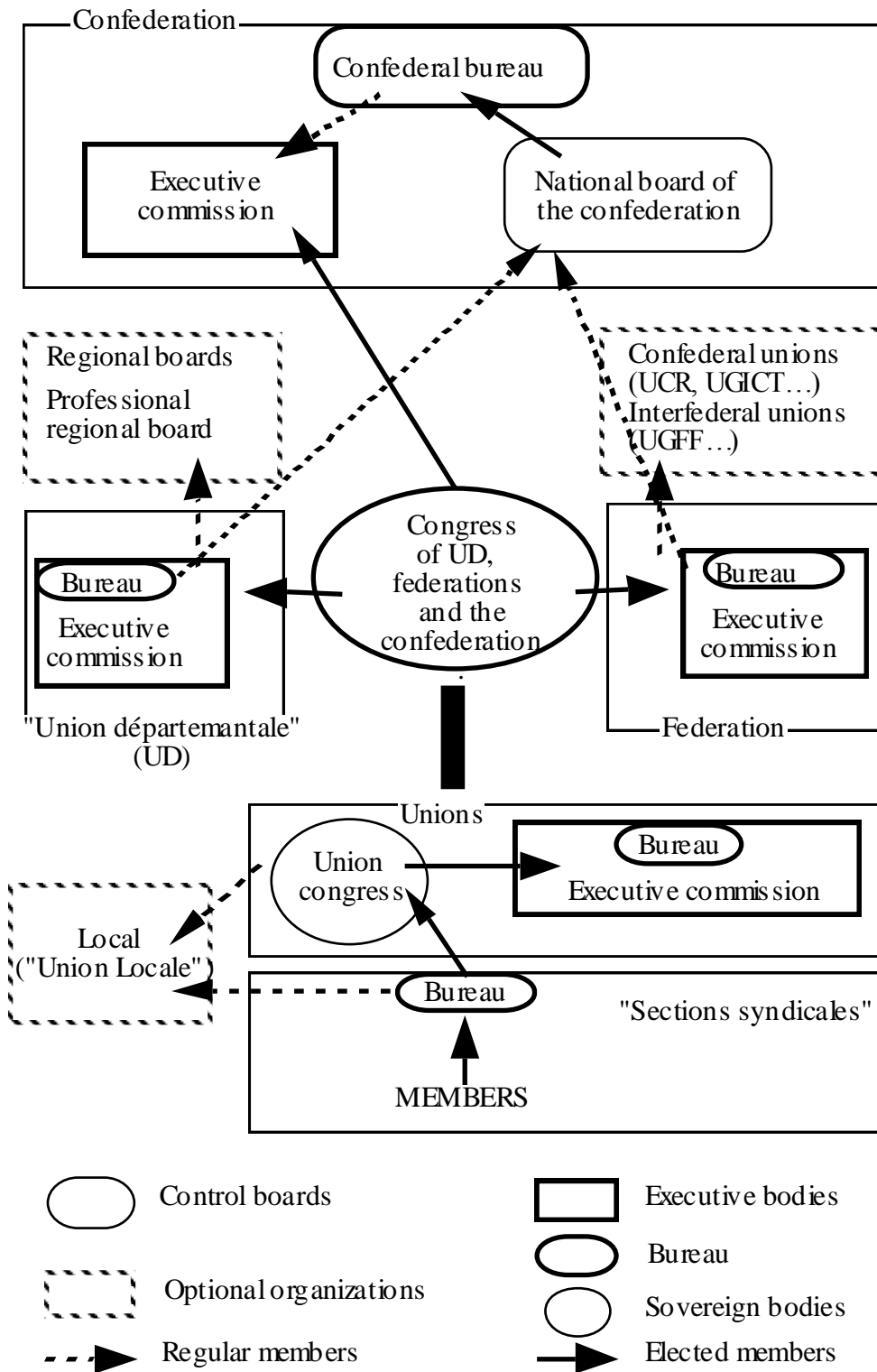
Secondly, in a limited area — like towns or regions — the "sections syndicales" are federated into a **branch union**: the textile industry, the steel industries, the postal services, the health and social services, and so on... In the French Labour movement, sovereignty resides in these branch unions. The majority of these unions is also very slim. For example, in the CFDT, in 1990, six out of ten unions had less than one hundred members. For the CGT the proportion is nearly 90% (Bernard-Labbé).

Thirdly, the unions are federated in a two way system as one can see on the diagram... On the right side of the diagram, a "vertical" aggregation according to branch or category: the defence of a common interest is the principle of this coordination. These organizations are called "**federations**". On the other hand (left side of the diagram), all the unions, located on the same territory, are affiliated into "groups of unions" called "**unions**" at the regional level and **confederation** at the national level.

The diagram is obviously an abstract presentation. But you must be aware that, in France, institutions are built on ideals and theories before taking account of reality. What is the reality of French unionism from the organizational point of view ?

⁴ This diagram is drawn from our paper in *Communisme* (Bernard-Labbé).

Diagram II. Organization of the CGT confederation.



In the work-place, the central question is that of trade skills and professional categories. For example, the following document is drawn from the archives of the CFDT. It is a circular from the "organization department" on the frontier between each federation. Firstly, they explain that, in a firm, every worker must join the same union, and they illustrate this principle:

"A nurse or a social worker in a plant cannot be affiliated to the health and social services federation but to the textile industries federation, if it is a textile plant, or to the mines and metal union (FGM) if it is a mechanical construction plant"⁵.

In fact, the principle was: "in a plant, all the workers must join the same union" — in order to achieve their unity faced with employers — whatever their crafts or categories. So the sweeper — who is the symbol of the unskilled French worker — is supposed to be unionised with his foreman, as are executives of the plant. They are all supposed to go to the same meetings, to read the same leaflets, and to act together. The diversity of status and skills are not forgotten, but their expression is possible only out of the workplace, through specific structures like specialized offices in the federation and, sometimes, craft federations (for employees and for executives).

For example, the diagram III presents the official organization, in the fifties and the early sixties, of the Christian steel-workers of Lorraine (region of the main steel industries in the East of France). In fact, the situation was very different. The diagram IV shows how the workers of a big plant⁶, near Nancy, were unionized. In this plant, there were two distinct groups with their own organization and their own officials. The first group was for the "ouvriers" — that is to say blue collar workers who were paid by the hour (wages). The second group included the white collar workers who were paid monthly (salary). The leaders of the two groups regularly met together, but the members never do so and always stand apart.

⁵ "Une infirmière ou un assistant social dans une usine ne peuvent être rattachés à la Fédération des services de santé et services sociaux mais à la fédération Hacuitex, s'il s'agit d'une usine textile ou à la FGM si c'est une usine de construction mécanique" (circulaire du Secteur organisation, 25 avril 1974).

⁶ This plant, called "Pompey", produced special steels and employed, at the time, more than 3.000 workers. Many leaders of the CFDT came out of this plant (especially Tony Troglic and Jacques Chérèque who became vice-chairman of the CFDT and, later, was a "préfet" and finally a minister in Rocard's left-wing government).

Diagram III. Theoretical outline of organization of the CFTC in Meurthe-et-Moselle before 1962

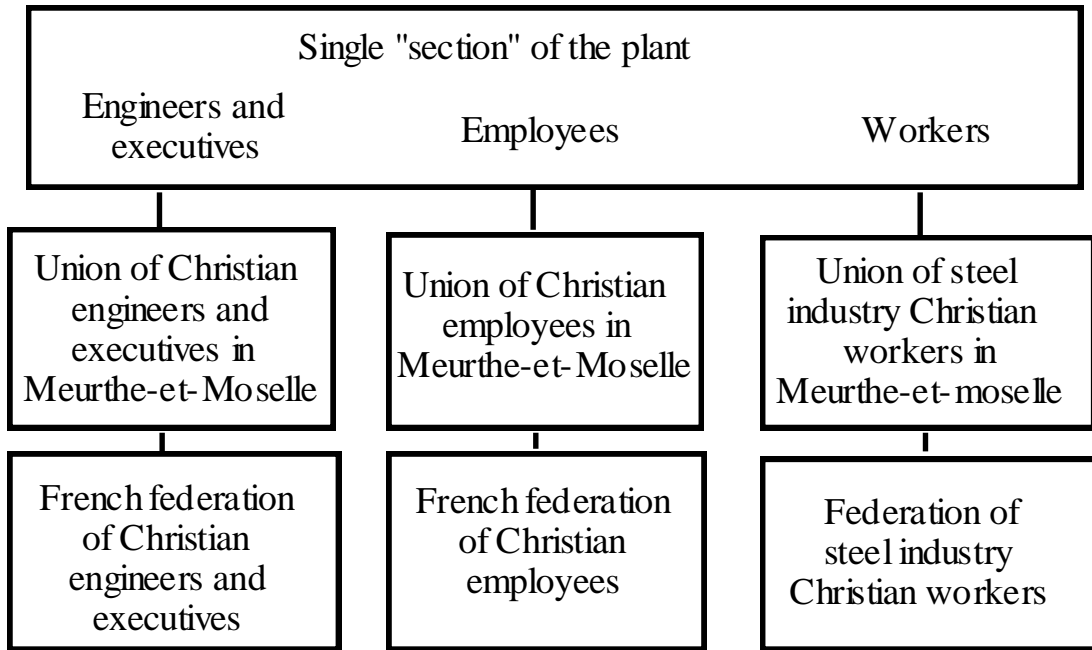
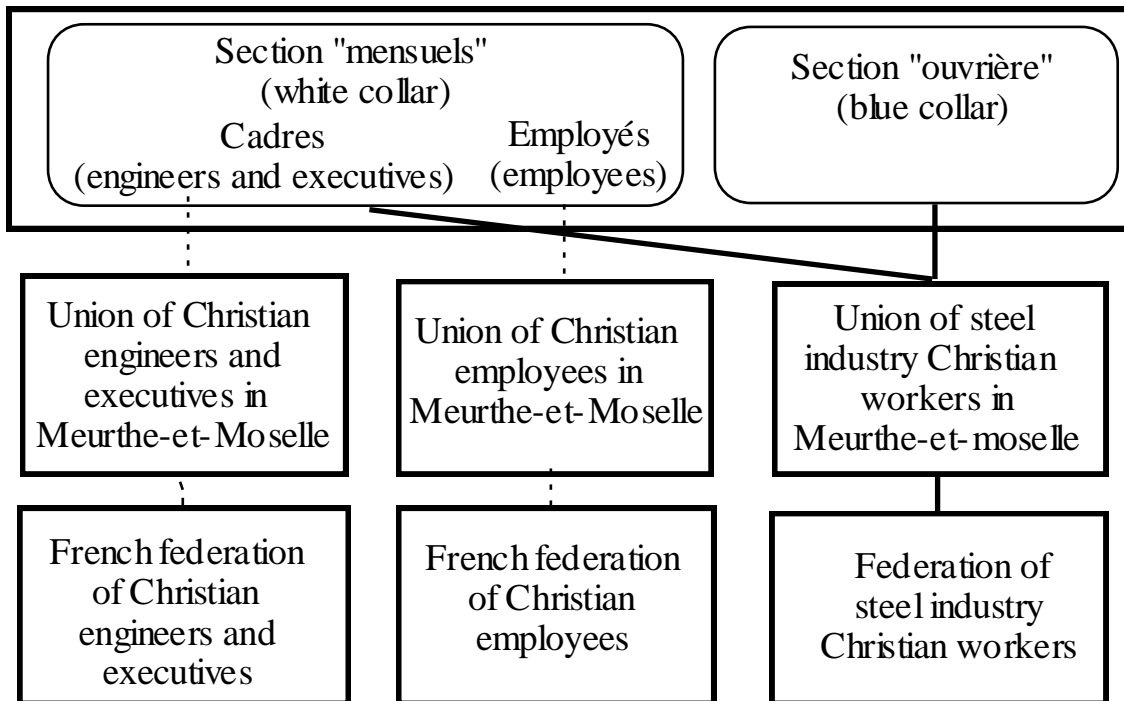


Diagram IV. Actual organization of the steel industry workers CFTC-CFDT in Meurthe-et-Moselle during the fifties and the sixties (The case of the "Aciéries de Pompey")



..... Proportion of union dues paid to craft unions
 ——— Steel industry dues and effective participation in the activities of the organisation

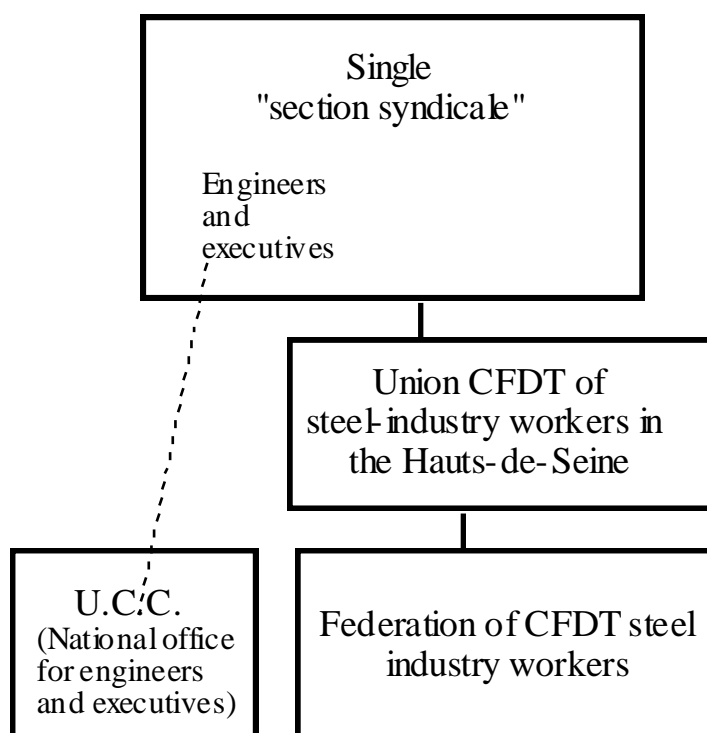
Considering the statutes of the CFTC at the time, the organization of Pompey's section was not legitimate, but it can be explained by practical reasons: in this plant, professional status and social roles were too different. So, it was unimaginable that everybody could stand together in meetings, elect the same officials and adopt a single position on matters of bargaining in the firm. On the contrary, political reasons may explain that, at regional level, the leftist leaders of the two groups agreed to join the same branch union which was the "Steel workers union of the Meurthe-et-Moselle". This decision also violated the rules of the CFTC, at this time, which imposed separate category unions (diagram III). In fact, during this period, the employees federation was politically linked with the right-wing christian democratic party (MRP); the steel workers unions were directed by activists of non-communist left-wing parties (SFIO and PSU).

This situation was very common. For example, we met the same one in Renault-Billancourt — the biggest plant in the country. Here also, the work-place unionism was based on skills and categories. And, outside the firm, local unions were organized on political and ideological positions.

The CGT and the CFDT consciously destroyed this spontaneous way of aggregation. In the name of working class unity, they imposed the principle of a single organization from the work-place to the national level (diagram V). Whatever their status and skill, workers of one branch had to be unionised in the same section, the same union, and the same federation.... Notice that, at confederal level, a specific national office — named "UCC" — is supposed to represent engineers and officers. But the activity of this office is very near zero.

In order to discipline the grass-root cells and to impose this single pattern of organization, the two confederations developed bureaucratic machines, especially strong "organization departments" with hierarchical control on the rank and file. They conceived a number of mechanisms to prevent diverting practices. This "normalisation" had not been easy. In the CFDT, it took nearly 15 years before skills and category-unions totally disappeared (especially for the civil servants). Trade unions built new large buildings, constituted numerous staffs, printed attractive magazines and obtained large subsidies from the government and local administrations. At the same time, organized opposition slowly dropped. Sometimes, one could hear leaders complaining about the workers "apathy" and about the silence of rank-and-file members. Sometimes also, a few members protested against "bureaucracy" and the lack of democracy in unions but, in fact, few significant schisms occurred. Silently, members massively dropped out and, now, French trade unions look like empty monuments.

Diagram V. Actual CFDT organization in Renault Boulogne-Billancourt since 1976



In conclusion: is it possible to imagine unions without members and without activists?

In France, we already have political parties without members or churches without congregations... These institutions can still live well because they receive large public subsidies, their employees are often paid by the government or by big firms, and so on. But, they become more fragile every day. We have seen how easily the old Italian worm-eaten party system has been destroyed. In France, wildcat strikes and spontaneous "comités d'action" have appeared in many professions like nursing, railway drivers, social workers, lorry drivers and so on. For some researchers, these "coordinations" could form the basis of unions in the future. The other option seems to be a renewal in the goals and in the internal organization of the unions. One of our recent studies shows that a revival in grass-root unionism is possible (Labbé-Croisat-Derville, 1993).

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RESTES ET LOCUTIONS ANGLAISES

In conclusion, I would like to say firstly that, nowadays, French unions seem like an army of generals : too many chiefs and not enough indians !

Secondly, I think that they are two types of approach to our subject.

— the research on the **labor movement**. It forms the mainstream in French research on the theme. Speaking of the Labor movement means one focuses on the political dimension of unionism. Studies have questioned the links between parties and unions, the political actions of unions : pressures on parliament, government and administration for regulations, rules, laws on wages and working conditions ; call for voting for left wing parties ; support for them during the campaigns. I think the same terms are also used in anglo-saxon sociology. But French researchers add 2 further dimensions. Firstly, parties control the leadership in the movement. The union's actions are inevitably weak, with little success, short range effects. Majors changes cannot be gained without the control of the power by the left wing parties. Unions action is tactical ; political action is strategic.

— talking about **unionism** means that the unions internal life is a significant field of research. It also means that the activity of unions is socially and politicaly significant...

We have a lot of studies on big strikes, leaders, ideology, activists, but very little research on unionisation, organisation, members, shop stewards, local structures...

We know well the discourse but not how the unions work how the comitee members change

About the strikes. Since the Liberation, the strikes is clearly a negative influence on unionism : Collapse of general strikes of 48, 53 and also 1968...

An overhead projector

Please be indulgent with my poor english and my accent

The public had lost confidence in the capacity of the government to change.

To defuse criticism with humour

To Know what somebody is talking about.

To ask something from somebody

To give something to somebody

"de" se traduit par of quand il signifie "possédé par" — "the stability of the rate", "the rate of unionisation" — par "in" quand il signifie "au sein de" — the growth in

the number" — par "from" quand il signifie : "venant de" — "some help from the steward" — par "for" quand il signifie "appliqué à" : "explanations for the decline"...

Table 2. Summary of the explanations for the decline

- general explanations
 - cycles of unionism
 - general situation of the country
- specific explanations
 - movement of employment into the services
 - changes in the organisation of firms
- ...

Table 3. From the ex-members point of view
(Why did they disappear ?)

- 25% Personal reasons
(retirement, professional and geographic mobility...)
- 35% Disappearance of the union
(it ceases or institutionalizes its activities) ;
- 45% Politization of the unions and divisions between unions