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The Midinette guiding the People.

An iconographic break of *the Assiette au Beurre*

Claude Didry

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### Summary

The Parisian midinettes' strike in August-September 1910 was aimed at increasing wages in an unprecedented context of rising living costs. It achieved partial victories, but ended with the movement running out of steam, which the press saw as a defeat for the strikers. One might think that the presentation of this movement through a series of caricatures published in the issue of 17 September 1910 of *l'Assiette au Beurre* ridiculed the amateurism of these striking women. But beyond the biting irony of the cartoonist, Maurice Radiguet, it is an avant-garde social movement that emerges under the banner of an avant-garde magazine in the field of satirical magazines. This double avant-gardism was due to a double break, in the practice of the strike on the one hand, and in its representation on the other. The strike was dominated by a festive dimension, while at the same time being organized around the union and the *Bourse du travail*. Radiguet's drawings challenge the established iconology of the strike, taking female figures out of the role of the *mater dolorosa*, and highlighting female figures that combine seductive attitudes with the determination in the movement. In this sense, it's a renewal of strike practice that is expressed by taking the strike out of its usual tragic and male-centric vision, to show its joyful strength in the search for continuous improvement in the working class condition.

In the representation of the strike at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sensation of misery and drama emanates from the large processions that wind their way through the countryside from the workplace - frequently the mine or the steelworks - to the workers' houses. In France, one can mention Alfred Roll's painting "la grève des mineurs" in 1880, Jules Adler's painting of the Creusot strike in 1899 or Steinlein's engraving in *the Assiette au Beurre* in 1901, slightly extending into the 20th century in the larger set presented in Novelion (2016).

At a European level, the expression of misery is often attached to the representation of strikes, in an iconography anchored in esthetic research as in Toorop's or Kolwitz' works<sup>1</sup>. The men, who obviously earned the living of the household, were accompanied by women who were more like housewives and mothers, some of whom were carrying children in an iconography evoking the Virgin and Child. The bodies were emaciated, suggesting the hunger that plagues a whole population. To the violence of poverty was frequently added that of the forces of order, under the figure of gendarmes and soldiers suggesting, beyond the demonstration, a challenge to public order announcing a revolt or even a revolution.

The strikes of the *midinettes* renewed the practice and the representation of the strike, by introducing the female workers, under the features of workers draped in the majesty of the shimmering clothes which they sew, the most often for a bourgeois clientele. It is a double rupture that this practice demonstrates which, by repeating itself since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, takes the dimension of a social fact more and more established: the emancipating rupture of the woman who by her work gains her life and her independence with regard to the family bonds; the rupture in the passage of the seduction to the claim which upsets the established relations between the sexes. This double rupture expressed by the *midinettes'* strikes was part of an intense reform dynamic preceding the adoption of a labor code from 1910 onwards, which recognized new capacities for female workers. Thus, in 1907, women became electors and eligible in the elections to the "Conseils de prud'hommes" (French labor courts) with the reform of this jurisdiction, the same year a law recognized the free disposal of her salary by the married woman, thus reducing the male tutelage instituted in the marriage by the Civil Code.

How is this rupture reflected in the September 17, 1910 front page (image 1) of the most famous satirical newspaper of the time, *L'Assiette au beurre*? Beyond a humor that relies on a certain machismo without hesitating to become gravelly at times, in what way does this ironic - even contemptuous - male representation of a collective action of female workers accompany and even express the affirmation of a form of "class consciousness" that could structure a social group?

Our hypothesis is that the drawings of this magazine mark a break in the *iconography* of the strike, by the meeting – in a terminology inspired by Panofsky (1939) – of what we can

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<sup>1</sup>. See Dorsemont in this volume.

call two *iconologies*<sup>2</sup>. It refers in the first place to an iconology of the magazine, such as regularities that emerge in the styles and the arrangements of the pages (drawing full page, subtitled by a caption/commentary) or of the whole notebooks (as chronicle of an event or a social fact). Secondly, it is part of an iconology of the strike, which it contributes to renew by thwarting the clichés that have been established through previous representations of the strike in painting and engraving. Taking up again from Panofsky (1957) the concept of *habitus*, one could say that this iconographic rupture translates a new *habitus*, insofar as it corresponds to the concomitance between a new pictorial representation, accompanying a renewal of the striker' practice as such, as well as a legal recognition of the place of women in labor. Indeed, the representation of the cover proclaims the gap or the "difference" between the striking practice of the *midinettes*, compared to the classic workers' strike. This renewed practice of the strike associates the culture of its festive dimension, a collective organization and the capacity of expression of the seamstresses' community carried by speakers. This is manifested in the drawings that follow one another in the notebook, showing not only elements of circumstance, but also new institutions such as the strike committee suggested through a series of drawings of meetings at the *Bourse du travail*. What emerges is a social group, organized around these spokes(women) of the world of the seamstresses that represent the *midinettes*.

The avant-garde character of the "*Assiette au beurre*" (1) is revealed in the case of the *midinette* strike in 1910 from a practice already ritualized in the profession (2), by a pictorial recognition of the power of the *midinettes*, as much in the action, as in its organization, which goes further than the macho irony of façade (3).

1. *L'Assiette au Beurre* as the melting pot of a social, iconographic and even pictorial avant-garde

Painting contributes to fix the features of the strike across Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in monumental tables that often witness the search for new commemoration (Dorssemont). It has to see with the religious celebrations that were the crucible of modern

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<sup>2</sup>. This rereading granting iconography the central place, in relation to iconologies was inspired to me by Huysman and Vernant (2019), in a return to Warburg and Panofsky, insisting on the reversal between iconography and iconology in the latter's work.

painting since the Middle Age, as an attempt to imagine “what these feasts and ceremonies of the future could consist in”<sup>3</sup>. But, a whole set of representations intercalate between pictorial art and photography whose use only allows with difficulty to trace the movement of strikers. In this universe of engraving and drawing, the creation of *the Assiette au Beurre* introduces an additional dimension, by linking the caricature to a progressive commitment that one could say "distanced". It constitutes the crucible of a more or less homogeneous "style", sharing at least a distance as well with regard to the aesthetic "academism" as with regard to a political correctness.

### 1.1. A publication inscribed in the field of satirical magazines

The “Belle Époque” in France was marked by the development of the press - in the wake of the 1881 law guaranteeing its freedom, but also of school laws spreading the mastery of reading in society - with titles such as *Le Petit Parisien* (with a print run of more than two million copies in 1914) benefiting from a large audience. The working classes took a large part in this development, in a society where the recent institution of a compulsory, free and secular school contributed to mass literacy. This development consecrates a competition based on the research of the spectacular, in what one begins to name the "*faits divers*" in French i.e., news focusing on catastrophes, murders, crimes, accidents (Kalifa 1993). It is then mainly under the prism of the "news", instead of annoying inquiries on social realities, that the political and social life is considered, through outstanding actions likely to give place to a picture. Thus, drawing and caricature benefited from this craze, contributing to the illustration of the written press, but also leading to the creation of specific magazines such as *the weekly Rire*, which frequently printed more than 100,000 copies between 1894 and 1914.

In this field of the illustrated magazine, without real socio-political commitment apart from the violent anti-Semitism in *Le Rire* during the Dreyfus Affair, the creation of *l'Assiette au Beurre* opens up a new space for critical expression of authority in all its forms, starting

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<sup>3</sup>. “If we find a little difficulty to-day in imagining what these feasts and ceremonies of the future could consist in, it is because we are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity. The great things of the past which filled our fathers with enthusiasm do not excite the same ardour in us, either because they have come into common usage to such an extent that we are unconscious of them, or else because they no longer answer to our actual aspirations; but as yet there is nothing to replace them. We can no longer impassionate ourselves for the principles in the name of which Christianity recommended to masters that they treat their slaves humanely, and, on the other hand, the idea which it has formed of human equality and fraternity seems to us to-day to leave too large a place for unjust inequalities.” (Durkheim 1915 [1912] p. 427).

with the State and the Administration (Dixmier & Dixmier 1974: 15). Indeed, “l'assiette au beurre” in French (“pork barrel” in English) is a colloquial expression that designates a lucrative place, a source of profit, targeting politicians, the military and capitalists. In his inaugural letter, the founder of the magazine Samuel Schwartz underlines this political orientations complementing a concern for technical and aesthetic innovations:

"We wish, that at the end of the year, the collection of *L'Assiette au beurre* constitutes a true artistic history of all the progress made, as well by the art of the printer as by that of the engraver and the paper maker. Is it necessary to add that *L'Assiette au beurre* will go beyond the point of view of art and will be devoted to social defense? We are, indeed, arrived at this turning point of the history where it is of the duty to approach frontally, particularly in a newspaper which addresses to the thinkers and to the artists, the social question under its most various aspects " (issue of May 16, 1901, translation by the author).

If the circulation of this newspaper remains modest, between 20 and 40,000 copies, for a relatively high price, around 40 cents (compared to 10 cents for *Le Rire*), the distribution that kiosks ensure throughout the country contributes to giving the published drawings - especially the drawings on the front page - a very large audience likely to mark the collective imagination.

The novelty of this weekly magazine is that the issues focus on a theme, taking the form of an album created by one or two artists. The drawings are presented in full page, in issues of about fifteen pages, so drawings signed by their authors who sometimes borrow pseudonyms. They oscillate between black and white, bi and trichromy, even sometimes more colors. The issues gather a collection of drawings accompanied by a brief commentary. This structuring of the newspaper gives him a great originality in the field of the press - including satirical -, by creating a form of distance towards the current events. One is tempted to see in this approach, a form of satirical and critical documentation on what corresponds to “social facts” in the terminology of Durkheimian sociology. In the vast collection of more than 600 issues published between 1901 and 1912, numerous subjects are presented: for example, British concentration camps in South Africa (September 28, 1901), religions (May 7, 1904), justice (September 26, 1908), feminism of the suffragettes (April 30, 1910), without forgetting a critique of the press's appetite for miscellaneous facts (“faits divers”) (September 8, 1906). Criticism carried by the newspaper is expressed within this framework, through a reversed image of social dominations, as in the relations between rich and poor, workers and bosses or

men and women. The provocation is also part of the game, with a brutally shocking drawing representing the face of King Edward VII in the posterior of a female allegory of England on the last page of the 28<sup>th</sup> September 1901 (on the Transvaal's English concentration camps) issue which sold over 250,000 copies. The resumption of this caricature on the Parisian walls with the face of President Macron in the posterior of M. Thatcher, suggests that *l'Assiette au Beurre* belongs to a (street) culture of caricature.

### *1.2 Designers between aesthetic and social avant-gardism*

The draftsmen who collaborate with *l'Assiette* are in their whole close to anarchism, but they reconcile their political inclination and the exercise of their artistic activity according to various methods. *L'Assiette* is for them an opportunity for earning their living and, at the same time, a place for the social mobilization of artists (Tiller 2014). For some, like Jules Grandjouan, union or political commitment prevails through the publication of drawings in a group of magazines which, in addition to *l'Assiette au beurre*, includes militant magazines such as *la Voix du Peuple* and *la Vie Ouvrière* which are organs of the CGT. But for others, this activity of draftsman is secondary activity, in a career dominated by an aesthetic activity in the avant-gardes of painting. This aesthetic avant-gardism, from Fauvism to Cubism, remains however itself marked by an anarchist tone in the "Parisian Bohemia" which concentrates, around the Bateau-Lavoir in Montmartre, those who will become great figures of the currents to come.

Certainly, Theophile Alexandre Steinlein, author of the famous engraving on the strike illustrating the cover of the first issue, was born in 1859. He belonged to the avant-garde of the impressionists and the realists/naturalists, and began to exhibit at the Salon des Indépendants in the early 1890s. But *l'Assiette* hosts also a new generation of avant-gardists. Kees von Dongen (born in 1877) participated in *l'Assiette* as an anarchist, throwing himself wholeheartedly into satirical drawings aimed at bourgeois society between 1901 and 1904, before returning to painting in a style that is described as "primitivism". In particular, he produced the issue on prostitution (October 26, 1901), a classic theme in anarchism (Leighten 2014), playing on the ambivalence between misery and female emancipation. The Spaniard Juan Gris also participated in *l'Assiette* with a strong activity in 1908, making in particular the

issue on justice in September 1908, before becoming, in the wake of his compatriot Picasso<sup>4</sup>, one of the protagonists of Cubism. Van Dongen's and Gris's participation in *l'Assiette* - and more generally their careers as draftsmen - reflects a distancing from academicism and classical style, moving toward a certain freedom in line that enriches their ability to take part in aesthetic dynamics such as primitivist fauvism and cubism (Leighten 2014). Beyond these two artists on whom Leighten dwells, the collaborators of *l'Assiette* also count among their ranks the Czech Frantisek Kupka, a future great actor of abstraction, who notably produced the issues on money in 1902 and religions in 1904. Let us also mention Jacques Villon, who was also one of the leading figures of cubism, then dadaism and surrealism with his brothers Marcel Duchamp and Raymond Duchamp-Villon.

### 1.3. *The strike in l'Assiette*

The representations of the strike are numerous in the issues of the magazine, starting with the cover of the first issue (1<sup>er</sup> January 1901), made by Steinlein<sup>5</sup>. This engraving, entitled "the strike fund", shows a worker accountant of the fund wondering if the "citizen-minister" has sent something, to which another worker replies "yes, 3000 troops". This black and white engraving, accentuating the melancholy of the theme with a grating humor, takes up the features of a mother with a child in her arms accompanied by another older child in the crowd of strikers (we find also in Rolls' and Adler's paintings) which it contributes to "typify" at least in the first age of its representation. It evokes a misery and a suffering that echo the repression of the Commune, celebrated by Steinlein after having met the exiles returning to Montmartre from the 1880s. Steinlen was active during the last two decades of the 19th century, when the time was ripe for the glorification of work. But in the artistic expressions of work, "Text and image merge much more closely to evoke in the worker the martyr and no longer as the hero of work." (Rébérioux 1994: 460) Apart from painting the strike and the misery of the workers, he made many drawings about midinettes, as in *Simplicissimus*.

However, an evolution takes shape in the different issues of the journal devoted to the strike, moving towards a de-dramatized, even joyful, vision of the strike, which emerges first

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<sup>4</sup>. Picasso participated as a draftsman in the magazine *Le Frou Frou* (which had the same owner as *l'Assiette*) which had a truly erotic tone in its representation of women, but his participation remained very limited and stopped in 1905 when he began to live from his art.

<sup>5</sup>. See Dorssemont op.cit.

of all from the agonistic dimension put at the center of an issue of 1905 by Jules Grandjouan. Indeed, Granjouan introduces a step back in the representation of the strike as, for example, on the frontpage of this issue, which breaks with a naturalization of the painter's point of view (image 2). Thus, the strikers are most often in the background with the members of the troop in the foreground, seen from behind when they are infantrymen or in profile when they are horsemen. The color marks this change of perspective, the red of the flag on the side of the demonstrators, is found in the madder red of the pants and kepi worn by the soldier. The dramatic dimension is maintained by an unfolding of the action over the pages, arriving at the burials of the strikers killed and the resumption of work. Under Granjouan's stroke, the strike is reduced to a manipulation of the "party" represented by a politician who encourages the rise to the front and celebrates the sacrifice of the dead. We find here the trade unionist fiber of Grandjouan, which will be expressed in the posters and the reviews of the CGT like *La Voix du Peuple* and *La Vie Ouvrière*.

The following decade marked a turning point by showing a new mastery of the strikers over their movement, which led to imagining victories. The issue on the midinette strike takes on its full significance in this context, coming between "the Big Night" ("*Le Grand Soir*") (7 May 1910) (image 3) and the "English strike" (2 September 1911) (image 4). The "Big Night" realized by the draftsman Hellé - with an almost childish line which gives a great stylistic originality to the number - and the trade unionist Émile Pataud leader of a CGT union of electricians who enjoyed a high profile in the media in 1910, on a victorious general strike. The press spoke of "King Pataud" because of his role in triggering the electricity strikes that paralyzed Paris, before Pataud lost himself in internal struggles and moved towards anti-Semitic positions close to the Action Française. This issue describes the progression of the strike in the different professions, imagining the bourgeoisie deprived of everything by the devaluation of the currency in favor of the union card of which it is precisely deprived. The issue of September 2, 1911 on "the English strike", which followed the great agitations of the summer in Great Britain, with in particular the national railway strike of August 18-19, was again realized by Jules Grandjouan under the pseudonym "To Day". The issue is presented as the chronicle of a movement crossed by a form of revolutionary syndicalism, a current to which Grandjouan is close. In style, Grandjouan's touch is found with a vision of the strike in retreat integrating the employer and public authorities into the scene. But this time, the representatives of the authority turn their backs to the crowd, and face the spectator, fleeing from the procession

and having a herald announce the institution of the sliding scale of wages. The issue concludes with a flamboyant caricature of the Kaiser, who rubs his hands at the success of his agents provocateurs, which echoes the insinuations of the English government.

Finally, the *midinettes* escape this aesthetic and social avant-gardism in the issue of September 17, 1910, which has for author Maurice Radiguet, not being to my knowledge in the aesthetic avant-garde, nor in the social avant-garde. Radiguet, also the father of Raymond Radiguet, the author of *Le Diable au corps*, is presented as a "sketch artist of atmosphere" for a publishing house, he also participates in many magazines as a caricaturist or author of comic strips like *Le Rire* or *La Jeunesse Illustrée*. He is one of the most important draftsmen in *l'Assiette* with the production of 37 issues (Dixmier and Dixmier 1974), in particular by taking charge for example of an issue on ceruse testifying by an acid humor of his refusal of the social injustice that constitutes the maintenance of this product in painting (Rainhorn 2021). His intervention on the strike of the *midinettes* makes an important part to their sensuality which emerges from its drawings, as well as to their lightness which emerges from the texts. But what seems interesting beyond these clichés is the view of the strike that a cartoonist without any obvious link to trade unionism has, which brings out a form of "common consciousness" of the strike. The different tables correspond to a form of chronicle, which is based on the reading of the press and highlights the meetings held at the *Bourse du travail*, leaving the insistence on the destitution and cruelty of the repression at the heart of previous pictorial representations.

## 2. The *midinettes* on strike

The publication of *l'Assiette au Beurre* devoted to the *midinettes'* strike, on September 17, 1910, comes in the middle of a movement that had gained momentum in August. This movement impresses by the determination of its actresses, as much as by their elegance. To understand its significance, it is necessary to return to the specificities of the profession and the conditions in which this conflict took place.

### 2.1. The *midinette* as an institution and icon of Parisian couture

The practice of the strike by the *midinettes* is marked by a festive dimension which does not hold only with the denigration of women taken in a claiming activity, until then,

rather male. In fact, the *midinette* has long been an urban institution, distinguished in particular by the outfits they made for themselves on the basis of a production intended for the bourgeoisie. It arouses as such a male glance carrying to the fantasy that redoubles its reputation to fall easily in love, as testifies Proust in *The Captive* (part six of *Remembrance of Things Past*):

“I reflected that on a Sunday afternoon like this little shopgirls, *midinettes*, prostitutes must be strolling in the Bois [of Boulogne]. And with the words *midinettes*, *little shopgirls* (as had often happened to me with a proper name, the name of a girl read in the account of a ball), with the image of a white bodice, a short skirt, since beneath them I placed a stranger who might perhaps come to love me, I created out of nothing desirable women, and said to myself: "How charming they must be!"”<sup>6</sup>

The *midinette* breaks with the representation of worker exploitation that is, in the clothing sector, the scandal caused by the *sweating system* as a form of subcontracting cascading from the order of the department store to the poorly ventilated attic, through long "wakes" in the workshop. She is thus, in some respects, the antithesis of the martyrological figure represented by Mary Ann Walkley in Marx's *Capital*, a milliner who died at the age of 20 from exhaustion in 1863, during one of those periods of press that forced her to work continuously from the workshop to the dormitory. The *midinette* thus differs from the victimized vision of the worker in the *sweating system* as it emerges from the investigations of the Leagues of Buyers, or from the mobilization engaged by Beatrice Potter Webb, by a care of the self which leads her to assume a freedom of dress, sentimental and sexual made possible by her financial independence with regard to the male tutelage dominating the family. She embodies a form of *avant-garde* in the clothing sector, by her youth and her magnificence, which gives her a capacity of drive in the workers' mobilizations while remaining subjected to the suspicion of class betrayal by tastes of luxury and the attraction that she arouses in the male public of the bourgeoisie. This situation in the profession is evidenced by a column in the newspaper *Le Temps* of March 2, 1901, during one of the first seamstresses' strikes:

“[The world of needlework] is a real kingdom that contains individuals of all kinds, an aristocracy and a plebeian. There are the workers who work for the great dressmakers of the

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<sup>6</sup>. M. Proust, *The Captive (Remembrance of Things Past, Part Six)*, New York, Albert & Charles Boni, 1930, p. 208.

Rue de la Paix; there are the seamstresses of the suburbs who are exploited by the entrepreneurs and the novelty stores. These are really to be pitied, their work is irregular and badly paid. They toil for twelve or fifteen hours, in their airless and fireless dwelling, to earn nickels and dimes. And as it often happens, it is the most unfortunate ones who show resignation. The seamstresses suffer in silence; and their companions, relatively privileged, who are employed by the luxury houses, raise the banner of revolt.” (Translation by the author)

The urban presence of the *midinettes* is not only due to their elegance, it is also based on practices that can be assimilated to rituals that tend to become fixed at the end of the 19th century. Such is the case of the celebration of Saint Catherine, the patron saint of the profession, leading to the parade of the “*catherinettes*”, i.e. the seamstresses who have not found a husband before their twenty-fifth birthday. This patron saint's (Catherine) day is celebrated first in the workshop, before eventually spilling over into the street. It gives rise to a subversion of dress codes, with some girls dressing as men to play the role of a potential husband with parodies of weddings (Monjaret 2015). If this celebration tends to focus attention on single seamstresses, it reveals also the existence of seamstresses who have married and had children, sometimes abandoning the fashion and garment workshops where the *midinettes* work, to continue their activity at home. The press also mentions the annual march of the *midinettes*, a competition that is also found in Berlin sewing, which honors a body hygiene that can be found in the youth movements of socialism and trade unionism. Finally, it is from the taking of meals outside the workplace, that is to say outside the home or the workshop, in the street and in restaurants that the *midinettes* take their name. This leads us to believe that the *midinettes* correspond to a type of seamstress who combines youth with the independence that income outside of family responsibilities (as daughter, wife and mother) provides and with fashion, even if a non-negligible part of them belongs to clothing workshops that respond to orders for ready-to-wear clothing from department stores. Moreover, this incarnation of the professional group accompanies an anchoring in urban life through a frequentation of the street both daily and obeying the ritual of regulated collective events. In this universe, the popular conservatory of Mimi Pinson created by the composer Gustave Charpentier provides the *midinettes* with a place of artistic training and a rallying point for an indirect politicization. But at the same time, *midinettes* are the targets of moral

crusades aimed at diverting them from the bad company they can find in the street, with the concern, for example, to create restaurants dedicated to them (Albert 2013).

## 2.2. 1910, the first strike of the *midinettes*?

In a journalistic and historiographical universe dominated by men, it is common to pay little attention to women's work and, *a fortiori*, to the collective mobilizations of women at work (Perrot 1998) by reducing them to charivaris pertaining to “folkloric” practices. Thus, on many occasions, the movement of the summer of 1910 was presented in the press as the first collective mobilization of *midinettes*, by justifying the fact that male trade unionists, such as the general secretary of the clothing federation belonging to the CGT, Pierre Dumas, set themselves up as tutors for *midinettes* in learning the rudiments of industrial action and the practice of strike action. But it turns out that seamstresses' strikes in Paris have been regular since at least the end of the 19<sup>ème</sup> century, as evidenced by the succession of mobilizations in 1899, 1901, and 1908, which precede the one in 1910 (Tilburg 2019: 156). They continued during First World War, around purchasing power in the face of inflation in 1916 or again in 1917 around the “English week” (free Saturday afternoon), which gave rise to demonstrations that definitively marked memories. Their mobilizations, by making the professional issues of seamstresses in general more sensitive, undoubtedly contributed to the passing of the law of 10 July 1915 instituting a minimum wage for home-based seamstresses (Avrane 2013) that paved the way to the idea of the extension of collective agreements by public authorities (Didry 2002).

The trade unionism of Parisian seamstresses includes great figures, such as Jeanne Bouvier<sup>7</sup>. Jeanne Bouvier was elected in 1901 to the Paris labor council and to the administrative commission of the *Bourse du travail*. In 1904, she was elected to the *Conseil Supérieur du Travail*, then in 1915 she was a member of the wages commission created in the wake of the law of July 10, 1915. The Parisian strikes were in some respects part of an international dynamic, as evidenced by a strike of the “sartine” in Milan in 1907 (image 5) or

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<sup>7</sup>. On Jeanne Bouvier, see the reference article on the “Maitron” (in French, unfortunately for non-French readers) <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article102055>

the mobilizations of the garment industry in New York (Green 1997), to which we can add the Montreal mobilization in Canada culminating in 1937<sup>8</sup>.

The seamstresses used to stop the activity of the workshops, but also in the prolongation of these social conflicts to negotiate tariffs while trying to make progress on the improvement of their working conditions. The newspaper *La Presse* of February 18, 1901 reports an important mobilization of the *midinettes*, quickly obtaining the demanded wage increases, including in the Paquin fashion house presented as the hardest. This house on the rue de la Paix, created in 1891 by the dressmaker Jeanne Paquin, was one of the most prominent at the time, especially given its location near Maxim's, as shown in the painting of the seamstresses going out on the rue de la Paix by Jean Béraud in 1900 (image 6). The *midinettes'* strike was regularly replayed in a festive guise, which was partly due to the fact that their demonstrations were less subject to the constraint of the forces of law and order, which were reluctant to engage in physical confrontations with women. Sometimes *midinettes* even thwart the restraint of law enforcement by engaging in a dance with the male supporters of the march, trade unionists or students by miming a dance, or pretending to settle down for lunch (Tilburg 2019). André Heuzé, a French movie director who was himself a unionist, made a movie on the strike in 1911, for which we only found the poster<sup>9</sup>. To capture the atmosphere, in an era close to the 1910s, we can see a sequence shot on the 1923 strike<sup>10</sup>. But the festive dimension is also accompanied by an organization, constituted by the strike committee that brings together nearly eight hundred seamstresses at the Bourse du Travail according to an article in *Le Temps* of March 2, 1901.

One can therefore think that the practice of striking was well established in Parisian couture when the 1910 strike occurred. Through the organized solidarity represented by the union and the lived solidarity of the strikes and parades, the *midinettes* symbolize an urban strike, in direct contact with political power. This dynamic of organization, by the capacities of resistance that it offers, was manifested in the case of the shoe workers of Fougères with an even stronger intensity. The conflict lasted several months in 1906-1907, thanks to the

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<sup>8</sup>. A quick look at the victorious 1937 strike in Montreal can be found at <https://fr-ca.facebook.com/SalutBonjour.tv/videos/salut-montr%C3%A9al-la-gr%C3%A8ve-des-midinettes/10154383618316762/>

<sup>9</sup>. This poster can be seen here: <https://www.tessier-sarrou.com/lot/77420/6490807-greve-des-midinettes-andre-heu>

<sup>10</sup>. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7w1hi3> film about the *midinette* strike in 1923

support of Parisian artists such as Sarah Bernard with shows intended to finance the strikers, or the sending of shipments across the country to families in solidarity. The struggle is supported by multiple social attachments, sustaining a determined but joyful form of social confrontation (Paugam 2022).

The midinettes' movement in the summer of 1910 was preceded by meetings which, although poorly attended, suggest a strong attention from the political world towards these garment workers. According to *La Presse* of Monday, January 17, 1910, a meeting was held on Sunday afternoon at the Bourse du Travail, bringing together only fifty or so workers, but with Jean Allemane, a prominent figure of socialism in France, on the podium. This newspaper also reports a "very studied speech" by the president of the league of the rights of the woman, Marie Bonneville underlining "how much it was urgent for the women, to group themselves, in order to obtain and the raising of the wages of famine and the suppression of the exploitation to which the women are in butte more particularly." Marie Bonneville was a teacher and trade unionist who was appointed to the Conseil Supérieur du Travail in 1901 by the Minister of Commerce and Industry (on which labor depended), the socialist Alexandre Millerand, whose feminist commitment was also reflected in her work as a journalist for *La Fronde*.

The decree of February 17, 1910 taken by the Minister of Labor, the independent socialist René Viviani, provides for the removal of a derogation authorizing what is called the "veillées" (wakes) in embroidery, hats and clothing, in the decree of application of 1893 of the law of 1892 prohibiting night work (between 21h and 5h) of women and minors. This means that it becomes impossible for fashion houses to make their female staff work until 11pm during the press period while maintaining the possibility of having recourse to overtime during the day. This decree shows a strong attention of the minister, an "independent" socialist who was a leading politician, to the working conditions of seamstresses. This new regulation of working hours in the needle industry accompanied the concern of Parisian seamstresses that visits by the Labor Inspectorate to the workshops be more frequent (Tilburg 2019), which shows a knowledge of their rights on the part of these workers or at least the most committed to unionism.

### 2.3. *The strike of the summer of 1910*

It is in the context of soaring food prices that the mobilization of seamstresses crystallized, before actions were taken around the various fashion houses, including fashion and clothing. On August 27, 1910, Jaurès' newspaper ran the headline "The price of life" subtitled "Patatoes overpriced" accusing entrepreneurs to rise the price of the products to increase their margins. It also devotes an article in the same issue to the success of the garment strike, taking great care not to talk about midinettes, but rather about seamstresses and dressmakers:

"At the headquarters of the Clothing Union, we were told that two small houses in Montmartre, the houses of David, a press contractor on Mont-Cenis Street, and Kapeluche, on the Ramey passage, had signed the tariff and recognized the Union. This brings to eight the number of houses that have accepted the conventions presented by the workers' organization. It is about a thousand workers - including those of the house Esders - who have obtained significant increases in wages. When one thinks of the state in which this unfortunate corporation was only three weeks ago, one remains amazed at the results achieved."

The strategy of the strikers was to lay siege to the workshops in order to obtain the signature of the new tariff, which suggested the existence of a piecework payment. During the month of August, the movement is expanding and the strikes are spreading with rallies in front of the workshops that have not yet signed, whose organization is decided by regular meetings at the Bourse du Travail within the framework of the CGT union of clothing. The demonstrations and gatherings were accompanied by male trade unionists, who provided a form of orderly service, and gave rise to police interventions that caused great indignation in the crowd of passers-by, sometimes leading to individual initiatives or mobilizations of the crowd to confront the agents, according to *L'Humanité*. The press also reported that the midinettes demonstrated while singing the *Internationale* with great pleasure, and also chased the "foxes" -an expression designating the non-strikers-. The movement seemed to run out of steam during the month of September, with an article in *L'Humanité* on October 9 reporting the "end of the garment workers' strike" presented as a defeat, "after forty-five days of struggle".

### 3. The midinettes in *l'Assiette*

The midinettes made their entrance in the 1910 issue of *L'Assiette* following the summer strike, before reappearing in the songs celebrating the events of the past year in the last issue of 1910. It can be said that this entry is triumphant in the front-page image, and then in the drawings chronicling the strike, even if a cynically macho tone persists in the captions.

#### 3.1. *The triumph of the midinette*

The midinette is a feminine archetype which starts from the young seamstress and dressed with the elegance of a bourgeois who arouses the immediate sympathy of the men attending their demonstrations, even accompanying them to support them. Thus, it is reported in the press of the rallying of students to the movement of 1901, this junction so much sought in the years post-1968 being found in a pioneer way in the strikes of the midinettes. At the same time, the young and elegant midinette who agitates the male libido is associated with a girl who falls easily in love and multiplies of this fact the disappointments and the sorrows of love. It is then common to see an innocence, even a silliness, which, associated with an ethic of independence and freedom, gives the midinette a reputation of lightness in morals that can sometimes lead to an assimilation with a light form of prostitution. The issue of September 17, 1910 does not escape these clichés, due in large part to a form of nihilistic dandyism on the part of the artist - Maurice Radiguet - who holds the pencil. It remains no less an ambivalence of the representation which, behind a cynically macho commentary, shows a "conquering" midinette in the image (image1).

The cover engraving breaks radically with the usual iconography of the strike, which is fixed around the representation of the demonstrations of miners, or that of the misery of workers in miserable interiors, by being located rather in the suburbs or rural areas. Indeed, it presents a midinette in a fitted dress that lets her leg show, occupying most of the field, embodying the revolution on her own, dominating, even pushing aside the paving stone cutter whose hand is almost under her heel. The line remains visible, giving the impression of a sketch, which contrasts with the current realism of the strike. Moreover, far from the crowd that unfolds in the strike processions, the engraving is reduced to two characters, with, in addition to the midinette, the worker whose we wonder if he lays the cobblestones, or if he arranges them in a barricade that became the pedestal of the revolutionary. Finally, if the worker can appear in a position of reinforcement on which the striker can rely, it is also a form

of domination of the woman over the man that is expressed, referring to the domination of the bourgeoisie suggested by the outfit of the midinette over the world of the worker, which is manifested by the ill-fitting shirt of the stonecutter. But at the same time, this domination can be interpreted from the perspective of the reversals that are the hallmark of *L'assiette* in terms of humor.

The color reinforces the tension of the painting by placing the midinette in a plain blue-gray outfit with a red ribbon that underlines the red shoes and the red flag, in symmetry with the worker's outfit in a checkered shirt and dark red pants evoking the midinette's shoes with a sort of scarf, even a tie of blue-gray tone. The pencil line remains visible, the elements in the background appearing only in a rough state, which distances the drawing from the realism used in the images of the strike. With the red flag that she holds by the top of the flagpole, the midinette surrounds the worker by enclosing him pictorially in a position of supporter of the revolution, which expresses part of the reality of these midinette strikes attracting male elements around them. In view of this situation, the words of the midinette ("And when the Big Night comes...") indicate a form of revolutionary impetus echoing the song of the *Internationale* which is very frequent in the demonstrations, while referring to a recent issue (May 7, 1910) of the newspaper entitled "the Big Night" whose political and pictorial boldness has marked the spirits (image 3). The worker's response sets the tone of the issue, which suggests, in filigree, the attraction of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois to which the midinette will inevitably succumb. It can also be interpreted as resentment, for the one who is convinced that he cannot compete with the distinction of the bourgeois in the seduction.

### *3.2. The insurgent Midinette, in the wake of Delacroix*

The front page of *L'Assiette* takes on a new dimension when compared to the front page of *Le Rire*, February 15, 1901 (image 7), during one of the first strikes of the midinettes (Tilburg 2019). The performance of *Le Rire* returns to the meetings of the midinettes at the Bourse du Travail, described in very complimentary terms by a columnist in *Le Temps* in 1901. It reduces the midinettes to their physical assets, likening them, during a show of hands, to *French Cancan* dancers by their reduction to pairs of legs, unable to respond otherwise to a disheveled speaker. A decade later, in *L'Assiette*, it is a person who dominates the front page: the midinette, who derives a certain grandeur from the red flag she waves, while remaining

under the recurring suspicion of betraying her class by the taste that the popular characters lend her for the bourgeois.

Thus, the 1910 midinette in *L'Assiette* can be compared to female representations that leave the religious register of the Virgin and Child, taking on an allegorical dimension. Bouchard (2020) suggests that the triumphant midinette can be compared to the female allegories of the Commune, which can be found in the work of Walter Crane in 1887, or Maximilien Luce in 1890. But later on, this female allegory embodying a form of purity was replaced by a representation of Marianne delivered to the businessmen who turned the allegory of the Republic into prostitution. Now, by following Bouchard on this path of the female allegory, we must also integrate the painting as a whole where the cobblestones suggest a barricade on which the midinette would be enthroned. Thus, it is rather the original Marianne before Marianne, that is to say Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* in 1830, incarnation of the Revolution brandishing a tricolor flag, which is evoked in the front page of the *Assiette*.

The reading of the *Assiette* also suggests enriching the gallery of female figures, ordered by Bouchard (2020) according to the tension between prostitution and housewives sublimated by the allegory of the Republic and the Commune. In the field of female figures, it is necessary to integrate the social tension between the bourgeois woman and the working-class mother. But another tension crosses the field, on the ground of political progressivism through the contrast which opposes the revolutionary midinette of 1910, sensual, free and light but sensitive to the charm of the bourgeoisie, to the austere, old and ugly feminists by a greenish tone in the issue of September 18, 1909 (image 8) . This is mitigated with the issue of April 30, 1910 devoted to the feminist Q-M by Gris and Cabanis (image 9), the abbreviation Q-M designating the "quinze-millistes" that is to say the deputies whose parliamentary allowance has increased from 9000 to 15 000 francs by causing some public agitation. The color of the drawings always tends towards green, while the cartoonists consider the election of deputies represented under younger and comelier than in the issue on feminism. The captions of the drawings are marked by the theme of a distancing of these deputies from their homes and their children. The desertion of the home and household chores finally tends to take precedence over austerity and ugliness in the representation of the committed woman.

### 3.3. *A chronicle of the strike*

Leaving behind the gravelly humor that Radiguet's issue maintains, some drawings suggest the existence of striking features in the 1910 strike. Thus, some drawings return to the question of purchasing power, for the first time at the heart of a strike, while insisting on the difficulty of apprehending the economic situation for the *midinettes* (image 10). In the caption, a first *midinette* emphasizes "we don't earn enough to eat and we only ask for 10 sous a day" to which another *midinette* replies "It's enormous, we need so little to feed ourselves... Mr. Descaves<sup>11</sup> affirms that three lumps of sugar are equivalent to an eight sous cutlet." On the back wall, a sign reads "Notice. The half portions are suppressed", reminding this suppression imposed by the restaurant owners (in the wake of the rise in the price of products) which directly affected the *midinettes* used to ordering a half portion.

Another engraving (image 11) synthesizes the union mobilization and the politicization of the *midinettes*, by presenting a meeting of the *midinettes* at the Bourse du Travail, practice illustrated since 1901 by photos of press. The speaker declares "And now, my darling chicks, let's go to the song of the International to the rue de la Paix... The small king of Portugal must pass there!...", evoking the song of the International regularly reported by the press during the demonstrations of the *midinettes*, as well as the official visit of the king of Portugal Manuel II in the month of May, before being dethroned in October 1910. Another drawing (image 12) insists on the oratory capacity of the *midinettes*, attributed to the training received at the conservatory Mimi Pinson founded by the composer Gustave Charpentier. The engraving distinguishes the speaker in a neat dress and a hat, of night blue color, in front of an audience composed mainly of *midinettes* in which are also men. But the legend is scathing in reporting the following dialogue:

“Since Charpentier taught them to sing and dance like at the grand opera...

- Only, it is unfortunate that they don't know how to make a pot-au-feu and darn the bottoms of the breeches.”

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<sup>11</sup>. Lucien Descaves is a writer close to the Goncourt and frequenting Picasso and Apollinaire, whose works deal with the working class.

## Conclusion

The so-called "midinettes' strike" in 1910, without being the first, undoubtedly left its mark on people's minds by reinforcing a dynamic of politicization of the midinettes themselves, as witnessed by the frequency of the *Internationale* in the processions. But precisely, to speak of a strike of the midinettes, as newspapers did, from *Le Temps* to *L'Humanité*, which did not adopt the term until later - sometimes reverting to the term "seamstresses" - is to recognize that the midinettes were representatives of a wider professional universe, ranging from milliners to home workers, via the garment workshops. What the front page of the *Assiette au Beurre* shows is the avant-garde dimension of the working class that the midinettes represent, both as the avant-garde of their professional group, and as the avant-garde of the wage-earners. Certainly, this front page relaying a more organized practice of the strike, in relation with a union structure opening to the workers the doors of the *Bourse du travail* that we find in the drawings of the issue, announces a distanced, ritualized form of the strike. But it suggests that the class struggle can be joyful, showing the female face of a conquering proletariat that presents itself as worthy and confident in the advances that its mobilizations bring. Thus, the midinettes succeeded in putting on the public way claims that they begin to formulate in their workshops, by announcing the great festivals that were the strikes of the Popular Front of which they were, there still, the pioneers.

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Image 1: Front cover of *l'Assiette au Beurre*, by Maurice Radiguet, 17th September 1910 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1050182r> for the whole issue).



Dépôt Légal  
Seine 4  
No. 1905

**la grève**  
BERNARD NAUDIN.  
Grandjouan.

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image 2: Front cover of l'Assiette au Beurre, by Jules Grandjouan, 6th May 1905 (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1048140m?rk=42918;4> for the whole issue).



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image 3: Front cover of l'Assiette au Beurre, by A. Hellé, 7th May 1910 (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k10501442> for the whole issue).

N° 544  
2 Septembre 1911  
50 Centimes

# L'Assiette au Beurre

REDACTION  
ET ADMINISTRATION  
62, Rue de Provence  
PARIS  
—  
Téléphone : 283-74

## LA GRÈVE ANGLAISE



**LA GRÈVE ANGLAISE**  
— Hurrah ! Old England... Le peuple anglais sait défendre ses droits, comme il saurait défendre sa Patrie!

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image 4: Front cover of l'Assiette au Beurre, by To Day (Jules Grandjouan), 2nd September 1911 (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1049956j> for the whole issue).



Lo sciopero delle sartine a Milano: una dimostrazione delle scioperanti contro una grande sartoria sul Corso V. E.  
(Disegno di A. Beltrame)

Image 5: the Strike of the Sartine in Milano, by Achille Beltrame in La domenica del Corriere, 27 October-3 November 1907, [http://digiteca.bsmc.it/cache/TO00182996\\_1907\\_00044\\_018.jpg](http://digiteca.bsmc.it/cache/TO00182996_1907_00044_018.jpg)



Image 6: Jean Beraud, 1907, *Sortie des ouvrières de la Maison Paquin rue de la Paix* (Musée Carnavalet, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sortie\\_de\\_Paquin.jpg?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sortie_de_Paquin.jpg?uselang=fr))

N° 330. 7<sup>e</sup> année. 2 Mars 1901.

15 centimes.

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FÉMINISME  
— C'est un vote à mains levées que je vous demande...

Dessin de WILLETTE.

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Image 7: Front cover of Le Rire, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1901 (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1174196t> for the whole issue).

N° 442  
18 Septembre 1909  
50 Centimes

# L'Assiette au Beurre

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PARIS  
—  
Téléphone : 283-74

## FÉMINISME ET FÉMINISTES

Par BING et SIGL.

DEPOT LEGAL  
N° 272  
1909



— Ce qui fait notre force, à nous autres apôtres, c'est la chasteté, la continence absolue que nous observons, malgré la convoitise masculine toujours posée sur nous!...

Image 8: Front cover of *l'Assiette au Beurre*, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1909 (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1049854c#> for the whole issue).

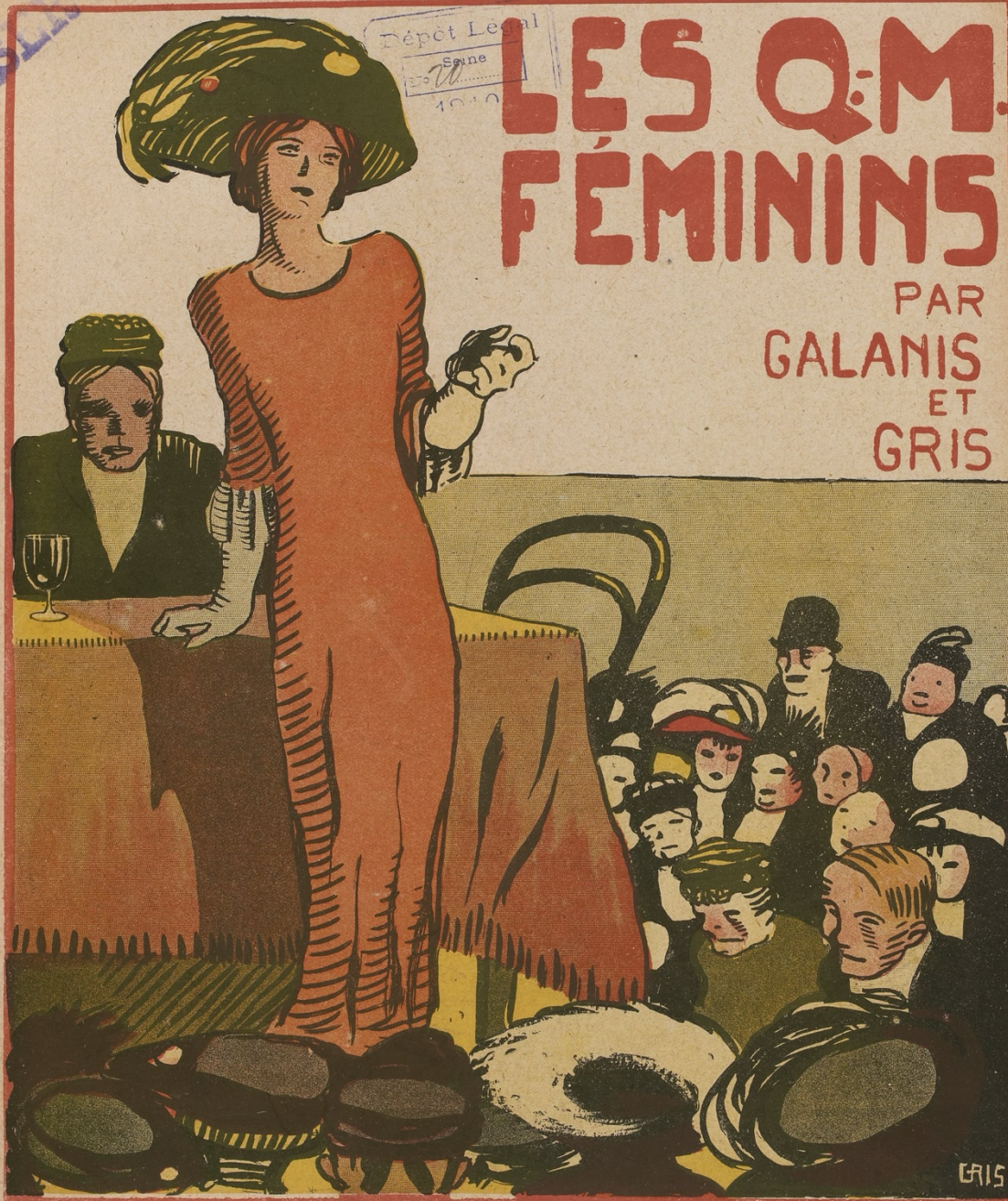
474  
30 Avril 1910

50 Centimes

# L'Assiette au Beurre

ET ADMINISTRATION  
62, Rue de Provence  
PARIS

Téléphone : 289-74



UN MEETING FÉMINISTE.

L'Oratrice. — Il y a entre l'homme et nous une si petite différence que ce n'est pas la peine d'en parler.

Un loustic. — Parlons-en, au contraire !

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image 9: Front cover of l'Assiette au Beurre, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1910 by Juan Gris (see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k10501427> for the whole issue).



## QUESTION ÉCONOMIQUE.

- On ne gagne pas de quoi manger et nous ne demandons que dix sous de plus par jour.
- C'est énorme !... Il faut si peu de chose pour se nourrir... M. Descaves affirme que trois morceaux de sucre valent une côtelette de huit sous !...

Image 10: Drawing by Maurice Radiguet, 17th September 1910, p. 411 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1050182r> for the hole issue).



— Et maintenant, mes poulettes chéries, rendons-nous au chant de l'*Internationale* jusqu'à la rue de la Paix... Le petit roi de Portugal doit y passer!...

(Toutes en cœur.) — C'est ça!... Allons l'embrasser!... Vive le roi!

Image 11: Drawing by Maurice Radiguet, 17th September 1910, p. 407 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1050182r> for the whole issue).



— Epatantes, ces petites mômes-là!... Depuis que Charpentier leur a appris à chanter et à danser comme à la grande Opéra...

— Seulement, il est malheureux qu'elles ne sachent pas faire un pot-au-feu et reprendre les fonds de culottes.

Image 12: Drawing by Maurice Radiguet, 17th September 1910, p. 413 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1050182r> for the hole issue).