

**Alex ANTISTE, “Monograph on the postal check center in Paris, 1945-1968” (Monographie du centre de chèques postaux de Paris, 1945-1968), directed by Antoine Prost and Christian Chevandier, University of Paris I, master’s thesis in contemporary history, 1999, 258 p.**

The postal check center in Paris received a frontal assault at the end of the 1960s. We now know that what was gained from the May 1968 strike served to improve the work and extra-curricular life of the majority of its staff. But beyond advances in the reduction of work hours, working conditions and union rights, this protest movement also had consequences on the management of personnel. Some very authoritarian older executives at Paris-chèques, who favored a military style discipline, left the center immediately after the strike, either because of a transfer or planned retirement. The long dreaded technical progress was finally introduced at Paris-chèques in 1970. Computerized processing of postal accounts had a profound effect on the organization and work methods at the center where work itself became less onerous but also perhaps less interesting, and boredom replaces fatigue.

1968 was also the time when growth in the use of postal checks in Paris had become such that it became necessary to open a new check center outside the city. In the course of that year the new postal check center of Orléans la Source was inaugurated for the management of checks in the Orléans area as well as new accounts in Paris. Barely three years after the enlargement of the Paris check center and the opening of a new building in Montparnasse, the Paris service was glutted. If we consider the breadth of the structural changes to the Parisian check center in the immediately after May 1968, we can inversely measure the stability of the center’s organization from 1945 to 1968. As one branch of the PTT administration, the postal check service was particularly concerned with the demands of productivity and profit making; as such, these demands theoretically conflicted with the notion of public service. After 1945 the success of this mode of paying bills, especially in Paris soon strained the center to maximum capacity and sent it scouring for new employees, a difficult search compounded by the instability of the staff.

This staff was mainly composed of young women who were recruited more and more from the provinces, especially in the south-west of France; public service was often the only work opportunity available to these women. Having left a close-knit social environment, these women often found themselves uprooted and alone in Paris. Nonetheless they were able to take advantage of the freedoms offered by life in the capital as long as they remained single. But they soon married and found themselves confronted by the same problems of housing, material concerns, and maternal difficulties that were shared by the lowest income group in Paris. From the end of the 1950s, many of these women were living in suburban apartments where they anxiously awaited their transfer, hoping to be sent back either to their own or their husband’s native region, since their spouses were also postal employees or civil servants. Physically exhausted by the long commute to and from work, women working at postal check centers endured the stress and nervous tension caused by their work routine on a daily basis.

Logistically the organization of Paris-chèques was tailored to its needs on a par with other contemporary data processing centers. This type of setting invited employees to work at a sustained pace regardless of their workload; workers could occasionally leave early once their work was done. Since the organization had little regard for the mental health of its employees, there was a large amount of sick leave and a high level of absenteeism. These factors aggravated

working conditions when the center was chronically short staffed and forced employees to work even faster. The harshness of these working conditions was softened by the congenial atmosphere that existed among these employees and by flexible rules that were well accepted on the whole. The operations staff was divided into two groups; the largest was composed of OS in the service sector who worked either doing data processing or checking information, the two most standardized and monotonous tasks that were also the most closely connected to production goals. The others either acted as were group leaders or were employed in related services where they were given more responsibility, with duties that brought them slightly more recognition.

Our study of the collective consciousness and union activity of the staff at Paris-chèques was also revealing. Most of the women who worked at the center at the beginning of the period we studied lacked the typical civil servant's mentality and were reserved when it came to union activity. In an administration that was particularly attuned to unionism, these women, like most employees in the private sector, were perceived as being rather passive. But after the strike of 1953 that was closely followed at the center, the same women took a more active part in the various activities organized by union groups in the workplace; these were most often CGT activities. A new group of very aggressive women activists played a significant role here. More so than their male counterparts, these women were able to promote the specific demands of women employees at the check center. But women agents at the center were always superseded by their male colleagues when it came to union involvement at the Arrivée service. After several unsuccessful skirmishes with strikes during the 1960s, women participated massively in the 1968 strike. During this manifestation, which lasted about three weeks at Paris-chèques, the main union groups represented at the center (CGT, OF, and CFDT) temporarily put aside their differences. Similar to the national level, the results matched the expectations. The postal check center staff made significant progress, especially on the level of the reduction of working hours, which was their main demand.

Characterized by the modest, provincial origins of its staff that was mainly women and symbolized by its loud and cumbersome data processing equipment, the postal checks center in Paris from 1945 to 1968 was a particularly representative example of the large French "administrative factories" in the service sector that was modernized after the war. Working conditions for women employed by Paris-chèques were indicative of how office workers were generally drawn from the working class in France in the 1950s and 1960s, following the changes in their recruitment and the devaluation of their duties. We should recognize, however, that even alienating work for women on an assembly line within an administration could represent a promotion. As in the postal check service, it could lead upward to the level of civil servant whose prestige alone practically corresponded to an intermediate social category between the working class and the lower middle class. Michel Crozier correctly observes that thirty years earlier, the same young working class women would undoubtedly have been unskilled workers, seamstresses who worked at home or servants.

Since the narrow focus of this study does not suffice to give a detailed picture of a broader cross-section of minor civil servants and French office workers, it would be interesting to continue this work in the direction of a more in-depth study of the information provided by the postal check center in Paris as a contribution to the ongoing research on the social history of businesses and administrations.