

Christelle MASABANA, “The development of postal unionism in the Gironde in the 20th century. The case of Bordeaux: from its origins to the Second World War” (“Le développement du syndicalisme postal en Gironde au XX^e siècle. Le cas de Bordeaux : des origines au deuxième conflit mondial”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Christophe Bouneau, Bordeaux 3, 2001, 232 p.

Postal unionism in Bordeaux had a difficult beginning that was related to the unusual context of the city itself. Although it followed the example of the developing unions in Paris, with a slight time lapse, this contextual study presents the specific contribution of Bordeaux that transformed the development of postal unionism there into a precise instance of the flourishing of postal unionism in France.

Postal unionism in Bordeaux had a difficulty beginning in a situation that was unique to Bordeaux. Unionism there was unstable insofar as the two large local work forces were competing over the union territory: these two labor bodies were the workers and the employees, respectively. But the separation did not end there, since in the 1880s Bordeaux enjoyed the privilege of having two trade unions and two labor exchanges in its midst. Since the beginning of the 1890s, unionism in Bordeaux had been attempting to federate into a single union and later, in 1896, a single labor exchange located at 42 rue Lalande. The national situation as well as the merger of Post and Telegraph in 1879 initially led postal employees to the decision to unionize themselves because of their own particular demands, status, and occupations. This situation led to the development of the first postal associations in Bordeaux, such as the federative union created in 1880 and the society of the *Agents des PTT de Gironde* in 1901. The creation of the CGT at the very end of the 19th century was the real catalyst for the development of postal unionism. This was a confederation of workers created in order to support the unions and unite them under the umbrella of a single organization. As such it had a significant impact on the birth of postal unionism in Bordeaux, since it was in favor of creating unions. This occurred in 1900 with the creation of the professional society of PTT employees who were immediately members of the CGT.

The beginning of the 20th century encouraged the PTT unions to plant their roots in Bordeaux, inspiring their legitimacy and legality. Their foundation was supported by local political figures such as Raymond Lavigne and Antoine Jourde and assisted by the more charismatic participation of men like Jules Guesde and Jean Jaurès. Their support led to occasional improvements like the founding of the *Assistance Mutuelle pour les Ambulants*, but influence of the budding postal unions was minimal compared to the stature of their employer, the State. It was not until Alexandre Millerand arrived on the scene as PTT minister that significant advances were made. Millerand approved wage increases and decreases in work hours. This movement went hand in hand with the creation of national and local postal unions, like the society of PTT Agents and Sub-Agents in the Gironde in 1905.

Thanks to the impact of the Waldeck-Rousseau law in 1901, unionism was mainly composed of workers’ societies at the beginning of the 20th century. Their major goals recall the definition of unionism itself: to defend its members’ economic and legal rights. Postal unionism in Bordeaux truly came into its own when it decided to resist the State concretely; this decision is apparent in the strikes of 1906 and 1909 that pitched the State (as the employer) against postal workers (the

employees). One also notices for the first time that in the context of this crisis, there is a palpable desire to come together and unify the various postal societies. On the local level, these strikes did not precipitate any incidents or elaborate demonstrations in Bordeaux. The local postal workers banded together in support of Paris, fearing the repressive and discouraging arm of the State. By 1910 postal unionism had found its niche in Bordeaux, despite a difficult beginning and significant divisions. On the eve of World War One, the postal workers' unions in Bordeaux had to assert themselves once again within the larger group of postal unionists.

The First World War brought with it significant changes to postal unionism and a new parameter to be reckoned with: the search for a union identity. After the relative failure of the 1909 strikes for the postal unions, these groups had to reconsider their position. Controlled by the State, they were disunited because of the diversity of different postal unions and competition between union leaders. Furthermore, workers in Paris were under the regulatory authority of Paris, and as such they took no initiatives concerning Bordeaux. On the other hand, their relations with public authorities were ambiguous: although they had the ear of the regional PTT manager, this person would also transmit their entire conversation to the prefect or minister. These two authorities kept abreast of all demonstrations and “officially” monitored all the unions of the postal administration. Postal employees also had to adapt to the new phenomenon of the growing unionization of women who had created their own union and organized a complete journalistic campaign.

The outbreak of war in 1914 had a special impact on Bordeaux. The city became the temporary capital of France, thereby ensuring that the economic development of the city continued despite the war. Parisian life and government was moved to Bordeaux, a shift that favored economic and postal activity. Postal growth showed a significant increase in the flow of military and personal correspondence. With this spike in circulation, women entered the PTT in great numbers to assuage the overflow of work that needed to be done. This was followed by a drop in buying power - unfortunately accompanied by much higher prices - all of which led the unions to toughen their demands. The State subdued them by reinforcing its control. 1917 was a pivotal year, not only because it marked a turning point in the war with the Americans' entry into the conflict, but also because the postal employees became aware that they needed a union identity. This new awareness was boosted by the decline in Bordeaux's economy and living conditions. In turn, the unions began to reflect on the need to formulate a united defense of their demands and improve the working and living conditions of their members. The group of auxiliary workers took the initiative to launch a sudden strike on 17 May 1917 that had no lasting results. The war had considerably changed the face of postal unionism in Bordeaux. The unions were obliged to include women in their midst and give consideration to their gender-based demands. The unionists also understood that the gradual rapprochement of the postal unions was indispensable. The CGT itself was in favor of seeking the “holy union,” a favorite expression of Raymond Poincaré. The push to unify was cut short at the beginning of the 1920s as postal workers were trying to find their way within the framework of the workers' movement. In 1919 there were endless strikes at all socio-professional levels where there was no room for the postal unions. The unions realized that they had the characteristics of two opposite worlds - workers as opposed to civil servants. Furthermore, the postal Federation and the CGT disagreed on the measures to be taken. Despite their disagreement, the three postal federations, consisting of the three union organizations of agents, sub-agents and workers, joined forces against the State based on their

common demands. Unfortunately this attempt to unify was soon aborted by the internal division of the CGT in 1921. This division began in Bordeaux in April 1922 and evidences the beginning of the politicization of the postal unions, revealing political rather than union oppositions. With its traditional union values, the CGT held a majority, as the CGTU, with its minority and communitarian tendencies, was created. At the beginning of the 1920s, people wondered what had become of the issue of the unity of the workers' unions within the PTT. The issue was revived in the mid-1930s.

1936 marked a renewal of the coalition of PTT trade unions. By the end of the 1920s, postal trade unionism found itself confronted by the rise of labor unions that had become increasingly politicized. First of all this politicization was apparent in the role of the trade unions' leaders. In Bordeaux, Mr. Marin was a fervent communist leader who readily conveyed his enthusiasm to union members. Leaders in Bordeaux needed political support in order to stay at the head of their trade union and promote the unionization of the postal workers. They also indoctrinated union members. This in turn promoted the spread of communism throughout the PTT, strengthened by significant propaganda.

Communists in Bordeaux developed start-up newspapers but communism itself met with mixed results. The communists who had been suppressed were defended but the city was far from infatuated with communism and postal workers began to fear this political ideology. It was certainly the cause of the disunion of the postal trade unions against which postal workers decided to fight. The CGT lauded the return to the doctrines of the Charter of Amiens of 1906 and public authorities supported this decision. They took steps against communism and tracked down local party leaders. This fear led the postal trade unions to strike in protest against communism. A comparative study of the two strikes in 1930 and 1934 reveals the same demands: the re-evaluation of wages, retirement at age 55 and job security. The strikes differ in their modes of operation and the course each strike took. The 1930 strike took place in solidarity with Parisians, but the 1934 strike was a struggle against the State. Despite a few demonstrations in Bordeaux, these strike precipitated the disappearance of communism in Bordeaux. Few demands were accepted. It was not until 1936 that significant social advances were made. There were three workers' confederations: the CGT, the CGTU and the CFTC that existed since 1919. A coalition was gradually formed in Bordeaux and the postal labor unions decided to join in, mainly as a way of combating the politicization of the labor unions. The coalition was promoted by a strong propaganda campaign and the merger was an unprecedented success. Postal employees received time off weekly and on Sunday, a wage increase and buying power. The postal administration promoted the choice of postal worker as an occupation because there sorely lacked staff. On 27 March 1936 a retirement law was passed and retirees were granted 3/5 of their active duty salary. But dark clouds soon appeared on the horizon. Postal workers struck again in 1938. Their demands addressed the high cost of living, and working and living conditions that had gradually deteriorated to the point of a complete loss of vested rights by 1936. The political situation and the developing economic crisis were both troublesome. From 1937 onward the threat of war became more and more worrisome to the postal labor unions. In 1939 their situation had reached critical proportions. The declaration of war in 1939 threatened to dissolve the labor unions. Workers immediately struck in favor of preserving peace. The war effort to justify national security took hold and the postal labor unions were dissolved at the end of 1939.

With the support of the CGT at the end of the war, the labor unions were slowly reformed and their coalition was automatic. Postal workers had finally found their own union identity. Their legal status as civil servants was officially recognized from 1945 onward, and they gradually distanced themselves as a group from the workers' union movement. Postal unionism in Bordeaux finally gained national recognition, taking its own position within French postal unionism in the early 1950s. At that time it became possible to speak of the vital role of the postal labor unions in Bordeaux. The postal labor unions in Bordeaux originated the national strike in 1953. Their postal workers laid the groundwork for the strike, playing an independent role within the framework of French postal trade unionism for the first time. It was also the first time that these workers took significant and noteworthy initiatives of their own.

