

**Frédéric PACOUD, “The birth of French postal trade unionism” (“Naissance du syndicalisme postal”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Henri Morsel, Lyon 2, 1997.**

Arising at the end of the 19th century, postal trade unionism brought this socio-economic issue to the core of the State’s relationship with organized labor. The PTT’s business activity was rapidly expanding, leading the Third Republic to adopt it as the first French industrial and commercial public service. The nature of its business and the class origin of its personnel provided a ready setting for union influence from the private sector. The problematics of the early years of postal trade unionism are embedded in this socio-economic nexus. In many regards – wages, living and working conditions – postal workers resembled the working class, but after 1884 they did not share the same rights. Although the law of 21 March 1884 repealed the Le Chapelier law of 1791 that forbade the formation of professional societies, it still refused union rights to civil servants. Consequently, the postal world, which had a foot in both the public and the private sector, became the most ardent defender of the move to extend this law to all workers.

The rise of postal trade unionism progressed slowly. Given the lack of existing organizations, it merely incubated until 1900. The very idea of unions composed of postal workers was fundamentally opposed to the prevailing administrative authority. As a result, the notion spread slowly. It was encouraged, however, by the growing dissatisfaction among postal workers who found themselves confronted by a growing and more diversified work load – influenced by industrialization and educational progress – without any increase in pay. The inertia of successive governments that did not address this issue led postal workers’ resentment of political power to materialize. Although their wages remained modest with their only hope for improving their lot lying in promotion, the reforms concerning this issue provoked a series of labor strikes. The first crisis concerning promotion occurred in 1888-89, awakening a broader consciousness among postal workers of their working and living conditions that led some of them to realize the potential of collective action. For the moment postal workers limited themselves to meetings organized against the governmental measures that attempted to economize and restrict possibilities for promotion. Telegraph operators were the first to strike in January 1889. When the government ultimately withdrew its bulletin reforming the promotion process, the postal milieu saw just how effective organized action could be. The corporate press became the privileged organ of their aspirations during the 1890s. Meanwhile the administration dissuaded postal workers from forming an organized group by making some alterations in 1892.

The socialist minister Alexandre Millerand gave postal trade unionism its first political support, allowing it to acquire an institutional life through professional associations. After Parisian sub-agents struck in May 1899 against the Senate’s refusal to raise urban mail carriers’ salaries, Millerand’s arrival at the PTT Ministry that same year brought a breath of fresh air to the postal environment. The postal proletariat led the way with the creation of the national salaried PTT workers’ union in December 1899. From its beginnings, the postal trade union was based on the administrative hierarchy of the PTT: sub-agents (mostly mail carriers) created their own national union in 1900. Other agents (postmasters and assistants) followed suit by creating their own general association in November 1900. The passage of the law of July 1901 concerning associations conferred legal status upon these associations. However, postal workers considered these associations to be only second best and merely a step toward creating actual unions. But it

was these associations that began the struggle against the State as boss, while the government kept the controversy over the respective merits of the laws of 1884 and 1901 alive. Its goal was to minimize differences in order to prevent agents and sub-agents from creating unions that would constitute a direct negation of the State's authority over civil servants. The newly-born postal trade unionism found itself involved in a political, legal, and theoretical battle. The debate did not spare the newly formed groups themselves, and the sub-agents' association split in 1905, producing a newly categorized union. Meanwhile postal workers very pragmatically adapted their outlook to the legal and political circumstances at hand. They maintained relations with socialist parliamentarians and benefited from the benevolence of public authorities in obtaining social reforms. By banding together with other civil servants who were interested in joining the trade union, postal workers became one of the main forces in the measured transformation of the State.

Created in 1904, the committee for the protection of union rights attempted to have the role of the civil servant in the governmental machine redefined; thanks to the union, he or she would no longer simply be another cog in the works with no voice but instead a participant in the evolution of public service. Postal workers were clearly the group that was the most determined to bring about this transformation. The diffusion of the unspoken concept of the State as boss transformed their desire to overturn traditional categories, provoking reprobation from most jurists and fear on the part of a government that was jealous of the union's authority.

The confrontation with authorities broke out between 1906 and 1909, ending the genesis of postal trade unionism that until then had never had recourse to a general strike. In 1906 postal sub-agents began a strike that was provoked by the lack of any real improvement in their working conditions, and by the government's disparagement of their condition. Although it was not a complete success, this strike proved that postal workers did not need the legal recognition of their union before taking action. The strike highlighted the weakness of the government's strategy in thinking that it could avoid a strike by forbidding the union to exist. But the postal workers' ambitions were not limited to satisfying material demands or acquiring union rights. They also increased the number of reports and studies on topics that were of direct interest to the PTT at the time, such as disciplinary councils, the telephone crisis, and the cleanliness of offices. The general association of agents was certainly the most productive in this area and tried to act as a genuine interlocutor of the administration in order to de-compartmentalize a hierarchical system that blocked deep-seated reform.

Despite these efforts, a new crisis was prompted in 1908-1909 by the desire to reform the advancement, harshness, and clumsiness of Clemenceau's government and by the radicalization of postal trade unionism that opposed any project concerning the status of civil servants that would definitively remove the benefit of common law in union matters. Simian, the PTT under-secretary of state incorporated the postal workers' grievances brought before an administration where favoritism was rampant and the hierarchy displayed indifference and contempt toward its lower categories. While insisting that they no longer merely wanted the government's tolerance of their associations, postal workers and especially agents organized a general strike in 1909. The postal world gathered its forces in a show of force against the government. This first strike ended with a misunderstanding that led to a second movement in May 1909 that received less support than the first one; the government put an end to it with a series of revocations. But these two

strikes brought about a rapprochement between the various organizations within the postal environment and the workers' world. The postal workers had recourse to one tool whose use the CGT had vigorously promoted. Their cause seemed more legitimate to many jurists, and governments could no longer ignore the existence of postal trade unionism. Their demands were consolidated by this test, and when Millerand returned as PTT minister after Clemenceau's fall, they received compensation and reparation for their damages.

As a result, the emergence of postal trade unionism must not simply be considered as the birth of one more instance of trade unionism but as the first example of a new type of trade unionism that intended to introduce democratic processes at the core of the administration. It revealed the corporate nature and tensions that characterized the public function and also found its unity in the common struggle for the recognition of common rights. Its appearance shook the manner in which the State traditionally operated as a public sovereign in relation to its civil servant-subjects. Before World War One, postal workers were the only group to take such extreme action in protesting against the State. Consequently, the emergence of postal trade unionism presages the formation of contemporary administrations.