

Aurélie PELLET, “Post Office Personnel in the Department of the Rhône 1871-1914” (“Le personnel des Postes dans le département du Rhône : 1871-1914”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Yves Lequin, Lyon 2, 1999, 96 p. + appendices.

This thesis studies the situation of Post Office personnel in the department of the Rhône during the Third Republic. We begin by analyzing the many changes in postal service that occurred during this period and their repercussions on employees in this sector of the workforce. The development of networks, the growth in the flow of the mail, and the annexation of telegraph and telephone services all contributed to major upheavals in the performance and management of personnel.

Diversification led to a higher rate of recruitment whose criteria seem to have become more and more selective. Although new jobs were open to a large number of candidates, the persistence of politically motivated recommendations and jobs that were reserved for former troops with priority often made the selection process inequitable.

There were definite advantages to being hired by the State, such as the right to retirement benefits and job stability, but these advantages often came at the price of very hard working conditions. Fatigue, stress, and illness were the daily lot of these postal workers whose situation was liable to deteriorate over time rather than improve.

Our research then turned to issues of employee mobility. The study of their geographic and professional trajectories provided answers to some of our questions.

Although the departments of origin of postal workers noticeably correspond to those of the population of Lyon, the majority of these workers came from modest social circumstances, mostly from peasantry. These individuals saw public service as an opportunity to change their lives and expose themselves to a brighter future.

Most of them succeeded in improving their quality of life during their postal career, but the opportunities for social promotion were not the same for everyone. Women’s wages were lower than their male colleagues and women almost never had the chance to move up the ladder to positions of greater responsibility. Many mail carriers’ salaries were not sufficient to support their families and could leave the family destitute. This potential situation was made worse by the State that tried to economize by maximally limiting the number of promotions that became more and more difficult to obtain.

Working in the postal sector also had a deep influence on the family life of employees whose long and exhausting workdays could be detrimental to married life. There were high percentages of unmarried employees, especially women who found it difficult to reconcile their profession with a husband and family. Married workers were inclined to have fewer children in exchange for maintaining their quality of life and promoting the social mobility of the next generation.

Lastly we study the workers’ rights movements that affected the postal sector at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the workforce grew considerably, there were always too few postal workers and their working conditions deteriorated over time. Challenged by these problems, movements to create contingency funds sought to provide for the neediest employees. At the

same time, there were further signs of dissatisfaction and isolated outbursts. Despite the State's persistent refusal to grant workers the right to strike, the creation and gradual organization of many unionized groups led workers to win back their rights

The categorical divisions that permeated the post office limited the possibilities of applying pressure to the powers that be. Although the strikes of 1906 and 1909 brought some improvement, they also suffered from a lack of solidarity and did not produce the results that were expected. But they did signal the beginning of a struggle that only wound down after several more years of struggle.