

Caroline FRAU, “Le militantisme syndical : des prémices de l’engagement à la défection. L’exemple d’un centre de distribution de La Poste” (“Union activism: from the first results of involvement to defection: the case of a postal distribution center”), Master’s 2 degree in political sociology directed by Michel Offerlé, Paris 1 - Sorbonne, 2006, 184 p.

This thesis is based on the analysis by numerous social science researchers of the drop in unionization in France. Using an inquiry conducted among the staff of one of La Poste’s distribution centers, our study analyses the conditions of personal commitment to and disinvolvement with union organizations. At the end of her study on the mail carrier’s profession, Marie Cartier explains that as carriers’ dissatisfactions grew, unions could play an important role: “One of the most important challenges facing union organizations and similar social movements today is to be able to unify and collectivize personal dissatisfactions and translate them into political terms.”¹

But following Jean-Robin Merlin’s lead,² we have also observed that union activists at La Poste have become increasingly demoralized. Joseph, the secretary of the OF section and a union member for 37 years, confessed to us that “we are in the hollow of the wave.”³ This level of discouragement is related to changing work conditions for postal employees and the demobilization that has cut union organizations in France and the rest of Europe to the quick.⁴

This decline has been analyzed mainly from a macro-sociological point of view. Rather than interpreting the phenomenon of de-unionization as “a crisis of French trade unionism,”⁵ this thesis attempts to restore the carriers of trade unionists and their militant praxis by re-inscribing them within the social history of the union sections of the business setting we have chosen to study. This shift in perspective is a fruitful one insofar as it allows us to understand the local and personal issues involved in de-unionization that are too often ignored by studies on the decline of union activism.

The analysis of career trajectories allows us to understand why certain individuals belong to a union organization, why they become activists and why they later quit the organization. Union membership is not only the product of an alignment of cognitive spaces between individuals and the organization to which they belong. The study of the different stages of the process that leads an individual to join a union and then militate at a later date reveals that ideological motives are necessary but insufficient in themselves to explain this involvement. Research on partisan and association-based activism has already illustrated this point.⁶ Membership is the product of a meeting of minds between a local hiring policy carried out by union activists and personal pre-dispositions that are instilled during the primary and secondary process of an individual’s socialization. A participant’s modes of perception, subjective representations of his or her environment, and various life-experiences may all contribute to a disposition toward involvement. But activism is still only possible if participants present a biographically determined open-mindedness that allows them to commit more actively to trade unionism.

¹ Marie Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées. Un service public au quotidien*, op. cit., p. 310.

² Jean-Robin Merlin, *Le syndicalisme à l’épreuve de l’altération de la qualité du travail. Analyse de deux sections syndicales de salariés du secteur tertiaire*, op. cit., p. 386.

³ Interview with Joseph, secretary of the FO section, 14 November 2005.

⁴ Jean-Marie Pernot, op. cit., pp. 121-182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ Daniel Gaxie, “Economie des partis et rétributions du militantisme,” *art. cit.*, pp. 126-128.

Therefore, the different life-paths that categorize a person must be carefully studied as well. In the course of our inquiry, we have not been able to do a detailed analysis of “genre-based” differences that contribute to one’s commitment to union activism. But we noticed another feature: some activists may also have a spouse who is a union member. And so these individuals are required as a couple to lead their family, professional, and union life side by side. An in-depth study of activist couples would enable us to understand how these couples manage multiple commitments.

From our study of entry-level activism we learned that about ten people represented the core of the union activists at the distribution center we investigated. The answers to the questionnaire we distributed to the entire staff of the La Poste distribution center revealed that some individuals call themselves activists although they do not belong to a union organization. We also noticed that some union activists occasionally but intensively participate in activities sponsored by associations. Would the dynamic of this situation not also apply to some postal employees’ interactions with unions? These individuals may be highly mobilized in relation to union activities but only on an occasional basis. The critical approach we have taken, which is to consider (only) participants who belong to a confederation or federation, would automatically exclude them. We should perhaps reconsider the methodology of our inquiry in order to expand the parameters of our study pool’s base. The union activists we have observed communicate persuasively in order to mobilize support and carry out their plans. The repertoire of actions they call for by implementing their knowledge and know-how stands in contradiction to the firm’s management policy.

Because of a lack of adequate material, we were unable to delve into the union strategies devised during the last restructuring of the firm in 2004. But we were able to ascertain that activists did attempt to mobilize external support for trade unionism during this reorganization that caused the elimination of jobs and prolonged carriers’ rounds. Hervé, the secretary of the CGT section, had close ties with the Communist officials in his district. He called upon their support on the issue of the future of mail distribution in the district. The officials gave their support in the form of a letter addressed to the mayor of the district: “The Council of the ... arrondissement requests that the Mayor of Paris make a show of his support to the Prefect of the Ile-de-France and Mr. Bailly, Chief Executive Officer of La Poste in order to ensure the ongoing and improved quality of the postal service extended to the residents and businesses of the ..., by preserving the current distribution system and the number of employee positions.”⁷ Moreover, all local sections united in sending a letter to the residents of the district entitled “A note to you from your local mail carriers.” The letter was an attempt to expand the framework of the situation and mobilize customers’ support. The extension of salaried employees’ duties was its main argument: “These reductions of staff and carriers’ routes are made at the people’s expense,” “La Poste refuses to recognize one basic element: your opinion,” “Your mail carriers suggest that you act in your own capacity as private citizens by calling upon the management of La Poste and taking any and all useful initiatives so that we as a group compel La Poste to reconsider its project that would be highly detrimental to public service as well as to La Poste itself.” The weakness of the union

⁷ *Petition by C, D, E and the Communist officials of the ...arrondissement to the Mayor of Paris, 2004, 1 p.*

movement incited the activists to mobilize their own political relationships and create synergies with clients. In this particular case, this path of action came to no end.

Jean-Robin Merlin⁸ has also illustrated the mobilization of this type of support in his study which leads us to look at the possible emergence of a new way of taking action. To carry out their actions, the union attempted to get satisfaction that would put them in a place where they could offer collective advantages to staff members. They also obtained individual advantages for postal employees. Using their skills and contacts, the union activists also assisted the most under-educated employees. This vote-catching relationship allowed them to reinforce ties of interdependence and increase both their membership and results in professional elections. They also differed from each other in their use of this rationale. This type of union activity produces what we call a by-product: the by-product of activism is the set of satisfactions and dissatisfactions created by union activities. It is variable and subject to change in relation to people and over time. This variability may partially explain the withdrawal of some participants. We have studied the various types of withdrawal suggested by Albert Hirschman: withdrawal in order to join another organization and complete withdrawal.⁹ We have also demonstrated that there was occasional speech making at the time of withdrawal. These models do not correspond to the same misalignments between institution and activist. Withdrawing in order to join another organization is an action taken by activists whose political socialization does not conform to their base union's models of perception or worldviews. Complete withdrawal comes about when union skills are redirected toward other types of activities. Our analysis of withdrawal is only concerned with activists. We were not able to analyze the behavior of those who simply remained members. A longer study with a stronger in-house presence would allow us to interview these individuals and analyze their behavior.

In conducting our inquiry we adopted a macro-sociological analysis of the entire staff of the center and a micro-sociological analysis of the union activists. The biographical analysis then allowed us to study the activist, professional, and family trajectories of those who severed their union commitment. The longitudinal perspective enabled us to reconstruct the evolution and interweaving of different areas of life. The evolution of the participants' enrollment sites and the value placed upon them somewhat explains the shifts and deviations among activists. The use of different analytical levels is especially heuristic in the study of personal commitment and subsequent non-commitment.

The goal of this thesis was to define the major role of local trade union activists in politicizing a group of workers. Today more than ever an awareness of this role seems to be crucial to union organizations for the future of trade unionism. This necessity is apparent in the resolutions voted by the 46th meeting of the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (the French Democratic Workers' Confederation): "The success of unionization depends on the creation of dynamics that reach the level of the union section,"¹⁰ and "sections are the most valuable and direct representation of the CFDT. As such they will be strongly called upon to enact a new dynamics of unionization."¹¹

⁸ Jean-Robin Merlin, *Le syndicalisme à l'épreuve de l'altération de la qualité du travail. Analyse de deux sections syndicales de salariés du secteur tertiaire*, op. cit., p. 202-205.

⁹ Albert Hirschman, op. cit., 141 p.

¹⁰ *Resolutions of the 46th Meeting of the CFDT*, Grenoble, 12-16 June 2006, no. 7.22.3, p. 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 7.22.7, p. 67.