

# The Emergence of the Bourses du Travail in turn of the century France: The Search for a New Form of Work Regulation in the Context of a Minor Credit Crunch

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## Introduction

Recent research has established that the category of unemployment lacks the internal consistency which its elaboration in public policy presupposes. The emergence of the category owed much to the work of statisticians and policy experts and was arguably as much an invention<sup>1</sup> as it was the discovery of a pre-existing reality. Post-war full employment policy, however, presented ‘unemployment’ as an over-determined category of public action which married the administrative procedures governing the identification of ‘the unemployed’ to demand-management policies. This was clearly the case in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> In France the category emerged as a *national* problem in the period which followed the brief crisis associated with the ‘Freycinet plan’ of 1879 but it retained a local character which reflected the territorialization of French industry<sup>3</sup>. The creation of a nationwide network of labour exchanges modelled thus led to a completely different outcome to that which was in evidence in Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Topalov C. ‘Naissance du chômeur 1880 – 1910’ Albin Michel, Paris 1994

<sup>2</sup> See in this respect Beveridge W.H. ‘Full Employment in a Free Society’ George Allen and Unwin, London 1944

<sup>3</sup> On the notion of ‘territoire’ see Daumas J.C ‘Dans la ‘boîte noire’ des districts industriels’ in Daumas J.C, Lamard P et Tissot L. ‘Les territoires de l’industrie en Europe (1750 – 2000) Entreprises, Régulations et Trajectoires’. Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, Besançon, 2007

Part of the explanation for the difference in outcomes was the different way in which the local and the national levels interpenetrated. The tensions which existed between the advanced Parisian model and the constitutional arrangements of the Third Republic account for much of the difference. The constitution notoriously sheltered the social conservatism of the smaller rural centres behind parliamentary hesitation and Senatorial resistance. As Garrigues<sup>4</sup> has shown, the straightened economic circumstances of the birth of the republic placed the financial circles lodged in the Senate at the very centre of governmental intrigues. This social immobility practiced by the Senate placed the Radical movement in the early 1880's in an impossible position. The radicals needed the peculiar architecture of the Freycinet plan of 1879 to attach leading business circles to their reform project. But these financial circles had objectives which seriously compromised the successful outcome of the plan. As we shall see, the series of *events* which followed the unravelling of the project qualify the nature of the much of the subsequent institution building.

### The Ambiguities of Moderate Trade Unionism

On the strictly economic level the Freycinet project underlined the economic problems caused by shortcomings in communications (railways, canals, roads, bridges, ports and the like) in a country where territorialized units of production could be situated at some distance from potential markets. The architects of the project aimed at creating a dynamic of growth based on infrastructure development. The idea was that of maintaining the level of steel production in the face of a slow-down in railway construction. It was also conceived as a way to lower prices in a context of heightened international competition. Leading financiers, however, also perceived it as an alternative to the nationalisation (*rachat*) of the major railway companies. For Gambetta the plan offered a way

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<sup>4</sup> Garrigues J. La République des Hommes d'Affaires 1870 – 1900, Aubier , Paris 1997

of anchoring financial interests to a republican government committed to social reform. Moderate parliamentary government could thus face down opposition coming both from the intransigent right in the Senate and from Extreme Left republicans in the Chamber of Deputies.

Over time the restrictions placed on progressive social reform by the constitutional set-up covered the administration of Gambetta and ‘the opportunists’ in general with a fair degree of popular opprobrium. In Paris and Lyons, political<sup>5</sup> extremists underlined the links between parliamentary indifference, senatorial obstruction and the compromises of the ‘official’ labour movement exemplified by the Gambettist ‘Union des Chambres Syndicales’ (U.C.S.). This movement gained governmental support because its moderation ran parallel to the financial sector’s exaggerated fear of social unrest. Senatorial resistance to even the mildest social reform could be stubborn. The moderate law of 1884 on ‘syndicats professionnels’ followed the direction laid down by the conciliatory U.C.S. ‘Syndicats’ were given the role of providing a range of services (placement, conciliation, mutualism, co-operation and so on) to meet strictly economic objectives. They were constructed as occupational entities whose statutes had to be approved by the Préfet. Nevertheless, Waldeck-Rousseau had to intervene personally in order to ease its passage through an unconvinced Senate.<sup>6</sup>

Popular support in for the U.C.S. in Paris and elsewhere was doubtless a legacy of its activity during the 1870’s when it countered the repression of labour movement militants by selecting members as delegates to the various ‘conseils de prud’hommes’. As a bi-partisan system of conciliation the prud’hommes moderated the tendency of employers to dictate the terms and

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<sup>5</sup> Hutton P. ‘The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition : The Blanquists in French Politics, 1864- 1893’, University of California, 1980 p 130 - 161

<sup>6</sup> Guarrigues J. op.cit. p 278

conditions in the workplace. Semi-artisanal workers thus tended to elect foremen who defended the workplace against the merchants. However in 1872, the Préfet de la Seine integrated delegates from the ‘conseils de prud’hommes’ and from the *chambres syndicales* into the process which led to the fixing of standard wage rates, the so-called ‘série des prix’ in Paris. ‘Standard wage rates of this kind – in fact a list of piece work rates - formed part of the process of bidding (‘adjudication’) for public works contracts which had initially emerged in railway construction but which had been extended to building and other trades. ‘Adjudication’ was a mechanism which guaranteed tight budgets<sup>7</sup> in line with liberal thinking. It was, as we have seen, a process subject to the regulations outlawing undercutting which had been applied by the Paris municipality from the 1830’s onwards.

More importantly, the edicting of a decree by the Prefect in 1876<sup>8</sup> established the participation of *chambres syndicales* in the fixing of the ‘série de prix’ for public works via the *prud’hommes*. As a result trade unions concentrated on the election of delegates towards these bodies. Over time this resulted in the transformation of an institution which governed the process of bidding for public contracts by entrepreneurs into one which fixed the obligations of employers towards their workers. In the short term, however, the underlying political commitments of the union movement proved counter-productive as employers found themselves in a position where they were unable to defend their interests against concerted action by ‘worker’ delegates who were, in fact, recruited in political (Gambettist) organisations.<sup>9</sup> Employers thus became

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<sup>7</sup> Rudischhauser S. ‘Salaire Minimum et libre concurrence. Le rôle de la Demande Publique dans la constitution d’un marché national du travail . France- Allemagne 1890 – 1914 in Didry C., Wagner P., and Zimmerman B. ‘Le Travail et la Nation. Histoire Croisée de la France et de l’Allemagne à l’Horizon Européen’ Edition de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Moutat A. ‘Le mouvement ouvrier à Paris du lendemain de la Commune au premier congrès syndical en 1876’ le mouvement social, jan-mars 1967 N° 58

<sup>9</sup> Olszack N. ‘Les conseils de prud’hommes : un archétype judiciaire pour le mouvement ouvrier ?’ Mouvement social oct-déc 1987 N° 141 p. 101 - 121

increasingly reluctant to accept the adjudications which resulted from a process which could leave them in a minority position. At any rate employer reluctance was probably furthered by the element of wage inflation in the building trade become more and more evident from the mid-1870' onwards.

Here it is important to note that the inability of the collectivist socialists to fully benefit from the growing rift between the U.C.S. and the socialist movement was at its most evident in Paris. Here the centralized organisation of the Guesdistes proved less palatable to workers than the decentralized federalism of the 'possibilists' which aimed at harnessing the possibilities of action at the municipal level to the revolutionary cause. The re-assertion of the political autonomy of Paris was also, of course, part of the Radical platform. Here however, the tendency of the Radicals to promote the upward mobility of working-class *individuals* was confronted by the tendency of socialists to promote measures aimed at defending working-class *organisations*.<sup>10</sup>

Here if anywhere, the association between *subordination* at the workplace and the contractual aspects of individual wage earning was not in evidence.<sup>11</sup> Paris swarmed with semi-artisanal workers, small craftsmen, and their wage-earning associates together with highly skilled craftsmen and small entrepreneurs. Many semi-artisanal workers believed that wage-labour was only a brief halt on the road to independence. Others alternated sub-contracting, group sub-contracting, wage-labour and independent activity. Economic activity in Paris took place in a finely regulated collective system which limited the unilateral action of individual employers in the workplace. As a result the system maintained intact the ability of workers to defend the standards and

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<sup>10</sup> Gaillard J. Le Conseil Municipal et Municipalisme Parisien (1871 – 1890) Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne juin 1981 p 7 - 16

<sup>11</sup> Cottureau A. Droit et bon droit. Un droit des ouvriers instauré puis évincé par le droit du travail (France, XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle) Annales 2002 Vol 57 N° 6 pp. 1521 – 1557

practices of individual trades via the insistence of apprenticeship or by the exclusion of outsiders to the region and so on.

### The Importance of Building Activity

Coming on stream in 1879, the 'Freycinet plan' cemented the compromises of moderate republican government by projecting an expansion of the railways deep into the countryside (involving roughly 18,000 kilometres of railways over 5 years, far outstripping the existing capacity for steel production).<sup>12</sup> In this the plan followed hard on the heels of the prosperity produced by the mid-nineteenth century railway boom. In the smaller provincial towns the expansion of public works of this kind notably created patterns of dual-activity right across provincial France<sup>13</sup> compensating for the seasonal downturns in various trades: potters in Aubagne, leather workers in Grenoble, hatmakers in Chazelles and metal molders in Bordeaux. Significant migrations of labour during the mid-nineteenth (the Loire area in 1853 and 1859, Grenoble 1855 - 1856, Dauphiné 1861-1862, Savoie 1862-1863 and the whole Lyons region from 1853 to 1863) attest to the importance of public works. <sup>14</sup> The growth in supplementary waged activity in the semi-rural areas led to the expansion of small peasant holdings from 1.25 million in 1852 to 2.51 million in 1882 as the larger farmers came under pressure from foreign cereal producers following the advent of free trade in the 1860's.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gonjo Y. 'Le plan Freycinet' 1878 – 1882 : un aspect de la 'grande dépression' économique en France' *Revue Historique* tome CCXLVII juillet-sept : 49 – 86

<sup>13</sup> Perrot M. 'Les Ouvriers en Grève', Mouton, Paris 1974 p. 520

<sup>14</sup> Lequin Y. 'Les Ouvriers de la Région Lyonnaise (1848 – 1914) La Formation de la Classe Ouvrière Régionale', Presses Universitaire de Lyon, 1977 p 73

<sup>15</sup> Levy-Leboyer M 'La Décélération de l'Economie Française dans la Seconde Moitié du XIXè siècle' *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* vol XLIXè 1971 N°4 pp 485 – 507

Much the same can be said of building activity in Paris. In the 1850's and 60's building workers from the Creuse, the Cantal and surrounding areas spent anything from 6 to 9 months in the city.<sup>16</sup> In 1859 the Préfet of the Creuse region estimated that half of the region's able-bodied workforce had migrated. 10 years later the figure was nearer to two-thirds. Between 1876 and 1881, the population of Paris grew by 50, 000 a year on average.<sup>17</sup> The building of 215,304 new lodgings in Paris in the years 1852 - 1869 employed no fewer than 20% of the entire Parisian workforce and so on. Unfortunately, the project to deliver 120,000 building units in Paris (approximately 17% of the existing stock)<sup>18</sup> in the early 1880's) was totally out of phase with the gradual slowdown in migration into the city. Just as the planned expansion of the railway network was out of all proportion to the potential increase in fare-paying traffic, the planned expansion of building activity in Paris was deeply compromised by the shrinking of the market.

The need to maintain a high level of economic activity in the Paris region and elsewhere had never simply been a question of maintaining wage-levels. In Paris the sheer scale of the Haussman works led to the creation of a politically acquiescent building proletariat<sup>19</sup> dependent a constant supply of funds from the Credit Foncier,<sup>20</sup> a Bonapartist money-machine mired in corruption. In much the same way, the Freycinet plan was dependent on the acquiescent of a financial sector which was expected<sup>21</sup> to raise 16 billion francs<sup>22</sup> between 1880 and 1884. When faced with the growing insolvency of the state, these selfsame

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<sup>16</sup> Pinkney D.H. 'Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris' Princeton University, 1958 p. 156 - 167

<sup>17</sup> Lecerf E. 'La Famine des Temps Modernes. Essai sur le Chômeur' L'Harmattan, Paris 1992 p 51

<sup>18</sup> Levy-Leboyer M. and Bourguignon F. 'l'Economie Française au XIXè siècle' Economica, Paris p 77 - 78

<sup>19</sup> Engels F. 'The Housing Question' Progress, Moscow 1975 p 71

<sup>20</sup> For a complete analysis of the structuring of the house building trade see, Topalov C. 'Le logement en France. Histoire d'une marchandise impossible' Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris 1987 p 113 - 160

<sup>21</sup> Garrigues J. op.cit. p 154 - 163

<sup>22</sup> Levy-Leboyer M. and Bourguignon F. op.cit. op.cit. p 77

financial interests took advantage of the Stock Exchange crash of January 1882 to bring the period of economic expansion to an abrupt halt, toppling the newly formed Gambetta government in the process.

### The Employment Crisis

With Leon Say in charge of public finances, the 1882 administration led by Freycinet scaled down the public work project to suit the major railway companies<sup>23</sup> and considerably tightened up the process of adjudication. Highly restrictive clauses were introduced into public contracts, and existing orders for steel were cancelled or rescheduled. The nationalisation of the railway companies disappeared from the agenda and new forms of public-private financing emerged to suit their financial requirements. The effect of the slowdown on employment in coal mining and in steel production made itself felt over the course of the following five years: Noiriél notes that between 1883 and 1887 a quarter of the miners and a fifth of the metal-workers employed in the Loire basin were laid off.<sup>24</sup> Depressed areas soon began to emerge south of the Loire valley.<sup>25</sup>

The abrupt turnaround in affairs left many workers stranded in transit from one area to another as the crisis led to an explosion in the number of migrant workers subsisting alongside the expanding floating population of semi-rural vagrants both in the Seine region and elsewhere. These individuals were plunged into a semi-rural population suffering adversity due a succession of agricultural crises<sup>26</sup> coinciding with the decline of many of the smaller rural occupations

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<sup>23</sup> Garrigues J. 'La République des Hommes d'Affaires 1870 – 1900', Aubier, Paris 1997 p 219 - 231

<sup>24</sup> Noiriél G. 'Les ouvriers dans la société française XIXème – XX siècle' Seuil, Paris 1986 p 87

<sup>25</sup> Luciani J. 'Le Chômage au XIXè siècle en France' unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Université de Paris 1, 1987 p 34

<sup>26</sup> Désert G. 'La Grande Dépression de l'agriculture' in Duby G. and Wallon A. 'Histoire de la France Rurale.

and the curtailing of dual-activity. Wagniar<sup>27</sup> indeed notes the entry into the existing mass of vagrants of workers from the smaller rural crafts (clogmakers, locksmiths, cordwainers, carpenters, cabinet-makers, textile and wood workers etc.), alongside workers in building and in the small metal trades.

In Paris, the newly deregulated Credit Foncier reduced its building loans by 78% between 1882 and 1890<sup>28</sup> following the real estate crisis in 1882. 47,000 housing units remained unoccupied in 1888; a number roughly equivalent to those built between 1881 and 1882. The *Commission d'Enquête Parlementaire of 1885*<sup>29</sup> noted that out of the 40,000 or so masons normally employed in Paris, only 10,000 were so employed in 1885.<sup>30</sup> 9,000 of the 12,000 or housepainters were out of work and only 1/6th of the workforce of stonemasons was working. Of the 2,500 carpenters left in Paris, up to 1,500 were without work. Only 2,000 of the 15,000 building labourers remained employed.

Piece-rates in Paris were in free-fall: Stonemasons were earning 60-70c an hour as against 85c prior to the crisis. Building workers were now more frequently settled in the city than before: Up to 70% of stone-masons were fixed in the city compared with 30 % in the preceding period.<sup>31</sup> Under-employed building workers thus resorted to alternative refuge occupations; newspaper distribution, bar and café work, distributing leaflets, various small trades and so on.<sup>32</sup> Longer hours - although very frequent in the summer months - made up for falling piece-rates. Stonemasons complained of 13 hour days. In much the

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De 1789 à 1914' Seuil, Paris 1976

<sup>27</sup> Wagniar J.F. 'Le Vagabond à la fin du XIXème Siècle' Belin, Paris 1999 p. 221 – 230

<sup>28</sup> Topalov C. p 205

<sup>29</sup> Commission d'Enquête Parlementaire sur la Situation des Ouvriers de l'Industrie et de l'Agriculture en France et sur la Crise Industrielle à Paris, Imprimerie du Journal Officiel, M. Spuller, Paris 1885

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p 221

<sup>31</sup> Leroy M. 'La Coutume Ouvrière' M. Giard et E. Briere, Paris 1913 p 152

<sup>32</sup> Néré J. 'La Crise Industrielle de 1882 et le Mouvement Boulangiste' unpublished doctoral thesis, Faculté de Lettres, Sorbonne 1959 p 289

same way, the increased activity of wives and juveniles offset the falling wages of male breadwinners<sup>33</sup> and ultimately created the conditions for the entry of women into the labour movement.

An important aspect of this sudden deceleration was the fostering of forms of exploitative sub-contracting ('marchandage')<sup>34</sup> by entrepreneurs struggling to maintain their position in a situation of falling orders. An industry open to the entry of provincials and foreigners seemed to be emerging as small masters insinuated themselves between the entrepreneur – who frequently worked for the municipality – and the workers. Although the sub-contractor or 'tâcheron' was an established figure in the building trade, in the more competitive atmosphere of the 1880's his behaviour needed to be firmly regulated. Frequently responsible for paying the wages of his workers and as such tempted to take advantage of their need for employment, the growing insolvency of the sub-contractors placed them at the very limits of legality. Established construction workers, of course, continued to resort to public spaces to collectively fix wage rates in conformity with the joint-regulated system. Many entrepreneurs, on the other hand, resorted to recruitment in the provinces via 'foires', isolating incoming workers from constituted work-groups.

This then was the background to the institutionalization of work relations in France. Falling levels of activity meant that further upward revisions in the 'série de prix' were out of the question. The rise of disorganised patterns of mobility coincided with the more repressive line on vagabondage adopted by the interior minister Waldeck-Rousseau from 1883 to 1885. The growing public debt (47.7 billion francs by 1900) meant that excess capital was diverted away

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<sup>33</sup> Cottureau A. 'Precarité, pluriactivité et horizons biographiques au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en France' in Billiard I., Debordeaux D. et Lurol M. (eds) 'Vivre la Précarité. Trajectoires et Projets de Vie, l'Aube, Paris 2000

<sup>34</sup> Harison C. « 'La Question du Marchandage' The Political and Legal Struggle against Exploitative Subcontracting in Paris, 1881 – 1911 » *European History Quarterly* Vol 32 N° 4 Oct 2002 p. 451 487

from productive expenditure into the hands of a growing class of *rentiers*. As a result the economic downturn in France proved to be far lengthier than that which took place in the other major European countries. The Third Republic's attempt to divert idle capital into the colonial adventure did little to improve the domestic situation.

### Institutionalising Work

The tension within the labour movement finally came to a head in 1887 when the reforming Paris Municipal Council decided to restore the *série de prix* of 1882 on all municipal worksites. The upward revision of these piece-rates formed a major plank of the reforming platform of the newly elected Municipal Council and in many became emblematic of a claim for greater autonomy. The outlawing of *marchandage*, the application of the 9 hour day and the restriction of the entry of foreign labour formed part of the same approach. Thus in the same year the Paris Council 1887 established the regulation that municipal funds should facilitate the direct payment of the worker by the entrepreneur involved on municipal worksites, potentially exploitative sub-contractors having little or no say in the matter.

In much the same way, the establishment in 1887 of a 'Bourse du Travail' in Paris expressed the possibilist creed which initially sought to marry municipal reformism to revolutionary politics. Originally conceived as a mechanism by which the supply and demand for labour could be co-ordinated, the Bourse was also seen as useful premises for the housing of officially registered 'chambres syndicales'. This putative 'Stock Exchange for labour' was first debated by the Conseil Municipal in 1882. Its establishment clearly responded to the creation of a 50, 000 strong League for the Elimination of Private Labour Exchanges in 1886. Deeply-rooted hostility to the abuses of fee-paying placement was

symbolised by the Law of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1852 which outlawed the interference of unions in the defence of wage structures. Huge meetings, boycotts, violent demonstrations and petitions were orchestrated by Parisian socialists.<sup>35</sup> The violence of these demonstrations<sup>36</sup> accounts for the keen interest in the reform of placement procedures by the administration. Although the idea for the Bourse owed much to Edward Vaillant's 'Commission du Travail' and to Gustave Mesureur one cannot ignore the role played by Floquet, the Préfet of the Seine region.<sup>37</sup>

It therefore came as something of a shock when in 1888 the Conseil d'État cancelled both the restored 'série de prix' and the foreshortened working day introduced on municipal worksites. This decision, which confirmed the scepticism of the extremists<sup>38</sup> with respect to the ability of municipal reformism to loosen the grip of the central government, resulted in the prosecution of a prolonged guerrilla war between the municipal council and the central state represented by the Préfet.<sup>39</sup> In the short term private contractors working for the municipality immediately took advantage of the situation to impose lower piece-rates, employer reluctance to accept the decisions of the prud'hommes<sup>40</sup> having taken root over the preceding years. Wage levels stagnated.<sup>41</sup> The limitations on the 'possibilist' strategy were now clear enough to the small army of

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<sup>35</sup> Centi C. 'Les Leçons d'un échec: Molinari et le Marché du Travail' *Economies et Sociétés*, N°12 1989

<sup>36</sup> Lecerf op.cit. p 91 - 131

<sup>37</sup> Dommanget M. 'Edouard Vaillant. Un Grand Socialiste 1840 – 1915' *La Table Ronde*, Paris 1956 p. 153

<sup>38</sup> For an account of similar blocking actions by the Conseil d'Etat see, Rabinow P. 'Une France si Moderne. Naissance du Social 1880 – 1950' Buchet/Chastel, Paris 2006 p 331 - 334

<sup>39</sup> See in this respect Mazoyer C.M. 'Les conditions du Travail dans les chantiers de la ville de Paris' Thèse de la Faculté de Droit de l'université de Paris, V.Giard et E. Brière, Paris 1899.

<sup>40</sup> Olszak N. 'Mouvement Ouvrier et Système Judiciaire 1830 – 1950' Doctorat D'Etat 1987 vol 1 p 685 - 705

<sup>41</sup> For a useful synthesis of the literature see Boll F and Sirot S. in 'Du "tariff" à la convention collective, Grèves et syndicats des ouvriers à Londres, Paris et Hambourg à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle' in Robert J.L. Boll F., and Prost A 'Invention des Syndicalismes en Europe Occidentale à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle' Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997.

construction workers based in the Paris region, many of whom found an outlet for their dissatisfaction in the disorders of Boulangism.

The political situation in Paris soon became untenable. Outside the Bourse labour movement militants were embroiled in the Boulangist adventure. Inside the possibilists were in the difficult position of having to follow the options of a municipality which seemed unable to defend standard wage rates. The formerly under-represented federal 'syndicats' opposed to the possibilists were now in a position to use their numbers to better effect.<sup>42</sup> The newly formed federations of syndicats in the building and metal trades together with the railway workers loosened the hold of the possibilist trade unionists in the Bourse in the period which followed the violent strike of 12,000 building labourers in the summer of 1888 - an unsuccessful attempt to impose the unapplied 'série' of 1882. This precipitated the marginalization of the possibilists in the Bourse and its takeover by their opponents in 1891.

Only 102 syndicats out of a total of 219 in the Paris Bourse du Travail were registered with the Préfet in conformity with the law. When the government moved sharply to the right under Dupuy in 1893, the Bourse quickly became a target. Evacuated by the military in the same year, it remained closed for 3 years. During this time the government dissolved unregistered organisations, ignored protests against the law of 1884 and rejected a succession of alternative joint-regulated placement projects.<sup>43</sup>

For socialist militants in France, there was no longer any question of a solution to the social question based on production co-operatives

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<sup>42</sup> Schottler P. , 'Naissance des bourses du travail. Un appareil idéologique d'état à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle' Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1985 p 75 - 87

<sup>43</sup> Schottler P. op.cit. p 82 - 87

('associations').<sup>44</sup> Besides, the administration was providing 'friendly' production co-operatives with privileged access to bidding for public contracts in return for downward wage flexibility.<sup>45</sup> This was the case in the building trade.<sup>46</sup> Against these trends the development the issue of the invasion of public works by foreigners provided a response of sorts. This consisted in the severe restrictions which were placed on the recruitment of foreign workers on municipal worksites in Paris from 1886 onwards.<sup>47</sup> The movement for the abolition of private labour exchanges indeed ran in parallel to these tendencies, private agencies being accused of bringing outsiders into the Parisian labour market.

### 'Inventing Chômage'

Seen in this light the establishment of the Conseil Supérieur du Travail in 1891 and its sister organisation the Office du Travail were clearly attempts to prove the reforming intentions of governmental republicans. Created by decree in 1891, the C.S.T. resulted from the lobbying of Villiard, a Paris municipal councillor and the ubiquitous *Mesureur*. Placed under the direction of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the C.S.T. possessed a tripartite configuration which brought together parliamentarians, employers and workers' representatives charged with the task of elaborating projects for the regulation of wages, conciliation, arbitration and placement. As an expression of the need to integrate working-class leaders in a situation of stagnant wage rates and

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<sup>44</sup> Moss H. 'Aux Origines du Mouvement Ouvrier Français. Le Socialisme des ouvriers de métier 1830 – 1914' Université de Besançon, 1985 p 111 - 122

<sup>45</sup> Office du Travail ' Les Associations Professionnelles' tome IV Imprimerie Nationale, Paris 1904 p 35 - 40

<sup>46</sup> Poulot D. 'Question Sociale. Le Sublime ou le Travailleur comme il est en 1870 et ce qu'il peut être', Maspero, Paris 1980 p 59 - 60

<sup>47</sup> Noirielle G. 'Le Creuset Français. Histoire de l'Immigration XIX<sup>e</sup> – XX siècle' Seuil, Paris, 1988 p 78 - 95

rising levels of strike activity, the C.S.T. co-opted an ‘official proletariat’<sup>48</sup> of reformist syndicalists prepared to co-operate with the administration.

Following the line laid down by Leon Say and Keufer, the Office du Travail which emerged in the same year, was given the task of providing statistical and documentary evidence on wages and conditions capable of countering the influence of alarmist documents such as the parliamentary report of 1885. Prior to the appointment of Arthur Fontaine, the Office was directed by high level civil servants and engineers linked in one way or another to the private railway companies. The first director Jules Lax was, for example, a polytechnicien, who would abandon his post in 1893 to further his numerous interests in this sector. He was followed by Camille Moron an engineer from the Pont et Chaussées school whose work in the Office from 1894 to 1899 was never allowed to interfere with his consulting work in the railways industry.<sup>49</sup>

The efforts of the statisticians in the Office du Travail to construct the category of unemployment have been examined elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> Given the absence of modern public assistance mechanisms, the statistical construction of a threshold separating ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ fluctuations in business activity provided no clues as to where individual responsibility ended and social responsibility began. March’s recommended of public charity to workers subject to ‘chômage forcé’ expressed an attitude to the social responsibility of the state which ran against the emerging system of industrial relations. The conception of chômage defended by Keufer, on the other hand, replaced the stress on assistance with a plea for counter-cyclical public works and the protection of

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<sup>48</sup> Salais R. and Luciani J. ‘Materiaux pour la Naissance d’une Institution : l’Office du Travail 1890 – 1900’ Genèse, N° 2 Dec 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Lespinet-Moret I. ‘L’Office du Travail. La République et la réforme sociale’ Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007 p 58 - 62

<sup>50</sup> Salais R., Bavarez N et Reynaud B. ‘L’invention du chômage. Histoire et transformations d’une catégorie en France des années 1890 aux années 1980’ PUF, Paris 1986.

local labour markets by the discouraging of labour mobility. His own union's members seem to have preferred action to defend wage levels to investment in elaborate placement procedures.

If the Office was interested in placement procedures<sup>51</sup> this was doubtless partly a reaction to the emerging crisis in mobility structures. But for the Office the main issue was the nature and functioning of neutral placement mechanisms and the advantages of various forms of regulation. The fact that provincial 'Bourses' were becoming an important vector in the political revival of small and medium-sized towns tended to dissimulate the underlying issues involved in placement as the involuntary immobility of skilled workers increasingly focused their attention on the imponderables of local politics.<sup>52</sup> For even if the mobility patterns of itinerant workers mimicked 'compagnonnage', the Bourses were clearly not in a position to use mobility as a lever with which to bring recalcitrant employers to heel. Besides the Bourses were dependent on municipal subsidies for their continued existence and as such obliged to adopt an increasingly neutral stance towards non-unionised workers.

### Federal Structures

In competition with the Guesdists, the national federation of Bourses du Travail (1892) nurtured federal trade union structures from out of the unstable regional entities which preceded them. Possessing inter-occupational practices, permanent premises and a core of militants, the Bourse network avoided the legal and practical limitations which had been placed in the way of trade union activity. Workers could take advantage of the logistical support and experience

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Lax J. 'Le Placement des Employés, ouvriers et domestiques en France. Son histoire – son état actuel' Office du Travail, Berger-Levrault et C<sup>o</sup>, Paris 1893

<sup>52</sup> Hanagan M.P. 'The Logic of Solidarity. Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871 – 1914' University of Illinois Press, London 1980 p 100 - 108

available in the Bourses without having to follow the propaganda which emanated from them. The result was a political eclecticism which favoured labour movement mobilisation. The largely female textile workers in the Isère, for example, came under the influence of the Guesdists. The woodcutters of the Cher regions of central France were brought into contact with Blanquist militants and so on.

The existence of a permanent public space devoted to the working population in the smaller towns not only brought the working-class into local politics but also relieved the isolation faced by under-employed or nomadic workers. Activities such as dances, meals, outings, debates, conferences, exhibitions, promenades, children's choirs, day-trips, theatre performances, technical courses together with the publication of newsletters and bulletins certainly do not, perhaps deserve the condescension of historians. And this is not to ignore the sponsoring of co-operative activity, attempts to restrict overtime by military employees (in the Bourges Military Establishments), to encourage work-sharing (in Fougères in Brittany), the enforcing of work regulations and the sponsoring of local forms of municipal socialism; the list is endless.

Placement by the network of Bourses was small but not totally insignificant. The 609,000 stable placements affected by private agencies between 1897 and 1898 contrasts sharply with the 66,981 placement affected by the Bourses. Half of the recorded placement activity of the Bourses took place in the tertiary sector in Paris and Marseilles. Elsewhere placement was localised and often unrecorded but nonetheless subject to more demanding standards than those practiced by private agencies. Subsidies in the form of travelling benefits, on the other hand, worked more on the supply side: Here

the idea was that of maintaining and fixing the unemployed *elsewhere*,<sup>53</sup> or of *deconcentrating urban labour markets*. In this case, the prevention of the formation of overcrowded labour markets implied federal union structures and the regionalisation of labour mobility

The short and long range placement activity of the Bourses coincided with the growing conviction among legal experts that across-the-board legislation to stamp out vagabondage and public begging was becoming unworkable. Post-1891 various forms of public assistance to the destitute were becoming available and fixed residence criteria were disappearing together with the more repressive measures against vagrancy. Workers could henceforth benefit from forms of public assistance far from their place of birth. This was an implicit admission that many of the destitute had become vagrants because of major fluctuations in economic activity. In this case it is likely that the mere existence of the 'Bourse' network rendered the tendency towards the legal repression of vagabondage as incoherent as it was unrealistic.<sup>54</sup>

### Enter Millerand

The significance of political alliances struck at local level became clear in the years following the advent of the government of republican defence of 1899. Faced with growing reaction, the parliamentary socialists grouped around Millerand realised the political value of an alliance with the emerging labour movement. This implied an earnest attempt to wrestle with demands for social reform; attempts which would eventually weaken the union

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<sup>53</sup> Pelloutier F. 'Histoire des Bourses du Travail', Gramma Publication, Paris 1971 p 156.

<sup>54</sup> Guitton C. 'Le chômage entre question sociale et question pénale en France au tournant du siècle' in Mansfield M., Salais R., and Whiteside N. *Aux Sources du Chômage 1880 – 1914*, Belin, Paris 1994

movement's preference for unregistered structures. Hence the desire to re-regulate working conditions on public works schemes overcame many of the suspicions surrounding Millerand's political opportunism. The celebrated decrees of August 1899 which now bear his name obliged the state (and allowed local authorities and regions) to stipulate pay scales, working hours and conditions on public contract work.

In this strictly political sense then, it is possible that the elaboration of industrial relations centred on 'convention collectives' owed much to the emergence of the network of Bourses. But the controversies surrounding the building trade in Paris clearly played a role.<sup>55</sup> At any rate, it was clearly impossible to integrate the patchy system of 'contrats collectives' existing in mining and building into official conciliation procedures given the unstable membership of unions and the small scale of organisations. 'Convention collectives', on the other hand, enjoyed a semi-public aspect which could be used to insert loosely organised groups of workers into a stable framework of collective bargaining. Little wonder then, that local Bourse militants increasingly invested much time in the effort to master the corresponding legal procedures.<sup>56</sup>

Millerand also granted a large subsidy to the largely symbolic 'statistical service' of the Federation of Bourses in an attempt to remove building workers from Paris following the end of the Exposition Universelle of 1900. By supplying a list of public building sites in the provinces and delegating the signalling of vacancies to the Bourse network, the administration effectively granted labour movement militants the power to insist upon regional pay standards. Unionists used official facilities such as these to

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<sup>55</sup> Didry C. 'Naissance de la Convention Collective. Débats juridiques et luttes sociales en France au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle' Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en Sciences Sociales' Paris, 2002 p 114 - 122

<sup>56</sup> Bance P. 'Les fondateurs de la c.g.t. à l'épreuve du droit' la pensée sauvage, Claix 1978p 189 - 209

channel labour mobility by compartmentalising information on job-vacancies, by prioritizing local candidates and by obliging workers to visit the maximum number of workshops on their route.<sup>57</sup> This was clearly a general *demobilisation* of labour<sup>58</sup> which in many ways complimented the return of agricultural protectionism in 1893. But the use of public subsidies of this sort clearly implied the adoption of a neutral stance towards the established standards of trade standards and potentially the weakening of the ability of work groups to defend working conditions.

### Conclusion

A decree of 1905 finally subsidised the 'out of work' funds of trade unions with large *federal* structures and gave Bourses some responsibility in the management of local funds. This astonishing *volte-face* with respect to earlier official attitudes towards federal structures<sup>59</sup> placed the local Bourses in the front line of efforts to help unemployed workers travelling over the vast expanse of industrial France. The long awaited emergence of free municipal placement structures in 1904 brought to a close the pioneer status of the Bourses at the same time as it underlined the neutrality of the placement mechanisms official subsidies implied. The Bourse network's role in placement now ran in parallel to the official organisation of the job-search on a local and, over time, regional basis.

The reality of unemployment in France thus shared much of the ambivalence which could also be found in the British case but with an important difference: In the French case labour market regulation was built on a strong tradition of

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<sup>57</sup> Pelloutier F. 'Histoire des Bourses du Travail' Gramma Publications, Paris 1971 p 158 - 169

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Gaudemar J.P. 'La Mobilisation Générale' Champs Urbain, Paris 1979.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel C. and Tuchsizirer C. 'L'état face aux Chômeurs. L'indemnisation du chômage de 1884 à nos jours' Flammarion, Paris 1999 p 71 - 85

localised work regulation. Henceforth official subsidies went to federal trade unions lodged in Bourse premises, which were in turn just as frequently lodged in local town halls. The recognition of the need to establish and defend regional pay norms characterised this outcome: The Millerand decrees of 1899 recalled the localised regulation of piece rates at work in the adjudication process. But this institutionalization of the problem of unemployment accepted as given the undifferentiated nature of employment whilst underlining the *subordination* involved in the wage relation.<sup>60</sup> In so doing it represented a point of entry into the long process which led to the more rationalized form of social policy which we associate with the relocation of labour in response to changes in demand and the modern category of unemployment.

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<sup>60</sup> A point made with some force by Luciani J. 'Logiques du placement ouvrier au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et construction du marché du travail' *Société contemporaine* sept 1990 N° 3 p 5 - 18