

Parisian Labour During the French Revolution

Michael David Sibalis

Volume 21, numéro 1, 1986

Winnipeg 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030945ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030945ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Sibalis, M. D. (1986). Parisian Labour During the French Revolution. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 21(1), 11–32.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/030945ar>

Résumé de l'article

À Paris, à l'époque de la révolution, les travailleurs ne firent pas preuve d'esprit de classe ni, sauf certaines exceptions, du sens d'organisation que l'on observa au sein du mouvement des travailleurs après 1830. Néanmoins, une analyse des documents relatifs à quatre-vingt-cinq conflits de travail prouve que les protestations des travailleurs eurent un impact considérable dans la capitale entre 1789 et 1799. L'unité des sans-culottes a été exagérée. Les salariés formulèrent des revendications principalement pour des salaires plus élevés, ce qui les distinguait des maîtres-artisans et des boutiquiers qui dirigeaient le mouvement des sans-culottes. Face à ces remous chez les travailleurs, les autorités réagirent souvent de façon hésitante et la loi répressive de Le Chapelier de 1791 fut défait rarement invoquée.

Parisian Labour During the French Revolution

MICHAEL DAVID SIBALIS

Résumé

Workers in revolutionary Paris did not show the class consciousness nor, with certain exceptions, the organizational skills of the workers' movement after 1830. Nevertheless, an analysis of eighty-five recorded labour disputes proves labour protest to have been a significant form of protest in the capital between 1789 and 1799. Sans-culotte unity has been exaggerated, and wage-earners articulated demands (principally for higher wages) that set them apart from the master-craftsmen and shopkeepers who directed the sans-culotte movement. The response of the authorities to labour unrest was often hesitant and contradictory, and the repressive Le Chapelier law of 1791 was in fact rarely invoked.



À Paris, à l'époque de la révolution, les travailleurs ne firent pas preuve d'esprit de classe ni, sauf certaines exceptions, du sens d'organisation que l'on observa au sein du mouvement des travailleurs après 1830. Néanmoins, une analyse des documents relatifs à quatre-vingt-cinq conflits de travail prouve que les protestations des travailleurs eurent un impact considérable dans la capitale entre 1789 et 1799. L'unité des sans-culottes a été exagérée. Les salariés formulèrent des revendications principalement pour des salaires plus élevés, ce qui les distinguait des maîtres-artisans et des boutiquiers qui dirigeaient le mouvement des sans-culottes. Face à ces remous chez les travailleurs, les autorités réagirent souvent de façon hésitante et la loi répressive de Le Chapelier de 1791 fut de fait rarement invoquée.

i

Can we speak of a workers' movement during the French Revolution? From the first histories of the Revolution in the 1820s to the works of historians like Mathiez a century or more later, most writers have referred to a "question ouvrière" and have cited the popular riots, demonstrations, and strikes that punctuated the 1790s as evidence of an inchoate yet distinct workers' movement among "le peuple de Paris."¹ Nowadays, more sophisticated techniques of social history make apparent their misunderstanding of the nature of class and social tensions in eighteenth-century Paris. Their works are not without value or insight, but they tended to read back into the past contemporary concerns and preconceptions about the struggle

The author wishes to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, which generously provided him with research funds to spend a year in Paris (1984-85).

1. Michael D. Sibalis, "The 'Question ouvrière' in the French Revolution in the Works of Jaurès, Mathiez and Lefebvre," MA diss., Concordia University, 1972.

between capital and labour. Moreover, they often used the imprecise social terminology of the revolutionary period itself, and they used it inconsistently: words like "people," "artisans," "ouvriers," "menu peuple," and "sans-culotte."

Certainly, among the socially heterogeneous population of eighteenth-century Paris there was a wage-earning majority that comprised servants, skilled journeymen in the artisanal trades, construction workers, unskilled day-labourers in the street trades or on the ports, and many others. The fundamental questions, however, are clear. To what extent did these share common political and social ideals, aspirations and demands? Is it possible to disentangle their particular actions and ideology as wage-earners from the wider context of the sans-culotte movement?

For the sociologist, a "social movement" is a collective effort by a group of people sharing common interests and a common system of beliefs to promote change in accordance with those interests and beliefs (sometimes through illegal or even violent means). By definition, a social movement is organized, although this does not necessarily imply a formal bureaucratic structure.² Historians over the last thirty years have considered the primary social movement in revolutionary Paris to have been the sans-culotte movement, which united wage-earners and small-scale producers in their common interest as *consumers*. These men and women also shared a common ideology, a populist belief in popular sovereignty and rough social equality with limited but definite property rights. They had an effective organizational base in the clubs and assemblies of the Paris sections (neighbourhoods). This standard interpretation rests on the assumption that the "typical" sans-culotte was a master-craftsman who owned a small workshop, or one of the handful of journeymen whom he hired and who were susceptible to his political and ideological influence.³

This carefully crafted historical interpretation is now coming apart. Richard Andrews in particular, after a painstaking analysis of the sources, has begun to demonstrate that the social unity of the sans-culotte movement was a façade. He limits the term "sans-culotterie" to an élite of about four thousand militants who held office in the Paris sections and which he describes as "bourgeois in its social aggregate," because of its capital, property, literacy and "power to command labour on a large scale." In contrast, Andrews calls the broad masses "plebeians," comprising those without property "who lived by wage, piece-rate or remuneration in goods, by institutional charity, begging, prostitution, street-hawking... and hustles..."⁴ Andrews argues that the sans-culotte élite controlled the plebeians through both its socioeconomic domination and its ideological hegemony. Sans-culotte rhetoric stressed the value of productive labour as against the "unearned,

2. See Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass., 1978), 39–40.

3. The seminal work that put forward this thesis is, of course, Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II* (Paris, 1958).

4. Richard Andrews, "Social Structures, Political Elites and Ideology in Revolutionary Paris, 1792–94: A Critical Evaluation of Albert Soboul's *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II*," *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985–86):73, 77.

speculative or superfluous income” of mercantile capitalists, market speculators and landed bourgeois or nobles. Despite its own, often substantial, urban wealth, the élite considered its managerial and administrative skills a form of productive (and hence socially useful) labour equivalent to actual manual labour.⁵

This new approach to the *sans-culotte*, which dismantles a social movement into its component parts, opens the way to a reexamination of the workers' movement during the Revolution — something that the emphasis on the *sans-culotte* movement has hitherto tended to preclude. Indeed, George Rudé is the only recent historian specifically to study wage-earners in the Revolution, and that was in several short articles published years ago. In his unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rudé initially examined the role of wage-earners in the primarily political events of 1789–91.⁶ Having come to the conclusion that workers played no distinct political role, he broadened his approach to study the *sans-culottes* as a whole. This research produced Rudé's first book. His treatment of wage-earners in this and later works was only peripheral to his ground-breaking studies of popular protest.⁷ Rudé distinguished three forms of popular protest in eighteenth-century and revolutionary France: the political riot, the food riot, and the labour dispute. While he described the strikes of 1789, 1791 and 1794, Rudé minimized their political and social importance, commenting that, with the possible exception of the spring of 1794, “labour disputes were not so prominent a feature of social life as food riots. . . .”⁸ This may well have been true outside of Paris (although only a city-by-city study would permit a definitive conclusion), but it is clearly untrue for the capital city. Rudé, like historians before and since, has tended to underestimate the number and the extent of labour disputes in revolutionary Paris.

This paper starts where Rudé has left off. It deals with three aspects of Parisian labour during the French Revolution. The first part describes the overall pattern of labour protest, giving a tally of labour disputes that exceeds any previous account. The second part examines the inconsistent response of the authorities to labour agitation and suggests that the importance of the Le Chapelier Law of 1791 has been much exaggerated. Finally, the paper shows that labour protest was a significant and underestimated form of protest in revolutionary Paris, representing

-
5. See also Michael Sonenscher, “The *Sans-culottes* of the Year II: Rethinking the Language of Labour in Revolutionary France,” *Social History* 9 (1984): 301–28, which examines the *sans-culotte* “language of labour” in terms of the traditions of work prevalent among eighteenth-century journeymen. He interprets the “metaphor of the *sans-culotte*” — the hardworking and productive master-artisan or journeyman — as one resting “very much on the terms set by journeymen.”
 6. George Rudé, “The Parisian Wage-earning Population and the Insurrectionary Movements of 1789–91,” PhD diss., University of London, 1950.
 7. *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959). See also his essays collected under the title *Paris and London in the Eighteenth-Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (London, n.d.).
 8. George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York and London, 1964), ch. 6–8. The quotation is from 126.

a first step in the development of French labour militancy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

ii

The primary material for this study consists of the records of eighty-five disputes that occurred in the ten years between the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 and Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in November 1799. After extensive research in the newspapers and manuscript documents from the period, I have prepared a card file of these disputes.⁹ Unfortunately, there is no uninterrupted series of police reports for revolutionary Paris, and there is a bias in those sources that do exist: they overemphasize disputes in the public sector (public works projects and nationalized industries such as armaments and government printshops). It is therefore probable that the eighty-five catalogued disputes do not include all that actually occurred. Nor are they wholly representative, since it is unlikely that minor conflicts in trades like tailoring and shoemaking have left traces in the documents. Even so, the eighty-five disputes constitute a useful source of information.

The first labour dispute in my file is a riot in early August 1789 by workers who, while demolishing the Bastille, tried to hang a foreman for saying that wages were to be cut. The last, in early October 1799, was an attempt by about twenty joiners to bring the journeymen in various furniture workshops out on strike for higher wages. The disputes in between involved most categories of workers. There were twenty-seven disputes in the building trades (32 per cent of the total), fourteen of them in public works. The printing trades account for twelve disputes (14 per cent), half of them in government printshops. Yet at one time or another, apothecaries, bakers, hatters, hosiers, tailors, ribbon-weavers, potters, dockworkers and unskilled labourers, among many others, also voiced their grievances. Almost always, they demanded higher wages. All these men — for few women took part¹⁰ — used a varied repertoire of protest: petitions, mass demonstrations (including near-riots) and, of course, strikes. Some disputes took more than one form, as in the case of the city's lamplighters over an eighteen-month period between 1795 and 1796. At times, they peacefully petitioned the contractors for higher wages; sometimes, they threatened to stop work; and on three occasions, according to reports, "ils se sont tous levés en masse composée d'environ 150 familles, ils sont venus nous forcer de leur payer provisoirement l'augmentation qu'ils exigeaient..."¹¹

-
9. Given evident space constraints, I cannot reproduce here the sources for this card file. In the following pages, I will give precise citations only for protests specifically mentioned.
 10. The exception here were women attached to the spinning workshops set up as a form of poor relief. See Dominique Godineau, "Travail et politique à Paris pendant la Révolution: l'exemple des ateliers municipaux," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 263 (janvier-mars 1986):35-49.
 11. Correspondance in Archives Nationales (Paris) [henceforth, AN], F13 353 and 356.

PARISIAN LABOUR DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The fact that I have counted this series of incidents involving lamplighters as a single dispute — the same, for example, as a minor strike lasting only a few hours or a single collective petition for higher wages — indicates that the labour disputes in my file are not all exactly equivalent. In general, I have defined a “dispute” as a single incident (strike, demonstration or petition) involving one particular category of worker and centred on one or two precise issues. In eight cases where the agitation was continual and interconnected, I counted as a single dispute what was in fact something far more extensive. In a few cases, because of vague police reports that mention widespread protest among workers in general, without specifying details, I have also counted as a single dispute what was in fact clearly a cluster of protests by several categories of workers with assorted demands. For these reasons, no statistical analysis of labour protest in revolutionary Paris can do more than approximate a very complex reality. Even so, tabulation does serve to show the peaks and troughs of labour protest:

1789	8 incidents	1794	20 incidents
1790	1 incident	1795	10 incidents
1791	8 incidents	1796	14 incidents
1792	4 incidents	1797	8 incidents
1793	6 incidents	1798	4 incidents
		1799	2 incidents

(Note that 1789 begins on 14 July, and that 1799 ends on 9 November. When a dispute extended over more than a calendar year, it is listed under the year in which it began.)

There were four peaks of labour protest in Paris during the course of the French Revolution: the late summer of 1789, the spring of 1791, the winter and spring of 1794 and, finally, the Thermidorian and early-Directory period as a whole (from late 1794 through to the end of 1797). Much has already been written about the first three series of strikes and protests, although on the basis of incomplete information. The last series has been ignored, apart from a brief article by Edmond Soreau more than fifty years ago.¹²

The labour unrest of 1789 involved workers in various trades, who often gathered in large numbers to make their grievances known. Construction workers at the Bastille rioted against a proposed wage cut; journeymen tailors, journeymen shoemakers, and assistant apothecaries demanded higher wages; assistant wigmakers and journeymen bakers called for an end to the guild-controlled placement offices; domestic servants sought the expulsion of foreign servants; and workers in the state-run Gobelins tapestry manufactory wanted a new work code and fixed weekly wages in place of a piece-rate. Such varied demands and such scattered protests were not a uniform movement; yet there was a common link. The

12. Edmond Soreau, “Note sur les conflits ouvriers sous le Directoire,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 7 (1930):549-54.

sweeping-away of the Old Regime and the consequent reordering of the political and social order provided an occasion for the open expression of old grievances, while the political turmoil of 1789 seemed to legitimize riot, demonstration, and petition to the authorities. The conservative Marquis de Ferrières, like many of his contemporaries, perceived the mood and recorded it in his memoirs:

l'unité sociale rompue, chaque corporation, chaque individu, se croyait l'Etat et la Nation. Un délire universel semblait s'être emparé des têtes: tout était corps délibérant. Les... garçons perruquiers [délibèrent] aux Champs-Élysées; quatre mille domestiques ouvrirent leurs séances au Louvre...; trois mille garçons cordonniers s'assemblèrent à la place Louis XV, prononcèrent que ceux qui feraient des souliers au-dessous du prix convenu seraient chassés hors du royaume.¹³

The next strike wave, in the spring of 1791, was unprecedented in Paris, both in scope and in organization. Here, there was a single overriding demand: higher wages. The documents refer to printers, hatters, shoemakers, farriers, carpenters, locksmiths, and joiners — and the movement may have been more extensive than this, since the master farriers, perhaps with some exaggeration, warned of “la coalition générale de quatre-vingt-mille ouvriers dans la capitale; c'est la réunion d'une masse immense d'hommes, qui croient devoir être divisés d'intérêts et de principes avec le reste de leurs concitoyens...”¹⁴ Observers took particular alarm at the degree of organization manifested by the workers. Journeymen printers had formed an association to further their interests in 1790, and it was still active in 1791. The carpenters set up their Union Fraternelle in April of 1791, and it negotiated with the masters, blacklisted shops, and generally coordinated a prolonged strike that lasted from mid-April into June.

The political implications of these strikes remain obscure. They did, however, coincide with the democratic and republican agitation that culminated in the Massacre of the Champ de Mars on 17 July. Historians have generally followed Albert Mathiez, who interpreted the strikes as politically inspired. François Robert, a Cordeliers journalist, had established a central committee, which first met on 7 May, to link all the sociétés fraternelles in Paris. Mathiez declared that this committee “ne se proposait rien moins que de grouper et coordonner, de diriger aussi le mouvement ouvrier.”¹⁵ In fact, his conclusion is no more than speculation, since the evidence is circumstantial at best. The fraternal societies were political clubs, not trade unions, and Mathiez' own sources suggest that their primary goals were limited to republicanism and a broader suffrage. True, when Robert published an article on “the present condition of workers in the capital” that May, he

13. Berville and Barrière, eds., *Mémoires du Marquis de Ferrières* 3 vols. (Paris, 1821), 1:205-6.

14. *Pétition présentée à l'assemblée Nationale pour les maréchaux de Paris, le sept juin 1791* (Paris, 1791), Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris)[henceforth, BN], F3 35355.

15. Albert Mathiez, *Le Club des Cordeliers pendant la crise de Varennes et le Massacre du Champ de Mars* (Paris, 1910), 30-1.

denounced the “rapacité” of employers, defended wage-earners against “ces tiranneaux,” and urged the Paris municipal council to pursue a hands-off policy. But his article was also a plea for a free-market economy and he rejected fixed pay rates, a stand which could hardly have pleased the workers, since they were then on strike to win collective wage agreements.¹⁶

If, taken individually, the strikes in the winter, spring, and early summer of 1794 were shorter and less organized than those of 1791, they were as a group far more numerous and involved a greater variety of trades. Once again, the principal demand was for higher wages, which suggests that the Maximum Général that had controlled prices and wages since September of 1793 may not have been as effective as generally assumed. Certainly, in March of 1794, the Bureaux des travaux publics noted “parmi les CC. [Citoyens] Ouvriers un esprit d’indocilité et d’insubordination” that it found worrisome, but it added that “il est juste de venir à leurs secours. . . en raison de la cherté des denrées. . .”¹⁷ Alternatively, Rudé has argued that the price rise was fairly moderate and that the strikes were an attempt by workers to take advantage of a war-induced labour shortage to raise their standard of living.¹⁸ Whatever the cause, in January of 1794 police agents were reporting on the daily flouting of the Maximum on wages, particularly by those who sold their services directly to the public: men who unloaded and cut wood on the ports, carters, coachmen, day-labourers, chimney-sweepers, and errand-boys.¹⁹ (None of these is included in my card file, because the reports are much too vague for tabulation.) In addition, there were at least fourteen distinct protests by construction workers (especially carpenters), printers, bakers, transport workers, armaments workers, tobacco workers, and potters. Some of these threatened national defence by impeding the construction of arms factories or the production of arms; others disrupted the government’s effort to provision Paris.

Robespierre fell on 27 July 1794. Wage-earners’ hostility to the Maximum is one reason for their reluctance to rally to him after he had been outlawed by the National Convention. The guillotining of Robespierre and his supporters in the municipal government implied an abandonment of what at least one group of workers called the “foutu maximum.”²⁰ Although the Maximum was not in fact repealed until December of 1794, the tempo of strikes picked up again in August. There are records of six labour disputes in the last months of 1794 and of twenty-four more from January 1795 to September 1796. Reports explicitly link this unrest to the dominant economic problem of 1795–96: the dramatic depreciation of paper currency and the consequent hyperinflation. In Paris, the value of the *assignat* fell

16. François Robert, “Etat actuel des ouvriers de la capitale,” *Mercur national et étranger* 25 (11 May 1791):385-8.
17. Report of 15 ventôse an II, AN, F13 1935, doss. 26.
18. Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 133.
19. Pierre Caron, “Rapports de Grivel et de Siret,” in *Bulletin de la Commission de recherche et publication des documents relatifs à la vie économique de la Révolution* (1907).
20. Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 139–41.

to 49 per cent of face value in January 1794, 21 per cent in January 1795 and 0.4 per cent in January 1796; it lost another half of its value by May of 1796. The *assignat* was replaced by a new paper currency, the *mandat territorial*, in March 1796, but this too underwent rapid devaluation.²¹ By the late summer of 1796, many workers were not only demanding higher wages but also refusing to accept them in paper money: “il est notoire qu’ils se font payer presque un quart au-dessus du prix de 1790, et en numéraire; l’égoïsme est un sentiment qui leurs est commun.”²² A newspaper compared the wages of 1789, which, it said, had been inadequate, “par suite du despotisme des maîtres,” with the wages of 1796 that were too high, “par suite du despotisme contraire.”²³

Yet how can one not sympathize with the “despotism” of wage-earners who faced unprecedented inflation? Again and again, they returned to the charge as prices outstripped any wage gains they made. Thus, many of the recorded disputes dragged on over months. For example, the quarreymen who worked “under Paris” petitioned for raises six times between September of 1795 and June of 1796, when the series of reports stops. In September, the government agreed to raise their pay to a range of from twenty-one to thirty-six francs a day, depending on their classification. In February of 1796 they were earning between seventy and one hundred francs; in March, between 130 and 160 francs; and in June, between two hundred and three hundred francs. Yet this last amount, they claimed, amounted to no more than between eight and twelve sous, or from forty to sixty centimes in hard currency. Finally, in July of 1796 the government permanently pegged their wages at seven-eighths of those paid to construction workers at the Luxembourg Palace, a standard that was itself subject to regular raises in the following months. The quarreymen’s petitions were explicit about the reasons for the wage demands: “la progression aussi rapide qu’effrayante des denrées et autres objets de première et d’absolue nécessité.” In February of 1796 they quoted prices: “le pain est taxé à 40 [francs] la livre, viande à 145, ils payent une paire de souliers 1800 et les sabots 200. . . .”²⁴ The central importance of food prices as the root of labour unrest in this period is demonstrated by the lamplighters, who agitated almost constantly between February of 1795 and June of 1796. In May of 1795, they demanded a raise of 150 per cent, from four sous to ten sous per lantern — or else a single pound of bread per worker per day.²⁵

Thus, strikes were a major form of popular protest after the fall of Robespierre. High bread prices sparked the failed insurrections of April and May 1795, but otherwise there were no bread riots in the capital. Rudé is therefore wrong to write that “after December 1794. . . as inflation and unemployment took over, workers abandoned the strike and resorted to the traditional and more familiar

21. Pierre Caron, *Tableau de dépréciation du papier-monnaie* (Paris, 1909), 385–91.

22. Police report, 20 thermidor an IV, AN, BB3 84.

23. *Censeur des journaux* 314 (19 messidor an IV).

24. AN, F13 741.

25. AN, F13 353 and 356.

PARISIAN LABOUR DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

type of social protest [the food riot].”²⁶ Tonneson is equally wrong to argue that strikes in the Thermidorian period were mainly in large-scale state-run enterprises where the employer was impersonal.²⁷ True, there was intense and prolonged interest by armaments workers against the decision to denationalize the armaments industry in the late summer and early autumn of 1794, but there were also strikes in a wide range of trades. Although documentation is most abundant for government printshops and public construction projects, there are many indications in police reports to suggest a broad wage movement that simply cannot be put into statistical form. For instance, in June of 1796 the police reported labour unrest (a refusal to accept wages in *mandats*) among “ouvriers ébénistes, chapeliers et autres.” How is one to quantify “and others”? The protests appear to have reached a crescendo in early May of 1798, in what I have been able to count as only a single protest, when the police took action against a broad wages movement by unspecified “ouvriers et artisans.”²⁸ There were to be only four minor labour disputes in the next eighteen months.

Then Napoleon Bonaparte seized power. His vigorous reassertion of state authority had consequences for many aspects of life in France, including the labour movement. There were, to be sure, labour disputes and strikes in Napoleonic Paris — at least ninety in the years between 1800 and 1815 — but the authorities were better prepared to deal with them, as the state passed new laws and revived old ones for the policing and control of labour.²⁹ The legal position of labour in the revolutionary years was less clear.

iii

Before the Revolution, royal legislation limited the right of wage-earners to form associations, negotiate collective agreements, and strike. Police regulations controlled hiring practices, limited the mobility of labour, and generally attempted to discipline a class of men considered rebellious by nature and hence a permanent threat to public order.³⁰ The guilds were fundamental to the maintenance of hierarchy, order, deference, and morality: “La première ligne de la police de travail était constituée par les communautés d’arts et métiers.”³¹ This “first line of defence” was breached on the Night of August 4 (1789), when the National Assembly voted a resolution recorded succinctly as: “Réformation des jurandes.”³² Camille

26. Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 133.

27. K. Tonneson, *La défaite des sans-culottes* (Paris, 1962), 28.

28. Police report, 8 messidor an IV, AN, BB3 84; “Compte décadaire des opérations du Bureau central,” 11-20 messidor an IV, AN, BB3 88.

29. Michael D. Sibalis, “The Workers of Napoleonic Paris, 1800-1815” (PhD diss., Concordia University, Montreal, 1979).

30. Germain Martin, *Les associations ouvrières au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1900); Steven Kaplan, “Réflexions sur la police du monde du travail, 1799-1815,” *Revue historique* 261 (1979):17-77.

31. Kaplan, “Réflexions,” 26.

32. Patrick Kessel, *La nuit du 4 août 1789* (Paris, 1969), 169.

Desmoulins, for one, had no doubt as to the meaning of this vote: "Aura une boutique qui pourra. Le maître tailleur, le maître cordonnier, le maître perruquier plaideront; mais les garçons se réjouiront et il y aura illumination dans les mansardes."³³ But the deputies made no further reference to the guilds in the final decrees drawn up between 5 and 11 August, leaving the new Paris municipal government in an awkward position. As Bailly, the new mayor, later noted in his memoirs, "tout se souleva contre les privilèges des maîtres," yet he had to enforce the old guild regulations as best he could.³⁴ In fact, many of the guilds were unable to shore up their collapsing authority. Journeymen, butchers, printers and wigmakers openly defied the guilds and illegally set themselves up in business. In the case of the printers at least, Bailly wrote, "je fermais les yeux."³⁵

In the end, however, it is not worker opposition that brought down the guilds, but rather their fundamental incompatibility with (in Patrice Higonnet's words) the anticorporatism "at the heart of the bourgeois Revolutionary message." There could be no intermediate bodies between the autonomous, free citizen on the one hand and the nation-state on the other.³⁶ The D'Allarde Law (2-17 March 1791) abolished the guilds and replaced "ces derniers vestiges de la servitude" with an annual trade licence (la patente) payable by all businessmen, master-craftsmen, and professionals.³⁷

The Le Chapelier Law (14-17 June 1791) complemented this legislation. Its immediate pretext was the labour agitation sweeping the capital that spring. Le Chapelier, the deputy who presented the legislation to the National Assembly on behalf of its constitutional committee, specifically attacked the *compagnonnages* (traditional journeymen's associations) and mutual aid societies that he held responsible for fomenting labour unrest. Yet he defined the basic issue in ideological terms, as "corporatism" versus individualism: "Il n'est pas permis à personne d'inspirer aux citoyens un intérêt intermédiaire, de les séparer de la chose publique par un esprit de corporation." The Le Chapelier Law formally forbade trade associations "sous quelque prétexte et sous quelque forme que ce soit." Neither employers nor wage-earners in the same trade could deliberate together, elect officers, keep records, or draw up statutes to promote their "prétendus intérêts communs." In addition, articles four and eight of the law severely restricted collective labour activity. It was forbidden to make agreements "tendant à refuser

33. Quoted in Joseph Drioux, *Études économique et juridique sur les associations* (Paris, 1884), 271.

34. Berville and Barrière, eds., *Mémoires de Bailly, avec une notice sur sa vie*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1821), 2:275.

35. *Ibid.*, 2:275-6; *Pétition des perruquiers de la ville de Paris aux représentants de la nation* (Paris, [1790]), BN, Vp 2456.

36. See Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology and the Rights of the Nobles during the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1981), 68-9.

37. Sessions of 15 February, and 2, 17 and 28 March 1791, as reported in *Le Moniteur*.

de concert ou à n'accorder qu'à un prix déterminé le secours de leur industrie ou de leurs travaux. . . ."³⁸

Historians rarely realize that the passage of the D'Allarde and Le Chapelier Laws did not invalidate the corpus of labour legislation inherited from the Old Regime, as two court cases demonstrate. The first involved Hubert Maugin, a green-grocer, and his former assistant, Langrin, who in 1790 opened his own shop just across from Maugin's on the Rue Saint-Jacques. This violated existing regulations that forbade an employee to open a shop within five hundred toises (about one kilometre) of his former place of work. Maugin won his case, but Langrin appealed. And in the interim both the guilds and the old law courts were abolished:

la scène change. Les anciens tribunaux s'écroulent; les magistrats de l'ancien régime disparaissent, ceux de la liberté viennent s'asseoir sur leurs sièges, et peser les droits des citoyens dans la balance de la loi régénérée. Bien plus, l'assemblée nationale abolit les maîtrises et les jurandes.

The new judges, however, also ruled in Maugin's favour: the old regulation was in no way dependent on the guild system, "mais doit avoir lieu en tout état de choses, pour empêcher que des garçons, par des voies malhonnêtes, n'enlèvent à leurs maîtres une partie de leurs pratiques. . . ."³⁹

The second case has direct bearing on the Le Chapelier Law. In 1793 four workers quit Potter, a Parisian porcelain manufacturer, and went to work for his competitor. Potter argued that the workers, having acted in concert, were in violation of the Le Chapelier Law. The accused countered that they had used their "liberté naturelle" to work for whom they wished. (Wage-earners had frequently invoked a "natural liberty" against guild restrictions throughout the 1700s, though the phrase obviously had greater resonance in 1793 than before the Revolution.) The court ruled that the Le Chapelier Law did not apply in this instance, but found the accused guilty of violating the letters-patent of 2 January 1749 and 12 September 1781. These forbade workers to quit a manufactory without giving advance notice and receiving "un congé exprès et par écrit de leurs maîtres."⁴⁰

These decisions remind us that Revolutionary egalitarianism did not dramatically change the legal status of labour as subordinate to the employer. Masters no longer constituted a self-regulating body defined by tradition, privilege and law, but were simply the possessors of capital sufficient to rent a workshop, hire labour and pay the patente. This replacement of a hierarchy of privilege with a

38. Session of 14 June 1791, in *Le Moniteur*; also, Edmond Soreau, "La loi Le Chapelier," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 8 (1931):287-314.

39. *Gazette des nouveaux tribunaux* 1, no. 2:315-9.

40. *Gazette des nouveaux tribunaux* 7, no. 14:445-8. On the ordinances of 1749 and 1781, see Martin, *Les associations*, 174-5. On "liberté naturelle" before 1789, see Sonenscher, "The sans-culottes of the Year II," 321.

hierarchy of wealth (often, in fact, advantaging the same men) was, of course, a major redefinition of the social order. Yet it meant little for the poor and propertyless as wage earners.

This may not, however, have been obvious at first. Since few legal records survive, it is impossible to know to what extent the two court cases cited above were typical, nor how often employers turned to the courts to maintain their domination over labour. It may be that workers enjoyed a certain latitude in the mid-1790s, because of the revolutionary situation. For example, when in 1789 and 1790 the tapestry workers at the Gobelins Manufactory demanded improved conditions and higher wages, the administrators felt compelled to give in. As one explained in 1790: "Le Règlement de 1783 était bon. . . L'esprit de la révolution ne permet peut-être plus de songer à ce règlement, et peut-être aussi n'y pourrait-on insister sans danger." The situation was difficult, with "les ouvriers abusans de l'empire que le peuple a pris partout. On peut dire qu'ils ont mis le pied sur la gorge à l'administration."⁴¹ These were arguments from circumstance, not from legal principle.

Only in the late 1790s, after the destruction of the popular movement, could the old regulations be enforced once again. The Directory issued two similar decrees, one for the paper-making industry (2 September 1796) and another, more relevant to Paris, for the hat trade (7 July 1797), which imposed sweeping state control and cited as precedents a whole series of old-regime edicts as well as the Le Chapelier Law.⁴² In the early 1800s, the Napoleonic government considered, only to reject, a restoration of the guild system. It did, however, resurrect many of the eighteenth-century controls over labour, including official employment agencies (to replace the guild bureaux) and a compulsory passbook (le livret) for all wage-earners.⁴³ Even more important was the passage of new legislation in 1803 and 1810 to deal with labour disputes and strikes. This was necessary because of the obvious inadequacies of the Le Chapelier Law.

Historians have consistently maintained that the Le Chapelier Law brought an end to the labour agitation of the spring of 1791, dispersed the workers' associations that had encouraged it, and remained (until repeal in 1884) the cornerstone of French labour legislation. In fact, none of these three assertions is completely true. First, although passage of the Le Chapelier Law coincided with the winding down of labour unrest in June of 1791, there is no evidence — not a single document — to link the two events. The municipal government had already begun to move against strikers in May; moreover, the strikes of 1791 were the result of economic

41. "Observations," n.d. (late 1790) and "Observations sur le mémoire relatif à la manufacture des Gobelins" (1792), AN, OI 2052B.
42. Charles Schmidt, "Notes sur la législation et l'administration de l'industrie de 1788 à l'an XI," *Bulletin trimestriel de la Commission de recherche et de publication des documents relatifs à la vie économique de la Révolution* (Paris, 1909), 322–5.
43. M.D. Sibalis, "Corporatism after the Corporations: The Régulation of Parisian Labour, 1791–1830," unpublished paper presented at the CHA, Ottawa, June 1982.

discontent coinciding with political agitation. All popular agitation came to an end in the summer of 1791, in a wave of repression signalled by the Massacre of the Champ de Mars on 17 July. The Le Chapelier Law was at best ancillary to that process.

Secondly, there can be no doubt that the law's impact on workers' associations has been much exaggerated. True, Parisian leather-workers recalled in 1821 "les circonstances orageuses de la révolution où le Devoir [i.e. the *compagnonnages*] avait été presque anéanti..."⁴⁴ Similarly, in 1822 a philanthropist painted an equally bleak picture for the mutual aid societies, whose members, he said, carried on their mutualist activities in the 1790s in the greatest secrecy.⁴⁵ Yet the stonemasons' *compagnonnage* remained active in Paris, as a register for the period from August of 1791 to May of 1793 testifies.⁴⁶ A brawl among several Parisian carpenters on 31 October 1791 makes clear that their *compagnonnage* survived, and that it used intimidation to maintain the higher wages won by strike earlier that year. Moreover, neither the police nor the judges who investigated the brawl and interrogated participants and witnesses seems to have considered prosecuting the journeymen for illegal association.⁴⁷ There is also evidence that some mutual aid societies either survived undisturbed or managed to reorganize themselves after the passage of the Le Chapelier Law.⁴⁸ Indeed, since many mutual aid societies were in the form of journeymen's religious confraternities, the Law of 18 August 1792, which dissolved religious associations, had much more of an impact on them. The manuscript minutes of the *Confrérie de Saint-Laurent* record that a general meeting held on 7 October 1792 voted to sell all religious ornaments, to adopt a new name more in conformity with the prevailing ethos ("la Société des Amis de l'Égalité"), and to maintain its fund for the sick. Thereafter, regular meetings continued as usual, untroubled by the government or the Le Chapelier Law. Revolutionary events have left only minor traces in the minutes: members were addressed as "citoyen" rather than "sieur"; God became the Supreme Being; and the revolutionary calendar replaced the Gregorian in 1794.⁴⁹

One more point must be made about the Le Chapelier Law and workers' associations: no post-Revolutionary government used it against them. From Napoleon on, governments tolerated and even encouraged mutualism. While it is true that Napoleonic prefects and mayors invoked the Le Chapelier Law in their

44. Letter of accreditation from Parisian workers to the Assemblée de Bordeaux, 1821, AN, F7 9786.

45. Report by Everat, 1 June 1822, in *Rapports et comptes-rendus de la Société Philantropique de Paris pendant l'année 1821*, 67.

46. Register cited in Emile Coornaert, *Les compagnonnages en France du moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris, 1966), 56.

47. AN, Z3, doss. 311.

48. M.D. Sibalis, "Parisian Mutualism, 1789-1848," unpublished paper delivered at the Society for French Historical Studies, Iowa City, April 1983.

49. "Registre des délibérations," as quoted in Jean Bennet, *La Mutualité française des origines à la Révolution de 1789* (Paris, 1981), 750-2, 759-70.

repeated attempts to dissolve the *compagnonnage*, it was recognized at the highest levels that, as drafted, the laws were inadequate: "Les dispositions de ces lois ne prohibent point les *compagnonnages*. Elles n'interdisent pas non plus aux ouvriers de se réunir mais seulement de nommer des présidents et secrétaires de leur assemblée. . . ."50

The third aspect of the Le Chapelier Law was its ban on collective agreements and, at least by implication, on strikes. Although the law remained on the books for most of the nineteenth century, it was an imprecise and therefore ineffectual tool for repressing labour unrest. It was therefore replaced, or rather superseded, by Napoleonic legislation: articles six to eight of the Law of 22 Germinal Year XI (12 April 1803) and the almost identically worded articles 414 to 416 of the Penal Code of 1810. These were more specific in their interdiction of workers' combinations (coalitions) to alter wages, working conditions, or hours of work through collective action. The courts generally used these laws in the prosecution of labour activity after 1803, and not the earlier Le Chapelier Law, which was hardly ever mentioned.⁵¹

Indeed, even in the scores of labour disputes between 1791 and 1803, the authorities explicitly invoked the Le Chapelier Law only once, in 1798 (as we shall see). Instead, they dealt with labour protest in a variety of ways. They showed no firm commitment to *laissez-faire* economic theory, but rather seem to have regarded strikes and labour protest as, above all, a threat to public order. In this respect, policy after 1789 continued pre-1789 practice, pursued, however, by a restructured, reinvented, and more powerful state.

In the first years of the Revolution, it was the municipal government that was primarily responsible for dealing with labour unrest in Paris. Bailly's memoirs recount his dilemma. As mayor, he did his best to maintain public order while seeking conciliation whenever possible. Thus, in August of 1789 the municipal council refused to consider the demands of the journeymen tailors "parce qu'il n'est pas compétent" and enforced its decree of 7 August, which forbade large gatherings (*atroupements*) as "contraires au bon ordre."⁵² On the other hand, in May of 1790 Bailly arranged a meeting between master printers and their journeymen — "une assemblée qui ne peut avoir que la conciliation pour objet" — but which the journeymen failed to attend.⁵³ In the spring of 1791, the municipality showed itself to be tough-minded in the face of widespread labour protest. On 26 April it published an "avis aux ouvriers" to warn that their combinations were illegal and

50. "Rapport au Conseil de police," March 1810, An, F7 4236, doss. 9. On attempts to suppress the *compagnonnage*, see other dossiers in the carton.

51. This conclusion is based on my detailed examination of strikes and state repression in the years to 1834.

52. *Révolutions de Paris* 6 (16–22 August 1789), 15; S. Lacroix, *Actes de la Commune de Paris pendant la Révolution française*, 1st series (Paris, n.d.), 1:265.

53. "Registre de la Communauté des Maîtres Libraires et Imprimeurs de Paris," BN, Mss F.Fr. 21,861, fol. 42.

their demands unfair and unreasonable; on 4 May it decreed that the workers' resolutions were "nuls, inconstitutionnels, et non-obligatoires" and ordered the arrest of troublemakers; on 11 May Bailly directed the National Guard to close the carpenters' meeting hall; and on 20 and 21 May the municipal council appointed commissioners to consult with departmental officials and to seek the advice of the National Assembly's constitutional committee on how best to deal with the situation.⁵⁴ (This, of course, led directly to the Le Chapelier Law.)

There is no evidence of a coherent policy on labour unrest in the years 1792 and 1793, when disputes were scattered and unimportant. By late 1793 the growing influence of the Jacobins and of the sans-culotte movement brought a perceptible shift toward a more determined policy. Officials in the Paris sections were usually quick to demand action against strikers. As Richard Cobb has written in reference to a gilders' strike in August of 1793:

On sait que les autorités sectionnaires voyaient d'un très mauvais oeil toute tentative de "coalition" de la part des ouvriers, tentatives que l'on assimilait volontier à l'accaparement, à des infractions au maximum et à d'autres actes qui risquaient de compromettre la politique économique de guerre. . . .⁵⁵

This, however, was not true of all officials. As we have seen, the Bureaux des travaux publics recognized that there was some justification for higher wages. Moreover, the Hébertist faction, which controlled the Paris Commune, was reluctant to enforce the Maximum on wages. After the execution of Hébert, on 22 March 1794, the Robespierriest Commune showed more determination: Claude Payan, its dominant personality, was especially hostile to workers' demands.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Commune had the backing of the two powerful Committees of Public Safety and of General Security.

Officials in this period blamed labour unrest on troublemakers, foreign agents, and counterrevolutionaries. They replied with appeals to the patriotism of wage-earners who had been "misled" into striking. Thus, between 5 May and 11 July 1794, in a series of general orders to the National Guard, which he commanded, Henriot called on "mes frères les ouvriers" to ignore the "perturbateurs" stirring them up, reminding them of the principles of sans-culotte economic virtue: "oublions-nous que la médiocrité vaut mieux que la richesse, que nos moeurs

54. Lacroix, 4, 123-4, 318, 346; *Avis aux ouvriers* (26 April 1791) and *Arrêté concernant les ouvriers* (4 May 1791), BN, Lb40/1; Bailly to Gouvion, 11 May 1791, BN, Ms 11,697, 254-5.

55. Richard Cobb, "Une coalition d'ouvriers doreurs en août 1793," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 33 (1961):530-3.

56. Michel Eude, "La Commune Robespierrieste," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 10 (1933):412-25; 11 (1934):321-47, 528-56; 12 (1935):132-61, 495-518; 13 (1936):289-316.

valent mieux que tout l'or de l'univers...?"⁵⁷ Similarly, in June of 1794 the Revolutionary Committee of the Section de l'Unité voted to issue "une exhortation fraternelle" to the construction workers who, demanding higher wages, had stopped work on a saltpeter refinery in the former Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Furthermore, it added a warning: "Le comité arrête en outre [que] le citoyen assez malheureux pour que le patriotisme et la raison ne puissent le servir en guide, qu'il le considéra comme un esclave, que la seule crainte du châtement doit faire marcher. . . ."⁵⁸ Frécine, the man in charge of the project, told the strikers that "des Agens de Pitt et de Cobourg. . . voudraient vous mener à votre perte, par l'appât d'une augmentation de salaire, qui, ne connaissant plus de bornes, détruirait bientôt les liens de la société." And he reminded them that on 10 June the National Convention had ordered the Revolutionary Tribunal to prosecute as traitors those who interfered with the printing of assignats or the manufacture of guns and powder.⁵⁹

Indeed, workers were actually arrested in this period for their labour activities. On 21 April 1794 a delegation of tobacco workers asked the municipal council to support their request for a wage increase. Payan angrily turned on the disconcerted delegates and, besides accusing them of counterrevolutionary aims, expressed his astonishment "de voir des citoyens qui, au mépris de la loi, forment en ce moment une corporation." (This would seem to be an allusion to the Le Chapelier Law.) Four delegates were arrested.⁶⁰ Dorigny, a municipal official and public works contractor, had a carpenter named Benoist arrested for inciting others to strike on 19 June.⁶¹ Herman, a government commissioner, had three printers imprisoned on 7 July for stirring up trouble over the hours of work at the Imprimerie nationale du Louvre.⁶² The eight arrested men spent many weeks in prison awaiting an appearance before the dread Revolutionary Tribunal, which would in all likelihood have imposed a death sentence. They were released at various dates after the fall of Robespierre. Since Dorigny, Herman and Payan all perished on the scaffold as Robespierrists, the eight labour agitators were able to present themselves to the Committee of General Security as victims of political tyranny.

Labour policy during the Thermidorian period (July 1794 to October 1795) and the Directory (October 1795 to November 1799) was inconsistent. One Royalist

57. *Journal de la Montagne* 3, nos. 11 (18 floréal an II), 51 (29 prairial), 55 (3 messidor), 77 (25 messidor). The quotation is from the last.

58. Minutes of the Comité Révolutionnaire, 25 prairial an II, AN, F7* 2507, fol. 266-7.

59. Frécine, *Aux citoyens employés à la construction du nouvel Atelier* (Paris, n.d.), BN, Lb41 1121.

60. "Commune de Paris: Séance du 2 floréal," *Journal de la Montagne* 2, no. 161 (4 floréal an II); "Commune de Paris: Conseil général, 2 floréal," *Le Moniteur*, 7 floréal an II. For the dossiers of three of the four men arrested: AN, F7 4597, plaq. I, fol. 23-31 (Bertrand); F7 4644, doss. 1 (Chaufourier); F7 4737, doss. 3 (Guy).

61. AN, F7 4594, plaq. I, fol. 74-80 (Benoist).

62. Herman, *Mémoire justificatif pour le citoyen Herman* (Paris, n.d.), BN, Lb41 1206; Herman's dossier in AN, F7 4743; and a striker's dossier in F7 4709, doss. 3 (Fontenas).

critic even blamed the Directory for its failure to act against “les *ligues* qui font les ouvriers pour imposer la loi à ceux qui les emploient.”⁶³ In fact, this was only a partial truth. Generally, the state left all matters pertaining to labour to the police, who intervened in at least four of the six labour disputes in the period from August to December 1794, none of the ten in 1795, five of the fourteen in 1796, two of eight in 1797, and two of the four in 1798. The criterion for intervention is not at all clear, but it appears that the police were quickest to act when they considered workers’ demands unjustified and their protest a threat to public order. This would explain the relative laxness in the years 1795 and 1796, when rapid inflation could be seen as justifying wage increases, and why the firmest stand against labour unrest occurred at the time of the coup d’état of 22 floréal (11 May 1798), which was directed against the resurgent Left. On 7 May, worried by a wave of labour unrest that had begun in April, the Paris police issued a decree that banned gatherings by “des ouvriers [qui]... se coalisent,... délibèrent et font des arrêtés par lesquels ils taxent arbitrairement le prix de leurs journées. . . .” It was printed along with the text of the Le Chapelier Law and, on the very morning of the coup, posted in the streets of the capital to the sound of drum-rolls.⁶⁴ Once again, as in 1791 and 1794, it is evident that labour unrest aroused the most concern when it coincided with political instability. Moreover, this is the one and only time between 1791 and the 1800s that the Le Chapelier Law was explicitly invoked and used as intended.

Twice under the Directory, the national government itself acted to suppress a strike. The first time was on 5 November 1795 when the five newly installed executive directors faced a strike by two hundred workers in the print shop that produced the assignats. Because this labour action threatened financial stability, the directors invoked article 145 of the Constitution, which authorized them to take emergency action against threats to the security of the constitutional government. General Bonaparte used troops to contain a printers’ demonstration and the directors in person interrogated four arrested strike leaders.⁶⁵ The directors resorted to article 145 again in May of 1796 to order the arrest of seven leaders of a pressmen’s strike for higher wages at the Imprimerie de la République. Yet the minister of police released the prisoners within a few hours, on the grounds that there was no evidence of conspiracy against the government. The infuriated shop manager, who believed that the release compromised his authority, reported on their return to work: “Leur contenance, les chapeaux mis en l’air en entrant dans la

63. Sir François d’Ivernois, *Tableau historique et politique des pertes que la Révolution et la guerre ont causées au peuple français* (London, 1799), 229–30.

64. For the text of the decree, A. Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne et sous le Directoire*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1898–1902), 4:648–9. For details on its posting: Bureau central du Canton de Paris to the Administrations municipales, 21 floréal an VI, Archives de Paris, VD* 2153.

65. See the documents in AF, III 314, doss. 1241. The strike has been described by Raymond Guizot, “Une grève sous le Directoire,” *Revue d’histoire du XVIII^e au XIX^e siècle* 3 (1910):328–34.

cour, annonçaient la rentrée triomphante d'hommes injustement accusés." The minister of justice ordered the firing of the accused men.⁶⁶

Thus, hesitations and contradictions in labour policy are apparent throughout the revolutionary period, and even the Le Chapelier Law, which Karl Marx branded a "bourgeois coup d'état,"⁶⁷ was in fact rarely enforced. How can this be explained? In part, it was probably a consequence of the bureaucratic inertia of the authorities (police and judiciary) who tended to think in terms of old-regime policy, legislation and methods. Their concern for public order was paramount, and (whatever the intentions of the assemblies) little commitment to laissez-faire economics and bourgeois supremacy is evident in their words and actions.

Secondly, in a time of revolution, action against labour agitators could never be separated from broader political considerations. At any given time, the authorities acted according to the exigencies of the situation and the configuration of political, social and economic forces. They tried various tactics: a ban on atteroupements moderated by conciliation (in 1789 and 1790), the proscription of the "corporatist spirit" (1791), even repression of labour activity as a political crime (1794). Sometimes they appeared indifferent to or benignly tolerant of labour protest; at other times, they resorted to old-regime police methods.

There is another possible explanation that by no means excludes the others. Patrice Higonnet, in a recently published study of the bourgeoisie's ambivalent attitude toward the nobility, has argued that in the 1790s the bourgeoisie did not as yet fully perceive where their class interests lay, or even that society was split (or in the process of splitting) into rival classes. They held firmly to an ideal of a harmonious society based on shared social and political interests. Strife was unnatural, the result of "corruption rather than class conflict."⁶⁸ There is a close parallel here in the bourgeoisie's reaction to workers' protest. Labour unrest was seen as a threat to the harmonious social order because wage-earners sought to opt out of the national community and pursue their own egotistical interests. Their actions were perverse at best, treasonous at worst. The bourgeoisie was at a loss as to how to act in these circumstances, and shifted policy according to the exigencies of the moment. Ideologically committed to laissez-faire, they could not admit the reestablishment of the guilds or of state regulation. (This was noted by a perceptive royalist critic, who remarked that the Corps Législatif in 1797 repeatedly rejected calls for action against workers' *ligues* "en se récriant sur ce qu'on voulait le ramener aux Jurandes & Maîtrises." The legislature "a persisté dans ce qu'il appelle les *grands principes*, sans égard à cette observation. . . que la police devait porter un

66. Assorted reports, May 1796, AN, AA13, doss. 558; AF, III 373, doss. 1852, fol. 84-5 and AF, III 374, doss. 1857, fol. 57-8. See also A. Debidour, *Recueil des actes du Directoire exécutif*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1910-17), 2:484, 488, 501.

67. K. Marx, *Capital*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (New York, Vintage Books, 1977), 1:904.

68. Higonnet, *The Rights of Nobles*, 170-86.

oeil sévère sur des ligues qui pouvaient devenir funestes."⁶⁹) On the other hand, unwilling to admit the existence of class conflict, they were far less ruthless in the pursuit of their class interests than one might expect. The solution was to come only under Napoleon, when a frank admission of class interests combined with a determination to maintain social order at all costs to produce a complete reversion to the techniques of the old guild system, short of restoring the guilds themselves.

iv

If the French bourgeoisie was not fully class-conscious in the 1790s, how much less so were the wage-earners! It would only be in the 1830s — and particularly during the strikes of the autumn of 1833 — that there emerged in Paris a group of labour militants who articulated an explicitly class-conscious analysis of society. They portrayed the workingman as occupying an unjustly subordinate position within bourgeois society, and they proposed remedies: universal manhood suffrage to give him political power and cooperative workshops to end economic exploitation.

There were no such explicit expressions of class consciousness by workers in revolutionary Paris, although occasionally the rhetoric of the period lends itself to misreading. To illustrate this, we can examine one particular series of disputes. In 1790 the National Assembly voted to complete construction of the Sainte-Geneviève church, transformed into the Panthéon. Every spring from 1791 to 1796 the construction workers on the busy site were to prove a major nuisance with their repeated petitions and strikes, usually for higher wages. Quatremere-Quincy, in charge of the project in its early years, considered the militancy of the wage-earners a consequence of the Revolution. He described conditions on the worksite in the years 1790 and 1791 as

[un] système absurde établi entre les ouvriers qui, par une parodie absurde du gouvernement, regardent leurs travaux comme leur propriété, le bâtiment comme une république dont ils sont les concitoyens, croient en conséquence qu'il leur appartient de se nommer leurs chefs, leurs inspecteurs, et de se distribuer arbitrairement les travaux.⁷⁰

The sculptors and masons employed on the job replied with an adept use of revolutionary rhetoric. Insisting that there was no need for contractors to hire and supervise them, they denounced "cette dépendance qui subordonne les compagnons aux entrepreneurs" with the comment that "l'ancien régime ne subsiste plus."⁷¹ Furthermore, in a letter published by Marat in his newspaper, 340 masons at the

69. Ivernois, *Tableau historique*, 172.

70. Quatremere-Quincy, *Rapport sur l'édifice dit de Sainte-Geneviève, fait au Directeur du Département de Paris* (Paris, 1791), 20.

71. *Examen impartial de la demande faite au Conseil général de la Commune, par les sculpteurs en ornements, employés à la nouvelle Eglise Sainte-Geneviève* (Paris, n.d.), 13-14; AN, O1 1699.

church linked the question of the contractors' profits to their alleged political unreliability:

Ces hommes vils qui dévorent dans l'oisiveté le fruit de la sueur des manoeuvres, et qui n'ont jamais rendu aucun service à la nation, s'étaient cachés dans des souterrains les 12, 13 et 14 juillet [1789]. Lorsqu'ils ont vu que la classe des infortunés avait fait seule la révolution, ils sont sortis de leurs tanières pour nous traiter de brigands. ...⁷²

Finally, three years later, several stonemasons used their positions as sectionary officials to obtain the arrest of Poncet, the principal contractor, on charges of "de lapidation" and "incivisme;" he was in prison from February to August of 1794.⁷³

These quotations would at first appear to suggest a more radical consciousness and an increased militancy among wage-earners since 1789. Indeed, Quatremere-Quincy's charges were to become a commonplace in the nineteenth century: that the Revolution had transformed a subservient working class into an arrogant and rebellious one. This, of course, was an untenable position, since eighteenth-century employers had complained just as loudly about the insubordination shown by their journeymen.⁷⁴ The above quotations by wage-earners contain two basic concepts. The first is that wage-earners have their own dignity and deserve independence and an employer's respect. This was not new. Throughout the eighteenth century skilled journeymen resented being assimilated to domestic servants, and contested attempts by employers to dominate them and control the work process. The second concept is that profit is morally (and even politically) suspect if derived from the labour of others. This, too, was a common theme of workers' discourse in the eighteenth century, one that was in fact incorporated into *sans-culotte* ideology.⁷⁵ What events at the Panthéon demonstrate is the clever use of opportunities inherent in a revolutionary situation and the skilful manipulation of revolutionary rhetoric to achieve ends and to express ideas that were not in the least untraditional.

Nor were workers better organized in the labour disputes of the 1790s than before the Revolution. Confraternities (despite their religious purposes) and *compagnonnages* had traditionally played a role in coordinating labour protest. The *compagnonnages* and, to a lesser extent, the new mutual aid societies continued this role. There is also evidence of other spontaneous organizations in many labour protests of the 1790s. For example, in November of 1794 delegates from seven armaments workshops met in a tavern to produce a petition on behalf of their colleagues, and they presumably coordinated the subsequent unrest.⁷⁶ Printers' strikes in December of 1795 and June of 1796 were run by a mysterious committee

72. *L'Ami du peuple* 487 (12 June 1791).

73. AN, F7 4774/79, doss. Poncet.

74. Kaplan, "Réflexions," *passim*.

75. Sonenscher, "The *sans-culottes* of the Year II," 317-24.

76. On the strike, see Tonneson, *La défaite*, 23-7. On the meeting of delegates, see the declaration by Arnould, 6 *frimaire* an III, AN, F7* 2524, p. 25.

that met on the Rue de la Huchette.⁷⁷ Hosiers in 1796 and locksmiths in 1797 organized their strikes in a series of formal or informal meetings.⁷⁸ Such ad hoc organizations were typical of the eighteenth century and would remain common throughout the period from 1800 to 1830, but they were a far cry from the “sociétés de résistance” set up in the early 1830s to group all the workers in a given trade into a single association for the promotion of their collective interest.⁷⁹ Highly structured associations, with written statutes, central committees to direct labour action, and reserve funds to finance strikes, the “sociétés de résistance” had only two revolutionary precedents: the printers’ and carpenters’ trade associations of 1790–91. In 1832 an orator at a meeting of carpenters made direct reference to “ce que nos anciens ont fait il y a 40 ans, quand ils ont a cette époque former leur assemblée, qui était les mêmes qu’aujourd’hui et pour le mêmes sujet. . . .”⁸⁰

What was clearly new in the 1790s was an increase in the incidence of labour disputes: eighty-five in the period between 1789 and 1799 as compared to about one hundred in the previous nine decades.⁸¹ Even allowing for better reporting in the revolutionary years, this suggests a greater labour militancy. The decade 1789–99 compares favourably even to later decades, with sixty-two disputes in 1800–09, fifty-six in 1810–19 and one hundred and two in 1820–29.⁸² This is not surprising: we would expect as much given the weakening of traditional authority and the French Revolution’s implicit legitimization of popular protest.

Whether this labour activity in itself deserves to be labelled a “movement” is another matter, however. The sans-culotte movement was not as unitary as generally supposed and there were serious tensions between sans-culotte employers of labour and many of the wage-earners whom they led into battle on the various journées. Certainly, the wage-earners of Paris had their own economic interests (primarily decent wages) which they pursued with tenacity, especially in the years of rapid inflation. Thus, the craftsmen’s challenge to bourgeois hegemony that was to characterize French urban industry in the nineteenth century had already begun. On the other hand, there is very little evidence that the participants in the disputes that occurred in these years saw their demands and goals as part of a wider struggle

-
77. Police report, 29 frimaire an IV, AN, F1c III Seine 17; reports of June 1796, F7 7155A, doss. B2 5378. On the latter strike, see also I. Woloch, “Sur le mouvement ouvrier en l’an IV,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 35 (1963): 498–500.
78. On the *bonnetiers*, see reports of 27–28 ventôse an IV, AN, F7 7113, doss. B7370; and on the *serruriers*, reports of May 1797, AN, F7 7256, doss. 8783 B3.
79. M.D. Sibalis, “The Evolution of the Paris Labor Movement, 1789–1834,” *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Conference of the Western Society for French History* (1982), 345–54.
80. David, “Discours,” 23 August 1832, AN, AE V 84, doss. 1 (original spelling).
81. Michael Sonenscher, “Work and Wages in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” in M. Berg *et al.*, *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory* (London, 1983).
82. Sibalis, “Evolution,” 345.

extending beyond their own immediate and particular interests as a specific group of carpenters, tailors, or dockworkers. Moreover, most of the disputes centred on wages in a period of high inflation rather than on the question of control of the work process — a key issue later in the nineteenth century. It would be premature to write about a movement, except in embryo and by anticipation, because labour protest during the French Revolution was too short term and too fragmented. Here, too, the decisive shift was to come only after 1830.