

Trade Unions in French Universities, 1945-1972.

Between Social Justice and Career Strategy

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Post-'45 trade unionism amongst French university teachers was strongly determined by the transformations of France's higher education system. Its predominant state sector was marked by bureaucratic decision making, outspoken centralism and by a structural segmentation between the 'facultés', the 'grandes écoles', the newly created research funds and, after 1966, the 'Instituts Universitaires de Technologie'. The expansion of higher education was mainly carried by the 'facultés', where the explosive growth of the student population necessitated an expansion of the teaching staff. The specific form given to this staff expansion by the French government eventually generated a situation that clearly fostered pro-unionist attitudes amongst specific parts of the academic personnel. How was the teaching staff organised? Four categories were more or less clearly defined for the whole of the 'facultés' system. The so-called 'A-cadre' grouped the professors and the 'maîtres de conférences'. The 'B-cadre' encompassed the junior staff, i.e. the assistants and the category first qualified as 'chefs de travaux', later as 'maîtres-assistants'. Entry into A-cadre was only possible by the obtention of the very prestigious 'doctorat d'Etat'. Within these categories however, statutory positions often diverged: about 30 different types of statute were present in the '60s.

But, in spite of this imbroglio, they all shared a similar feature. The tenured status as a civil servant was quite often guaranteed from the start (as was the case with e.g. the assistants of the Science faculties) or was at least to be obtained at an early stage of one's career, normally with the promotion to the 'maître-assistant' level. So once entered into the system, there was fairly little chance of being pushed out of it. The non obtainment of the 'doctorat d'Etat', usually a long term objective taking ten years or more, was only occasionally a reason for drop-out, as in most faculties one could linger in a B-cadre position for a whole career. Consequently, staff

rotation was only minimal. Expansion not only made new elements enter the profession, but also kept in the older members of the junior staff.

In statistical data on staff are incomplete and rather superficial, they nevertheless allow us to observe the '60s hypertrophy of the B-cadre in the faculties which has been analysed by Bourdieu in his famous *Homo academicus*. Until the academic year 1958-59 the A-cadre of professors and 'maîtres de conférences' always was a little larger than the B-cadre of assistants and 'chefs de travaux'. Then, things quickly changed, first and for all, by the steady expansion of the assistants 'corps', but also by the creation of the 'maître-assistant' as a new staff category, which encompassed the older 'chef de travaux' and was to become the first promotional goal for the assistants. Both categories were expanded on a very quick pace: in the academic year 1963-64, the B-cadre already doubled the A-cadre (10,195 compared to only 4,902). It almost was three times its size in 1968-69 (17,930 compared to 6,672). In 1975-76, the size of the B-cadre was stabilised at a little more than 28,000 staffmembers, the A-cadre remaining at a good 10,000 for the rest of the '70s. So, official statistics show us that the 1968 crisis did not really affect the government's staff policy. On the contrary, the unbridled expanding of the B-cadre was not interrupted until 1975 when for purely budgetary reasons the recruiting was suddenly blocked. There still were some shifts within both cadres, as a certain amount of assistant posts were being upgraded every year to the level of 'maître-assistant', but there was no further promotional policy, the 'doctorat d'Etat' remaining the big barrier between both cadres, at least until 1984. Clearly, France did not design any kind of 'Mittelbau'-policy during the expansion period.

These numbers, however revealing they are, do not say everything. Indeed, they reveal the bottleneck situation created by a government, trying to cope with higher education expansion at low cost. It has to be stressed that specific actors within the university field were clearly in favour of this approach. It was well known that the A cadre was firmly opposed to any change of the career structure that could affect its position. It was highly revealing that in 1958 the conservative professors of the *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes* were intensely occupied with the name to be

attributed to the staff category eventually baptised 'maître-assistant'. The beatification of the professor's title and the protection offered by the typically French state doctorate pushed large parts of the A-cadre into complicity with the disruptive staff policy of the minister. A-cadre posts had to remain rare and valuable. In consequence, the B cadre had very good reasons to question the traditional classification schemes that blocked the road to A-cadre posts and substantial segments would not hesitate to do so when the 1968 student revolt offered them a good opportunity. We will come back to that.

It is one of those paradoxes of social relationships within French academe that the pains taken by the professorial elite to avoid all structural changing of the career path and to shield its position against lower personnel, eventually had a reverse effect and actually contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between staff categories, more particularly in the organisation of university teaching as such. The number of obligatory hours a French professor had to teach was so restricted —according to the law, only 3 hours a week— that it was not sufficient at all to provide for complete curricula. This was compensated by the widespread practice of teaching supplementary hours, which also helped to compensate for the relatively low wages of the whole university staff. The ministry coalesced in this practice, as it allowed the provision of a sufficient amount of courses at low cost. These extra charges were a most important factor for work conditions in the faculties.

In fact, the number of professors and 'maîtres de conférences' was far too small to provide sufficient *ex cathedra* courses, even if they were prepared to take up a large amount of supplementary hours. The consequence of this situation was obvious: the group that so effectively protected its titles was obliged to allow lower staff to fulfil teaching functions actually related to these same titles. By a phenomenon known as the 'glissement des fonctions' or function shift, teaching assignments normally reserved for staff members with a 'doctorat d'Etat' were *de facto* or even *de iure* taken care of

by B-cadre, mainly by 'maîtres-assistants' who did not formally possess the entitlements for this 'privilege'. Large numbers of the junior staff were charged with a teaching workload that prohibited any serious research for their 'doctorat d'Etat'. Furthermore, they were —at best— inadequately remunerated on the supplementary hour's budget. Detailed research will almost certainly show that more direct forms of exploitation by the 'patrons' were not uncommon. By doing this, the possessors and self-declared protectors of the 'doctorat d'Etat' not only created dissatisfaction amongst junior staff: they actually contributed in undermining the academic value of their cherished title. This situation was potentially explosive. For junior staff members, trade unionism was to become a major channel to contest this constellation.

Before World War II, trade unionism was a marginal phenomenon in French higher education. Professional organisation of the teaching staff remained limited to 'amicales', who comprised nearly all of the personnel, but whose role in interest aggregation was negligible. The development of trade unions in primary and secondary education, following their authorisation shortly after World War I, hardly affected higher education. Some leftist professors were affiliated to unions of 'lycée' teachers. Shortly before the collapse of the IIIrd Republic, a *Syndicat de l'Enseignement Supérieur* actually profiled itself within the unified *Fédération Générale de l'Enseignement*. In a similar fashion, a few professors affiliated to the Christian *Syndicat Général de l'Education Nationale* (SGEN). In both cases the influence of the university teachers was marginal. Even if they had formed their own trade union, it lacked all legal recognition. The young IVth Republic, by contrast, gave major incentives to the genesis of a genuine trade unionism amongst university staff. The authorisation of university teacher trade unionism and the elaboration of a collective bargaining system (with a '*Commission Technique Paritaire*') resulted in an assertion of existing unions and in a transformation of the 'amicales' into new ones. Later on, the unions were to play an important role in the academic promotion mechanisms of the *Conseil Central Universitaire* (CCU) whose commissions were partly elected by the academic staff itself, increasingly by dint of union sponsoring.

How did this post '45 unionism present itself in the 'facultés'? The left regrouped into the *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique* (SNESRS) and affiliated to the *Fédération de l'Education Nationale* (FEN) of the *Confédération Général du Travail* (CGT): it followed FEN into autonomy when CGT split in 1948. However, FEN could not avoid the tensions between social democrats, communists and other radicals. Quickly, these tendencies manifested themselves within FEN as institutionalized fractions. By contrast to the other FEN-unions, the SNESRS did not institutionalize the tendencies. This was a clear indication of the weight communists and their allies represented. If this PCF hegemony assured a political continuity, corporative division weakened the union's bargaining power during the '50s. In 1956, diverging interests between tenured 'faculté' staff and the contractual CNRS researchers led to a split of SNESRS, generating a separate researcher trade union and the new *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (SNESup).

It took the new SNESup a couple of years to regain a certain vigour, but the expanding numbers of assistants and "maîtres-assistants" clearly favoured this process. Without any exaggeration, one can say that the SNESup became the assistant's trade union par excellence. The precise numbers we possess for 1966 show us that, of about 4,800 members, A-cadre represented only 18 % of the members, the assistants representing 52 % and the "maîtres-assistants" 30 %. No wonder that SNESup quickly became more powerful than the other unions. The a-political *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes*, still largely present in the '50s, was severely weakened in the following decade. Its leading organs being manned by A-cadre mainly, it appeared more and more as the "mandarins" union, i. e. conservative and at a given moment even largely lethargical. SGEN seems to have somewhat better resisted the rising SNESup-tide, its Christian background and pro-socialist character procuring it a specific recruitment pool and a possibility of cooperation in a leftist front against the right wing government. SNESup continuously sought to assert itself as the leading force of the university staff and tried to channel all interest aggregation of the different staff categories into a single trade unionist mould. Nevertheless, it was obliged to account with

other agents in the field, not only with the competing unions, but most of the time it also had to find a common ground with a number of temporary, category related action committees, mainly favouring lower staff interests. In principle, SNESup was opposed to these 'corporatist' initiatives, but in practice it always allied itself with these groups, i.e. in the late '50s and again from the '70s onwards. So, Apparently, SNESup or the other unions were only capable of encompassing the whole of lower staff social action during the '60s.

More or less until 1967, the trade union activities headed by SNESup took a clear CGT-like stance. Anti-gaullist verbalism was combined with a reformist practice. Clearly, the toughness of faculty action went crescendo in this period. Strikes became more frequent and often lasted longer. But if they did so, SNESup's obvious goal was nothing more than the reinforcing of its bargaining position within the existing frame. This explains the political 'innocence' of SNESup demands. The slogan in favor of more teachers, more class rooms and more credits was combined with a defensive position. Indeed, the union had to resist the tentatives of central authority to augment the obligatory hours or to replace the tenured position of large parts of the lower staff by contractual engagements. Alongside these traditional trade unionist options, qualitative demands that might question the basic structures of the university system and staff hierarchy remained marginal or were simply non-existing, at least for the time being. Nevertheless, a more structural contestation of the university hierarchy was maturing amongst the SNESup rank and file, mainly amongst lower staff categories sympathising with student 'contestation'. They were close to the roaring student groups in age, but there is more to it. Quite a few of these junior staff members had been militating in the students' union UNEF in its high days during the Algerian war. Consequently, their sensibility for political developments within the student's world was quite considerable.

The opposition against the dominant pro-communist group crystallised in a far-left alliance around Alain Geismar and succeeded in conquering the SNESup bureau during the 1967 congress. SNESup was practically the only union where a 'gauchiste'

alliance ousted the traditional actors of the left. Clearly, the 'bureau 68', as it was to be known, was backed mainly by assistants and 'maîtres-assistants', but one should be cautious for a determinist interpretation of this Parisian earthquake. Indeed, the communist group had its supporters in the same categories just as well. Consequently, political contingencies had their influence. PCF-loyalty kept a host of assistants away from their 'gauchiste' or otherwise 'dissident' colleagues. The latter's coalition favoured a far more politically oriented trade unionism and fostered an outright breach in the university hierarchy as such, rather than defending the traditional material demands of the former. The contestation of the university structures was most symbolically translated in projects to replace the former A- and B-cadres by a 'cadre unique', designed to abolish the distinct status of junior and senior staff. At the eve of the May '68 revolt, SNESup had become profoundly divided. It generated a particular version of the FEN-tendency system, the 'bureau 68' being opposed by the vigorous, communist led 'Action syndicale', that would use all means to regain its former stronghold.

If the '68 events hardly disrupted the *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes*, things were quite different within SGEN and SNESup. Both unions entered a period of severe crisis, be it with very different results. Eventually, in both cases, the leading teams of 1968 were to be eliminated. Within SNESup, the political accounts were settled almost immediately, the take-over-process being completed in 1969. The 'bureau 68' had immediately joined the student's movement by an order for a general strike in the 'facultés'. It is well known how the SNESup secretary general Alain Geismar became one of the faces of the May revolt. But quickly, internal divisions weakened the leading 'gauchiste' team. Indeed, the option for a political role of SNESup necessarily raised the question of the precise meaning of the May revolt and of the possible role of a trade union, be it a transformed one. Was a real revolution at hands or was May only a fortunate but non-decisive occasion for union sponsored university transformation?

The ideological discussions, largely along the lines of the divers 'groupuscules',

subverted the unity of the 'bureau 68'. Geismar's resignation in favour of Bernard Herszberg was just the first sign of this process. At the 1969 congress, the divers 'gauchiste' fractions presented separate lists and were eventually outnumbered by the well-organised 'Action syndicale' tendency, which was way better in attracting social democrats and IUT-staff members with secondary school backgrounds. If the union's atmosphere remained highly conflict-ridden, the communist led group started a normalisation process within SNESup, reintroducing reformist bargaining strategies.

Curiously enough, the SGEN-direction was to be pushed aside because of its supposed inability to adapt its options to the set of May-related reorientations advanced by its younger rank and file, whereas the 68 SNESup-bureau was voted out of office because it was accused of having gone too far in its advocating of this more politically biased action. For SGEN, the tensions created by the May-events were a time bomb, eventually exploding in 1972. The principal SGEN-leaders took a hesitating, suspicious attitude against the student uprising. This created a growing malaise, fostered by the arrival of young militants advocating May's heritage against the old generation, mainly by stressing the 'autogestionnaire' ideology. In 1972, this younger group eventually minorised the old guard. Its university subsection recuperated part of the contestatory wing of SNESup who gradually left after the 'Action syndicale' take-over. This input of youth had a dynamic effect for SGEN, which became far more present at 'faculté' level than ever before. However, the maintenance of a militant climate was no longer threatening for the basic structures of university hierarchy. The union's negotiators first and for all pressed the minister or the universities state secretary to keep the whole staff in service, i.e. even those who only had a contractual status. So, if the ever-present menace of a massive strike in the universities had any serious effects upon decisionmaking, it was a major element in the policy of *de facto* tenurizing of the global staff and eventually in the recruitment stop of the late '70s.

Let us conclude. Even if it was to gain a rare 'aura' at a given moment, one must stress the late appearance of a specific trade unionism within the academic profession in France. Weakened for a long time by the 'amicaliste' tradition and by the structural segmentation

of the higher education system, it was only in the '60s that unionism *stricto sensu* became a central strategy in fostering the interests of junior staff, i.e. the category the least related to a potential professional project, like André Robert and myself have analysed as a quintessential element in unionist or non-unionist options. Significantly, the '60s appeared to be the only decade when category related interest groups of assistants and the like were quasi completely marginalised, as the unions, SNESup first and foremost, were predominantly manned by junior staff. At least a part of them tried to use trade unionism to subvert the classical mechanisms productive of the academic hierarchy. These mechanisms appeared to be at odds with pedagogical realities within the 'facultés'. Furthermore, they were part and parcel of the successions crisis engendered by the government's personnel expansion policy. Subversive stratagems were opposed to so-called structural subordination. But not the whole of B-cadre was into this. Not all were union members, to start with. And even amongst SNESup's rank and file, a substantial part of the junior staff shared the PCF's hostility to May and adhered to reformist strategies. They accepted the existing schemes of academic classification and tried to cope with the effects of the bottleneck situation by dint of older revendications, i.e. by demanding 'more of the same'. Individual interest could be defended by union representatives in the evaluative organisms of the CCU. As such, trade union strategies, even of the May 68-invoking SGEN after '72, were participating again in the bureaucratic traditions of the French state.